

Hard Times for Farm Women

by Ella Haley

Mary trembled as she thought of what had just happened. Her young son sobbed in her arms. She mustn't let anyone know how bad things were getting, the neighbours would talk. Her husband Joe had left for the barn still angry. His tense voice and movements remained in Mary's memory. Why did he have to deal with his frustration by yelling and banging and hitting?

They were all at their breaking point on this damned farm. All they ever did it seemed was work, work, work, and then only to pay the interest on their loan that never diminished. Mary thought of how much attention her three small children needed and how much they actually got. Even when they were babies, she hauled them to the barn with her while she did the chores.

The bills just kept mounting — machinery, repairs, electricity, fertilizer, seed... It had got so that Joe didn't say much anymore. Mary didn't like his silences. He brooded.

Mary is one of thousands of farm women across Canada who are experiencing the stress and isolation of hard economic times. Luckily, some of her fellow farm women are organizing to try and do something about this. They are coming together, networking through the mail, on the telephone and at meetings. They are making political statements about their personal plight and lobbying the government for funding and legislative changes. Canadian farm women have a history of mobilizing around issues. They were some of our leading suffragettes.

The current farm crisis is the result of several factors. It hits hardest at young farm families who set up in the 1970s, and at well established farmers who expanded during that period. During the '70s land values increased a great deal. Farmers were able and were encouraged (by bankers and agricultural advisers) to borrow

against this inflated value of their land. Then the sky fell in. In the 1980s land values dropped and so did the price of farmers' products. This left a large group of farmers carrying thousands of dollars of debt loads at interest rates of 15-20%. The number of farm bankruptcies has more than doubled since 1981. Canadian farm debt increased 450% in ten years (Mitchell, 1984).

Where does the farm woman fit in all of this? Most family farms rely upon unpaid and underpaid family labour. Several studies of farm women have indicated that finance is the major factor in stress on family farms. In order to make ends meet, more and more farm women are taking jobs off the farm. Seventy-three percent of them work outside the home either on the farm, in off-farm work, or both (Manitoba Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1984). Urban women work a double shift, one in the home, and one in the paid labour force. Many farm women are now working a triple shift — as homemaker, as paid worker off the farm, and as unpaid farm worker. Even in household duties, the farm wife spends more hours at work than her urban counterpart.

For her farm labour she often receives no wages. Diane Harkin, of Concerned Women for the Survival of Agriculture, comments: "Women are living under the delusion that they are equal partners with their husbands." She refers to the latest Statistics Canada figures on Canadian farmers. Only 11.75% of Canadian farms operate as a partnership, and of these, only 4.14% are formally arranged (Harkin, 1987). This is in keeping with women's strong loyalty to the productive farm unit. Those women who do not split their husband's income are jeopardized economically. They cannot contribute to the Canadian Pension Plan. In addition, due to the nature of their work, farm wives do not receive sick leave, maternity leave or

vacation time. Most farmers do not carry Workmen's Compensation for themselves or their wives, because it is so costly.

Farming is a system with a tradition of favouring men over women. Inheritance practices favour passing the farm training and information in general is geared to male farmers. Women farmers are also constrained by child care and household duties — areas which farm men in general view as the realm of women.

In the farm family there exists the notion that men's work is more important. This allows men to remove themselves from domestic duties. It also allows men to control their own realm (Sachs, 1983). This control permeates through their work situations on the farm, and through their political organizations. When women work on the farm, men usually determine the nature of the work women perform. Farm women, especially on large-scale farms, often are delegated to the role of labourer or book-keeper, rather than manager or decision maker. Work which is viewed as more "productive" or remunerative rarely falls into their realm.

Within this structure, the farm wife is expected to provide emotional support in times of trouble. She is the family "health guardian." It is she who detects the tension in her husband as he fears going under. It is she who must deal with the children's irritability because of their parents' fatigue and lack of attention. "First you go numb. But you can't because of your husband and children. There's no stability anymore" (Vold, 1987).

After marriage, most young farm brides come to live on their husbands' family farm. One-third of farm wives move from a town or city to a new way of life. When times get tough, especially if the young couple owe money to their in-laws, the farm wife may lack a support structure:

It is "his" family farm. She moved there from another community...All the neighbours around are his family and life-long friends. She is the relative stranger...She is getting depressed. (S)he discovers a complex system of bonds and loyalties which goes back four generations and which keep her from saying too much (Van Aertselaer, 1987).

Farm families have a pride about their work. They maintain a tradition of keeping their troubles private. This is an obstacle in dealing with family violence and in seeking emotional support or psychological assistance. This attitude is alienating many farmers from the community and from members of their own family (Wolfe, 1986). The public in general still continues to harbour stereotypes about mental illness and family violence. Yet Dr. Susan Tambllyn, of the Perth District Health Unit, Ontario, sees a change in rural people's attitudes: "(W)ith changing times and perhaps because of the heavy stresses of recent years, I think rural people are now feeling less reluctant to seek professional help...Unfortunately in some parts of the province mental health services are not readily available" (Tambllyn, 1984).

Two American researchers have studied the mental health of farm families who have gone bankrupt (Heffernan and Heffernan, 1985). In a study of forty-two families, they found that all of the women, and all but one of the men, had experienced depression at some time during the process. Over half of the men and almost three-quarters of the women continued to experience depression. Two-thirds of the men and women became withdrawn from family and friends, and experienced feelings of worthlessness. Increased substance abuse was also reported. Half of the men and a third of the women reported that they became more physically aggressive. This corresponded with the increased family abuse reported by social service and health agencies.

When the farm couples were asked what type of assistance they received from others which was most helpful, they cited social-psychological as most important. It is important to help farm families before they reach the stage where clinical attention is needed. Farm families facing bankruptcy are not only losing their jobs: many of them must move from their homes and their communities. They are losing both their livelihood and way of life. More funding is needed for preven-

tive mental health education, social support networks, and crisis hot lines (Heffernan and Heffernan, 1985).

Adequate services for rural women who are victims of violence is problematic. Party telephone lines may prevent the rural women from having a confidential conversation on a crisis line or with a support service. News spreads so quickly among the farm community that farm women who need to make use of "safe houses" may be reluctant for fear that the neighbours will talk. Farm communities tend to be conservative and may blame the woman for leaving a situation, no matter how intolerable it is. The husband may retaliate that his wife let others know about their private troubles.

Considerable money is being put into the setting up of more transition homes for battered women, "safe houses" in rural areas or small communities, crisis hot lines, and counselling services. Professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and social workers are being trained to prevent and deal with family violence (Tambllyn, 1984). Distance to support services is problematic, especially in more isolated areas. Janice Van Aertselaer (1987) writes of a prairie woman:

There is no social worker in the nearby town, only one that comes about once a month and is always busy. The public health nurse is her sister-in-law...The nearest transition house is in a city 150 kilometers away. She has no way to go there, and even if she did it would mean taking her two oldest children out of school.

Child care is a special problem for many farm women because of the varying work schedule of the farm. Farm families prefer in-home child care, but the cost and the lack of babysitters pose major problems (Sugarman, 1985). Child care is an essential need on the farm because of farm safety issues and varying peak work times.

Farm women have more formal education than their husbands. However, many of them are frustrated in their work off the farm. Within the rural community equal pay opportunities rarely exist. In addition, as the number of farms decreases, so too does the number of businesses which rely upon farmers for their livelihood. Rural women in general find that there are few jobs available which remunerate them for their level of education or work experience. This lack of viable employment opportunities contributes to financial difficulties, isolation, loneliness and anxiety and depression (Bohnen, 1980).

To cope with the stress of the current farm crisis, a number of new farm women groups have emerged across Canada. Because of their research and lobbying over the last few years, they have made the personal effects of the farm crisis a focus of concern. The traditional and well-established Women's Institute, in keeping with the times, is switching its attention to family violence. In addition, women are increasingly becoming more political within existing farm organizations which have traditionally been male dominated. Last fall Brigid Pyke was elected as the first woman president of Ontario's largest farm organization, the Ontario Farmer's Association (OFA). She is pursuing the possibility of OFA and rural women's groups combining their efforts. One area where she feels joint action could be taken is the provision of adequate rural daycare.

Church groups and health care providers are establishing self-help groups and support services to try and help farm families through these times of trouble. The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food has established a toll-free crisis line (1-800-265-1511) which can be accessed anywhere in Ontario, twenty-four hours a day. Among the services it offers is information on where to go for family and stress counselling. County health councils are addressing the need for more research, shelters, safe houses and counselling services to meet farm families' needs.

In Ontario, at the University of Guelph, Professor Jackie Wolfe and several of her students have compiled a booklet titled *Social Supports Directors*. This lists a range of services available to assist farm families in South-Western Ontario. It allows needy farm families the opportunity to find out what is available in their own area. It also facilitates networking between helping organizations.

Diane Harkin of Winchester, Ontario founded the first Women for the Survival of Agriculture (WSA) group in 1975. She was particularly concerned about the survival of the family farm. Winchester WSA acts as a resource centre and focal point to help other WSA groups set up. Above all, it is a self-help supportive organization for farm women. It helps to network farm women across the country. Today there are over 2,000 members across Canada.

Winchester WSA initiated the local community action to open a shelter for victims of family violence. In February of this year Naomi's Family Resource Center opened its doors to women and chil-



Opening banquet at the 3rd National Farm Women's Conference, Saskatoon



National Farm Union members at the Conference



Diane Harkin of Winchester, Ontario, founder of the first Women for the Survival of Agriculture group in 1975, which acts as a resource centre to help other WSA groups set up..

dren from the three counties of Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry. Three WSA members sit on the Board of Directors. By September response had risen to 1000 resident days for the month. Of these, there were forty-five women and seventy-five children. Farm women tend to have shorter stays than other women in the shelter. One WSA member explained this pattern: "They feel guilty if they don't go back to the farm. They're concerned for the survival of the farm and they fear for the animals."

Concerned Farm Women (CFW) formed in 1981 in Grey and Bruce Counties in Ontario. This is the same country which was the home of Agnes MacPhail and Nellie McClung. The CFW began as a lobby group of farm women to ensure the survival of the family farm. Initially they added force to existing farm groups to increase pressure on governments to provide relief and guidance for needy farm families. The CFW became a support group for its members. Today members of CFW attend meetings and conferences which allow them to connect with farm women across Canada.

Members of the CFW have conducted their own research on the effects of financial stress on the farm family. They packaged this into a book, *The Farmer Takes a Wife*. They found that lack of profit was the factor which contributed most to their stress on the farm. Other stressors included financial difficulties, lack of leisure time, lack of money for a holiday, family responsibilities, and expensive machinery repairs. Mental fatigue was listed as the most common symptom of stress, followed by frustration, irritability, indecision, and sleeplessness. "The greatest degree of stress was reported by the younger women (25 to 34), especially if they had just started farming and were raising a family. All stress levels were at the highest point in cases where they could no longer pay the interest on their loans" (Ireland, 1983; p. 57). Upon completing their research, members of CFW presented briefs to both federal and provincial government on the effects of financial stress.

In Saskatchewan, two new farm women's groups have emerged. The Saskatchewan Women's Agricultural Network and The Farm Women's Action. In 1985, the Saskatchewan Women's Agricultural Network emerged as a group focusing on farm women's equality with men. It is a support and educational group which serves to link all rural women in Saskatchewan and to facilitate the voicing of their concerns. In south-western Sas-

katchewan, the Farm Women's Action group formed in 1985 as a lobby group to help save the family farm. Myrna Martindale, one of its members, explained the philosophy behind the group: "Women see the stress of the entire community...They are the ones who are trying to hold their families and farm together. And they are the ones who see what's going to happen if nothing comes of the public farm meetings" (Willick, 1986; p. 20).

The Saskatchewan Action Committee (SAC) on the Status of Women set up an ad hoc committee on rural women in 1983. They saw this committee as necessary because rural women's needs were exacerbated by isolation and lack of services. Violence against women was selected by the rural women's committee as the priority focus. Rural women's participation in SAC was problematic because of time constraints and distance factors. These problems must be acknowledged by any group trying to organize rural women. Rural women's groups require child care and the pooling of local transportation. Twenty to thirty miles is the limit that they are prepared to travel.

At present the Saskatchewan Battered Women's Advocacy Network (SBWAN) is struggling with a number of obstacles. Attempts to establish a rural shelter in Fort Qu'Appelle were thwarted by lack of support from the Minister of Social Services, and the town council (Van Aertse-laer, 1987). After a struggle of three years, SBWAN members are discouraged by this and concerned about the safety of "safe homes." These places cannot offer twenty-four hour police protection. People who offer their homes do so at great risk. As well, being plunked in the midst of a harmonious family may not be helpful for a victim of violence. It may only increase her feeling of alienation and lead her to return to her former situation.

In 1980 the first National Farm Women's Conference took place. It was followed by a second one in 1985. Since then, every province has had a conference on farm women. This November the third National Farm Women's Conference will take place. These conferences are important because they allow farm women to share ideas and to assess their progress over the eight years. In December of 1987 the Federal Department of Agriculture is holding a conference in Ottawa. Professor Nora Keating of the University of Saskatchewan will speak on the family farm and stress. In addition, the results of a national survey will be announced. Among the topics studied are stress, the



Linda Haverstock, psychologist, Mental Health Clinic Association, Saskatoon



Donnette Elder, board member of Saskatchewan Women's Agricultural Network (SWAN)



Jean Sagan of Biggar, Saskatchewan, farmer and mother of four children; she has spent the past three years fighting a farm foreclosure against the Royal Bank.

changing role of women in family farm life, child care, pressure on families, the impact of rural depopulation, and access to support organizations (Agriculture Canada, 1987).

Farm women live within a milieu which is more patriarchal than for many other North American women. Add to this the effects of the economic crisis, and the shortage of mental health services in rural communities, and we have a problem which requires immediate attention. Innovative steps are being taken in the form of farm women's groups, shelters, crisis lines, self-help groups and education of rural health care workers. A thorough documentation of Canadian farm women's mental health needs, and their level of satisfaction with services would aid health care planners in the establishment of these rural services.

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RUTH A. GILBERT

Manana Split

Preparation

Take one child, preferably young, before she's had a chance to toughen, and smash her one.

Just one good hard whack should do.

Smile and administer chocolates after the blow.

Remember to hold her afterwards quite closely, because you can't stand the sight of tears.

Hate helps, but tell yourself it's love. She's such a helpless thing after all.

This should produce the necessary malleable consistency.

Flavoring

The stomach is of essence here, requiring a certain finesse on the chef's part.

What is wanted is a unique blend of terror and reassurance. Murder someone close, then throw several small incendiary devices in her vicinity precisely placed for their disruptive effects.

One must be careful here. Too much and she'll give up causing an overly acid result, or simply destroying the whole project. For piquancy, give her as many gifts as you can and steal them from her when she is not looking. Then let her steal them back from time to time.

Cooking

Let her ferment slowly in her own bile then apply heat in intermittent blasts.

Serves: Almost any number

Accompaniments:

Flowers and a Ph.D.

PAT WHEATLEY

Incommunicado

Suburbia — large lots mown grass but no flowers half an acre of owned woods

executive bay-windowed, heat efficient indoor-outdoor mainfloor families cowering behind two-car garages — where

darkness of summer leaves shades the neighbours' cluster of mailboxes threatening

from the outer world of terrorists welfare recipients rapists and muggers —

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