

# From sun-up to sundown: Work patterns of farming couples

by Cynthia Silver

In most Canadian families, there is a clear demarcation between paid and unpaid work. In farming families, though, the line between paid farm work and unpaid household work is more likely to be blurred. According to the Census of Agriculture, there were 66,690 census-farms operated by husbands and wives working together in 1996. These couples accounted for 24% of all census-farm operations in Canada and about 22% of total farm production.

This article presents a brief profile of the work patterns of farming couples, that is, husbands and wives who live on and operate a farm. It examines how many hours of paid and unpaid work they do each week, and how it is shared. Couples who have no paid employment off the farm are compared to those who do work off-farm, with special emphasis on the hours of work reported by husbands and wives who work only on the farm.

## Fewer than half of husband-wife farmers work only on the farm

Almost 50,000 farming couples had agricultural operations with sales over \$10,000 in 1995. Just under half of these couples (48% or 24,000) ran a "traditional" family farm in which both husband and wife worked exclusively on the farm. The remainder (26,000) were "non-traditional" farming couples, in which at least one spouse did some type of paid work off the farm; in fact, over two-thirds of them spent 20 or more hours per

week employed off-farm. Couples work off-farm for a wide variety of reasons; for example, some may hope to build their farm to a viable status by investing their off-farm earnings in land or equipment, while others could be hobby farmers.

Indeed, non-traditional farming couples seem better off financially. In 1995, about 52% of traditional farming couples made less than \$10,000 of their income from farming, and 28% had total personal income of under \$25,000. In contrast, only 18% of non-traditional couples reported a total personal income of less than \$25,000, even though 67% earned under \$10,000 from farming.

The income reported by traditional farming couples raises some interesting questions about the size of operation required for a family to make a living. In 1995, 37% made more than half of their total personal income from farming, while 39% made no farm income because their operation broke even or reported a loss. It should be noted, however, that farm families benefit to some degree from goods and services (such as some shelter and transportation costs) that are shared by both the household and the farm operation. At tax time, these payments can be expensed against their farm income, and thus increase their after-tax income.

Although earning little personal income from farming, many traditional couples had highly-capitalized operations. Fifty-five percent had \$500,000 or more in assets, with 38% of

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these valued at more than \$1 million. Nevertheless, only 21% of traditional farming operations generated gross sales of more than \$250,000 in 1995.

Non-traditional farming couples also tended to have large investments in their farms, but not to the same extent as traditional farming couples: only 40% had more than \$500,000 in assets. But less investment seems to be associated with fewer sales, since only 9% had sales receipts over \$250,000 in 1995.

The larger investments and revenues reported by traditional farming couples reflect the type of farms they own. About three-quarters (74%) of couple-run dairy farms were operated by traditional couples; of these, 86% had sales over \$100,000 in 1995. In contrast, the great majority of miscellaneous specialty farms<sup>1</sup> (64%) and

1. The major types of miscellaneous specialty farms include sheep, goats, horses, mink, fox, rabbits, bees, other livestock, bison, deer, llamas, mushroom, greenhouse nursery, maple products and Christmas trees.

Data in this article come from the Canadian 1996 Agriculture-Population linkage database based on the 1996 Census of Agriculture and the 1996 Census of Population. The study population consists of those census-farms for which both husband and wife were listed as farm operators. A large fraction of these types of census-farms were too small to generate gross sales of more than \$10,000, and are excluded from this study.

### Work Volume Indices

The census questions that distinguish between off-farm paid work and on-farm paid work use the year 1995 as the reference period, and unpaid work data are collected only for the reference week prior to the census. Therefore, the allocation of work effort across paid work on- and off-farm and unpaid household work could not be achieved without some integration of information across reference periods.

The Work Volume Indices use the Census of Population question on paid work hours in the week before the census. Although this weekly variable does not separate on-farm from off-farm paid work, paid hours spent on farm and off-farm work were estimated for the reference week using the annual 1995 distributions, as reported by farm operators listed on the Census of Agriculture questionnaire. This procedure makes it feasible to add paid work hours to unpaid household work hours and provide a basis for profiling work patterns.

Two limitations of this method should be noted here. First, there might be a seasonal bias due to the May reference week. Second, the farm work share of total paid work is slightly overestimated because other self-employment (such as running a non-farm business) was excluded from the estimated ratios used to distribute market work between farm and off-farm components.

**Census-farm:** includes all agricultural operations producing crops, livestock, poultry, animal products or other agricultural products for sale.

**Farming couples:** both husband and wife (whether married or common-law) identified themselves as farm operators on the census. Couples in which only the husband is identified as the operator are excluded, even though the wife may do a substantial share of the farm work, because the census does not collect estimates of time spent doing farm work by individuals who were not listed as farm operators. *Traditional farming couples* do not have any paid employment off the farm (this includes a small number who operate a non-farm business but are not employed by others). *Non-traditional farming couples* work off-farm for pay.

**Gross farm receipts/sales:** gross receipts of an agricultural operation (before depreciation and operating costs are subtracted) received during 1995. Revenues include income from all agricultural products sold in addition to such sources as marketing board payments, program and rebate payments received, and GST refunds.

**Farm income:** income from farming is defined as net income from self-employment, and includes income such as that received from the sale of agricultural products, rebates and farm-support payments, and payments under insurance plans.

**Total personal income:** the couple's combined income from all sources such as net self-employment income, wages and salaries, investment income, pensions, government transfers and tax credits.

**Household work:** unpaid housework, yard work or home maintenance for members of this household or others. Some examples include preparing meals, doing laundry, household planning, shopping and cutting the grass.

	Traditional couples		Non-traditional couples	
	Farm work		Total paid work <sup>1</sup>	Farm work
	Average number of hours per week, based on Work Volume Index			
<b>All farm types<sup>2</sup></b>				
Small	71	90	52	
Bigger	100	102	77	
<b>Dairy</b>				
Small	86	94	67	
Bigger	108	111	91	
<b>Cattle</b>				
Small	76	92	55	
Bigger	102	108	80	
<b>Hog</b>				
Small	--	92	57	
Bigger	99	94	69	
<b>Poultry and egg</b>				
Small	--	--	--	
Bigger	87	83	58	
<b>Wheat</b>				
Small	62	89	52	
Bigger	93	103	77	
<b>Small grain/oilseed</b>				
Small	58	87	47	
Bigger	95	99	74	
<b>Miscellaneous specialty</b>				
Small	78	90	52	
Bigger	114	107	75	

1. Includes farm work plus hours of off-farm employment.

2. Small farms have annual sales receipts of more than \$10,000 and less than \$100,000; bigger farms have more than \$100,000.

-- Sample too small to produce reliable estimate.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Agriculture-Population linkage database.

cattle farms (62%) were run by non-traditional couples; of these, 47% reported gross sales receipts over \$100,000.

### Some farms demand more work than others

According to the estimates calculated by the Work Volume Index, the old adage that farmers toil from sun-up to sun-down certainly seems to be true. And generally the larger the farm, the longer the hours. Traditional farming couples working on bigger farms generating over \$100,000 in annual sales spent an

average of 100 combined hours a week on farm work, while those on small farms with sales between \$10,000 and \$100,000 devoted 71 total hours.<sup>2</sup>

Farms with livestock are also more demanding of couples' time. For example, traditional couples running a dairy farm worked 86 hours a week on small farms and 108 hours on bigger farms. In contrast, those with wheat-growing operations had an average work week of 62 hours on small farms and 93 hours on bigger farms.

Younger farm-operator couples where the wife was under age 45 did

more farm work than older couples. Those between 35 and 44 years old put in 100 hours of labour on their farms; senior farmers (comprising a smaller group) devoted about half that amount, at 55 hours per week.

On the whole, non-traditional couples did fewer hours of farm work than traditional couples. However, because they spent additional hours in employment off the farm, they often did more paid work. In fact, non-traditional couples with small farms had a longer paid work week (90 hours) than their traditional counterparts (71 hours).

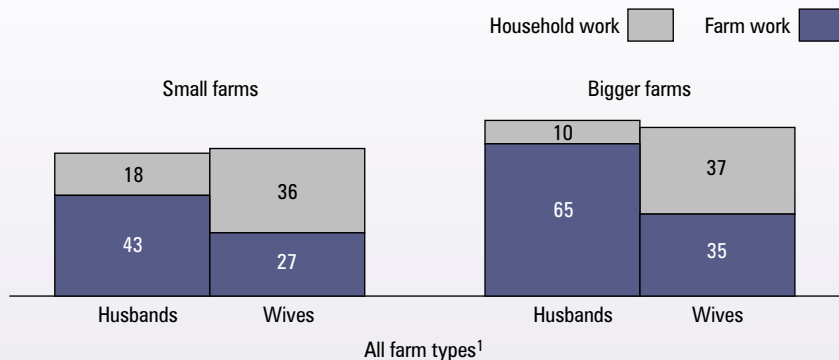
### Traditional farming couples split total workload down the middle

Studies in other countries have shown that the distribution of work and decision-making within farm households is affected by gender. Women are more likely to do "household" work and men "outside" work, even if one or both are also working off-farm.<sup>3</sup> A 1994 study of farm roles among New Zealand women suggested that they were constrained from assuming sole responsibility for farm production, even though they had a

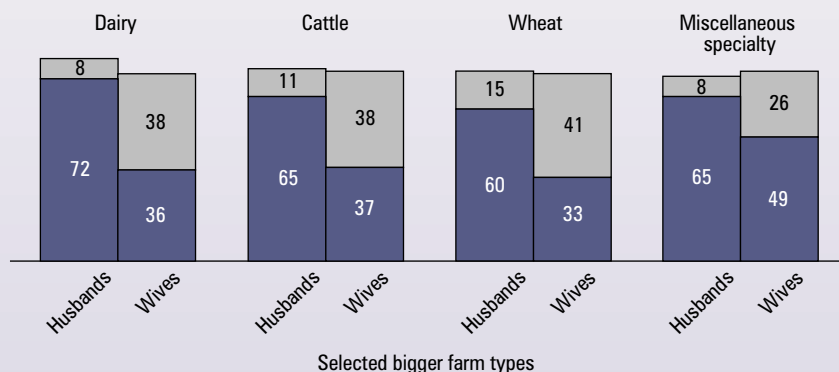
2. Statistics Canada uses gross sales receipts to classify farms by size, although revenues can be volatile from year to year. In this article, farms reporting sales of \$10,000 to \$99,999 in 1995 are defined as small farms, while those reporting more than \$100,000 in sales are described as bigger farms.

3. Wilson, John, Ida Harper Simpson and Richard Landerman. 1994. "Status variation on family farms: Effects of crop, machinery and off-farm work." *Rural Sociology*. 59, 1: 136-153; Alston, Margaret. 1995. "Women and their work on Australian farms." *Rural Sociology*. 60, 3: 521-532; Tufts Rickson, Sara and Peter L. Daniels. 1999. "Rural women and decision making: Women's role in resource management during rural restructuring." *Rural Sociology*. 64, 2: 234-250; Keating, Nora C. and Heather M. Little. 1994. "Getting into it: Farm roles and careers of New Zealand women." *Rural Sociology*. 59, 4: 720-736.

Average number of hours per week, based on Work Volume Index



... regardless of the type of farm



1. Small farms have annual gross sales receipts of more than \$10,000 and less than \$100,000; bigger farms have more than \$100,000.  
Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Agriculture-Population linkage database.

range of on-farm involvements; nevertheless, the amount of domestic work for which they were responsible declined as their on-farm role moved along a continuum from “homemaker” through “half farm-hand” to “farmer.”<sup>4</sup>

In Canada, too, traditional farming couples tend to share their long hours of work in a gender-specific way. Husbands generally do much more of the farm work, even though their wives are one of the farm’s operators; at the same time, wives consistently do a much larger share of the household work. Overall, husbands did roughly 60% to 85% more farm work than their wives, while wives did two to almost four times more household work than their husbands. But the total volume of

work done by each spouse in these traditional farm-operator couples was virtually the same.

On small farms, husbands and wives each averaged a 61- and 64-hour work week, respectively. Husbands spent 71% of their time (43 hours) on farm work, and wives put 57% of their work time (36 hours) into household work. On bigger farms, couples worked longer hours, with husbands recording 75 hours of total work and wives 72 hours. But while the husband spent almost all his work-time on farm work (87% or 65 hours), wives divided their time almost equally between farm and household work (35 and 37 hours, respectively).

The division of farm work within traditional farming couples is also

related to the type of farm they operate. For example, wives on dairy farms did a smaller share of the farm work (50%) than did wives on wheat farms (55%) or miscellaneous specialty farms (75%).

When young children are living in the home, their impact on the division of work is predictable. For example, young wives with children under age six did less farm work (28 hours) than those without children this age (39 hours); on the other hand, they did substantially more household work (43 hours versus 28). Since this estimate does not include time spent focussed exclusively on child care, it does not cover all of the unpaid work done by farming mothers with young children.

Summary

Farm couples are no strangers to long hours of work, with both spouses fully engaged in maintaining the farm and the household. Although husbands do more farm work and wives more household work, the total volume of paid and unpaid work on farms is shared about equally between them. That said, there are variations in the amounts of farm work done by operators of different types of farms. In general, the larger the farm, the larger the husband’s share of farm work and the more household work the wife was responsible for. In other words, the larger the farm, the more gender-based the division of labour becomes.

4. Keating and Little. *ibid.*



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