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## "Woman's Place is in the Home": The Ideological Devaluation of Farm Women's Work

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Recent scholarship on U.S. farm women<sup>1</sup> demonstrates that historically farm women produced a significant proportion of agricultural production, in terms of both agricultural commodities and on-farm consumption. Literature aimed at farmers in the nineteenth century recognized women as hard working contributors to the farm, and agricultural educators recruited skilled poultry and dairy women to share their knowledge with male and female participants in Farmers' Institutes (Perriam 1984 [1884], Illinois Farmers' Institute 1910). Nonetheless, when the government developed programs in the twentieth century to "modernize" farming, it virtually ignored women's productive contributions. How are we to understand this disjuncture between the realities of agricultural production and the propensity of policy-makers to overlook farm women's labor or to view it as a symptom of rural "backwardness?" How did dominant constructions of femininity serve to devalue women's work in general, leading to the super-exploitation experienced by most women workers? And finally, to what degree and in what ways did farm women assent to or dissent from these dominant notions of femininity and associated policies?

I argue that policy-makers', opinion-setters', and educators' attempts to transform farm women from "housekeepers" to "homemakers" resulted from deeply sedimented notions of appropriate female roles, characterized as the "doctrine of separate spheres" that developed during the nineteenth century. This "cult of domesticity" linked women's appropriate activities to evolutionary theories in which ruling elites saw themselves as the embodiment of a progressive modernity to which all more "backward" peoples would eventually assimilate through the liberating effects of labor-replacing technologies. In the process women's normative activities were segregated from the public (male) economy that was regulated by the capitalist market; in the prescriptive writings that guided policy decisions, they became the repositories of morality, aesthetic expression, and self-development. At the same time, farm women participated in capitalist development in a distinctive manner that conditioned their own standards for evaluating the worth of their labor and products.

The doctrine of separate spheres developed as part of the transition to industrial capitalism, particularly in New England. Calvinist reformers and educators like Catherine Beecher (Sklar 1973) drew on the traditional New England division of labor in which women were responsible for running the household and its manufactures like cloth

production while men were responsible for operating the family's agricultural and manufacturing enterprises. As industrialization separated men's manufacturing work from the household and industrialized many of women's traditional tasks, particularly cloth manufacture, these reformers promoted a newly conceived division of labor: Children, no longer useful in the manufactory or farm, were the primary responsibility of women who were charged with their moral education. As the world of commerce became more insecure, with frequent panics and cutthroat competition, reformers gave women the charge to create islands of harmony and security to which the husband could retreat—a "haven in a heartless world" (Lasch 1977). As the machine entered the garden, with unsettling consequences, the home was naturalized as a place of bucolic peace. The Calvinist tradition, which stressed women's importance as the family's moral center, merged, sometimes uneasily, with the southern "cavalier" tradition in which women were ideally leisured ladies whose primary role was as hostess and symbol of their husbands' success (see Bloch 1978, Cott 1977, 1978; Cowan 1983, Degler 1980, Lerner 1969, Matthaei 1982, Matthews 1987, Ryan 1982, Sklar 1973, Strasser 1982, Taylor 1961, Welter 1966, Wright 1981, Zaretsky 1986).

Both these idealizations of adult womanhood were predicated on the idea that women were not "productive" workers, production being the domain of manufacturing, now carried on in factories distant from residential districts. Increasingly, "work" became coterminous with production that could be evaluated in monetary terms. Kessler-Harris (1982, 1990) has analyzed the multiple ways in which women were persistently excluded from this domain: In the nineteenth century reformers, labor unions, and other political actors took up the idea of a "living wage" or a "family wage" as the foundation below which a man's wage should not fall. In contrast the courts, and other venues in which norms were articulated and institutionalized, established that a woman's wage was based on "custom," rather than contract, and assumed that women would have supplementary forms of support from family members (Kessler-Harris 1990:Chapter 1). Women who entered the wage labor market, therefore, found their labor was valued significantly below that of men: the cultural norm that prescribed homemaking for a married woman was enforced by wages so low that women with family responsibilities entered the wage labor market—became "productive workers"—only when they found all other avenues for support closed.<sup>2</sup>

The equation of "work" with "gainful employment" was reflected in census categories. Folbre (1991) documents the refusal of the Census Bureau to consider feminist criticisms of the Bureau's omission of household production following the Civil War. Women's production was considered only when it appeared in formal labor markets or when their income-producing activities were the "principle means of support or principle source of income" (Reid 1934:79). Home economist Margaret Reid herself was locked into the idea that "gainful employment" was a qualitatively different kind of work than "household tasks,"

despite her counter-hegemonic attempts to find ways to evaluate the household's contribution, that is, "what proportion of the total real income comes from family labor expended to provide the members with goods" (Reid 1934:78). Despite the inability of statisticians to find ways to enumerate women's unwaged labor, farm men, including working age sons, were considered as gainfully employed if they worked on their own farm, while farm women were rarely if ever so considered. Inasmuch as the census is one of the primary ways a complex society represents itself to itself and the census provides categories through which social realities can be interpreted and made meaningful, the exclusion of most non-waged work from these figures, and virtually all women's non-waged work (even if it was income-producing), contributed to the ideological construction of women as "unproductive" and their labor thereby rendered invisible, without social value.

If industrial development tended to separate the urban household from manufacturing, it had very different consequences on farms. Rather than separate the house from the site of "productive" (i.e., market-oriented) activities, men and women both increasingly became commodity producers and, among the lower class, workers in the growing paid agricultural labor force.<sup>3</sup> There is some evidence that women's farm work was conceptualized differently among different ethnic groups and/or cropping systems: Fink (1986, 1988), for example, argues that the Iowa women with whom she worked saw themselves as "helpers" rather than "workers." She found that "a woman lost social favor by engaging in any economic or political activity outside the context of the family, but almost any degree of crossover into male roles was permissible if done within the family's system of control" (Fink 1986:19). Osterud (1990:99), in contrast, found that some of the nineteenth century farm women whose diaries she read considered themselves "helpmeets" to their husbands—a term that connotes "partner" more than "assistant" or "helper—fully engaged in the tasks of daily life. I found some evidence for the attitudes documented by Fink in the southern Illinois region in which my research is located. For example, an elderly man said he "would not let his women work [in the fields]." This same man, however, hired women to do field work, and most families I worked with spoke freely about women working in a variety of jobs both on their own farms and, if they were from a poor family, on other peoples' farm. Southern Illinois farm women seemed closer to the New York women about whom Osterud writes than to the Iowa farm women of whom Fink writes.

In addition to possible ethnic and temporal differences, this may reflect the different crop regimes: Iowa farmers tend to be grain and livestock farmers, while Union County, Illinois, farms specialized in fruits and vegetables, crops that were the same as those grown by women in large house gardens. The farmers Osterud studied concentrated on dairy, another area in which women had traditionally been predominant. I found little evidence that in Union County, prior to tractors, women often did heavy field work that required driving a team to equipment,

either in the orchards or in the fields.<sup>4</sup> They were full participants, however, in horticulture, working in the fields. Farm-owning wives often "bossed" the packing shed while husbands "bossed" the fields. Poorer women, and children from all class levels, often worked for their neighbors. The women I interviewed spoke freely of working hard; they seem to use the term "help" to denote decision-making authority. Therefore, their husband "helped" them by plowing and cultivating the garden, cutting stove wood, hauling water for laundry, and so forth. Conversely, they "helped" their husband in such tasks as harvesting the corn and rounding up livestock when they broke out. Children "helped" their parents except on their own income-producing projects, when parents might "help" their child. Paid labor was also "help."

Whatever the specific gendered division of labor in different regions of the country, industrialization brought with it increasing urbanization and a concomitant demand for agricultural products. The railroad system that was created in the nineteenth century allowed farmers easy access to urban markets. The Illinois Central Railroad linked Union County, in extreme southern Illinois, with the growing Chicago market in the 1850s; during the next century this link, as well as rail lines to St. Louis, Missouri, built in the 1870s and '80s, provided the primary avenues to urban markets, supplanting the earlier Mississippi river routes southward. As farms in general increased commodity production, farm women expanded their traditional production of dairy products and poultry (as meat and eggs) to supply local town and distant city markets. This pattern begun during the colonial period on the eastern seaboard (Jensen 1986), occurred in southern Illinois in the late nineteenth century. Inasmuch as women had long been engaged in cloth and clothing production, organized in such a way that they created exchange networks outside the home, these commodities probably replaced their prior economic contributions to the household, albeit this time linking the household to commodity markets rather than to neighborhood networks. Oral accounts indicate that by the turn of the century earnings from these enterprises provisioned virtually all the family's needs, including clothing, shoes, medicines, household furnishings (except perhaps major investments like stoves), and sundries.

Farm women also had a far greater responsibility for raising and processing foods for the family than did urban women, particularly as the century progressed. In southern Illinois hog butchering was a community affair and some women raised pigs, segregated from the commercial flock, specifically for home use. The wife's kitchen garden and orchard produced most of the fruits and vegetables the family ate fresh, canned, and otherwise preserved. In addition, most Union County<sup>5</sup> farms used considerable amounts of day labor. Some of these laborers lived in the house and the wife was expected to cook, clean, and mend for them for no charge, despite the fact that they received less wages than did men who provided their own board. In contrast, boarders like school teachers paid their rent to the wife who kept the earnings. Farm households might also include other kin and non-kin dependents,

some of whom might be paupers or orphans bid off by the county to individual households.

The farm household, therefore, retained many characteristics of the "pre-modern" home, including as it did a number of unrelated laborers and dependents in addition to the nuclear family and other close kindreds, what Haraven (1976:195) terms an "augmented household." The similarities were deceptive, however, for farm households, like their urban counterparts, had become more specialized, shedding, in addition to cloth manufacture, manufacturing enterprises like sawmills, carpentry shops, blacksmith shops, and grist mills, with the associated apprentices. The American commercial farm household of the turn-of-the century, despite retaining some forms that outwardly looked like their pre-modern antecedents, were thoroughly "modern," in the sense that they were fully integrated into and dependent on the industrializing society. They represented a specific route into "modernity," albeit one that was misrecognized by the elements of society which were able to articulate norms for the general public (Adams in press).

Two movements arose around the end of the century that institutionalized the doctrine of separate spheres in a new way. First, a number of ambitious and educated women who, as women, were excluded from pursuing professional careers organized the Home Economics Movement. Second, reformers associated with the Country Life Movement sought to bring the new standards of living to farming people. These two movements included a number of the same people, such as Liberty Hyde Bailey, Director of the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell, an "urban agrarian" who was one of the founders of the Country Life Movement and a promoter of the new Home Economics (Danbom 1979, Elbert 1988, see also Bowers 1974). These reformers shared the evolutionary assumptions common to most educated professionals that privileged industrial efficiency and "scientific management."

Key notions held by intellectual elites reinforced the devaluation of women's work: These included the belief that women's primary biological destiny was reproduction and that mental activities reduced her reproductive capabilities (Matthews 1987: Chapter 5); that the greater the division of labor the higher the evolutionary development; and that "scientific management" represented the path to individual happiness and social harmony. Various prescriptions flowed from this, including that "farm work and household work are totally separate, and indeed, that the greater the separation of spheres, the more modern, efficient, and hence successful agri-industry would be" (Elbert 1988:261).

Home economists generally promoted scientific management but did not fully accept the narrow definitions of "work" which excluded virtually all women's unwaged labor. Rather, they sought to elevate women's domestic activities to a level co-equal with men's.<sup>6</sup> Products of University of Illinois' recently-created Home Economic department, speaking to Farmers' Institute Short Courses in 1911, argued that "Home-making is a profession

on an equal with medicine, with the law, with the ministry and with teaching" (Illinois Farmers' Institute 1911:284). In what now appears as contradictory, these home economists simultaneously averred that "housekeeping" and "homemaking" are a girl's "natural destiny and her God-given right," but at the same time argued that housekeeping required training so that she could "perform her household tasks in an orderly, efficient manner" (Illinois Farmers' Institute 1911:283). The domestic ideology was so strong that these home economists failed to perceive the farm home as structurally distinct from the urban home. Despite the centrality of farm women's commodity production, particularly poultry and dairy, to the farm economy (and to feeding urban residents), and their major contributions in raising, processing, and preparing food and other necessities, these home economists were unable to incorporate these activities in their research or education. At one of the Illinois short courses a home economist stated "Agriculture ... provides the means whereby food, clothing, and shelter for men are obtained ... household science adapts these things to the needs of the family" (Illinois Farmers' Institute 1911: 283). Home economists' statements implicitly placed men in charge of the agricultural sphere and women in charge of the family-centered household. Nowhere in these statements do women appear as income-earners nor as producers of valued products.

In the name of progress reformers in the early twentieth century sought to extend industrial models of organization and efficiency to farming. While recognizing, and often romanticizing, differences between agricultural and industrial production systems, reformers more generally tended to criticize farmers' lack of "modern" forms of efficiency and scientific rationality. Just as women, who produced outside of the public marketplace (at least ideally, if not in fact), represented a closer affiliation to nature and the body, so also did farmers. Unlike women, who as wives were safely domesticated in the home, farmers, as a large "backward element," threatened social stability both by their failure to produce enough food to supply the growing cities, and through their failure to assimilate to modern forms of organization (Danbom 1979). Like the unruly immigrant masses, with whom much of the Progressive movement was deeply concerned, farmers represented a less civilized past which, if not adequately assimilated to modern life, threatened to overwhelm civilization itself. The Land Grant colleges, through their colleges of agriculture, aimed to transform farming into a scientific enterprise; their home economics departments aimed to do the same for farm households. Elbert (1988:254) observes, "The standard upheld to both immigrant women and farm women was a new pseudo-profession, unpaid and unlicensed—housewifery."

### Counter-hegemonic Ideologies

The account sketched thus far focuses on elite ideologies that became hegemonic in policy-making circles. There is little evidence, however, that farm women or men significantly internalized these standards. To the contrary,

throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century most farm men and women remained strongly committed to an ideal of femininity that required hard work. Letters written to the U.S. Department of Agriculture as part of the Country Life Movement-instigated study of farm attitudes attest that farmers held strongly to an ethic of hard work. For example, a man from Iowa wrote (United States Department of Agriculture 1915:33):

The country club for women has not bettered the condition, as they are invariably dominated by the town club, where washing dishes, cooking for harvest hands and plowmen is not at all fashionable, and sweeping floors and dusting is considered as detrimental to the color of the cuticle of the hand. So if a country club is organized, let it be by the country women and women who are proud of their ability to labor and who consider labor honorable.

Such sentiments were apparent in southern Illinois, where hard work was normal even for farmers who were members of the county elite. For example, a Union County family who lived near the market center, descendants of the town's founder who were related to the town's leading families with whom they generally socialized, maintained distinctly farming norms. The great granddaughter of the farm's founder, Barbara Throgmorton, recalled (WSIU 1991):

My grandmother who worked hard in the gardens and such dreaded visits of some of the other relatives who lived in the city who would come out in their finery ready to sit and visit. Her hair might be flying and she had her sleeves rolled up and she'd been out sweating and doing some kind of hard job somewhere. ... Yet they were very cultivated people.

At threshing time, Barbara recounted, when the threshing crew came in for their dinner, her grandmother played opera for the workmen on her Victrola. Her grandmother was reputed to have earned enough from her poultry enterprise and piano lessons to buy a nearby farm.

The fact that farm men valued farm women for their work does not mean that women's work received equal status with men's. Fink (1988) argues that farm women's commodity production was conceptualized as a "sideline," not only by their husbands and by census takers, but by themselves. I never heard women refer to their work in this manner, but it is clear from oral recollections and memoirs that women's work did not carry the same social weight as men's. Edith Rendleman (born 1898), in her memoirs, recounts that her mother bought all the family's clothes, including suits for her six brothers, what furniture they had, and all purchased food with proceeds from her poultry and butter production. However, deriving from a long patriarchal tradition in which the male household head controlled all the property and income, the husband controlled money from sales from the farm. Edith Rendleman recalled:

Dad used to pocket all the money from the farm. A woman never knew what it was to have any. When you would tell him to buy comfortable chairs he would say he could sit on a nail keg.

Women who worked in the fields were paid 1/2 or 2/3 that of a man's wage, the same as a child's or youth's wage.

Some women, often widows who inherited a prosperous estate, achieved a status as a businesswoman in her own right, but these cases appear rare.<sup>7</sup> Illinois women achieved the automatic right to own property in their own name, regardless of marital status, only in 1861; other rights pertaining to property, the ability to make contracts, and to participate in civil society were granted later (Gross 1868:Chapter 69a; see also, e.g., Ryan 1983, Grossberg 1985). Farm women inhabited a separate and unequal sphere, albeit one defined quite differently from that of their urban middle class counterparts.

By the 1920s, in southern Illinois many farm women, particularly young women, began to aspire to more urban standards of living. I have found little evidence, however, that desire for greater material comforts and conveniences carried with it the dominant notion of domesticity. On the contrary, farm women appear to have increased their poultry and dairy production; both interviews with women who established families in the '20s and census figures indicate that these two products increased during the 1920s (see Tables 1 and 2). The market did not shift decisively to mechanized production, controlled largely by men, until after World War II. As late as 1964 more than two thirds of Union County farms still reported raising chickens, although by this date more stringent health codes had eliminated the market for fryers and cooking hens. Initially, farm women responded to increased consumer desires by intensifying commodity production, not by becoming a "just a housewife."

**Table 1.** Number of Dairy Cows  
Union County, Illinois, 1860-1960

Date	Number of Cows
1860	2623
1870	2907
1880	3268
1890	4089
1900	3248
1910	3323
1919	4291
1929	4518
1939	5135
1949	5182
1959	1850

*Source:* U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Agriculture 1860, 1870, 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910, 1919, 1929, 1939, 1949, 1959.

**Table 2.** Number of Chickens  
Union County, Illinois, 1860-1950

Date	Number of Chickens
1880	43,269
1890	99,725
1900	73,088
1910	157,326
1919	149,948
1929	160,113
1939	147,258
1949	68,766

*Source:* U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Agriculture 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910, 1919, 1929, 1939, 1949.

### Poultry Production, Dairy Production

When farmers, both men and women, met the market, however, they tended to receive a lower rate of return on their labor than did industrial labor, due to what agricultural economists characterize as unequal terms of trade between sectors (Cochrane 1979). The only period in which this was not true was the "golden age of agriculture," 1910-1914, the period that established the "parity ratio" for later farm programs. The persistent inequity in the valuation of agricultural labor compared to labor in other sectors of the economy, I suggest, is due to the persistence of production for use as a necessary (albeit decreasing) part of the production process. In many ways, farm and household production have appeared anomalous in advanced capitalist economies (e.g., on farming: Adams 1988, de Janvry 1980; Friedmann 1978, 1980; Goodman and Redclift 1981; Hedley 1981; Lehmann 1986; and Mann and Dickinson 1978; for a recent summary of the debates around housework see Collins 1990). Neither the "family farm" nor the "home" ideally utilize significant amounts of waged labor; in both, many productive activities are oriented to internal consumption and do not enter commodity markets. That is, farmers and housewives deploy labor to produce goods and services that appear only in the form of their use values—to be consumed by the producing unit. In addition, they may (and generally do, especially in the case of farm men and women) deploy their labor to produce goods and services that are realized as use values only through the medium of commodity exchange. To use the common shorthand, they appear as "exchange values" rather than "use values."

In non-capitalist economies, few products take on the form of commodities—goods reduced to a common denominator and exchanged as objects stripped of the social relations through which they came into being; rather, goods and services circulate along with social relationships. These different aims of production yield different bases on

which to calculate value:<sup>8</sup> In a capitalist firm all "factors of production," including land, labor, and capital, are reduced to a common monetary calculus and used to calculate marginal utility of each factor, with the aim of increasing returns, conceived as profit on investments. Non-capitalist forms do not use a common denominator to calculate beneficial investments, nor are investments necessarily oriented to producing profits. Chayanov (1966) developed a theory of peasant economy that postulated that peasant producers used a calculus of drudgery versus need satisfaction to determine investments in labor and land. Gudeman and Rivera (1991), in a provocative although circumscribed excursion into the history and ethnography of western economic theory, diagnosed a "house economy" in which the aim of production was to keep as much production as possible within the bounds of the household--household ranging from the estate of ancient Greece to a marginal peasant house in the highlands of Colombia. Unlike Chayanov's peasant economy, in which labor never appeared as a commodity, Gudeman and Rivera argue that, for families that deploy resources within a "house economy," sales of labor or commodities in capitalist markets are understood as supplementary to the basic means of support, and a considerable amount of effort is expended to avoid dependence on such markets (see Friedmann 1980 for a more strictly Marxist presentation of a similar argument).

Gudeman and Rivera stress that the decision to operate on the basis of a "house economy" or a "capitalist firm" is not based on individual preference; rather, in a capitalist economy all forms of production that can produce a profit will be operated as capitalist firms. Therefore, only those domains of production that are unprofitable will appear organized through a "house" form of organization. This analysis appears empirically valid when the structure of agriculture is more closely examined: those agricultural products that are not closely tied to long-cycle natural processes (Mann and Dickinson 1978), like livestock and horticulture, have been increasingly concentrated in the past four decades. The largest farms, which are fully capitalist firms, those with \$5 million or more in sales, earned nearly 90 percent of their sales from vegetables, fruit, nursery and greenhouse, and from poultry and cattle (Reimund, Stucker, and Brooks 1987:4). Row crops, in contrast, with their "lumpy" use of labor and capital, and their dependence on relatively inflexible natural growth cycles and on the vagaries of climate, is the only form of agricultural production that has been left almost entirely in the hands of family-operated farms. Given the persistent inequality of returns to family farm labor, and given a national economy that offers alternative sources of income, an important question then becomes, why do people choose to continue to operate family labor farms?

The solution to this riddle, I suggest, may help illuminate the reasons women have acquiesced for so many years to the low wages they receive in the formal economy—the public devaluation of their labor. First, it is important to note that farmers and women have not passively accepted the low valuation of their labor by the

larger society: farmers have organized repeatedly to try to achieve higher prices for their crops; thousands of farmers left farming, especially after World War II, to find more remunerative employment in the expanding industrial and service sectors of the economy; and women who entered the industrial labor force joined unions to get better wages and working conditions. The question is, then, why have so many families stayed in farming, and why have women for so long failed to mount a successful, unified effort to gain an equal wage? Why have so many farmers and women "gone along with" these structured inequalities?

I suggest that the key to understanding farmers' persistence in the face of structural inequality rests largely, although not entirely, on the fact that farming remains the only area of production in which production based on a "house" calculus—that is, on the production of use values—persists, however tenuously.<sup>9</sup> The common phrase, "farming is a way of life, not a business," refers to this (increasingly untenable) reality. On the family operated farm, as in the household, labor does not appear as a commodity. It is not reduced to a dollar calculus and used to calculate opportunity costs. Rather, farmers and housekeepers deploy labor rationally among diverse, qualitatively evaluated and mutually non-convertible ends, retaining in the process a direct link between the various "moments" of the production process. As Marx so well demonstrated, the conversion of labor to a commodity is the fundamental basis for alienation in capitalist economies. Those who perform farm and household labor for their own families therefore experience their relationship to their work as relatively less alienating than that experienced by wage workers.

The "house economy," based as it is on direct relationships among family members, has a different moral content and ethical requirements than does the economy of the firm. I suggest that this distinction undergirds the Victorian attribution of essentially different moral temperaments to women and men, with women the superior to men. Similarly, agrarian idealists, from Jefferson onward, have extolled the virtues of the yeoman farmer who "is the repository of virtue" (Jefferson 1955 [1784-5]).

I suggest that farmers and housekeepers, by refusing to evaluate their labor in monetary terms, seek to avoid the alienation inherent in entering labor markets. They are caught, however, in an untenable contradiction: by persisting in petty commodity production and in other forms of unwaged labor as the major means to provision themselves, they simultaneously attempt to remain free of alienating relationships and open themselves to having their labor devalued through commodity exchange, both as the seller and as the buyer of commodities.

A new stage in capitalist relations appears, however, to have become consolidated. By the 1980s both farms and households had become so completely dependent on commodities produced elsewhere that "intensification of household labor ... is no longer the basis for extending the wage" (Smith 1990:136). This appears true, as well, for agricultural production. Virtually all production inputs are

now purchased, from fenceposts to seed to fertilizers to tractor power. Whereas prior to World War II farmers faced with weak market conditions could retreat into relative self-sufficiency and even absorb unemployed industrial workers, as they did during the Great Depression, that option is no longer available. During the farm crisis of the 1980s many farmers were forced to apply for foodstamps, and during that period the average work day during peak periods often extended to 18 or 20 hours. That is, the strategy described by Chayanov and by Gudeman and Rivera for households that exist "beyond the profit margin," of producing more goods for domestic consumption "within the doors" is no longer possible, either for farms or for households.

**Table 3. Percentage of Women in the Labor Force: U.S. and Union County**

Year	All U.S.	U.S. Farm	Union Cty. Farm
1940	25.4	12.2	16.0
1950	33.0	16.0	13.0
1960	37.0	23.0	24.0
1970	41.4	29.9	29.0
1980	49.9	40.3	36.0

*Source:* U.S.: U.S. Census of the Population 1940, V. 2, Pt. 1, Table 41; 1950, V. 2, Pt. 1, Table 118; 1960, V. 2, Pt. 1, Table 82; 1970, V. 1, Pt. 1, Sec. 1, Table 90; 1980, Pat. 1, Ch. C, Table 103. Union County: 1940, Table 23, p. 538; 1950, Table 49, p. 13-197; 1960, Table 93, p. 5-452; 1970, Table 137, p. 15-820.

### Women in the Labor Force

Ever larger numbers of women are entering the paid labor force, and ever more farmers are leaving the land. Union County farm women began entering the paid labor force in significant numbers as their home-based enterprises lost viability (see figure 3). Accompanying this shift, the ideological underpinnings for segregating women as a poorly-paid part of the labor force have been evaporating. Beginning in the 1960s women began systematically attacking the doctrine of separate spheres (e.g., Friedan 1963); by the 1990s key questions of social policy had shifted from providing a family wage to a postulated male breadwinner to issues of wage equity and to creating institutional supports for families in which both parents worked outside the home. Similarly, virtually all farmers who remain in business in the 1990s accept that their farm is a capitalist enterprise—albeit a small enterprise—and make major decisions on that basis. They increasingly purchase services provided by professionals,

hire seasonal labor, and rent land and equipment. Their role, that is, is increasingly that of a "hands-on" manager. Wives sometimes enter this new production system as partners or formal assistants (in contrast to go-fer and informal helper), managing the books, developing marketing expertise, and doing other office tasks (Rosenfeld 1985).

The southern Illinois farmers with whom I have worked have not adopted this pattern. Rather, many have quit farming, using their farm house as a residence and renting the land to a neighboring farmer, whose wife often works off the farm. Many continue to farm part of the land part-time, raising beef cattle or other crops that fit into the schedule of an off-farm job (see van Es et. al. 1981). Some women have developed their own house-based enterprises, catering, hair-dressing, baby-sitting, and so forth, while more have found off-farm jobs.

### Summary

White farm women's labor has historically been rendered socially invisible and/or devalued relative to white men's labor for a number of historically specific reasons: In the nineteenth century work became defined as "remunerative" work, largely carried on outside the home. As part of this process, drawing on the prior gendered division of labor, reformers and policy makers defined a special realm of domesticity for women, one elevated by the attribution of special moral qualities, but devalued by the denial of productive contributions to the larger society. This ideal simultaneously defined women's appropriate role outside of production and required men to be the main wage earner to earn enough to maintain a family—the "family" or "living" wage. These normative gender roles justified a separate, minimally paid, market for women's labor.

At the same time, intellectual elites embraced an evolutionary epistemology that identified complexity in the division of labor and rationalization in the labor process with social progress. By these measures both housework and farming, with their minimal division of labor and relatively inefficient forms of organization appeared as "backward"—lower down the evolutionary scale. The aims of reformers and public policy were, therefore, to raise farmers and homemakers to modern levels of efficiency and scientific rationality. These reformers implicitly and explicitly blamed the poverty and drudgery associated with farming and housekeeping on the people who did these jobs, misrepresenting them as carry-overs from a period of deprivation rather than as specific, inequitable, forms of integration into the modern era.

That farm women and men accepted the devaluation of their labor, I argue, was due not only to their relatively weak positions in the nation's political economy, and even less to their internalization of standards hegemonic to national elites. Rather, elite ideologies combined opportunistically with the particular ways farmers and housekeepers evaluated their own labor such that farmers and housekeepers were unable to formulate a clear



political alternative to the existing order. Specifically, farmers, both men and women, like urban housekeepers, deployed their labor according to a rationality based on maintaining the household (farm) unit, rather than according to the calculus of the capitalist firm. They realized much of their labor directly as use values, rather than as commodities alienated from them as exchange values. On pre-World War II farms men tended to conceive of their production of use values as supplementary to commodity production; in the farm household the equation was reversed, with commodity production understood as supplementary to production for domestic consumption.

Despite these differences, which contributed to the devaluation of farm women's labor, neither farm men nor women calculated their labor as a commodity. I suggest that farmers and housekeepers retained a sizeable domain of non-commoditized production, and resisted selling their labor on the market, because of the alienation entailed by capitalist relations of production. The gulf between the morality of the two forms of economic organization is large, and it appears that many people will cling to non-capitalist forms even when they yield a relatively lower return to labor. The attribution of a high value to farming and homemaking by those who carry them out, and their retention as a form of resistance to full incorporation into capitalist relations of production, coincided with a particular stage of capitalism when unwaged labor provided significant value to the larger economy that could not as conveniently or cheaply be provided through capitalist firms. That this period is ending is indicated by the seemingly perpetual "farm crisis," the ever-declining number of family-operated farms, and the increasing number of women entering the wage labor force. Even as feminist scholarship is reclaiming women's unwaged labor as an important part of the national economy, it is being eliminated by the juggernaut of late twentieth century consumer capitalism.

#### Notes

1. See Bennett and Kohl 1982, Bush 1982, Fink 1986, Groneman and Norton 1987, Haney and Knowles 1988, Jensen 1986, Osterud 1991, Rosenfeld 1985, Sachs 1983.
2. This account overlooks the large number of women who found ways to earn income in their homes by taking in boarders, laundry, sewing, and other tasks that could be done without entering the 'marketplace' (e.g., Jensen 1986, Matthaei 1982, Ryan 1981:201).
3. In Union County many people who worked as day laborers, both owners of small farms and renters, also raised products such as poultry, sweet potatoes, and daffodils for sale and for domestic consumption.
4. I have accounts of a few women undertaking this kind of work. A man now in his 80s reported that his mother enjoyed plowing more than housework; Edith Rendleman recounted in her memoirs that her uncle 'made' his wife plow the field when they were grubbing out stumps. There was clearly variability

within the community on whether or not such work was appropriate for women to do.

5. Many of the patterns I am describing were widely shared throughout the U.S., but there is enough variation, based on ethnic differences, crop and labor regimes, and historical period, to be cautious about making global statements. Union County, Illinois, is northern in many respects, particularly in the absence of African-Americans; however, in other respects it retains its cultural linkage to the Upland South from which most settlers came. In addition, horticulture and orchards dominated the county's political economy from the building of the Illinois Central Railroad in the 1850s through the 1950s, while farming in the Mississippi Bottoms (flood plain) was largely done by tenants until the Great Depression, so farming in this county was dissimilar from that of the upper midwest or more urbanized northeast. Many of the global characterizations I make pertain to northern commercial farms and excludes such farming communities as the Amish.

6. This was an impulse similar to the one that took many women reformers and suffragists into the public realm: They did not argue with their imputed elevated moral sensibility; rather, they argued that the unique female temperament fitted them uniquely to create a more humane world.

7. I base this on anecdotal accounts and two documented cases of women who were able to make mortgages (and in at least one case foreclosed after the mortgagee defaulted over a number of years) and other investment decisions. Salamon and Keim (1979) document the way in which widowed farm owners in a German community in central Illinois use their control of land as a source of power and status.

8. It is strictly inaccurate to characterize 'non-capitalist' forms of circulation as 'a form:' peoples have created widely varied bases for attributing value to objects; these varied forms only appear as a unity when contrasted with capitalist relations which in fact represent one system of production and exchange. This discussion does not address the labor theory of value as I am not concerned here with whether or not an absolute basis for establishing value exists, but in what ways people create calculations of value.

9. For a fuller analysis of the ideological bases for the exploitation of farmers, see Adams 1991.

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## Women Rubber-Tappers in the Brazilian Amazon: A Life of Work Silenced<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

In the extensive scholarly work on rubber production in Latin America, ethnological or historical discussion of women's work in rubber estates—the "*seringais*"—is very scarce, restricted to phrases or paragraphs. The few accounts of women's experiences in Amazon rubber estates focus on the cruelties they have suffered, rather than their role in rubber production (Casement 1912-1913;

Masô 1912; Rivera 1924; Tastevin 1925). Even the iconography on rubber production has exclusively depicted men as rubber-tappers (Melo 1985; Pereira 1966). This article, which reports on research in Acre and Amazon State in Brazil, is the first inquiry devoted to women rubber-tappers.

The important and massive migration of male workers within Brazil to work in rubber production in the 1870s-1880s, and again in the mid-twentieth century, has been a focus of research, and may explain the lack of attention to women's participation in rubber production (Hemming 1987). But ideology, specifically the idea that rubber-tapping is a male job due to the hardships of the task, seems to have played a crucial role in the persistence of silence on women rubber-tappers' plight. An exception to this silence is the work of Araújo and Araújo (1987), which revealed that in Aripuaña, in the state of Amazon, most of the local women worked steadily as rubber-tappers. Based on my preliminary research in the mid-Madeira river and