

All the inequities are compounded for farm women

By Gord Wainman

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They may be running a bit behind their city cousins, but farm women now are demanding their voices be heard on inequities they suffer as women and more particularly as members of a diminishing rural society.

If urban wives can be called "super mom" for holding down two jobs — running a family and working outside the home — it would be difficult to hang a tag on many farm wives who often hold down additional third and fourth jobs — farm manager and laborer.

Activist farm women's groups such as the Concerned Farm Women and Women For The Support Of Agriculture have popped up in the past three years in response to recession stress on the farm community. The provincial agriculture ministry last year sent adviser Molly McGhee to study the changing rural woman in a series of 48 public hearings in 24 locations across Ontario.

The result is a 72-page study — *Women in Rural Life: The Changing Scene* — released earlier this month. On its release, the study got some media attention as a news story, but not much in-depth reporting has surfaced to date. It's somewhat ironic because one of the findings of the study, rightly or wrongly, says: "In general the media foster the outdated stereotype of farm women and their families as living a peaceful, pastoral life, free from worry and stress."

If urbanites do harbor those stereotypes, they'll have to rethink their opinions in light of the study finding that 73 per cent of farm women aged 20 to 44 years work off the farm — well above the 56 per cent general average for Ontario women in the work force.

"A depressed agricultural economy has forced more wives to contribute to the farm income by working off the farm," McGhee says. Between 85 and 90 per cent of farm women help in the operation of the total farm enterprise, and between 80 and 90 per cent in the business aspects of the farm.

The majority of farm wives, like their city counterparts, told the hearings they worked off-farm to improve the economic status of their families, but they had the added burden of gaining needed capital for the farm enterprise.

Escalating along with the added financial burdens is stress, the study found. Concerns over stress accounted for 45 per cent of the hearing submissions. McGhee cites findings of a university and government supported study — *The Farmer Takes a Wife* — published by Gisele Ireland of Teeswater, a director of the activist Concerned Farm Women group.

"The study found that the main factor contributing to stress was a lack of profit, followed by financial difficulties, a lack of leisure time, and lack of money for vacation," McGhee says in her report.

"Many Ontario women contended that financial problems extend beyond dollars and cents. Fatigue from long hours of work strains family relationships," McGhee found. "The inability of the family farm to support more than one family today causes

a high degree of stress." Traditionally, many farm operations supported father and sons (or daughters) and their families.

And farm women also feel frustrations related not only to their changing role but to the community at large, the report says. They feel more isolated than their city counterparts not only because of geography but also lack of job opportunities and services available in the city. Day care poses a larger problem in rural areas than cities — due in part to lack of public transportation and day-care facilities themselves.

Compounding adjustment to the farm woman's changing role is the growing generation gap between younger women working off the farm and the more traditional stay-at-home generation of farm mothers who raised these working farm wives.

"Older women in six locations suggested that if women stayed at home and learned to accept a lower standard of living initially, their economic ills would be cured," McGhee says. "Younger women made it plain they wanted a standard of living similar to their urban and suburban colleagues."

This generation split, along with declining rural population in general — from 702,800 in 1951 to 288,700 in 1981 — could account in part for the declining membership in the traditional Women's Institute, McGhee says. "As members of the Women's Institute become older, a further decrease in their numbers is anticipated."

And as farm women — both by necessity and choice — intrude into traditionally male-dominated activities, as have their city cousins, they too have become more



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politically active and demanding of equality, McGhee says.

"Historians and social scientists will probably credit the recession of the 1970s and '80s as the beginning of society's awareness of rural women as a political and social force," she says. "Until fairly recently feminism's effects in rural areas were popularly considered to be non-existent and the common notion of rural women as a content and grateful homemaker and helpmate persisted throughout North America."

A complaint of many farm women, most of them involved heavily in the financial decision-making of increasingly complex farming operations, is their access to credit, McGhee says.



Molly McGhee

"Examples of discrimination against women in agriculture by the lending institutions, agri-business, commodity boards and the media generated much discussion. Lending institutions, especially the banks, came in for the harshest criticisms," she says. "While loan officers may assert that they are non-discriminatory, their actions belie their claims."

And McGhee cites a testimonial by a woman who runs a swine operation herself while her husband works in the city. The story involves an encounter with a patronizing farm supplier:

"I had asked the company to send someone to see me. . . . The representative arrived, saying his car had gone into the ditch. He wanted my husband to pull him out. I explained that my husband worked in the city and I ran the farm. I got out the tractor, hitched the car to it, and pulled it onto the highway. He thanked me, jumped into the car and drove off, saying: 'I'll phone and see when your husband will be home.' Needless to say, I don't buy from that company anymore."

And women tobacco producers not only complained about discrimination in the auction warehouses by male classifiers and graders, McGhee says, but "harrassment of a sexual nature also occurs."

Farm women also censured the advertising industry for either ignoring women or depicting them incorrectly.

McGhee's report ends with a list of 33 recommendations which will be discussed at a conference of farm women at Toronto's Constellation Hotel June 21.

It will be a chance for Agriculture Minister Dennis Timbrell, who is throwing this conference, to hear from a group which has only recently begun to speak out about its common problems and exercise some political clout.

During the early part of the recession, Timbrell let it be known he preferred dealing with the *reasonable* Concerned Farm Women Group of Bruce and Grey counties to dealing with their more *rowdy* husbands, many of them members of the militant Canadian Farmers' Survival Association.

The farmers, male and female, will have to be careful they don't end up with the agriculture minister standing between them.