



A Profile of Female Farmers in Kentucky

Betty S. King and Kimberly A. Zeuli, Department of Agricultural Economics



Ann Bell, a Scott County farmer (left), assisted by Caroline Stone at the Lexington Farmers' Market.

Introduction

Women in agriculture is not a new concept; women have farmed with their families for centuries. However, women farming either on their own or as true managing partners with their spouses is a growing phenomenon. Many women have now expanded their role from farm wife to that of farm manager and key decision-maker.

Recognition of the expanding role of women in agriculture comes at a critical juncture in Kentucky's struggle to diversify agriculturally and renew its emphasis on rural development. Policies aimed at rural women typically have focused on their roles as farm wives and mothers who benefit from family nutrition and health programs, but effective agricultural and rural policies need to be based on current rural realities, reflecting women's economic contributions as well.

U.S. Trends

Women are farming alone as a conscious economic decision. Nationally, both the number and proportion of independent female farmers (women who are individual owners, sole operators, or senior partners of a farm) have been increasing steadily since 1978, the first year the census of agriculture differentiated operators by gender. In 1997, 8.6 percent of all farmers (a total of 165,102) were women, an increase from 5.2 percent (128,170) in 1978 (Figure 1).

The latest census of agriculture (1997) reports that women own almost half of all the private agricultural land in the United States. Both the increase in independent female farmers and the amount of farmland owned by women signify an increasing role for women in agriculture.

Women Farmers in Kentucky

As reported in the 1997 Census of Agriculture, the number of female farmers in Kentucky has not been increasing steadily. However, the proportion of female farmers in the state has been increasing steadily since 1982 (Figure 2), since the number of male farmers has decreased during that period.

Most female farmers in Kentucky reside on their farms (71.4 percent), yet more than half (60 percent) do not list farming as their principal occupation. On average, female farmers in Kentucky have spent approximately 20 years on their current farm. Their average age is 60.2 years, 6.8 years more than the average age of the state's male farmers.

Most female farmers in Kentucky are full owners of their farms (85.9 percent). Of those farms, 86.6 percent are organized as sole proprietorships. Most farms operated by women are fewer than 140 acres. Male farmers, who on average operate much larger farms, own a smaller percentage (71.4 percent) of their farmland than female farmers do. Male farmers rent or lease almost 30 percent of their land.

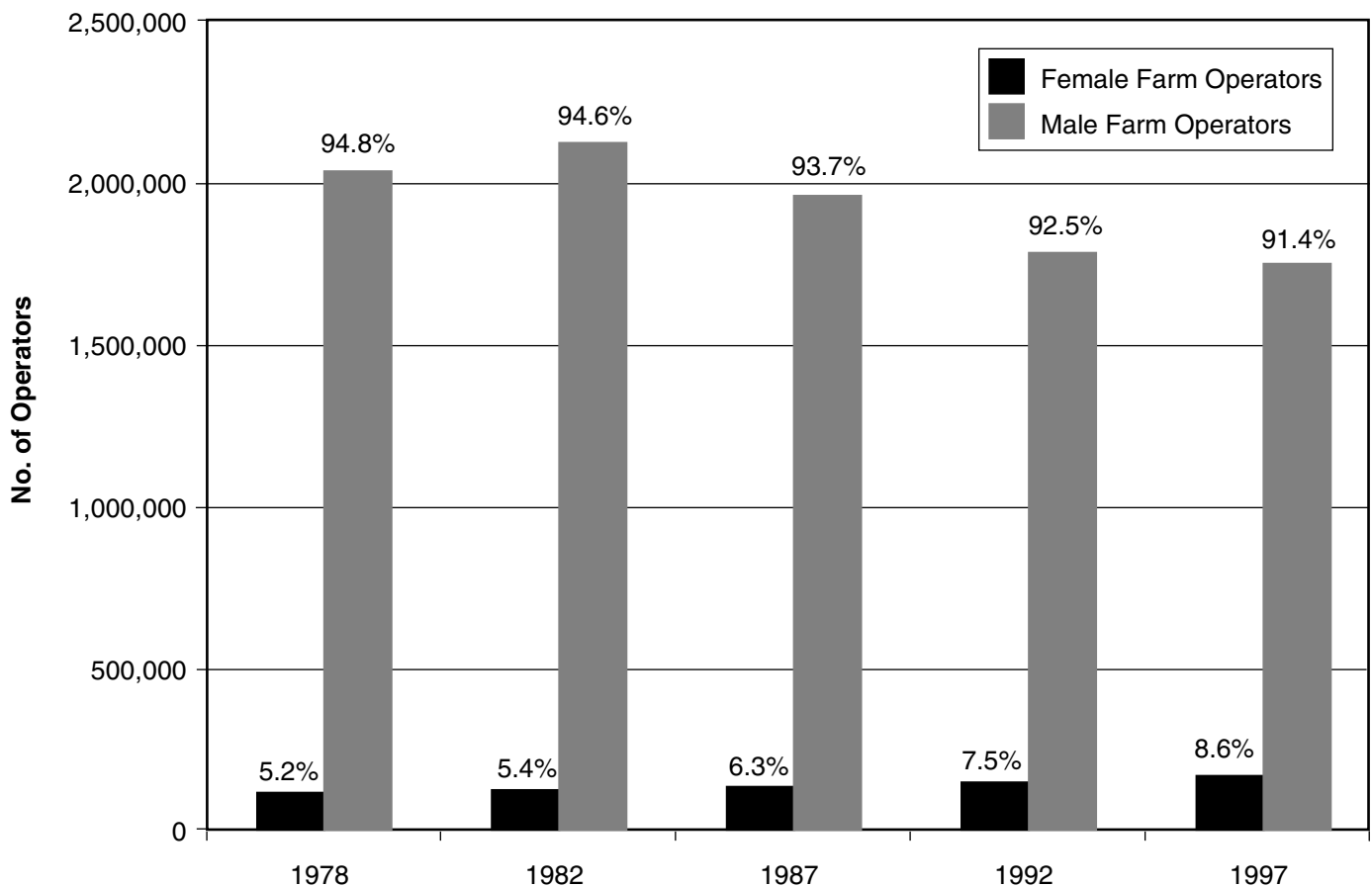


Figure 1. U.S. farm operators, 1978-1997, by gender.

Source: USDA, Census of Agriculture, 1997.

The greatest differences between male and female farmers in Kentucky are in the:

- types of farms operated.
- market value of agricultural products sold.

Almost half of all female farmers in Kentucky operate crop farms: nearly half operate farms yielding tobacco, hay, and similar products. The remaining farms operated by women are concentrated in oilseed and grain farms, beef cattle operations, and aquaculture and other animal farms. (Figures 3 and 4). The distribution across farm types is similar for male farmers, with the exception that a much smaller proportion of male farmers operate aquaculture and other animal farms. When assessed by market value of agricultural products sold, farms operated by women in general have lower sales than those operated by men (Figure 5).

Challenges

Most of the issues women continue to struggle with as farmers have little to do with their gender. The most

crucial problems many women farmers in Kentucky face are:

- potential loss of the tobacco quota.
- consequent loss of tobacco income.
- loss of land due to development.
- more pressure due to environmental regulations.

(Sommers, Hoppe, Green, and Korb, 1998). Some also grapple with the stress that comes from working with family members.

Other studies (Allen, Berger, and Thompson, 1999 and King, 1999) indicate that many of Kentucky's women farmers face the same challenges faced by Kentucky's small business owners, including:

- gaining access to capital.
- recruiting and keeping skilled labor.
- staying current on technological change.
- complying with business and environmental regulations.

- remaining competitive in a changing marketplace.
- finding affordable ways to protect their families and enterprises from risk.

Female farmers who attended a 1999 Kentucky conference on women and agriculture took a look at the challenge of making their livelihood more profitable—a major concern of many farmers. Those who attended the conference learned about marketing, financing, innovative ideas, business planning, and cooperative development.

Comparison of Associations

Data were collected from membership lists of Kentucky commodity associations (beef, pork, burley tobacco, corn and small grain) and specialty associations (aquaculture, Christmas tree, produce, organic products, sheep and wool) and used to identify the number of women members in the various associations (Table 1). Women listed individually as well as those listed with their husbands were counted. The participation of women in these associations reveals patterns in their farming interests and indicates that Kentucky female farmers are finding their niche in agricultural specialty markets.

Kentucky Association	Type of Membership		Total Association Membership (and Total Percentage of Women Members)
	Single	Joint	
Beef Cattlemen	206 (5%)	376 (9%)	4,125 (14%)
Pork Producers	13*	29*	
Burley Tobacco Growers Co-op	2,879 (9%)	—	33,787 (9%)
Corn and Small Grain Producers	22 (2%)	3 (<1%)	1,026 (2%)
Aquaculture	35 (15%)	13 (6%)	229 (21%)
Christmas Tree	4 (7%)	0	54 (7%)
Produce Growers	3 (12%)	94 (21%)	448 (33%)
Certified Organic Growers	15 (23%)	23 (35%)	65 (58%)
Sheep and Wool Producers	16 (14%)	43 (39%)	111 (53%)

Sources: Association membership lists; Kentucky Agricultural Statistics, 1997-1998; Kentucky Department of Agriculture, 1998 Aquaculture Directory; Kentucky Department of Agriculture, 1998 Kentucky Produce Directory; Kentucky Department of Agriculture, Organic Growers Directory.

*Percentage of women members for this association cannot be calculated because total membership figures were not available.

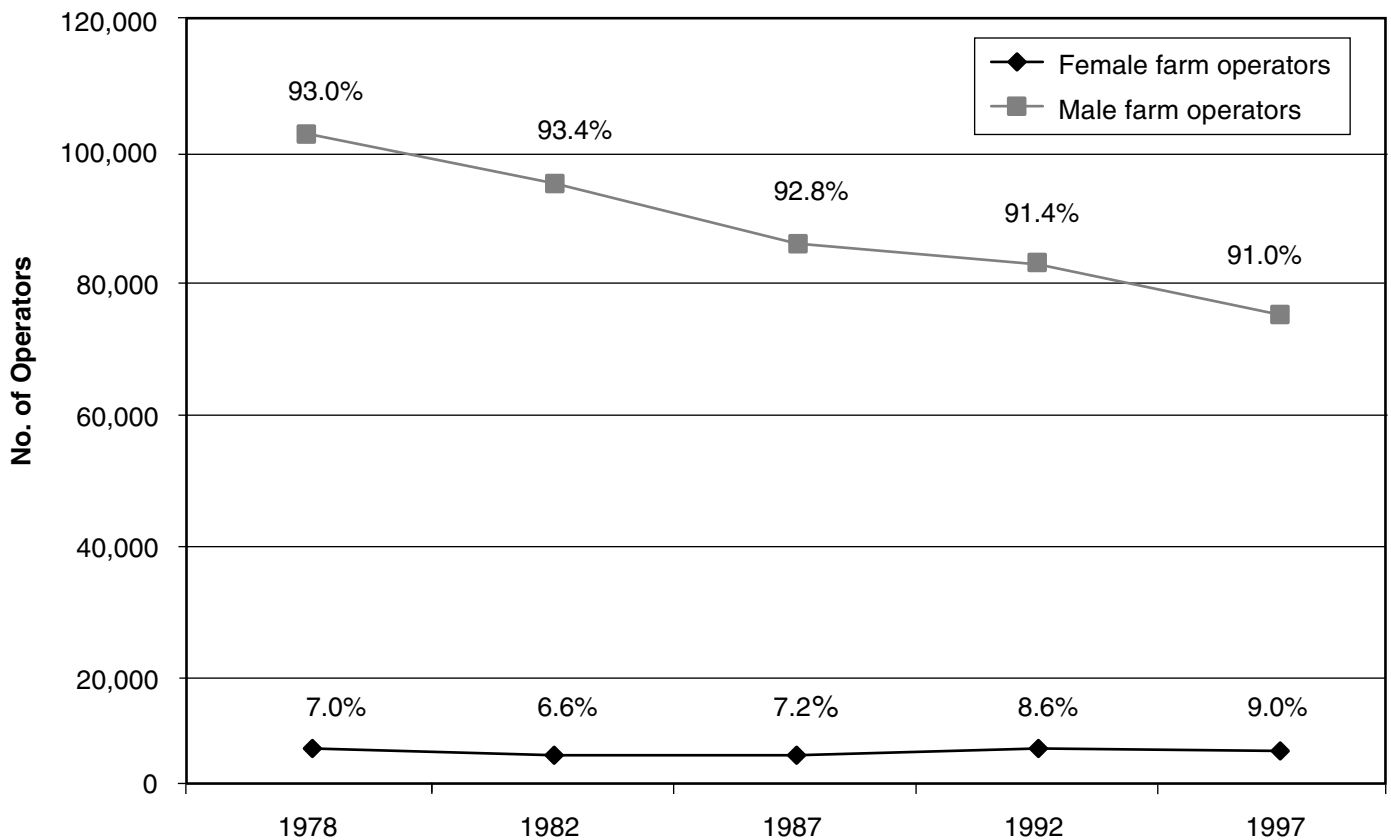


Figure 2. Percentage of Kentucky farm operators by gender 1978-1997.

Source: USDA, Census of Agriculture, 1997.

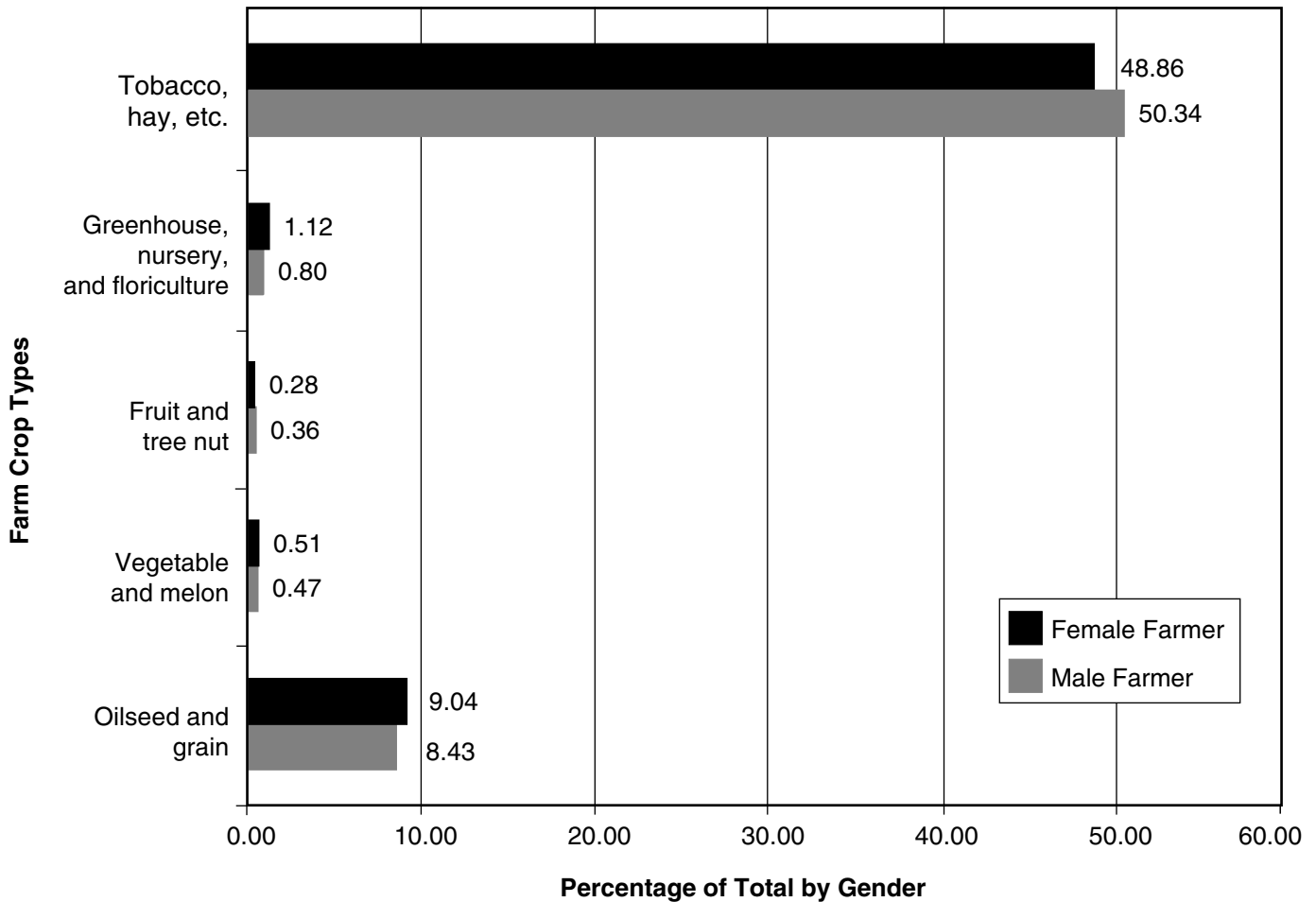


Figure 3. Crop farmers in Kentucky by farm type and gender.

Source: USDA, Census of Agriculture, 1997.

The percentage of female farmers in membership lists of commodity associations ranged from 2 percent to 14 percent. The Kentucky Corn and Grain Association had the lowest percentage of women members, and the Kentucky Cattlemen's Association had the highest percentage.

The percentage of women members in the specialty associations ranged from 7 percent to 58 percent of total membership, with the Kentucky Christmas Tree Association reporting the lowest percentage and the Kentucky Certified Organic Growers Association reporting the highest percentage. With the exception of the Kentucky Christmas Tree Association, women had a proportionally higher percentage of membership in specialty associations.

These results are not surprising, given that female farmers are more concentrated in specialty farming areas. Also, the specialty associations are relatively recent creations and may be more open to women members.

As reported by census data, the percentage of women in various associations generally reflects the percentage of women in the associated farm area, but the cattle, tobacco, aquaculture, produce, and sheep associations report higher percentages of women members than the census reports for the associated farm type.

In percentage of total membership, more women showed up on rosters of nontraditional associations than traditional ones, which suggests that female farmers are as equally active as male farmers in the nontraditional associations. The Kentucky Corn and Grain Association seemed to lack female farmer participation, given that its membership included only 2 percent women, yet 9.6 percent of all oilseed and grain farmers in the state are women.

Specialty Markets

The 1999 Kentucky conference on women and agriculture referred to earlier made evident that many female farmers' enterprises are thriving within the

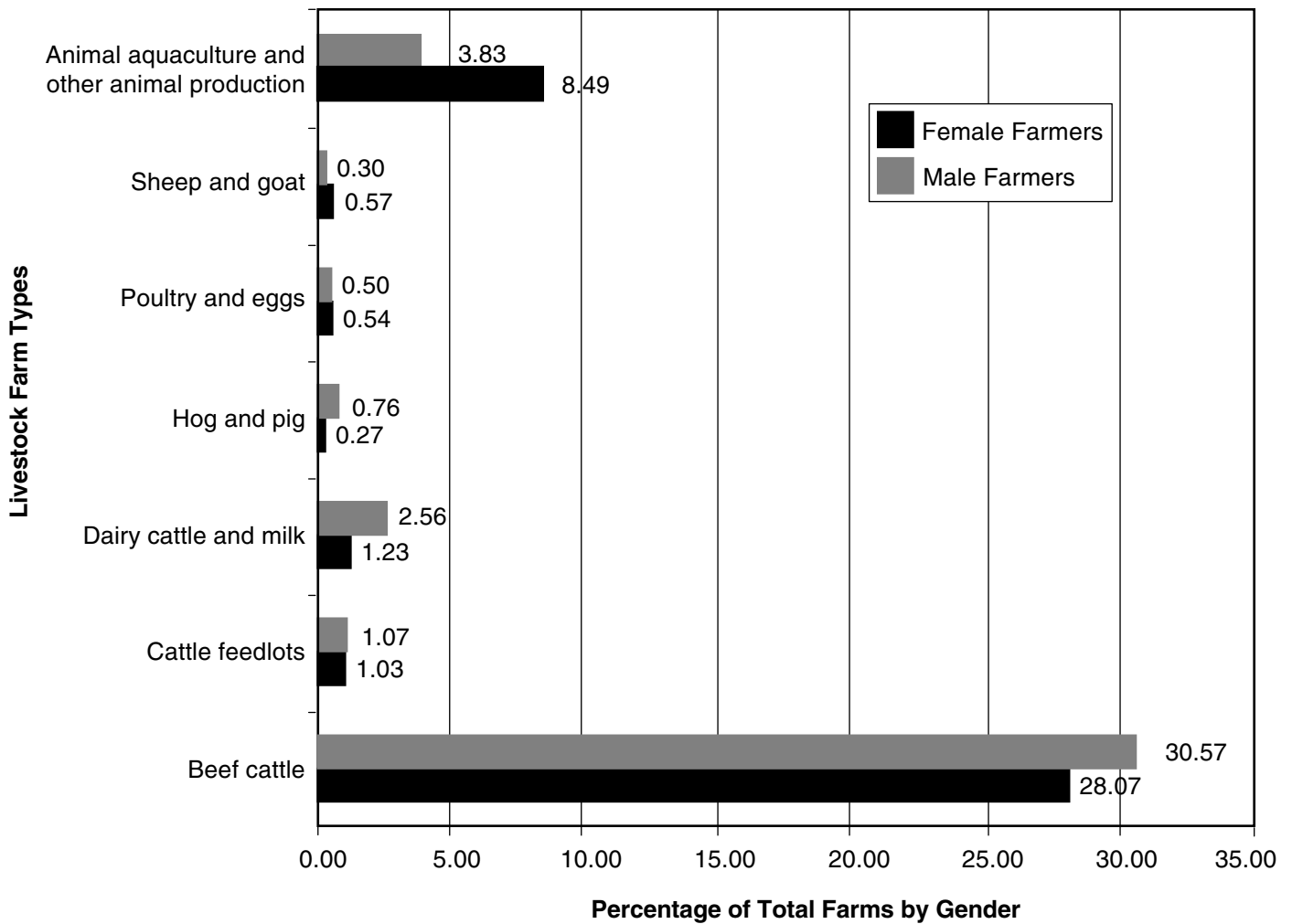


Figure 4. Percentage of livestock farmers by farm type and gender.

Source: USDA, Census of Agriculture, 1997.

changes in the farm and marketplace. Many of the women farmers at the conference identified specialty markets for their products in addition to markets for more traditional crop and livestock enterprises.

Many had also developed value-added enterprises such as producing cheese, herb, and floral products. Others had expanded direct marketing efforts for meat and horticulture crops or developed complementary ventures for their farms such as tours and bed-and-breakfast accommodations.

Implications

Increasingly, women are playing a more visible role on family farms, both individually and as key decision-makers. This trend has important implications for policy in Kentucky, especially in efforts to diversify agriculture.

To understand the dynamic between a woman's role as farm wife and that of owner-operator, more research is needed about couples who farm as business partners and the role each partner plays in making decisions for

the enterprise. More information is also needed about women farmers in order to determine whether they see opportunities stemming from land-based enterprises, such as tourism and growing flowers. The potential effect of these opportunities on the farm couple and the growth of the couple's total enterprise will need to be determined.

Female farmers are entrepreneurial in spirit, and data indicate they gravitate to specialty farms, since they are more concentrated in these farm categories and, as noted earlier, are especially visible in specialty market organizations.

Clearly, many female farmers in Kentucky are discovering agricultural markets by being innovative and by developing the business savvy that enables them to compete.

Role models are needed for women in agriculture. The opportunities and barriers that exist for them are challenges for educators, Extension personnel, and researchers interested in improving the economic and

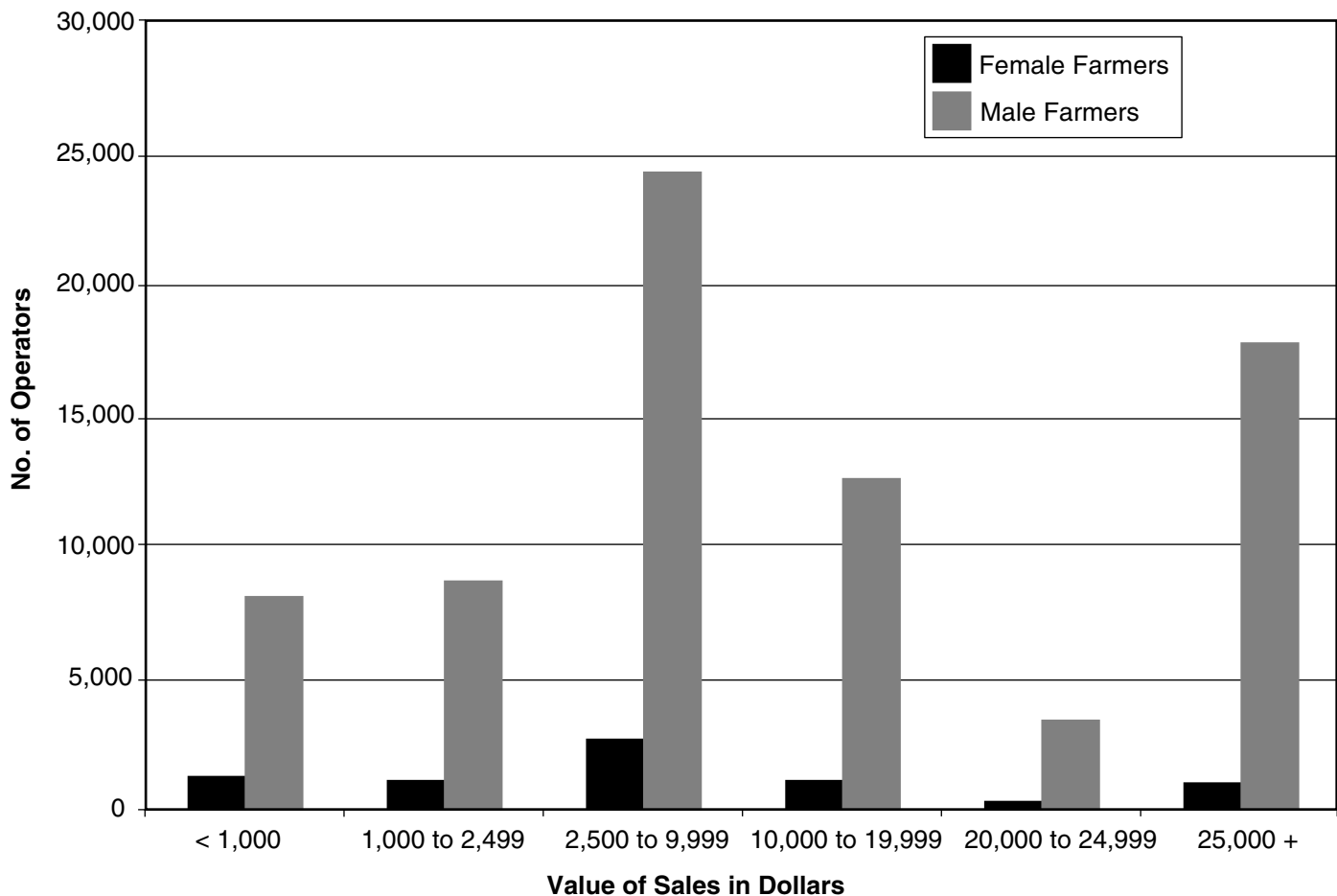


Figure 5. Kentucky farmers by farm market value and gender.

Source: USDA, Census of Agriculture, 1997.

social conditions of agricultural communities and farm families. More information is needed on how women learn about agricultural practices and view those practices and about the contribution of women members to agricultural organizations.

The changing role of farm women has implications for Extension fieldwork. If women obtain information about farm production and marketing in different ways than men do, Extension will need to offer some different educational programming, such as home study courses or programs targeted specifically to women farmers.

Some of Kentucky's Women Farmers

The following examples highlight the diversity of work and experiences that characterizes female farmers in Kentucky. The women profiled were involved in the Kentucky Leadership for Agriculture and Environmental Sustainability (KLAES) project, which is partially funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the University of Kentucky.

Ann Bell is a Scott County farmer who operates a farm along with other family members. Although the family manages some of the farm together, she is the sole decision-maker and manager of 5 acres and considers herself a full-time farmer. She always had an interest in farming, but did not find her way back to her vocation until she completed college.

"After trying to do every other job in the world I could find other than farming, I slowly got back to it," says Bell about her return to the farm. After someone suggested she should help start a farmers' market in her hometown, she decided to begin producing fruits and vegetables on her family's farm with her brother and her father.

"As much as I tried to get away from farming, I realized that's where I wanted to be. I realized I'd never be happy doing anything else," she says. Bell says the major challenges in farming for her are "to diversify and market to fit in with our [farm's] commodities and [to have] all of my family participating on the same land to make a living."



Owsley County farmers Denise Hoffman, right, and her husband Neil with their daughter Megan.

Today Bell grows and sells vegetables at the Lexington and Georgetown farmers' markets, at retail and wholesale markets, and to restaurants. She is involved in numerous agricultural groups and programs, including the Philip Morris Leadership Program (sponsored by the UK College of Agriculture for farm-business leaders), the Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, and the Community Farm Alliance.

For **Denise Hoffman** as well, farming is a family business. Denise and her husband Neil live in Owsley County. They moved there in the early 1970s after they graduated from Ohio's Miami University because they wanted to farm as a family and live in a rural area. The Hoffmans' farming operation includes tobacco, vegetables, fruit, livestock, and timber. To help market their vegetables and meat goats, the Hoffmans are members of associations for both vegetable growers and goat farmers.

Hoffman is employed part-time off the farm. She attended the Second International Women and Agriculture conference in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1999 and serves on local boards and the Kentucky Commission on Family Farms. Hoffman believes family farms are important for sustaining both communities and democracy. She and her husband believe the small farm is the heart of rural America and that if small farms go out of business, the rural community dies.

Cecilia Hart, who farms near Natural Bridge State Park in Powell County, describes herself as a part-time organic farmer who learns best hands-on. Hart, who farms with her husband Tom, was a participant in the KLAES Organic Cooperative and the KLAES research project on organic integrated pest management practices. She puts creativity and care into her livelihood—

her apple trees are thriving and will add to the future diversity of the Hart family farm.

Other aspects of the Harts' operation are expanding: they participate in the Lexington Farmers' Market, offer educational tours of their farm, and have increased their agri-tourism efforts. For example, they assist with the Archway Tourism Association by providing fresh produce for the dining room at the lodge of Natural Bridge State Park. They also offer a farmers' market at the lodge. The Harts see their operation becoming more profitable in the future.

The women involved in agriculture in Kentucky recognize that agriculture is important not only to their own families and livelihoods but also to the sustainability of their communities. Bell, a Scott County native, says, "I'd like to especially see the Scott County Farmers' Market succeed. It's nice to know who you are selling your vegetables to."

Bell sees farmers' markets as incubators for farmer-led business in her community. For example, the irrigation equipment purchased by Scott County Farmers' Market during the KLAES Project has made a difference for Scott County farmers participating in the farmers' market. It also has helped many farmers make the transition to growing quality commercial vegetables for the Central Kentucky Growers Association in Georgetown.



Cecilia Hart, a Powell County farmer.

Specialty Farmers

Here are some examples of women farmers in specialty markets:

Susan Harkins of Bourbon County raises freshwater shrimp. She markets it primarily to Lexington restaurants under the name Bubba Sue's Shrimp. Harkins also markets meat products and specialty produce to Lexington restaurants and retailers.



Susan Harkins, a Bourbon County farmer.

Janet Jenkins and her family, who live in Scott County, organized the Organic Kentucky Producers Association Buying Club, which was established to provide home delivery of fresh produce in the Danville and Lexington areas. The club is a new marketing approach for selling fresh produce directly to consumers.

Lisa Stanley and her husband Steve of Happy Hollow Farms in Hopkins County are exploring alternative crops and enterprises to add to their farm operation. About 10 years ago, the Stanleys added popcorn. Today they grow 300 to 500 acres of popcorn each year. They sell their own microwave brand, Hans-On Popcorn, in bulk, by mail order, and through local retail.

Selected Resources

Here are some information resources for female farmers:

- *Kentucky Women's Agriculture Leadership Network* is a new resource for women farmers. The Web site describes annual conferences, online publications, and links to other agricultural leadership groups and resources for women. You can find it on the Web at <www.uky.edu/agriculture/agricultureeconomics/agwomen.html>.

- *Agri-Business Development Guide 2000: A Quick Desk Reference Guide* is available online from the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture. The guide offers useful Web sites for specialty agriculture and information on regulations, financing and grants, business planning, marketing, and risk management as well as other resources. It is on the Web at <www.uky.edu/agriculture/agricultureeconomics/agbizguide.html>.
- *Women's Business Center Online* is a service provided by the U.S. Small Business Administration. The Web site offers information ranging from marketing ideas to business planning to small business development loan information. It is on the Web at <www.onlinewbc.org>.
- *Appropriate Technology Transfer to Rural Areas*, the national sustainable farming information center, has a good, all-purpose Web site on farming, from production to marketing. The site is especially useful for specialty markets. It is on the Web at <www.attra.org>.
- *Kentucky Small Business Development Centers* are located around the state to assist individuals with small business planning in a program co-sponsored by the U.S. Small Business Administration and the Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development. Visit the program's Web site at <www.ksbdc.org>.

References

- Allen, Steven N., Mark C. Berger, and Eric Thompson. A Survey of Issues and Challenges Facing Kentucky Businesses. University of Kentucky: Kentucky Small Business Development Centers, Gatton College of Business. (September 1999).
- King, B.S. Challenges and Rewards for Women Business Owners. University of Kentucky Department of Agricultural Economics, TVA Rural Studies and Gatton College of Business (September 1999).
- Sommer, Judith, E., Robert A. Hoppe, Robert C. Green, and Penelope J. Korb. Structural and Financial Characteristics of U.S. Farms, 1995: 20th Annual Family Farm Report to the Congress. Economic Research Bulletin No. 746. Washington, D.C. (December 1998).
- U.S. Department of Agriculture. National Agricultural Statistical Service. 1997 Census of Agriculture.
- Betty S. King, Extension Specialist in Rural Economic Development, and Kimberly A. Zeuli, Assistant Professor, are both in the Department of Agricultural Economics, College of Agriculture at the University of Kentucky. King served as project coordinator for the Kentucky Leadership for Agriculture and Environmental Sustainability (KLAES) project, a W. K. Kellogg Foundation project. Both authors conduct research about women in agriculture.

Photos by Betty S. King.

Mention or display of a trademark, proprietary product, or firm in text or figures does not constitute an endorsement and does not imply approval to the exclusion of other suitable products or firms.