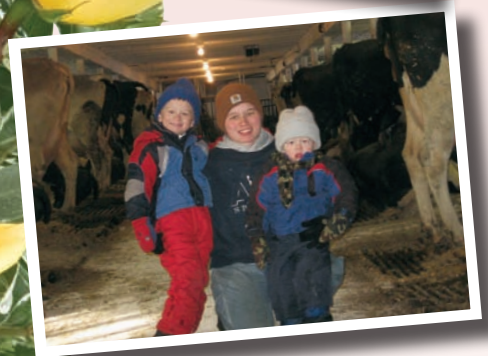


Personal circumstances, concerns and needs of **women** on Wisconsin dairy farms

REPORT



Marshfield Clinic®



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PURPOSE

Women who operate, co-operate, and/or live on dairy farms in Wisconsin are an important segment of the dairy industry and key to the survival of family farms. However, based on many anecdotal reports and conversations with farm women, their personal circumstances, concerns, and needs have sometimes been overlooked or ignored. Women on farms around the nation have indicated that some experience role conflict, extreme time pressures, sleep deprivation, lack of appreciation and respect, social isolation, absence of recreational time away from the farm, and/or intergenerational conflict. This project conducted a statewide mail survey of women on Wisconsin dairy farms in order to describe their circumstances, concerns, and needs, with the goal of promoting and facilitating the addressing of those concerns and needs.

INTRODUCTION

In a 1956 speech in Peoria, Illinois, in the midst of his re-election campaign, President Dwight Eisenhower made the following profound and oft-quoted statement:

“You know, farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil and you're a thousand miles from the corn field.”

Even today, over 50 years later, the difficulties faced by farmers are not often truly understood by those who have not lived or worked on a farm. This is understandable, as the U.S. farm population as a percentage of the total population has declined to just above one percent (Cooper Center, 2006). The view of farming for many is idyllic, consisting of fresh air, beautiful fields, tranquil animals, big barns, and families working together to feed America and the world. Non-farmers read about government subsidies to farmers and assume farmers must be doing well.

In reality, farmers deal with the forces of nature, animal and plant diseases, food safety, weather-related time pressure, environmental challenges, labor problems, rapidly-changing technology, high rates of farm-related injury and illness for themselves and their families, issues surrounding genetically-modified products, globalization, urbanization, unpredictable and uncontrollable economic situations, and a continuing cost-price squeeze. A host of universities, businesses, farmer organizations, government agencies, and media work diligently on various aspects of these problems. Their goal is to help farmers improve their operations and their bottom line, or in many cases, help farmers just to survive.

Similarly, the differences faced by women who live on farms are not often well understood or even acknowledged. Sometimes the principal farm operator, commonly a co-operator, and often the wife of a male operator, these women fulfill a variety of roles that might or might not be appreciated. Like other women, they may have household and child care responsibilities, plus employment outside the home, and in addition carry a large burden of farm work on top of everything else. Yet their challenges are often buried beneath the more visible needs of the farm itself.

The object of this research project was to describe the personal circumstances, concerns and needs, of women who operate, co-operate, and/or live on dairy farms, estimate the proportion of women who have these concerns, and depict their assessment of concerns in order to promote and facilitate a better understanding of those concerns and needs. The ultimate goal is that those who counsel farm women or develop programs for them will have a better understanding of their lives and the challenges they face, and be better able to meet their needs.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study design was a random sample mail survey of women who operate, co-operate, and/or live on a dairy farm in Wisconsin. A mail survey was chosen over a phone survey because of the difficulty of contacting people on farms by phone. A mail survey offered increased anonymity for answering personal questions and expressing feelings.

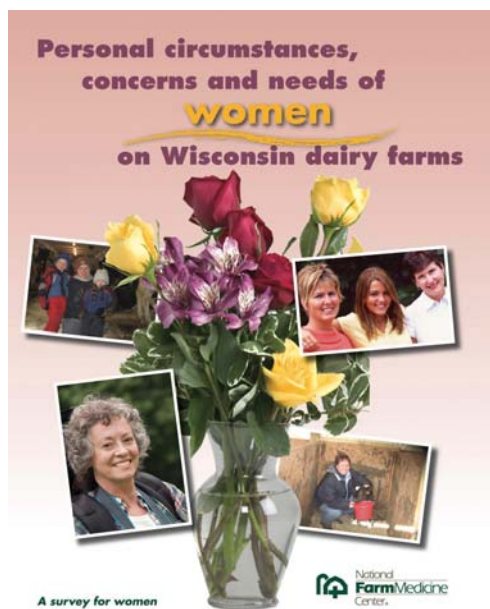
Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire was developed by drafting a set of questions based on a focus group of farm women, literature reviews, interviews with behavioral health specialists, anecdotal evidence, and experience in agricultural safety and health outreach programming.

The question set was reviewed and downsized by the investigators to a manageable length, then sent out for review to a list of reviewers from the fields of dairy farming, behavioral health, occupational health, agricultural safety and health, Cooperative Extension, and statistics.

Because this is a qualitative study, and the intent was not to measure stress or other widely-measured states of being, a standardized, validated, quantitative questionnaire was not used. The decision was made to develop very specific, customized questions tailored to this farm population and obtain face validity via expert review.

Questionnaire



A five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral/undecided, disagree, strongly disagree) was used for most questions with the exception of demographics.

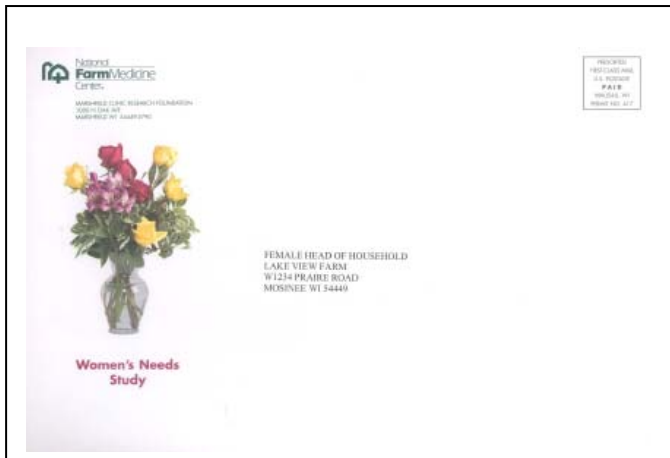
The final questionnaire consisted of 155 questions, with generous white space and user-friendly formatting on each page. It was printed as an 8.5 x 11 booklet, stapled at the spine, with a four-color cover.

It was recognized that identifying and capturing responses from women who have already left the farm due to divorce or death of a husband was not possible. Women who have divorced and left the farm because of problems with their spouse or farm life in general would have been of great interest. However, it was still important to learn from single women who may be divorced or widowed and still live on the farm. Thus a special feature of the survey was to ask these women to answer questions on the basis of their past experience.

Survey Methods

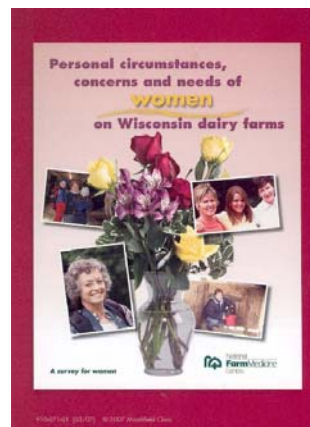
A modified Dillman method (Dillman, 1978) was used to conduct the mail survey. A cover letter with an explanation of the project, informed consent, and procedures used to maintain anonymity and confidentiality, along with a questionnaire and full-size preaddressed, business-reply postage-paid envelope, were included in the mailing packet. The cover letter was designed to emphasize the importance of the survey as a way to provide a voice for women and their concerns, but also the importance of providing an accurate picture of lives of women on Wisconsin dairy farms.

Outer Envelope

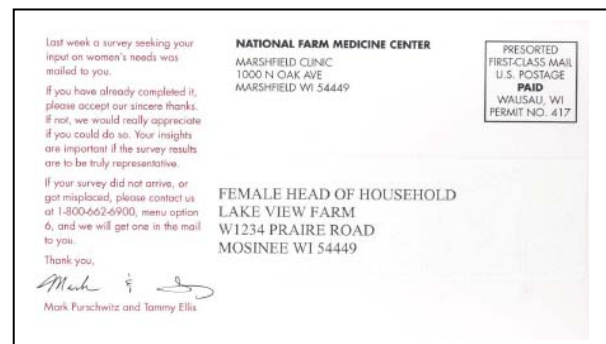


Postcard Front

Approximately one week after the questionnaire was mailed; a postcard was mailed to the entire sample as a thank-you for returning the survey or as a reminder to do so. Approximately two weeks later, the entire procedure was repeated for nonresponders (complete package mailed, followed by the reminder/thank-you postcard). A final contact for non-responders was one last request to complete the survey, and included a questionnaire request card to be used in the event that previous mailings had been misplaced or discarded.



Postcard Back



Staff from Marshfield Clinic Biomedical Informatics Research Center handled data entry, quality control and statistical analyses, following standard procedures.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Great care was taken to preserve anonymity and confidentiality and to emphasize its importance to the survey population, in order to promote candid and personal responses. The detailed procedures were posted on the inside cover of the questionnaire, so the women would have no doubt how the survey was conducted and their responses handled.

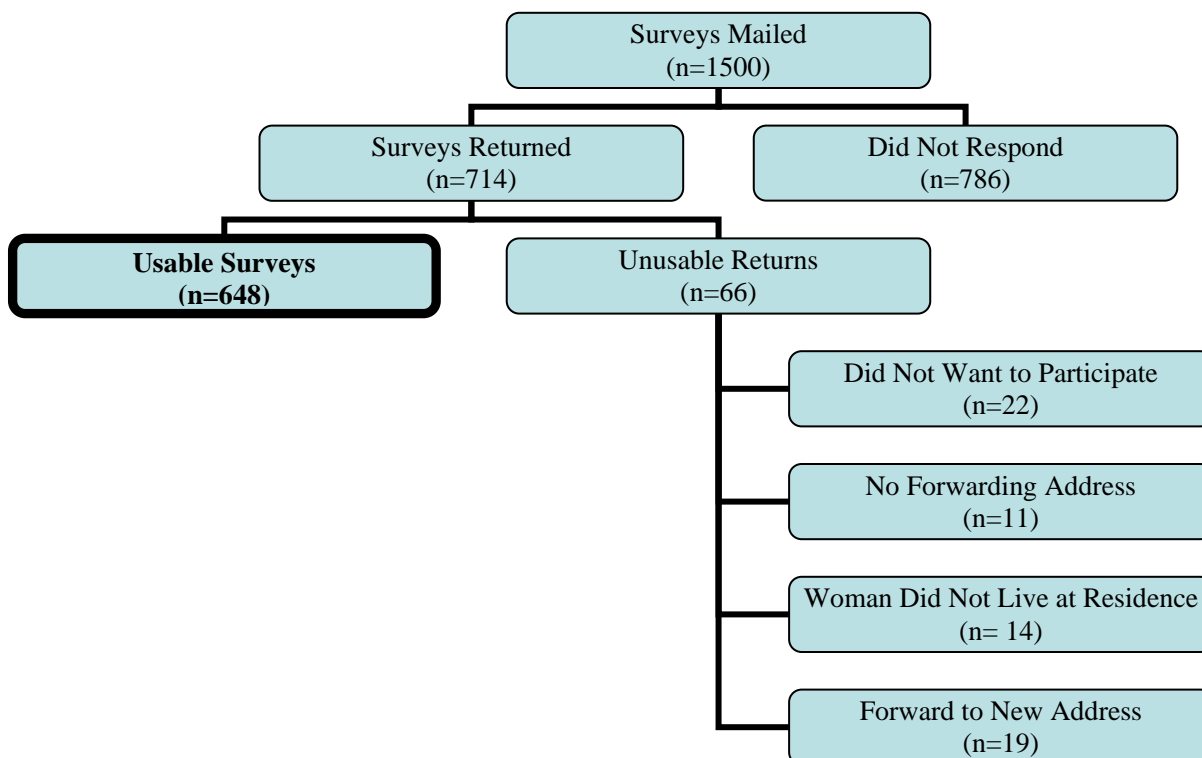
Each mailing address in the sample was assigned a code number, which appeared only on the external and business reply envelopes, but not on the survey itself. The respondents were requested to use the business reply envelope, which was preaddressed and postage paid.

When the questionnaire was returned, a staff member entered the code from the return envelope into a database, eliminated the address corresponding to that code from the address list, removed the survey from the envelope, and gave it to a second staff member. This second staff member, who did not have access to the list of mailing addresses or codes, stamped the survey with a unique internal unrelated number for quality assurance checks and entered the responses into a database. The survey was then filed with other returned surveys. Because the survey had been separated from its envelope, it had no connection with any address, and was completely anonymous. Completed questionnaires were kept in secure locked storage per Marshfield Clinic Research Foundation procedures.

STUDY RESULTS

Survey Response

Surveys were mailed in March 2007, before the planting season. Of the 1500 surveys that were mailed, 714 (47.6%) were returned, with 648 usable surveys for a true response rate of 43.2%. Some unusable returns noted that the woman did not want to participate, a forwarding address was unavailable, a woman did not live at the residence, or that the survey could be forwarded to a new updated address.



About the Women

The overall profile of the women who completed the survey is described below.

The majority of respondents (65%) were in their 40's and 50's; only 16% were younger than 40. 94% were married. 94% had children; 65% had children living at home. 54% had some post-high-school education, up to and including college degrees. The majority of respondents (65%) came from a farm background (grew up or worked on a farm as a youth.) 73% had been farming for 20 years or more; 43% had been farming 30 years or more; and 17% had been farming 40 years or more.



- Most Common Profile
- Married
 - Have children
 - Farmed for 20 or more years
 - 40-60 years old
 - Have children living at home
 - Have farm background
 - Have post-high school education
 - Have held an off-farm job
 - Operate a farm previously owned by parents/inlaws

The women responding to the survey were involved, either presently or in the past, with many different tasks on and off the farm. *The first number represents percentage of women doing these tasks at present; the number in parenthesis represents "not now, but in the past":* 47% (45%) cared for children; 52% (30%) milked cows; 69% (27%) fed cows, heifers or calves; 33% (31%) worked with other animals besides cattle; 50% (27%) operated barn or farmstead equipment; 47% (34%) operated field equipment; 81% (9%) performed office work; 66% (27%) kept a garden; 44% (31%) had an off-farm job; 20% (26%) cared for an elderly parent or in-laws; and 58% (13%) traveled for business.

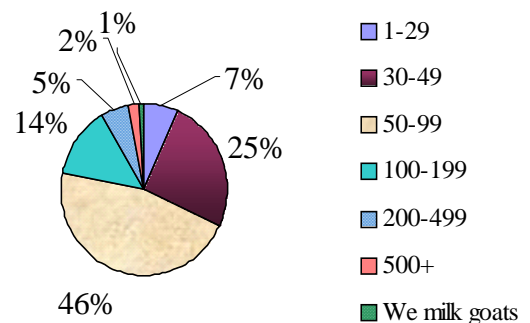
The majority (64%) operated a farm that was previously operated by their parents or their husband/partner's parents. Of those farms, only 12.5% had been operated by the woman's parents, while 87.5% had been operated by their husband/partner's parents.

About the Farm

The majority (73%) of respondents said their dairy operations were best described as "stanchions or tie stalls;" 19% said "freestall or loose housing;" 2% said both stanchions/tie stalls and freestall or loose housing; and 6% said "managed intensive grazing."

46% of the farms were described as "multigenerational," with two or more generations operating the farm together. 22% of the farms were "multifamily" operations, with two or more families operating the farm together. 41% of the farms had been in the family for three or more generations.

Cow Herd Size (n=644)



About the Husband/Partner

98% of husbands/partners were involved with the farm operation; 96% came from a farming background. A minority (36%) had some post-high-school education, up to and including college degrees.

Personal Circumstances, Concerns and Needs

The questionnaire was organized into the following sections: Time Pressures, Sleep, General Health, Health Insurance, Off-Farm Employment, Childcare, Children's Work on the Farm, Farm Safety, Changes in Agriculture, Community, Extended Family and/or Farm Partners, Farm Transfer or Retirement, Finances, Socializing and Networking, Personal Feelings, Marital Communication, Husband/Partner Relationships, and Views on Male-Female Relationships on Farms in General. At the end of the survey, extensive space was specifically provided to write about any additional concerns and needs not covered by the survey.

Listed below are the 20 sections of the questionnaire followed by the actual questions or statements in the order in which they appeared. The levels of agreement and disagreement are the sums of "agree and strongly agree" or "disagree and strongly disagree," respectively. From those numbers the percentage of "neutral or undecided" responses can be calculated, which sometimes in itself can be revealing.

Time Pressures

- 31% agreed that "I have adequate time to pursue my personal hobbies/interests." (57% disagreed.)
- 61% agreed that "It is difficult to find time to care for my home." (27% disagreed.)
- 27% agreed that "It is difficult to find time to care for my family." (55% disagreed.)
- 41% agreed that "It is hard to say NO to volunteering." (35% disagreed.)
- 27% agreed that "I am satisfied with the number of short vacations (one to three days) we take." (63% disagreed.)
- 21% agreed that "I am satisfied with the number of longer vacations (four or more days) we take." (67% disagreed.)
- 89% agreed that "Farm schedules dictate life." (6% disagreed.)

Sleep

- 46% agreed that "Most days/nights I get enough sleep." (46% disagreed.)
- 46% agreed that "Stress or anxiety makes it difficult for me to fall asleep or stay asleep." (37% disagreed.)
- 42% agreed that "Overall I feel I have a sleep deficit." (39% disagreed.)
- 50% agreed that "I think my husband/partner has a sleep deficit." (35% disagreed.)

General Health

- 62% agreed that “I take good care of my health.” (20% disagreed.)
- 45% agreed that “My husband/partner takes good care of his health.” (36% disagreed.)
- 49% agreed that “I am satisfied with the amount of preventative health care our family gets overall.” (33% disagreed.)
- 35% agreed that “My husband/partner gets regular preventive health care.” (53% disagreed.)
- 58% agreed that “I am satisfied with the amount of preventative dental care our family gets overall.” (33% disagreed.)
- 49% agreed that “We take better care of our cows' health than our own.” (30% disagreed.)

Health Insurance

- 90% answered ‘yes’ to “Does your family have health insurance?” (10% said ‘no.’)
- 50% agreed that “I am satisfied with our health insurance.” (34% disagreed.)
- 57% agreed that “Our health insurance premiums strain our budget.” (28% disagreed.)
- 17% agreed that “We have had to go without health insurance from time to time.” (75% disagreed.)
- 28% agreed that “Not everyone in the family is adequately covered under our health insurance.” (62% disagreed.)
- 45% agreed that “The health insurance deductibles are so high we rarely use the insurance.” (41% disagreed.)
- 67% agreed that “I worry about health-related costs (insurance premiums, present or potential medical bills).” (20% disagreed.)

Off-Farm Employment

At the time this survey was conducted, 45% of women who responded held an off-farm job, 19% had held an off-farm job in the past but not at present, and 36% had never held an off-farm job. This section was completed by the 64% of women who at present or in the past had held an off-farm job.

- 78% agreed that “I find off-farm employment satisfying.” (9% disagreed.)
- 78% agreed that “Being around other people in my off-farm job is important to me.” (9% disagreed.)
- 81% agreed that “I have to work off the farm for financial reasons (income or insurance).” (12% disagreed.)
- 33% agreed that “I would work off the farm whether we needed the money/insurance or not.” (45% disagreed.)
- 12% agreed that “My husband/partner decides whether or not I work off the farm.” (75% disagreed.)
- 59% agreed that “My husband/partner shows appreciation for my off-farm work.” (22% disagreed.)
- 54% agreed that “My husband/partner and I agree on how to spend my off-farm income.” (27% disagreed.)
- 15% agreed that “I would like more control of how we spend my off-farm income.” (54% disagreed.)
- 22% agreed that “I must do an unreasonable amount of farm work in addition to my off-farm job.” (61% disagreed.)
- 16% agreed that “My off-farm work is a source of conflict with my husband/partner.” (71% disagreed.)

Babysitters or Childcare

16% of respondents currently had children young enough to use babysitters or daycare, 54% had in the past had children young enough to use babysitters or childcare but not at present, and 30% never had children young enough for babysitters or daycare. This section was completed by the 70% of women who at present or in the past had children young enough to use babysitters or childcare.

- 53% agreed that "Finding adequate babysitters or childcare is difficult." (33% disagreed.)
- 37% agreed that “We should use babysitters or childcare more often.” (42% disagreed.)
- 48% agreed that “Our finances dictate whether or not we use babysitters or childcare while we work.” (38% disagreed.)
- 43% agreed that “We need more off-farm childcare options.” (28% disagreed.)
- 71% agreed that “Having our children with us while we do farm work is important for parent-child relationships.” (11% disagreed.)

- 61% agreed that “I generally have little choice but to bring our children with me while I do farm work.” (26% disagreed.)
- 8% agreed that “Use of babysitters or childcare is a source of conflict between me and my husband/partner.” (72% disagreed.)

Children's Work on the Farm

42% of respondents currently had minor children (under age 18) at home and at least one of the children worked on the farm. 40% did not currently have minor children who work on their farm, but did previously. 18% never had minor children who worked on their farm. This section was completed by the 82% of women who at present or in the past had minor children working on their farm.

- 99% agreed that “Working on the farm is important to teach responsibility and/or build a good work ethic.” (Less than 1% disagreed.)
- 99% agreed that “Children learn important skills doing farm work.” (Less than 1% disagreed.)
- 89% agreed that “The tasks our children do are age appropriate.” (6% disagreed.)
- 70% agreed that “My husband/partner makes our children feel appreciated for their farm work.” (16% disagreed.)
- 68% agreed that “My husband/partner compliments our children for their non-farm-related accomplishments.” (16% disagreed.)
- 67% agreed that “My husband/partner and I agree on the amount and type of farm work our children do.” (19% disagreed.)
- 15% agreed that “Our children are required to work too many hours on the farm.” (67% disagreed.)
- 30% agreed that “Our children have difficulty participating in off-farm activities because of farm schedules.” (61% disagreed.)
- 93% agreed that “I am grateful for having the opportunity to raise our family on a farm.” (1% disagreed.)
- 16% agreed that “Sometimes I wish we did not raise our children on a farm.” (74% disagreed.)

Farm Safety

- 81% agreed that “We do a good job of making our farm safe.” (6% disagreed.)
- 45% agreed that “Money is a limiting factor for improving the safety of our farm (equipment, structures, etc.)” (41% disagreed.)
- 43% agreed that “Concern about the risk of injury on our farm (to a child, adult, visitor, etc.) causes me stress or anxiety.” (36% disagreed.)
- 20% agreed that “My husband/partner does not take farm safety seriously enough.” (69% disagreed.)
- 13% agreed that “Farm safety issues are a source of conflict between me and my husband/partner.” (73% disagreed.)
- 21% agreed that “Other adults on or around our farm do not take farm safety seriously enough.” (61% disagreed.)
- 10% agreed that “Farm safety issues are a source of conflict between me and other adults on or around our farm.” (70% disagreed.)

Changes in Agriculture

- 56% agreed that “Concern about government regulations or actions causes me stress or anxiety.” (20% disagreed.)
- 51% agreed that “Concern about farm-related environmental issues causes me stress or anxiety.” (22% disagreed.)
- 67% agreed that “Concern about the long term future of the dairy industry in Wisconsin causes me stress or anxiety.” (16% disagreed.)
- 51% agreed that “People moving into our area and complaining about farming cause me stress or anxiety.” (26% disagreed.)

Community

- 64% agreed that “Farmers are respected in our community.” (16% disagreed.)
- 44% agreed that “Farm women are respected by non-farm women.” (29% disagreed.)
- 69% agreed that “Non-farm people think farmers are well-off financially.” (13% disagreed.)
- 64% agreed that “I enjoy volunteering in my community, church, etc.” (11% disagreed.)
- 84% agreed that “Non-farm activities are not timed well for farmers to participate.” (6% disagreed.)
- 62% agreed that “Sometimes I feel like I am a minority in my community.” (21% disagreed.)

Extended Family and/or Farm Partners

- 56% agreed that “When it comes to farming, my husband/partner's family respects me and my opinions.” (22% disagreed.)
- 29% agreed that “My husband/partner’s parents (father and/or mother) are critical of how we run the farm. [Answer even if parents are deceased.]” (53% disagreed.)
- 16% agreed that “My own parents (father and/or mother) are critical of how we run the farm. [Answer if deceased.]” (68% disagreed.)
- 61% agreed that “Our farm business partners (family or non family) get along well. [Skip if no business partners.]” (19% disagreed.)
- 51% agreed that “We get treated fairly compared with other families involved with our farm. [Skip if no other families are involved.]” (21% disagreed.)
- 18% agreed that “My husband/partner felt pressured to become a farmer.” (70% disagreed.)
- 8% agreed that “I felt pressured to become a farmer or marry one.” (81% disagreed.)

Farm Transfer or Retirement

- 28% agreed that “I am confident we will be financially secure when it comes time to retire.” (46% disagreed.)
- 27% agreed that “I am satisfied with our estate planning (wills, farm transfer plans, asset allocation, etc.)” (49% disagreed.)
- 37% agreed that “I think one of our children will take over the farm some day.” (40% disagreed.)
- 16% agreed that “I will be very disappointed if none of our children want to take over the farm.” (62% disagreed.)
- 18% agreed that “I expect family conflict when it comes time to transfer ownership of the farm.” (56% disagreed.)
- 47% agreed that “I think our children would be better off if they did not go into farming.” (25% disagreed.)

Finances

- 36% agreed that "We are comfortable financially." (48% disagreed.)
- 38% agreed that "I am comfortable with our debt load." (47% disagreed.)
- 63% agreed that "My husband/partner and I agree on how to spend our money." (23% disagreed.)
- 48% agreed that "We seem to have money to spend on the farm but not on the household." (32% disagreed.)
- 48% agreed that "I am responsible for finding the money for household needs." (37% disagreed.)
- 22% agreed that "My husband/partner controls our finances." (61% disagreed.)
- 31% agreed that "Finances are a source of conflict between my husband/partner and me." (51% disagreed.)
- 83% agreed that "The price of milk dictates most of our financial decisions." (10% disagreed.)

Socializing and Networking

- 41% agreed that "I have adequate time to socialize with other women." (47% disagreed.)
- 22% agreed that "My husband/partner gets to socialize, but I have to take care of the children or household." (63% disagreed.)
- 56% agreed that "I enjoy networking with non-farm women." (11% disagreed.)
- 7% agreed that "My networking with non-farm women is a source of conflict with my husband/partner." (71% disagreed.)
- 28% agreed that "I feel socially isolated." (51% disagreed.)
- 16% agreed that "I would like to be in a support group of farm women." (52% disagreed.)
- 26% agreed that "I envy women who do not live on a farm." (55% disagreed.)

Personal Feelings

- 75% agreed that "I love being on the farm." (8% disagreed.)
- 70% agreed that "I love all the different roles I fill." (11% disagreed.)
- 49% agreed that "I have too many roles to fill." (28% disagreed.)
- 49% agreed that "I have guilty feelings due to priority conflicts." (27% disagreed.)
- 64% agreed that "I feel stress when equipment breaks down on the farm." (20% disagreed.)
- 46% agreed that "I feel appreciated for what I do." (35% disagreed.)
- 40% agreed that "I do more than my fair share of the work." (29% disagreed.)
- 38% agreed that "I don't get enough respect." (41% disagreed.)
- 33% agreed that "I often feel depressed." (43% disagreed.)
- 27% agreed that "Sometimes I feel mentally or emotionally abused." (58% disagreed.)

Husband/Partner Relationship and Communication

98% of respondents indicated they had a husband/partner. This section was completed by those respondents.

- 63% agreed that "My husband/partner and I communicate well on important issues and topics." (24% disagreed.)
- 60% agreed that "My husband/partner keeps me well informed about farm-related issues." (26% disagreed.)
- 44% agreed that "My husband/partner is attentive to my needs." (34% disagreed.)
- 52% agreed that "My husband/partner considers me his equal." (27% disagreed.)
- 35% agreed that "My husband/partner helps with the house or children." (51% disagreed.)
- 18% agreed that "My husband/partner and I could use some counseling." (59% disagreed.)
- 34% agreed that "If we ever needed counseling, my husband/partner would agree to participate." (40% disagreed.)
- 15% agreed that "People would look down on us if we got counseling." (53% disagreed.)
- 6% agreed that "Substance abuse (alcohol or other drugs) causes problems in our relationship." (89% disagreed.)

Your View of Male-Female Relationships on Farms in General

- 31% agreed that "Farm women often feel helpless or hopeless." (44% disagreed.)
- 37% agreed that "Farm women are unequal partners." (42% disagreed.)
- 29% agreed that "Mothers and daughters on farms have restricted independence." (49% disagreed.)
- 19% agreed that "Daughters feel conflicted over gender roles on the farm, because of what they see or learn at school or elsewhere." (53% disagreed.)
- 23% agreed that "Mothers and daughters on the farm don't have a voice in the farm and feel subservient to the males." (58% disagreed.)
- 34% agreed that "Fathers and brothers dominate the emotions of the family." (45% disagreed.)
- 10% agreed that "There is more physical or sexual abuse on farms than people think." (62% disagreed.)

COMMENTS FROM WOMEN ON FARMS

Additional comments were solicited on the last page of the questionnaire, and two blank pages were provided. Contact information for appropriate agencies and organizations, such as the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection's "Wisconsin Farm Center Hotline," was included in the event that participants felt they needed to talk with someone about any personal issues relative to the concerns or needs discussed in the survey.

Of the 648 eligible surveys received, 230 surveys had written comments. For quantification purposes, comments were grouped into the 20 survey categories (i.e. Time Pressures, Health Insurance, Finances, etc.). Actual disclosure or summarization of these comments is beyond the scope of this report, but the top five categories of comments were:

1. Finances
2. Personal Feelings
3. Time Pressures
4. Off-farm Employment
5. Health Insurance

PROJECT STAFF

Lorelle Benetti¹
Epidemiologic Programmer/Analyst

Richard Berg, MS¹
Senior Biostatistician

Marilyn Bruger¹
Data Entry/Quality Assurance Specialist

Tammy Ellis²
Research Program Associate

Ruth Mueller²
Administrative Secretary

Mark Purschwitz, PhD.³
Agricultural Safety and Health Specialist

1. Biomedical Informatics Research Center
2. National Farm Medicine Center
3. University of Kentucky, formerly with the National Farm Medicine Center

ADVISORS

Christy Carter, EDD
Clinical Psychologist
Marshfield Clinic

Jennifer Michels, PhD
Clinical Psychologist
Marshfield Clinic

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

National Farm Medicine Center

Phone: 1-800-662-6900

Website: <http://www.marshfieldclinic.org/nfmc>

University of Wisconsin-Madison Center for Women's Health & Women's Health Research

Phone: 1-608-263-9770

Website: <http://www.womenshealth.wisc.edu/>

Wisconsin Alliance for Women for Women's Health

Phone: 1-866-399-9294

Website: <http://supportwomenshealth.org>

Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection Hotline

Phone: *Wisconsin Farm Center* 1-800-942-2474

Website: <http://datcp.state.wi.us/index.html>

Email: center@datcp.state.wi.us

Wisconsin Maternal and Child Health Hotline

Phone: 1-800-722-2295

Website: <http://www.mch-hotlines.org>

Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

Phone: 1-800-448-5148

Website: <http://www.wwhf.org/>

US Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health

Phone: 1-800-994-9662

Website: <http://www.4woman.gov/>

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Report

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Phone: 1-800-662-6900 or 1-715-389-4999

Email: nfmcsh@mcrf.mfldclin.edu

Internet: <http://www.marshfieldclinic.org/nfmc>



For a copy of this report, please contact:

**National Farm Medicine Center
Marshfield Clinic
1000 N Oak Ave
Marshfield WI 54449-9914**

