

Farm women speak up for their rights

HAMILTON (CP) — Farm women are sick of being considered dependable but dumb.

They have their own national and provincial pressure groups and they want the same rights, respect and services as city women are beginning to take for granted, says Dianne Harkin, president and founder of Women for the Survival of Agriculture, a national farm women's organization formed in 1975.

A suburban housewife turned beef farmer in Winchester, Ont., near Ottawa, Harkin started the group when she saw the contrast between the talent and resources of rural women and the image that urbanites, and to some extent female farmers themselves, had of farm women.

"It's not that I hated what I was doing," she said. "But I resented being put down by city women.

"I resented (that) there was no recognition for farm women and that we worked side by side with our husbands on the farm but in anything away from the farm, we were not working side by side with our husbands then."

Farm women are starting to demand that recognition.

In the last couple of years they've won the right to claim a salary from

the farm income and pay into the Canada Pension Plan.

But most farm women still don't have a legal partnership with their husbands, so they're at the mercy of the courts in most provinces if their marriage breaks up, said Harkin.

It's usually up to the judge's discretion whether the farm was a family asset, jointly owned or owned solely by the husband.

And while women usually do farm bookkeeping, they often have to fight discrimination when they try to establish credit and confidence at the bank, she said.

"Banks want us to co-sign papers with our husbands, yet they don't like to give us credit."

While the woman may do the same job as the man, her work goes virtually unnoticed, said Harkin.

"People think it's part of your housekeeping chores but it's not," she said. "It's a full-time career in itself. Then you do all the housework besides."

"Many farm women have taken jobs away from the farm to help subsidize the operation on top of their farm work."

The federal Agriculture Department says farm women work an

average of 30 hours a week on farm chores alone.

But Marie Bright, regional co-ordinator of the National Farmers Union, a family farm organization, said that's a conservative figure.

She said a survey conducted by her organization found farm women

did all the tasks farm men did and put in much more than 30 hours a week on farm-related work.

"We found that women were working 120- to 140-hour weeks," she said. "Some of them were not only laborers on the farm, they were the official transporter, and they

were in many cases working a couple of days off the farm to provide the kinds of things that, in other businesses, would have to come out of the income earned."

Bright said farm women's work amounts to subsidization of Canadian food costs.

"You look at government policies and cost of production formulas and no one really considers that they've got this extra labor going in. If the farmer had to hire that labor, Canadian food would cost a whole lot more."

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