Farm women and work: required but not recognised

Fiona M. Haslam-McKenzie
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Across Australia, government sponsored Rural Women’s Networks have been established to encourage rural women to look beyond their individual context and to identify as part of a much larger group of women, all with common concerns. These networks have encouraged women to view themselves as legitimate participants in a patriarchal society and to realise that the traditional male culture of farming is redundant. Fiona M. Haslam-McKenzie, a lecturer in the Faculty of Business at Edith Cowan University, reviews the recognition given to women on the farm.

In Australia, the family farm is the backbone of the agricultural industry and the land and ownership of the process of production are integral to farming in this country. The farm family is a unique unit in modern industrial society because all or most members of the family participate in both production and reproduction, although women, often as unpaid, ‘invisible’ workers.

Since the farm family is both an economic and a social unit, the farm women may be called upon to combine a number of roles, contributing to the farm business as well as performing the tasks of housewife, friend, mother, daughter or sister. Consequently, the role of farm women is a complex one with many facets.

A growing number of researchers argue that the traditional definitions of work marginalise women’s work because they include the stipulation that effort must be paid in order that it be classified as ‘work’. Work time is not easily distinguished from non-work time on the family farm where the household physically co-exists with the place of tangible production.

Farm work usually undertaken by farm women, such as nurturing orphan animals, propagating seeds, fetching supplies and directing farm traffic is not awarded a value and therefore is termed ‘non-productive’ or ‘reproductive’. On the other hand, work usually undertaken by men, such as shearing, cropping, mulesing and constructing is viewed as having a commercial value and is termed ‘productive’. The reality is that few family farms are sustainable unless all of these tasks are performed. Therefore the division of labour on farms is not easily defined and emerges under the auspices of both family/household roles and wage labour.

Research on work has focused primarily on urban based organisations and the men within them while research on family has concentrated mostly on relationships between women and children. These research traditions have fostered the assumption that work and family in the industrial world are separate domains.

The few studies that have been undertaken in the agricultural sector world wide, have rarely raised questions about interdependence of production and family systems. Alston (1990) argues that farm work is defined in terms of commercial agricultural production with the result that only tasks concerned with the direct production of goods for money are included. The contributions by farm women are consequently discounted.
There is no particular task that they do not perform. They have multiple, intertwined roles which make them essential to the success of capitalised family units. As 'domestic' workers, they are in charge of housework and other tasks which are tied to farm work such as running errands, bookkeeping and administrative duties, feeding calves and lambs, raising poultry, experimenting with new seeds and taking responsibility for much of the farm landcare activities.

The interviews demonstrated that, like their counterparts in the Eastern States of Australia and other parts of the international agricultural community, Western Australian farm women have become active participants in all aspects of agricultural work. An overall perception of the women interviewed was that self-esteem was low and was likely to remain so while their contribution to the rural industries is largely unrecognised.

Very little, if any, work has been done in Western Australia to determine the contribution of farm women. In order to test some of the theories and claims made by other researchers, a preliminary study was undertaken in the most de-populated ABS statistical divisions, that is Hotham, Lakes and Campion in the sheep/wheatbelt of Western Australia, by conducting semi-structured interviews with 21 women from farms.

The results showed that women in Western Australia are active on their farms but are not nearly as active in agri-politics as their Eastern States counterparts. Western Australia has only just established a Rural Women's Network. In part, the responses to the questionnaire showed:

- All but one had an education equal or better than that of her husband.
- Two had some off-farm income. Ten others would like to have an off-farm income if suitable job opportunities were available.
- All of the 21 worked on the family farm. Four of the 21 proclaim themselves as primary producers or farmers. The remainder perceive themselves as indispensable 'help mates' but not necessarily 'farmers'.
- Six said they would be interested in getting involved in agri-politics but only one had actually become involved.
- The remaining two-thirds said that it was 'scary territory' and were afraid that they would be put down for lack of knowledge, lack of political savvy, fear of being accused of being thin skinned and concern that their domestic responsibilities would be ignored.
- All acknowledged the financial commitment in terms of travel and time away from the property and family if one becomes involved in a committee, especially one based in Perth.
- Three said that their husbands were involved in some sort of agri-politics and someone had to stay at home and keep the place going.
- Eight said the agricultural industry in Australia is in such dire straights and "what difference would we make to force 'them' (government and industry authorities) to listen?"
- Sixteen would like or would have liked, their children to have employment opportunities away from the farm or the local area.
- All 21 looked forward to the newly established Rural Women's Network in Western Australia. Some were cynical and wondered how long the State government would support it.
- All but two said they thought it fair to demand recognition and equity in terms of treatment by their families and their industries.
- All acknowledged that their industries cannot survive without the active participation of women.

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Women are farm managers, office workers, production workers and family counsellors. They are decision-makers as well as labourers. They are often concerned for the survival and well being of both family and enterprise. These interrelated, multi-dimensional aspects of farm women's work, make it extremely difficult for the family unit to replace them with outside wage-workers.

The survival of most family farms would be immediately threatened if wives were to cease their contribution. The difficulty is, however, that for the farm woman whose work is unpaid, her economic contribution is largely unrecognised because economic theory purports that domestic work has no value because it does not contribute to the economy and she is therefore a dependant.

Realistically, the contribution cannot be provided by ordinary wage-workers. Not only can many farms not afford the additional labour costs, but it is not possible to find a paid worker, or a combination of paid workers who can perform the multi-dimensional and interrelated functions of the farm wife. Nor will hired workers use their income to subsidise the farm.

In work undertaken in Canada and since validated in Australian research, farm women, when questioned about their role on the family farm, de-emphasise their skill and knowledge or see their work as an extension of their basic housework duties. Women on farms are caught between the conflicting feminine images of women fostered in our society and the realities of a situation in which they must react to expectations on the farm to be active in production. Much of what farm women do is done outside the public sphere. The public face of agriculture is a male one.

Confronting these realities is often difficult for farm women. Women will often deny their active role on the farm because farming has traditionally been classified as a 'male' occupation and women do not identify or classify themselves as farmers, simply because they are 'female'. Many women continue to see themselves as wife, mother and homemaker. Many explicitly say that only men can be farmers.

Even when women are in charge of operating the farm, they have a difficult time defining themselves as farmers.

The media, the advertising industry, the urban population in general, even the Departments of Agriculture and farm organisations have often acted as though all the significant aspects of farming are performed by males.

One way to resolve role conflict is to segment life. A person may play one role to one audience and another role when confronted with another audience. This may explain why some women who are active on their own farms are not active in farming organisations. When they are off their farm they avoid role conflict by not playing the farmer role.

Another resolution of role conflict is withdrawal from the situation. This can be expressed emotionally, socially or if the strain of constantly being torn between conflicting expectations is too great, the person may simply leave. Researchers at the University of Queensland believe that Australia's rural society is at least 50 years behind city communities in acceptance and participation of women in changing roles.

According to a family counsellor working in New England, many women have suffered a loss by becoming a farm wife: of income, status, individuality, time and space. A common reaction is anger directed at the land and the farming community for competing for their husband's energy and time, followed by great feelings of depression and guilt for their disloyal feelings.

This is exacerbated by the legal position of farm wives often being tenuous. In many circumstances where wives are made partners in the business of farming they are not partners in the ownership of the land, the real asset, by virtue of patrilineal inheritance. Generally, women enter agriculture through marriage. By virtue of patrilineal inheritance, Kerry James from the University of Queensland notes that "women participate in the farm labour process under conspicuously different relations and conditions from those of their husbands and sons". In spite of wives' active participation in many aspects of managerial and administrative work, almost all of them have a subordinate power position in the enterprise.

Active awareness of this by government agencies and industry organisations has the potential to change the social dynamics of the family farm and empower women to the eventual advantage of the industry. Simple measures such as addressing mail to male and female operators is a simple but significant strategy which recognises the active participation of women on family farms.

It is also belittling farm women when a caller on the telephone asks to speak to the 'boss'. It is highly probable that the female of the enterprise does the books, has intimate knowledge of the needs of the property and is articulate.
Why is it presumed that she is not a 'boss'? Such behaviour undermines and undervalues the contribution of women and their status on the farm.

Government and industry agencies could also encourage women to attend field and information days. It is well documented that many farm women are better educated than their husbands and yet ideologies and structure tend to have the effect of excluding women who were brought into ongoing rural enterprises as 'outsiders' or the dreaded D-I-L (daughter-in-law), and they remain outside major policy-making, whatever their legal status or labour contribution.

As a Canadian researcher states, "There is much written on the interdependence between the family and the enterprise, however, this interdependence does not translate into equality. There are in fact, fundamental inequalities within the family enterprise. Farms are not owned or controlled collectively by all those who contribute labour. Property relations do not reflect the labour contribution of women ... The patriarchal relations that dominate families in farming are reflected in property relations which for the most part have excluded women from the ownership of land".

While farms continue to have on average, negative incomes and uncertain futures, the next generation of farmers are unlikely to want to, or be encouraged to, return to the farm. In fact a tired joke that has done the round of rural circles for several years sums up a growing reality.

Question:
What's the latest form of child abuse?
Answer:
Leave your farm to your children.

Statistics show that women are less willing to marry into a farm enterprise when they are unlikely to be recognised financially or legally. Younger women are not as accepting of prescribed patriarchal gender roles as the older women. With limited opportunities for her to work off the farm, it is unlikely the wife will have any financial independence or choice.

Despite the fact that even on conservative figures, (census statistics have not been gathered in a way to properly account for farm women), one third of the national farm workforce consists of women, it is hard to find women in places of power in agriculture. Still, farm women rarely have positions on the Boards of the industry authorities that influence their lives and livelihoods.

In 1994, the then Federal Minister for Primary Industry and Energy, Bob Collins formally acknowledged this and made an effort to attract women to the 507 board positions within his portfolio. By 1995, 49 of the 507 positions were occupied by women but of those 49 only nine went to women primary producers.

Further reading
ABARE 1994. 'Off-farm wages and salaries for farm families'. Farm Surveys Report, Canberra, pp. 91-2.

For further information contact Fiona M. Haslam-McKenzie at Edith Cowan University, Churchlands Campus, Western Australia, 6918. Fax: 61 9 273 8754 or E-mail: F.McKenzie@cowan.edu.au

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