

Gender impacts on perceptions of careers in dairy farming

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Abstract: Dairy industries worldwide are challenged in terms of an assured supply of skilled young entrants. The perception remains that to be a dairy farmer, one must come from a farming background, be male and be the designated successor. If young people from farming and non-farming backgrounds are to be attracted into the industry, there is a need to understand how factors such as gender are influencing the occupation choices of school leavers.

Keywords: dairy farming, female, agricultural careers, adolescents, attitudes

Introduction

The availability of a constant supply of highly skilled young entrants is among the main challenges common to dairy industries worldwide. Attracting young people to the dairy industry is vital for generational renewal and also to enhance innovation (McKillop *et al.*, 2018). The dominant perception is that it is necessary to be from a farming background and to be designated as a successor to consider a career in dairy farming (Deming *et al.*, 2019). Females face barriers to enrolment in agricultural careers including breaking stereotypes (Shortall *et al.*, 2017), the most common entry route for Irish women is still through marriage, as women acquire farms by gift, inheritance or otherwise only in exceptional circumstances (Molloy *et al.*, 2017). Changing such perceptions is imperative to attract new entrants from farming and non-farming backgrounds irrespective of gender to the industry, and has led to increased interest in understanding the factors that influence occupational choice of school leavers. This paper examines the attitudes and perceptions of adolescents towards potential careers in dairy farming within the context of generational renewal for a dynamic agri-food sector through the lens of occupational choice theory.

Method

A mixed methodology approach was used to ascertain the perceptions and attitudes of adolescents towards careers in dairy farming.

A quantitative survey with 35 close-ended questions was conducted with adolescents from urban and rural schools. Key questions relating to: (1) agriculture, (2) perceptions of dairy farming and, (3) parents'/teachers' support were included. The surveyed population is considered representative of adolescents potentially available for agricultural careers in Ireland. The target population were adolescents aged between 15 and 18, who attended one of three agri-information events held in March 2017, November 2017 and March 2018. All adolescents were surveyed before the events started so they were not influenced by learning at the event. A total of 486 adolescents (240 females and 246 males) were surveyed.

In March 2020, an in-depth focus group with agricultural science students (n= 30) aged between 16 and 19 years was held in two schools. The focus group lasted for 1hr and 20 minutes. Firstly, adolescents

were asked why they chose to study agricultural science. Next the group was divided into 'from a farming background' or 'not from a farming background' and the participants were facilitated to complete a flexible brainstorm to answer the question 'What do you want / hope for in your career / working life' and then to sort and discuss in-depth the results of their brainstorm. Finally, the participants were asked to brainstorm for jobs relating to agriculture and discuss in-depth the results of their brainstorm. Notes captured during the focus groups as well as the results of the flexible brainstorming were analysed for key themes.

Results

The average age of the adolescents was 17 years. The majority of adolescents (84%) were studying agricultural science; 61% were from a farming background with dairy farming the most common farming enterprise (49%). Of the adolescents living on a farm, 56% reported having had a discussion on the future ownership of the farm with their parents. Adolescents largely viewed inheritance of a dairy farm as necessary to pursue a career in dairy farming while many indicated that farming would be a hobby due to the low incomes compared with other careers.

Parents have the greatest influence on the career choices of adolescents and many parents would not encourage their children to pursue the same career regardless of their profession. There was a positive correlation between studying agricultural science in school and considering an agricultural related career. More males (38.3%) were interested in a dairy farming career compared with females (18.5%). When asked if they were interested in learning more about dairy farming careers, 168 (55%) said yes, with 102 males (56%) and 66 females (52%) interested. The majority (83%) were interested in completing work experience on a dairy farm with 171 males (86%) and 107 females (79%) interested. This study confirms the continuation of the stereotypical perception that dairy farming is a male occupation and one where the ownership of land is a barrier to entry. The findings highlight the importance of exposure to the realities of farming and social interaction with farmers who challenge the stereotypes. The promotion of successful female farmers as role models for young women is important to disrupt the gender stereotypes and to highlight see that women have opportunities and shifting the perception that inheriting a farm is necessary.

The focus group discussions supported the survey findings. Gender stereotypes were common. Males and some females from farming backgrounds felt they might be part-time farmers in the future but only if they inherit. Most felt their parents wanted them to be happy in their career choices and that they had more opportunities than their parents' generation. There were mixed perceptions about careers in farming. They also expressed concerns about volatility and negative sentiment in the farming sector as well as the environmental impact of farming.

Conclusion

Adolescents' attitudes towards careers in dairy farming are subject to perceptions about gender and inheritance. Studying agricultural science and having work experience on dairy farms can positively influence the awareness and interest of young people and their parents about career possibilities in the dairy farming sector. Negative sentiment in the farming industry is a deterrent but there are also opportunities to profile positive examples of females and those from non-farming backgrounds having fulfilling careers in farming. The findings have implications for strategies and interventions that can potentially be used to help support participation in agricultural careers among diverse students in particular females and those from non-farming backgrounds and points to the important role that

agricultural curriculum and parents play in forming career aspirations of adolescents. The study contributes an understanding of career choices and aspirations in adolescence to add to the growing body of literature on generational renewal in farming.

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