

Women: the silent partners of agriculture

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the place of women in Australian agriculture. Firstly, it draws attention to the processes which have rendered women's efforts invisible before providing background history about women's contributions to agriculture. Secondly, the paper discusses the consequences of the denial of women's place in agricultural history before moving on to examine the political activism of current Australian farm women which has arisen as a result of their invisibility. Finally, the paper looks briefly at state and federal government responses to this activism of women.

### **Key words**

Women, agriculture, history, activism.

Women have always been critical contributors to agriculture and food production across the world.

They produce up to 80% of the world's food and yet analysts, policy makers, historians, and, dare I say it, agricultural researchers and extension officers, often fail to recognise the enormity of their efforts. In Australia, women's contributions have been equally significant and equally ignored. In this paper, I outline the extent of women's involvement in Australian agriculture before moving on to discuss the results of research I am currently working on which is examining women in agricultural leadership. While much of this research is not necessarily relevant to the topic of this paper, what I would like to discuss is the data collected from agriculture departments across the country outlining departmental interactions with women engaged in agriculture.

### **A history of women's involvement**

We know that women have made extraordinary contributions to Australian agriculture. What is disappointing for historians and researchers like myself is that we often know this only by accident. Much of our information comes from diaries and letters produced by women over the last two hundred years. Very little is recorded in official records because of the dominant masculine discourse in which as Summers (16) notes 'Australian' and 'men' are viewed as synonymous terms and which translates in agriculture to 'farmer' being equated with 'male'. This ideological position was help-ed along by nineteenth century politicians who decided in the 1890s that women's farm work would no longer be recorded (11) and that, therefore, censuses would no longer register farm women. Likewise, statisticians of the period distorted historical Australian statistics by excluding from censuses women engaged in 'unwomanly occupations' and married women (1).

This ideological position and the historical distortion of official records has continued through the twentieth century with successive generations of women invisible in official accounting. As a consequence of this framing of women as 'other' and therefore outside the real business of agriculture, agricultural extension services and state and federal department actions have been developed with little consciousness of the needs of women.

Yet, historically, women have played a vital role in the development of agriculture in this country. We know of the outstanding work of Elizabeth McArthur in developing the merino wool industry in this country and, yet, her contribution is still viewed as secondary to her husband despite his absence from the country for seventeen years during the development phase. We know far less about Mary Penfold, whose husband was a medical practitioner often away for extended periods as he visited his patients on horseback. Mary occupied herself as farm manager working hard on her Magill Estate. Mary's diaries

record various farm transactions, an account of the purchase of plough shares in Adelaide, payments to workers and a unique entry in the 1850s which says simply 'Today I began making wine' (14). ?Because colonial women were not expected to work in the fields, the growth of the famous Penfolds wine industry is attributed historically to her husband.

Another favourite of mine is Eliza Furlonge a Scotswoman who, faced with the death of several of her children, was determined to protect her surviving two sons. She was initially unable to persuade her Scottish businessman husband of the wisdom of moving to Australia so she set about organising the venture herself. In 1826 she walked over 1500 miles on foot through Saxony and Prussia gathering fine Saxon sheep. One hundred were gathered and herded to Hamburg and shipped to Hull where Eliza and her two sons walked them to Scotland for shipment to Australia. Before she could do this, the new Australia Company which was established in Britain to take advantage of the new colony's opportunities, bought the first shipment, so Eliza repeated the journey twice more. Each time she gathered a flock for her sons who were sent to Australia with the sheep where Eliza and her husband joined them. The Melbourne Age in 1908 described Eliza Furlonge as someone who had 'notably stimulated and largely helped to mould the prosperity of an entire state and her name deserved to live for all time in our history' (reprinted Wagga Wagga Daily Advertiser January 27 1989). It is discouraging that very few Australians recognise her name or realise the significance of her achievements.

These three examples serve to highlight the outstanding efforts of some great Australian farm women. What I would also like to point out is that generations of ordinary Australian women have laboured in agriculture and their efforts have been ignored by those with the power to misrepresent. Lake (11) notes the efforts of the soldier settlers' wives in Victoria in the early part of this century who worked alongside their husbands in cruel conditions. Evidence to the 1925 Royal Commission on Soldier Settlement suggests that most farms, particularly in the dairying area, were unviable without the unpaid work of a wife. Women were cruelly overworked and many reported their health breaking down (11). The following quotes from women's letters to the Country-man newspaper were reprinted in Lake's book.

*If a farm won't pay without women having to make slaves of themselves in this fashion, well the quicker we give them up the better ...*

*In the dairying districts one story only is needed – that of over-tired mothers and the slavery of little children. Men must be roused to take some action ...*

*I have been on a farm 25 years, and before my health broke down, I always helped with the milking and when we sent our milk to the city I was always in the sheds at 5am. Now at just 50, I am completely broken down ...*

Despite the repeated theme of extreme hardship, until Lake's detailed investigation, the efforts of these women were not officially recorded or acknowledged.

I draw your attention also to the efforts of Australian farm women during the 1950s and 1960s. When I conducted research with farm women in 1990-1, I was at first astounded and then dismayed to find that women had made very significant contributions of which I had been unaware and which received little mention in the agricultural texts and history books. I am referring to the small enterprises and subsistence production conducted by women in many areas of this country. It was not unusual for women to run their own enterprises, funds from which were used to pay the consumption costs of the family. I found women who had run up to 1000 hens for egg production and meat, others who had turkeys, and still others who sold cream and butter. Most of these women had also produced their own vegetables and made most of the family's clothing. What is significant about their achievements is that the money produced or saved, freed the farm from having to cover family expenditure. Yet, we do not acknowledge that these farms were anything but efficient production units and no account is given of the efforts of women to ensure their continuity.

I would argue that the work of women continues today to subsidise farm production units in this country. A modern version of women's unacknowledged efforts takes the form of off-farm work. At the end of the

twentieth century, Australian farm units are struggling to maintain viability and many are forced to rely on off-farm income to survive. My research indicates that 50% of women are working off-farm to provide essential food or consumption items for their families (2). This figure corresponds with the Office of Status of Women findings in the Life Has Never Been Easy Report which found that 47% of respondents work off the farm for income (13). Far from being the most efficient farm production units, as we are led to believe by industry leaders and government representatives, family farms in this country rely on the efforts of predominantly women and some men working off-farm to produce the income to remain viable. Yet, their efforts are still not being factored into the analysis of agricultural profitability in any significant way.

It is also worth noting that women are now increasingly evident in the technical and scientific fields of agriculture. There are many female agronomists making a serious impact on the nature of Australian agriculture and, yet, we need to remember the sobering fact that women only gained entry to most agricultural colleges in this country in the 1970s.

#### The consequences of the denial of women's contributions

As a result of the whitewashing of women's history in agriculture, we have a distorted view of agricultural production. We note, value and count the physical work of agriculture which is most often done by men and we ignore the value of the work done by women. The discounting of women continues to the present time much to the despair of farm women. Let me draw your attention to the Australian Farm Journal's February 1997 edition which outlined a list of the top 100 movers and shakers in agriculture. How many women were included? Forty? Thirty? Surely ten? In fact, only three women made it on to the list – even Dr Wendy Craik, Executive Director of the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) missed out! Such an outcry from women followed this publication that the July edition contained a list of the top 100 women in agriculture and the editor noted he was surprised 'to discover such a vast pool of talent' (6). This story provides telling evidence that significant commentators and analysts are still comfortable about completely overlooking women.

As a consequence of their invisibility, women have suffered in a number of ways. Not only have they been denied agricultural training until recent times but, significantly, because agriculture is equated with men, women have been overlooked as future inheritors and farmers leaving many young skilled women with no access to the resources of agriculture. The most evident point of entry to agriculture for women is through marriage, a tenuous link which often gives little legal status and makes them secondary in negotiations with extended families. Further, departments of agriculture and other government agencies have tended to direct their efforts towards male farmers providing women with little access to information and advice (12). This situation is compounded by the lack of attention paid by such agencies when organising information sessions to ensuring that venues and times are women-friendly. Much agricultural literature is gendered and directed at men from a male frame of reference. We are all familiar with advertisements directed to 'the Man on the Land'. There are many such references which denote agriculture as a masculine activity. Additionally, research funding bodies have for many years largely overlooked women's issues or failed to incorporate women as research subjects.

A further not unwelcome consequence of the denial of women's history in agriculture is the increasing political activism of farm women through the difficult period of the 1980s and 1990s. Younger, educated women, working in a number of areas, including on farm, off farm for income, and in the community (papering over the cracks left by the withdrawal of services), are questioning their invisibility and the lack of acknowledgement of their efforts. The movement by women, begun in Victoria and gradually sweeping across the country has had a number of significant milestones including the International Women in Agriculture Conference in 1994, the First National Rural Women's Forum in 1995 and the National Forum on Women in Agriculture and Resource Management in 1997. As well, women's activism has seen the development of Rural Women's Network units in Victoria, NSW, Queensland and Tasmania and a national unit in the Federal Department of Primary Industries and Energy. Constant themes at these gatherings include the demand for women's work to be acknowledged, for women to be made visible in agriculture, and for women to gain equitable representation on decision making bodies. As well, they are seeking continued funding for their networks. Further, women have been vocal about a number of social

justice issues including the need for child care, for education and training, for access to advanced telecommunications, for improved health and welfare services and for employment opportunities in the bush (3). At these gatherings women have been forthright about the barriers they face in rural Australia including the impact of traditional assumptions about women, gender discrimination, lack of access to positions of power, inappropriate selection criteria, 'old boys' networks, a lack of a sense of ownership of their industry, organisational structures which exclude, a lack of acknowledgement of women as critical clients, policies which are not inclusive of women, the burden of the expectation that women will perform unpaid voluntary work, family responsibilities and lack of child care (3).

### Consequences of women's activism

Women's activism has caused a shift in attitudes and the beginnings of a reappraisal of the business of agriculture. In 1995, the Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics (ABARE) produced a new booklet of statistics entitled *Women on Farms* (9). While this is a welcome addition to the statistics of farming, elsewhere (5) I have criticised the publication for not going far enough in its counting of women. We do know that the number of women who are paid workers in agriculture has increased from 15% to 32% over the last fifteen years and that women now make up 40% of agricultural business partners (15). However, official recording agencies are still not defining what is counted as 'work' or dissecting the contributions of partners to a degree that would expose women's contributions in what might be considered unpaid effort or effort that supports and sustains production and rural community viability.

However, further evidence of a new mood of acceptance is apparent in the national and state responses to the National Forum on Women in Agriculture and Resource Management. All states and the Northern Territory have produced a state action plan outlining their proposed efforts in dealing with women. DPIE has also produced a National Action Plan. These plans demonstrate that, across Australia, departments recognise that women have been treated poorly in the past and that there is good will to move forward on women's agendas. It remains to be seen whether good will translates into concerted action.

Perhaps more significantly, the activism of women has led to new research efforts around women's concerns being funded and to new evidence that women are critical partners in agriculture. One of the best examples of this work in recent times has been the *Missed Opportunities* project conducted through the Rural Women's Unit, DPIE, in 1997 (7). This project, using economic modelling, reveals, by counting the value of women's work on-farm, their off-farm waged work, and their household, volunteer and community work, that women contribute 48%, or \$14 billion, of total real farm income. This is a figure which women can readily relate to and which renders laughable the discounting that has occurred over the last two hundred years.

### The nature of Government's responses

I want to turn briefly now to my current research project on *Rural Women and Leadership* and to draw on one small part of that research in furthering our understanding of how women have been rendered invisible in agriculture and why they are truly viewed as the Silent Partners in Agriculture. As part of this research, I have conducted in-depth interviews with key personnel at senior levels in Departments of Agriculture across the country. Many, but not all of these key informants, are women and all are at Senior Executive Service (SES) levels of their relevant departments. Because of the very limited number of women at SES levels particularly in agriculture, I intend to protect these informants by limiting reference to their states or positions.

As I have pointed out, rural women's issues are on the agenda in all states and the Territory. However, it is noteworthy to study the structures through which women's issues are being addressed. In most states there are women's affairs or women's network offices with many departmental staff noting that these developed, not as a departmental initiative, but as a response to rural women's advocacy. Many women's areas are in agriculture or rural communities departments although in one state they have found an obscure home in Treasury. Almost all reports suggest they are understaffed. Nevertheless, their existence as a result of women's advocacy provides irrefutable evidence that the existing departments did

not see women as clients and were not responding to their needs. The state plan initiatives which have emerged from the National Forum in 1997 will hopefully go some way towards changing departmental environments which see women as 'other' or outside the norm of traditional clientele. My research suggests that the motivation is strong in many quarters, however, I am disheartened by the report of one interviewee who stated that at the senior executive level (where very few women are involved) in her state the item on the state plan for women was treated with great hilarity.

*I'm trying to be diplomatic here ... there was a discussion of the [Forum] items ... this was put down the end [of the agenda] in a somewhat disparaging manner and there was a lot of 'ho, ho, hos' about it. I thought 'shit how far have we come'? ... look there is an 'old boys club' we've got there.'*

One also wonders at the continued motivation within departments and the fragility of the gains made when senior executives report that a change of government can harm the advances made by women. This has already happened in Victoria and in South Australia where we had a change of government and so all the women's stuff really came to a halt. In South Australia, for example, the Rural Women's Network was renamed the South Australian Rural Network!

Departments must necessarily examine their client base to determine their program delivery. For too long delivery has been aimed at male farmers, a process which excludes women. Consequently, when women's needs are addressed they are seen as add-ons and separate to core business. In times of political change, these services may then be viewed as dispensable. One of the key initiatives in mainstreaming women is the development of gender inclusive language. I draw your attention to the Primary Industry South Australia (10) report Valuing Women as Customers which outlines some very useful strategies to allow the inclusion of women as mainstream clients.

In many states interviewees noted the importance of the Minister in creating a climate of acceptance of women as clients and in allowing women into leading policy positions. In one state it was noted that the Minister provided support to the state farmer body for the processes of exclusion of women from key Board positions.

*Oh yes, it's a closed shop actually, it's a boy's club and that is how they want to keep it themselves ... we also have an extremely conservative Minister who identifies very strongly with the [state farmer body]. So there is no great incentive to change. ... The Minister doesn't interfere. When you are looking for an invitation [to fill] a board position it will go to them rather than the department and so he is one of them almost.*

This state contrasts markedly with another where the Premier wrote to all Ministers insisting that representation of women increase.

In our case our Minister has written to each of the chairs of the Boards and Authorities in his portfolio and also to the chief executive officers of the agencies ... that is making known the Premier's wishes and also putting forth some strategies on how they can go about that ... the Premier wants a report back in six months ... on progress ... there has even been some talk about having the progress as part of performance agreements with those chief executive officers.

There would be no prizes for guessing which state will improve representation of women and access for women to the business of government. ?Support from the top, at Ministerial and departmental level, is essential to allow change.

Meanwhile, at industry body level, there appears little motivation for gender equity. In several states and at Federal level, the slowness of change within industry bodies has caused departments to set up alternative access for women to allow them some influence on policy. Thus, rural women's groups are being given infrastructure support to allow them to act as an alternative source of advice to government. That this strategy has had to develop indicates that farmer bodies are negligent in their efforts to facilitate access for women to their representative structures.

One disturbing fact to emerge from the interviews held with key departmental officers was the problems experienced by women within the departments associated with agriculture. Many reported an almost hostile climate to women at senior levels and some complained of outright harassment.

*Women don't progress through the management structures as much as men ... in a department like agriculture [there] is a very blokey culture.*

I have really hit my glass ceiling here ... We have just had an audit ... and we have come out badly ... if you just look at what's happening and where women are at and not at in the agency, you know that there has got to be things wrong. But now that we have had these audits on our systems and processes, you know that it is clear that there are real problems ... We didn't even have a grievance officer here. There are no anti-harassment programs in place ... there are still managers who think in spite of concerns expressed by some of the women staff that it is okay to have full length nude women on the back of doors in offices ... A lot of men also are feeling increasingly uncomfortable because the place is not sensitive to women...

It is difficult to imagine how such agencies can adjust to demands to focus on delivery of services to women external to the department when within their own organisations female workers are feeling marginalised and harassed. While some departmental responses to women's activism have been wide-ranging and laudable, they appear to be reactive. Women are still outside the core business of agriculture, viewed as 'other', facing hostility and lack of access to essential information. Departments and key personnel associated with agriculture must act to overcome bias in their own departments and workplaces, in the industry bodies with which they come in contact, and in the wider farming community. Women cannot make changes on their own because of the enormity of the structural and attitudinal resistances they face.

## Conclusion

The public face of Australian agriculture has largely been an uncompromisingly male domain. Women have been ignored or marginalised and treated as incidental to the core business of agriculture even when their contributions to agriculture are substantial. When assessing why women remain the silent partners of agriculture, many commentators have taken comfort from stating that the problem lies with women – they are not interested, they have other interests, they are not putting themselves forward, they lack confidence or skills or qualifications etc etc and therefore we can afford to ignore them because although there is a problem the problem is women (4). Such simplistic assessments ignore the historical neglect of women. They ignore the structural impediments which have restricted the recognition and accommodation of women. As I have outlined these impediments include the lack of proper accounting of women's efforts, the lack of recognition of the importance of women's work to the business of keeping agriculture viable, and the lack of cultural acceptance of women as farmers. The core of the problem lies with the association of farming as a male activity rendering all of women's efforts to the periphery as mere 'help'.

What I have attempted to do in this paper is to open up the possibility that the problem does not lie with women. In fact, it has been women's activism that has forced a reassessment of the agenda. The problem more truly resides with the way services are developed and delivered, with the language used, with the structural impediments which restrict women's careers in agriculture both within and outside the departments, and with the 'culture' which surrounds agriculture.

If we are to allow women to become other than silent partners, then we must change our very thinking about the business we are in. We must view women as equal partners, open and receptive to changes and developments in agriculture, but who have for too long been denied access to information. Currently we are overlooking the talents and energy of half our farming population. Quite apart from the fact that this does not make sense in a social justice context, it also does not make sense economically.

You will need to work hard to gain the confidence of women. Years of neglect have made women feel unwelcome. Yet, at the conferences I have attended over the last several years, women have been crying out for information, field days and courses that are targeted to them.

We must think carefully on the words of one women farmer. Women have a lot to offer but this potential is not always realised. Women can be stifled by the strong attitudes and traditional expectations about what they can do (8).

That 48% of real farm income in Australia is contributed by women must count for something. I suggest that you assess your own programs and practices- is the language gender inclusive? Are the times and locations women friendly? Is a women-only course a suitable option? Are you reaching isolated non-English speaking background farm women? Do you include women in your discussions during farm visits? These are all issues that must be assessed to ensure that women are not being excluded from information exchange in agriculture. My challenge to you is to break down the barriers that freeze women out of agriculture and prevent them being recognised for their enormous contributions to agriculture.

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