

## **Nothing About Us Without Us - Australian Women in Agriculture: a model for empowering agricultural women through building capacity, bringing voice and increasing production.**

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*“The problem as I see it is this. A great leader comes along once in a lifetime. A great problem, three times a week.”* The solution, as I see it, is for women to be empowered to take on leadership roles in their own lives, communities and agricultural industries. This paper outlines the key lessons from the experience of leadership development and creating a model for a national NGO for women in agriculture. It is based around the experience of Australian Women in Agriculture and the associated growth of industry specific women’s groups.

At the fourth international conference of women in agriculture held in Durban, South Africa, the motto “Nothing about us, without us!” became the cry of the participants. It reflects the deep yearning for women’s voices to be heard in every place where decisions are made which impact on their lives, their families and their livelihood. It reflects women’s longing to be the authors of their own destiny. This significance of this cry is reflected in research which shows that by the reallocating of resources within the household from men to women, output can be increased by as much as 6%<sup>2</sup>. Organisations such as Australian Women in Agriculture and PNG Women in Agricultural Development Foundation (PNGWiAgDF) provide a mechanism for women to use their voices, to be involved in decision making, for their productive work to be acknowledged and to enable them to become powerful agents for change.

Australian Women in Agriculture was formed in 1993. It is a national organisation of women who have an interest in agriculture. Members include farmers, journalists, researchers, politicians, communicators, politicians, bureaucrats, teachers, scientists. The aim is to raise the profile of women within the largely male dominated agriculture industries and to gain for women and their interests, a place at the tables where agricultural decisions are made.

In Australia in the 1990s, there were very few women in public roles within agriculture. Dempsey (1992)<sup>3</sup> argues that agriculture was seen as men’s work. This was a matter of perception, as women were and, are active in all parts of agriculture. Research undertaken by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (1998)<sup>4</sup> and made public in the Missed Opportunities Report quantified their economic activity.

*“Adding together the value of farm women’s on-farm contribution, their off-farm wage income and the value of household, volunteer and community work, women contribute 48% of total real farm income. This contribution was worth almost \$14 billion in 1995-96; \$4 billion in on-farm work, \$1 billion in off-farm work, over \$8 billion in household work and almost \$0.5 billion in volunteer and community work”*

The problem, as explained by Williams(1992)<sup>5</sup> was that women’s unique contribution to Australian agriculture, while real enough, was invisible to policy makers, researchers and often invisible to the women themselves. Women in agriculture would comment that “I don’t work” or alternatively

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<sup>1</sup> Cathy was made a life member of AWiA in 2008. Details about the organisation can be found at: <http://www.awia.org.au>

<sup>2</sup> Goldstein, M 2012 Gender Practice Leader - The World Bank, presentation at the GCWA New Delhi

<sup>3</sup> Dempsey, K., 1992. *A Man’s Town – Inequality between women and men in rural Australia.*

<sup>4</sup> Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation 1998 Missed Opportunities Vol 2, p 53

<sup>5</sup> Williams, J., 1992. *The invisible farmer : a summary report on Australian farm women*

identify themselves as a “just a farmer’s wife” and on the rare occasion, usually reserved for widows or single women as a “woman” farmer.

The problem facing Australian Women in Agriculture wasn’t only one of invisibility. It was also necessary to make the results of agricultural research relevant to women, to ensure the benefits of research reached women and that productivity increases flowed to women. This was not just a matter of extension or networks, it goes to the heart of development: the power to set the agenda, the ability to influence, to choose the operating environment and the resources needed to implement research.

To address this invisibility, to gain recognition, give voice to their interests and to create spaces for women to come together and network, Australian Women in Agriculture acted in a number of ways:

- Members committed to taking on a leadership role.
- They formed a national, member based organization.
- They started collecting data, counting, monitoring and reporting.
- Organised the inaugural international conference of women in agriculture in Melbourne, Australia in 1994.
- Organised and supported local, regional, state and national gatherings and forums for women to meet, discuss, network, organize and influence.
- Arranged lobbying activities, visits to the capitals, parliaments and bureaucracies with state and national politicians as well as agricultural and farming leaders.
- Advocated on behalf of agricultural and farming women, families, children and communities.
- Supported programs that gave recognition and financial support to women in agriculture.
- Partnered in research projects such as the RIRDC report on women’s contribution to the agricultural economy, university research programs and Government Departments’ policy initiatives.
- Delivered capacity building programs for members and colleagues with a focus on leadership development.
- Developed women friendly communication channels including: regular magazine The Buzz, on line email groups, web pages, twitter and face book pages.
- Arranged international exchange programs and supported the International Congresses of Women in Agriculture in Washington 1998, Madrid 2002 and Durban 2007.

**What is it about the activities of a national organization of women in agriculture that empowers women and enables change?**

Based on the experience of Australian Women in Agriculture, there are a number of key factors:

- Becoming visible as women in agriculture,
- Collecting and using data,
- Recognition and acknowledgement,
- Lobbying and advocacy,
- Creating publicity and opportunities for women’s voice to be heard,
- Communication systems for women,
- Participation and representation – being ‘at the table’,
- Partnerships,
- Women’s Gatherings,
- Commitment to an national agenda
- Sharing the learning

A brief note on some of these success factors:

## **Becoming visible as women in agriculture**

Women need to see, know and title themselves as women, as farmers, as agriculturalists. In the first instance we need to become visible to ourselves. In Australia we run workshops helping women identify their many roles, to recognize the complexity of the roles they play, the skills they have and their economic contribution to the family, business, community and industry. In our workshops we role play and practice introducing ourselves: *"I am a farmer"* *"I am the managing director of a farming business"* *"As well as managing the family, my community work and looking after my husband, I run a small/productive/profitable business marketing fresh vegetables"* *"As a women in agriculture I produce flowers for the local tourist industry"*. *"I am a successful agricultural business woman"*

For many women this is challenging. Their perception is that it is their husbands, fathers, or brothers who are 'the farmers'. They see themselves as the helpers, the farmer's wife/daughter, sister. What we have learnt is that it's not a competition. In agriculture, there are many players, many roles, all skills are needed and there is room for everyone. It's not a matter of making men less, rather here is an opportunity to make women more. When all the members of the business are "visible" and involved in decision making, production increases, and when women name themselves as farmers or agriculturalists they are much more likely to be included at the table. <sup>6</sup>

## **Collecting data**

For Australian Women in Agriculture collecting data about women's work was a priority. Marilyn Waring<sup>7</sup> in her ground breaking analysis of the international accounting system, outlines many opportunities where women's work, especially the work of rural women needs to be counted. On her advice, Australian Women in Agriculture joined with other women's groups to lobby successfully for the unpaid work of women to be included in the national census. As well as the Missed Opportunities Report (1998), in 1998 over 100 Government, industry and community organisations endorsed "A Vision for Change: National Plan for Women in Agriculture and Resource Management."(1998)<sup>8</sup> and the Australian Government committed to report annually on progress to monitor change towards the aims and objectives of the national plan. Reliable, accurate data helps make for good policy particularly when it is set against clear indicators, regular evaluation and consistent reporting.

## **Recognition and acknowledgement: Award programs**

Another important tool used by members of Australian Women in Agriculture to gain visibility, recognition and acknowledgement was through the ABC Rural Women of the Year awards. Now known as the RIRDC Rural Woman of the Year<sup>9</sup> these awards continue to grow in popularity and impact. The nomination process encourages women to detail their contribution, ambitions and successes in agriculture. The interview processes brings together diverse agencies and sponsors who need to grasp what it is that defines an 'award winning woman in agriculture'. And no expense is spared on the actual award night: Lovely venues, frequently at the national capital, delicious food, high profile presenters, national media and financial sponsors, agricultural women and their partners in all their finery. These events are followed by extensive publicity on radio, magazines and rural newspapers. With the confidence and networks gained through the award, many of the winners become industry leaders and there is a significant change in the public's view and knowledge of a what it takes to be a "woman in agriculture. "

## **Lobbying and advocacy**

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<sup>6</sup> African experience

<sup>7</sup> Waring, M., 1988 *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*. Allen & Unwin/Port Nicholson Press

<sup>8</sup> Department of Agriculture, 1998 Fisheries and Forestry (AFFA) *A Vision for Change: National Plan for Women in Agriculture and Resource Management*. Commonwealth of Australia

<sup>9</sup> RIRDC rural women of the year award; <http://www.ruralwomensaward.gov.au/>

With accurate data, confidence, sound knowledge of issues and surrounded by a network of 'good women' and a commitment to be a public voice for women, Australian Women in Agriculture have taken on the challenge to address rural inequalities. One particularly effective activity is the annual lobbying and advocacy trip to the nation's capital. The Canberra trip focuses on meetings with politicians, bureaucrats, representatives from farmer organisations, academics and sponsors. Briefing papers enable members' issues to be addressed. Social functions build relationships and understanding. For those in power the opportunity to connect with grass roots women is always appreciated. A key lobbying focus has been on the appointment of women to agriculture advisory and regulatory bodies. Due largely to the work of Australian Women in Agriculture, the representation of women on boards has grown from 9% in 2005 to 19% in 2010.<sup>10</sup>

### **Publicity & Communication**

Australian Women in Agriculture keep in touch with mainstream media and members via their newsletter *The Buzz*, the world wide web, twitter and facebook. As well as using the media to promote individual women in agriculture, and supporting women to take on leadership positions, Australian Women in Agriculture has taken an active role in providing feedback to the agricultural sector where there is blatant sexism. One particular instance involved an agricultural calendar. Following letters by Australian Women in Agriculture to management and a threat to boycott the business, the offending item was withdrawn from circulation.

### **Participation and representation – being at the table**

Irish women in agriculture nominated the major barriers to more women being at the table as the 4 c's of culture, cost, confidence and children. In 2005, as a result of lobbying from rural women's groups, the Australian government conducted an enquiry into women's representation on regional and rural bodies of influence. The report "At the Table" (2006)<sup>11</sup> documented the gender composition of

- Agricultural commodity councils: females 9%
- Rural industry research and development corporations: females 16%
- Rural representative bodies: females 13%
- Publically listed agricultural companies: females 7%
- Catchment management authorities: females 26%
- Mayors and Presidents of local government authorities: female 17%

While there have been some changes since this publication, there is still much work to do in this area.

### **Partnerships**

There are many advantages of doing things in partnership: it shares the load, the resources and learning is spread across a wider network, it can be more fun and sometimes easier. Australian Women in Agriculture collaborates with public (government), private, not for profit, community and any other agencies with whom we can find common ground. To ensure women's voices inform policy, we have worked with government departments to set up rural women's units within bureaucracies. To ensure that women are actively engaged in agricultural research, we have partnered with research organisations and institutions. To ensure that gender in agriculture is covered in curriculum we have partnered with agricultural learning institutions and universities. To ensure that professional women in agriculture have equality of opportunity, access to promotion and sustainable career paths we have partnered with Departments of Agriculture and Primary Industries. To raise the profile and increase coverage of women in agriculture we have partnered with media organisations. An example of a very successful media partnerships resulted in a national farmer's

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<sup>10</sup> Australian Government, 2011, *Gender Balance on Australian Government Boards Report 2010-11*.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Transport and Regional Services. 2006 "At the Table" The report of the enquiry into women's representation on regional and rural bodies of influence. P 6

magazine running a segment, which profiled the top 100 women in agriculture. Many of these partners are also corporate members of Australian Women in Agriculture and their significant membership contributions help to support the administration and work of the organisation

### **Gatherings of women**

Part of the success of the movement around Australian agricultural women has been our ability to create opportunities for women to gather in local, warm, women friendly, environments. At these events, women get to know each other, share stories, learn, plot and plan and become friends. In Australia these events are mostly known as 'gatherings'. We have gathering of women on farms, of women in dry times, whenever we feel the urge to celebrate our achievements. Food is a key ingredient. Venue and timing are important and an agenda that gives time for women to talk to each other about things that are important to them.

### **Commitment to a national agenda**

Working with the support of the Commonwealth Government's Rural Women's Unit, organisations such as Australian Women in Agriculture have been able to influence a national agenda for rural women in Australia<sup>12</sup>. In 1995 and 1996 a number of national forums were held and commitments made to a national plan with the Vision: *The National Plan's vision for change is to achieve profitable and innovative agricultural industries and sustainable resource management and vibrant rural communities by realizing the full potential of women*". There were five areas for action: structure and strategic support, skills, design and delivery of services, programs and policies, communication and research and data collection. Importantly resources were allocated and monitoring systems enacted. As part of the negotiations leading up to these forums, lasting relationships were built and respect established across all sectors of agriculture. These relationships have helped consolidate the leadership role played by women in agriculture.

### **Sharing the learning**

Parallel with the work of Australian Women in Agriculture, specific women's groups have been also been established in key agricultural industries. Largely financed by the national research and development corporations, these "women in" dairy, horticulture, sugar<sup>13</sup>, grains<sup>14</sup>, fishing and forestry groups exert considerable influence within their industries. Typically these groups begin with a stock take of women's participation within the industry. This is followed by the development of a strategy to increase the participation of women and the formation of women's groups to exchange information, undertake extension activities related to industry research, leadership development, networking and representation.

International connections between members of Australian Women in Agriculture and women in other countries have also flourished. Special relationships now exist with women in agriculture groups in Ireland, India, USA and PNG.

In 2007, the Papua New Guinea (PNG) women decided to form a national organisation: PNG Women in Agricultural Development Foundation (PNGWiAgDF). Working closely with the National Agricultural Research Institute (NARI) they have developed a strategic plan, time lines and budgets.<sup>15</sup> To date, projects have focus on capacity building in the floricultural and horticultural industries as well as building the business acumen of women. In a country where women produce over 85% of food, PNG women have potentially a major role to play in setting agendas for agricultural policy, extension and research.

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<sup>12</sup> DPIE, 1996. A report from a National Rural Women's Stakeholders meeting, Canberra; A Vision for Change – National Plan for Women in Agriculture and Resource Management

<sup>13</sup> McGowan, C., 2007 CANEGROWERS Strategy for Women and teams. SRDC Brisbane Australia:

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton, P., 2008. The value the Partners in Grain program is delivering to rural women and the grains industry. Thesis CSU Wagga Wagga NSW

<sup>15</sup> PNG WiAgDF strategic plan 2010: see [www.cathymcgowan.com](http://www.cathymcgowan.com) - projects PNG

There is considerable communication between members of Australian Women in Agriculture and PNGWiAgDF. Members have visited PNG in a voluntary capacity to assist with training, consulting with members and developing the strategic plan. PNG women have visited Australia for annual general meetings of Australian Women in Agriculture, lobbying activities, training and friendship events. "We are friends!"

Members of PNG WiAgDF have supported the formation of the NGO in the Solomon Islands "Solomon Islands Women in Agriculture", and are planning a network in the Pacific of women involved in agriculture. There is strong evidence to believe that this model of national, member based, organizations of women in agriculture is transferable.

#### **Call to Action: What needs to be done**

- ✓ Commitment by international agricultural research organisations to including women, from all sectors of agriculture, at decision making tables.
- ✓ Support by donors and international agencies in the development of national organisations of women in agriculture.
- ✓ An international research agenda on women in agriculture.
- ✓ Sharing best practice of working with, engaging with, communicating with, reporting to and improving the lives of women in agriculture.
- ✓ Creative partnerships between the public and private sectors.
- ✓ Making World Rural Women's Day October 15, a focus for action

#### **World Rural Women's Day October 15**

The first International Day of Rural Women was observed on 15 October 2008. This new international day, established by the General Assembly in its resolution 62/136 of 18 December 2007, recognizes "the critical role and contribution of rural women, including indigenous women, in enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating rural poverty." We know that women play a critical role in rural economies of developed and developing countries. They participate in crop production and livestock care, provide food, water and fuel for their families, and engage in off-farm activities to diversify their families' livelihoods. In addition, they carry out vital functions in caring for children, older persons and the sick.

The importance of this international day is that it provides a focus for action. Locally, nationally and internationally this day gives the impetus for doing things that enhance women's lives, for making statements and gaining publicity. Let's make October 15<sup>th</sup> our day for action.

In conclusion

At the Global Conference on Women in Agriculture held in New Delhi, Her Excellency Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil, President of India, emphasized the need to empower women with new knowledge and skills to bring women into the mainstream of agricultural development and reduce gender disparity. The formation of a multi-stakeholder Gender in Agriculture Partnership (GAP) which was launched at the Global Conference on Women in Agriculture and will report at the second Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development (GCARD2) to be held in Punta del Este, Uruguay in Oct 2012 give us hope that the cry of women in agriculture, "nothing about us, without us" has been heard and that a commitment has been given to support the formation of NGOs of women, at the international, national, regional and local levels.

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