Potential roles for spouses/partners within the farm business

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Summary

- Farmers' partners bring a diversity of backgrounds, skills, knowledge and perspectives and in most cases are beginning to see how they can strengthen and develop their role within the business.
- Taking part in a management course changed how the partners viewed the farm, moving towards seeing the farm as a jointly operated business rather than something that their spouse did and one in which they could play a pivotal role regardless of their technical farm knowledge.

Introduction

Most farmers partners have off-farm careers when 'marrying into' the farm, yet they play an important role in terms of financial contributions and work on the farm. The importance of farm couples working together to determine the direction of their joint life and business is increasingly recognised as a critical factor in the success of a family farming business. Despite the importance of their role, a previous Irish study found that there is poor engagement among farm women with advisory services for a number of reasons including: the feeling that women wouldn't be taken seriously; that they are unwelcome; lack of self-confidence; lack of knowledge and training; and isolation. The aim of this study was to understand the role of farmers' partners within the family dairy farm business.

The research undertaken for this study was focused on farmers' partners participating in the pilot learning initiative - an online training course developed by two independent consultants that was specifically designed to engage dairy farmers' partners/spouses. A questionnaire survey of the participants was conducted at the start of the programme. The questionnaire was anonymous, but participants were asked to give contact details if they were willing and interested to take part in a follow-up interview.

Results

Twenty-one participants completed the survey; they were all female with a diversity of backgrounds and backstories. The majority of participants were from a non-farming background, with 37% from a rural area, 36% from an urban area while 27% were from a farming background. Sixty-four percent of the participants had a part-time or full-time off-farm job in a variety of careers, including teaching, science, law, banking, childcare, and environmental services. Their off-farm incomes were contributing to household expenses, savings and investment and farm expenses. Participants included young, recently married women with no children, women with small and school-age children and older women with grown-up children. Their (partners') dairy farm businesses were larger than the average Irish dairy farm. All of their farms employed non-family labour with a mix of part-time and full-time employees. The participants' individual length of involvement on their farms varied from newly being involved to being involved more long-term. When asked to describe their current role on farm, participants identified a wide range of roles but mainly focused around business rather than physical/technical tasks. Many of the participants were involved in more than one task, highlighting the diverse role that farm partners play in the business. Administration and business tasks included farm planning, decision making, ordering supplies, dealing with DAFM schemes, farm accounts (including liaising with banks and accountants) and paperwork tasks (e.g., calf registrations, record

keeping and form filling). Human resource management tasks included ensuring health and safety, coordinating/feeding staff, dealing with callers, and payroll. Calf rearing and milking were the physical tasks some completed regularly, while other physical farm tasks they completed occasionally included repairs and maintenance, grassland management, operating machinery and animal care.

Analysis of the interviews revealed similar trajectories in terms of role development. They all 'married in' to the farm business and before marriage considered the farm and farming to be 'his job' while they had their own separate careers. Some who came from farm backgrounds felt that this prepared them better for the realities of dairy farm life. Other interviewees recalled their shock at the busyness of the calving season and the realisation that in-laws often had expectations of them in terms of bookkeeping and family care responsibilities. For some, the arrival of children meant the juggling of many responsibilities as well as a struggle regarding their professional identity. In the majority of cases, women carried the responsibility for childcare and domestic tasks. Many spoke about questioning what their role was on the farm in light of competing demands on time and giving up their off-farm jobs – a 'crossroads' as one interviewee called it. A pivotal point in the majority of cases was a decision to take part, as a couple, in a strategic management course facilitated by the same consultants who developed the partners' programme. The outcome of this was an overarching reorientation by the partners towards seeing the farm as their family business rather than something that their spouse did and in which they had just a peripheral role. For example, an interviewee had reached the stage where she confidently identified herself as 'a farmer', having developed a key role in calf care, human resource management and administration while also initiating a farm tourism project within the business.

This study highlighted the importance of training, advisory and networking support for farmers' partners at the different stages of developing their roles within the farm. However, the design and facilitation of such support needs careful consideration as the skillsets and the learning needs are varied. The interviewees in this study placed the highest value on peer learning for building confidence, learning the language of dairy farming, and exploring roles that they would like to develop. They also highlighted the importance of space to discuss the sensitive challenges inherent in family farms with regard to finances, partnerships and succession.

Conclusions

This examination of the experience of farmers' partners who were involved in a learning initiative reveals that their roles within the farm are evolving. They are bringing a diversity of backgrounds, skills, knowledge and perspectives, and in most cases are beginning to see how they can strengthen and develop their role within the business. This case study suggests that bespoke learning initiatives specifically designed for farm spouses/partners can enhance their role within the farm business.