

Strategic Analysis Paper

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Empowering Women in Agriculture: Australia and Beyond

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Key Points

- Women make up approximately half of the international agricultural workforce, but exercise significantly less power in the sector than men.
- Reducing the “gender gap” in agriculture is recognised as a way to considerably increase food security. Women’s empowerment is currently a dominant theme in international development campaigns.
- The Australian agricultural industry is heavily dependent on women’s off-farm work, much of which goes unrecognised. Women do not have adequate representation on rural decision-making bodies.
- In the 1990s via the “women in agriculture” movement made some progress on empowering women. Since then, however, momentum has declined and little progress has been made in the last decade.
- Agricultural policy must be reframed to encourage women’s active engagement in agricultural policy and practice. Failure to do so not only creates gender inequity, but also limits the potential of half of Australia’s rural workforce.

Summary

Globally, women are not sufficiently recognised for their contributions to farming. Women play a key role in the global rural workforce, comprising [nearly half](#) of all agricultural workers. They contribute to on-farm work as managers, paid farm workers, unpaid domestic workers and also sustain rural communities through off-farm work and community participation.

Australia is lagging behind the rest of the developed world in empowering rural women. Despite being highly developed in many areas, the face of Australian agriculture is still that of the middle-aged white male. Women are under-represented in agricultural politics and the decision-making processes of farm organisations.

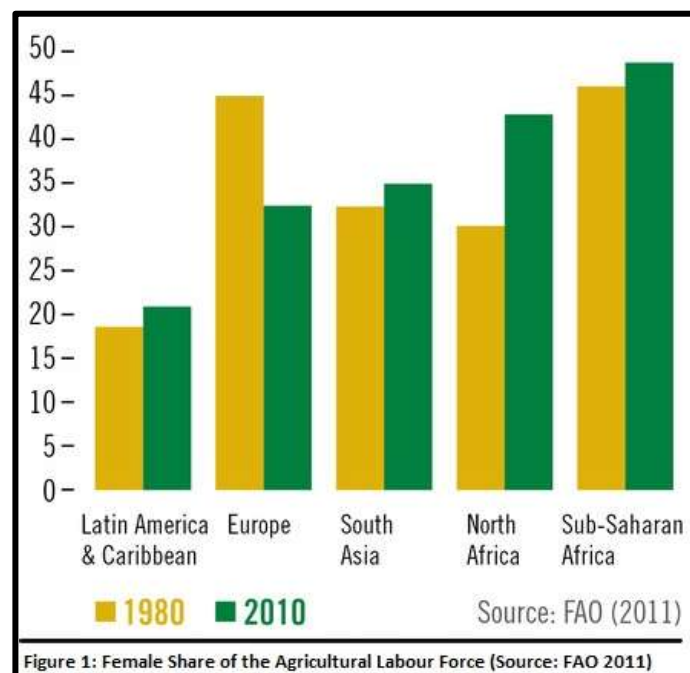
This is not merely a gender equity issue. The Australian agricultural sector faces challenges from environmental change and a competitive global market. Women make up half of the rural workforce; consequently their lack of influence denies the sector half the potential of its workforce. Australia needs to both empower women and radically change the way that agriculture is portrayed here, to encourage more young women to see agriculture as a viable career path.

Analysis

Agriculture is central to economic growth and food security. Yet, around the world, it is underperforming as an industry. One of the major reasons for this is the fact that women engaged in agriculture lack the resources and opportunities to make the most productive use of their time. Although women grow half of the world’s food and represent [43 per cent](#) of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, they face a common “gender gap” that hinders their productivity. This reduces both their contributions to agriculture and the development of the wider economy.

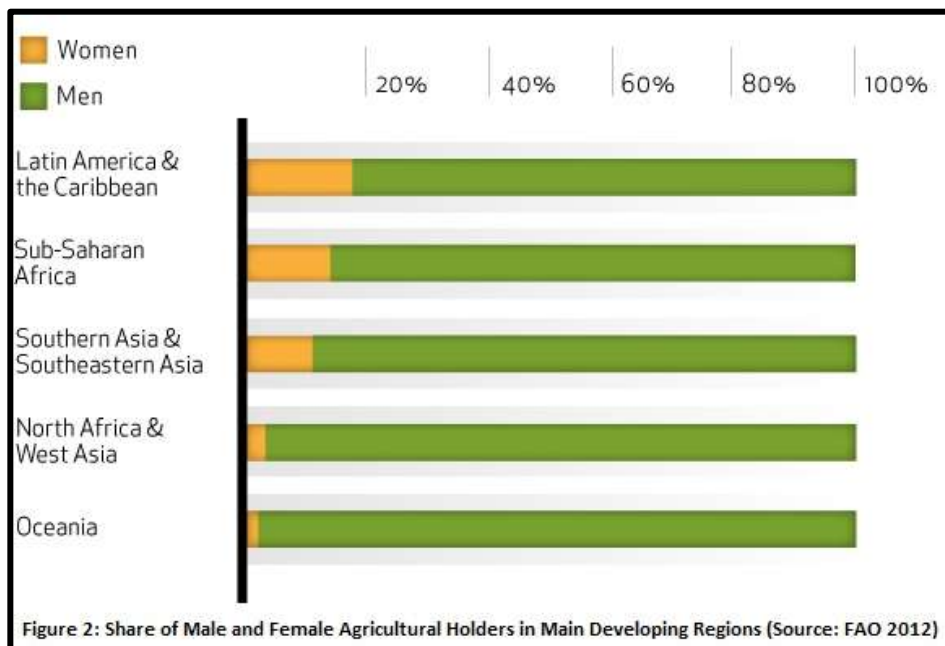
Women in agriculture in developing economies

In the developing world, women are the [primary providers of water, food and energy](#). Women’s involvement in agriculture is increasing, particularly due to changes in social norms and the outward migration of rural males to escape poverty.



Women’s ability to produce food and earn an income is conditioned by prevailing social constructs, which govern their ability to access resources and services. Women generally have a lower level of education than men; less access to inputs, credit and information; and tend to bear the double burden of producing food and nurturing the family. [Research](#) conducted by the FAO indicates that given the same opportunities and inputs, female farmers are just as efficient as their male counterparts. Closing the gender gap in agriculture would increase agricultural productivity, reduce poverty and hunger, and produce significant economic gains for society.

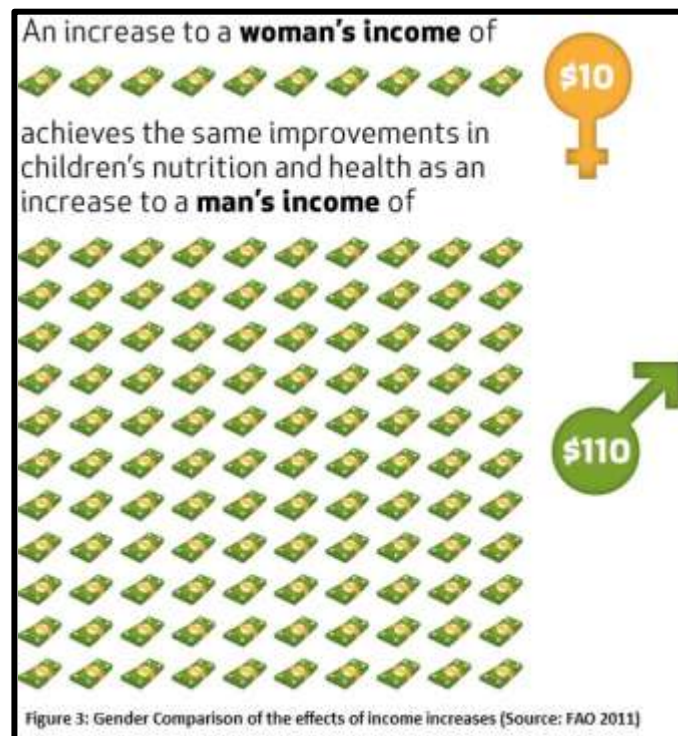
Worldwide, the [family farm](#) is the major institution in which women work as unpaid and unrecognised farmers. Family farms are central to global food security and sustainable productivity. They make up approximately [90 per cent](#) of the total number of farms worldwide, approximately 75 per cent of farmland and produce more than 80 per cent of all food crops. Despite women’s involvement in family farm production, legislation in many developing countries bars them from any entitlement to resources and land. Women are also often excluded from access to training, extension and institutional credit. This leaves them unable to take on leadership roles, whether on the family farm or in wider community structures.



Empowering Rural Women

Raising the profile of women in agriculture is essential for global rural development. Research by [UN Women](#) shows that women are more likely than men to use natural resources to increase overall family welfare, reduce child malnutrition and improve family food consumption. Women, on average, spend [90 per cent](#) of their income on their family, while men tend to spend [between 30 and 40 per cent](#), even where the income is insufficient to meet the family’s needs. Empowering women in natural resource management can

reduce food insecurity and assist in stabilising the economy, particularly in areas affected by conflict.



Women's empowerment in agriculture has recently come to the forefront of international aid dialogue. The CGIAR Consortium has widely publicised the role of women in agriculture and is committed to targeting women's empowerment, to improve agricultural productivity through the [Consortium Gender Strategy](#). Feed the Future, a major program initiated by US Aid, has listed inclusive agricultural sector growth as a major objective; empowering women is a particularly important goal in achieving this. In 2013, the FAO celebrated the International Day of Family Farming, which raised global awareness of the family farm as the dominant force in global food production. It also highlighted the vulnerability of women on family farms.

US Aid, the International Food Policy Research Institute and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, have jointly developed the [Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index](#) (WEAI). This is the first-ever measure to directly capture women's empowerment and inclusion levels in the agricultural sector. The index tracks the engagement of women in five areas of agriculture: production, resources, income, leadership and time use. It also measures their empowerment relative to the men in their households.

Baseline data for the WEAI was collected in 2011 and 2012. It analysed 13 developing countries, which allowed scope for generalisations and cross-country comparisons. The data collected links women's empowerment with other development indicators, such as income, household hunger and child nutrition. The findings of the [baseline report](#) showed that the greatest constraints on women's empowerment were access to, and decisions on, credit, workload and group membership.

Country	Region	SDE	GPI	WEAI	Ranking
Bangladesh	Asia	0.65	0.80	0.66	Low
Cambodia	Asia	0.98	0.99	0.98	High
Nepal	Asia	0.79	0.89	0.80	Medium
Tajikistan	Asia	0.68	0.79	0.69	Low
Haiti	Latin America & Caribbean	0.83	0.94	0.85	High
Honduras	Latin America & Caribbean	0.74	0.87	0.75	Medium
Kenya	East Africa	0.71	0.81	0.72	Low
Rwanda	East Africa	0.90	0.96	0.91	High
Uganda	East Africa	0.85	0.92	0.86	High
Ghana	West Africa	0.70	0.81	0.71	Low
Liberia	West Africa	0.66	0.95	0.69	Low
Malawi	Southern Africa	0.83	0.91	0.84	Medium
Zambia	Southern Africa	0.79	0.89	0.80	Medium

Figure 4: WEAI Cross-Country Comparison of Rural Women's Empowerment (Source: WEAI Baseline Report 2012)

According to [the FAO](#), a focus on women's participation was a key factor in halving extreme poverty rates in East and South-East Asia since 2000. Although women's empowerment and the reduction in extreme poverty levels have a long way to go, making gender equity a major development objective assists in spreading awareness of the contribution of women to agriculture. This, in turn, helps to empower female farmers all over the world.

Australian Women in Agriculture

While the FAO has turned its attention to empowering women farmers in the developing world, much of the developed world exhibits a similar 'gender gap'. In Australia, contributions by women in the agricultural industry are not given the recognition they deserve. Despite being a key factor in Australian agricultural production, women are given little public recognition in the industry.

In the mid-1990s, the "[women in agriculture](#)" movement gained momentum in Australia. It involved a collection of informally-linked organisations, activists, scholars and community groups, which emerged to raise the profile of women in Australian agriculture. Speaking to [Radio National](#) in 1998, Dorothy Dunn, one of the movement's founding members, said "it's [ingrained in] rural culture that a farmer is male... It's actually taken us right out of rural and agricultural policy, because we are not seen to count. We were only counted as housewives and homemakers. We had no recognition whatsoever of the work that we actually did on farms." The "women in agriculture" movement sought to value and support the contribution of women to agriculture and to increase the participation of women in all aspects of the industry.

To a large extent the movement was successful. Prior to the 1990s, women in agriculture were archaically recognised in the law as unproductive "sleeping partners"; not farmers in their own right. The movement encouraged Australian women to reject that position and

push for a review of farm women's status by the Australian Law Reform Commission. In 1994 [the legal status of women in agriculture](#) was changed to that of "farmers" and, in 1995, the Australian government established a Rural Women's Unit in its agricultural department. This had the effect of increasing women's visibility in departmental programs and training.

Engagement between rural women also gained momentum at regional, national and international levels. Australia's Eastern States adopted the "Women on Farms Gatherings", an annual weekend conference that encouraged discussion on public rural issues. The inaugural "Women in Agriculture International Conference" was held in Melbourne in July 1994. Overall, the movement was a huge step in breaking down barriers to women's empowerment, both behind and beyond the farm gate. Bodies founded as a result of the movement, such as the [Australian Women in Agriculture](#) (AWIA) organisation, continue to provide recognition for women as farmers and industry leaders in Australia.

Progress in Australia since the "Women in Agriculture" Movement

Unfortunately the momentum gained by the "women in agriculture" movement was short-lived. Academic and political discussion of women's advancement in the agricultural sector has died down in the last decade and Australia has now fallen behind Asia in its effort to recognise the contributions of women in farming.

One of the key messages the movement sought to convey was that rural women are not adequately represented in mainstream farmer groups, such as the National Farmers' Federation (NFF). Lynne Johnston, post-doctoral student at the University of Western Australia, presented [research](#) in 2014 to show that women's participation in primary producer organisations is still limited. Men aged more than 35 years are still the most likely to be elected to boards, although 40 per cent of Australian farmers are women, with an average incidence of tertiary education that is double that of men. Looking at trends in board membership over 50 years, she describes farming decision-making bodies as "closed social networks". In 2014, there was only [one woman](#) on the board of the National Farmers' Federation.

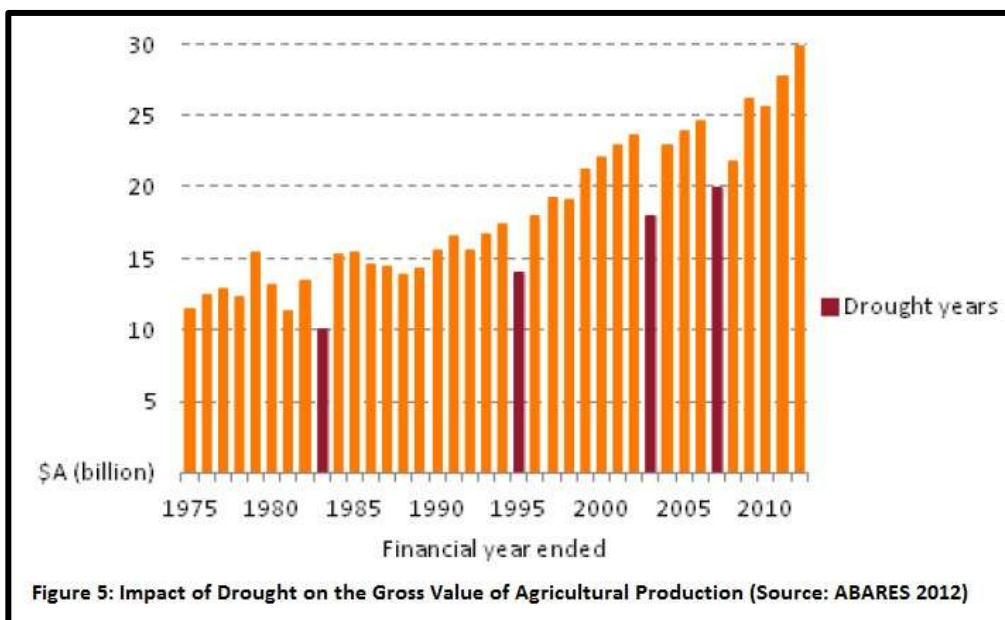
The "women in agriculture" movement has stalled for a number of reasons. Agricultural policy dialogue tends to focus on "efficiency" for economic development and growth, but ignores the vast amount of off-farm work that women do in support of farm units. This tragically limits the power of women.

The election of the Howard government in 1996 also caused momentum to falter, as Australia moved towards a neoliberal political model that favoured private sector styles of corporate governance. The coalition's first budget made 40 per cent cuts to the funding of the Office of the Status of Women and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. A number of special Women's policy units including the Women's Bureau and the Work and Family Unit were abolished, in line with the coalition's promise to "govern for the mainstream". Even the Regional and Rural Women's unit was abolished by 2004. This

government infrastructure was a key part of achieving rural women’s empowerment and it has not yet been restored.

Policy Recommendations

The Australian agricultural industry is facing a number of challenges. Diminishing productivity, investment and revenue, and increased international competition, mean that profitability is declining in the rural sector. [Research and development in agriculture](#) has experienced an investment gap, which is creating a decline in productivity compared with other OECD countries. Rural debt levels have doubled in the last decade and restrictive loan conditions have caused many farming families to move into alternative industries. Environmental variability and climate change are creating further challenges for the industry. At the same time, domestic consumption levels and demand for Australian food exports [continue to rise](#).



Policy initiatives need to focus on opening access for women to enter the agricultural sector. Encouraging diversity in rural leadership will assist in making agriculture a more attractive career choice for women. The current conditions in agriculture promote isolation and migration from farming communities; they also discourage dialogue. It is now more important than ever that women be encouraged to take an active part in the creation of a successful agricultural future.

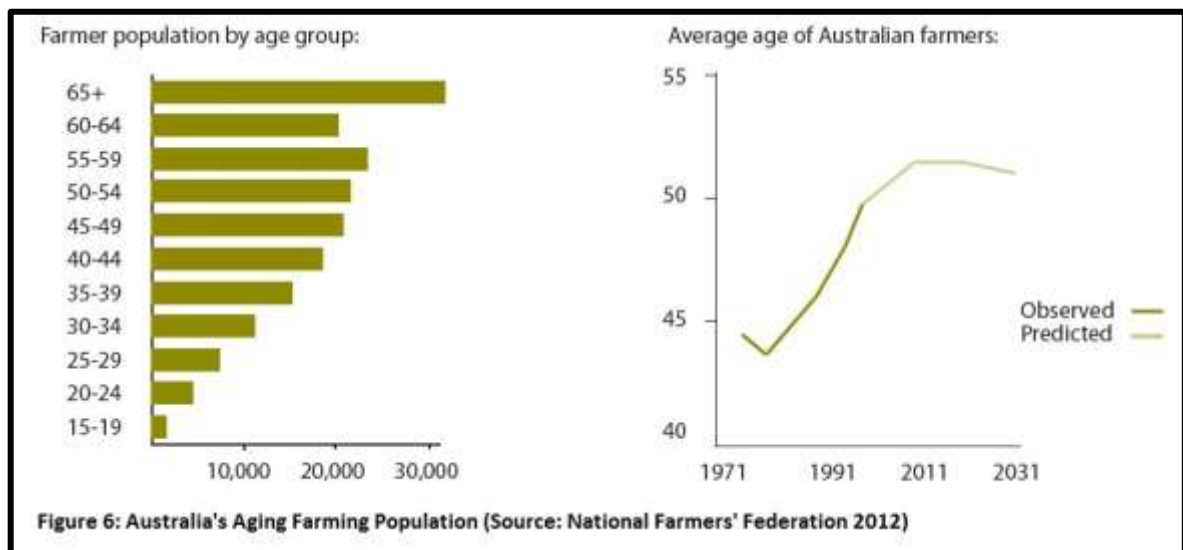
Organisations

Regional and national organisations can play a key role in creating support networks for isolated rural women. Grower and producer bodies should be encouraged to adopt changes that allow for greater membership and input from women. Changing voting rights so that individuals within a farm partnership can become members in their own right would assist this. Women’s organisations such as the Country Women’s Association (CWA) provide a

forum for women to connect, share experiences and offer support. Unfortunately, in recent years the CWA has gained a reputation as a “white women’s group”, but with a national membership of more than 20,000 it has extensive potential as a platform for advocacy and change. The CWA’s challenge is to improve its image among the broader population and to encourage the growth of other women’s groups.

Research and Development

Agricultural research and development has declined over the last decade. Research organisations and universities need to actively promote and, if possible, provide financial support for agricultural science programs, to make them more attractive and available to women. The Australian farming population is aging and it is imperative that young people are appropriately trained to ensure a sustainable future for the industry.



Government

Government agricultural agencies should develop specialist programs to encourage diversity, by providing sponsorship to women who might serve as role models. Currently, the ABC’s Rural Woman of the Year program recognises outstanding contributions made by women in agriculture. More programs of this kind could be initiated at state and federal level. Government agencies should also review the legislation that determines the composition of boards and advisory committees. They should place increased focus on recruiting women from remote and rural areas, and provide specialist education and training for senior managers in implementing diversity in agencies.

Agribusiness

As with many issues facing agriculture, women’s empowerment cannot be achieved through the public sector alone. The government must encourage agribusinesses and private

research and development organisations to allow better access for women. CEOs in agribusiness should be encouraged to participate in events at which speakers promote diversity in management. Cadetship programs are also needed and should promote the recruitment of female management trainees from rural and remote areas, thereby bringing their experience into the agribusiness sector.

Conclusion

Empowering women in agriculture is essential; not only for gender equity, but also for the economic sustainability of global primary industries. At a global level, the “gender gap” in agriculture has been brought to the forefront of policy dialogue. Women continue to lack power in the industry, but international forums recognising their achievements are gaining momentum. Developments such as the WEAI index and CGIAR’s rural programs will facilitate more research into women’s empowerment in agriculture and advance the status of rural women internationally.

Australia has fallen behind other developed countries in its recognition and support for women farmers. Public and private sector collaboration is required to put a spotlight on this issue. Currently, the Australian agricultural sector is facing a number of challenges from the environment and declining terms of trade. Women make up half of the agricultural workforce and represent a large part of our next generation of workers, managers, researchers and decision makers. It is therefore necessary, as a matter of urgency and for the sake of the sustainable future of our agricultural industry, that women’s empowerment is taken seriously. The government needs to initiate structural changes that encourage agricultural organisations and agribusinesses to prioritise women’s involvement at all levels.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

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