

Neoliberal Trade Policies in

BY SHANNON STOREY

The number of Canadians described as “primarily employed” in agriculture had fallen by 26 per cent between 1998 and 2001.

Les paysannes qui sont responsables d'au moins la moitié de la production mondiale des denrées ainsi que la responsabilité d'assurer l'approvisionnement domestique, portent aussi une part disproportionnée des difficultés socio-économiques qui résultent de la baisse des prix des produits agricoles en plus du poids de la production et de la reproduction. Une analyse conduite par le mouvement international Via Campesina et ses affiliés canadiens, le Syndicat national des cultivateurs nationaux, indique que les politiques du commerce néolibéral sont mauvaises pour les agriculteurs et pour les consommateurs, elle recommande donc, que

l'agriculture soit rayée des ententes commerciales au profit de politiques qui appuieraient l'égalité des sexes et la priorité de l'alimentation au foyer.

Farm Families: Why Are They Going?

On February 22, 2002, the offices of the National Farmers Union (NFU) were inundated by phone calls from reporters anxious to hear a farmer's response to the latest news from Statistics Canada. The news? The number of Canadians described as “primarily employed” in agriculture had fallen by 26 per cent between 1998 and 2001, and the drop was apparently biggest for female spouses of self-identified male farm operators. For NFU representatives who responded to those calls, the real news was that anyone thought this was news.

Since the late 1980s, when Canada started to remake its agriculture policies in anticipation of so-called trade liberalization requirements under the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (CUSTA), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and now the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), farm families in Canada and around the world have had their already challenging lives turned upside down by a vision of global trade that has served to displace the perception of food as a human need in favour of one that views food as just another commodity in the marketplace. Increased trade has been treated as the magical

answer to problems of global malnutrition, despite ample proof that it may actually make access to food more precarious for many of the world's poorest people (Bread for the World). In Canada, as farm families have increasingly found it impossible to get a fair price for the food they produce in the national and international marketplace, the Canadian government touts yet more trade as the solution to all of agriculture's problems. Most of the global corporations that deal in agricultural products are showing respectable and sometimes obscene profit margins. Between 1993 and 1998, for example, Canada's largest non-cooperative food retailers averaged a return on equity of over 21 per cent; the large chartered banks averaged over 15 per cent. Although some processors had difficult years, most did well, with the most flamboyant returns on equity being earned by General Mills with a five-year average in excess of 151 per cent. Yet this was a period in which Canadian farm families averaged only 0.7 per cent return on equity (Qualman). At the end of 2001, with these corporations still doing well, 26 per cent fewer people in Canada had farming as a main occupation, largely because so few can make a living doing it. At the same time, off-farm employment rose among both designated farm operators and their spouses (Statistics Canada).

The Canadian government does not actually have an agriculture policy. Instead, it has a trade policy that is pretending to be an agriculture policy. In the name of this agriculture-based trading agenda, Canada and most of its provinces, with the notable exception of Québec, have dismantled most of their traditional farm infrastructure supports such as transportation assistance and central desk marketing of pork, oats, and various other staple foods. Canada has also agreed to terms of trade that in the long run will endanger our supply-managed sectors of dairy and poultry production, two of the few products which actually return a fair share of the market dollar to Canadian farm families. Many of these policy changes, such as the removal of railway subsidies, actually predated trade agreements that would have permitted these supports to remain in place at only slightly lower levels for years. In general Canada has reduced these other subsidies much faster than any other country in the name of the principles of neoliberal trade principles, but not because of actual trade agreements.

Accordingly, Canadians cannot blame all of the policy-related problems suffered by farmers on trade agreements.

Agriculture and the Destruction of Global Food Security

Who Can Feed the World?

However, we can be regarded as a test case for the potential of neoliberal policies to create a healthy farm economy. Since our food exports have indeed soared since the signing of NAFTA and the creation of the WTO, our federal government likes to claim that its policies have been good for Canadian farmers. In fact, there is a fairly direct chronological correlation between the rise of Canada's food exports, the rise of our food imports, and the reduction of family farm profitability both in Canada (Qualman) and in the majority world countries in which many of our food imports originate. Clearly the pursuit of trade for its own sake has no connection to the well-being of the people of the land. In fact, the brief study of returns on equity above indicates that our current dominant system of trade serves only to reduce the ability of farm communities to obtain a fair and necessary share of the money paid by consumers to corporate middlemen in the food system.

We should also note that the average consumer in Canada can be led to pay more for food than the average consumer in many of the countries that are among our regular customers, such as China, Algeria, and Indonesia. Under liberalized trade, Canadian farmers have given up relatively wealthy customers for poor ones. At the same time, a higher and higher percentage of those consumers' yuan, dinars, and rupiah are being caught by the corporations in the middle. Since a major effect of the trade agreements has been to accelerate the process of corporate concentration, fewer corporations are sharing the pot, and can apply more intense pressure on the myriad of small producers and consumers around the globe to give up more and more of their own fair share (Qualman).

There is plenty of money in the food system. Consumers are paying enough. The problem is that the money is getting stuck in the pockets of everyone between the farmer and the consumer. This has always been a problem, but the problem has been exacerbated by trade deals which tend to favour the interests of expanding international trading companies rather than actual people. As usual, women have borne the biggest share of the resulting poverty and exhaustion in the farm sector not only in Canada, but around the world.

A Woman's Place is in Food Production

According to rather inadequate global statistics that fail to

record much of women's work, women play a direct role in the production of over 50 per cent of the world's food, and in many developing countries they are responsible for up to 80 per cent of it (NFU Women's Radio Collective). In contrast to the food directly produced by men in many developing nations, the food produced by women is often intended for use in their own households and communities. In subsistence economies, where cash income is scarce and the cash market addressed by trade agreements is irrelevant, whole communities would starve if women were not producing food and processing it for home and community use.

In Canada, our farmers seem on the surface to have little in common with the subsistence producers of the so-called Third World. Most Canadian food production is carried out for marketing in the cash economy and, aside from the supply managed production of milk and poultry and a few specialty markets, most of the food we produce is exported. Our 1996 census seemed to demonstrate that the large majority of this production was carried out by men; only 25 per cent of self-reported farm operators in the 1996 Census of Agriculture were women. (Statistics Canada 1997) Yet about half the people living on Canadian farms are women. Information collected via interviews demonstrates that the majority of those women play a definite role in the physical labour or business operations of their farms, and many play a very substantial role. (National Farmers Union 1982; 2002) The balance of farm/nonfarm labour is changing, however, as the decline in farm profits makes nonfarm income an absolute necessity for more and more farm families. Many of these families, exhausted by the struggle of each adult member to balance two separate professional lives with family needs, finally leave farming altogether.

A Farm Woman's Life in Canada

The language of the Canadian government around these changes in Canadian farming are often disturbing. Statis-

Women play a direct role in the production of over 50 per cent of the world's food, and in many developing countries they are responsible for up to 80 per cent of it.

tics Canada (2002) recognizes that the loss of numbers in farming are connected to the fact that "Farm profits have not risen since 1996," and that

net farm income was \$2.6 billion in 2000 (adjusted for inflation), about the same as in the previous three years and only a fraction of the \$11.1-billion high reached in 1975.

"If the mother's been off working in Yorkton or someplace all week, all night, or day, she's got to come home, cool a meal and then put the kids in the car and drive another 30 miles."

Earlier in the same article, however, the writer credits a major reason for the shift to be that "Off-farm job opportunities for farmers appear to have improved dramatically," specifically in transportation, manufacturing, trade, health care and social assistance, and education, "the main industries in which farm operators and their spouses can apply their skills." Farm family members see these nonfarm jobs not as opportunities, but as exhausting necessities. Job-seeking family members are required to travel further and further from the farm to find these "opportunities" which will feed the family not just because they

want to, but because they fear they may never again receive a grain cheque that will do more than pay the production bill. A spouse who is not working off-farm is left with an extra load of farm work. Nikki Gerrard and Gwen Russell quoted one interview subject thus:

It is stressful driving back and forth two and a half hours every weekend [from her off-farm employment to her farm], keeping a house there and keeping a house here...that's a lot of added stress. It's also expensive, I would say it definitely affected my health. (Gerrard, Russell and Saskatchewan Women's Agricultural Network 3-4)

The strain on families, combined with the depopulation of rural areas, also eats away at essential community support. Another woman reflected,

Many activities revolved around the [formerly local] school. Communities can't survive if people are going somewhere else. If the mother's been off working in Yorkton or someplace all week, all night, or day, she's got to come home, cool a meal and then put the kids in the car and drive another 30 miles. It's just asking too much of people. (qtd. in Gerrard *et al.* 4)

As infrastructure erodes, women in particular are also faced with increases in other kinds of work: "I have a

mother who's 84 and she's ill, and then a farm out here, and this job in the city. Life can be overwhelming at times" (qtd. in Gerrard *et al.* 5).

The themes common in Gerrard *et al.*'s work reiterate those uncovered in a series of workshops conducted by Saskatchewan Women's Institutes (Hiebert Group). Over and over again, the organizers found women reporting constant and growing economic and financial pressures with increased nonfarm work as a result; increased workloads for a shrinking pool of community volunteers; lack of local access to health and other necessary services, with women picking up the burden; added driving challenges and risks during the winter to get access to services and employment; and all of these stresses contributing to the cumulative effect on women of increased stress, tension, fatigue and illness, "particularly for women with multiple roles of: parent, employee, work on farm or family business, caregiver (child and elder), cook, driver, volunteer, etc." (Hiebert Group 13).

Farm Women in the Caribbean and Latin America

Via Campesina is a global movement of organizations representing family farms, farm workers, landless peasants, rural women's groups and indigenous peoples worldwide. Established in 1992 in response to the increasing power of neoliberal philosophy and corporate interests in global food and trade policy, Via Campesina is the only international farm organization to guarantee a place of equality for women in its organizational structures, and the only one dedicated to incorporating gender analysis at every level of its policy analysis and advocacy work.

As an important part of its early policy development work, Via Campesina and its participants and partner organizations in the western hemisphere organized women's workshops in South America, Central America, and the Eastern Caribbean to give women an opportunity to examine their situations, identify the roots of the inequalities they experience, and ensure that their input would be incorporated into the policy work of their home organizations and of Via Campesina as a whole. Coupled to similar gender analysis work done by Via Campesina organizations elsewhere in the world, including the NFU in Canada, a picture of farming women's lives emerged which differed in detail from region to region, but which was startlingly similar in terms of its roots and total effects.

In the Caribbean, women of the Windward Islands Farmers Association (WINFA) identified the loss of preferred status for European markets under a 1997 WTO ruling as a direct cause of the worsening economic status of the women who do the majority of Windward Islands farming. Under the WTO ruling, European countries were no longer able to favour family-raised Caribbean bananas over cheaper Central American products produced by multinationals. These include such solid corporate citizens as Chiquita which exploited its plantation workers,

which engage in environmentally dangerous practices of chemical overuse and monoculture cropping, and which egged the United States into putting forward the trade action against the small and poor Caribbean nations. (WINFA) The women of WINFA identified the resulting fall in banana prices as contributing directly and indirectly to loss of access to food; health problems; and land not being actively farmed as women became unable to purchase seed and other tools of production. A large percentage of households in the eastern Caribbean, including agricultural households, are headed by women who are their families' only security; hence the range of poverty-related problems associated with the collapse of banana prices hit women particularly hard. Some specific negative effects of the WTO ruling on women who farm on St. Vincent include:

Less money is being circulated in rural areas. Women in agriculture work the hardest, the most hours ... they are looked upon as poorest.

There is less return for labour; prices are lower due to competition. This forces women to reduce their quality of life.

There is more pressure, frustration and stress due to low return on banana prices, thus more domestic violence, child abuse and incest. (WINFA 15)

At the same time, under WTO rules, Caribbean governments are not able to provide much in the way of cash and infrastructure assistance to help Caribbean families move to more diversified farm production. Farm women are encouraged to sell their produce in the informal economy and form a substantial percentage of food sellers in the informal economy, but cheap WTO-promoted food imports from outside of the Caribbean provide stiff competition for the money of the few customers who have cash adequate to their needs. In addition, the growing prevalence of supermarket chains has made it difficult even to find local foods for sale in urban areas. Rather than increasing the participation of farm families in the cash economy of the region, so-called liberal trade has made such participation even more difficult. Instead of improving food security at the household level, liberal trade has increased the problem of malnutrition.

The FTAA negotiations held in Quebec in April, 2001 demonstrated that a number of the Windward Islands governments understood the danger of further liberalization of trade for their people. During the Agricultural People's Forum organized by the National Farmers Union as part of the People's Summit in Québec. A citizen of the Windward Islands nation St. Vincent and the Grenadines was able to demonstrate this during a presentation made to the Agricultural Forum which the National Farmers Union organized as part of the Québec People's Summit. Renwick Rose of WINFA was able to report that his own prime minister had expressed strong

reservations to the other national leaders at the official summit, and other Eastern Caribbean leaders had supported the Vincentian stance. Most other parts of the Caribbean and throughout Latin America, however, countries have been implementing development projects based entirely on the logic of the neoliberal model.

At the First Latin American Assembly of Rural Women held in Brasilia in 1997, women representing organizations in Via Campesina and its sister movement, the Coordinadora Latinoamericana de las Organizaciones Campesinas (CLOC), found that "the economic and social effects [of these projects] are the deepening of misery, hunger and social exclusion," and that "rural women are most affected" (CLOC 12). Concentration of land in the hands of a few has always been a problem in post-Columbian Latin America, but as trade-inspired structural adjustment programs have stripped away mechanisms for community land ownership and counteracted progressive land reform programs, concentration of land ownership has become even more of a threat to rural families and has made food security virtually impossible.

In Paraguay, for instance, 351 haciendas own 41 per cent of the arable land, and 95 per cent of this good farmland is uncultivated while 350,000 peasant households—especially households headed by women—go hungry because of lack of access to land. In Columbia 250,000 families have no land, and in most other Latin American countries the problem is similar. Women are hit doubly hard because the most common response of Latin American men to dispossession is to go away to find work. Women are left on their own to scabble a living for their children however they can, through casual agricultural labour, handicrafts, or other activities in the highly insecure informal economy. Families that do have access to typically tiny plots of land are often forced to abandon the land because they cannot get access to tools and seed, because they borrowed inputs from suppliers who charged exorbitant prices and interest, because they cannot get their title recognized, or because their richer neighbours have employees with guns.

Meanwhile, the growth of corporatized agriculture for the export market has created paid employment for many Latin American women, and governments claim that this is adequate justification for participation in neoliberal trade agreements. As noted by Via Campesina and the CLOC, however, "this work is characterized by instability, precariousness, informality and low salaries. If globalization has indeed generated more jobs for women, they aren't very good ones" (CLOC 22).

"Women in agriculture work the hardest, the most hours ... they are looked upon as poorest. This forces women to reduce their quality of life."

These jobs have been generated at the cost of women's former roles in subsistence agriculture which actually provided better assurance of household food security in many communities. In fact, overall food production in the world's least developed countries has actually shrunk since the liberalization process started in the early 1980s (Bread for the World Institute).

We find, therefore, that trade liberalization has had very negative effects on the lives of farm women and their families throughout the western hemisphere. The children of Canadian farm women are unlikely to starve as do those of their sisters in the south. However, women of the land throughout the hemisphere share the experience of drastically increased workloads on the farm, off the farm, and in the family as each growing season provides less of what the family needs to survive and stay on the land.

The essential problem with the neoliberal model of agricultural production and trade lies in its failure to respect the fact that economies are supposed to serve people, not people economies. The governments of the world have allowed primacy to an economic model that fails to take the actual needs of people into account and that measures wealth in terms of dollars instead of in quality of human life. Women are generally responsible for guaranteeing the necessities of life to all family members and are much more likely to be left with sole responsibility for the family than are men (WINFA; Bread for the World). Trade Agreements that suck resources out of the community and into corporate pockets therefore have stronger negative effects on the average woman's life than on the average man's. Since farm people have been almost universally impoverished by neoliberal trade policies, farming women naturally carry a double load of disadvantage in the current economy.

What Needs to Change?

Of course, a major need of women around the world is for men to carry a fairer share of the responsibility for the family's well-being. In Latin America, in the eastern Caribbean, and in Canada, women in each of the workshops and studies cited above have reported far too large a reproductive and productive workload that becomes even larger whenever the family is under economic stress. However, regardless of gender inequalities in distribution of work and responsibility, the economic system should not be placing so much stress on the families that produce the world's most important product, food. Food is not just another marketable commodity. It is a necessity of life, and it is a necessity that is too often denied to the most vulnerable of the world's peoples. The people who produce food have too little control over their means of production and over the price they can receive, and are being deprived of fair prices for their labour even now, when world food grain stocks are among the lowest in 25 years and grocery store prices are steadily rising (Qualman).

At the very least, trade agreements cannot be permitted to limit a country's right to sovereignty over food production and distribution, or over the means of production. Changes in land tenure should serve to improve the security of peasant families and should also ensure that the women who farm are actually in control of their own land. Governments should promote low-input forms of farming that prevent farm families from falling under the control of companies that provide inputs, and pricing should be monitored so that farmers are not paying unfairly high amounts for inputs and receiving unfairly low returns for the food they grow, and so that low-income people are paying a fair price for the food they eat to farmers, instead of enriching highly profitable corporations. This means that farm and urban people need to communicate directly, instead of through multiple layers of profit-taking traders and processors.

The women of WINFA had very specific recommendations, some of which have been successfully implemented in the past three years:

- Form groups and work together to market the produce.
- Get involved in fair trade in order to eliminate the middleman.
- Local and national farmers organizations network with international farm organizations to promote trade policy changes and for mutual support. (9)

The next recommendations by the WINFA women, while equally essential, are harder to implement because they require government cooperation, and too many governments are bedazzled by neoliberal promises:

- When governments make policies, farmers, including women farmers, should be integrated as an effective part of the negotiating team.
- Promote fair trade.
- Lobby on our behalf (9)

Via Campesina advocates taking agriculture completely out of the WTO, NAFTA, and other agreements, and there are some very good reasons for this stance. Not only do the agriculture-related provisions now in the WTO serve to impoverish farmers, but it ignores the status of food as a human right under the terms of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Many western nations, notably but not only the United States, have chosen to ignore that part of the Declaration, but most have agreed that women's rights are human rights, and women's rights are inextricably linked to the right to sustenance because women are responsible for making sure that everyone is fed.

Neoliberal trade agreements interfere with socially just forms of agrarian reform and access to land, and hence with the right of women to gain land title, to carry out their traditional responsibilities to the environmental

health of the land, and to speak in their own right when agreements are being negotiated. Neoliberal trade agreements limit the right of farmers to trade cooperatively, and prevent governments from passing legislation in support of collective ways of organizing farm production and trade. Since cooperation is the farm community's only effective defence against excessive profiteering by the handful of companies that dominate agricultural trade, any agreement that discourages collective organization is bad for farm families and their communities. Furthermore, neoliberal trade agreements prevent governments from supporting agriculture for local consumption. This forces communities to become dependent on food from outside, regardless of whether the community is capable of producing its own food and regardless of the effect that reductions or reduced variety in local food production might have on the overall well-being of that community. This is a terribly dangerous limitation, one which has caused crises in the food security of communities throughout the "developing" world.

Here in Canada, we need to change our whole approach to agriculture policy, and we need to do much more to ensure that the role of women and youth on the farm is understood and respected. Above all, we need to develop policy that is not driven solely by lust for more trade, because increasing trade in no way guarantees just distribution of wealth derived from the real value of farm labour. Perhaps more importantly, the single-minded trade focus that dominates policy has removed resources from every other aspect of human life and development. The proper duty of government is to legislate, regulate, and enforce regulations in the interests of the citizens of the country, not to augment corporate profits. In the long term, the interests of citizens require policy that is holistic rather than narrow in focus. Policy needs to take into account the interactions between all aspects of human life: not only monetary aspects, but more importantly the need for egalitarian relationships within the family and community; the need to meet all citizens' physical, emotional, and self-actualization needs; and not least, the need for a healthy and sustainable environment.

We need to take agriculture out of the WTO, and we need to replace it with a clause giving nations the express right to legislate in support of locally-based food security—that is, to sovereignty over their domestic food production, supply, marketing, distribution, and environmental protection mechanisms. We also need to recognize that food security is ultimately the responsibility of women, and to give women the rights, resources and support they need to fulfil that responsibility to the benefit of all. We cannot do this within the boundaries of a neoliberal economic model. We need to replace this greed-based model that benefits only a few with a model of sustainable food production based on concepts of social justice and genuine participatory democracy. Only then will most women of the land be able to live up to

their potential, and enable their children to do the same.

Shannon Storey is the Women's President of Canada's National Farmers Union (NFU) and chair of the NFU's International Program Committee. A farmer since her marriage in 1990, she has worked on issues of gender equality, international education and international cooperation for the NFU in various capacities since 1991. Her non-farm employment is as an instructor and academic advisor at the University of Saskatchewan. Because of the demands of their nonfarm jobs, she and her husband are living in Saskatoon with their two children.

References

- Bread for the World Institute. *The Changing Politics of Hunger: Hunger 1999*. Silver Spring, Maryland: Bread for the World Institute, 1998.
- Coordinadora Latinoamericana de las Organizaciones Campesinas (CLOC) and Operational Secretariat of the CLOC. "First Latin American Assembly of Rural Women." Sao Paulo, Brasil: Operational Secretariat of the CLOR, 1998.
- Gerrard, Nikki, Russell, Gwen and Saskatchewan Women's Agricultural Network. "An Exploration of Health-Related Impacts of the Erosion of Agriculturally Focused Support Programs for Farm Women in Saskatchewan." Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Women's Agricultural Network, 2000.
- Hiebert Group. "Report on Balancing Work and Family Focus Groups." Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Women's Institutes, 1999.
- National Farmers Union. *Employment Practices of Farm Women*. Saskatoon: National Farmers Union, 1982.
- National Farmers Union and Centre for Rural Studies and Enrichment. "Employment Practices of Farm Families 2001-2002: Initial Qualitative Data." Saskatoon, 2002.
- National Farmers Union (NFU) Women's Radio Collective. "Farm Women's Work and the Market Economy." Audiocassette. Saskatoon: National Farmers Union, 1993.
- Qualman, Darrin. "The Farm Crisis and Corporate Power." Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2001.
- Statistics Canada. "Profile of Canadian Farm Operators, 1996." Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Agriculture Division, 1997.
- Statistics Canada. "Farmers leaving the field." *The Daily Friday*, February 22, 2002.
- Windward Islands Farmers Association (WINFA). "Caribbean Farmers Responding to the Challenges of the New Millennium." Kingstown, St. Vincent and the Grenadines: Windward Islands Farmers Association, 1999.