

Silencing Women in Canada

The Effects of the Erosion of Support Programs for Farm Women

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On n'entend plus les agricultrices canadiennes depuis l'érosion des programmes qui les aidaient. L'auteure parle de ceux qui ont existé et ceux qui furent éliminés dans les années 1970-2000. et les intégrant dans un contexte politique elle assure qu'ils ont subi l'influence des partis politiques au pouvoir dans l'obtention et la cessation de ces programmes. Elle rapporte les bénéfices encourus par les femmes quand ces programmes étaient fonctionnels sans oublier l'impact quand ils furent annulés.

It is through women's organizations that the public voices of women are heard (Dominelli; Feldberg and Carlsson; Handy and Smith; Thurston, Crow and Scott). The positive health impacts of such organizations have been recognized for many years (Handy and Smith; Shaw; Thurston, Crow and Scott). The foundation on which existing Canadian women's organizations are based was established over a century ago when rural women of Canada recognized the importance of organizing so that they could speak as one voice for economic and social reforms (Federated Women's Institute's of Canada). National Women's Councils that formed in the late 1800s dealt primarily with the needs of urban and professional women. It was not until after the First World War, in 1919, that the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada arose as an umbrella organization to co-ordinate provincial groups that addressed the needs of rural women (e.g., Women of Unifarm in Alberta and Women's Institutes (Saskatchewan Women's Institutes; Women's Institute). Support for rural women's organizations continued to grow to meet the needs of women throughout rural Canada, reaching a peak in the 1970s. Since that time, federal and provincial financial support for rural women's organizations has continually been eroded, essentially silencing rural women in Saskatchewan and throughout Canada.

Until this research, there had been no systematic examination of this support and its erosion. In this Participatory

Action Research project, the destabilizing of farm women's support programs in Saskatchewan were explored through:

- an inventory of federal and provincial support programs from 1970 to 2000;
- documentation of the erosion of these programs;
- documentation of the political context since 1970;
- an exploration of a number of the benefits of these programs and the impact of their erosion;
- actions to address the need for farm women's support programs related to:
 - a) their health and social well-being,
 - b) the inclusion of women in the development of agricultural policy, and
 - c) the erosion of their social support.

In examining participation we adapted the concept of political space put forward by Lars Engberg-Pedersen and Neil Webster, talking about poverty reduction, as "the range of possibilities present for pursuing" women's equality by women or on behalf of women "by local organizations" (8). Political space is made up of "institutional channels" through which women can participate in the policy process; "political discourses" in which rural women's concerns are considered significant; and "social and political practices" of rural women (Engberg-Pedersen and Webster 8). The political space for women has been examined in terms of numbers of women in elected office (Goetz), the impact of local government ignoring local women's organizations (Graham and Regulska), and the impact of globalization. As public policy (that set by governments or their representatives, health authorities) is developed, political space is closely related to the idea of the political stream, "the social and political context" (Thurston, Scott and Vollman 127) in which policy issues are being considered. This stream is largely managed by the party in power.

Methodology

The research upon which this article is based was designed as Participatory Action Research. It was initiated by the Saskatchewan Women's Agricultural Network (SWAN) and funded by the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence (PWHCE). A SWAN representative contacted one author (Gerrard) and together they sought funding from the PWHCE to explore the effects of the erosion of farm support programs on women in farming. As part of the process, SWAN provided input through consultation during the research tenure.

For the purposes of this study, an agriculturally focused support program was defined as an initiative that exists to assist farm women in their rural environment and situation. Issues typically supported were leadership, safety, childcare, education, and financial and legal security. Our interest was in support that was ongoing (i.e., a program, in contrast to a project which usually consists of a one time event) and that included a plan or procedure for moving towards a specific goal. An integral characteristic of a program is that it delivers something tangible, is active, and is funded by an agency, organization, or government. A major reduction or total elimination of that program was seen as the erosion of that support program.

The key information collected included the name of the program, when the program was implemented, the mandate or purpose of the program, who was involved, and its status in 2000, including the reason for its demise if it was no longer in existence. We use the term "political space" to describe the political context at the time of inception and erosion of these programs. Information for this project and inventory was requested from a broad array of sources, including women's agricultural organizations in Saskatchewan (National Farmer's Union (NFU), SWAN, and the Saskatchewan Women's Institutes (SWI), federal and provincial agricultural departments, women's directories, Saskatchewan Health Districts, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food library (Women in Agriculture section), Saskatchewan Safety Council, and Centre for Agricultural Medicine, University of Saskatchewan. Media archives were also searched for information that was relevant.

Our goal was to have an in-depth understanding of the benefits of these programs and the impacts of their erosion, as experienced by the women we interviewed through qualitative research methods (Taylor and Bogdan and Lincoln and Guba). We used contacts in SWAN and snowball sampling to recruit a total of eleven women, between the ages of 40 and 74, from a variety of locations around Saskatchewan. Interviews, using a semi-structured interview guide, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Results

There have been very few programs, as defined for this

research, at the federal level and none at the provincial level (Table 1). The majority of funds that provided monetary support during the period under study were for projects for farm women. These projects are characterized by being one time events and are not intended to be sustained over a period of time. Thus policy at the federal and provincial government level that funds by project has meant that criteria to be met for funding are in a constant state of flux. Qualifications are apt to change from one year to the next and current funding criteria are focussed on the ability of the project to advance policy change. As one woman noted, "[This] meets the needs of the government, but not the needs of the organization."

Political Context and Political Space

Table 2 summarizes the dates of federal elections for the 30-year period discussed here, that is, 1970–2000.¹ The table includes identification of the party that won each election and a chronicle of programs discussed above.

Programs for rural women occupied a diminishing "political space" over the 30-year period, as illustrated in Table 2. One can also see that in the period 1970–2000 the Liberals did not initiate any farm support programs for women in their mandates from 1968–1979, but introduced one in 1981 when they were re-elected. The Conservatives initiated the largest number of programs in their mandate from 1984–1993 while the Liberals ended most of them, including the National Coalition for Rural Childcare that they, in fact, started in 1995. The data in Table 2 illustrate how, with relative ease, any political party can adopt policies that expand or shrink the possibilities for women's participation (their political space) in women-centred policy development. Thus benefits that facilitated women's voice in policy were also directly negatively affected in the decisions that reduced or eliminated support for projects and programs.

Benefits of Participation in Support Programs

Women reported significant benefits from government-funded programs. These benefits included building awareness of farm-related issues; increase feelings of support for farm women and farm women's issues; decreased isolation; increased access to educational opportunities; increased self-esteem; increased participation and role in decision-making locally, provincially, and nationally; and a sense of stronger families and communities. One woman commented, "[Participation in the programs] got you aware of so many wrongs that were happening." Another woman noted the very real value of breaking down the isolation:

It's just priceless. I can't imagine what it would have been like if I hadn't had ... meetings with the women and talking with them.... (It) was wonderful.

The benefits of increased access to educational opportunities, were significant as one woman indicates:

To be able to give them that power... That's why whether it's a one-day seminar type thing, or with educating women in different things.... I think those [education activities] are really important.

Education allowed women to gain a broader perspective on how their individual farm fit into the macro level of agriculture:

Impact of the Erosion of Funding for Support Programs for Farm Women

The benefits documented above disappear when funding is no longer available for programs and projects. Women in our study highlighted several ways in which the erosion of this funding had affected them. They spoke of experiencing a general lack of support for projects or programs, the return of isolation from other women and the larger world of agriculture, and resultant poor communication among farm women. Taken together the lack

"I felt I was having some impact on policy formation for federal programs in addition to assisting in developing some programs that could be used throughout the country ... There was the ability ... to speak to policy makers in Ottawa."

You know how it is on the farm. You work hard and long hours day after day but you are not sure how you fit into the bigger picture. All of a sudden [due to my involvement] I started getting more and more into really looking at the economy, how it affected me and our farm....

Women were articulate about the effects of participation in programs on their health and well-being. One woman reported that involvement in the programs was: "...very good for your mental health, and your physical health." Another added, "I'd have to say the benefits to my health are feeling strong, feeling confident about myself and my position as a farm woman." Still another woman described in detail the positive effect participation had on her mental health:

My involvement has been one of the best antidotes to depression.... If there's something you can do about a situation, it's the best way to get undepressed, because instead of being focused on how grim things are, you focus on how you can impact the situation. Taking action and feeling more in control is the best antidote for depression.

While for some the benefit of participation was significant at a personal level, others had experiences at different levels:

To be involved at a national level and get the group perspective of things—I also felt I was having some impact on policy formation for federal programs in addition to assisting in developing some programs that could be used throughout the country ... That's where there was the ability to impact, and to get to speak to policy makers in Ottawa.

of support was experienced through feelings of invisibility and anger.

Without the opportunities provided by the government funded programs to meet, to learn, to be involved in activities, and to share experiences with other farm women, the women interviewed experienced a significant lack of support for the specific issues that daily impact their lives. The loss of funding often had very real implications that undermined shared effort and planning.

The Rural Childcare Coalition was a really good example of what happened... the thing that really caused that coalition to fall apart was removal of federal funds, just when a plan was coming together.

Not surprisingly, the erosion of these programs increased women's isolation and decreased their ability to communicate with each other. Even computers do not solve this problem, partly because many of the women do not have them, but also because as one woman commented, "The computer, the radio and the television are artificial. They can't take the place of interacting with a real person."

One of the greatest effects of the cessation or limiting of funding for programs and projects was the loss of women as participants in political processes and involvement in the formation of policy:

I don't have the input on policy in the same way because the funding is not there and the opportunity is not available.... You have to find other ways to make an impact. You can't travel because you don't have the money to travel, or even to do conference calls for that matter. How do you stay in touch across a country on a national type of thing?

Table 1. Federal Support Programs for Farm Women, 1970-2000

Program	Began	Ended	Comments
Farm Women's Bureau (FWB)	1981	Funding seriously cut back 1995	A unit of Status of Women Canada, the FWB was formed in order "to implement Ottawa's Status of Women policies as they apply to agriculture" (Carbert). It was severely cut back in 1995. The Farm Women's Bureau does not appear to have any written mandate, is on the verge of being cut out of the agriculture budget completely and has no future budget for projects to advance the legal, economic, and social issues of farm business women.
Farm Women's Information Initiative (FWII)	1985	Questionable whether it ever functioned	In 1985 The Farm Women's Bureau in Ottawa introduced the Farm Women's Information Initiative to provide information to farm women on agricultural policies, programs and legislation as well as projects, speeches, events, and reports. It is not clear whether this program ever really got off the ground. A mailing list was compiled in 1991 by the Communications Branch which included a maximum of 100 leaders of farm women's groups and occasionally there were direct mail-outs on specific issues such as family violence. A toll free phone line was set up and is still in place.
Canadian Farm Women's Education Council (CFWEC)	1987	1994	This council was founded at the third Farm Women's National Conference in 1987. The objectives were to increase access to training, increase awareness of the status and impact of policy on training, promote professionalism and leadership for farm women, and lower barriers to participation. Provincial farm women's organizations sent representatives to CFWEC which met regularly to plan action for change.
Farm Women's Advancement Program (FWAP)	1988	1996	This program was introduced through the Farm Women's Bureau in the fall of 1988 and began in 1989. Its purpose was to provide up to \$150,000 per year in grants to financially assist farm women's organizations to aid in the achievement of legal and economic equality for farm women; promote participation of farm women in policy making and management of the agricultural sector; and encourage recognition of the contributions of farm women.
National Coalition for Rural Child Care	1995	1998	This program was first proposed in 1995 as part of the federal government's Child Care Initiatives but did not actually begin until 1996. It built on project work that had been done previously by a number of organizations (e.g., SWI) and individuals. The purpose of the program was to set up child care centres in rural Canada. The Federal government wanted a specific program with a national scope but would not fund administration or needs assessments. In addition, each of the provinces had different regulations governing child care and situations in rural communities were different in each region so the concept of one rural child care model for the whole country just did not make sense.

Another woman talked about how this “invisibilizing” affected her health and well being:

I miss the collective power and support of working with other women in a specific program or project because that tends to boost your confidence and self-esteem. It also gives you a sense of accomplishing something and making a significant contribution.

Another added, “If we’re not involved, and we remain peripheral and voiceless, it’s very detrimental to our psychological health, to our physical health.”

Emotions were strong over the loss of one program:

I did feel ... anger when they wouldn't fund the education council and the Canadian Farm Women's Network.... We lobbied very hard, we put a lot of time and effort into that program. It was very disheartening and discouraging when they wouldn't fund it anymore.

Although for the majority of women in our study dissolution of programs resulted in significant losses, a few women actually indicated that there was a silver lining to the cloud of their silencing. These women reported that they were less tired, had a lot less work to do, and were not away from their families as much, and one said that she did not have to deal with some of the sexism she faced in the course of her activities. Yet these were small benefits compared to the costs to many others who spoke with us.

Addressing Shrinkage: What is Needed for Change?

One woman in our study succinctly characterized the nature of agriculture: “The agricultural sector walks like a man, talks like a man and is a man in every way. There’s got to be a change of attitude. Women need to be recognized for their contribution and skill.”

Women who shared their insight with us readily identified factors needed to revitalize programs that support farm women: increased input, education, support, and funding for farm women. One woman spoke of the scope of change that is needed:

Often you hear people say that they want the voice of women but there's more to it than that. It's being respected, being taken into account as full-fledged partners in the social domain. It's ... having established yourself as serious, full-time, legitimate participants in the public discussion.

Another woman illustrated how a filtering process for participation takes place to reduce attention to issues of diversity and varied skills among farm women and limit their opportunities to provide their views on agriculture:

They quite carefully overlook the farm women who, by

their organization or their voice, have already challenged the notion that we're a homogenous group of nice girls. They quite carefully avoid appointing people like that. It's astonishing that somebody ... who's been 15 years quite publicly, quite openly, and very effectively involved in organizing, finds herself never on any government boards. She clearly has the talent and the education but she's quite clearly distinguished herself as someone who might challenge the notion that we're a homogenous group.

Education needs to be improved in the areas of opportunities, access, and scheduling. Women want to have opportunities to learn about the larger, more complicated farm operations. As more volunteers are required to serve on more and more boards, women want leadership skills training. “Programs [need to] be in the smaller communities ... once a month.... It has to be accessible.... It has to be within 15-20 miles of me....” It was also noted that sometimes very basic realities of farm life are overlooked: people who plan educational training must be sensitive to the fact that rural people are not available between seeding and harvest.

Most of the women interviewed were of the age to be the “sandwich generation,” having responsibilities to care for both their parents and their children. They want support for these enormous care-giving loads:

There is very little support in terms of managing off-farm jobs, on-farm jobs and family. [It's] the triple role that women play, the caregiver role that they also play for their family, but also their parents, and the whole home care issue where farm women may have to be the ones who are supposed to provide care to others that are very near and dear to them. There's also the issue of respite care. If somebody is coming home early from the hospital, how do you take time off from work to be there? [Another problem is] a lot of kids are left home alone while women are out in the field and they're too young. This issue of rural childcare just won't go away.

Funding is the fuel that is needed to make the engine go. If farm women are to be active and visible players in the whole agricultural sector, they need funding to make participation possible. Core funding for farm women’s organizations is essential. Educational events need funding. In order to not be silenced in discussions about agriculture, farm women need to be at the decision and policy-making table. This has not happened because of funding cuts. One woman explains: “[Two farm women’s organizations] have been invited to conferences where they should have been there, but there was no way they could go because there wasn’t the money for travel or accommodation.”

Funders need to be more aware of the realities of farm women’s lives in Canada. As one woman said, “Come out

Date of election	Party which won	Farm women's support programs
1968	Liberal	
1972	Liberal	
1974	Liberal	
1979	Liberal	
1979	Conservative	
1980	Liberal	•1981—Farm Women's Bureau begins
1984	Conservative	•1985—Farm Women's Information Initiative begins but is questionably functional •1987—Canadian Farm Women's Education Council begins
1988	Conservative	•1988—Farm Women's Advancement Program begins
1993	Liberal	•1994—Canadian Farm Women's Education Council ends •1995—Farm Women's Bureau is severely cut back •1995—National Coalition for Rural Childcare •1996—Farm Women's Advancement Program ends
1997	Liberal	•1998—National Coalition for Rural Childcare ends

and meet the women that need and use these programs.” She added,

If you're getting money from the federal government, what do they know about living here? What do most of them even know about living on a farm, far less living in Saskatchewan? They really don't know anything about it, and I guess the terrible thing is, most of them don't even try to find out. That's the sad thing.

An enhanced identity for farm women is needed, one that takes into the account their role in the economy. This was pointed out by a research participant who said, “It's important that women identify themselves with the farm family as woman of the farm family—woman farmer—and the farmer part of that is important. They need to see the value of their contribution in economic terms.”

The women interviewed also felt it was crucial to raise awareness of the unpaid work that farm women do. As one woman comments:

When I go into town and I write a cheque and they ask

me if I work and I say, “You're damn right I do.” Then they ask if I get paid for it and I say, “No.” I feel like I want to hit them. That's the mentality out there—unless you are being paid, you don't work. Society needs to be educated about the realities on the farms that produce the food they eat.

This awareness is an important element in triggering change.

Past the Millennium: A Glimpse of the Future?

While our focus here is on documenting the history of support over the final years of the twentieth century, a brief mention of the current status of farm women's programs needs mention. While there are a number of rural women's organizations currently in existence, such as the BC Rural Women's Network and Women's Institutes in each province, those focused specifically on farm women are few. They include Ontario Farm Women, the Canadian Farm Women's Network, and the National Farmer's Union. The Saskatchewan Women's Agricul-

ture Network is now defunct. Of note, however, is that these organizations are often supported by members and working in isolation. For example, while women are encouraged to be part of the National Farmer's Union and its mandate includes ensuring women are represented at all levels of the organization relevant to farm women, membership is for families and may be at a cost that prevents those in the most need from joining. Some organizations that appear in Internet searches for farm women are businesses advertising various services in rural areas. The Ottawa Farm Women Bureau, since 1981 the

exclusion from political space, are evident and pervasive in the descriptions and discussions of the experiences of the women interviewed for this study.

The study's inventory of agriculturally-focused support programs for farm women revealed an alarming trend that has decimated their numbers. Women interviewed accessed what programs were available through their farm women's organizations. A lack of funding for these organizations affects these organizations' viability and thus the women's abilities to access programs and retain the little political space they had. this lack of funding for ongoing programs

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conduit for information and contact among all farm women's groups, is continuing its work in spite of 1996 funding cuts. However, that work is being done in an environment of challenge—reduced funds to do ever increasing work.

Finally, in late 2004 the president of the National Council of Women of Canada presented to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Status of Women. In her comments, Catherine Laidlaw-Sly echoed what women in our study had already said, "women, doing the unseen and uncounted unpaid work of our society, are the invisible lubrication of that engine [of economic growth]." While calling for Electoral Reform to support women's elected representation at numbers that move toward equal representation, Laidlaw-Sly noted the urgent need for the Standing Committee to, "have as its self-imposed mandate, the responsibility to see that women's organizations have the necessary resources to participate...." The presentation described concern with the undermining of stability and viability of women's non-profit and volunteer organizations, particularly the trend to fund projects rather than core funding. One of the consequences of the erosion of funding is the absence of women's voice through appropriate representation by the best and most knowledgeable representatives of these NGOs in government consultations. There is no doubt that farm women and their (former) organizations are among those referred to in that presentation.

Conclusion

The enormous challenges that are currently facing farmers in Saskatchewan and the rest of Canada are magnified for farm women. Women's diminished accessibility to economic, political, and social power, and their

and farm women's organizations has resulted in the silencing of farm women. This silencing also disempowers farm women at the level of decision-making and policy formation. As Wilfreda Thurston, Barbara Crow, and Catherine Scott have pointed out, it is through women's organizations that a great deal of their public voice is heard and through which policies that support women and their needs are implemented and disseminated.

Farm women continue to lack appropriate and much needed representation across the spectrum of political spaces. In part this is true of women in general in Canada, aside from small numbers of individuals in high profile positions with some influence. Comments and recommendations made to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Status of Women highlight the need for the will to change—at the level of federal government and down to local levels. The mere existence of the Standing Committee is commendable. Yet, given the absence of any direct support for the status of women in some provinces, mechanisms for structures and processes that support the inclusion of women, including vulnerable farm women, are needed to prevent further erosion of support for farm women's programs. Furthermore the shrinking political space with limited institutional channels through which women's voices are heard do not provide convincing evidence of Canadian commitments made at the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.

A reductionist lens would assert that there is no specific need to fund programs that support farm women separately from gender neutral organizations. However, evidence from this study documents the negative impacts on these women as a direct result of the erosion of agriculturally-focused support programs. Failure to account for the experiences of farm women in national and provincial

policy amounts to a failure of the democratic process to ensure their equal participation in Canadian governance. Policies that are developed in the absence of women's voices can only partially address issues faced by farmers across the country. In reality, farm women's families, communities, provinces, and the entire nation also lose valuable insight, expertise and participants when farm women are silenced.

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¹The party in power in 1970 was elected in 1968 and is included in Table 2.

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Canadian Health Network

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Canadian women share many of the same health concerns, but women living in rural, remote and northern areas face some unique challenges to maintaining good health, like limited access to local healthcare services, lack of public transportation and childcare, and geographic isolation. The Women section at www.canadian-health-network.ca offers resources related to rural, remote and northern women's health.

What is the Canadian Health Network (CHN)?

The CHN is a national, non-profit, bilingual web-based health information service that focuses on how to stay healthy and prevent disease and injury. The CHN website offers up-to-date, reliable information on a wide range of topics and groups.

Who is the Women Affiliate?

The Women Affiliate is the women's health content expert for the CHN. womenshealthmatters.ca at Sunnybrook & Women's College Health Sciences is proud to be the Women Affiliate for the CHN.



Don't miss the December 2005 feature on the health issues of women in rural, remote and northern areas:

- ♦ New Women Affiliate email information alert
- ♦ At www.canadian-health-network.ca: new homepage article with related resources on the Women page.

For more information, to suggest rural women's health resources or to sign up for our information alerts, contact us at womenaffiliate@womenshealthmatters.ca.

Les Canadiennes partagent de nombreuses préoccupations en matière de santé, mais les femmes vivant dans les régions rurales, éloignées et nordiques font face à des défis particuliers pour ce qui est de maintenir une bonne santé, comme un accès limité à des services de santé locaux, le manque de transport public et de services de garderie, et l'isolement géographique. La section Femmes de www.reseau-canadien-sante.ca offre des ressources sur la santé à l'intention des femmes vivant en milieu rural, éloigné et nordique.



Qu'est-ce que le Réseau canadien de la santé (RCS) ?

Le RCS est un service Web national, bilingue et sans but lucratif qui fournit de l'information sur le maintien de la santé et la prévention de la maladie et les blessures. Il fournit une information à jour et fiable sur un grand nombre de sujets et de groupes de personnes.

Qu'est-ce que le membre affilié du RCS, volet femmes ?

Le membre affilié, volet femmes est responsable du contenu du RCS portant sur femmes. femmesensante.ca du Sunnybrook & Women's College Health Sciences Centre est fier d'être le membre affilié du RCS, volet femmes.

Ne manquez pas les articles spéciaux en Décembre 2005, sur les questions de santé qui préoccupent les femmes en régions rurales, éloignées et nordiques:

- ♦ Un nouveau message expresse du membre affilié du RCS, volet femmes
- ♦ Sur www.reseau-canadien-sante.ca: un nouveau article sur la page d'accueil, avec des ressources sur la page Femmes

Pour plus d'information, proposer des ressources sur la santé des femmes en milieu rural, ou abonnez au messages expresses, communiquez avec nous à womenaffiliate@womenshealthmatters.ca.

The Canadian Health Network is brought to you by the Public Health Agency of Canada and major health organizations across the country.
Le Réseau canadien de la santé est présenté par l'Agence de santé publique du Canada et des organismes de santé réputés du pays.



KY Hanewich, "Apricots (tribute to Chardin)," oil on canvas, 20" x 30", 2005. Photo: Mikhail Hanewich-Hollatz