

# Wisconsin Family Farm Facts

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Current research findings from  
the Program on Agricultural Technology Studies

## HEART OF THE FARM WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

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During the late 1970s and early 1980s, University of Wisconsin-Extension (UWEX) sponsored educational programs specifically for farm women. These programs targeted women who helped manage their farming operation. Unfortunately, these programs were abandoned. Two reasons are thought to have contributed to the end of programs for farm women: (1) a lack of leadership in UWEX for these audience specific (versus topic specific) educational programs, and (2) the move of farm women to seek off-farm employment to supplement incomes and provide insurance benefits for their family. Working off the farm made it difficult for women to participate in the traditional weekday programs that Extension professionals typically provided.

*Heart of the Farm – Women in Agriculture* is an attempt to reach this underserved audience of UW-Extension agriculture programming. Three things happened to make Heart of the Farm in Wisconsin possible. (1) The Program on Agricultural Technology Studies (PATS), UW-Madison, published its research, **The Roles of Women on Wisconsin Dairy Farms at the Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century<sup>2</sup>**. This research indicates that most farm women are responsible for the financial record keeping on their farm and also share in the decision-making to borrow money and/or expand the operation. At the same time, many women were taking off-farm jobs and the number of farms was decreasing. This demand for their time coupled with the lack of contact with others who understand the complexity of farm life created a feeling of social isolation for many farm women. (2) The second piece of the puzzle fell into place when a core group of UW-Cooperative Extension professionals were interested in developing programming for women involved in agriculture. As a result, two female county-based UWEX agricultural agents and four University of Wisconsin campus-based faculty/staff formed a steering committee to develop this project. (3) The final factor was funding. A Women's Challenge Grant from the North Central Region's Risk Management Education Center (NCR RMEC) made it possible to conduct two pilot workshops. Information gathered from pilot evaluations and a follow-up focus group provided information that was useful in developing the program and seeking additional funding to expand the program. In 2003, four *Heart of the Farm – Women in Agriculture* Conferences were held throughout Wisconsin.

The purpose of *Heart of the Farm* is to address the needs of farm women by providing education on pertinent topics, connecting them with agricultural resources, and creating support networks.



*“Heart of the Farm wasn’t a fluff program. You didn’t treat us like ‘women’. You gave us real information. We make decisions just like our husbands do, and we need this information to make better decisions.*

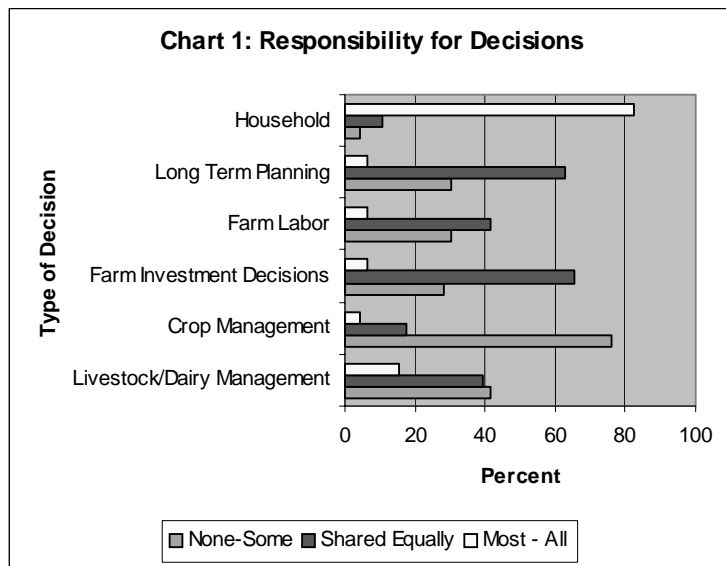
—2001 Heart of the Farm Participant, Eau Claire

## Heart of the Farm Participants

Six *Heart of the Farm* (HOF) conferences were offered at various sites throughout the state during 2002-2003: Jefferson, Ladysmith, Eau Claire (2), and Richland Center (2). Over 150 women attended these conferences. Almost two-thirds (62%) of the participants were between 35-54 years of age, with an equal number of younger (18-34 = 18%) and older (55 or older = 20%) participants. More than 1 in 3 women indicated they worked off-farm. The average number of hours engaged in off-farm work was 30 hours per week. This means that for most of these women (89.4%), off-farm work constituted more than a part-time job. As might be expected in Wisconsin, the majority of women who participated in HOF came from dairy farms (58.7%). The remaining 40%+ were involved in other enterprises – beef, grain, hogs, other – or a combination of enterprises.

## Women are Involved in Major Farm Decisions

As indicated by Chart 1, women are involved in all of the major decisions that are made in their farming operation. The majority of women are responsible for almost all of the decisions related to the household



(93%), however, these women are least involved with decisions about crop management. What is most interesting is that these women are most likely to be part of the decision making in areas that relate to long-term planning and farm investments. And to a slightly lesser degree, they influence the decisions that relate to farm labor, and livestock or dairy management.

Farm women were also asked how they would describe their involvement in the decisions that were made on the farm. More than one-half (57%) said that they were “very involved.” Another one-third (30%) said that they were “involved to somewhat involved”. Only 2% said that were “not involved at all” in farm decision-making.

## ‘Womens’s Work’ on the Farm

Similar to their involvement in the farm decision-making, farm women play a crucial role in the farm tasks that they perform. The contribution that women make to their farming operation is often overlooked.

‘Women’s work’ includes farm work, household tasks, and for some, off-farm work as well.

When asked how they would describe their involvement in the day-to-day farm tasks, almost two-thirds of the respondents said that they were “very involved” (61%) and another 22% said they were “involved.” Less than 5% said that they were “not involved at all.”

‘Women’s work’ on the farm is divided into three main categories – bookkeeping/marketing, manual labor, and machinery/field work. While farm women are involved in a variety of tasks they are most likely to be involved in bookkeeping /marketing and work that requires manual labor, and less likely to be involved with machinery/field work.

The majority of women (85%) “regularly” and “sometimes” do the farm bookkeeping and bill paying. Because of their close connection to and understanding of the farm business finances, women’s involvement in the decision-making for their farm operation is critical.

On farms, women do a variety of manual labor tasks that range from running errands to rock picking. Much of the work revolves around feeding and taking care of the livestock. The most common tasks that women regularly or sometimes perform are: (1) running errands; (2) caring for young stock; (3) milking cows / cleaning after milking; (4) feeding livestock; and (5) picking rock.



Women are the least involved in work related to machinery /field work. Many share the responsibility for haying (70%) and harvesting crops (59%).

### **Women’s Changing Roles in the Farm Operation**

Regardless of the long hours and multiple tasks that women do in their farming operations, the majority (82%) indicated that they are satisfied with their responsibilities. However, 3 out of 5 (60%) said that they see their responsibilities changing. For some those changes are related to physical changes or health reasons that affect their ability to perform the farm work. For others it is related to off-farm employment that takes away time that would be available for on-farm work.

For most, however, the changes were related to major transitions in the farm operation. These transitions covered a wide ranged — “working son into the business”, transferring the farm from one generation to the next, retirement, and expansion of milking herd or other livestock.

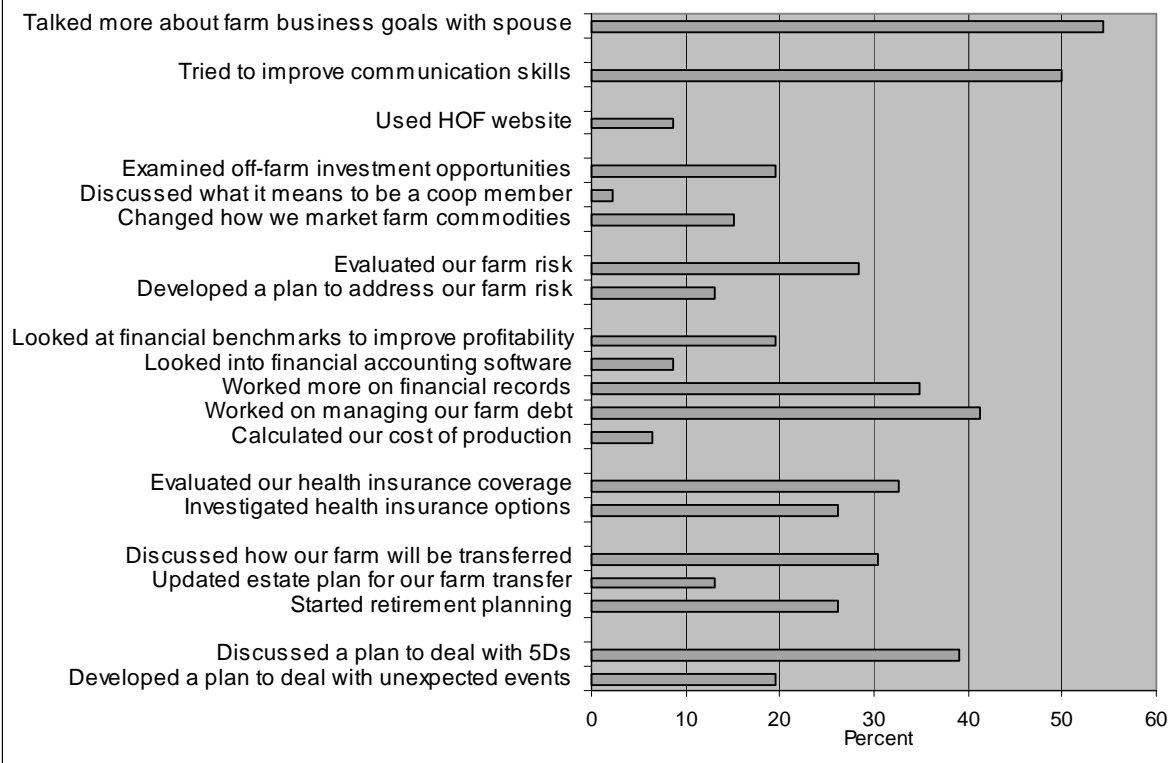
Regardless of how their farming operation was changing, women see financial information as a key component in making that transition. Financial information needs include record keeping, taxes, marketing, retirement planning, and farm transfer.

### **HOF Motivates Changes in Managing Farm Risk**

As shown in Chart 2, farm women indicated that they used what they had learned at a HOF program to address many of the risks that they face in their farming operation. Not only did the program participants gather information, but in many cases, they applied this new knowledge to manage a risk in their farming operation. For example,

- Participants not only “*Discussed* a plan to deal with 5Ds” they also “*Developed* a plan to deal with unexpected events” or
- They “*Discussed* how our farm will be transferred,” “*Updated* estate plan for our farm transfer,” and then “*Started* retirement planning.”

**Chart 2: As a Result of attending a HOF Program.....**



**But farm women want more...**

Input from farm women is essential in guiding the selection of program topics. Through focus groups, program surveys, and follow-up evaluations, farm women have indicated the topics that would be useful in managing risks on their farm. They include: production issues, government and law, financial management, health issues, marketing, long-range planning...to name a few. Women are integral to each of their farm operations. Providing farm women with the tools and skills to perform their tasks will benefit all of agriculture.

*“Great program! I hope it continues!! Farm women have needed this for a long time.”*

—2003 Heart of the Farm Participant

For more information about *Heart of the Farm*, visit: [www.uwes.edu/ces/heartofthefarm](http://www.uwes.edu/ces/heartofthefarm).

<sup>1</sup> Heart of the Farm Steering Committee has developed and guided the work of Heart of the Farm – Women in Agriculture Program since its inception. Members consists of: Joy Kirkpatrick, Associate Professor, UWEX – Richland County; Carol Roth, Outreach Specialist – Program on Agricultural Technology Studies; Jenny Vanderlin, Farm Management Specialist – Center For Dairy Profitability; Rhonda Gildersleeve, Associate Professor, UWEX – Iowa County; Kim Zeuli, Assistant Professor – Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, UW-Madison; Kevin Bernhardt, Professor – Agricultural Agribusiness, UW-Platteville.

<sup>2</sup> Vogt, Jennifer; and Douglas Jackson-Smith, Marcia Ostrom and Sharon Lezberg. November, 2001. “The Roles of Women on Wisconsin Dairy Farms at the Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” PATS Research Report No. 10. Madison, Wisconsin: UW-Madison.

**The Program on Agricultural Technology Studies is a unit of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and University of Wisconsin-Cooperative Extension. Contact us for additional copies of this sheet or the report on which it is based.**

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