OPPORTUNITIES FOR HOME ECONOMICS EDUCATION

IN SOUTH AMERICA

by Floyd Andre*

Introduction

Some probably have had more background and experience and are more knowledgeable as to the role and status of women in other countries than I. I doubt, however, that many would disagree with the fact that women have a very high status here in the United States. You would agree, too, I am sure, that there are several recognized women's professions in this country, such as the teaching profession, the secretarial profession, the nursing profession, and the home economics profession -- to name just a few.

This is not the case in some foreign countries, however. I was much surprised, for example, to find that the nursing profession is not held in nearly so high regard in Argentina as in this country. Yet for men, the medical profession and the legal profession are actually the two most highly regarded professions in Argentina, even though some educated for these never practice a single day.

Most of you would agree, too, with the view that here in this country education is the great leveler. By this I mean that regardless of a person's previous economic status, equally qualified men or women have more or less the same opportunities for employment in similar jobs.

In discussing the topic -- "Opportunities for Home Economics Education in South America" -- one must first recognize that the status of women is coming up some in certain Latin American countries. This is particularly true as these countries industrialize and become more urban.

My comments are based mainly on my experiences in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, and Paraguay and on the observations of several staff members from the College of Agriculture who have been on various assignments in these same Latin American countries. As background, I will mention just briefly something about elementary and secondary schooling in Latin America and also something about the university system and degrees offered. Then I would like to discuss in more detail some of the opportunities for specialization in the home economics field and the clientele for trained home economists in certain Latin American countries. It is in this last area -- where we consider with whom the person trained in home economics would work -- that we can most clearly see the challenge in the development of more opportunities for home economics education in Latin America.

*Dr. Andre is Dean of Agriculture at Iowa State University.
Elementary and Secondary Schooling

The elementary and secondary schools vary somewhat between public and private schools and among countries. In general, however, there is a system which allows young people to obtain about 12 years of education if they attend school that long -- five of which might be at the high school level. Even though grade schools -- perhaps through the fourth grade -- are available to many in the population, high schools are mostly available to those living in cities. This means that the young men and women completing high school work have either been raised in cities or their families have sufficient means that they can be sent to cities or kept in cities for their high school training. The fact that many country children -- both boys and girls -- have no opportunity for high school education is, of course, a real handicap to educational work.

After completion of the seventh grade or equal, some students enroll in the regular five-year high schools. Because of crowded conditions, the schools run in shifts and the more fortunate students might attend a Spanish or Portuguese school in the morning and an English or French school in the afternoon or vice versa. In the case of some boys, an opportunity might be provided at this time to go to a specialized high school. In a few instances, this might happen to the girls, but the opportunities are rather rare.

University System and Degrees Offered

A typical degree for an agriculturally trained person in a Latin American university is an "Ingeniero Agronomo" degree. For those specializing in animal science, a "Doctor of Veterinary Medicine" can be obtained. As far as I am aware, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Peru do not offer degrees in home economics. In recent years, however, home economics degree programs have been developed in Brazil. I will mention this in more detail a little later.

Opportunities for Specialization in Home Economics

Argentina

After they have completed a five-year high school the most comprehensive school for girls to learn about home economics in Argentina is at Bolivar. There these girls study in school for a year and are given such subjects as general agriculture, horticulture, cheesemaking, poultry production and management, bee culture, canning and preservation of fruits and vegetables, and quantity cookery. Besides these subjects, the girls devote a certain amount of time to manual labor. Nevertheless, most of the girls that complete this course are able to find jobs in extension work or go back to high schools to teach home economics.
Peru

In Peru there is a Department of Domestic Science within the Faculty of Social Science in the Agrarian University at La Molina. At the university level some girls also follow more or less scientific curricula and often switch from scientific subjects such as botany to social science when they wish to become extension workers. Extension work by women is appreciated and viewed somewhat in the sense that we would view a social worker -- not a professional home economist.

Unless the church helps or at least cooperates on the education of women for the home, progress is likely to be slow. Several good examples of cooperation are now extant.

Little "breaks" sometimes make a big difference in the success of a program. At the San Lorenzo land reform project in Peru, a school was established for youngsters so that they could learn to read and write. Then a reading and writing program was offered to the mothers. At first none of the mothers appeared for class. But as the children progressed in reading, the mothers started coming -- some walking several miles to learn to read and write.

Brazil

As I mentioned earlier, there are degree-granting programs in home economics at the university level in Brazil. The first institution to grant degrees in home economics was the Rural University of the State of Minas Gerais, beginning in 1957. Since the establishment of the program there, a home economics school has been developed at Pelotas. One was scheduled to start at Piracicaba in 1965 and another at Ceara in 1966.

The program at the Rural University has been developed with the assistance of staff members from Purdue University. Six main areas of work are taught: nutrition, clothing, housing, child care and nursing, education, and home management. When Dr. Marvin Anderson, Dr. Leslie Johnson, and I were at the Rural University last summer we felt the entrance requirements and the course offerings indicated that the school was providing good home economics training at the university level.

Uruguay

The College of Agriculture here at Iowa State has a contract in Uruguay, and our work there has been chiefly with the Faculty of Agriculture of the National University of Uruguay. Apparently, the only place that work related to home economics -- as we think of this field -- is given at the National University of Uruguay is in the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Science. In the Faculty of Medicine, work is offered in child care and in the field of dietetics; the Faculty of Science offers work in the general field of social service, especially with regard to delinquency.Interestingly enough, the students of the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Agriculture have a club or group which voluntarily gives its services for the improvement of sanitation facilities in rural areas of Uruguay.
Two schools in Uruguay offer home economics training at the high school level. One of these is part of the Crandol Institute, a private high school located in Montevideo, and the other is a specialized high school located in Colonia Suiza.

A number of years ago some specialized training in social science relating to the home economics field was offered at one of the specialized high schools called San Ramon. About 25 girls were trained by international organizations for the home economics field while this program was active. These girls were from four different countries including Uruguay; thus you can see that the effect of people trained from this program would be limited.

In Uruguay, too, there is a system of high schools under an organization called the Universidad del Trabajo. In one sense these are specialized high schools, and for boys they offer work in such specialties as beef production, poultry production, horticulture production, and other subjects. At least two of the schools in this system also have specialized training for girls which would correspond roughly to a three-year high school program in the field of home economics.

Clientele for Home Economics Workers

As one can readily understand, the opportunities are limited for specializing in home economics at the university level in Latin America. But this does not mean in any sense that there is not a need for trained home economists. Actually, the need for personnel trained in home economics is great in Latin America, and an awareness of this need is gradually developing, especially as extension activities are being set up in several countries. A look at some of the extension programs and their clientele may point out some of the problems confronting workers in the home economics field.

Certain centers have been developed in Latin America from which extension educational programs are carried out. The pattern in many instances is somewhat like that which we have come to follow in the United States. By this I mean a unit setup in which one would find a unit extension leader, a unit youth assistant, and a unit home economist.

Argentina

In the great agricultural region of Argentina called the Pampa, the center of these extension activities is at a place called Pergamino. The extension workers for home economics are young women who have completed a five-year high school and perhaps have had three weeks to a few months of special training in home economics. On a unit basis, these girls find themselves working with a clientele which has had an average schooling of three years.

This presents a real challenge to the home economics extension specialist. One of the major handicaps which she must overcome is to keep the clientele interested in educational subjects. This is not too much different, however, from what often is true in this country -- the women are especially interested
in making things which they can take home to show to their family, such as purses, clothing, and canned fruits and vegetables. It is much more difficult for the extension worker to encourage them to go into such problems as sanitation, getting running water in the homes, and other major problems.

Another problem is that these women who constitute the clientele will always say that there are no nutritional problems in Argentina. Actually, what they mean by this statement is that people are not hungry. Certainly there are nutritional problems.

The clientele served by extension centers out from Pergamino reside on middle-size family farms — composed of 200 to 300 acres — with about 2/3 of the families in the extension programs being owners. Few of the families would be considered poor families. It is also interesting to note that there is little connection between the programs for men — which might deal with hybrid corn, machinery, and management problems — and the programs carried on for women.

The wives of these farmers — or in other words the women's extension audience — see little opportunity for their sons or daughters to attend high school, but they do see opportunities for their children to finish the seventh or eighth grade versus the third grade. This clientele in general knows what extension is and what an extension worker is, but it probably does not appreciate too much what a home economist is. An extension worker going into a new area to develop a home economics program has to break down the closed community philosophy. When this is done, the extension program can be carried forward.

Brazil

In Brazil similar extension programs have been developed with encouragement from the national government of Brazil as well as state governments. Many of the same problems confront extension workers, especially in the home economics field, as is true in Argentina. One very significant difference in Brazil, however, is the fact that there are degree-granting programs in home economics.

One of the most interesting extension programs in Brazil is being carried on by a home economics specialist in the city of Belo Horizonte. This home economist has set up a program for young women who have secretarial jobs in Belo Horizonte. The program is set up for a period of two weeks with girls attending class from 5 to 9 p.m. each working day and is conducted at four locations in the city. The purpose of this program is to train these young women particularly in nutrition and also in such areas as sanitation and clothing. The home economist responsible for this program has done such a good job that an effort is being made to have her set up similar programs for training girls to work as home economists in the rural areas.
Uruguay

In Uruguay the level of education obtained by women is perhaps higher than in other Latin American countries. The information available on this particular question of level of education attained would indicate that the average wife on a farm would have attained more than a primary education, presumably more than seventh grade. The level of this education is increasing at a fairly rapid rate, so that home economists in some localities might be working with women that had at least a year or two of high school.

In Uruguay, also, there are several areas where large ranches have been broken up into smaller units. The operators of these smaller units have been carefully selected, and if an extension worker in the home economics field were fortunate enough to work in an area of this kind, the participation in the programs might have a chance to be especially successful. Certainly some of the same needs exist for home economics help in such areas as sanitation, nutrition, child development, and home management as in other countries.

Paraguay

In Paraguay there are 16 extension centers, several of which have home economics leaders. The main problem for these extension workers is one of transportation. In some instances, they even need to rely on bicycles as a mode of getting places.

Conclusion

In summary, I am sure you will agree that there are many needs and many opportunities for people trained in the home economics field in Latin America. Moreover, the level of education of women is going upward in these countries. Since mothers have a tremendous influence in encouraging their children toward education, the role of home economics and home economics specialists will become increasingly important.