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"I Always Put Myself Last": Rural Women and the Challenge of Work-Life Integration

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"My sister's going to quit her job because she can't find daycare. 'Don't you love your job?' I asked her. 'Yeah, I do,' she replied. 'But I just can't find child care I can afford without driving 40 miles round trip in the morning and the afternoon. I don't have time to do that and I can't afford it. And Mom just can't take care of her anymore.' I sighed in frustration. I WISH I had a job that I loved, and here she has one and has to quit because she can't find someone close by to care for her three-year-old daughter."

This story told to me recently illustrates three of the most significant challenges rural women face as they attempt to integrate the many roles in their lives — the difficulty of finding adequate child care in rural areas, the distances they have to drive just to live their lives, and the difficulty of finding satisfying jobs. This article will highlight the unique challenges often experienced by women who live in rural areas — work, parenting, family, self-care, relationship maintenance, eldercare and more, offer some thoughts about those challenges from experience and research, and share stories of some rural women who are living those challenges.

Introduction

Let me begin by introducing myself, so readers understand my background and experience related to this issue. I was a family educator for many years for the University of Minnesota Extension Service in rural Minnesota, and I still work for the University of Minnesota in another capacity, focusing on issues related to children, youth and families — but now I commute 140 miles round trip to the Twin Cities two days a week. I am a rural resident and farm wife whose husband is a partner in a large dairy operation. I am an employer who hires many rural residents. I am a grandmother who cares two days a week for my grandson. I am a daughter who

traveled many miles to care for aging and invalid parents in a rural area. I spent my entire growing-up years and half of my adult life as a "city kid," so I have experienced firsthand the significant differences between city and rural living.

I've also learned something important while writing this article. There is very little research and few resources on the unique challenges of *rural* women in integrating work and life issues. After days, literally, of searching, most of what I have found is from other countries: Canada, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and more. I am certainly left with the feeling that this is an understudied area and one that merits some attention. Roughly 20% of the population in the United States lives in rural America, and 30% of Minnesota's population is considered rural (Minnesota State Demographic Center). It certainly seems this number is sufficient to warrant greater attention to the needs of rural women integrating work and life. So this article will be based mostly on my experience, on stories from rural women, and from the few sources that I was able to find.

I also want to acknowledge that there are significant differences in "rural" Minnesota based on where one is located. Closer proximity to an urban center decreases many of the challenges I will be discussing, as long as one has the transportation and financial ability to obtain the resources the urban centers offer.

Finally, I am using many stories and examples from a few rural women who have most graciously shared their insights and experiences with me through a small and informal survey. All the stories and examples are true, but they have been changed so the people cannot be identified.

Balance is not the goal

The phrase "balancing work and family" has been used for years to talk about how people manage the many roles in their lives. Unfortunately, the word "balancing" seems to imply a sort of equality that simply is not realistic. Some roles, such as full-time employment, require much greater time commitment in terms of hours or percentage of a day than others. I prefer to talk instead about work-life integration, and that is the phrase I'll be using throughout this article. I think about work-life integration as the ability to devote adequate time in one's life to all of the roles that call for attention, ***including self-care***, so that the overall result is a general feeling of satisfaction and well being *most* of the time, and that stress due to time and role demands is low *most* of the time. I certainly realize there are times in everyone's life when role demands and stress will escalate due to unusual circumstances, and satisfying

integration will be less likely. And the work-life integration that is satisfying for one person may not be for another, depending on their personalities, priorities, values and needs.

For the most part, rural women face the same issues related to work-life integration as their urban and suburban counterparts. These include work/job/career requirements and satisfaction, childcare, parenting, family responsibilities, caregiving (defined generally as caring for adults vs. children), primary relationship maintenance, and care for self. But for rural women, nearly all of these roles are made more challenging by virtue of place — rural Minnesota.

Satisfying work that "pays the bills"

Opportunities for employment are much more limited in rural areas, and the jobs that are available tend to be low-skilled and pay less than similar jobs in urban areas. One study of low-income rural women found that 70% of poor rural mothers worked in the service industry (hotel, restaurant or health care) (Walker & Blumengarten, 2002, p. 2). These jobs often require working evenings, nights and weekends. Another source of employment in rural Minnesota is agriculture, which also typically requires working during non-traditional hours, making child care difficult.

One of the major studies of rural women in the U.S., *Rural Families Speak*, has followed more than 500 low-income rural mothers in 17 states over nearly 10 years. This study confirms what many rural residents already know — the rate of poverty is higher in rural areas, and access to jobs is critical to move out of poverty. So in addition to the normal challenges of integrating work and life, rural women are often struggling just to survive — and may work two or three jobs to make ends meet. The researchers also found that, given a choice, the mothers in the study rated job satisfaction and flexibility as more important than the amount of pay received, and would sometimes sacrifice a stable job because of lack of flexibility (Bauer & Katras, 2007, p. 2).

> *A low-income mother of two young children held a full-time, low-paying job in an urban center 30 minutes from her rural home. Her partner and father of her children is a Mexican immigrant who has worked at a large dairy farm about 20 minutes from home for many years. The couple only had one vehicle and couldn't afford childcare, so they worked opposite shifts to accommodate travel and childcare needs. Her employer told her they were going to change her schedule so she could open the store where she worked. This would mean she'd have to*

be at work before her partner got home from his job. His job paid $4 an hour more than hers, so she made the decision to tell her employer no. As a result, she was terminated. She eventually found another job with the flexibility she needed. But they struggle financially every single day.

Although skilled and professional jobs — such as teaching — can be found in small towns, they are limited and require college degrees or other training beyond high school, and on average fewer women in rural areas have college degrees. So women seeking higher-level employment often either have to move or commute to urban centers to find suitable employment.

A young woman who lives in a rural area holds a professional position in an urban center 45 minutes from home. Her work also requires teaching some evenings and Saturdays and traveling to other towns as part of her work. She reports that the commuting time adds an hour and a half to her work day — time that she could be spending with her husband and young daughter. But professional jobs in her field are just not available any closer to home. She also tends to do grocery shopping and running errands in the city after work, because prices are cheaper and it avoids another trip later. But that makes the day even longer for her.

One of the trends in rural areas that will certainly have an impact on women is the increase in self-employment. In a publication from the Rural Sociological Society, Stephen Goetz says, "If current trends continue, one rural worker will be self-employed for every three wage and salary workers by 2015" (Goetz, 2008, p. 1). A significant contributing factor is the exponential advances in technology that make things like telecommuting, home-based businesses, on-line teaching and more possible.

Child care

Child care of some sort is a necessity if women with young children work outside the home. In urban centers, although child care is expensive, there is generally a fair amount of reliable, quality, licensed care available. This is not the case in rural areas. Rural areas face particular challenges in the supply, quality, accessibility, and affordability of child care. The story at the beginning of this article illustrates one problem — having to travel a significant distance to obtain child care.

Another mother of a young child reported that she "basically had three choices for child care: a center in town, a home daycare in town, or a Christian-based daycare in the country near our home. We are lucky to have a quality daycare that our daughter enjoys, because we don't have much for choice as a rural community."

In addition to the general lack of availability of child care in rural areas, there is the problem of lack of regulated child care, especially during non-traditional work hours, such as very early mornings (3 a.m. shifts), evenings and overnights, and weekends.

"Finding daycare on evenings or weekends is a challenge because my husband has chores late into the evening and I work some evenings and Saturdays each month. We are lucky to have family that can care for our daughter during these times usually."

Rural women tend to rely more heavily on informal sources of child care (family, friends) for a variety of reasons: they can't afford full-time child care, they can't find child care they trust, the few child care settings that are available are full and have waiting lists, or they work hours that child care is not available. One potential benefit of rural living is that families tend to stay in the communities in which they live. Even though a high number of rural young people are leaving their communities, there are also some who stay and others who move back when they have children. Thus, family care options may be more available to them if the family members are willing and able.

A mother of a newborn who lives in the country outside of a small town in rural Minnesota has roughly 15 family members within 15 miles who are willing to care for her child when she goes back to work. It's something of a juggling act to schedule, but it's a solution she and her husband are very satisfied with, for now.

In the *Rural Families Speak* study, researchers found that some women decided to stay home and care for their own children, at considerable financial sacrifice. Sometimes this was a value-based decision about staying home while their children were young, and other times it was because they couldn't find child care they could afford or with which they were satisfied (Walker & Reschke, 2005, p. F5). Most of the women who worked "found ways of compromising their dual roles. Some of these compromises included working only while children were in school, working from home, working part-

time, or doing 'split shift parenting' with their partners" (Walker & Reschke, p. F6).

Quality child care is a persistent social challenge for all working families. But with rural families, the need for child care is complicated by the lack of options, the cost relative to income, and the distance families must often travel to access care. *One mom said, "On top of commuting 40 miles to work, I go ten additional miles out of my way to take my son to child care. That may not seem like a lot, but over time, it adds up. I wish I could find care closer to either work or home."* If you consider her dilemma based on Twin Cities mileage, it would be roughly equivalent to living in Apple Valley and working in downtown St. Paul, but instead of taking the straight route on I-35E, detouring to your child care setting in Richfield first.

Distance and transportation

If you live in rural Minnesota, you have to have a vehicle to get just about anywhere. It's not uncommon for children's schools to be 15 miles from home due to school consolidations in rural areas. While some small towns have grocery stores, residents in many areas have to travel 30 miles or more to get groceries. As one woman put it, *"A quick trip is NOT a quick trip in rural areas."* Although some medical centers have opened family practice clinics in small towns across Minnesota, doctors are still some distance from home for many rural families. The same is true of government centers, community action centers, and other places where families receive assistance.

> *"That is another thing: living in the country, you live far from everything you have to do, so there is time used there that some of my friends that live in town don't have. It takes them two minutes to get to church and it takes us 10. And now also is the expense of it. That gas price is a killer."*

While public transportation exists outside the urban centers in rural Minnesota, it can vary greatly in availability from county to county. In some cases there are commuter buses available for people going to work, and they are getting more use all the time. But they generally are scheduled around weekday, daytime jobs, not evening or weekend shifts. And they run once or twice each way, so they aren't really an option for running errands such as getting groceries. Dial-a-ride services are more helpful for these kinds of trips and are becoming more available around the state.

A rural woman who works as a computer specialist at a medical center in a larger community lives 20 miles away so she has a 40-mile

commute round trip every day. She was lamenting about how much the gas prices have hurt their family budget. In discussing options with her supervisor, she said, "If I could take the commuter bus, I'd do it, but it only goes to one place (in the large community) on the other side of town, and then how would I get here? And if we had a computer crisis late in the day and I had to stay late, I wouldn't have any way to get home." They are negotiating a way for her to work from home a couple of days a week.

Some community action centers or senior living centers provide transportation for rural residents. They are mostly staffed by volunteers and are often provided only by appointment.

All of these services help, but they don't even begin to meet the enormous transportation needs of rural Minnesota.

As a rural employer, I find that the most common reason employees are unable to come to work is lack of reliable transportation. We quite often pick up employees and take them home again because cars don't work, the weather is bad and they are afraid to drive, they don't have money for gas, or their shared car is being used for another purpose.

When I lived and worked in an urban center during an earlier time of my life, I always took public transportation from my suburban home to my downtown job. It was so much more relaxing than driving in rush hour traffic and it was more cost effective because of the reduced rates for bus passes provided by my employer. I was actually able to use my "bus time" for some of my self care. I wish I had that option now, commuting from my rural home to the University of Minnesota Minneapolis campus. I'd use it in a heartbeat.

Caregiving

Many people travel long distances to care for aging parents. That in itself is not unique to rural women. What is unique is the lack of available resources in rural areas to help when you are not there — home health care, assisted living, even nursing homes. While this has improved considerably in recent years, it's going to need to improve much more with the rapid growth of the senior population in rural Minnesota.

Rural seniors tend to like to stay in the communities in which they have lived. They have friends there, they have a sense of community and connection, they understand and like the community culture and norms and often are quick to guard that culture — sometimes to the frustration of younger community

members. But many rural towns are losing businesses and services, and seniors who live there may have difficulty accessing the services they need as their ability to get around decreases.

"Some rural seniors live miles from necessary services. With increasing frailty and health problems, many are unable to provide their own transportation to and from needed medical and business-related appointments. Public transportation does not exist in their communities. Poor roads and inclement weather add to these difficulties. When faced with dependence upon younger non-relatives for assistance in meeting these transportation needs, and with fewer people available to help, many seniors simply do not take advantage of these services, and their needs remain unmet" (Machir, 2003, p. F18).

Thus, the need for support of frail rural seniors often falls on their children — typically their daughters. Taking them to church, driving them to doctor appointments, helping them with financial matters, taking care of their physical needs — "sandwich-generation" women find themselves providing care for both their parents and their children. How to integrate this into their already busy lives is a great challenge for rural women.

> *When my parents were both dependent on others for their day-to-day living, they lived in a very rural area with no home health care or other related services within 20 miles — and even those were limited. The nearest city of any size was 60 miles away. My two siblings and I contracted with a distant relative, who was actually older than they were but in good health, to live with them 24/7 during the week, and the three of us rotated caring for them on weekends. It was a 400-mile round trip for me, 300 for my brother and about 150 for my sister. My mother was cantankerous and difficult to care for. My dad had so many needs that it became increasingly difficult for the older relative to care for them. We eventually had to move them both to a nursing home in a city 75 miles away. They were isolated there and my mother, particularly, was extremely unhappy. She died a couple of months later. This caring had gone on for four years, and I knew it was affecting my mental health. After my mother died, my 16-year-old daughter said to me, "Would you PLEASE get some counseling? I need my mother back." I took her advice!*

Self care

It seems by virtue of the fact that we are women, self care always falls to the bottom of our priority list. One farm woman expressed this well when she said, *"The only time I get time for self-care is when I'm pregnant!"*

Yet self-care and meeting your own mental, emotional and physical needs is at the heart of being able to integrate all of the things discussed in this article.

Self-care is not a dilemma that is unique to rural women, and so I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it here, even though the temptation is great. But one aspect of self care that can be a challenge in rural areas is social connection and support. "Social support has been recognized as one variable potentially mediating the negative effects of stress due to poverty" (Anderson, et.al., 2003, p. F4) — and, I would add, the general stresses of everyday life. But ironically, the kind of social support a person needs when they are particularly stressed can be difficult in rural areas because of the very thing people say they like best about rural communities — that everyone is connected and knows each other. So who do you talk to when your life is in chaos? Who do you talk to when you are in financial difficulty? Who do you talk to when your relationship is stressed? Finding kindred spirits you trust is not always easy in communities where everyone knows everyone else, and counselors and other professional advisors are not as available.

There also appears to be an increased stigma in rural areas regarding mental health treatment. When I was working for the Extension Service in rural Minnesota during one of the particularly difficult financial times for farmers, we tried to encourage farmers to go for counseling to help deal with the financial stress and related emotional stress. The resistance was quite incredible. It was a combination of not wanting to admit they needed help and not wanting anyone else to know.

Women tend to need to talk about their problems to work through them. Finding people to talk to in rural areas can be a challenge, particularly if you don't want others in the community to know about your problems. It's much easier to be anonymous in urban and suburban areas.

Parenting and family time

Like self-care, the challenge of caring for the primary relationships in life — children, spouses, partners — is not unique to rural women. And as with self-care, nurturing relationships and parenting are critical for family satisfaction and well-being. Stresses in other areas of life — like the time it takes to do things, the lack of resources available, poverty, lack of job satisfaction — all of these and others have the potential to create tension in those primary relationships and roles. Some of these stresses are more complicated in rural areas, for all of the reasons already discussed.

Volunteering

One rural woman summarized the challenges of volunteering in rural areas quite accurately:

> *I think there is an expectation in the rural areas that one will volunteer at church, school, as an EMT, on the township board, etc. It is the only way some functions will happen — through volunteers. It can be difficult because of the other obligations of children, extended family, work and so on. Volunteering is falling off; it is kind of coming to a head for rural women, with the older ones saying, "I've done my share." The older ones say the younger ones need to take over and figure it out.*

There seems to be more pressure for people to volunteer in rural Minnesota because so many community functions depend so heavily on volunteers. This pressure seems to be less in more highly populated areas with more resources. In rural Minnesota, positions like township officers and county commissioners are largely volunteer. (Although there are minimal stipends, it doesn't come close to equaling the time spent on these activities.) Fire departments and ambulance crews are often staffed by volunteers in rural Minnesota. Interestingly, these local government and community service volunteer positions are rarely filled by women. But in churches, schools, 4-H clubs and other similar organizations, the volunteers are mostly women.

As with most aspects of rural life, distance plays a role in how, and how often, women volunteer. When they are juggling so many other roles, volunteering except where it directly concerns their children or family life often goes to the bottom of women's priority lists.

Farm women have different challenges

My own experience, research in which I was involved several years ago, and comments from rural farm women have convinced me that rural living for a farmer is different from rural living for a non-farmer. There are a number of reasons for this: The farm almost always comes first. If a cow is calving, if it's going to rain and crops need to be planted or harvested, anything else goes out the window. Whether it's attending children's events, going on a date, taking vacation or even just having regular meals, everything depends on the needs of the farm. A couple of women expressed this quite clearly:

> *We just do a lot of prioritizing as a family. I can't get too upset if supper happens at 5 p.m. or 9:30 p.m. If I insisted on a definite schedule, the whole thing would fall apart.*

Because health insurance doesn't "come with the job" for farmers, they often have to buy it individually at exorbitant rates with high deductibles. Many farmers — usually the women — work off the farm primarily for health insurance. One farm wife talked about the challenges that this presents:

> *As an active farm woman, I help with field work, livestock, grain marketing and accounting and work a full-time job (and part-time at a local hospital). I am also a half-time college student (online). One challenge is that full-time/part-time jobs with affordable family health insurance benefits are difficult to find due to the rural area. Employers are few and far between and this forces people to hold onto jobs which are stressful…. You find yourself emotionally drained by a job that you would like to change, but unable to due to loss of health insurance and other benefits.*

Other women identified the demands of farm life that they perceive to be different from their counterparts in town:

> *Unlike women in a city whose husbands are home by 5 or 6 p.m. or don't have to work weekends and then can lead a normal life, I am married to a dairyman who is out by 5:30 a.m. each morning and finally in the house between 7 and 9 p.m. After milking, he takes off Sunday for church and until about 3 p.m., when it is time for chores again. I not only have a job off the farm, I do all the farm books, which is another job, on top of the house and family and doing calves on Sunday nights.*

> *It is difficult to keep up with household duties as farm/field work always takes top priority. Also, it can seem that farm work is more valued than housework. Farm work is difficult to schedule as it is hard to be reliable. Our best-laid plans may change in a moment due to a sick cow, or rain, or a breakdown in equipment. Other family members and friends find it frustrating to set up get-togethers or events as we can never commit ourselves 100%.*

> *Our kids were not allowed to be in fall activities at school: there just wasn't time to get them to and from school (we live 15 miles from school). Also they were needed at home. So at our house, farming is always first.*

A number of years ago I was involved in a research project in which a team of Extension educators interviewed dairy farm families about their perceptions of their quality of life. All of the challenges of farm living mentioned above also surfaced in that study. Dairy women talked about having multiple jobs: parent, cook, housekeeper, farm partner and its many related responsibilities, and often, off-farm employment on top of it all. Yet like the women surveyed for this article, they also said they loved rural living and wouldn't change a thing (Parlor Profiles, 1997).

So why do they stay?

In spite of the challenges, women identified many important strengths of rural living. At the top of their lists are people and relationships — the feeling of community and closeness, knowing their neighbors, and having good friends.

> *There is more family-and-friends time. Rather than traveling to the larger towns for entertainment, family and groups of friends get together to enjoy their company. We have a close group of friends, who also have young children, and it is a good time just to get together and let the kids play and parents talk and enjoy some fun. There is also a nice community feeling. People support the community and seem to be very involved with groups, organizations, and local businesses.*

> *The benefits of rural living are that you know your neighbors, and almost all of them are good, honest, hard-working people, just like you. They go to your church, or the other one in town, their kids or grandkids are your kid's friends.*

A second important strength of rural living identified by several women is safety. They believe their families — and in particular their children — are safer in rural Minnesota than they would be in more urban or suburban areas.

> *I had little fear if my children were outside playing in the woods or in the pasture. I felt they were safe. When they were in town at the grandparents (small town under 2,400), they could bike to the pool at a pretty young age. Again a safety factor.*

Another strength of rural living is the accessibility of green space. There has been considerable attention paid in recent years to the importance of green space and nature in children's development and learning. A national Children and Nature Network has

developed with the goal of reconnecting children and nature. In rural areas, one doesn't have to go very far to find trees, lakes and rivers, wildlife, and wide open spaces.

> *They have space and freedom to shout, laugh out loud, and use their imaginations. They also have real responsibilities. We seldom watch TV and we don't play video games.*

> *Other benefits are connection with nature and a comfort level with nature, whether it was rain or wind or good weather or thunder or snow.*

Conclusion

Rural women face unique challenges in integrating their day-to-day life roles that their counterparts in urban and suburban areas do not experience in quite the same way. Less access to well-paying jobs with benefits, fewer options for child care, lack of resources for caregiving for elderly or disabled family members, and making adequate time for family, relationships and self are all more difficult for rural women. Researchers who studied women and work in a rural community identified several areas of research that are needed related to rural women and families. These include looking at "the effect of the rural context on women's work and family experiences," ways in which lack of work opportunities impact families and their economic well being, and child care needs in rural areas and how those needs might be met (Ames, et. al., 2006, p. 129).

Some of the challenges rural women face can't be changed — such as the distances to services and schools. But several potential research questions occur to me that might help shed light on how rural women can achieve a more satisfying integration of work, family and self:

- What can we learn from research and best practices in other countries about rural women and work-life integration? There is quite a lot of international work on many of the issues raised in this article that could help frame research questions.
- How can we create a system of child care in rural areas that encourages the development of more high-quality child care settings (home and center based) with greater geographic representation and more non-traditional hours?
- What models/best practices for rural transportation currently exist, how effective are they, and how could they be replicated? Given the increasing cost of fuel, the importance of transportation issues is multiplying exponentially in rural areas.

Commuting 20 miles to work, while it has been a time drain and somewhat of an inconvenience in the past, is now a major "budget breaker" for many rural families. Most urban areas have options for public transportation, biking or walking to work, or carpooling, but these options are just not there for most rural residents. Addressing systems and policies related to rural transportation is a key issue.

- How can communities and community institutions create opportunities for social support among rural women — with particular attention to the social needs of poor women, immigrant women, non-white women, lesbian women and others who are often marginalized in rural areas?

As a woman who has experienced life in the country, rural small towns, suburbs, and large cities during my life, I have a strong preference for rural living, where I find myself now. I see the same strengths in rural living as other women have expressed here, and the additional strength of quieter, less complicated surroundings. But as a woman nearing retirement age, I well understand the challenges my younger rural neighbors and families face. Many of them struggle every day with all of the issues discussed here. I believe their lives would be enhanced if answers to some of these questions could be found.

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