

LNC94-075/LNC94-020

**Making the Transition from Conventional to Sustainable Agriculture: Gender, Social Movement Participation  
and Quality of Life on the Family Farm**

By Alison C. Meares

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Communication should be sent to: Alison Meares, 1703 W. Division, #2, Chicago, IL 60622

## **Making the Transition from Conventional to Sustainable Agriculture: Gender, Social Movement Participation and Quality of Life on the Family Farm<sup>1</sup>**

### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study of a non-random sample of six farm couples in southeastern Minnesota was shaped by a question originally posed by the participating couples: Is quality of life changing in the same ways for women and men as a consequence of the transition to sustainable farming systems? Historically, the family farm has been treated in research and policy debates as a single unit, with little analysis applied to the multiplicity of interests and roles within the family. Some organizations of the sustainable agriculture movement have followed suit and largely ignored women's roles on the farm despite their importance to the farm operation. The social construct of gender has implications for how farmers in this study define quality of life which in turn affects participation in the sustainable agriculture movement. Much of what men emphasize in describing quality of life reflects the values the sustainable agriculture movement itself espouses. For their wives, descriptions of quality of life are largely entwined with their highly elastic gendered roles and responsibilities on the farm, in the household, and in paid and unpaid work in the community, and much less with their involvement in the movement. Because women's different and important contribution to the farm and family are not institutionally recognized and addressed by sustainable agriculture movement, the movement's goals, vision and activities are gender-specific, dominated by men's participation and contribution.