

Women in Agriculture: Understanding the Third Shift Phenomenon
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Abstract

The third shift phenomenon has been used to describe the many roles and responsibilities of women who live and work on farms. Financial need often necessitates that a member of a farm family take an off-farm job and more often than not, it is the woman who takes the outside job. Traditional gender role expectations in terms of housework and childcare coupled with farming duties present unique factors that impact the behavioral health of female farmers. Human service providers strive to understand the third shift phenomenon. This paper offers first hand reflections of working the third shift on a small family farm against the backdrop of a growing literature on the topic.

Keywords: Third shift phenomenon, farm women, farm related stress

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Farm work is dangerous and stressful. This paper looks at issues that can impact the behavioral health of female farmers. A licensed clinical social worker with over 15 years experience working in the field of mental health now works a “third shift” on a family farm. This experience provides a unique and insightful picture of what it means to be a female farmer. Farming ties one to the land and to whatever Mother Nature has in store for us. This may mean being at the mercy of the weather but this includes the sunshine and rainbows. The three shifts are described, followed by a review of related literature, and an outline of what contributes to the female farmer’s stress with reflections about what may help promote behavioral health.

The Three Shifts

It is not unusual for farm families to rely on at least one member taking an off-farm job. The Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture reported that the majority of U. S. farm households depend on off-farm employment (Groover, 2000). The primary reason for this is financial need (Gallagher

and Delworth, 1993). In the United States, more often than not it is the woman who has the outside job. Off-farm employment helps with paying the bills and it is a way to maintain health insurance. Most are familiar with the second shift as described twenty years ago by Hochschild (1989). For off-farm employed farm women there are three work shifts. According to Gallagher and Delworth (1993), the first shift is off-farm employment. The second shift like urban women, as Hochschild describes, is housework and childcare. It should be noted that the second shift for farm women may be more demanding than for urban dwellers because of gardening and caring for animals for family food consumption, dust from the fields, and work clothes and children's play clothes may get more soiled (Gallagher and Delworth, 1993). The third shift is farm labor. The type of labor depends on the type of farm but women have been doing more on the farm and off-farm employment does not necessarily deter the amount of work they do on the farm (Scholl, 1983).

The Nature and Impact of Farm Work

All farmers face risk for injury while using heavy equipment or in the course of strenuous labor, lifting, or bending over. One prospective study found that back pain was an important predictor of suicide at 13 year follow-up (Pentinen, 2001). Compared to other occupations, farmers are at higher risk for suicide (Fraser, Smith, Judd, et al, 2005; Gregoire, 2002). Farmers face health and mental health risk because of the use of chemicals (Carruth and Logan, 2002). Farmers are at greater risk for accidental mortality and at increased risk of hematopoietic and nervous system cancers (Fleming, Gomez-Marín, Zheng, et al, 2003). Farmers work more than ten hours per day, take few holidays and often live on their farms which are relatively isolated (Gregoire, 2002). Fatigue increases risk for injuries and injuries are predictive of depression in farm women (Carruth and Logan, 2002). For all farmers, stress can be increased by social and geographic isolation and shrinking social networks (Gregoire, 2002; Raine, 1999). Another factor which increases stress for farmers is their lives are governed by unpredictable, uncontrollable forces such as the weather, diseases, insect and animal pests, and farm machinery (Gregoire, 2002).

The Role of Gender

Farming is male dominated and this impacts the nature of farm work for women. A 2001 report on U. S. family farm characteristics describes female operated farms as smaller in sales and acreage than male operated farms. Like most households with small farms, women farm operators rely heavily on off-farm income. Female-operator households earn less than the average male operators and for all U. S. households (Sommers, 2001). Because of the difficulty women have in establishing themselves in conventional agriculture, female farmers are turning to alternative and sustainable agriculture (Women's Agriculture Community Web, 2009).

Women still take the primary responsibility for housework and childcare (Carruth and Logan, 2002; Haugen and Brandth, 1994). Some research is showing while woman have been taking on more tasks outside, men have not been taking on additional

household chores (Gallagher and Delworth, 1993). Contributing to stress in rural farm women are “role overload” and the lack of acknowledgement for their contributions to farm and home (Constantine, 2001). Role over load refers to attempts to be farmer, employee off-farm and mother. Census of Agriculture in the U. S. allows only one operator per farm and this contributed to the underestimating the work women do on farms. If both husband and wife run a farm, the operator that is most likely disregarded from the census is the woman (Hoppe, 2001). Female farmers get less leisure time and less sleep than male farmers (Gallagher and Delworth, 1993).

Women cope with the same risks and stressors that men do on the farm. The experience of women in farming is also different than males. They cope with traditional domestic chores, childcare, lack of acknowledgement for their work on and off the farm, and stress related to juggling multiple tasks and responsibilities. The stress farm women experience may be compounded by less money; less opportunities and all the risks that come from turning to alternative agricultural practices should they so choose.

This Farmer’s Story

If someone asks me what I do for a living, I tell them I am a social work professor. I don’t really think of myself as a farmer. It’s not on my resume. I used to call myself a farmer’s wife. The truth is, I am a farmer, the second operator on a small family farm. We grow fruits and vegetables using organic methods. The thoughts I am sharing came to me as I planted, carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, peas and peppers. I have been socialized to think of farming as a job for men. I have never shied away from anything that was supposed to be done by men not women, for example lifting heavy things, maintaining equipment or even getting really dirty. Yet, I referred to myself as a farmer’s wife, not a farmer. I am supposed to can tomatoes and make fabulous apple pie. I work the “third shift” (Gallagher and Delworth, 1993) on our farm. In this section I will share my experience, my struggles and my blessings. I hope that my reflections and insights will contribute to greater understanding and empathy for women who work the third shift.

How I Became a Farmer

It did not happen suddenly. Over many years, my father-in-law taught me how to maintain different crops in their garden when my husband and I would house sit while they traveled. We moved to the family farm when my first child was born. My husband grew up farming and fully understood the implications of growing one’s own food and growing food to truck to market. He decided to sell his business in town and grow food. I was soon initiated to what really fresh food means with the start of our own garden. Things grew enough that there was plenty to share and gradually sell. I was always a willing participant. I enjoy so much of what is involved, being physically active, spending time outdoors and having time to reflect. There is something about feeling soft freshly tilled earth under your bare feet and the whole process of growing food, which serves to keep one grounded. This is how I became a farmer and part of why I continue to farm.

Role Identity and Stress

Traditional farm family roles would have the man out in the field, the women in the house and both sharing barn chores (Gallagher & Delworth, 1993). My husband tends to take the traditional route when it comes to gender and housework. It could be a point of contention but it doesn't have to be. Right now my husband is working at least 12 hours a day and if I'm gone he is responsible for the kids. My sons are already helping with dishes and laundry. Gender roles and men helping with house work and childcare is not uncommon. It is not so abnormal to juggle work at the university and house work and kids. The farming part is what is extraordinary. It is more like a secret identity. My life requires many transitions on a daily basis. In my case, I have been reluctant to acknowledge my role as farmer and therefore limit any acknowledgement for it. There have been times when I have spent the morning up to my elbows in manure, fertilizing and planting and then in the afternoon, I'm sitting in a faculty meeting or rushing off to teach a class. I find myself thinking, "You people would not believe what I did this morning." The flip side is selling produce at the farmer's market when my customers don't know I am a social work professor with a Ph. D.. They ask me if I grew those cucumbers or what kind of cherry tomato is the sweetest. Then there are the other farmers who do know I am a professor and think I am a mere "hobby farmer," discounting my labors. I gave up trying to hide the fact my hands look like I'm a farmer. I know I'm not a "hobby farmer."

Bolton (2000) writes about a different type of "third shift" involving the time and energy women put into challenges around identity, getting the job done, and balancing career and caring for others. It's not so much that I don't know who I am at any given moment. It's really more about being pulled by one role when trying to accomplish something in another. The stress I feel may be similar to what Bolton (2000) describes but more complicated, using her definition, I would be working a fourth shift. The truth is I don't spend that much time worrying or "fretting." Sometimes I wish I had more hours in a day and more time with my kids. I just do the best I can and keep on going. The hard part is this element of secrecy. I don't hide what I do. It's just so different that a lot of people don't fully understand it. Case in point: We recently hired a young woman to help outside. She was very enthusiastic and eager to learn about growing food but she did not have even a basic understanding of how physically taxing the work can be coupled with her own limitations. She just could not do it and had to quit. If I feel stressed, it's something only other female farmers really understand and I don't know too many of them.

Working with Women Who Farm a Third Shift

Here are some thoughts about working with women who work the third shift farming. The type of farming matters. Find out about what is being farmed and how. There is a difference between larger and smaller farms, whether one type of crop is grown or 40, animals are raised and what methods are used. Are their hired hands to manage? Is the farm a family run business and how many generations are involved?

Where do the farmers sell what they produce? Is this a farm that is the first in a community or the first generation in a family to grow organic? And if so, how does that impact social interactions and relationships? Understanding the type of farm helps with assessing risks and hazards, potential for social isolation or support and place within a community.

Working the third shift is a juggling act. Switching gears takes practice to focus on the shift at hand and not on what is coming later or what just was. There are techniques to this. It helps in reducing stress and increasing efficiency. Managing the time at each shift and sticking to routines and schedules when possible helps reduce stress too. Find the uniqueness of the person and the strengths will become evident. Everyone has strengths sometimes they don't fully realize. Acknowledgement may be lacking and seeking and finding it reaffirms convictions and integrity. Getting in touch with why the farmer chose farming and not something else is affirming. What about identity? Which role(s) make the most sense to her?

Some things are the same as working with any client. Basic self care is absolutely essential. This means nutrition and sleep, exercise and recreation. Relationships matter of course. In the case of third shift farmers, there is much potential for marital conflict because of work load expectations and double standards for women. There is also potential for supportive friendships away from the isolation of the farm. Support from other female farmers is also affirming even via the internet. Everyone needs to vent sometimes, a confidant and someone to empathize. Finding creative ways to get work done and spend time with family is a must. Thoughts, prayers, and counting blessings matter. Find out what gives meaning to the life of a female farmer. Does she pray? What is in her prayer? Thoughts and perspectives relate to coping and adaptation or if necessary making changes.

Reflections on Sunshine and Rainbows, and an Occasional Thunderstorm

The benefits of farming come from both the process of growing food and of course the farm itself. We all know the health benefits of eating more fresh fruits and vegetables. Perhaps children are more willing to eat vegetables if they helped grow them. Some argue that the fresher the fruit or vegetable, the better the taste and the better the nutrition. So the less time in travel the fresher the food. You can't get any more "local" than your own backyard. Growing food teaches patience. It takes time to go from seed to zucchini. Sometimes, things don't grow as planned. Farming promotes the exercise of perseverance. If something doesn't grow well, try something else. If sweet potatoes don't seem to work, maybe peanuts will. If the bugs and the bunnies eat all your broccoli plants, plant some more. Keep trying. Keep going. Growing plants teach the farmer to listen and to cultivate the nurturer within. Plants need care, water, sometimes a blanket if it gets too cold. Farming demonstrates the relationship between hard work and rewards.

Working with dirt can help keep one grounded. What does it mean to be grounded? Perhaps being grounded means having a firm grasp on reality and stability. It also means having sensitivity, awareness and understanding of one's place within an

ecological environment. Growing food reminds us of the nature of life. Some things are certain; some things in the garden and in life are not. In both we find ways to cope or adapt and to grow. It reminds us of the cycle of life. Plants will die but new ones will grow. Nature has a beautiful, efficient way of renewing itself over and over. A farmer can take part of this process and work in harmony with nature. So if life gives you fertilizer, you could probably grow some really good tomatoes or melons.

Reflecting upon the life I have as a social work professor/mother/farmer, I have gradually begun to collect ideas, strategies and metaphors to carry me through. This lifestyle forces me to manage my time and to prioritize various activities. Simply making lists and numbering them by importance helps. Asking for help is a must. I need to be nurtured too (Harmelink, 1987). Sometimes messes must wait. Resisting the urge to fling some compost at my farm boss/husband usually pays off later on. Finding humor, singing songs and counting blessings all help get me through the day. Sticking to schedules, eating right and getting sleep are essential. Getting a little down time, a movie, games with the kids or a night with my husband has to be given just as much importance as my shift work. Sharing food with neighbors and colleagues feels good. Sharing my home and farm with family when they visit feels even better. Being able to work side by side with my children is wonderful and watching them play outside for hours on end is priceless. I celebrate my life, farming enhances it and I remember this while I do what I need to do to support my family. When I walk up to the house from the field, through our little orchard and I can see the pond down the hill, feel the sun, the rain, or the breeze, smell whatever is blooming (or composting) and I can prepare a meal for my family that is full of fresh fruits and vegetables that we grew, I have to think to myself, "I work so hard but I have so much. It just can't get any better than this."

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