

# Farm Wives: The Forgotten Women

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Les fermières se considèrent un secteur oublié de la société canadienne. L'article qui suit est un résumé d'un rapport préparé par l'Union Nationale des Fermiers sur la condition et les préoccupations des fermières.

The National Farmers Union (NFU), was established in 1969 in an attempt to amalgamate all existing farm unions. Although it represents only about ten per cent of Canada's farmers, it boasts a membership of over thirty thousand farm families. With the assistance of federal International Women's Year funding and provincial support, four women from the NFU coordinated and prepared a special report entitled *Farm Women in Our Society*.

Seven hundred and twenty-one Ontario farm women, both members and non-members of NFU, were surveyed. These women view themselves as the forgotten women in Canadian society. According to the NFU, the farm population in Canada is less than five per cent of our total population, yet farming generates jobs for about half Canada's labour force. The contribution of women to our agricultural economy is substantial, but for the most part, invisible—particularly to Canadians unfamiliar with the economic realities of farm labour. Most farm wives work at two jobs—household management and farm chores—without pay, social security, or domestic support from their husbands or sons. Additionally, in order to make ends meet, many farm women must also take off-farm employment, generally on a part-time basis. In this capacity, they experience the wage discrimination familiar to most working women.

Although the vast majority of the farm women surveyed prefer farming and rural living to other alternatives, they acknowledge that farming is 'a hard road', demanding long hours for low returns and little public recognition. Though many viewed their unpaid labour as a necessary sacrifice to keep the farm going, they felt they should be entitled to some recognition for their contribution to our economy. In particular, they sought coverage under the Canada Pension Plan and tax provisions such that their husbands could pay them wages and deduct these payments as legitimate farm expenses.

## *Work Performed by Farm Women*

**Housework:** All the women surveyed were married. Ninety-five per cent of them had children and two-thirds of them were full-time housewives.

**Field Work:** One-half of the women surveyed regularly operate farm machinery, averaging 339 hours per year at such work. Field work includes such tasks as seeding, haying, harvesting, manure-spreading, discing, fertilizing, cultivating, ploughing, and spraying.

**Barn Chores:** Three-quarters of these women routinely help with barn chores such as running the milking operation, feeding livestock, cleaning the barn, and nursing animals. Where husbands work at off-farm jobs, suffer an illness, or cannot find hired hands, farm women tend to take on all barn chores on top of their regular household responsibilities.

**Maintenance and Repair:** Farm buildings and machinery are exceptionally expensive capital investments. Women take part in maintaining and repairing all farm assets from fencing, which generally needs mending every spring, to tractor overhauls.

**Marketing and Distribution:** Where farmers still sell directly to consumers, women tend to oversee this operation—gathering or harvesting, grading and delivering such products as eggs, vegetables, and fruit. Some also operate roadside stands throughout the summer.

**Food Processing:** Although most food processing is now done off the farm, many women still make their own butter; others help slaughter livestock and cut and wrap the meat. Most farm families have very large gardens organized, maintained, and harvested by women. Women also can, freeze, and process this produce to feed their families and hired hands for an entire year.

**Miscellaneous:** Women also fill silos, unload and grind grain, dehorn cattle, debeak turkeys, castrate livestock, load and transport livestock, and pick stones.

Emergencies punctuate farm life. Fences break, allowing cattle to escape; sows, mares and cows have problematic deliveries; bush fires threaten the buildings, lightning hits the barn; ice bars the driveway to milk trucks; rabid animals or wild dogs enter the barnyard, etc., etc.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last twenty-five years, farm expenses have risen much more rapidly than net farm income. The consequences to women have been profound.

In order to compete with huge agribusiness corporations, some farmers expanded their farm interests dramatically, gambling that increased productivity would enable them to pay off their debts. This meant that their families forfeited all frills and some necessities until bigger production paid off. Others tried to avoid debt by staying small while pouring in more labour—usually their family's—and by taking off-farm jobs. This obviously increased the already onerous workload on women. Still other farmers abandoned farming altogether. This is perhaps the most heart-breaking impact of agribusiness on farm families. For women to whom farming was a favoured vocation, the loss of the farm was bitterly regretted.

### *The Value of Women's Farm Work*

Agribusiness corporations have indirectly admitted that they cannot pay anyone to work for them as cheaply as a farmer, his wife, and children would work for a family farm.

Socially, male dominance prevails in agriculture. Men view women as 'helpers', and women themselves often underestimate their own indispensable contribution to the farm. One woman, who noted that she spent three hundred hours a year selling farm produce at a roadside stand, five hundred hours a year bookkeeping for the farm, and forty hours a week in off-farm employment, commented, 'There would probably be more significance in the farm if there was more participation on my part.'

Certainly, part of the reason women and society at large undervalue the contribution of farm women is that, like housewives, most farm women work for free. To many of the women surveyed, this seemed unfair. 'Everyone else gets wages for their work.' 'I do the work of a hired man, so why shouldn't I be paid for it?'

Legally, it is difficult for a husband to pay his wife a salary, even if he wanted to. He cannot deduct this amount from his own income as a business expense. At present, his options are few. He can give his wife tax-free gifts annually. Although such gifts give the wife some compensation for her labour, they are solely at her husband's discretion and do not carry with them any social benefits like pension coverage or unemployment insurance. Alternatively, a husband and wife may form a legal partnership, granting both partners an equal claim on the profits of the farm enterprise. Although this arrangement formally acknowledges the wife's contribution and her right to a share of the farm property, it still does not provide her with any social security benefits.

The only way a wife can receive a wage and its accompanying social benefits is if the farm is incorporated. Incorporation *does not* guarantee the wife a share in the property necessarily. To ensure this, joint deeds and titles, records of receipts, cancelled cheque stubs, and documentary proof that her money comes from extra-marital sources are the wife's best protection.

Over half the women surveyed definitely wanted wages for their work. With no pension benefits of their own to fall back on, women who work without wages are entitled to a share of their husbands' pensions only upon their death. Divorced women are still not guaranteed a fair share of the farm assets accrued through decades of their labour. Only in Ontario does a farm woman have the protection of the law in this regard. All Canadian farm women would do well, however, to maintain records of their financial and other contributions to the farm business.

### *Off-Farm Employment of Women*

In 1976, the average gap in wages between all men and women working 50-52 weeks per year was \$6,947. In 1973 farm men averaged \$6,175 per year while farm women made only 43 per cent of this—\$2,662. Consequently, farm women are unpaid at the farm and underpaid off the farm.

One-third of the women surveyed by the NFU had off-farm jobs on top of their housework and farm labour. Very few had any hired help with the household chores. Though three-quarters of the women surveyed assisted their husbands with the barn chores, the vast majority received no help from their husbands with the domestic chores.

The NFU survey reveals that farm women share most of the concerns of paid and unpaid working women everywhere. They admit that universal day-care facilities would benefit them enormously; they support the principle of equal pay for equal work; they wish to see women's contribution to the economy recognized openly by their husbands, their families, and society; and they are tired of being viewed as helpers instead of full partners in the family enterprise.

The survey also emphasizes problems unique to the farm woman. Her vocation demands total commitment and endless overtime, yet even with such dedication she sees that her way of life is threatened with extinction because of the growth of the huge agribusiness corporations. She maintains at least two unpaid jobs, and faces virtually no security should her marriage break up or sickness and age require that the farm be sold. And, given that the NFU estimates that some three-quarters of Canadian farmers live below or close to the poverty line, she must face the fact that until the tax laws that apply to farmers are reformed, there is little likelihood that she can ever enjoy wages for her farm labour or the social-security benefits which are tied to wage earnings.

1. One of the emergencies the NFU fails to catalogue in its report is the frightening incidence of disabling accidents on farms. Contrary to the pastoral myth, farming is dangerous work. Tractors often tip over; farm machinery jams or grabs clothing, often claiming fingers, arms, or legs; long summer hours cause heat-stroke and slippery barn yards have caused a few reported cases of death by freezing in recent years. Livestock, too, cause human injuries. At best, farm women must excel as first-aid ministers. At worst, they fall victim to handicaps themselves or must assume the burden of farm management on their own to compensate for recuperating or permanently disabled husbands.

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### **Farm Women: One Woman's View** **Doris Shadd**

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Doris Shadd, Women's Director of District Six of the NFU outlined for CWS/CF her own concerns as a farm woman. Her comments broke down into two general groups. First, her concern for farmers as a vanishing, underpaid, and exploited occupational group, victim of government indifference, consumer misunderstanding, and agribusiness starvation. Second, her concern for women as an unpaid and unprotected labour force. Amongst her comments on farm women were:

Farm women need legislation so they can be paid on the same basis as other employees and receive the same benefits. At present, the farm wife cannot receive any wage from her husband and cannot pay into Canada Pension Plan. However, the husband can pay the children for work.

There are more farm women with high blood pressure and mental disorder today because they can't cope with farm problems. Their husbands cannot make a profit, there is no future for their children, and this is leading to stress and strain. Therefore women need information services such as family counselling and health, education and recreation counselling.

A farm woman may drive the tractor (she is a hired hand) with no pay and, therefore, no Workmen's Compensation insurance.