

GENDER EQUITY FOR RURAL WOMEN:

ARE WE MAKING ANY PROGRESS?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the roles of women in rural areas and limitations placed on them by traditional division of labour based on gender. It identifies the financial dependence of farm women on their husbands, and how their lack of equity in the farms reinforces this. The lack of recognition for women's unpaid labour is discussed. Reasons for women's lack of participation in rural industry policy and decision making processes are examined, and methods to rectify are considered. The role of rural women's networks is highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

Australia as a British colony inherited the concept of men belonging in the outside world and women belonging in the home. This ideology was deeply entrenched in the 19th Century. Women who worked were limited to such female occupations as cooks, laundresses, midwives, seamstresses and nursemaids, and were expected to stop working when they married. Towards the end of the 19th Century and early in the 20th Century, women began to find employment in manufacturing industries (frequently in clothing and footwear workshops), and in offices and shops (Weeks 1995).

Women's participation in the labour force continued to increase; however, men were considered to be the dominant sector in the working environment. When the first basic wage was set in 1907, it was based on providing for a working man, his wife and three children. Women's wages were lower, as it was perceived that they



would be principally supported by a man (Weeks 1995). Women today continue to earn less, as they are concentrated in lower paying industries, and at lower levels of organisational hierarchies. In 1993, women working full-time in the community services industry were earning 71.5% of men's earnings (ABS 1993). As two-thirds of the employees in this industry are women, this figure is likely to be lower in other, more male dominated segments of the workforce. This lower earning capacity reinforces the pattern of women as primary domestic care providers (Weeks 1995).

This is confirmed by McAllister (1990) who stated that women hold jobs of lesser status than men, achieve less job satisfaction, receive fewer material rewards, and face greater barriers to promotion, although they put more effort into their work than men.

The last 25 years has seen a significant increase in women in the workforce, reaching 42% in 1991. The majority was employed in community services, finance, property and business services, recreational and personal services, wholesale and retail trade, and public administration. While most of these women are employed in "white collar" positions, they are generally employed in lower ranking positions than men (Graycar & Jamrozik 1993). In fact, ABS figures showed that whilst women were over 40% of the workforce, they held only 25.4% of managerial positions (ABS 1991).



WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE PAID WORKFORCE AND DOMESTIC LABOUR

The division of labour by gender also occurs in homes. Married women in paid employment are more likely to take primary responsibility for domestic labour and childcare than their partners. This double burden of paid work and domestic labour is an effect of the traditional male/female roles, in which men take minimal domestic responsibilities, and in fact, can create a self-fulfilling prophecy in that women are seen as less reliable employees, more likely to require time off from work for domestic reasons (Grant & Porter 1994).

Research has shown that women working full-time are most affected by domestic commitments. They have the greatest difficulty in balancing their home and work responsibilities. Women with high earnings potential are strongly disadvantaged if they lack resources for domestic help. In contrast, domestic work does not impact on women in part-time work to such a great extent, on either the hours they work or their rate of earnings. This suggests that these women assess their domestic responsibilities and then choose work suitable to their needs in terms of flexible working hours, closeness to schools and home, and job content (McAllister 1990).

As the number of women in the paid labour force increases, pressure is placed on their leisure time. This is defined as residual time remaining after paid work time, unpaid work time, and time spent on self-care, such as eating, sleeping, washing, etc. An important part of gender equity concerns the distribution of leisure time. Analysis of data shows very little variation between the hours of paid and unpaid



work by men and women, with leisure hours for both sexes being similar. However, the constraining nature of women's family responsibilities mean that women have less quality leisure time. It is more fragmented and therefore less likely to relieve stress. Similarly, while men now spend more time with their children, they are more likely to take part in play activities, while women are involved with the physical care of the children. This indicates a continuing gender gap in leisure time (Bittman & Wajcman 1999).

The domestic division of labour is currently in a period of transition. Changes have occurred from the traditional view of domestic labour being women's work. The necessity of performing domestic labour and paid work puts great pressure on women in the workforce. In most households, redistribution of domestic tasks happens. However, there is evidence that women in paid work reduce the hours spent on housework, even though the increase in men's contribution to housework is very small. Because of this, the percentage of hours of domestic labour performed by men has increased (Bittman & Matheson 1996)

WOMEN'S WORK IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Changes are also occurring in gender divisions in farming communities. Rural ideology supports traditional gender division of labour. Productive labour has always been valued more highly than intellectual achievement, and farming is considered to be more a way of life than a job. Women "marry" the job, taking on the role of supporter and nurturer of their husbands and families, and treating the farm as an extension of the family. Their position is seen as subordinate to their husbands, limited by their lack of physical strength. However, as the emphasis on



farm management becomes greater, the perception that many farmers' wives have of their role changed. Their farm management skills are important to the farming operation. The partnership of marriage is extended to include a working partnership, with the wife being considered as an active partner in the operation; however, gender division of tasks still occurs, with the men taking the tasks considered to be heavy or dangerous (Bryant 1996).

The First International Conference of Women in Agriculture held in Melbourne in 1994, made five recommendations to create sustainable agriculture while empowering women. These were to get more women into decision-making positions on marketing authorities and government bodies; to encourage women to join agricultural bodies; to have women's unpaid farm and house work recognised in official statistics and in the calculation of the gross domestic product; and to form a global network for women in agriculture (Share 1994).

Much of the on-farm labour by women is rendered invisible because it is not acknowledged as work. In 1999, the Australian Bureau of Statistics did not recognise farming women's labour, and it was only in that year that the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) acknowledged women's contribution to the Australian farming economy (ABARE 1999, Jennings & Stehlik 1999). Women's on-farm work is not only the traditional indirect inputs of cooking, housekeeping, childcare and farm errands, but also general farm labour such as tractor work, planting, harvesting, mustering, stock care, accounting and computer record keeping. There has also been a proliferation of on-farm income earning projects amongst farming women, based



on cottage industries and craft work, such as the production of gourmet food items, pottery, handspun garments, etc. (Jennings & Stehlik 1999).

Many farming women undertake paid off-farm labour, frequently traveling relatively long distances to do so. Many women return to jobs for which they were trained before marriage; however, the majority are more likely to work in lower paid, lower status jobs, frequently as part time or casual employees (Jennings & Stehlik 1999). This increases during times of rural downturn. In Whitsunday, for instance, women from sugar cane farms frequently obtain work as housemaids at local accommodation businesses at Airlie Beach when the cane industry is depressed. This enables them to provide basic essentials when farm income is insufficient. It also enables them to limit farm indebtedness from increasing in bad years, undermining the sustainable viability of farming operations. These reasons have also been identified in other rural industries (Alston 1998, Jennings & Stehlik 1999).

The nursing profession has noted significantly higher levels of nurse employment in terms of population in rural areas than in metropolitan areas, being 1705 nurses per 100,000 population in large rural centres as against 1183 in capital cities. However, a larger percentage of nurses in rural centres are lower-level enrolled nurses, rather than more highly regarded registered nurses, and of these enrolled nurses, more than 93% are women (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare (AIHW) 1999).



Farm women take off-farm paid work to gain a sense of self worth and personal satisfaction as well as for financial reward. It gets them away from the farm, allows them to interact with people outside farming communities, and lessens their financial dependence on their husbands (Alston 1998, Danes & Keskivan 1990, Jennings & Stehlik 1999).

Many women find that the option of off-farm work is not viable for them. The demands of their on-farm labour, high costs in time, fuel and stress in traveling to the work place, their lack of training in current sellable skills, and conflict caused by opposition from partners and families often prevents women from taking paid jobs, or results in them finding themselves unable to cope and resigning. In the sugar industry, women are pressured by community expectations to take “proper” care of their husbands and children. Going out to work is seen as selfishness on the wife’s part. She is seen as neglecting her prime domestic duties, and contributing to the loss of young people from the area, by taking an employment opportunity from a young person who may have to go away to find work (Jennings & Stehlik 1999, Pini 2001).

WOMEN’S POSITION IN RURAL INDUSTRY PEAK BODIES

While women’s roles in farming operations have changed, research shows little penetration of women into industry representation. The path to industry leadership in the Queensland sugar industry, for instance, is almost totally male dominated. In its 70 year history up until 1994, no woman had ever been elected to the peak industry body, Queensland Cane Growers Organisation (QCGO), although the large majority of sugar cane assignments are registered in the names



of both men and women. Since then, the number of women members has varied from zero to 4, out of a total of 184 elected members (Poggi 2001).

Pini (2001) showed that women are actively involved in sugar cane farming and make a major contribution to the industry's sustainability, but have no role in industry decision making. She believes that this is because legitimacy within the industry as a leader is equated with status as a farmer who performs the male role of on-farm physical labour. Women's knowledge of financial farm management carries less status, and therefore they are not considered for industry leadership. Women are also denied opportunities for demonstrating their leadership potential, which occurs at forums such as shed meetings, where women's presence is still considered to be inappropriate by men.

This flows on to the administration of the QCGO. Of the 29 regional Canegrowers offices, none have a female manager. One woman was appointed to the position of manager in North Queensland in the late 1990s but left after a short time, unable to work with the lack of support from the elected members (McBean 2001).

Research into general farming operations in Australia has identified that women make up 40% of farm business partners, and that more than seventy thousand women defined themselves as farmers. In 1998, they were contributing 48% of the total Australian real farm income. Their standards of education are higher than men. Most of them complete high school, and many have tertiary education (Alston & Wilkinson 1998).



If women are making such a large contribution to farming, why are they not involved in policy and decision making? Rural media downplay the role of women in agriculture, perpetuating the image of men holding power and women playing secondary roles. A list of 100 top people in agriculture published by *The Australian Farm Journal* in 1997 featured three women. In response to an outcry from rural women, the magazine then published a list of 100 top women in agriculture, and were astonished at finding “*such a vast pool of talent*” (Carson 1997). Most rural magazines and papers feature men in the business and leadership roles, and women in the social and handicraft sections.

Grace and Lennie (1998) consider that participation in decision-making in peak rural organisations has increased in the last decade. They cite the initiative by the Dairy Research & Development Corporation to enhance participation of women, and the funding of a study of women’s participation in the sugar industry by QCGO. The Canegrowers study, however, described the path to leadership within Canegrowers as “*subjective, closed and distinctly gendered*” and states that, “*within the organisation Canegrowers, merit has been equated with being a male*” (Pini 2001 p.iv and p.v).

Farming peak bodies are permeated by gendered political culture and mythologies which require that their members be “real” farmers, capable of the physical, heavy components of farming, able to be mechanics, builders and electricians when required. Women’s contributions to farming are acknowledged, but they are seen as lacking the strength and male aggressiveness required in agricultural politics to



obtain a better deal for struggling rural industries. Agricultural politics constantly use fighting metaphors and have a confrontationalist perspective. This further reinforces the perceived need for male leaders (Liepins 2000).

Traditionally, farms are handed on to sons, not daughters, and women are most likely to enter into a farming partnership through marriage. This places them in a secondary position, bound by expectations that they will accept the gendered division of labour. This shapes and limits the choices which they make. Their subservient role in the farm hierarchy means they are excluded from rural policy making organisations, which leaves them with no forum in which to express their views, and they are effectively rendered silent. This silence is then alleged to be lack of interest, and used as justification for their exclusions (Alston & Wilkinson 1998, Shortall 2001).

Pini (2001) suggests that the Canegrowers elected members' reaction to the question of women's representation fits in with Margaret Alston's typology of denying that lack of women in the Organisation is an issue; identifying women as the problem; and developing some strategies to resolve the problem, but basing these strategies on the concept of women being the problem. As an example of denial, she documented comments by elected members that men and women naturally have different roles. Women's natural role is the care of house and family, and it is therefore very difficult for them to be away for the period of Canegrowers' meetings. She quoted members as saying that arranging child care is a personal matter, as is the matter of whether the man or the woman in the farming partnership should take part in industry policy making bodies, and as



such, Canegrowers had no right to advocate changes in these areas. This enables them to absolve Canegrowers from introducing policies which would make it easier for women to take part in the Organisation.

Pini (2001) also states that women's lack of representation in the sugar industry was explained by most members as due to deficiencies in women. Elected members stated that the process of electing members was democratic and based on the merit of those standing for office. The fact that so very few women had been elected to the body indicated a lack of merit in the women. This ties in with the idea that farming is an area of hard physical labour more suited to men than women, and that only men who undertook this labour had suitable knowledge about cane growing and the sugar industry. Pini considered that the definition and application of merit in QCGO is gendered, and that the members did not acknowledge this in any way. Members were therefore able to rationalize that the Organisation was in no way responsible for the lack of women participating in the decision and policy making in the sugar industry.

Initiatives have been introduced by the Commonwealth Government to increase women's participation in rural policy and decision making. Women are encouraged to take part in government agencies, industry bodies and communities, and a database has been established with details of women with suitable skills, expertise and experience. An annual Rural Woman of the Year Award was inaugurated in 1999 to lift the profile of women in agriculture (Troeth 2000).



Margaret Alston (1999), however, believes that government, industry and farming bodies lack respect for, and withhold support from women. In a survey of 171 women in leadership, she identified a disturbing level of harassment, ranging from exclusions from pre-meeting and social activities, to verbal comments. Some women reported incidences of physical assault. Many of these women also lacked support at home, with 40% of them reporting limited or no family support, and 72% retaining primary responsibility for running the household. Including minority groups in decision making widens the perspective of the decision making process, and rural leadership would undoubtedly benefit from the wider perspectives achieved by including women, but if it is to occur, action is required in the areas of leadership training and mentoring for women, provision of child care, and affirmative action. This will require changes from farming organisations, industry bodies and government, as well as from women themselves (Graham 1999).

While farm women are a large segment of the rural population, the economic base of the Australian rural sector is becoming increasingly diverse, and the category of rural women also includes women living in small towns and mining communities, professional women working in rural environments, and those seeking alternative life styles on hobby farms. This diversity is often underestimated as “rural women” is interpreted to mean farming women (Grace and Lennie, 1998). This is further confused as some rural women belong to two or more categories – many farmers’ wives teach in local schools or work in businesses in rural centres.



Newly appointed female principals in schools in rural areas of Australia are disadvantaged in that most professional and academic literature of an empirical nature is strongly androcentric. This results in an inability for women principals to learn from research findings specific to their needs and problems. It has been considered the norm for principals to be male, based on the belief that disciplining boys requires a powerful figure, and a man is more likely to be successful, and that men are more capable of leadership than women. These beliefs are more entrenched in rural and regional areas, where a female principal is more likely to meet with sexism from staff, students and the general community (Dunshea 1998).

The androcentric bias has two results. It confirms that male experience is “right”, and reinforces sexism. The lack of female experiences in teacher education literature generalizes both genders into an amorphous mass, and leads to the assumption that the experiences reported are general to both genders. This ignores the problems of sexism which many women principals encounter. This occurs in such forms as undermining activities of male staff who cannot accept a woman in a superior position, or expressed opinions that a woman appointed to a senior position has been given the promotion for reasons of political correctness rather than merit (Dunshea 1998).

The National Landcare Programme was an initiative established by the Labour Government in 1989 to address environmental degradation and rural decline. Its approach is participatory, and its aims are to create efficient, sustainable and equitable management of natural resources in Australia. Its developers hoped that



it would recognise the role of women in land management, and encourage their participation in the planning and implementing of projects. However, its success has been limited. Community perceptions continue to doubt women's ability to make major decisions in farm management, and while many women are involved in the Landcare movement, they are disproportionately represented in support and administrative roles. This further perpetuates the image of women lacking the capability to carry out roles of power and influence (Thompson & Leigh 2001)

A consensus of opinion among writers is that rural women make a major contribution to the rural economy but they are perceived as being "invisible". This is an obstacle to them taking a part in policy and decision making processes in their industries. Unless they can be seen to make a contribution in their local areas, they will fail to be elected to industry bodies or appointed to government boards and committees; however, the patriarchal structure of rural industries, with its belief that women lack the necessary skills and interest, makes it almost impossible for them to play a role at the local level (Grace & Lennie 1998, Jennings & Stehlik 1998, Alston & Wilkinson 1998, Alston 1998). If women are to make a start in breaking down this barrier, it is necessary for them to have a forum where they will be accepted.

RURAL WOMEN'S NETWORKS

In Canada in the 1970s, the situation for women was similar. A network of women's groups was established as mutual support groups and lobby groups. Under the network's auspices, research was undertaken on such subjects as the socioeconomic status of women, farm women and property law, and the image of



farm women in the Canadian media. The network achieved a notable success when in 1991, the Census form asked for the names of all farm operators, rather than one name only. This not only provided an accurate picture of the part played by women in agriculture, but acknowledged that they were an integral part of farming operations (Teather 1997).

The 1994 International Women in Agriculture Conference recommended the establishment of similar networks for women across the world, and based on the Canadian model, the Federal Government and many of the State Governments established Rural Women's Units. The first one was established in Victoria, and was called the Rural Women's Network to reflect its role of linking disparate elements of rural women's movements with each other and with government (Grace & Lennie 1998).

These networks now exist across Australia, and continue to push for women's unpaid work in homes and on farms to be acknowledged, for women to be made "visible" in agriculture, and to gain equitable representation on decision-making bodies. This philosophy differs from the long established Country Women's Association (CWA), which is a conservative body that supports existing patriarchal social structures. The CWA has been integrated into the Rural Women's Networks in New South Wales and Victoria; however, in other States, it has resisted this. In a survey carried out in Queensland, many women reported that the CWA does not meet their needs, and this is supported by falling membership and the increasing age of its members (Grace & Lennie 1998, Alston & Wilkinson 1998, Alston 1999).



In 1998, the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management (SCARM) adopted a five year National Plan which aims “*to achieve profitable and innovative agricultural industries and sustainable resource management and vibrant rural communities by realizing the full potential of women*” (SCARM 2001 p.6). Benchmarks were set on the gender composition of statutory bodies and SCARM committees, and on the level of participation by women in programmes and courses. The recently released report on the first year shows that progress is slow – the number of women on SCARM committees and statutory boards actually declined, with only 2.2% of members being women. However, it is hoped that increased participation by women in programmes and courses, especially in leadership and business management, will be reflected in an increase in women representatives on SCARM committees for the remaining four years of the Plan (SCARM 2001, QCGC 2001).

A different form of women’s network is the commodity specific, regional groups which have been developed under the umbrella of the QCGO. The first one, Canegrowers Network Mackay, began when a group of women banded together to lobby State and Federal politicians for practical assistance for rural families unable to cope with a combination of extremely high interest rates, severe drought and very low sugar prices. They were successful in obtaining assistance for struggling cane growing families in Central Queensland, and the recognition that their efforts as a combined group had achieved this success encouraged them to formalize their group. With a focus on the sugar industry and the rural communities in which it operates, the group aims to foster development of new



skills, and stimulate interest, knowledge and participation levels by women in the industry.

The Network tries to avoid being labelled as feminists as this would create a backlash in a very andocentric industry. Members believe that they can reverse the almost total lack of recognition for women's contributions to sugar growing and representation on industry bodies by offering women training to increase skills and self confidence, and increasing their profile by participating in meetings, events and workshops. The success of their policy is illustrated by the fact that the Network is regularly approached by organisations and bodies, and by Federal, State and local governments for submissions on a wide range of subjects, and with invitations to take part in meetings and conferences on many issues. Members also gauge their success by the increasing number of women at industry events – less than 20 years ago, no woman would have attended any sugar industry gathering; now it is accepted as the norm – and by the election of the first women to Canegrowers bodies (Lowry 2000).

Pini (2001) identified a backlash to the Network from the male-dominated QCGO. While staff accept the necessity of being seen to be politically correct in encouraging women to participate in industry policy making, many elected members have been slower to accept the benefits, resisting in both overt and covert ways. The Network has been criticized as being discriminatory as it is a women's only group, driven by a radical feminist agenda, aiming for a "take over" by women; and for using resources which have been taken from other important areas. In short, it is seen by some as divisive.



Despite this resistance from some male members, Pini (2001) believed that the Network offered many benefits. It has given an opportunity for hegemonic assumptions about farming to be influenced, and has widened the definition of farming knowledge. The existence of the Network has challenged a commonly held view that women are not involved in industry leadership because they are not involved in, or interested in the industry, and it helps to refute the idea that the problem is the women, not the organisation. The Network provides an opportunity for women to unite to resist the status quo in a far more effective way than could be done by individuals, and it offers support to women trying to play a part in industry policy and decision-making processes. The input of women into Canegrowers has the benefit of widening the perspective, leading to better decision making, and the Network provides a focus as an identifiable group of women in the sugar industry, enabling them to have input into groups external to the sugar industry whose activities impact on the general rural community.

CONCLUSIONS

The roles of women in rural areas and on farms in Australia have traditionally been constrained to that of carer and assistant. This has not changed, with women still seen as having the primary responsibility for home and child care. This is particularly so in the older generations, and older farm family members often put pressure on women who marry into the farm to accept their “proper” role of nurturer of the family.



Women are increasingly defining themselves as farmers, rather than farmers' wives. They keep the farm accounts and perform many of the management tasks, as well as undertaking heavier farm duties such as tractor work, planting, harvesting, mustering and care of stock. At the same time, they still retain all the traditional tasks of farm women. It is a growing source of irritation for many women that their labour is still not acknowledged, and that they are rendered "invisible" by this lack of recognition for their efforts.

Women living in rural areas but not on farms also are disadvantaged. Research into female principals in rural schools shows that they face the entrenched belief that men are more likely to be successful principals as they are considered to be more powerful and more capable of leadership. In the nursing profession, a far larger percentage of nurses in rural areas are lower level enrolled nurses rather than registered nurses, and most of these enrolled nurses are women.

Even less progress has been made in getting women involved in policy and decision making in rural industries. Farming peak bodies retain their gendered political cultures and perpetuate the myth that rural industries can only be understood and represented by "real" farmers capable of performing heavy farm labour, and that male aggression and strength is required to obtain a better deal for members. Women are excluded from industry meetings and events. They have no forum in which to express their point of view, and because their view is never heard, men assume they are not interested and their exclusion is therefore justified.



Government initiatives have been introduced to increase women's participation in rural decision and policy making, and women are being encouraged to take part in government agencies and bodies. However, research shows that if they do join these bodies, little is done to limit harassment, assist women with child care to enable them to attend meetings, or to provide mentoring or leadership training to give them the skills and confidence required to participate successfully in these bodies. Examples such as the Landcare movement show that while women are becoming involved, they tend to be in administrative or support roles rather than decision makers.

The image of women in rural media also has shown little change, showing men as holding power, and women in secondary roles. Men feature in business and leadership roles, and women are in the social, family and craft sections.

One avenue through which it is hoped that change will occur is the rural women's networks which are being developed. While the networks take many forms and have differing focuses, their main push is to gain recognition for women's work in homes and on farms, and to gain equitable representation on decision making bodies. They are a forum where women can make their opinion heard, and where they can be seen as being part of the rural industries. Many of them offer training for women, ranging from first aid to leadership courses. It is hoped that through the medium of the networks, women can obtain the skills and self-confidence necessary to allow them to take on roles as industry representatives, and that by lifting the profile of women in rural communities, they will be able to stand for election to industry bodies and win.



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