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Farm Businesswomen's Aspirations for Leadership: A Case Study of the Agricultural Sector in Queensland, Australia

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Abstract: *In Queensland, Australia, more than half of all women working in agriculture are employed as farmers or farm managers, and they contribute 33 percent of all on-farm income. However, women play a major role in contributing to day-to-day living and farm survival through their off-farm earnings, which is estimated to contribute an estimated $2,715 million* or 84 percent of all off-farm income. Yet little is known about the role of women and the contribution they make in agricultural and rural businesses, and what their aspirations and goals are in achieving leadership roles within industry. We analyse qualitative data, extracted from a larger mixed-methods case study, using Acker's concept of the 'ideal worker' and inequality regimes framework (1990, 2006) to highlight the issues farm businesswomen face when aspiring to become leaders. We focus on regional, rural, and remote women farmers and business managers in the state of Queensland, Australia and find there is a long way to go for these women to achieve their leadership goals in this traditionally male-dominated industry. We identified that the aspirations of farm businesswomen are varied, but we do not know what their priorities are and how these differ between sectors, regions, development needs, and at different life and family stages. What we do know is that women are a vital part of the agriculture industry, both economically and socially, especially in rural communities, and are the driving force behind business expansion and entrepreneurial activities. We identify that women want to expand their roles and undertake leadership opportunities and be recognised by their partners and industry for the contributions they make. We acknowledge that training and development plans need to consider the complexities and priorities of women who manage the mix of farm, family, community obligations and remoteness, and their economic and social contributions to the wider agricultural industry. We find that there are barriers that must be overcome through the provision of training programs and resources to support their development; however, further research is required to ensure that the programs and resources are identified and targeted to their specific needs in meeting their leadership aspirations.*

Keywords: *agriculture, Australia, farm businesswomen, leadership, women*

Introduction

In Australia, women contribute half the total value attributable to farming communities through their paid and unpaid activities (Sheridan and McKenzie, 2009) and their contribution has been recognised as critically significant for farm family survival (Alston and Whittenbury, 2013). In 2005-06 it was estimated that women contributed 33 percent of all on-farm income ($8,558 million AUD) and 83 percent of all off-farm income ($2.7 billion AUD) (Jefferson and Mahendran, 2012; Sheridan and McKenzie 2009), however when considering on- and off-farm work together with community and household work, it is estimated that farming women contribute as much as 49 percent of national industry output (Sheridan and McKenzie, 2009). In 2019, 33 percent of all persons employed in agriculture were women (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2019), and over one-third (37%) of farmwomen were a business owner manager of an enterprise (Binks *et al.*, 2018). Self-employment is common and 'family farming is officially recognised as the dominant mode of agricultural production' (Alston, 2014: 189). The economic and social contributions of women are not matched by their representation in leadership positions in key agricultural organisations. Despite government targets of 50 percent female representation on boards, women at best form one-third of members and at worst have no representation on some of the major agricultural industry boards in Queensland.

Women's role in agriculture and in rural communities is often overlooked leading to women's roles in farming being described as 'invisible' (*e.g.*, Williams, 1992; Alston, 2003). In contrast, there is

widespread recognition that women in Australian agriculture represent an untapped potential for rural businesses, rural communities, and the nation. To utilise this potential, it is necessary to understand the characteristics and diversity of women in farming, their current contributions, aspirations, and the training and organisational needs that will assist them in attaining their business, social and leadership goals. The recognition that women are a vital part of farming businesses is lacking, and the potential for women to add value to their farm businesses and the economy is great, but further investigation of their specific needs is required. There is much diversity in agriculture on the continent of Australia and little current research that specifically examines women in farm businesses, their roles and future business needs.

This paper discusses the leadership and development aspirations of women in farm and rural businesses in Queensland, one of the eight states and territories in Australia. Queensland comprises an area of 1.853 million km^2, almost three times the area of France, and has a population of 5.11 million. Its climatic zones are tropical, sub-tropical, hot arid and warm temperate resulting in a wide variety of farming enterprises. The research question is: *What are the goals of farm businesswomen in Queensland and what are the enablers and barriers to reaching these goals?* We first provide an overview of women's employment and contributions to agriculture in the broader Australian context, which then provides detail of women's contributions to farm enterprises in Australia, women in leadership, together with an overview of evident issues of gender regimes in farming. We follow this by presenting the methodology for the study which was operationalised through a mixed-methods case study approach, examining the untapped potential of farm businesswomen who aspire to become business leaders, as expressed through their own voices. We then present the findings which highlight the lack of acknowledgement of women's roles in farm businesses, the implications for women's leadership aspirations, and the undervaluation of their roles which has direct implications for economic and social development. We utilise the concept of 'the invisible worker' to help understand the issues uncovered and conclude by providing future directions for research which has arisen from our analysis.

Women's Contribution to Farm Enterprises in Australia

Women play an important role in the Australian agricultural workforce. In August 2019 women represented 47 percent of all employed persons (12,859,400) in Australia (ABS, 2019). In the Industry Division of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing, the total employed was 318,600 persons of whom 33 percent were women (ABS, 2019). Over one-third (37%) of the total employed in this division were an owner manager of an enterprise (Binks *et al.*, 2018). The Sub-industry Division of Agriculture directly employed 274,300 people and this represented 2.1 percent of all employed people. One-third (35%) were women (ABS, 2019).

Self-employment in Australia's agriculture industry is widespread and 'family farming is officially recognised as the dominant mode of agricultural production' (Alston 2014: 189). Over half the agriculture workforce in 2016 comprised owner managers (nearly 40%) and contributing family members (nearly 18%) (Binks *et al.*, 2018). In 2016, there were 87,325 farming families, a category defined as having at least one person who is a farmer or farm manager (Binks *et al.*, 2018). Many of those employed in the agriculture industry own their own farm (Commonwealth Department of Jobs and Small Business [DJSB], 2019). In August 2019, the ABS (2019) indicate there were 177,952 Farmers and Farm Managers nationally, 31.7 percent of whom were women, an increase of just over seven and a half percent since August 2016. The majority of Australian farmers (71%) were non-employing and 28 percent had one to nineteen employees (NFF, 2017). Women also contribute to the agriculture industry through their roles as businesswomen. Using 2016 Australian Census data we can determine that 33 percent of all Business Owner Managers [BOMs] (1,529,502) nationally (ABS, 2018) were women. The 2019 ABS Labour Force survey data shows that more than half (53.7%) of all women working in agriculture were employed as Farmers and Farm Managers.

Women's economic contributions to the agriculture industry through on- and off-farm income are considerable. Sheridan and McKenzie (2009) estimate that women contributed 33 percent of all on-farm

income ($8,558 million) to the agriculture industry in 2005-06. A relatively high number of women also undertake off-farm work where their 'total contribution of over $2.7 billion represents approximately 83 percent of the estimated $3.26 billion of total off-farm wage income' (Jefferson and Mahendran, 2012: 200). This off-farm income generation is a critical survival strategy for most farm families (Alston and Whittenbury, 2013). And women are likely to work off-farm 'for the much-needed income for the family to survive in agriculture' (Alston and Whittenbury, 2010: 65). At least one-third of family farms are dependent on women's income (Alston, 2014) which contributes significantly to families' day-to-day survival (Alston *et al.*, 2018). Women generate '48 percent of real farm income through their off-farm and community work', which goes to support the continued existence and development of the farming business (Alston, 2014: 198). In addition, Binks *et al.* (2018) report that three-quarters (75%) of women in the agriculture workforce engaged in five or more hours unpaid domestic work in the week leading up to the 2016 Census, while nationally, 62 percent of women indicated a similar engagement in unpaid domestic work. Thirty-seven percent of working women in agriculture are also involved in volunteer activities, which is substantially higher than the national average of 23 percent for all women (Binks *et al.*, 2018).

Women in Rural Leadership in Queensland

It is difficult to gain a detailed picture of women's roles as leaders in their communities given the multiplicity of small organisations and the difficulty of accessing relevant data through publicly available information. One way that we can examine women's roles in the community is to look at the numbers of women in board positions in agricultural organisations as this reflects the composition of the sector and has a critical role in shaping the agenda of an organisation (Alston, 2014: 192). Agricultural industry boards play an important role in their representation to government and manage significant government funds which deliver industry initiatives. Without the inclusion of women to provide their experiences and values, these boards may not be representative of the industry (Alston, 2014).

Organisation	Number of Board members	Number of Women	Number of Women required to reach 50% female representation	Percentage of Women Board members
Queensland Farmers' Federation	6	1	3	17
Cotton Australia	10 (currently 5 each from Qld and NSW)	2 (currently 1 from Qld, 1 from NSW)	5	20
GrowCom (horticulture industry)	8	3	4	37
NGIQ (Nursery and Garden Industry Queensland)	10	2	5	20
Canegrowers Brisbane	8	0	4	0
TOTAL	42	8	21	19

Table 1. Female representation on five of Queensland's agricultural boards: Queensland Farmers' Federation, Cotton Australia, NGIQ, GrowCom, and Canegrowers Brisbane. Source: Ressia et al.*, 2020.*

Historically, leadership positions in all industries have been held by men. Leadership positions in agriculture were filled largely by older white males and were rarely representative of the sector (Alston, 2014). There have been calls for increased levels of female representation on agricultural industry and government boards since the 1990s. At the first rural women's international conference held in Melbourne in 1994, the Minister for Agriculture, 'agreed that 50 percent of all agricultural and rural board positions would be held by women by 2000' (Alston, 2014: 197). However, in examining the board of Queensland's five major agricultural organisations, this aim has not been achieved (see Table 1). Currently, the Queensland Government has 'gender diversity targets of 50 percent representation of

women on Government bodies by 2020 and 50 percent of all new appointees to Government bodies to be women' (Queensland Department of Innovation, Tourism Industry Development and the Commonwealth Games, 2018).

Women as Farmers

There is a range of historical and contemporary complexities in farming and Australian society more generally which have had an impact on how women are perceived as farmers and industry leaders. The European settlement of Australia in the nineteenth century was a male enterprise and there is evidence of this in the collection of government statistics: women were classified as non-economic earners in census data and government policy. Farm work was shared by men, women, and children but the work of the last two groups rarely appears in public records (Strachan, 2009; Strachan and Henderson, 2008: 493). Alston (2014) emphasises that, historically, women have faced a range of issues that preclude them from being viewed and respected as credible contributors to individual farms and the broader farming community. She suggests that historical influences have contributed to gendered policy formation over time, and this, coupled with the lack of acknowledgment of women's roles in supporting the long and short-term sustainability of farms, has contributed to their lack of recognition.

Farm businesswomen are not considered to fit the 'ideal worker' type within the context of farm work and therefore they experience discrimination due to the limited recognition of, and importance of their roles in farm work. Societal beliefs such as women's role as caregivers and men's role as breadwinners inform the concept of the 'ideal worker' (Acker, 1990). The 'ideal worker' is based on the model of the Caucasian male with no family of care responsibilities who works hard spending eight or more hours per day in the work environment paying full attention to work, and puts work first, totally dedicating themselves to paid employment (Acker, 2006). As such, notions of the ideal worker are tied to the male role, and the women's role becomes overshadowed and invisible. This 'invisibility' ties back to traditional and gendered views of women's work and their classification as non-economic earners in census data and government policy over time (Strachan and Henderson, 2008).

Farm businesswomen may experience a sense of reduced power in terms of how they negotiate 'new working arrangements' with their male partners, which in turn creates farm-level gender regimes which structure the way the farm, household and off-farm work is managed (Alston, 2014: 193). Joan Acker (2006) discusses gendered assumptions, such as expectations that men are to put work first and women are to put family ahead of their own desires to work. She describes how these result in underlying power regimes and gender-based inequalities in organisations, through her inequalities regimes theory. Acker defines inequality regimes as 'loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organisations' and are linked to inequalities in societies, politics, history, and culture (Acker, 2006: 443). Consequential disparities of organisational gender-related inequalities, such as lesser power and control over goals and resources, workplace decisions on how to organise work, opportunities for interesting work, pay and other monetary rewards, and respect (Acker, 2006), may help to understand the gendered experiences and outcomes that farm businesswomen experience.

Methodology

We use a mixed-methods case study to explore the aspirations of farm businesswomen, as expressed through their own voices and to answer the research question is: *What are the goals of farm businesswomen in Queensland and what are the enablers and barriers to reaching these goals?* The data which provides an insight into the views of Queensland farm businesswomen was collected by the Queensland Farmers' Federation [QFF] and documented in a report titled '*Cultivating the leadership potential of Queensland's farm businesswomen'* (QFF, 2018), written by Manktelow, Muller and Slade. The data were collected through four workshops comprising a total of 83 women, and an online survey completed by 149 women. This data was re-analysed by the researchers through the concept of the

'ideal worker' and an inequality regimes theoretical framework (Acker 1990; 2006). This enabled an in-depth understanding of the characteristics and diversity of women in farming, their current contributions, aspirations, the barriers and enablers to achieving their goals, and the training and organisational needs that would assist them in achieving business, social and leadership goals within the context of a traditionally male-dominated industry (Ressia *et al.*, 2020). Our findings concentrate on the qualitative workshop data to provide rich insights about the experiences of farm businesswomen and their aspirations for achieving leadership positions within the industry.

Findings

Our analysis clearly showed that Queensland farm businesswomen are highly educated and are keen to expand their economic and social contributions. These women aspire to make further contributions both economically through their business development and socially in their communities, to the wider farming community and to state and national policy development. They undertake a range of leadership activities in the agriculture industry and within the community. Many farm businesswomen want to be leaders and to encourage and help develop other women. However, they are constrained by factors such as the lack of recognition of their roles in farm businesses.

There are a range of barriers preventing farm businesswomen achieving this recognition, which stem from a complex mix pertaining to their multiple roles (farmers, business owners, homeworkers, carers, community workers), succession planning, limited support and recognition from others, lack of representation on industry boards, and lack of education and resources available to support them. Personal circumstances and capacity can also be a barrier to further engagement in leadership, as can organisational issues and a lack of recognition of the skills and perspectives women have developed. This research also found a range of enablers that women felt supported them in achieving their leadership goals.

The QFF (2018: 1) Report shows that women want to 'achieve greater parity in the level of women's participation in senior management and leadership roles. Queensland farm businesswomen aspired to a wide range of roles within the next five years, which included mentoring less experienced farm businesswomen, being a spokesperson or advocate within their industry and community, diversifying, innovating, value-adding or developing new areas of commercialisation within a farm or another business, being on an industry association board, executive committee or research and development [R&D] advisory committee, or on Government board or an advisory forum. In addition to these aspirations, farm businesswomen were already active in carrying out leadership activities within their community, and others were developing new business ventures such as in tourism (QFF, 2018: 22, 28, 70).

Farm businesswomen face complex challenges. While these women perform varied roles, the evidence suggests that they are not achieving the leadership outcomes to which they aspire. The barriers and enablers identified by Queensland farm businesswomen occur at an individual level and within the context of organisational structures with which they interact. Table 2 presents the themes and sub-themes that emerged with the themes divided into two categories: individual and organisational. Using these two categories, the barriers and the enablers are identified, presenting sub-themes (*e.g.*, perceptions and culture) in both the individual and organisational categories.

Individual barriers that were identified by workshop participants included their own negative perceptions and an undervaluation of self-worth. We see that women's opportunities are further compounded as some lack support in their pursuit of leadership roles and juggle the management of farm work and family roles against a backdrop of geographic isolation. Concerns about mental and physical health add yet another barrier and supports the findings in earlier research undertaken by McGowan (2011). *Organisational barriers* add another dimension to women's ability to attain leadership roles. Cultural issues arise due to the gendered social beliefs about women in leadership, as well as barriers that prevent women from participating in professional opportunities such as networking and developing

workplace relationships. Alston (2014) asserts that gender stereotyping is a major barrier to women's involvement in leadership and decision-making positions. The ability to keep on top of technological advancements in the industry and limited access to supports such as mentors and resource knowledge through funding are barriers that stymie growth and innovation.

Individual	Organisational
Barriers	
Perceptions—Self and Others Self *e.g.*, undervaluing, self-belief Others *e.g.*, stereotypes, capability, credibility	**Culture** *e.g.*, workplace masculinity, bias
Work-life-overload *e.g.*, managing work/home, responsibilities, overcommitment, restricts opportunities for leadership	**Lack of Professional Opportunities** *e.g.*, networking, voice, innovations, succession clarity, confusion with associations and organisations
Supports *e.g.*, other women, family	**Lack of Supports** *e.g.*, mentors
Geographic *e.g.*, logistics/distance restricts leadership opportunities	**Technology** *e.g.*, rapid changes
Health *e.g.*, mental and physical	**Lack of Workplace relationships** *e.g.*, connections to customers, family business relationships
Succession planning *e.g.*, succession arrangements for family business or lack thereof limit opportunities to grow as a leader in the family, business, or industry	**Lack of Resource Knowledge** *e.g.*, leadership, funding for growth and innovation
Enablers	
Perceptions – Self and Others Self *e.g.*, attitude, self-belief, capability, purpose	**Professional Opportunities** *e.g.*, strong industry associations, training, and development, seeking opportunities
Work-life-overload *e.g.*, priority choices, choose some balance *e.g.*, leisure, fun activities	**Supports** *e.g.*, engage and learn from regional facilitators (leaders), networking databases, sponsors, collaboration, partner/team leadership approach
Supports *e.g.*, partner support/team, family	**Resource Knowledge** *e.g.*, financial assistance
	Education *e.g.*, access to tertiary education, scholarships, leadership courses, training and development

Table 2. Categories relating to leadership barriers and enablers of Queensland farm businesswomen. *Source: Ressia* et al.*, 2020.*

Individual enablers include perceptions of having a positive attitude and self-belief, being supported by their partner, and having the ability to compartmentalise the toughness of farming by taking time out to have fun. *Organisational enablers* presented women with professional opportunities available through industry associations enabling access to information and network supports when carrying out, or aspiring to, leadership roles. Access to education was also important for developing business and leaderships skills and these could be achieved through access to tertiary education, leadership courses and other training and development that recognise their unique requirements, for example, the needs of women who marry into farming families. Furthermore, through education, women's knowledge and management of technology has become valuable in enabling decision-making and change (Hay and Pearce, 2014).

Discussion

The research identifies that women's contribution to the farming and agriculture sector and to rural and regional communities has been underestimated. We know that historically, when compared to males, women have been 'invisible' and unacknowledged as farmers. There is still a lack of information about the detail of women's roles on farms and in the agriculture industry. We also know that women's roles

are complex and varied and this requires many women to adapt quickly to changing economic and environmental conditions. We also acknowledge that these women have a wide range of responsibilities related their farm businesses, innovation, entrepreneurship, and family care. The barriers identified by the farmwomen are not new and include their roles within the family, the lack of recognition of their roles in the agriculture industry and a culture of masculinity in agriculture. These are combined frequently with the impact of remoteness from a variety of support including mentors.

The concept of the 'ideal worker' has been used widely in academic literature (Acker 1990). While this concept focuses specifically on organisations, we suggest that the concept of the ideal worker can be extended to farm businesses. Women are still struggling for recognition in the shadow of their male farming counterparts in two ways: First, as they undertake the management of traditional gender roles and so are not unencumbered by the responsibilities of the family and the home. Second, we find that women are not outwardly recognised in terms of their contributions to farm management and for their economic earning activities rendering their contributions invisible. In this respect, we therefore extend the concept of Acker's (1990) 'ideal worker' by introducing the concept of the 'ideal farmer', to distinguish a worker who is focused on work on the farm external to the house, without any family and childcare responsibilities, a worker who has been seen historically as a man with household and family work undertaken by his wife. We have related this concept to the feelings of farm businesswomen, of being the 'invisible farmer'; a feeling identified by some respondents in the QFF (2018) survey and discussed in the work of Alston. In part, women are invisible because they are not seen as the 'ideal farmer' as they are often required to work off-farm to subsidise income while at the same time they undertake the majority of domestic work.

Unfortunately, the legacy of the 'invisible female farmer' continues today. The ABS recognise that using the number of individuals who report farming as their main job cannot measure women's contribution as 'farming families' are officially recognised by the ABS as the main mode of agricultural production in Australia (Alston, 2014: 189), and women's individual contributions are still unrecognised (Alston and Whittenbury, 2013: 124). Furthermore, we are aware that there is inadequate policy and industry attention to facilitate women's various work, care, and community roles (Alston, 2014: 194), and policy formation has often ignored and/or trivialised women's contributions to their families, communities, and industries (Alston, 2014).

Conclusions

For agriculture and rural areas to survive and thrive with an enhanced quality of life, equality is necessary for everyone to be able to contribute to territorial policy development. Rural policy is required that ensures future generations of rural women have an equal opportunity to remain, contribute, and thrive in their communities (Alston, 2014: 202). However, there remains little policy acknowledgement of women's roles in farming, and no recognition of the burden this places upon women, their health, wellbeing, and family lives. As such this represents a 'failure to gender mainstream policy [under a] flawed focus on neo-liberal economic policy' at the expense of farm businesswomen's quality of life (Alston, 2014: 194). Thus, the lack of recognition of their worth coupled with the complexity of managing multiple roles impacts these women's aspirations for leadership in the sector.

Our review of the academic literature, government policies, industry reports and statistics concerning women in the agriculture industry were analysed through the lens of a gender regimes theoretical framework (Acker 1990; 2006). This has enabled an in-depth understanding of the characteristics and diversity of women in farming, their current contributions, aspirations, barriers and enablers to achieving their goals, and the training and organisational needs that would assist them in achieving business, social and leadership goals within the context of a traditionally male-dominated industry (Acker 2006). More resources are needed to support these women and for them to be equally recognised as valuable and credible contributors to the agriculture industry, through the breaking down and elimination of persistent gender regimes.

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