

PENN STATE SURVEY OF U.S. FARM WOMEN ¹

Jill L. Findeis

**Professor of Agricultural Economics and Demography
Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology
Pennsylvania State University**

Introduction

The role of women on farms in the United States today is an important topic deserving of our attention. Farm women have long provided support to U.S. farms and ranches in terms of their on-farm work that has historically included, to varying degrees, work in the fields, tending animals, keeping books, working in farm-related value-added enterprises, and making farm decisions, among other forms of work. Women's roles on farms are particularly important today because women now face more options: they can choose to own and operate a farm or ranch as a principal farm operator, be one of several main farm operators, own and operate a nonfarm business or have an extra job off the farm. That is, today they have more options for financially supporting the farm household and the farm operation itself. They also likely have an important voice in the transferral of the farm in the long run. Women on U.S. farms often outlive husbands and partners, and therefore very likely influence the ultimate transferral or even disposition of the farm.

To better understand women's roles on U.S. farms today and how these roles have changed over time, Penn State recently conducted a major survey of farm women in the United States. The study was conducted with collaborators at the Economic Research Service (ERS) and in collaboration with the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) at USDA. The last major survey of farm women was conducted by Rachel Rosenfeld in 1980, and one major purpose of the 2001 Penn State survey was to compare our results with hers, using a common set of questions for a portion of the 2001 survey. The Penn State survey was conducted by telephone in April 2001, and a total of 2,661 farm women were interviewed. In addition, a subset of farm men participated in a supplemental survey to better understand joint decision-making on farms today.

The 2001 Penn State survey included questions focusing on farm women's perceptions of their role on the farm, their involvement in farm decision-making and farm work, land ownership and inheritance issues, computer use on the farm and the adoption of sustainable farm practices, and their participation in off-farm work and nonfarm businesses. Questions were also asked on the demographic characteristics of the farm household and on the farm operation itself.

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Who Participated in the Survey?

On average women participating in the Penn State survey were 53 years old (see Table 1). Like the American population more generally, farm women are on average older than in the past. This observation is based on comparisons of the Penn State data with the age distribution of farm women in the earlier Rosenfeld study (see Rosenfeld, 1985). Farm women in the U.S. are quite well educated, with over half going to school beyond high school. In total about 9 percent of U.S. farm women have had an agriculture-related education, either in college or in a vocational program. The majority of farm women in the United States are white non-Hispanic (93 percent) and most are married (also 93 percent). The survey respondents were most likely to live in the Midwest and South, with smaller percentages of the survey respondents living in the Northeast and West. Almost half (46 percent) of the women grew up on a farm or ranch.

[Table 1 about here]

As is true in general for farms across the U.S., the majority of women participating in the 2001 survey live on mid-size or small farms. Some of the women responding to the survey live on large farms, i.e., those classified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as having more than \$250,000 in annual farm sales. Comparing the distribution of farms across sales classes in the 2001 survey to the ARMS survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the distributions are quite similar, except that there are relatively fewer very large farms and more mid-size farms in the Penn State sample. Finally, 57 percent of the farms participating in the Penn State survey reported producing one or more crops and 68 percent had animals — often beef cattle, equine, dairy, poultry, hogs, and sheep and goats.

Survey Results: Observation 1

What do the survey results show about U.S. farm women? First, it is quite clear that many farm women consider themselves to be *main operators* of the farm or ranch. When asked if they are ‘the main operator or one of the main operators of the farm or ranch’, 53 percent of farm women answered yes. Clearly the role of personally operating the farm is an important one for farm women. This is an important finding because many times we assume that there is only one main operator of the farm when we collect farm data and when we assess investment, land use, enterprise selection and innovation, and a myriad of other farm decisions made by who we assume to be the ‘main farm operator’.

The classification of women by themselves as main operators varies by region. The shaded agricultural regions in Figure 1 are those regions with higher concentrations of women answering that they are main farm operators. These areas are in the U.S. West, Northeast, and South. It is in the Central region of the country that farm women are less likely to consider themselves as the main operator or one of the main operators of the farm.

[Figure 1 about here]

We also wanted to understand in more depth women’s perceptions of their roles on U.S. farms, and we asked women to self-classify themselves into five categories: principal farm operator, full agricultural partner, business manager, agricultural helper or a women with no involvement on the farm or ranch (see Table 2). Almost 10 percent of farm women reported that they are the principal farm operator, the ‘person who has sole or primary responsibility for all aspects of the farm operation’. In addition, another 31 percent reported that

they consider themselves as full agricultural partners, a ‘person who shares equal work responsibilities, or decision-making on all aspects of the farm operation with her spouse or others’. And 7 percent consider themselves as business managers. These three types of farm women expressed *high involvement* in the farm or ranch.

[Table 2 about here]

In addition, another 33 percent classified themselves as agricultural helpers, a ‘person who participates in agricultural production mainly during busy times, runs errands, and does other similar farm work. Interestingly, time allocation data collected through the survey show that many of these women spend significant amounts of time working on the farm or ranch. They have an important role — providing labor when it is most needed, and when it may not be possible to hire labor to supplement farm family labor.

Finally, about one in five farm women reported that they are not directly involved at all in any farm or farm-related activities. Figure 2 shows the distribution of farm women by level of involvement, with high involvement including the first three categories — principal operators, full agricultural partners and business managers — and these groups together comprise about half of all farm women in the United States. The other groups — those with medium involvement (i.e., the ‘agricultural helpers’) and those with no direct involvement — comprise the remaining women responding to the survey.

[Figure 2 about here]

One question that arises is why some women who reported working on the farm or ranch many hours classified themselves as ‘agricultural helpers’ whereas other women defined themselves as being more directly involved in the farm or ranch operation. Initially, it was hypothesized that the woman’s age might be a key variable, with older women more likely to view themselves as agricultural helpers. This hypothesis, however, does not appear to be correct — results from the Penn State survey instead suggest if the farm was inherited through the woman’s family, she is more likely to view herself in a ‘high involvement’ role, and less likely to view herself as a ‘helper’.

Survey Results: Observation 2

A second major observation is that U.S. farm women continue to make significant contributions to the farm or ranch and are *increasingly* involved in making major farm decisions, those of particular relevance in terms of agricultural policy. Like Rosenfeld, we asked women about their involvement in farm work and in farm decision-making. To allow for comparisons over time, we asked farm women exactly the same questions that Rosenfeld had asked in the 1980 study. We then compared the percentages over time.

For some farm tasks, women’s participation in these tasks has increased over time, while for other tasks, decreases are observed (see Table 3). For example, farm women in the U.S. reported greater rates of participation now as compared to 1980 in (1) applying fertilizer, herbicides, and insecticides, (2) doing other field work without machinery, and (3) making major purchases of farm and ranch supplies and equipment. In fact, almost half of all farm women reported being involved in major farm purchases now, as compared to 37 percent of farm women in 1980.

At the same time, women reported lower rates of involvement in (1) plowing, disking, cultivating or planting, (2) taking care of farm animals, and (3) supervising the work of both farm family members and hired farm labor. Significant declines are observed in farm work supervision. The lower rate of supervision of farm family members now as compared to 1980 may be because the women in the 2001 study sample are older and have fewer children living at home. Further, family sizes are, on average, smaller today. The declines in supervision of hired labor by farm women may reflect both the decline nationwide in the use of ‘casual’ or part-time labor on U.S. farms and the shift in the hired farm workforce from entire families being hired to work on farms to young solo immigrant males increasingly doing this work today.

[Table 3 about here]

Finally, many farm women are now involved in the task of doing computer work to support the farm operation. We asked specifically if the farm or ranch operation had a computer and how it was used — to access farm information via the Internet; for record keeping; for bookkeeping, payroll, or tax preparation; to e-mail other farmers or ranchers; for e-mailing agricultural consultants or ‘experts’; and/or to do farm-related word processing. We also asked women to indicate whether or not they are *personally involved* in using the computer for each task.

About 55 percent of farm households reported having a computer used for farm or ranch work. Further, if the household reported having a computer, women were highly likely to be using it. The survey results show that, regardless of the specific farm-related computer task, at least 3 out of 4 farm women use the computer to accomplish that task. Rates of use by women are found to be very high overall, not only for traditional tasks such as bookkeeping and record keeping, but also for accessing farm information via the Internet and for e-mailing consultants and ‘experts’. Farm women are broadly participating in these computer-based activities.

Decision-Making

A major finding of the Penn State farm women study is that farm women today are much more likely to be involved in farm decision-making than was the case in the past (Table 4). For almost all types of decisions, women are more likely to be making the decision themselves or jointly with someone else — they are less likely to be ‘not involved’ in making farm decisions. For example, the 2001 survey shows that women today are more likely to be involved in making decisions related to farm land — whether to buy or sell land, or whether to rent land to or from others. This is consistent with the observation that most (87 percent) of the women respondents to the survey had their name on the farm deed.

[Table 4 about here]

Farm women are also much more likely to make decisions, either by themselves or jointly, about buying major farm equipment — in 1980 approximately 48 percent of farm women in the U.S. noted that they were involved in these decisions whereas by 2001, 58 percent were involved in making major farm capital decisions. Whether to produce something new on the farm or to try a new production practice are also decisions that over half of the farm women reported that they are involved in making (see Table 4). About half are also involved in deciding when to sell farm products. These results are very consistent with the earlier result that over half of all women on U.S. farms consider themselves to be ‘main farm operators’. These women are involved in making the most major decisions about the farm — decisions regarding the use of farm land, capital investments and

innovations on the farm.

Survey Results: Observation 3

The third major result of the study is the observation that there has been very significant growth in the prevalence of off-farm work among U.S. farm women. In 1980, 37 percent of farm women in the United States worked off the farm at some time in the past, with 31 percent currently working off-farm (Rosenfeld, 1985). In the 2001 survey, 52 percent of women on U.S. farms reported that they had worked off-farm in a wage or salary job in the past year (Figure 3). Among farm women of working age, this percentage even higher: 62 percent of all working-age farm women had a wage or salary job, in addition to farm work. The large majority of off-farm jobs are reported to be full-time and are at a site away from the farm — generally not in the home or on the farm itself. Across the U.S., the higher than average concentrations of off-farm employment are in the Central states and in the Northeast, with the lower concentrations being in the West and South, in general (Figure 4).

[Figures 3 and 4 about here]

Asked about why they worked off-farm, the most women responded that having money to pay for farm household expenses was either *very important* or at least *somewhat important*, as expected. Earning money in an off-farm job *to support the farm operation itself* is also *very important* to one in three farm women in the U.S. Another 24 percent of farm women working off the farm noted that earning money for the farm is *somewhat important*.

Past research has shown that securing employee benefits, such as health insurance, is an important reason that farm households engage in off-farm work. The study results also show this to be the case, with 54 percent of farm women noting that securing employee benefits is a very important reason for their off-farm employment. When asked about the specific employee benefits they received from their employment, the most common benefits were health insurance, life insurance, a pension, paid leave, and overtime. Very few farm women received child care benefits, in part reflecting their age.

Finally, farm women are also found to be at work because they want to develop and use their job skills. Over half noted that this was a *very important* reason for this work. Development of job skills may be viewed as a necessity for enhancing earnings to maintain the farm household and ultimately the farm.

Conclusions

Several key conclusions can be made, based on those results. First, there is a tendency to view farms as involving ‘farm families’ but being primarily operated by a main farm operator. In this context, farm women are often viewed as ‘helping out’, particularly in terms of doing record keeping, bookkeeping, running errands, and performing other similar farm tasks. The Penn State 2001 survey shows that over half of all farm women disagree with this perception. Many farm women, in fact, consider themselves to be the main operator or one of the main operators of the farm or ranch operations.

The very significant upward trend in the off-farm employment of U.S. farm women is also noteworthy. Off-farm employment provides additional income for the farm household, and can provide for important employee

benefits such as health and life insurance, and retirement funds. Off-farm income from the paid work of farm women also stabilizes farm household income, an important goal when the risk associated with agriculture is considered. Further, the study results show that farm women across the United States are involved in many forms of work to make ends meet: they are putting in hours on the farm, off the farm, perhaps in an on-farm business and in the household. Examining only one aspect of their work alone tends to minimize the work time commitments that they make.

Finally, farm women in the U.S. are increasingly involved in making *major* decisions that affect the profitability of the farm and the use of farm land in the United States. This may be the result of earning income from off-farm jobs or may reflect the generally greater role of women in decision-making today. Given this trend, consideration of the influence of farm women on important farm decisions is essential.

References

Rosenfeld, R. 1985. *Farm Women*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of the U.S. Farm Women Sample.

Characteristics	
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<u>Demographic</u>	
Average age	53 years
	<u>Percent</u>
Education	
Did not graduate from high school	7
High school graduate	40
Education beyond high school	53
Agriculture-related education	9
White non-Hispanic	93
Married	93
Location of survey respondents in U.S.:	
Midwest	41
South	40
West	13
Northeast	6
Grew up on farm or ranch	46
<u>Farm</u>	
Produced one or more crops	57
Had animals (principally beef cattle, equine, dairy, poultry, hogs, sheep and goats)	68

Table 2. Self-perceived Roles of U.S. Farm Women.

	Percent
Principal farm operator	9.6
Full agricultural partner	30.8
Business manager	7.2
Agricultural helper	33.0
No involvement	19.4

Table 3. Farm Women's Changing Involvement in Farm Work.¹

	1980	2001
<u>Increasing involvement</u>	percent involved	
Applying fertilizer, herbicides, and insecticides	17.3	19.8
Doing other field work without machinery	42.3	47.5
Making major purchases of farm and ranch supplies and equipment	37.1	48.0
<u>Decreasing involvement</u>		
Plowing, disking, cultivating, or planting	37.4	32.9
Taking care of farm animals	66.1	59.1
Supervising the work of:		
Other family members	49.4	35.8
Hired farm labor	36.1	28.1

¹Based on comparisons made by Fern Willits and Natalie Jolly.

Table 4. U.S. Farm Women's Involvement in Farm Decision-making.¹

	1980	2001
<u>Farm decisions</u>	percent involved ²	
Whether to buy or sell land	61.3	73.1
Whether to rent more or less land	52.2	64.6
Whether to buy major farm equipment	47.8	57.8
Whether to produce something new, such as a crop or a new breed of livestock	42.0	52.8
Whether to try a new production practice	37.4	52.8
When to sell products	40.2	48.9

¹Based on comparisons by Fern Willits and Natalie Jolly.

²By self or jointly with someone else.

Table 5. Reasons for Working Off-farm, Among U.S. Farm Women.

	Very important	Very or somewhat important
	percent	
Money for household expenses	68	90
Money for the farm operation	33	57
Employee benefits	54	63
To develop or use job skills	53	79

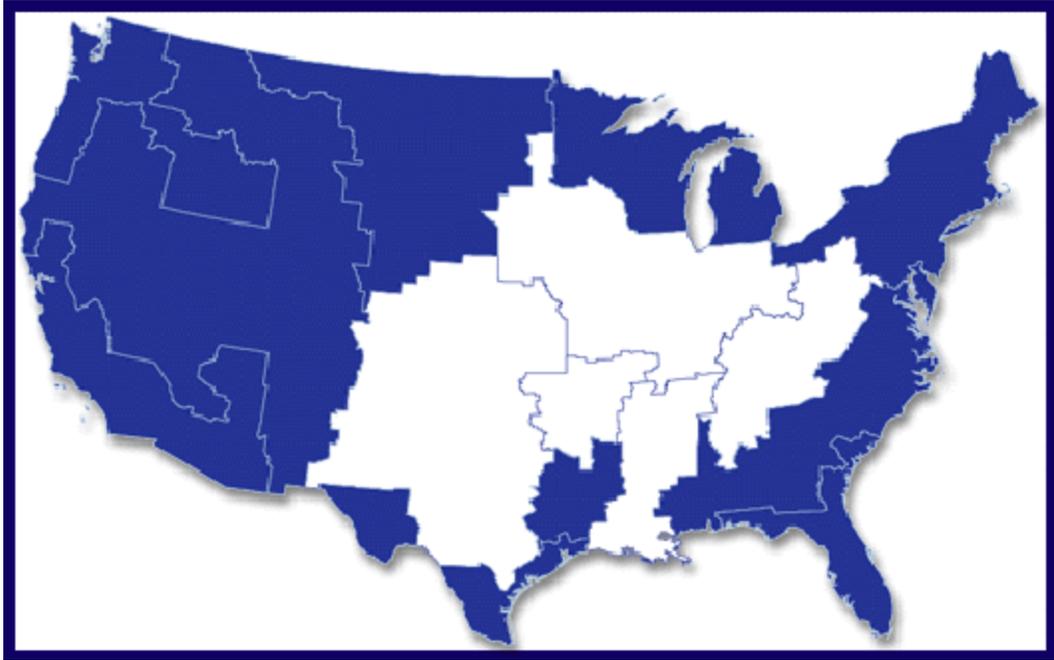


Figure 1. U.S. Farm Women as Main Farm Operators.¹

¹Higher than average concentrations shown as shaded areas.

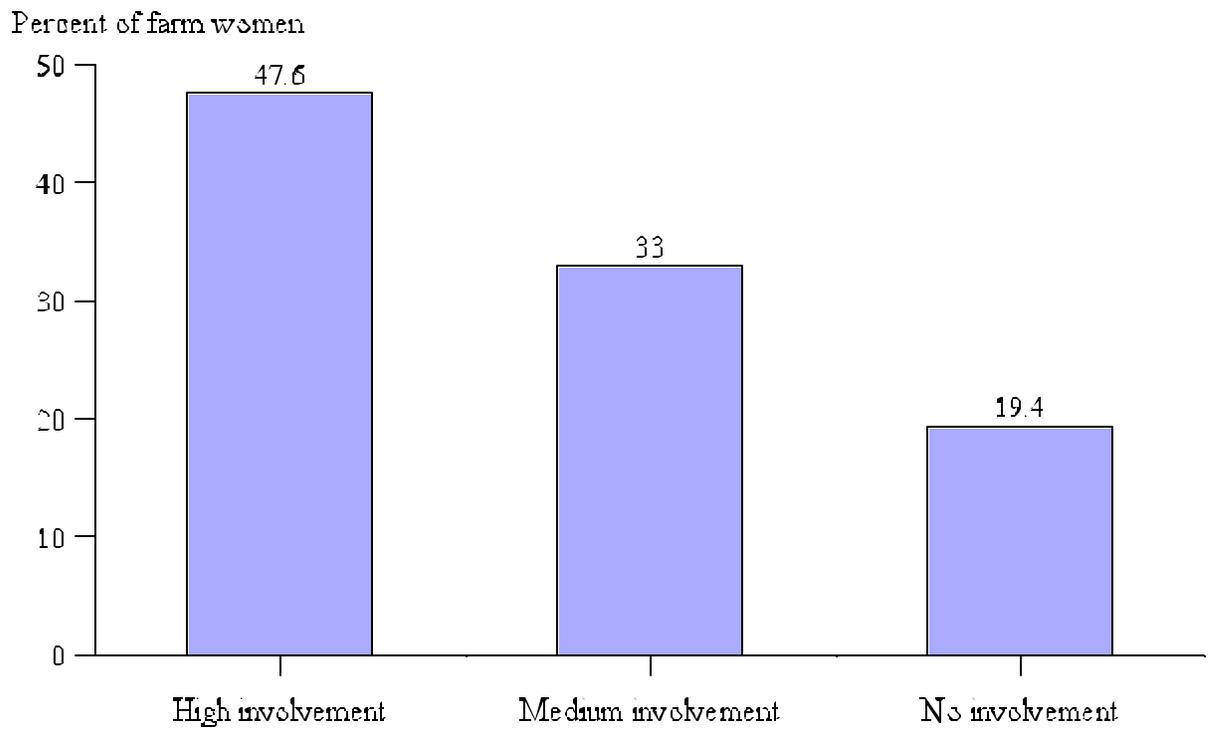


Figure 2. Self-perceptions of Level of Farm Involvement of U.S. Farm Women.

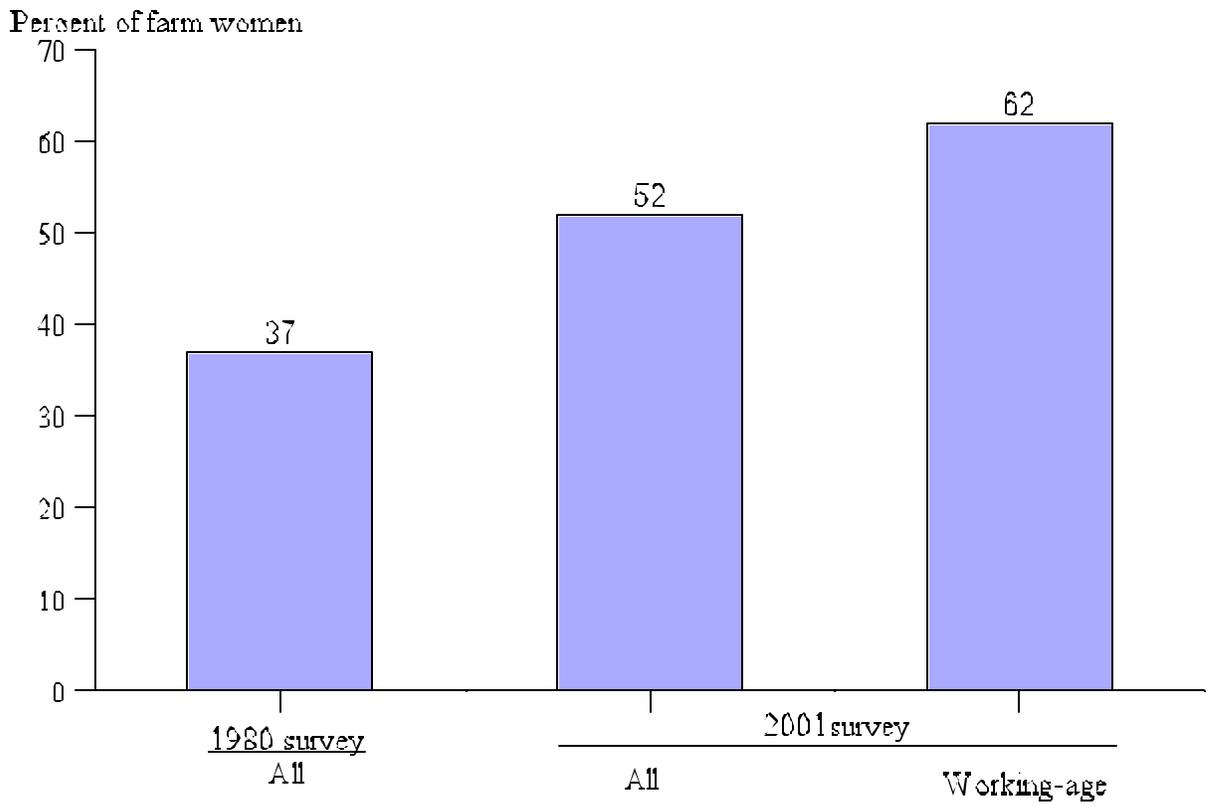


Figure 3. Changes in Prevalence of Off-farm Work Among U.S. Farm Women.

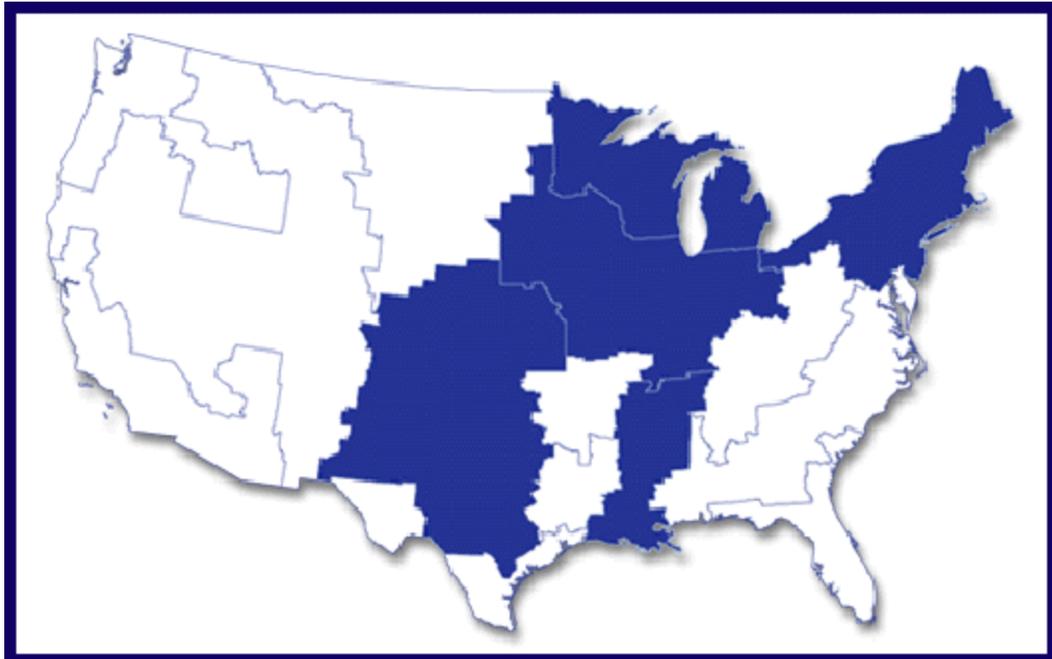


Figure 4. Off-farm Employment of U.S. Farm Women.¹

¹Higher than average concentrations shown as shaded areas.