

SUPPORTING OUR RURAL WOMEN

ARE CURRENT GROUPS, SERVICES AND INITIATIVES
APPROPRIATE TO TODAY'S FEMALE RURAL DEMOGRAPHIC?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rural women are moving their social space and networks online and increasingly seeking to work longer hours off farm, while the communities they live in continue to operate in the historical colonial space of a 'man's world'.

Survey results for this report portray farming Mums in particular, as largely feeling lonely and isolated and without support.

Social media has become their crutch - their shoulder to cry on and for some, their exclusive social forum with the outside world.

With 88 percent of the rural mothers in this report's survey working 21 hours or more and 26 percent working for over 40 hours a week, their usual social space within the rural community and, in particular, the school community had been vacated.

Traditional volunteering roles of these women within communities that are heavily reliant on the exploitation of that time, were not able to be met, leading to exclusion from important social peer groups.

Coupled with that was the immense exhaustion, stress, anxiety and pressure these women reported as suffering due to hectic timetables and pressure to take children to a large number of extracurricular activities.

The rural school's role in escalating that pressure was evident, with many demanding volunteering from parents as Government funding has tightened. However, if that role was not fulfilled by a rural mother, she was in danger of being completely isolated from the community.

The majority of rural schools offer little to nothing in the way of after-school childcare despite evidence that many rural women were now earning off farm with many working Mums reporting feeling 'excluded' and 'ostracised' because many school events were held during working hours which they could not attend.

Many rural women have come from urban environments and may not have any experience of agricultural life. It is clear that educated career women outside of agriculture have limited options in using their skills in a farming context and risk limiting their personal growth.

Women spoken to for this report that categorized themselves as being 'happy' were utilising skills they had in a former career and were being paid for them. General farm manager from OB Group, Stu Taylor deliberately looks to use male employee's partner's skills in a way that benefits both parties. Recently this saw a female partner of a member of staff create a health and safety app for his farm that is now about to be rolled out nation-wide.

From this it is clear that farm owners and managers have a role to play in supporting rural women whether they be employees, partners of employees or partners and wives.

With the Government wanting to double primary industry export targets and wanting to encourage educated students into agriculture it is clear that the current 'wasteland' of knowledge among rural women who have had to stop their careers to live on farm has not been tapped into or acknowledged.

Finally, there has been very little research undertaken of today's rural women or the wider social environment she endeavours to live within. Without urgent research, and targeted initiatives rural women and their families are at risk of severe harm that could be felt for generations to come with a vast cost to society.

To that end the following recommendations are made:

- 1 Urgent in-depth research of rural women in New Zealand is needed.
- 2 Current rural women's groups need to engage empathetically across social media and educate themselves on the modern social space of rural women if they are to survive. To do that there needs to be better internet access across rural New Zealand as this is also the main way in which the modern rural woman socially engages with her peers. Without that connectivity she is at risk of further isolating and excluding herself from the wider rural community and that in turn could lead to deteriorating mental health.
- 3 While the social space of rural women has changed, the environmental space has not. Rural schools are at the forefront of communities and should reflect that modern social space, and seek to support it. Board of Trustees within these schools need to consider if they are currently supporting the changing environment of today's rural families or if they are condemning them.
- 4 Working women need more support in after school childcare. Until that is enacted it will be hard for rural women to continue careers and personal growth. It's a practical way of enabling social change, particularly as this report's survey shows many women are working substantial hours often to the point of exclusion in their community.
- 5 Transformative learning across rural New Zealand, for all rural women, not just those who have been marked out as leaders or professionals, would benefit the community and rural women's health. While there are many professional courses available to rural women in agri-careers there is no support available to the rural woman who does not have an agri-career and is not interested in attending agri-professional women's groups such as Dairy Women's Network, Women in Arable or Rural Women NZ.
- 6 Farm employers need to embrace the skillsets offered by females who may live on the farm because of their partner's career. They should seek to find ways to incorporate those skill-sets in a way that showcases the female's worth and remunerate financially.
- 7 Volunteer work is often considered mandatory in rural communities where volunteer workloads are high. However, it should not be considered a viable alternative to a women's previous career as that can prove exploitative and ultimately unfulfilling.
- 8 There is no data available to analyse mental health in our rural women. There needs to be an annual survey similar to 'rural business confidence' conducted by one over-arching organisation so that when a crisis like the dairy downturn occurs,

there is data available to lobby groups to ensure Government does not leave our rural women behind. We have no gauge as to how our rural women are coping in the current downturn and no knowledge of the crutches some of them may be turning too to cope i.e. alcohol and/or drugs.

- 9 Who is the voice for rural women? There seems to be confusion among women as to who is representing them. Rural women groups urgently need to co-ordinate and develop a collective strategy in today's environment.

INTRODUCTION



BACKGROUND

This report is grounded in the story of the little girl on the left of the above photo who is sitting on her father's knee.

This is also a story of how little has changed in rural New Zealand since this photo was taken in 1980.

On the surface this picture is of a happy normal middle to lower class white rural family from South Otago.

But below the surface there is the rural services agent Father who has suffered physical abuse from his adoptive parents, there is a Mother who is the product of an unhappy wartime marriage. Between the two of them they have a toxic marriage which results in physical abuse towards the isolated Mother and the children and a Father who is struggling to overcome his demons.

With no women's refuge, and the Mother's extended family living in the North Island there was no way out for her or those children and nowhere the Father could turn to in order to get help in the 'stoic rural man's world' he existed within.

This is also a story of how that little girl, and her three siblings lost their Father to suicide in the paddock beside their house when he was just 36 and the little girl was five.

It's the tale of how the rural farming community around them knew nothing of the abuse within that family, nor of how that Mother stayed in bed day after day and how the little girl became an expert at making school lunches and getting herself ready for school.

That little girl also became an expert at hiding the trauma she lived among, including the abusive but 'well respected' farmer stepfather from next door her Mother took up with. She never told of the fragility or suicide attempts of other siblings, nor of her own suffering.

She never said one word until she saw the same patterns repeating themselves among rural women today. And then she did something...

She spoke up.

TODAY

The characteristics, motivations and habits of rural women have significantly changed over the past century and continue to do so in today's challenging climate, as farming intensifies. (Allen, 2002)

Today's rural woman is often not born in the area she lives in, is not supported by family or friend networks and is often living in a transitional status within her community.

Unlike other periods of history, she will often be an equal in a farming situation, both practically and theoretically, while providing an important nurturing role to her immediate family.

Many young rural women come from advanced careers within urban environments and are trying to adapt their previous life to one that fits in with their partners farming aspirations and the needs of the wider rural community.

SUPPORTING OUR RURAL WOMEN – ARE CURRENT GROUPS, SERVICES AND INITIATIVES APPROPRIATE TO TODAY'S FEMALE RURAL DEMOGRAPHIC?

This report looks at the make-up of today's rural women, their social spaces and analyses current support and initiatives available to advance personal growth.

An online survey and interviews with many rural women and two rural school principals aims to provide a small but significant snapshot of the current environment they exist in.

APPROACH TO REPORT - METHOD

On preparing this report an online survey of 109 rural women was undertaken through the Farming Mums NZ Facebook Page, Young Rural Ladies Facebook Page and Dairy Women's Network Facebook pages. (Appendix One and Two)

Information was also gathered through various research papers in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom.

Interviews were undertaken with important rural women figures in New Zealand including Farming Mums NZ facilitator Chanelle O'Sullivan, Rural Women NZ President Wendy McGowan, Dairy Women's Network CEO Zelda de Villiers, the Mental Health Foundation and the Ministry of Health.

Previously the author has completed a series of features on issues among our rural women following the significant financial effects of the dairy downturn and interviewed a number of women from varying agricultural backgrounds.

THE RURAL WOMAN'S IDYLL? NEW ZEALAND AS A MAN'S WORLD

Literature here in New Zealand and in countries like Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada seek to explain the dominance of male culture in rural societies.

While the literature covers wider issues of rural women including physical health stature, this report will seek to explore the themes of New Zealand as a man's world, the cost of feelings of isolation and social exclusion, the effects of stress and anxiety, under-valuing of rural women and the concept of exploitation by means of voluntary work.

The literature investigated incorporates these themes in a number of ways but for the purpose of this report we will look only at what is relevant to the constraints on rural women in New Zealand today.

The idea of New Zealand being a man's world, with scant acknowledgement of a women's role from early European settlement, is supported widely by literature.

Our pastoral history is interwoven with the myth of masculinity - a "powerful legend of pioneering manhood" that Jock Phillips aptly describes in his 1987 book, *New Zealand, A Man's Country*.

Phillips goes on to say a New Zealand male was typically thought of as a "rugged practical bloke" that fixes anything. He is "strong and tough, keeps his emotions to himself and is usually scornful of women". While this has dissipated somewhat over time and much progress has been made it is useful to remind ourselves of the context on which rural society was formed.

Women do not feature prominently in this version of history, where, like many other 'settler' cultures such as Australia and Canada, New Zealand has historically 'identified itself with a model of tough, rural, "pioneering" white masculinity' (Bannister, 2005).

Bannister agrees with Phillips assessment, saying it is based on a puritan work ethic allied to an ethos of exclusive masculinity based on "mateship" - the male camaraderie of pioneers united by a common physical struggle against the elements, in war or sport, all cemented in the pub.

Both men and women have attested to the power of this archetype to Bannister.

And while, undoubtedly, much progress has been made across rural New Zealand towards women's emancipation from traditional and historical roles, there remains an impasse and exclusion among rural women, as has been highlighted by the survey undertaken for this paper.

This theme is highlighted in the important Australian paper 'The Social Spaces of Rural women' by Kerrie-Elizabeth Allen who asserts although there has been groundbreaking progress on opportunities and advances in rural women in Australia, there is still much within rural culture that has not changed 'as many women remain restricted by traditional, patriarchal attitudes'.

She cites research by Lawrence and Gray in 1998 that showed 40 percent of women were business partners in farms but only eight per cent occupied leadership positions within the rural industry.

Teather (1998) concurs, and says the intransigence of gender relations in rural Australia, New Zealand and Canada and patriarchal structure of the family farm had not changed.

Rural women fiercely defend their lifestyle, she added, despite its shortcomings, and colluded with the patriarchy to ensure its continuation.

The book "A History of New Zealand Women" by Barbara Brookes paints a vivid landscape in which the idea of New Zealand as a man's world is reinforced.

A clear example was the disdain New Zealand premier Robert Stout's wife, Anna experienced from friends and other women, when she declared herself to be a 'new woman' in 1895 because she believed women should have equal rights with men.

"New woman wish to have the right to be educated physically, mentally and morally, so as to be able to live their own lives and support themselves without the degrading necessity of accepting a home at some man's pleasure." ¹

Her stance reflected New Zealand's progressive nature when it came to women's rights, particularly after Governor, Lord Glasgow, signed a new Electoral Act into law in 1893 that enabled New Zealand to become the first self-governing country in the world to grant the right to vote to all adult women.

At the time this was a truly radical change in thinking with many other democracies not allowing women to vote till decades later.

But while a minority of women like Anna Stout were beginning to express some dissention around their traditional domestic roles, New Zealand was very much a male dominated and formed society according to Brookes.

This was shown to be true again when a Government committee inquiry into mental defectors and sexual offenders in 1952 reported 'it had rightly been decided that this should only be a "white man's country" but as completely British as possible.'²

Women as mothers, and household bound subservient wives were a large part of the British example immigrants sought to implement in their new country. Brookes uses a National Council of Women report to a local newspaper to highlight that subservience.

'Women from the very fact of their maternal functions' could either revive the race by good motherhood or add to its deterioration by bad motherhood according to teacher Isabel Howlett in report from the National Council of Women in the Auckland Star in 1913.³

By the Second World War, motherhood as the purpose of female existence was increasingly being contested by a new generation of women who had enjoyed independent working lives in expanding urban towns.

However, women's roles in the workforce were confined to culturally acceptable roles. Brookes notes that teachers, nurses and social workers were among suitable vocations.

"Domestic service remained a key occupation, but it was less attractive than work that offered shorter hours, more companionship and less constant surveillance".

Brookes goes on to say change was afoot in rural areas too with flocks of farm women, according to the New Zealand Dairy Exporter, producing the bulk of the country's eggs, but doing so at a financial loss.

The magazine went on to call for women instructors to advise women how to succeed in running a profitable poultry business, 'since success in keeping poultry mainly depends on attention to detail and real cleanliness, and in these matters women certainly have an advantage'.⁴

It added that the next sensible move would be to appoint women as dairy-testers. Such a job 'would be an excellent livelihood for country girls who otherwise would have to seek city occupations.'

Marriage could change a rural women's role according to literature of the time, and afford her respectability and an increasing commitment to voluntary work. Organisations such as Country Women's Institute played an important role in equipping the rural women with the social etiquette of being a farmer's wife.

'In the midst of family life, women knitted and sewed, sketched and gardened, combining pleasure with their daily routine tasks,' Brooke reports, with reading and writing also popular among married women.

Publications of that era reinforced the entrenched role of rural married women. The New Zealand Dairy Exporter produced a 'Farm Home Journal' where all manner of domestic duties were discussed and advised upon. In 1935 the New Zealand Woman's Weekly commented that a 'slovenly and untidy woman certainly is a grief to her husband but since the cause of it is sheer laziness, there is no cure for it.'⁵

The idea of work for most married women was unsupported by societal expectation.

An agony aunt column in the Woman's Weekly from the same era records a letter from a wife keen to supplement her husband's income but who had been told that a working wife 'breaks a man's morale and belittles him'.⁶

But for rural women life was about to change as the Second World War seconded ablest bodied young farming men, leaving a shortage of labour to work the farms. Around 2711 women in the Land Service helped maintain essential primary production during the war years and in doing so began to change the way in which women contributed to society.

By 1941 a National Service Department report by Government described women with husbands in the forces as redundant and demanded if they were not needed to look after husbands or children, they should be called upon to serve the country.⁷

The change was short lived however, with women expected to resume domestic chores and wifely duties when their husbands returned from war. The Women's Weekly ran a series of articles in late 1945 to help women adjust and advised them to 'self-abnegate'.⁸

For many women, putting aside their important working roles during the war was difficult and left them feeling unfulfilled.

American author Betty Friedan documented the tensions of middle class women in her book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 and controversially voiced the discontents of well educated women who felt trapped in the home and unable to use their talents to the full (Brookes).⁹

By 1966 20 percent of women were working outside the home, a seven percent increase in ten years and many were pushing for that to increase. In 1969 National Council of Women president Mrs L.W. Tiller had this to say about women.

“The accepted role of women has changed for a number of reasons. Women are better educated than they used to be. The intellectual pursuits that used to give satisfaction no longer seem enough for many women. Family planning has made it possible for people to limit their families. Labour-saving devices have cut down the time needed to do domestic jobs. People want more in a material sense, and so women who are in a two pay packet situation find too difficult to adjust to the one pay packet situation.”¹⁰

Brookes states the decade from 1967 to 1977 saw arguments everywhere on the role of women in New Zealand society. ‘When prominent psychiatrist Dr Fraser McDonald announced in 1968 that women were the Negroes of New Zealand society’, many women, like the 30 000 members of the Country Women’s Institute which upheld the role of women as homemakers and mothers of the citizens of the future, were baffled.’

By 1971 feminism with its new ideas on a women’s role was sprouting everywhere, especially following leading Australian second-wave feminist Germaine Greer’s visit to New Zealand. Her bestselling book *The Female Eunuch* called for revolution and rapidly disappeared from bookshops across the land. While here she told women houses had been developed to keep women off the streets when really ‘we ought to be out there in the streets’.

However, although much had changed, traditional attitudes still encroached on New Zealand women - as experienced by Anne Barry of Auckland, who by 1981 had spent two years battling to join the New Zealand Fire Service. Eventually, after much discrimination Barry was admitted to the service after the Human Rights Commission overturned their decision to decline her application.

Her admittance was met with anger particularly by the 600 strong South Island branch of the Fireman’s Union who had voted against admitting women.

“Women in the working environment can be very restricting to some men’s ability to express themselves. There is no doubt that a certain amount of sexual activity will take place, however much supervision is imposed...as those who have dealt with women will realise, they will be harder to discipline and cannot be handled in the normal way...We are going to have to cope with pregnancy, menstrual cycles and associated unpredictable behavior, menopause and associated depression and ill-health.”¹¹

A further example of entrenched views of New Zealand being a man’s world came with National Selwyn MP Ruth Richardson’s introduction to motherhood in 1982 while a serving member of parliament. Unused to working mothers, and mother with newborn babies’ parliamentarians offered little support.

“There were no facilities for breastfeeding parliamentarians, let alone tiny infants who need quiet sleeping conditions. To add insult to injury, Standing Orders forbade me to take Lucy into the voting lobbies if the vote clashed with breastfeeding time. She would have been categorized as a ‘stranger in the House’ and presumably evicted by the Sergeant at Arms had I pushed my luck.”¹²

According to Brookes by 1996 30 percent of women with an infant under one, and 50 percent of women with children aged one to four were in paid work and yet by 2005 the most common paid occupation for a woman was as a ‘service worker or sales assistant’ with old patterns of expectations regarding feminine service meaning those vocations remained the staple of unskilled women.

It is clear then that from colonial times as Phillips subscribed, there was a legend of ‘pioneering manhood’ as further evidenced by Bannister in the historical identification of New Zealand as a model of ‘tough rural masculinity’. That settler type mentality was not unique to New Zealand and existed in Australia and Canada as evidenced by Allen. Brookes too outlines the historical context of women in New Zealand and accounts for them once being described as the ‘Negroes’ of New Zealand society.

THE COST OF ISOLATION

Rural women as evidenced by this report’s survey, are isolated by distance, lack of social networks and time. The cost of this social isolation has been discussed in literature. York Cornwell and Waite (2009) agreed with this assertion, and said that previous research had identified a wide range of indicators of social isolation that posed health risks, including living alone, having a small social network, infrequent participation in social activities, and feelings of loneliness.

It’s important to note that the terms “loneliness” and “social isolation” are often used interchangeably (Bernard, 2013) when in fact they are two distinct concepts. People, she asserts, can be socially isolated without feeling lonely, or feel lonely amongst others. This was supported by this report’s survey respondents.

Bernard also reported loneliness in men was more often associated with the quality of their relationship with a spouse or partner, whereas for women, the absence of wider social networks was particularly important.

That idea is supported by a first-hand experience of a female settler travelling through rural Canterbury in the 1860s.

Sarah Courage wrote of feelings of isolation, but they were more than just a concern about the geographical location, and could be seen as an anxiety about being a lone woman among men without any peer social groups.

“I felt so terribly alone...the sort of feeling one would imagine of those who were transported for life. The sense of desolation was so great that tears rushed to my eyes.” (Brookes, 2016)

An Australian report completed in 2007 (Harvey) showed how Courage’s experience has not changed. The report found the rural context presented some unique constraints in seeking out others with whom to share intimacy.

“These included fear of rejection and ostracism for being different from the dominant rural culture, lack of privacy and confidentiality, lack of driving skills and public transport, and lack of informal opportunities to feel connected with others.”

It concluded the emotional distance from others was most keenly felt during times of crisis, ill health or changed family circumstances, such as following child birth. “These experiences were associated with a range of consequences, including feeling sad, psycho-social distress, and hospitalisation”.

Perhaps most critical was the finding that a sense of isolation persisted despite modern communications - something that was also evident in survey results for this report.

There have been many research papers conducted that outline mental and physical costs when a person feels isolated.

Individuals who lack social connections or report frequent feelings of loneliness tend to suffer higher rates of morbidity and mortality (Brummett et al. 2001; Seeman 2000; Uchino, Cacioppo, and Kiecolt-Glaser 1996) according to York Cornwell and Waites, as well as infection (Cohen et al. 1997; Pressman et al. 2005), depression (Heikkinen and Kauppinen 2004), and cognitive decline.

The pair concluded that social disconnectedness is associated with worse physical health, regardless of whether it prompts feelings of loneliness or a perceived lack of social support.

A more recent report from Bernard (2013) concurs with these findings and said loneliness and social isolation had a lasting effect on people’s health.

The physical, mental and emotional effects of loneliness was found by Bernard to have inevitable consequences on quality of life and the wider community.

Coupled with mental and physical health effects, for many, voicing their feelings of isolation in the rural community could be met by social exclusion as proven by comments from the survey conducted for this report.

Several women said they were considered to be a failure or not coping if they complained of feeling lonely or isolated from the community. This in part is because of the way in which a ‘powerful image’ (Teather, 1989) has been developed over time of a ‘lone individual or small farm family coping with fortitude in isolated backblocks. Those rural people are portrayed as being heroic, stoic and are celebrated in books and movies such as *The Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, which documented a singular isolated elder male and his connection with a young urban boy.

Hughes (1997) reported that single women may only be accepted within a rural community when she is married and has a family. So for those women who are in a relationship and are yet to have children, it raises questions as to how they fit among rural society.

And what happens to those 'non-conforming' rural females who work full time and don't participate in local school or community volunteering? What affect does their exclusion have on their mental health, their sense of belonging?

In conclusion research and literature has shown there are significant costs to social isolation in rural communities. From physical to mental health effects, that sense of being lonely or isolated can cause detrimental effects to rural women. Exclusion by being different is part of that detrimental effect and needs to be explored further.

CASE STUDY - FARMING MUMS NZ FACEBOOK POST

For a number of these women, social media has become their voice, their peer group and their community. The Farming Mums NZ Facebook page is evidence of that growth.

The 6000 strong social media group was created in 2013 by South Canterbury vet nurse Chanelle O'Sullivan when she took over a smaller Facebook page with around 600 'likes'. Chanelle changed the page to a group format, giving members the ability to post and comment freely.

The group now has more than 6,500 members and has doubled in the past year, with around 40-60 new members joining each week.

The group offers a support network, particularly for 20-30 year olds who have been career focused and then married or had a baby and suddenly find themselves living rurally.

"With their husband working a lot out on the farm the women could feel a little bit stuck at home. I was in the position of just having moved rurally after vet nursing and the group provided a lot of people in the same boat as myself."

Chanelle said while there had been a "much-needed" emphasis on men struggling with depression, she believed rural women had been forgotten.

She has been dealing with the stress women have been enduring since the downturn first-hand on the private section of the page where significant problems were being highlighted on a regular basis.

"Just this morning I had a woman whose husband had been hearing voices and was under the care of a psychiatric team and she wasn't sure who she could turn to. The fact that she had to come to an online forum to get help shows there should be more support."

While women might not commit suicide in the same numbers as men, Chanelle said many were still struggling, miserable, isolated and unhappy. She was discussing hiring a counsellor full-time because the need was so great, but was uncertain how to fund the service.

This social medium is offering a network to women and is increasingly a place where they turn to discuss problems and find solutions. Women said they felt they could say how they 'really felt' online without being judged, making it plausible that social networks could bring about social change within the community.

Evidence of how women are communicating issues via the page is shown below in a post from a rural Mum who was able to post anonymously.

"Can you please post anon. We just moved into a house and found out someone committed suicide in it years ago. I thought oh well that's sad but didn't feel anything bad about the house, which I usually do with things like this. That's all well and good but I swear I heard someone walking around the house after we went to bed, that didn't bother me as nothing bad happened. Since we moved in my partner is grumpy as hell and picking fights with me all the time, and on top of this yesterday for no reason and I hadn't been thinking about it, I thought to myself this house is going to break us up! I don't even know why I thought of it like that. And apparently it was a lady that shot herself after her husband cheated on her or something. Also just before we got here I snapped my partner out on dating websites talking to women saying that we were over and he was looking for a new relationship. I just need some advice on what I should do or whether it could be the house or something in the house making my partner like this." - May 29 2016

The page is also a vehicle for women supporting other women:

"After some advice. How would you approach a person who you think needs to see a Doctor? You are not close to this person, but have witnessed their moods from going from high to low and high to low and back again. This person has multiple marriage failures, relationship breakups with siblings and parents, she lashes out at her own children, and anyone she comes into contact with depending on what day it is etc. etc. One day the sun is out and life could not be better to the next day there is a big announcement on Facebook that she is in tears people are bastards then next day all is well again. You get the picture. Like I said I am not close to this person but get to witness this, should I just not say anything? Or if I do say something how can I put it nicely that I think maybe a Doctor's visit may help? Honestly this lady could really benefit from evening out with some medication. It is hard to watch her poor family are suffering. Unfortunately, her family suggesting something will be met with a big announcement that they are all bastards and C** and they can take a flying leap. But I was thinking if it came from someone not close to her she may listen? What do you think?" -May 29 2016

After monitoring this Facebook page for twelve months and talking to Chanelle O'Sullivan it has become apparent the 'one big happy family' view of rural community life Dempsey (1992) describes is a myth.

Domestic abuse, depression, loneliness, financial stress in the current farming downturn and feelings of inadequacy as a rural mother are all themes that appear on the page regularly. That these women feel only able to be honest about their problems in an online forum was evident in survey results.

Hey ladies, I was wondering ladies that have/ had young babies do or did you feel tearful everyday? My son is 4 months and have a 2yo and I honestly feel like crying everyday over many different things. Is this normal? I don't feel happy but then there will be a week where I feel happy then I'm back to feeling miserable. I love both my kids n have perfect bonds with both. What's wrong with me 😞😞
Help 😞

12 Comments

 Like

 Comment

4 hrs •  Animals & Pets Families
Our very much loved dog was hit by a car/ truck tonight and sadly had to be put to sleep. My hubby has lost his best mate and me and the kids a family member. I'm devastated, our poor loyal baby managed to drag herself up the long driveway, she almost made it to her bed. When we found her I sat beside her and she lay her head in my lap and right up to the end she kept looking at my hubby with nothing but loyalty in her eyes. How does a person live with themselves knowing they have hit something... See More

   69

23 Comments

 Like

 Comment

Relationships

How do I leave or what do I do. X amount of kids and one on the way. If nothing else hubby of 5 minutes man I love and whom I thought was my best friend is messaging other woman telling them they are super hot sexy mumsy and looking on dating sites

  3

14 Comments

 Like

 Comment

STRESS, ANXIETY, DEPRESSION AND THE RURAL MOTHER

With higher expectations than perhaps ever before, dual roles of motherhood, farming and sometimes off farm work, the rural women are susceptible to higher levels of stress and anxiety than perhaps any other time in history. When this report was written dramatically decreased dairy prices was financially restricting farm incomes severely - leading to increased stress and anxiety levels in rural women as they sought to continue their dual roles and offer moral support to partners.

An American study (The Rural Women's Work Group of the Rural Task Force of the American Psychological Association and the American Psychological Association's Committee on Rural Health, 1999) supports that rural women can suffer higher stress levels than urban counterparts and that can result in increased levels of depression.

The resulting report said other studies had pointed to additional factors associated with depression among rural women, including: the isolation associated with rural life which affects both social supports as well as access to mental health services; weather problems; the declining farm economy with resulting unpredictable and irregular income (Bushy, 1993); and the lack of social, educational, and child care resources.

Stressful life events that are unique to rural environments have been linked to feelings of depression and worthlessness in many rural communities in America. The report found that high levels of stress may be the result of limited access to the resources required to meet both personal and interpersonal needs (Wilkinson, 1984). According to the Surgeon General of the United States (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1999), rapid social change and widely experienced events such as the farm crisis of the 1980s which unleashed a period of severe economic hardship in many areas already beset by poverty, "adversely affected the mental health of the community".

Leipert (2005) had similar findings in Canada with rural women and reported a lack of public recognition, undervaluing of women and women's work in rural settings, social exclusion and stresses placed on resource-based economies, contributed to women's mental health issues.

Her report said despair, depression and psychological distress was becoming increasingly common for women in rural settings in Canada. Being undervalued could make rural women feel invisible and led to them taking on additional responsibilities both inside and outside of the home to address those feelings.

She found that by adding those responsibilities to their multiple family and community roles and commitments, rural women may overextend themselves and compromise their mental health in the process. This was certainly supported by comments from rural women in the survey results for this report.

The report found that rural expectations and community dynamics, norms and values could also contribute to mental health issues.

Western Australia research (Haslam-McKenzie, 1997) recorded similar concerns. Not enough time in the day, lack of government understanding of rural women's issues, males' attitudes towards women on farms and in rural business and in-laws and multi-generational family farm enterprises were the main issues of that era.

What is disturbing is that the same issues are being recorded eighteen years later, suggesting little in the way of social reform in rural communities in regard to the rural women that reside there.

However, a New Zealand's rural women's main issue or 'worries' has changed markedly from Ponter's 1998 survey of rural women where he found the greatest cause for worry was childcare services. This was in perhaps partly due to a severe downturn occurring at that time that saw a lot of women seek work off farm for the first time in their married life.

But he noted ominously that overall the picture of rural women was one of increasing anxiety and conflict within the home.

The issue of exhaustion with rural men in particular commenting on ever increasing hectic lifestyles, coupled with the pressure of 'complying' as one woman remarked, with the expectations of the rural district she lived in, needs to be investigated further as its existence is well documented and supported by literature in other countries.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND EXPLOITATION

Today's rural women may have changed somewhat from the traditional stereotypical one of decades' past, whose main role was confined to the household. The increase in educated females entering rural communities has meant that stereotype has changed significantly but as research supports, the rural community she lives in has not changed and in fact may be exploitative, particularly in the volunteering social space.

Allen (2002) supports that view and says that the 'one big happy family' view of rural community life may be exploitative, exclusive and marginalizing.

The report found that women who are 'different' because of culture, birthplace, sexuality, ideas and values are excluded because they are considered inappropriate in rural society.

That exclusion permits those who 'conform' to maintain and reshape value spaces within rural communities to meet their own needs.

Volunteering is a major part of that conformation. In fact, Beilin (1995) and Poiner (1990) argued that community demand's for women's time for volunteerism was exploitative and contributed to the ideology of male domination in rural areas because their work was largely unpaid and often largely unrecognized.

In 1997 women's volunteering work in rural Australia was thought to have been worth at least \$0.5 billion. Teather believed therein lied the double bind of 'women devoted to a rural way of

life, but unable to continue the volunteer input that it needs; and criticised by older women for failing to contribute as those older women did in former days’.

Although it could be argued this volunteering work leads to a sense of purpose among our rural women, other time pressures mean it could be viewed as an expectation of duty rather than fulfilling a need.

Allen (1998) found volunteerism as a vehicle for community acceptance was questionable particularly as it is through this activity that many women have gained entry to rural culture.

“Once again it can be seen that many dogmatic traditions reside within the idyllic view of community, traditions which are rigid and narrow-minded and which lead to exploitation and exclusion.”

While it cannot be denied that men have increased their level of volunteering since 1990, many of the women surveyed for this report still commented their volunteering was increasing their workload, and was expected to be undertaken from their peers, and was not ‘respected’ by urban counterparts or their partners.

Dempsey (1990) supports that view and found man’s superior power was related to their advantageous position in the market labour force, women’s economic dependence and a community belief system which stereotypes women as inferior, advocates that women’s proper place is in the home, and argues that men are entitled to greater freedom than women to pursue their own leisure activities.

Alston (1990) found that any women who chose not to meet those high expectations and did not participate in their rural community in a way that was accepted, was alienated - thereby creating pressure to do extra activities in an effort to belong.

By using the concepts of patriarchy and power to illuminate farm women’s lives, it was clear to Alston that they were extremely “marginalised and their labour contributions largely ignored”.

“There is much work to be done by feminists in addressing the areas of concern for farm women.”

According to Statistics New Zealand by 2007, 41% of all 25 to 64-year-olds in New Zealand had tertiary education. This figure was well above the OECD average across 30 countries (27%), higher than the United States (40%), United Kingdom (32%) and Australia (34%), but less than Canada (49%). Although there is no breakdown of rural women statistics it is certain that there is a higher number of women with tertiary education in rural areas than in previous decades.

This is important because it indicates that rural women have changed yet literature supports that the community they live in has not and that is creating tension among our contemporary rural women.

THE SURVEY - IMPORTANT FINDINGS

ISOLATED BUT CONNECTED WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

It is important to acknowledge early on that all of the findings described from literature in previous sections of this report were supported by this report's survey results.

The first significant finding was that while we live in perhaps the most connected phase of history yet, rural women report that 'isolation' is a significant issue right now.

When asked what they thought was the biggest problem facing rural women, 57 percent of the 81 women who answered the author's survey question said isolation or loneliness.

The isolation these women refer too is not simply about geography. Their sense of isolation is also correlated with their social space and transitioning into the rural community they live in with many reporting they didn't know who their neighbours were and wouldn't consider meeting socially with them.

The second most common issue for rural women, according to survey comments, was the constraints on their times because of exhausting schedules that often included the roles of wife, mother, employee and volunteer. Many reported anxiety and stress over tiring timetables and considerable peer pressure to be a 'Supermum' like others they perceived to be 'coping well' in their peer group.

Overall, 26 percent of the rural women surveyed said the pressure of trying to fulfill many roles including unpaid work on farm as being their biggest issue.

Other issues included the perception in the wider urban community of a rural woman being someone comfortably ensconced in the family home baking, and rearing children instead of the reality many of them reported which would more likely include farm bookwork and tasks on farm. Eight percent believed they were mis-understood and undervalued with little respect or understanding outside of their immediate community, for the true role of a rural women.

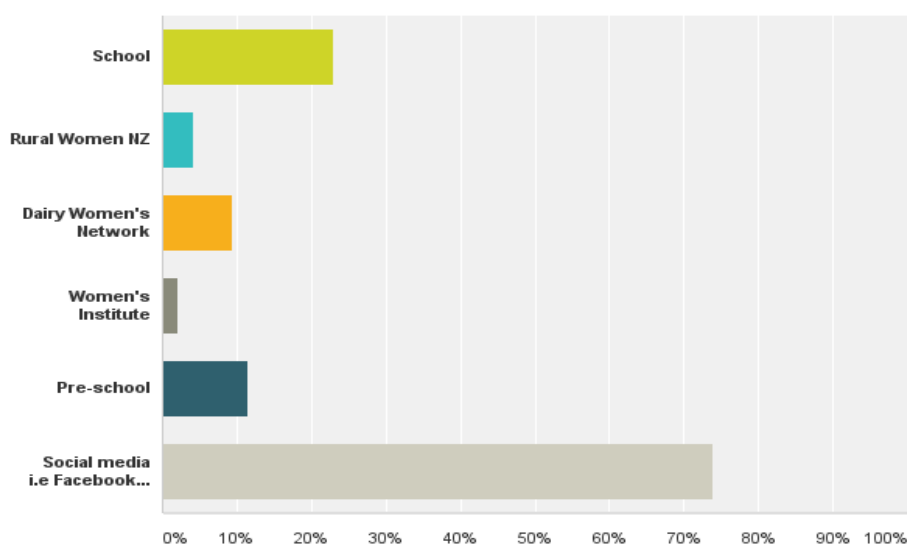
Sexism, community 'cliques' and financial pressure were also reported as being among the biggest issues facing rural women.

The way in which rural mothers find support has changed as the technological age has imprinted their lives. When asked which group gives the best support to be a Rural Mum, almost 75 percent said social media.

Quite a few respondents commented that having a social forum that could dispense advice 24 hours a day was attractive to them, showing the traditional meetings of some women's groups was not as flexible for today's rural women. Honesty and anonymity were also common themes as to why rural women see social media as the best forum to help them.

Q12 Which group do you think gives you the most support to be a rural Mum in your area?

Answered: 96 Skipped: 13



This new social space rural women are actively engaged in needs researched further. It offers a different network for women and offers a wide range of support. The importance of this network cannot be over-stated. In Canada, Leipert (2005) found one of the main ways women in isolated settings stayed healthy was through social support. Social resources there helped women obtain practical, emotional and affirmational support. She found it helped women develop and sustain resilience in the face of hardships by assisting them in developing hardiness, confidence and the ability to carry on.

This social space is not currently engaged or supported by the Ministry of Health. The Farming Mums NZ Facebook page has no funding base with the facilitator currently attempting how to work out funding a full time counsellor service, such is the need.

TRANSIENT COMMUNITIES

The success in the dairy industry has led to high number of families moving away from family and friend networks and to the fracturing of the rural communities as a whole as the make-up becomes transient from year to year.

The chart below shows 48.6 percent of rural women surveyed did not have close family living in the same area as them. This correlates to Ponter's extensive research in 1989 of rural women. Back then 54 percent of surveyed women reported having extended family members in their neighbourhood or district. For those, especially in the dairy industry, without family support, further research needs to be conducted to ascertain just how much of an impact that is having on their social and mental health.

Q10 Do you have close family living in the same area as you?

Answered: 107 Skipped: 2



Social networks are replacing those traditional family networks but at what cost? Further research needs to be employed to ascertain the impact.

COPING IN THEIR SOCIAL SPACE

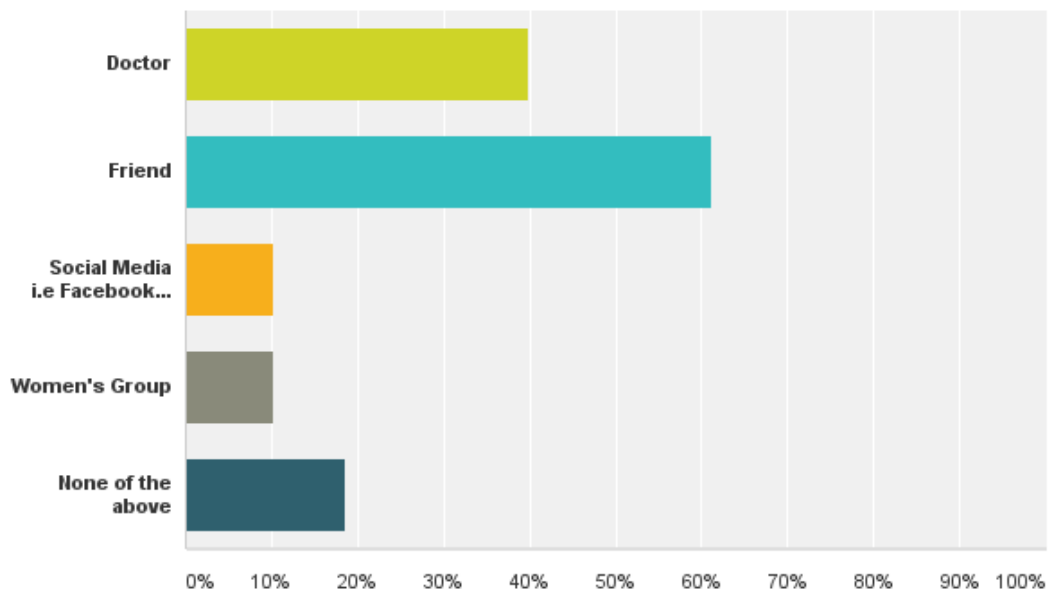
While much has been promoted about the Rural Health Alliance, the role of Doctors as the first point of call when a women was experiencing a significant issue also indicated a significant shift in how women engage in their social space.

Where once the family doctor might have been their only port of call, it's clear that women would rather turn to friends (66%) rather than their doctor (44%). Ten percent said they would turn to social media for support, and ten percent would turn to a women's group. However, 18 percent said they would seek help outside of those networks, including family. This is a significant change to Ponter's 1989 New Zealand survey where 66 percent of women said they would talk to their partner if they were 'feeling down'. Just 15 percent would resort to talking to their friends.

It's difficult to ascertain how much of a role social media has in the results as many would engage with their friends via social forums. Also, the term friends has undertaken a new definition with women considering many more people 'friends' because of the online relationship they have with them.

Q13 Where would you go to get help if you're not coping?

Answered: 108 Skipped: 1



We can assume however that social media underpins much of engagement between rural women when you look at the survey results. Ninety-three percent said they use social media to connect with other rural women. As an avenue of support it is apparent that today's women's networking groups need to embrace social media to advance their cause rather than the traditional meetings of old.

WHAT ROLE DO TRADITIONAL RURAL WOMEN'S GROUPS PLAY?

It was also evident from the survey that there has been a dramatic shift in the role of support groups in today's rural women's lives. When asked if they had attended any rural women's group meetings in the past three months less than one percent said yes and those women attended 'non-traditional' women's groups including FAR Women in Arable, Dairy Women's Network and the Agri-Women's Development Trust.

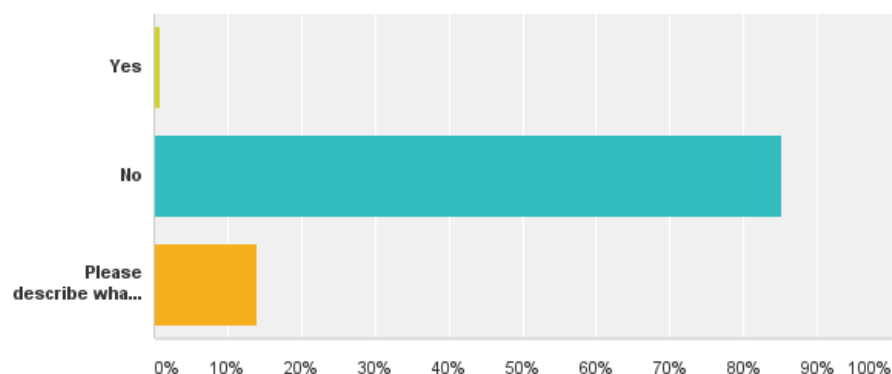
Rural Women NZ and Women's Institute did not feature in the women's answers. In a further question 87 percent of women said they had never had any association with Rural Women NZ while 68 percent said they had never had an association with Dairy Women's Network (that figure includes women from other primary sectors).

How does that then change their engagement when they need help? When asked if they had any association with the Rural Support Trust (an organisation charged with helping farming families during difficult circumstances such as drought, flooding and severe weather events, and more latterly the dairy downturn) 81 percent said no.

From this we can establish that traditional networks do not appeal to today's rural women.

Q9 Have you attended any rural women's group meetings in the past three months?

Answered: 108 Skipped: 1



THE QUESTION OF SUPPORT

To answer how best to support our rural women, we have to first understand what support they need.

Nearly sixty percent of survey respondents said there wasn't enough support for rural women but when asked what types of activities they would be interested in within a group the responses were many and varied.

From networking, to learning household skills, to practical skills to implement on farm and budgeting, all of them came back to sharing a social space and having the time to do so.

The hyper busy lifestyle rural women are undertaking was forewarned in Ponter's 1989 study when he commented that there was 'high levels of stress apparent in rural communities'. Ponter said there were several reasons why women stayed in their exhausting lifestyles including loyalty, love to partners, economic dependence, personal and financial circumstances and expectations of gender stereotyping.

Leipert (2005) made similar observations in Canada and in particular the effects of adding to already hectic lifestyles by women seeking work off farm to supplement finances - a situation occurring in New Zealand at present as poor whole milk powder prices have driven dairy farmer incomes down.

She found adding to responsibilities to a rural woman's multiple family and community roles and commitments may lead to rural women overextending themselves and compromising their mental health in the process.

When increased voluntary commitments in rural communities are taken into account as funding and support has decreased in rural districts over time, the scenario is inflated.

Teather (1998) discusses the ongoing effects on women of the collapse of many rural communities in North America, Australia and New Zealand. The withdrawal of services means there are few pre-schools or child-care facilities other than those that run with a great deal of help from volunteers.

Mothers may have to drive their children long distances to school, or even just to the school bus, she found, and although rural community life has always relied on woman volunteering, the situation is getting more demanding.

Although it could be argued this volunteering work leads to a sense of purpose among our rural women, other time pressures mean it could be viewed as an expectation of duty rather than fulfilling a need.

Rural schools in New Zealand seem to be increasingly seen as an acceptable social space for women and much volunteering work is being done through them. Their importance was shown in our survey when after social media, schools and pre-schools were considered the area that offered rural Mums the most support in the community.

This is despite the fact that most rural schools don't offer after school childcare and are demanding more and more of the busy rural Mums time. Here too exclusion from the social space can occur when women work full time and are unable to attend school events or fundraising efforts. This writer has experienced that social exclusion first-hand and women interviewed for this report also reported similar experiences with some saying urban Mums who were friends often had school events at night as the schools were much more sympathetic to working Mums.

If rural women consider the school community as a support network, there needs to be more research done into the mechanisms of delivering effective support via that community and Board of Trustees need to consider how they can support the modern rural family including working Mothers rather than condemning them.

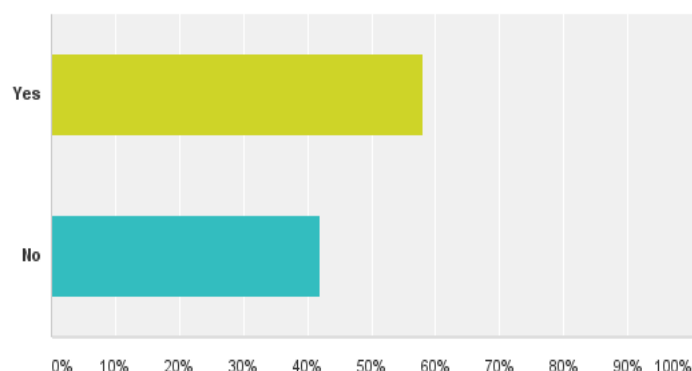
THE GREAT WASTELAND OF POWERFUL MINDS

As the farming landscape has changed, so too has the traditional rural demographic within rural districts. The 2013 Census data shows across New Zealand there are only about 82 single men for every 100 single women. This has led to rural men seeking urban women and a greater number of 'career women' entering rural communities. But what has happened to those women? And how do they utilise their education and careers in areas that have limited scope in employment?

When rural women were asked if they were utilising the skills they had been educated or trained for, fifty-eight percent said no. So how do we begin to utilise those skills and why should we make the effort?

Q16 Are you utilising the skills you have been educated or trained for in your career?

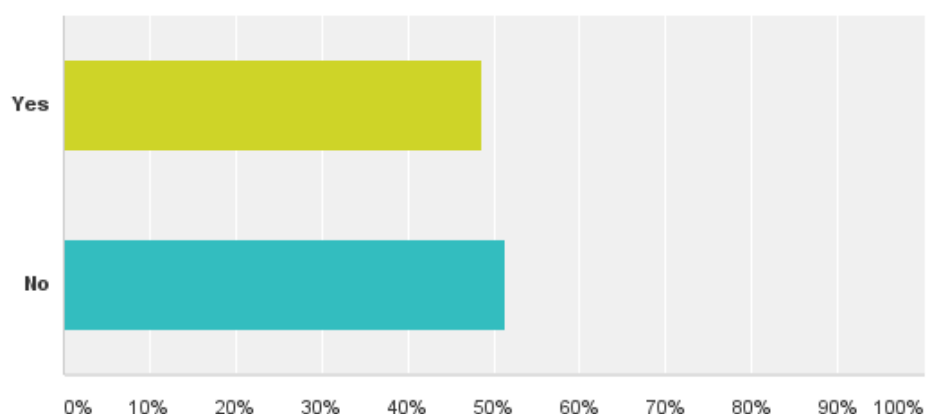
Answered: 105 Skipped: 4



Part of the answer to that question lies in the survey question ‘did you compromise your own career to live on a farm with your partner?’. Around 49 percent of rural women agreed they had compromised their career. So what does that do to their sense of personal worth and how do we manage to continue those careers?

Q15 Have you compromised your own career to live on a farm with your partner?

Answered: 109 Skipped: 0



WHY THE WASTELAND OF POWERFUL MINDS MATTERS

“The goal is to double primary industry exports in real terms from \$32 billion in June 2012 to over \$64 billion by 2025. Businesses are likely to be larger, more complex, use more technology and require more professional support. The challenge for all of us now is to promote the diversity and breadth of careers in the primary industries. Employment in the primary industries will need to increase by 50,000 to reach this export double goal by 2025.” – Minister of Primary Industries, Nathan Guy, 2014

Survey results show there is a knowledge bank among rural women that is not being utilized. From University to a career, and then back to the farm where they may not be able to use their skills, a vacuum exists among our rural women. While the Government is concentrating on bringing new people into the Primary Industry we need to ask is there a way in which we can use the skills that currently exist but are not being used to their full potential?

CASE STUDY - OB GROUP FARMS, STU TAYLOR - GENERAL MANAGER

General Manager of OB Group Dairy Farms in the North and South Island, Stu Taylor works with many employees and actively encourages participation of skills from their partners.

Stu believes it's important to utilise partner's skills and believes there is a need to give the partner an opportunity to express themselves in a working situation.

"It gives real satisfaction and a feeling of worth and provides a break from the intensity of raising kids each day. It makes them better parents and helps grow kids into great people."

Rather than trying to make these women fit farm tasks, Stu looks to find ways of the farm using the women's skills from their previous career. For Stu it's a no brainer.

"It's what they love to do and it is usually where they are highly trained and successful."

Tapping into their skills allows them to show people (and themselves) how skilled they are in a certain area.

"It allows them to have success and gives them confidence and self-worth."

Recently Stu and his team were working through ideas on making some great cultural shifts on farm in regards to new Health and Safety regulations. When working through what needed to be done it became apparent that there needed to be an easier way for farmers of recording and writing things down. A partner of one of his staff members, Neriah Broughton, who formerly had a career in software development and IT suggested she make an app for staff to use rather than buying one.

Stu embraced the idea and that app and the culture on farm saw OB Group's Regent Park farm win the Site Safe Best Health and Safety Initiative by a Small Business at the national SAFEGUARD workplace health and safety awards.

It is not the only example of how partners on the farm use their career skills to advance both the farm and their own personal worth.

From financials to planning, the women are evaluated for their skills in their previous careers and are given paid opportunities to showcase them.

It's a no brainer according to Stu.

"The family is happy and the person working for us is happy and more likely to be creative, positive and productive. It also adds to the community by providing positivity both on the farm but also at school."

He also believes it builds the farm's reputation of being an employer of choice.

"It's about trying to get every good productive person in our group an opportunity to get what they want from life and work."

"The next step for Neriah is funding her into her own business and getting a team of people around her so she can really get going in this space. Empower people and give them an opportunity it is amazing what they can do but it has to be their passion not yours".

Stu goes on to say that the lucky thing for Neriah is that she can generate the funds for part time childcare.

"So she and her husband can share the childcare role. It's harder if the skills of the person pay less than the cost of childcare. One partner on the farm has a husband that stops working at 2.30pm - allowing the woman to work from 2.30 to 6pm. In another case the woman milks cows until 8am and then the man fences and drives diggers from 8.30am onwards. Job share works when the woman's (I realise it could be the man but most times it is the woman) pay is less than or the same as the cost of childcare but the key is flexibility in work hours by the employer."



Stu Taylor above, congratulating Neriah Broughton at the SAFEGUARD awards in May 2016 for a Health and Safety App she developed for their farms.

OTHER FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

THE DEMOGRAPHIC

By far the greatest number of respondents were between 25 to 34 (41 percent), with 35 to 44 year olds the next largest group (36 percent) and 45 to 54 year olds not far behind (22 percent).

Of that 76 percent of respondents were from the dairy sector, 18 percent from the beef industry, 16 percent from the sheep industry, nearly 5 percent from the arable industry, nearly four percent from the deer industry, nearly one percent from the horticulture industry and nearly 2 percent from the viticulture industry. Almost five percent said they were in other areas of the primary industry.

EMPLOYMENT - WOMEN COPING WITH DUAL EMPLOYMENT ROLES

The changing status of rural women from Ponter's 1987 seminal report was clear in the survey question asking rural mothers if they worked off farm.

Over 41 percent of respondents said they did work off farm, but what became apparent was that while some rural mothers were juggling motherhood with working off farm, many of them were also undertaking an on farm role as well.

Over 86 percent reported they work on farm, meaning many of our rural women are coping with several roles on and off farm. The effect of that has not been researched or analysed - but should be.

CHANGING PRIMARY INDUSTRY DEMOGRAPHIC

The survey reflects the rapid expansion of the dairy industry and corresponding changing of transient demographic across New Zealand with almost 77 percent of respondents identifying the sector as the industry they or their partner was involved with.

Equally the decline in sheep farming was reflected with just 16 percent of respondents identifying with that industry. Beef was slightly higher on 17.6 percent, arable 4.6 percent, deer 3.7 percent, viticulture 1.6 percent and Horticulture less than one percent.

FARMING MUMS WORKING SUBSTANTIAL HOURS A WEEK

The survey was directed at farming mothers and showed around 88 percent of women were working 11 hours or more a week, with 14.6 percent working 11 to 20 hours.

But the majority of mothers were working 21 hours plus a week with 29.3 percent reporting they work 21 to 30 hours a week, 16.51 percent reporting they work 31 to 40 hours a week and 13.8 percent working 41 to 50 hours a week.

What was perhaps most alarming were the number of farming mothers who worked over 50 hours a week with 8.2 percent working 51 to 60 hours and 4.6 percent working over 60 hours a week.

It is clear from the survey that rural mothers are working a substantial number of hours but it is unclear if there is relevant support in place to enable them to do so. With limited childcare options in rural areas this is another area that needs to be addressed with further research.

SOCIAL MEDIA MORE THAN JUST ENTERTAINMENT

The effect of social media on rural women's lives is apparent from the 94 percent of farming mums who said they use it to talk to other rural women.

So how do rural women connect if they live in areas of little to no internet connectivity? And for older women who may not be as experienced in the social media forum, how do they then find connections in the modern technological age?

Again further research needs to be obtained in this area.

WHAT RURAL MUMS WANT

With survey results reflecting a Mum's busy lifestyle with most working over 20 hours a week, the question of what activities they would like to do if attending a rural women's event drew a myriad of answers. A common theme was 'anything social', back to basic craft, sewing and cooking classes, practical farm tasks and business development. Several said they were 'too busy' to attend anything. Financial and budget planning also came up as did working with heavy farm machinery - reflecting the increasing role of rural mothers on farm.

CONCLUSION

In order to support our rural women, we have to understand the social space in which they operate in.

I concur with Teather's (1998) assertions that prescriptive expectations remain in conservative rural communities despite massive social change outside of them. Like Teather, I agree that rural women continue to be expected to devote themselves to family and community despite dramatic change in women's education and opportunities, while most rural men cling stubbornly to patriarch attitudes and expectations.

When bringing in women who have existed in a modern urban space, and who have climbed the career ladder, our communities have not adapted to meet their needs.

The traditional rural women's support groups such as Rural Women NZ and Women's Institute bear little in common with the aspirations and needs of today's rural women. A smattering of other groups engages on a professional basis (Dairy Women's Network, FAR Women in Arable) while others seek to grow leadership capabilities (Agri-Women's Network) but a void exists between those groups and the women inside the farm gate, and that void has been more visible in the current farming climate.

The expanse in dairying has brought about the demise of traditional rural communities and made today's communities fractious and transitional. It can be difficult for women to find support in this climate and relationships to community and each other are compromised.

Yet the 'rural idyll' described by Little and Austin (1996) and the values accorded to it remain strong and are co-realised by women. Under those values there is no tolerance to difference. Volunteering is part of those values. While women complain of being exhausted and of having 'too much to do', they are afraid of the repercussions of not volunteering in their community.

There also exists little to no support for rural women who try to continue their career despite their rural location and choosing to have a family. Survey results showed 88 percent of rural mothers are working 21 hours or more a week with 12.5 percent working 50 hours or more. Almost no childcare or after school care is offered within these communities and the inability to participate in volunteering puts her at risk of exclusion.

Today's rural women is as isolated, if not geographically, by the lack of networks and support as her colonial ancestors. However, rural women have found social media effective in meeting their short term needs and enjoy the flexibility and anonymity those networks offer. However, the popularity of those networks could lead to a further denigration in face to face networks. It is unclear what effect that would have and is something that needs further investigation.

Spry and Marchant (2014) discuss in an Australian report how a personal development programme can enhance social connection and mobilise women in the community, and this is something that could be applied in our own rural communities.

Over seven weeks' women attend 90 minute workshops where they are taught core topics of worth, strength and purpose. Underpinning concepts were self-esteem, emotional intelligence and purpose-in-life and mobilization.

This transformative learning can bring about a process Hughes (1996) called 'conscientisation' - a means of challenging women to connect what they learn about themselves to the wider context of power structures with the ultimate aim of achieving social change.

Through the survey it is apparent the importance rural schools play in a rural women's social space both on a volunteering and networking basis. More research needs to be undertaken in how that social space could be better developed and enhanced to help today's rural women, bearing in mind the traditional social space the school environment remains in. Little has changed within the school's role within a community, yet rural women have. And how do rural women without children find a social space if the school is the one point of community in a district?

One answer is social media - the fastest changing evolution within social spaces. Yet there is no evidence that Government, nor traditional women's groups are engaging effectively with rural women in that space. With some regions still experiencing little to no internet coverage, rural women are at risk of being further isolated among their peer groups within social networks.

Finally, there is a vast expanse of knowledge that gets lost between a women leaving a career and becoming a partner living on a farm. In terms of productivity this is an inefficient use of the great resource many rural women possess from their crossover lives.

OB Group Dairy Farms manager Stu Taylor has shown how partner's talents are being captured and utilised to provide real returns for both parties. His example of a female partner of an employee developing an app for Health and Safety using her IT skills show how this vast untapped knowledge base that exists within rural women across New Zealand can be mastered to give a sense of personal worth and value.

While completing this project the author became aware of how little research exists on rural women. While Ponter's 1989 survey on Rural Women was a landmark project, nothing of true value has been done since. And worldwide the topic of rural women has been relatively untouched.

Urgent, in depth surveys and research need to be undertaken if we are going to deliver better long term support to our rural women - especially to our rural mothers.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To that end the following recommendations are made:

- 1 Urgent in-depth research of rural women in New Zealand is needed.
- 2 Current rural women's groups need to engage empathetically across social media and educate themselves on the modern social space of rural women if they are to survive. To do that there needs to be better internet access across rural New Zealand as this is also the main way in which the modern rural woman socially engages with her peers. Without that connectivity she is at risk of further isolating and excluding herself from the wider rural community and that in turn could lead to deteriorating mental health.
- 3 While the social space of rural women has changed, the environmental space has not. Rural schools are at the forefront of communities and should reflect that modern social space, and seek to support it. Board of Trustees within these schools need to consider if they are currently supporting the changing environment of today's rural families or if they are condemning them.
- 4 Working women need more support in after school childcare. Until that is enacted it will be hard for rural women to continue careers and personal growth. It's a practical way of enabling social change, particularly as this report's survey shows many women are working substantial hours often to the point of exclusion in their community.
- 5 Transformative learning across rural New Zealand, for all rural women, not just those who have been marked out as leaders or professionals, would benefit the community and rural women's health. While there are many professional courses available to rural women in agri-careers there is no support available to the rural woman who does not have an agri-career and is not interested in attending agri-professional women's groups such as Dairy Women's Network, Women in Arable or Rural Women NZ.
- 6 Farm employers need to embrace the skillsets offered by females who may live on the farm because of their partner's career. They should seek to find ways to incorporate those skill-sets in a way that showcases the female's worth and remunerate financially.
- 7 Volunteer work is often considered mandatory in rural communities where volunteer workloads are high. However, it should not be considered a viable alternative to a women's previous career as that can prove exploitative and ultimately unfulfilling.
- 8 There is no data available to analyse mental health in our rural women. There needs to be an annual survey similar to 'rural business confidence' conducted by one over-arching organisation so that when a crisis like the dairy downturn occurs, there is data available to lobby groups to ensure Government does not leave our rural women behind. We have no gauge as to how our rural women are coping in the current downturn and no knowledge of the crutches some of them may be turning too to cope i.e. alcohol and/or drugs.

- 9 Who is the voice for rural women? There seems to be confusion among women as to who is representing them. Rural women groups urgently need to co-ordinate and develop a collective strategy in today's environment.

DEFINITIONS

While there is no internationally recognized definition of a 'rural area' the term 'rural women' aligns to Statistics New Zealand's definition when it is used in this report.

Although it may have been tenable in the past to regard the rural population as homogeneous, recent trends in migration have changed the character of this group. Included under the rural umbrella today are a diversity of groups - farmers and farm workers, forestry workers, 'alternative lifestylers' and craftspeople, among others. (Statistics New Zealand, 2016)

Using workplace area, Statistics New Zealand were able to create mesh blocks in rural areas which were allocated to one of four categories, based on their dependence on urban areas.

The percentages working in each urban area were weighted through the use of multipliers. The multipliers allowed for the increasing urbanisation of different sized urban areas. For example, the percentage of rural people working in a main urban area had double the impact of the same percentage working in a minor urban area. This weighting acknowledges the impact that a large urban centre has on its surrounding area. It is also consistent with other methodology, such as the Ministry of Education's isolation index. The weighting ensures that, for example, rural areas surrounding the secondary urban area of Gore are acknowledged as being very different from rural areas outside the main urban area of Christchurch (the latter would be included in the category rural area with high urban influence).

Therefore, in this report 'rural women' is defined as being women outside of primary and secondary smaller urban areas, who are distant, but dependent, on those urban areas for services

APPENDIX ONE - RURAL WOMEN SUPPORT GROUPS

RURAL WOMEN NEW ZEALAND

Rural Women New Zealand is a charitable, membership-based organisation which supports people in rural communities through opportunities, advocacy and connections.

Members are diverse, but all share rural interests that connect and energize members. They are the leading representative body promoting and advocating on rural health, education, land and social issues and provide information, support, practical learning and leadership opportunities.

Groups exist through-out New Zealand. Some groups meet for networking and friendship, often supporting their local communities through events or fundraising. Others are focused on education and learning, and facilitate training days and workshops.

Established in 1925 by women who wanted better social and economic conditions for rural people. For over 90 years we have been at the forefront of rural issues, working to grow dynamic communities in New Zealand.

DAIRY WOMEN'S NETWORK

Dairy Women's Network works alongside members to give them additional skills to take them to the next level in their careers.

The Network's purpose is to develop and educate women to add value to the business of dairying.

Established in 1998 by several of New Zealand's leading dairying women, following their attendance at the second International Conference for Women in Agriculture held in Washington, DC.

Since then, they've grown rapidly. Women have welcomed the professional and personal support the Network offers through activities such as conferences, Dairy Modules, regional meetings and social media channels.

Increasingly, the Network has become an influential industry participant and attracts significant support from sponsors and dairying organisations.

In its infancy, Dairy Women's Network was a pioneer in connecting women online, with the launch of its first membership forum in 1998. This tradition continues with a key focus on creating virtual meeting spaces.

WOMEN IN ARABLE (FAR)

Women in Arable (formerly known as Active in Arable) was formed in 2001 when a cluster of Canterbury women promoted a business orientated discussion group for rurally based women involved in arable farming. It continues to receive the exceptional support of arable women in the Canterbury region.

AGRI-WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT CHARITABLE TRUST

The Agri-Women's Development Charitable Trust was founded in September 2009 by Alfredton director and farmer, Lindy Nelson, following her extensive research in her 2008 important Kellogg's project titled 'Unlocking Potential in Rural Women'.

Trust Patron Mavis Mullins, and founding Trustees Jane White, Sue Yerex and Lindy Nelson formed the initial board. One cup of coffee in Dannevirke and two meetings later and they did what rural women do so well - rolled their sleeves up and got on with it.

Initial support from industry was encouraging, particularly from Beef + Lamb, Fonterra and Asure Quality. Foundation funders included the Burnside Hart Trust, Lottery Grants Board and the Max Foundation.

An Advisory Group comprising dedicated industry professionals supported AWDT's vision, advised and supplied expertise in the early months.

AWDT's foundation programme, Escalator, was launched at Parliament by Agriculture Minister David Carter on 15 September 2010.

Backing and support for AWDT's work has continued in many other ways. It has an impressive database of mentors for women undertaking Escalator, which not only ensures their success but connects industry to the programme.

WOMEN'S INSTITUTE

They are the largest women's organisation in New Zealand and began in 1921 and have remained relevant for women in town and country communities since then.

What they do:

Offer friendship and fun, travel and walking groups, get involved with our local community, encourage leadership, teach and share homemaking skills, provide opportunities for members to be involved in choral, drama, floral art and all types of handcraft and writing - and most importantly networking and fellowship.

Interestingly, Women's Institute has been open to new ideas and has recently allowed younger women to set up 'Tea and Tarts' groups which has been modelled on the United Kingdom version that has been credited with rejuvenating and saving the organization.

New Zealand leadership have been thrilled with younger rural women contacting them and have encouraged them to form new groups.

"Every age, shape and level of exuberance is represented. So whether you are confident in new surroundings or an honest to goodness wallflower, please don't let another month go past before coming and joining us." – Tea and Tarts, United Kingdom



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RURAL WOMEN SUPPORT GROUP

must evolve and reach out to younger women. Whereas in past times rural women were often stay-at-home mums, these days many are tertiary educated and have come from strong careers – and all are using social media to network and inspire.

"We've been told if we want the Institute to die, sit back and enjoy your meetings as you can get out and push it. We are a fun group even though we do community work as well."

Since the 1960s Women's Institute has played an important role in New Zealand rural life. From supporting soldiers in wartime to teaching women the basics of cooking, gardening and everything in between, Institute has been the backdrop to a social supportive environment for all women.

The generational shift of the past decade has been the most difficult issue of all facing Institute – causing Kay to advocate starting young people's groups like Tea and Tarts in Marlborough alongside



Although not as raunchy as the English version pictured here in a promo shoot, Tea and Tarts Marlborough is the first of its type in New Zealand.

the older branches where membership can range from 60 to 90. "You cannot expect the 99-year-olds to appreciate what the 25-year-olds want."

Kay believes retiring

women may also be important in future. "Because women work through to 65 and it takes two incomes to buy a home, they don't create the hobbies they once did."

Thrilled with the success in Marlborough, she is hoping Sally's lead will catch on around the country. "It's not happening fast enough for me, but it's started!"

RURAL WOMEN'S GROUPS

- Tea and Tarts groups via New Zealand Federation of Women's Institute: You can set up your own group under the umbrella of this great organisation. Phone 04 801 5553
- Rural Women NZ: A charitable, membership-based organisation which supports people in rural communities through learning opportunities, advocacy and connections. Call 04 475 5524
- Young Rural Ladies Facebook Page: Like-minded women in New Zealand and worldwide sharing their inspiration, entrepreneurial ideas and tricks for a better quality of life. Many coffee groups have sprung up from people that have met on the page.
- Farming Mums NZ: A Facebook page designed to support rural mums.
- Dairy Women's Network: The Dairy Women's Network supports women to stand proudly and securely in the knowledge of the value they add to their dairy businesses. <http://www.dwn.co.nz/>



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FARMING MUMS NZ - FACEBOOK ONLINE FORUM

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Alone and in crisis

n crisis

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PHOTO: ADRIAN WILSON

Farming Mums NZ facilitator Chanelle O'Sullivan says people don't realise how dire the situation is with our women.

continued P 4

Farming Mums NZ facilitator Chanelle O'Sullivan says people don't realise how dire the situation is with our women. PHOTO: MICHAEL O'BRIEN



A white service truck with "DRAIN JETTING" and "All Pro Drain Services" branding. The truck is a cab-over-engine model with a white body and a yellow stripe. It has a large black sign on the front that says "DRAIN JETTING" in white letters, and a smaller sign below it that says "All Pro Drain Services" in yellow and red. The truck is parked on a paved surface.



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RURAL WOMEN IN CRISIS

from P3

The sad news this year is that the posts have moved away from mums sharing photos, recipes and farm experiences to more despondent posts from lonely, unhappy miserable women dealing with the stress of the dairy fall-out.

And what's alarming and becoming ever clearer to Chanelle is that there is very little out there to help them.

For every public post on the page dealing with a myriad of social situations including domestic abuse, there's an equal number sent anonymously behind the front screen of the page.

There are the stories of heartbreak at watching a partner's mental decline on farm as the financial noose tightens the angst at trying to support children and put on a happy face for their partners the tears at losing their job their livelihood and their dreams.

Just this morning I had a woman whose husband had been hearing voices and was under the care of a psychiatric team and she wasn't sure who she could turn to. The fact that she had to come to an online forum to get help shows there should be more support.

While women might not commit suicide in the same numbers as men, Chanelle and many were still struggling, miserable, isolated or

unhappy

'And I don't think we can afford for our rural women to be like that. People don't realise how dire the situation is and how many people are on edge.'

While the page is not all doom and gloom, it does paint a disturbing picture of our rural women - alone and in crisis. And while these women might not be killing themselves

drinking and psychological distress it doesn't break the data down into rural versus urban areas.

So with no real data prompting a wake-up call, and the most at risk women able to hide their struggle behind the farm gate, the chasm is not just gaping between support available for these women and their access to it - it's the Cook Strait between two very

Maxwell responded that the problem was being dealt with through the Rural Health Alliance Aotearoa New Zealand (RHANZ) - something she has been heavily involved with since its inception in 2013.

The alliance was set up as a united voice from multiple rural sector organisations to develop solutions and influence policy affecting the health and wellbeing of rural communities.

One of its key objectives was to research key issues in rural health, develop knowledge about them, and disseminate relevant information and knowledge to those with an interest in rural health.

The alliance has also been contracted by Government as part of its \$200,000 emergency response funding to upskill rural health professionals and social services groups in suicide prevention strategies and to strengthen rural sector linkages.

Women, Mrs Maxwell claimed, with the help of upskilled GPs would be more likely to talk to their doctor about any issues they might be experiencing when they take their children in for an appointment.

While a great theory many of the farming women carrying heavy burdens at the moment say they can't afford to leave the farm. They haven't got the money for a \$500 consultation for themselves and are not likely

Just this morning I had a woman whose husband had been hearing voices and was under the care of a psychiatric team and she wasn't sure who she could turn to. The fact that she had to come to an online forum to get help shows there should be more support

and therefore not appearing on the Government's radar, they are at risk of self-harm in other ways - yet alcohol and drug abuse has not been measured in rural communities thus far.

Ministry of Health senior media adviser Rebecca Walsh said while a range of data was gathered through the New Zealand health survey, including information on hazardous

different islands.

Part of the issue is the ministry's ignorance and indifference to the growing issue. One staff member's glib comments to this reporter that if women were talking on a Facebook page they were okay was symptomatic of the often stereotypical way women's issues are handled.

At a recent presentation, Federated Farmers' board member Jeanette

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RURAL WOMEN IN CRISIS

to sit down and divulge their private struggles in the confines of a 15-minute appointment while they get their children vaccinated.

For the Government it's great PR – a feel-good funding gesture – but it doesn't reach the heart of the issue, women on farm, who are not having any communication with the outside world.

On several occasions the Minister of Health, Jonathan Coleman, has refused to respond to questions over rural women's health. His press secretary constantly refers us back to the \$600,000 injection into boosting mental health services in rural communities but whenever deeper answers are sought about our rural women the answer is resolute – no comment.

And yet the issue remains and grows. A rural school principal with a high proportion of dairy farming families told us recently of escalating behavioural issues among the students as parents struggled to cope.

That principal's message was clear – ignore what's happening behind the farm gate and you designate some of our rural children to social problems.

Mid Canterbury Principals' Association president Chris Murphy said while the association had only discussed the dairy downturn's impact in passing, principals were aware of how tight the financial situation was for many rural families at present.

continued P 6



Rural Women NZ President Wendy McGowan is keen to find a solution.



Thank you for keeping our community strong.

From the team at House of Hearing.

House of Hearing

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Dairy Focus

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RURAL WOMEN IN CRISIS

from P.S.
Mr Murphy said they were working with DairyNZ to implement a school kit to support families within the next month. Rural schools are always the hub of their communities. We care not only about the children but the communities they come from. It's definitely difficult times out there but we will continue to do our best for the community.

Chanelle O'Sullivan knows just how difficult the situation is - the issues have avalanched into her mailbox, so much so that she is now having to consider finding funding for a counsellor and upskilling by way of a Mental Health 101 course. And yet she sits in isolation with very little to help her and her small administration team.

Once the stalwart of women's rural issues Rural Women NZ are at a loss to know what to do, with many of their members ageing and of a different generation to those that are having significant issues now.

But they are trying to understand. President Wendy McGowan said the federation was 'very aware' of the issue, although there were not any current initiatives under way to help.

'Apart from stopping to have a cup of tea with your neighbours'.

Wendy, like many of their current members, lives through the turmoil of the 1990s. It has much to offer in support and advice to our women. But it's

finding a forum to do that in with many thinking of Rural Women as an outdated concept.

Keen to reach out, Wendy said they would be approaching the issue at board level, and grappling with how to best reach those in most need.

'We do have to look at what we can do we need to look at who is looking after the care.'

And while the Rural Support Trusts have been banded about by the primary sector as the one-stop shop to go for professional and mental services, they are scrambling to meet escalating soft skill needs.

The trust was originally set up for adverse effects. They were the support organisation you went to when you had mammoth snowfalls or catastrophic flooding on your farm. They were the people that co-ordinated the manpower to snow rakers in the high country or the farmers to clear debris - much like the student army did during the Christchurch earthquakes.

Superb at practical support but with no past experience nor mandate to handle the soft skills required of this dairy downturn, and in particular women soft skills, they have struggled to fill the gaps.

It's far to say the dairy crisis has thrown a whole new can of worms at them and while they're up for the challenge, history suggests they're not experienced at handling women's needs.

However, Mid Canterbury Rural Support Trust co-ordinator Tim Silva was at pains to say the trust was not gender specific, worked across nationalities, and across the working spectrum and were tapping on women's groups as required.

Tim pointed out 90 per cent of calls to the trust are from rural women on behalf of their family or a neighbour they were concerned about.

He said if there was a perception the trust was not the first port of call for rural women's mental or social issues it needed to be fixed.

'What we don't want when dealing with the issue is to torpedo the trust as an option for these women.'



Mid Canterbury Rural Support Trust co-ordinator Tim Silva says the trust is working with DairyNZ to implement a school kit to support rural families.

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RURAL WOMEN IN CRISIS

There is no doubt the trust has done an incredible job and will continue to do so, but the lack of a gender specific approach to women seems to be working against it with one dairy woman's first-hand experience of the trust highlighting the complexity of the issue.

The woman shared with us that while the trust had offered great advice on consultants to help with managing the farm through the crisis, and had supported her depressed partner whose mental health had deteriorated, no support was offered to her.

She was the mother of two children, worked alongside her partner on farm and was doing the bookwork.

Just thinking about their situation was enough to make her vomit, but she felt her plight was not important. So long as the man in the situation was okay that was all that mattered. No one asked her how she was coping.

That same woman said she couldn't afford to go to a doctor, didn't have time to be attending counselling because cut-backs on farm meant she needed to work longer hours, and her children were suffering because she frequently lost her temper, shouted at them.

There were no women's events

Women are socialised to talk more about their problems and have not been taught that when times are really tough you just have to harden up

In her areas and most other rural mums were too busy to have coffee as many have had to work off farm in order for it to survive. She knew of many mothers who were drinking at least a bottle of wine a night to cope – even though they couldn't afford it.

Her only communication and perceived support was from reading other rural mums' posts on the Farming Mums NZ Facebook page but she felt it wasn't enough.

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand CEO Hugh Morris believed one of the reasons the focus had been on men was because they were more likely to isolate themselves and work harder when times were tough.

But he acknowledged the pain women faced as well, especially with many couples working as equal partners.

"If men aren't coping well women may need to be there to pick up the pieces as well. We definitely need

to not forget about their needs as well."

While men have higher rates of suicide, women have higher rates of depression and anxiety problems, he said. "Women are socialised to talk more about their problems and have not been taught that when times are really tough you just have to harden up."

However, he believed there was room, among the current rural mental health initiatives for a programme that gets women involved as well.

"Even though traditionally women have had stronger social networks there comes a point where they need extra help as well."

Another good strategy for coping, he said, was to draw on social connections in the community because one of the benefits of sharing is that people learn they are not the only ones struggling and between them they can share the burden.

> HELPLINES

- Rural Support Trust: 0800 787 254 Rural Support Trusts help people and families in the wider rural community who experience an adverse event – climatic, financial or personal – to more effectively meet and overcome these challenges. Services are free and confidential.
- Lifeline (0800 543 354 for calls outside Auckland and 09 5222 999 for Auckland)
- Samaritans (0800 726 666)
- Youthline (0800 376 633)
- Depression help-line (0800 11 757)
- Helpline (0800 611 116)
- Some websites have information about depression and who to contact for help. The Lowdown also has text and email support services available specifically for young people.
- www.thelowdown.co.nz
- www.depression.org.nz
- www.wellbeing.org.nz
- Counselling services such as school guidance counsellors, iwi and other Maori health/counselling services, iwi and gay support counselling services, sexual abuse counselling services, alcohol and drug services or other specialist counselling services, such as bereavement services, family counsellors, whānau support services, respite support services, etc.

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RURAL WOMEN IN CRISIS

King calls for urgent rethink

So with the fragmentation of services, and decline of women's groups the question remains - what can be done to help these women?

Labour health spokesperson Annette King believes an urgent rethink of strategy around rural mental health funding is needed and wants the Minister of Health to listen to escalating concerns about rural women struggling to cope with the dairy downturn.

Rural women should not be the last cab off the rank, she said, because if their mental health breaks down, it has a wider effect on their family and their community.

"This is the time to rethink the strategy and look at the most appropriate place to put funding. Don't wait until we have a crisis and say we should have done something about it and listen up to what's being said."

Ms King said while \$500,000 was granted by Government to help the rural community around mental health at the beginning of the dairy downturn, the situation has deteriorated further and the original

strategy no longer fitted the looming crisis in rural communities.

"They just muck around at times when some positive forward action could save a lot of heartache like the mental health row over the people of Christchurch after the earthquake. It's five years on but the minister is only listening now."

Forecasts say the downturn isn't going to get better over the next one to two years, she said, with some commentators threatening this will have an impact of catastrophic proportions on rural communities.

Ms King said women in particular need some added help. "The women will be looking after everyone else - making sure the kids are alright and making sure their husbands are coping. What would probably work is some support funding into a relevant group like the Dairy Women's Network."

Dairy Women's Network Chief Executive Officer Zaida de Villiers said the network relied on volunteers to run event days where women can get together and share their stories but this was proving difficult in the current



Labour health spokesperson Annette King wants the Ministry of Health to have an urgent review of strategy, saying rural women shouldn't be the last cab off the rank.

climate as more women worked off farm or for longer periods on farm to alleviate financial stress.

"She said the network could 'look into' helping the situation if it had funding to do so. "But we are a very small non-profit group reliant on funding. In tough times our funding goes down. It's not just about knowing what needs to be done but having the funding to do it."

Ms de Villiers said the dairy

industry was "often focused" on men's wellbeing.

"And that is true that men bear the burden and often don't talk about these things but the buck stops with women when they are isolated on the farm. Who's helping them?"

But even then one dairy woman told us the network was perceived as being a professional-only organisation - not somewhere women could 'let their hair down' and just talk.

South Canterbury contract milker Kayla Searle had a hospitality career behind her before she went in boots and all with her husband this year on the Seadown 610-cow farm they milk on. Although reasonably sheltered from the downturn by their supportive employer, Kayla knows how isolating rural farm life can be for a woman, having previously lived in the rural wilds of South Canterbury with husband Scott.

While they were only 40 minutes from town, Kayla struggled with not seeing her friends regularly.

She believes strongly in having a support network of friends and family and wonders how those that

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RURAL WOMEN IN CRISIS

And that is true that men bear the burden and often don't talk about these things but the buck stops with women when they are isolated on the farm. Who's helping them?

shuffled into a different area to where their family support has been are coping.

Kopla is an optimistic mum of two children who knows that while the current downturn will delay their dream of becoming farm owners, there is still much to be positive about.

Her previous experience of isolation is not unique and an irony of the modern rural world where we are connected better than we ever have been, thanks to technology.

But so Mid Canterbury Rural Support Trust co-ordinator Peter Reveley says technology doesn't replace real friends and family at the end of the road.

He remains concerned about the plight of our rural women during this downturn.

"Girls are taking a hiding more so than their partners particularly if the men are not giving them a true picture of what's happening on the farm."

Peter said communication wasn't good between many couples and he was concerned about the many women

who moved into the district and had no family support or networks.

"I'm not sure what's going to happen if it gets any worse. They (the women) need someone to talk to. The men need to cut the plug to the television and talk to their women and their families and they need to go home and look after their wives because that's the person they really need to give them a cuddle at night."

He suggested farming districts need to return to past habits of regular gatherings and neighbours communicating regularly.

Mid Canterbury Rural Women NZ president Sandra Curd urged any woman that felt they needed to talk to someone outside of the farm to ring anyone within Rural Women.

"We are there if they need our help."

Mrs Curd believed the stress women were facing had been underestimated and said Rural Women would help in whatever way they could to alleviate problems, including helping schools and pre-schools to run community events if required.



Health Minister Jonathan Coleman refuses to be drawn on the issue.

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RURAL WOMEN SUPPORT GROUP

A weekend of rural fun

Working on remote Northern Territory cattle stations gave Kristy McGregor a unique insight into the hardships rural women face. The ex-pat Aussie and Federated Farmers regional policy advisor tells Nadine Porter about how a unique ladies weekend was formed in the area, leading to long-lasting friendship networks and support and how the same format could be used here.



The ladies weekend put together Ladies Day in Western Queensland. Kristy McGregor is third from right.

It's fair to say Australia's loss is our gain when it comes to Kristy McGregor and her passion for rural women – and you can't help wondering if she isn't the visionary we need.

Living in the Manawatu on a family farm with her Kiwi partner, she has been involved in vital regional policy work for our farmers, but the wellbeing of rural women is never far from her mind.

That's because a conversation over a few drinks in a pub one evening in the remote Channel Country in Western Queensland, led to the realisation that there weren't many opportunities for women to come together.

Having worked on cattle stations in the Northern Territory, Kristy became the governess on a 2.9 million acre sheep and beef property there, she says, groceries were a 10 to 14-hour drive away and the rainy season could see an engagement on the farm for over a week at a time.

They were unique challenges that the women faced and so she and other like-minded women formed the Channel Country Ladies Day – a weekend of inspiring presentations and speakers and a chance for women to connect.

cont. p14

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14 Dairy Focus

RURAL WOMEN SUPPORT GROUP



One of the varied workshops at Ladies Day - hula hooping.

from P17

Like here, Australia has strong women's groups and organisations including Country Women and the Queensland Rural Regional Remote Women's Network, but also like here, many women, particularly on the fringes of remote areas, did not feel connected to these groups.

So the first Ladies Day held in a hangar on Durham Downs, the station she was working on, brought many experienced rural women that they didn't normally get.

Rarely getting an opportunity for a break, 80 to 90 women turned up in dubious weather, donned their pink dresses and pink heels and made good.

It was to be a life-changing experience for Kristy, who realised just how vital the event had been when one woman approached her with tears in her eyes and thanked her for making her think about what she was doing with her life.

This year, the fifth Ladies Day will be held in October.

Numbers have been capped to between 180 to 190 and the budget is now \$150,000 - a far cry from the first event which was put together in four months.

Women come from over 1000km away and no-one bats an eyelid when some fly in on planes - this is, after all, remote Australia.

While some may question how an annual weekend away can make a difference in these women's lives, Kristy has seen friendships flourish, and strong connectivity through social media between events.

"One thing that's critical to developing partnerships is having health services too - such as the Flying Doctor Service as well as other health services. They don't come to be in that role but instead participate and join in and offer a support network if the women need it."

The group of what she has helped to put together and the current feeling of not being connected by rural RWA women has not gone unnoticed by her.

"Ladies Day could be a really nice model for here but it's got to be community-driven to make it happen."

But she knows it's difficult to find one organisation suitable for such an event.

"The role of Rural Women is really critical and it needs strong leadership but it's a challenge for the younger women on the ground don't see them as representing their interests."

However, she learnt from her own experience that it just takes a couple of passionate women to put together an idea.

"The key thing I learnt was that if you see an issue and want to do something about it, it doesn't matter what your role is in the community or where you live or how isolated you are. If you want to create change you can."

Open to sharing and helping set up a similar model in New Zealand, Kristy is concerned our sense of community here isn't as strong as what she experienced in Western Queensland.

"And I think that's a risk for our communities here but in that, there are new opportunities."

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RURAL WOMEN SUPPORT GROUP

Helping inspire rural women

In the Hāmatua Valley in North Otago, two friends have begun a Facebook page for like-minded young rural women to inspire each other, and its popularity has stunned them.

Bea Murray and Sarah Connell began Young Rural Ladies on Facebook at the end of May. Two weeks later the need for such a page was validated with 1000 members. That has now grown to 3000 members and the girls hope to hit 5000 members by Christmas.

The girls wanted to create a space where women could share ideas. Sarah says they were looking to build a positive space online that inspired women.

"We are not qualified to go too deep into farming matters... there are other platforms that maybe do that better."

She is referring to the hugely popular Farming Mums NZ page that boasts over 5000 members, where all manner of issues are discussed.

"It does really worry me how many women are feeling lost, depressed, isolated, unsupported or struggling financially... that page in particular strikes a chord with me that rural

women need a bit more attention." Sarah said she and Bea would look into Rural Women NZ and talk with them in the future, although they have no set plans as to where their online network will lead.

Although Rural Women NZ is amazing, I think they are just a bit outdated, so women of our age are not partaking in it."

A former city girl herself, Sarah understands the unique challenges women face when they first come to a farm and it's more common than it was in the past.

A lot of friends I've made locally don't necessarily have rural backgrounds."

She cites two English women in her area who met their Kiwi farmers overseas and came back to live with them.

"You kind of question things. Am I doing the right thing and am I doing enough? We're naturally busy people having come from strong careers. I guess we're looking for another sense of fulfilment by sharing our story and gathering people along the way."

The girls have keyed into a strong

resurgence in handicraft hobbies among young women. Bea herself dabbles in spray-painting antlers and sanding and oiling odd bits of wood she finds on farm, while Sarah, who is a great cook, often shares recipes online. Others inquire with photos of interesting projects they are working on.

Although the Facebook page has been a way to share, Bea believes meeting in person is equally important - something a group of Waitaki Valley women do often.

The page creates a conversation, she says. "But it's still great to meet for a coffee once a week face-to-face."

The page has given them an insight into some amazing businesses rural women are involved in - and they want to continue

to promote small businesses.

For Bea the page has become far bigger than the original Trade Me for rural women concept she had originally planned.

"Social media is offering us support and a place where we can all come together and share ideas."



Sarah Connell (left) and Bea Murray from the Waitaki Valley are the founders of Young Rural Ladies - a Facebook page helping to connect and inspire rural women.

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APPENDIX TWO

See the attached survey

ENDNOTES:

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