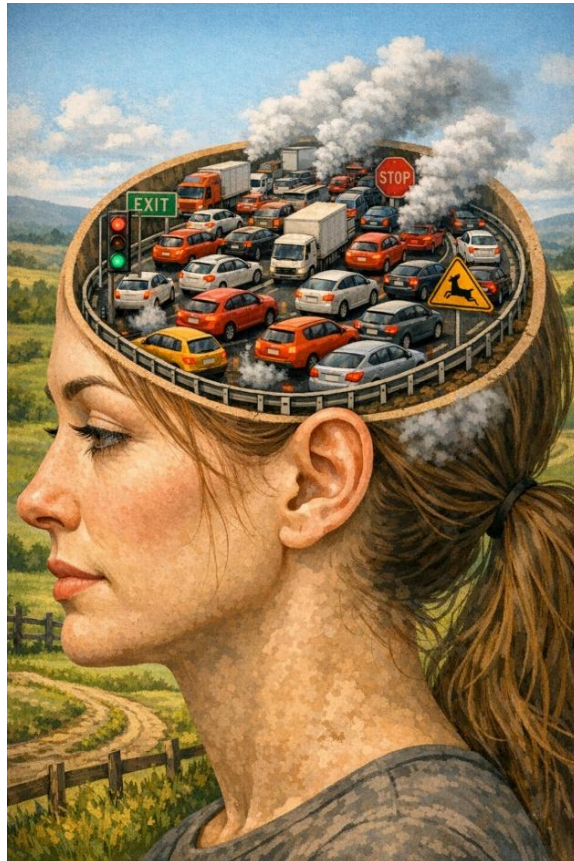




KELLOGG
RURAL LEADERSHIP
PROGRAMME



Is the “carpark” too full?

Is the mental load of rural women affecting their everyday lives and how can we support it?

Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme

Course 55 2026

Kaylene Bennett

I wish to thank the Kellogg Programme Investing Partners for their continued support.

Strategic Partners



Programme Partners



Professional Partners



Academic Partners



Regional Partners



Disclaimer

In submitting this report, the Kellogg Scholar has agreed to the publication of this material in its submitted form.

This report is a product of the learning journey taken by participants during the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme, with the purpose of incorporating and developing tools and skills around research, critical analysis, network generation, synthesis and applying recommendations to a topic of their choice. The report also provides the background for a presentation made to colleagues and industry on the topic in the final phase of the Programme.

Scholars are encouraged to present their report findings in a style and structure that ensures accessibility and uptake by their target audience.

This publication has been produced by the scholar in good faith on the basis of information available at the date of publication. On occasions, data, information, and sources may be hidden or protected to ensure confidentiality and that individuals and organisations cannot be identified.

Readers are responsible for assessing the relevance and accuracy of the content of this publication and the Programme or the scholar cannot be liable for any costs incurred or arising by reason of any person using or relying solely on the information in this publication.

This report is copyright, but dissemination of this research is encouraged, providing the Programme and author are clearly acknowledged.

Scholar contact details may be obtained through the New Zealand Rural Leadership Trust for media, speaking and research purposes.

Contents

1. Executive Summary	- 5 -
2. Acknowledgments	- 7 -
3. Introduction	- 9 -
4. Purpose	- 9 -
5. Literature Review	- 10 -
5.1 Concept of mental load as it applies to rural women	- 10 -
5.2 The psychological differences between man and woman	- 12 -
5.3 The impact of not enough sleep	- 13 -
5.4 Current support, policy and models.....	- 14 -
Networks.....	- 14 -
Policy	- 16 -
Models.....	- 17 -
5.5 Barriers to support	- 18 -
5.6 The traditional roles of women.....	- 18 -
5.7 Mental Health Continuum Model	- 19 -
6. Method.....	- 20 -
7. Analysis	- 21 -
8. Findings and Discussion	- 22 -
8.1 Mental Health Continuum Model	- 23 -
8.2 Pressures of rural life	- 24 -
8.3 Organising your day	- 26 -
8.4 What rural women are doing for themselves daily.....	- 28 -
8.5 What would help reduce mental load	- 30 -
8.5 Leaving a paid job or career to focus on your family or farm work.....	- 32 -
8.6 Support needed.....	- 34 -
8.7 Barriers to support	- 35 -
8.8 Investment in self grows confidence	- 36 -
8.9 Overcoming guilt	- 36 -
8.10 Volunteering	- 37 -
8.11 Comparison	- 38 -
8.12 Mental health of men	- 39 -
8.13 Sleep	- 39 -
8.14 Priorities, exhaustion and too many tasks	- 39 -
9. Conclusions.....	- 40 -

10. Recommendations	- 42 -
11. Limitations of this study	- 45 -
12. References.....	- 45 -
Appendices	- 47 -
Appendix 1	- 47 -
Appendix 2	- 48 -
Appendix 3	- 49 -
Appendix 4	- 57 -

1. Executive Summary

The carpark isn't just full; it's overflowing, with no space left for the people holding everything together.

This report exposes the invisible but relentless mental load carried by rural women across New Zealand. More than just being busy, mental load is the constant cycle of anticipating, planning, organising and emotionally supporting others. A cognitive and emotional burden that never switches off.

Drawing on 196 survey responses and 15 in-depth interviews, this research reveals a powerful and consistent reality; rural women are operating at or beyond capacity, navigating an unrelenting mix of roles as farmers, mothers, partners, employees, business managers and community contributors.

What makes this load uniquely rural is not just its volume but its intensity. Geographic isolation, limited access to services, the blending of home and workplace, and deeply embedded expectations to "do it all" compound daily pressures. Even when tasks are shared, women remain the default coordinators – carrying the invisible responsibility for planning, decision-making and emotional oversight.

The impact is significant.

- Over half of respondents report constantly managing too many tasks.
- Mental exhaustion is common – even in the absence of physical work.
- 80% of women identified as "reacting" or "injured" on the mental health continuum, signalling reduced wellbeing and sustained strain.

Organisation of women's time, by women, through routines, lists and self-sacrifice are methods used that do not reduce the load, only contain it.

Structural barriers make meaningful relief difficult. Limited childcare, inaccessible services, financial pressure, time scarcity and a culture that normalises resilience over rest all reinforce the cycle of overload.

A common theme emerging from this research is the role of guilt in sustaining the mental load and the transformative impact of overcoming it. Many rural women carry a deeply internalised expectation to do it all; often placing themselves last and saying yes beyond their capacity, despite already operating at a full load. Letting go of this guilt is not simply a mindset shift; it is a key lever for change.

This research makes one thing clear. This is not an individual problem; it is a systemic one. Improving outcomes for rural women requires more than better coping strategies. It demands recognition, redistribution of responsibility and structural change that reduces competing demands and values the invisible work women do every day.

Rural women are stretched beyond capacity, the impact extends far beyond the individual, it extends to families, farm businesses, community and the future of the rural sector itself.

The recommendations of this report focus on moving from recognition to action. They call for greater acknowledgement of mental load as real and valuable work, more equal sharing of cognitive and practical responsibilities at home and on farm, and rural-specific solutions such as flexible childcare, accessible professional development, and local low-barrier support systems.

The report also recommends reducing administrative burdens, strengthening community connection, improving the visibility of support services for women, and encouraging personal development, boundary-setting and earlier intervention so rural women can move from coping at capacity to genuinely thriving.

This research concludes that the “carpark” is not just full – it is consistently over capacity, with significant implications for wellbeing, identity, workforce participation, productivity and farm business sustainability.

2. Acknowledgments

What a journey I have been on through my involvement with the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme and the preparation of this project. Who would have thought an email at calving last spring requesting applications to the programme would lead me to this. I have been through all sorts of emotions in preparation of this project but the drive to acknowledge the mental load of rural women and give women a voice and the motivation to make a difference has kept me going and we are nearly there.

My first very big thank you goes to my amazing supportive husband Jason and our children Bailey, McKenzie, Sierra, Jonty and Hadlee, who have allowed me the time to be stuck in my office without interruptions and who have bought me food and water when I've been on a roll and couldn't leave my computer. I hope that I have inspired you to never stop growing and learning.

To my extended family - thanks to Mum and Dad for always being there and always encouraging me to pursue dreams and goals. Thanks to Nicky for not only being my sister but my best friend and true ear for my frustrations and celebrations. And to my brothers and in-laws for their continued support and feedback.

Appreciation to Loshni for opening my eyes to the fact that the reason I wasn't coping was because I was at capacity, for helping me make a change in my journey of life and being a part of my inspiration behind this project.

Thanks to Richard and Eleanor for all your encouragement, check ins, contacts and feedback, it is appreciated more than you know. Thanks to Jolene for all your proof reading, suggestions and edit proposals. Your time and expertise have been very much welcomed. To Robyn and Helen for your advice, discussion and support it has been very much appreciated.

Thanks to Kirsty and Dale for allowing me to chew your ears off on our morning walks as I discuss yet another project finding or bit of research. Your feedback and discussion and encouragement have been truly valued.

When I read the profiles of the Kellogg 55 cohort I got a terrible case of imposter syndrome, but what I found was a group of amazing humans with different backgrounds, a huge amount of passion and enthusiasm for the rural sector and nothing but support for each other. Renee as facilitator brought a massive energy to the room every day, an ability to reflect deeply, listen and feedback, for this thank you. Thanks to Lyndsey and Annie for your organisation skills, your passion for growing rural leaders and your feedback. Thanks also to Craig for your guidance, your timely responses to emails and texts and your openness to discuss concerns, provide support and encouragement in particular to this project.

A project like this holds a lot of emotion and can be very personal so to the interviewees for being so generous of their time, their journey and themselves I appreciate your honesty and your emotion. To the 198 respondents that took the time to fill out my survey with such great detail, it gave me the motivation to continue. The responses were personal and emotional and although anonymous I could feel the connections. You have helped with so much of the project and the gold was in the text responses. I would also like to acknowledge the many people that reached out via messenger or texts to make a direct connection and share with me their appreciation for conducting the research or for making them think about themselves.

To all women we live in a society that has changed significantly, but there is still change to happen, continue to feed this change and don't every underestimate your ability.

3. Introduction

My mental load has always been significant. I enjoy being busy and I'm passionate about my commitments. However, I do often find myself operating at full capacity, much like H and J's carpark building in Invercargill at Christmas time, with no space left. My deeper awareness of this issue emerged in November 2024, when I was working full-time on the farm while my husband was away working. I was managing part-time accounting work, volunteer commitments and caring for our five children, one of whom had broken her humerus and another daughter who had undergone her second leg surgery in early October 2024. My daughter had experienced complications that required numerous medical appointments locally and repeated trips to Invercargill, many of them unplanned. Navigating ACC, managing multiple responsibilities, and coping with the emotional strain of her situation on top of everything else, became overwhelming.

One day, while sitting in the doctor's waiting room, I realised I could not continue as I had been. I reached out to a friend who is a wellbeing coach and asked for help. This marked my first step toward prioritising my own wellbeing and recognising that my "carpark" was far too full—an issue I now see reflected in conversations I have with many women each week. While the mental health of men is incredibly important and well-researched, far less attention has been given to the mental load carried by women, particularly rural women, and how this affects their daily lives, decision-making, wellbeing, and broader participation in their communities and the workforce.

This realisation prompted the central question of this research: Is the "carpark" too full? More specifically, is the growing mental load of rural women impacting their everyday lives, and what practical, sustainable supports can help ease this load? By exploring the experiences of rural women, the pressures they face, and the gaps in current support systems, this study seeks to better understand the scale of the issue and identify meaningful ways to support the wellbeing and capacity of women, who are integral to the functioning of rural families, farms and communities.

It is incredibly important to emphasise to the reader that this report is not intended in any way to take away from the importance of the mental health of men and our youth as it is also vital that these topics are researched and understood. This research has been done to shine a light on what I believe is an invisible issue in our community.

This report will begin with an exploration of some literature that has been done on this topic and related topics before and will then follow into my own research.

4. Purpose

The aim of this research is to investigate the mental load experienced by rural women, understand how it is affecting their everyday lives and identify practical strategies, supports and community initiatives that both ease this load and enable women to continue to thrive in their pursuit of their own happiness.

The key research points aim:

-
- To define the concept of mental load as it applies to rural women, including emotional, cognitive and invisible labour.

- To examine the daily responsibilities and pressures faced by rural women.
- To understand the scale of the issue.
- To assess the impact of this mental load on wellbeing, relationships, productivity, decision-making and quality of life.
- To identify coping mechanisms currently used by rural women and evaluate their effectiveness.
- To explore barriers to support.
- To produce recommendations for practical, sustainable support systems and services.
- To explore how rural communities and industry can create environments that enable rural women to build and maintain meaningful careers, ensuring their skills, leadership, and expertise are retained within the sector.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Concept of mental load as it applies to rural women

When we consider mental load, we consider the many tasks, responsibilities, aspects of life and planning that occurs daily to have a household, family and business that functions. Does this look different for rural women vs urban women, or does it look different to a woman in comparison to a man? For reporting purposes, I have just focused on the two genders of man and woman.

According to Dean et al (2022) mental load is a combination of cognitive and emotional labour. They argue that mental load has three characteristics. The first being that it is invisible as it is enacted internally but results in a range of unpaid, physical labour. Secondly it has no boundary as it can be brought to work, into leisure and sleep time and lastly it is never complete because it is tied to caring for loved ones which is constant.

Figure one illustrates how women's cognitive and emotional labour operates across domestic, productive, community and relational domains on a continuous basis. Rather than discrete tasks, mental load involves ongoing anticipation, coordination, and emotion regulation that sustains farm households and rural social systems (Little, 1987; Hochschild, 1983; Schirmer, 2013; Daminger, 2022).

Figure 1. Daily Mental Load of Rural Women



Source: Little (1987); Hochschild (1983); Schirmer (2013); Daminger (2022)

Figure illustrates reproductive; productive and emotional labour integration in rural contexts

Cognitive labour is anticipating needs, identifying options for meeting needs, making decisions and monitoring progress. “Put in simpler terms, it’s like project management for the household.” (Scott, 2026). McLean, et al. (2023) explains examples of domains of cognitive labour to include: food (deciding what food to buy and cook), logistics (maintaining the family calendar), cleaning (coordinating unpaid and paid cleaning), and home and care maintenance (recognising needed repairs, finding repair professionals). All of these take up a lot of head space but can’t be seen. In a family environment for a woman this cognitive labour is multiplied.

Emotional labour is managing your own emotions and the emotions of others. In a rural environment, managing the emotions of others can be in the household, in the community, in our own businesses and on our farms. With the fact that individuals are now more available through technology use there is sometimes no way to escape this load. Farming businesses and the services that support them don’t stop when you walk in the door at night. Scott (2026) discusses the fact that while there might be a partner in a relationship before a decision is made, a woman may do a lot of preparation before discussing options with their partner and will consider the emotions of the partner before putting the options in place.

Haupt and Gelbgiser (2024) highlighted that cognitive household labour—planning, organising, anticipating needs, coordinating schedules, managing social and emotional aspects of family life—remains heavily gendered across European countries. Women disproportionately carry the mental load, even when household tasks are physically shared. This cognitive work is often unrecognised and undervalued because it is less visible than physical housework. Barigozzi et al., (2025) surveyed 415 heterosexual couples in Italy, targeting the cognitive and emotional effort

involved in planning and managing household and childcare tasks. The study demonstrated that the mental load is heavily gendered and that men tend to underestimate women's organisational burden. Women were far more likely to be the default planner and reported higher emotional fatigue across all domains, including children's well-being, partner's well-being, execution of daily tasks and overall family balance.

Barigozzi et al., (2025) also found that for a great number of women the mental load crossed into the workplace, with 41% of women frequently thinking about household organisations at work versus 10% of men, and 47% of working women who do so for childcare tasks, versus 14% of men. It is likely that this influences work productivity. Women spend much more time on household work and childcare while men spend far more time in paid work. Interestingly, the survey did conclude that women are significantly less likely to be employed than men (70.4% vs 93.2%) and less likely to work full time (77.4% vs 96.1%). There were, however, no differences in the likelihood of holding a college degree nor in the years of education.

"Unpaid work remains highly gendered" (Oláh et al., 2018). Despite progress in employment Oláh et al., (2018) found that women still perform most unpaid work, including household labour, childcare and emotional management. Men's roles in these areas have expanded only gradually.

These ideas are all reinforced in the Rural Women Dilemma "The work women do is often the work that keeps everything together, yet it's the work least likely to be acknowledged," (Manikam, 2022)

5.2 The psychological differences between man and woman

Prior to this research, my preconceived belief was that women as a generalisation were kind, caring, looked after everyone else and were more emotional. Men were strong, tough, more reserved and not as good at sharing emotions. This led me on a search for what the psychological differences were. Amazingly, there are no psychological differences between men and women or anything of any significance, we are all born with the same emotions. It seems that the differences that we see are all up to our upbringing. Young girls are given dolls to look after, and young boys are given trucks. If a girl gets hurt, we will give them a hug and look after them and if a boy gets hurt, we will tell them to get up and walk it off. Although these are very generalised ideas and certainly not the case across all households, they do help explain some of the differences we see between men and women.

Research on the psychological differences between man and woman has been many, varied and still argued. Chu (2022) found that there are some psychological differences, but they are small. He finds that men and women are more alike than different across most psychological traits and where differences do exist, they are small to moderate not absolute or universal. Chu (2022) also found that nurture has a major influence. Parenting and environment strongly shape gender differences "parents use their children's sex to guide parenting decisions" (Chu, 2022). This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where gender roles are learned and repeated.

Schirmer (2013) emphasises that observed emotional differences between men and women are small, variable and strongly shaped by social context, rather than purely biological. Roles are developed through repeated social demands "roles reinforce emotional processing styles"

(Schirmer, 2013). Women frequently engage in anticipating others' needs, managing family tension and smoothing conflicts between work, family and community.

This was also highlighted in the Farmstrong (2018), where it was confirmed that women were usually the key support for their husbands/partners/families and tended to notice wellbeing issues before the men acknowledged them. One described "keeping an eye on the signs", (Farmstrong, 2018) as part of the role of the woman on the farm as "men are bad at bottling it up." (Farmstrong, 2018)

While most research has shown that there is no or very little difference between the psychological attributes of a man and a woman "traditional gender roles and society's expectations result in women taking on more of the mental load" (Scott, 2026).

Gray (1992) in contrast to the above argument believes that there are fundamental psychological differences between men and women:

1. Men and women cope differently with stress – men withdraw to process alone while women seek connection to talk things through.
2. Men need to feel competent by being trusted, needed and appreciated while women need to feel valued by feeling cherished, heard and understood. These are emotional needs and while they are different, they are complementary.
3. Men tend to use communication to solve or fix, while women tend to use communication to connect and to be heard.

It is important to note that Gray (1992) did not present these claims as scientific research findings; rather, they were based on his observations and opinion as a relationship writer. This means his argument sits outside the scientific evidence discussed above. The difficulty with Gray's view is that it treats men and women as fundamentally different psychological groups, when much of the research suggests that where differences do appear, they are often small, context-dependent and strongly shaped by socialisation, expectations and learned gender roles.

Gray's model also risks presenting culturally reinforced behaviours as natural or fixed differences. For example, if boys are encouraged to be independent, problem-solving and emotionally restrained, while girls are encouraged to be caring, communicative and emotionally aware, those patterns may appear later in adulthood as "male" and "female" traits. In the context of this research, Gray's opinion is therefore less useful than evidence-based explanations that recognise how rural women's mental load is shaped by social expectation, invisible labour, caregiving norms and the unequal distribution of cognitive and emotional responsibility. Rather than proving that men and women naturally think, cope or communicate in completely different ways, the scientific literature suggests that gendered patterns are more likely to be produced and reinforced by the environments, roles and expectations people live within.

5.3 The impact of not enough sleep

For adults, getting less than seven hours of sleep a night on a regular basis has been linked with poor health, including weight gain, having a body mass index of 30 or higher, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, and depression. (www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle-adult-health/exper-answers/how-many-hours-of-sleep-are-enough, n.d.)

Nowakowski et al., (2013) reviews how sleep quality, sleep disorders, and insomnia affect women differently than men. Reproductive hormones, life transitions and social roles have a strong influence on women's sleep and explain why women experience higher rates of insomnia and poorer sleep quality. "Women report poorer sleep quality and have a higher risk for insomnia than do men." (Nowakowski et al., 2013)

Nowakowski et al., (2013) found that shifts in estrogen and progesterone levels affect sleep; including increased sleep disturbance in premenstrual phase, progressive worsening of sleep across pregnancy and elevated insomnia risk during perimenopause and menopause. "Women are particularly vulnerable to developing insomnia disorder during times of reproductive hormonal change." (Nowakowski et al., 2013).

Overall, Nowakowski et al., (2013) found that sleep disturbances are common, biologically mediated and clinically significant across women's lives. Poor sleep impacts not only energy and fatigue, but also mental health, physical health and quality of life. They argue for better screening of sleep problems in women and greater recognition of hormonal and life-stage effects. "Identification and treatment of sleep disorders is vital to a woman's quality of life." (Nowakowski et al. 2013).

These ideas were also explored in Stone and Xiao (2018) where they found that sleep problems are highly prevalent, often under-diagnosed and have wide-ranging consequences for cardiometabolic health, depression, cognitive decline, falls and overall quality of life. This reports key findings showed that sleep problems increase with age and disproportionately affect women because as women age sleep typically becomes shorter and less efficient, more fragmented and slower to initiate. "Research evidence also suggests that women in particular are more likely to report aging-related sleep problems." (Stone and Xiao 2018).

Another key finding in Stone and Xiao (2018) was that poor sleep is strongly linked to physical health risks such as obesity and metabolic syndrome; hypertension, cardiovascular disease and stroke; diabetes and impaired glycaemic control. It was highlighted that sleep quality often matters more than sleep duration alone. "Sleep disorders and disturbances... are associated with adverse mental health outcomes including increased risk of depressive symptoms" (Stone and Xiao 2018) also found that sleep disturbance increased the risk of depression in older women through insomnia and poor sleep quality and fragmented sleep.

5.4 Current support, policy and models

Networks

This research looked directly for current support networks for rural women in New Zealand and identified the following:

Rural Women New Zealand

Rural Women New Zealand's (RWNZ) 2025-2028 strategy ruralwomennz.nz focuses on supporting rural women and their communities through three key areas: economic wellbeing, community wellbeing and personal wellbeing. It aims to strengthen opportunities for women by expanding leadership, business, and education programmes while also supporting local branches, advocacy and essential services in rural areas. A strong emphasis is placed on connection and accessibility, offering both online and face-to-face support. Building networks through initiatives such as

ConnectHER helps rural women navigate and access the right services early – particularly where distance and availability are barriers so they can better manage wellbeing, family and business pressures.

Rural Support Trust

The core existence of the Rural Support Trust is to “strengthen connection in Aotearoa New Zealand’s rural communities” (rural-support.org.nz.) They do this by providing help and support across 14 regions of NZ focusing on mental health and wellbeing; employee support; adverse events; financial pressure; employer support; animal welfare and biosecurity. The Rural Support Trust has over 300 trained staff available to assist. They pride themselves on being rural people themselves who operate locally and is strictly confidential.

Farmstrong Foundation

According to their website “Farmstrong is a nationwide wellbeing programme for the rural community. Our aim is to help you live well to farm well” (farmstrong.co.nz.) They have created a toolbox with tools and strategies for managing workload, stress and pressure. These tools and strategies are provided through a “variety of tips, podcasts, videos and resources that can be easily integrated into daily routines to help stay mentally fit, manage stress and improve your overall wellbeing”. They also hold events specifically for wellbeing and bring in guest speakers.

Agricultural Industry Levy Bodies

Industry bodies are funded via levies on commodities from their associated industry i.e. Dairy NZ – dairy farmers, Beef + Lamb New Zealand – sheep and beef, Hort NZ – horticulture, Vege NZ – vegetables etc. This is set up to enable industries to fund their industry-good activities. These industry levy bodies have a unique and influential role in shaping where funding is directed within the rural sector, but their structure both enables and limits investment into areas such as the mental load of women. Because these organisations are governed by industry-elected boards their spending priorities align with what the boards perceive as “industry good.” Although there are some strategies with a focus on rural women the typical focus is on productivity, profitability, environmental compliance and farm system performance.

Levy bodies can invest in initiatives that support mental wellbeing including programmes, tools or training that reduce stress and improve resilience as this clearly affects productivity, decision-making and staff retention and is visible so more likely to receive attention and funding. Whereas the mental load of rural women specifically may be more limited because it is often seen as a social or personal wellbeing issue, rather than a direct production issue. We discuss further the fact that mental load is invisible and gendered, meaning it can be undervalued or overlooked especially when it is not clearly connected to economic outcomes or industry performance.

If seen as a sector-wide issue with some outcomes related to the effect on productivity, decision-making and staff retention then it is more likely to be seen as an investment. My findings and discussion will show that this is a challenge to put towards funders.

Private Coaching

Private coaching is a personal investment in yourself. As an option for rural women private coaching offers a personalised, flexible and practical form of support. Allowing a step back from constant demands to reflect on priorities, values, and goals to help reconnect with their own identity beyond farm, family and community roles. Coaching can help with prioritisation, boundary setting and learning how to say no without guilt.

Accessibility can be online or in-person, but cost can sometimes be prohibitive to some.

Dairy Women's Network

Dairy Women's Network welcomes you to their website with the phrase "empowering women to do great things in the dairy sector." (dwn.co.nz.) They focus on helping women thrive through connection using events, education, webinars, and the creation of resources available to members to create personal development. They are funded through a mix of membership fees, partnerships and sponsorships. Understanding the funding model is important when we work out where our challenges lie in having the mental load of rural women acknowledged and getting personal development targeted in this space.

Agri-Women's Development Trust (AWDT)

AWDT is a New Zealand organisation focused on developing leadership capability in women (wahine) across the food and fibre sector. "When we grow, so does our whanau, whenua, community and impact" (awdt.org.nz)

These programmes offered focus on personal growth, career development and increasing women's impact in the sector. Programmes offered are short courses building self-awareness and leadership skills; multi-month programmes and opportunities for coaching, networking and connection with other rural women.

Funding is supported through a combination of programme fees paid by participants and strategic partnerships and sponsorships. This form of funding aligns with Dairy Women's Network so again becomes a challenge in making the mental load visible to funders.

Unfortunately, throughout the term of my research AWDT have made the announcement that in twelve months' time they will be closing down due to funding constraints. This strengthens the need to ensure collaboration from the different networks to secure funding and education.

Policy

Pae Ora (Healthy Futures) for all New Zealand was formed by the Ministry of Health in 2023. From the creation of Pae Ora there were six strategies formed. One of these was the Rural Health Strategy 2023, established to improve system planning and delivery to support rural communities with living long and healthy lives. This was implemented after finding that "rural communities" strengths, challenges, and outcomes have been overlooked in how health services are provided." Ministry of Health (2023). Health needs are often under-served, particularly in relation to accessing health services while remote communities and rural Māori feel this even more acutely."

Another of the strategies was the Women's Health Strategy and the vision for that was "all women will live longer in good health, and resilient whanau and communities, within health environments that sustain their health and wellbeing." Minister of Health (2023). It stresses that women must be heard, represented, and supported across all levels of the health sector – including leadership and the workforce.

One of the priority groups within this strategy was Rural Women, as it found that women in this group and the groups of Wahine Māori, Pacific Women and Disabled Women experienced worse health outcomes, poorer access and systemic bias. The Women's Health Strategy identified that "18.8% of women live rurally, and higher numbers of older women live in rural areas." Ministry of Health (2023). It highlighted that these structural inequities needed correction. The Women's Health Strategy also stated that "rural women are disproportionately affected by maternity

workforce shortages. Midwifery Council registration data analysed by rural/urban classification, shows that just 11% of registered midwives work in rural areas, whilst 18% of children aged between 0 and 4 years live in rural communities." Many of the Women's Health Strategy priorities link to the Rural Health Strategy such as Priority 2 – improving health care for issues specific to women links to the Rural Health Strategy Priority 3 – services are closer to home for rural communities.

While it is great to see the establishment of Pae Ora (Healthy Futures) 2022, with 5 – 10-year plans in place, it is important to ensure that these outcomes are measurable and monitored to ensure progress is made and to help drive action in key areas.

Models

The use of the Te Whare Tapa Wha, Model of Health – Mason Durie (1984), a Māori health advocate, is a fundamental tool in wellbeing assessment. This model is easy for all to understand and more widely used in education now. It is a balanced approach to understand how important it is to ensure that when all four walls are balanced, a person thrives; if one is weakened, overall wellbeing is affected. (Figure 2)

The four cornerstones of wellbeing.

1. Te Taha Tinana – Body – physical health
 - Eat well, sleep well, exercise
2. Te Taha Wairua – Soul – spiritual health
 - Acknowledge who you are, what you believe in and where you have come from.
3. Te Taha Hinengaro – Mind – psychological health
 - Understand how mental health can shift over time – recognise the signs.
 - Use resilience tools
4. Te Taha Whanau – Whanau – Family Health
 - Nurture and build your relationships
 - Keep an eye out for your buddies (and get them to do the same for you)

Figure 2. Te Whare Tapa Wha. Sourced from <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/te-whare-tapa-wha>



5.5 Barriers to support

Jaye et al., (2022) through their study found that regarding isolation in the physical environment, including the landscape and climate was seen as both an asset and a challenge. Participants expressed deep attachment to the land and its beauty. "We do have beautiful wide-open spaces, and we do need to appreciate it because not everyone has that." It's important to look at the positive side not the negative side of isolation. The challenge of isolation and limited healthcare access were significant particularly for mental health and aged care. Stoicism and self-reliance were common values but could act as barriers to seeking help. "The isolation and stress is a real problem, and there's this country thing about coping and not showing anyone you're down" (Jaye et al., 2022).

This report explored the idea that individuals had to be "rural fit" possessing the physical, social, and emotional capabilities to navigate the challenges of rural living. The report however did focus on the small rural community of Vale and only 17 adults participated so may not be representative of other areas (Jaye et al., 2022).

Haupt and Gelbgiser (2024) argue that policies addressing work–family balance often focus on time availability or childcare, but not on the hidden cognitive demands placed on women. Creating policies that promote equal parenting must acknowledge invisible planning work. Current workplace expectations such as work hours of 9am–5pm when school finishes at 3pm and lack of childcare options and facilities in rural areas add to the mental load.

Rural wellbeing initiatives often focus on the acute mental health crisis, farm stress, economic shocks and the weather but they rarely address chronic gendered overload, especially among women; the need to support women not only as supporter of farmer wellbeing but as primary wellbeing subjects.

"Women experience barriers to health service access, including cost, transport, and access to childcare. Health service design tends not to consider women within their broader whanau and environmental context" (Minister of Health 2023)

5.6 The traditional roles of women

I was once asked if I could write a list of all of the roles I played on a daily, weekly and monthly basis on. It was a big list, and I was told it was probably only half of what I did. I recently listened to a speaker who introduced herself in a very formal way and then went on to say that that was her LinkedIn introduction and now for her actual life introduction, before she listed all of the many things as a mum, business owner, wife, daughter, sister etc that she was and did. It highlighted for me the many roles that women cover daily.

The traditional roles of women were very domesticated. They were expected to keep the fires burning at home, cook the meals and have them on the table when the men came in from work. They were expected to look after and bring up the children. The expectation was that the woman did the housework – vacuuming, washing, bed changes, dusting and cleaning etc. A full-time role as it was. While the traditional role of the man was to go out to work and bring home an income. As time evolved and women wanted more, their role outside of the home increased but the domestic load never changed which led to what I see now as an increasing problem. Women are so busy meeting the expectations of the environment that they are in as well as their own self

expectations. "Somewhere along the way, many rural women forget who they are outside the farm and the family." (Manikam, 2022)

Zhu and Chang (2019) link traditional gender roles to life history strategies shaped by environmental risk. In harsh and unpredictable contexts, present-oriented reproductive strategies reinforce a sex-typed division of labour in which "women serve as caregivers and men as providers and protectors," (Zhu and Chang 2019) as such arrangements maximise reproductive success and survival. However, the authors emphasise that these roles are "evolved but not fixed," (Zhu and Chang 2019) weakening as societies become safer, more stable, and future-oriented, allowing greater flexibility and gender equality.

Oláh, et al. (2018) argued that the traditional male breadwinner – female caregiver model has weakened across Europe and replaced by more diverse family arrangements – most notably dual-earner households. "The male breadwinner model has been challenged across Europe," Oláh, et al., (2018) and "women's increased labour market participation is a defining shift" (Oláh, et al., 2018). Although women's paid employment has risen substantially, caregiving and domestic responsibilities remain unevenly distributed. This mismatch creates work-family strain, particularly for women, and highlights the need societal change rather than individual adaptation alone.

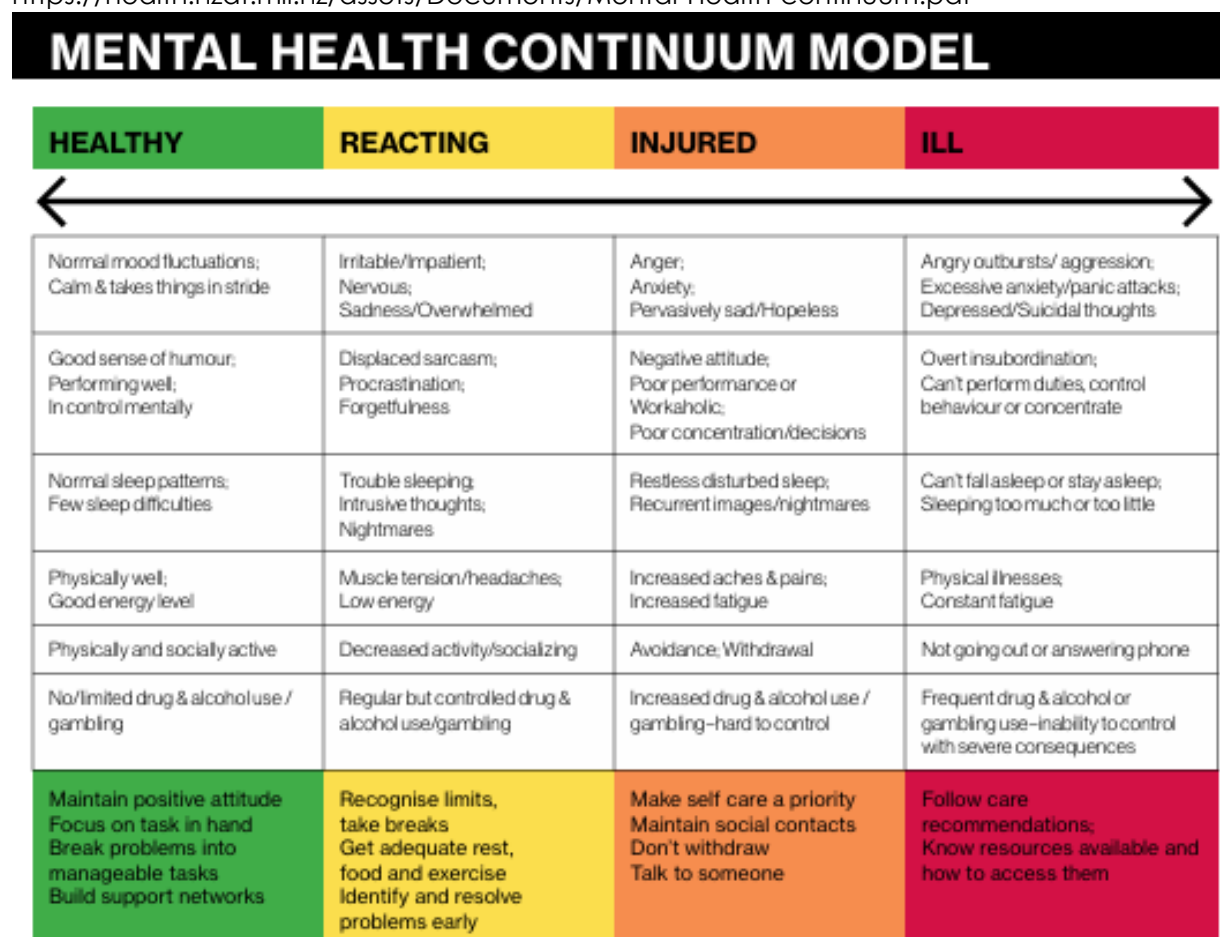
Taking the findings of Oláh et al., (2018) and relating them to New Zealand it would show that there is a strong need for institutional support not just social change. While there has been social change, the roles have shifted faster than policies and institutions producing greater stress rather than equality. Although the role of females in the labour force has increased rapidly there remains greater inequality in unpaid work, especially in rural areas where farming, family business and caregiving are intertwined. Rural women often combine paid farm or off-farm work, unpaid farm administration, childcare and eldercare and community volunteering. Without institutional recognition, this labour remains invisible and unsupported.

5.7 Mental Health Continuum Model

The Mental Health Continuum Model recognises that mental well-being fluctuates depending on life circumstances, stress, relationships, and other factors and that people can move in either direction along the continuum. The model highlights that mental health is not static, it encourages early recognition of challenges, and supports strategies to move toward flourishing, making it a valuable tool for individuals, organisations and mental health professionals. It is widely used in organisational psychology, military training and mental health education. The NZ Defence Force uses it in their Mental Health pocketbook (*appendix 1*).

The model has great strategies to take action as you find yourself in the various phases.

Figure 3. Mental Health Continuum Model. Sourced from <https://health.nzdf.mil.nz/assets/Documents/Mental-Health-continuum.pdf>



6. Method

This report investigates many aspects of mental load, mental health and previous research done on this topic.

The project was undertaken with human ethics approval from Lincoln University through the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme.

This research used a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative responses from open-ended survey questions and semi-structured interviews. The survey provided measurable insight into the scale and patterns of mental load experienced by rural women, while the interviews and written responses added depth, context and personal meaning to those patterns. Thematic analysis was then used across both the survey and interview results to identify recurring ideas, shared experiences and points of difference.

A survey (Appendix 4) was prepared which included some demographic questions and investigated the mental load of rural women, current situations and the factors affecting mental load and mental health. This survey was shared on Facebook via Farming Mums NZ, NZ Farming,

Dairy Women's Network and from here shared by individuals. The link was also sent on Agri-Women's Development Trust's monthly newsletter. I reached out to some other organisations, in the hope that they would share my survey, but they did not return my communication.

I participated in a radio interview for "The Muster" on Hokonui Gold with Andy Muir. This was an opportunity to explain my research, what brought me to this space and promote the ability to voice through my survey which was then shared on The Muster's Facebook page.

Throughout the course of my project, I undertook 15 interviews with women in leadership roles across our industry. These interviews were recorded via Teams' video and transcripts via this system. Although I had some questions (Appendix 2), I was happy to just see where the conversation took us as I understand that the journey to where we are is different for everybody. All interviewees signed the Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme standard consent forms prior to the interview which confirmed their answers would remain confidential and any direct quotations used in my report would be anonymous. From these interview transcripts I identified key themes and used them to aid in findings and discussions. There were some participants that indicated a desire to be interviewed but when an inability to set up an interview happened twice, I decided that I didn't want to add to someone's mental load by chasing up again. All people completing the surveys and interviews had the opportunity to withdrawal from the survey and/or interview at any time prior to and during the survey/interview occurring.

I chose to interview women in leadership roles across the industry because they could offer a broader, more informed perspective than individual lived experience alone. As women who have worked across farms, organisations, communities and leadership spaces, they were well placed to reflect on the patterns they see among rural women, the pressures that are often hidden, and the wider industry structures that either support or intensify mental load. They also brought insight from their own leadership journeys, including how they have managed competing roles, set boundaries, invested in personal development and navigated expectations around family, farm, work and community. Their perspectives helped connect individual experiences of mental load with broader themes such as support systems, childcare, volunteering, guilt, identity and the need for industry recognition and change.

Survey and interview responses were reviewed for common language, repeated concerns and underlying meanings, allowing key themes to emerge across the data. This approach strengthened the analysis by ensuring that the findings were not based only on numerical trends, but also reflected the lived experiences, emotions and realities expressed by rural women in their own words.

Also included in my findings and discussion are the comments and thoughts that arose just through day-to-day conversations held with friends, colleagues and family.

7. Analysis

The following section summarises the analysis of my survey.

198 responses – 2 selected not to continue, 196 fully responded.

Appendix 3. graphically illustrates the demographic responses of those surveyed.

Age Demographics

37% of respondents were aged 30-39 years, followed by 31% 40-49 years and 16% 50-59 years of age. There were a small proportion over the age of 60 and 11% of those surveyed were aged 20-29 years. (Appendix 3.1)

Regional Demographics

32% of respondents were from Southland followed by 20% in the Waikato and 15% in Canterbury. We then seemed to have a small percentage 1-7% of respondents across each of the other regions. The numbers in Southland may have been due to my connections in Southland as I reside in that area. (Appendix 3.3)

Stage of Life

77% of respondents indicated that they were currently married or living with a partner and had children. This may be due to my main distribution of the survey going through the Farming Mums NZ facebook page. 13% of respondents were married or living with a partner, while being single or a solo mum were 6% and 3% respectively. (Appendix 3.4)

Areas of Involvement

193 respondents responded to this question 178 of which are involved in the farm while 152 respondents had children. 110 women indicated an involvement in an off-farm business/employment with an additional 17 women indicating an involvement in other. Further investigation of what other was showed off-farm business, on-farm associated business or employment. 66% of respondents had community involvement. (Appendix 3.5)

8. Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the survey responses and interviews identified a consistent set of key findings about the mental load carried by rural women. Across both data sources, the issue was not simply that women were busy, but that they were carrying the ongoing responsibility for planning, anticipating, organising, caring, deciding and emotionally supporting others across home, farm, work and community life. The survey results provided evidence of the scale of the issue, while the interviews added depth and explanation by showing how these pressures are experienced, managed and often normalised. Together, the findings show that mental load is cumulative, gendered and largely invisible, with significant implications for wellbeing, identity, decision-making, workforce participation, relationships and the sustainability of rural families and farm businesses.

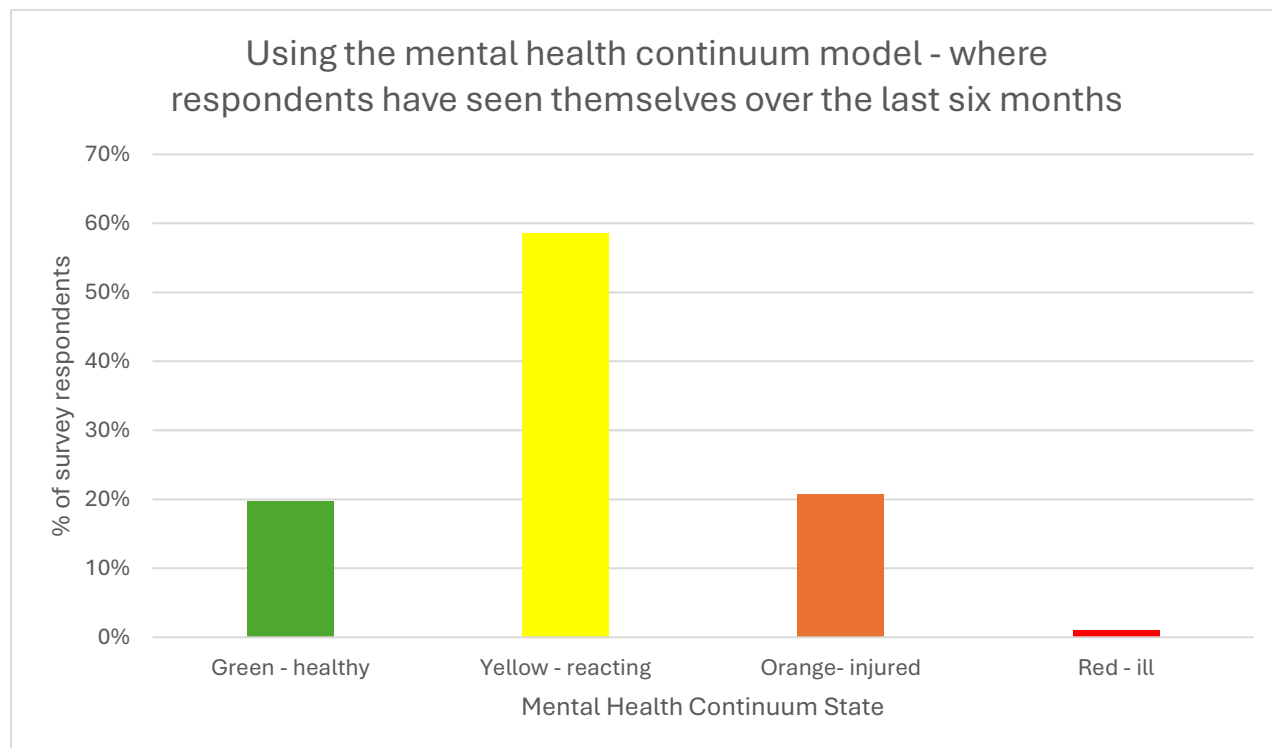
- **Mental load is invisible but constant:** Rural women described carrying the thinking, planning and emotional oversight that keeps households, farms and communities functioning, even when this work is not easily seen or formally recognised.
- **Rural life intensifies pressure:** Geographic isolation, limited services, seasonal workload, weather events and the blending of home and workplace make it difficult for women to switch off or separate competing roles.

- **Women are often the default coordinators:** Even where practical tasks are shared, women commonly remain responsible for noticing what needs to be done, planning ahead, organising others and following up.
- **Wellbeing is being affected:** Survey results showed high levels of mental exhaustion, task overload and a large proportion of women identifying as reacting or injured on the Mental Health Continuum, indicating sustained strain rather than short-term busyness.
- **Support is often inaccessible or mismatched:** Childcare, healthcare, mental health services, professional development and practical help are frequently limited by distance, cost, availability, timing and rural relevance.
- **Guilt and comparison sustain overload:** Many women described internalised expectations to do it all, say yes, be strong and appear capable, which makes it harder to ask for help or prioritise themselves.
- **Personal development builds confidence:** Interviews highlighted that investing in self, understanding personal values, setting boundaries and learning to say no are important tools for reducing guilt and managing capacity.
- **Structural and cultural change is needed:** The findings suggest that individual coping strategies are not enough; reducing mental load requires recognition of invisible labour, shared responsibility, rural-specific support systems and industry acknowledgement of women's contribution.

8.1 Mental Health Continuum Model

As discussed in the literature review the Mental Health Continuum is a model used to depict where individuals sit in terms of mental health. The model depicts that you can go between each colour over a period of time. Those surveyed were asked where they saw themselves over the last six months. 59% of those surveyed indicated that they saw themselves as reacting, 21% as injured, 20% as healthy and 1% as ill. These results are concerning given that 81% of women did not see themselves as healthy.

Figure 5. Respondents indications to where they have seen themselves over the last six months on the mental health continuum model.



My preconceived thinking was that the idea of ages and stages would depict the phase where women would frequently see themselves on the mental health continuum model. But my survey responses indicated that there is no significant relationship between what age you are (*Appendix 3.2*) and stage of life (*Appendix 3.9*) you are in and where women feel they sit on the mental health continuum model.

8.2 Pressures of rural life

"I feel that it is one of the only jobs where you can experience physical, mental, and emotional strain/stress" survey response.

93% (*Appendix 3.7*) of our survey responses indicated that they did believe there were some unique pressures associated with rural life that others may not understand. It's important to highlight that this survey was focused on rural women, and we do not know if they have experienced any other living other than rural. The responses could also be indicative of the pressures also felt by men in the rural industry and/or all women at some stage in their lives.

Survey respondents indicated that rural life creates a distinct and cumulative set of pressures that differ markedly from urban living, largely due to the inseparable nature of work, home, and place. For rural women, these pressures are intensified by the constant demands of farming systems, geographic isolation, limited access to services, and deeply gendered expectations regarding care, work, and community contribution.

Across survey responses it was shown that a defining feature of rural pressure is the 24/7 responsibility inherent in farming. The free text survey responses consistently highlighted that farming does not stop - animals must be fed, milked, monitored, and cared for every day, regardless of illness, family crises, extreme weather, or exhaustion, one survey respondent commented "the farm and animal health comes first and isn't always planned." Women describe never being able to truly "switch off," as the farm is both their workplace and their home. Even time away from the farm is mentally occupied by concern for stock, weather events, staff issues, or machinery breakdowns. This constant vigilance creates a persistent cognitive load that urban workers, who can physically and mentally leave their workplace, do not experience.

Time pressure and unpredictability further compound these demands. Rural women juggle long working hours - often seven days a week - alongside parenting, household management, business administration and in many cases, off-farm employment. Daily plans are routinely disrupted by urgent and non-negotiable farm needs such as sick animals, weather changes, or equipment failures. As a result, personal commitments are frequently cancelled or avoided altogether, contributing to social withdrawal, guilt, and frustration. Many women note that friends and family outside the rural sector struggle to understand why plans cannot be kept, reinforcing a sense of being misunderstood and unsupported. One survey respondent commented that "the farm and animal health comes first and isn't always planned. Friends/family sometimes don't understand why they don't see you for so long."

Geographic distance and travel demands are another significant pressure unique to rural living. Accessing healthcare, childcare, schooling, groceries, social activities, and sports often involves long travel times, high fuel costs, and complex logistics - particularly when children are involved. Respondents describe spending hours each week driving, waiting, or coordinating transport, with little flexibility or margin for error. Distance also reduces opportunities for self-care, preventative health, and informal social connection, increasing fatigue and isolation.

A recurring theme is role overload and the necessity of wearing multiple hats. Rural women frequently carry responsibility for farm labour, administrative and compliance work, financial management, household tasks, parenting, and community involvement simultaneously. These roles often overlap and occur in the same physical space, leaving little opportunity to focus on a single task without interruption. Unlike urban households, rural families have limited access to paid supports such as childcare, cleaners, meal services, or after-school care, meaning much of this labour remains invisible and unpaid.

The data from surveys also reveals strong gendered expectations that contribute to mental load. Despite women's substantial contribution to both farm businesses and household income, many respondents report ongoing assumptions that they are "not really working," or that their primary role is supportive rather than essential. One survey respondent commented "I think in a lot of ways rural life for women hasn't evolved from the single breadwinner mind set yet the ability to live off a single shepherd/stock manager wage has. Women are expected to maintain all the typical farm wife roles AND earn an income." Rural women are often expected to maintain traditional caregiving roles while also earning income, assisting on the farm, and volunteering in their communities. This expectation to be endlessly capable, flexible, and resilient - while appearing to cope - adds emotional strain and limits help-seeking.

Isolation and loneliness emerge as pervasive pressures. Physical distance, long hours, lack of childcare, and community change make it difficult to build and maintain social relationships. While rural communities are often described as close-knit, many women report difficulty accessing them due to time, exhaustion, or established social groups. Loneliness is particularly acute for

women whose peers have moved away or who live far from extended family, reinforcing the sense of carrying their responsibilities alone.

Finally, rural pressure is intensified by the emotional weight of responsibility for living systems and livelihoods. Women describe the strain of managing animals, land, staff, and family finances in environments shaped by factors beyond their control, such as weather events, market volatility, regulation, and public perception of farming. Decisions carry high stakes - not only for their own families, but for employees and animals who depend on them - adding moral and emotional pressure to an already demanding workload.

Interviewees described what they see more as a difference in mix of stressors between rural and urban women. These women highlighted geographic distance, limited transport, fewer services and the reality of living and working in the same place – making it harder to “leave work at work” and increasing the sense of always being on-call. Seasonal variability and weather events added unpredictability, while small-community visibility increased perceived judgement and pressure to cope. Participants also noted that when services or social outlets do not exist locally, rural women often create them themselves – sometimes helpful for connection, but also another layer of volunteer responsibility.

One of my interviewees commented that they felt a degree of separation was a difference between rural and urban living. “Rural women who live on a farm, work where they live, so have no sense of separation. In an urban environment you can have a degree of separation where you can leave stuff behind. You still have a mental load, but “your basket might be bigger or smaller depending on where you go.”

Another lady spoken to highlighted the impact that feeding of staff and unexpected guests could have on her. Planning and buying food for unknown quantities is tricky and a sudden need to feed extras could throw them out. Geographic distance meant that there is no easy option like whipping to the shops for extra ingredients or getting takeaways when everyone is late home and exhausted.

Together, these factors create a mental load that is continuous, complex, and uniquely rural, shaped by the convergence of paid work, unpaid labour, emotional responsibility, geographic isolation, and cultural expectations. While rural women display significant resilience and adaptability, the responses indicate that this comes at a cost to wellbeing, rest, social connection, and self-care - costs that are often unseen and poorly understood outside the rural context.

8.3 Organising your day

One survey question asked, “When life gets busy what gets dropped first?” Of respondents, 42% indicated that the first thing that got dropped was themselves, 23% reported reducing time spent with friends and 18% reported compromising on healthy food choices (Appendix 3.6) Each of these areas is very important. Nutritious food, physical activity for self and time out support overall wellbeing, while social connection is a key protective factor in managing mental load, enabling experiences and challenges to be shared and processed.

The survey and interview responses show that rural women actively organise their days as a deliberate strategy to manage mental load, with organisation functioning less as a preference and more as a necessity for coping within the unpredictability of the farming environment.

Organisation is used to reduce cognitive overload, create a sense of control and buffer against the constant disruption inherent in rural life.

- **Advance Preparation to Reduce Daily Decision-Making**

A prominent strategy is doing as much as possible ahead of time, particularly in the evenings or on weekends. Women describe preparing daycare and school lunches the night before, meal-planning one to two weeks in advance, batch cooking, stocking freezers with easy meals, and laying out clothes and bags ahead of time. This advance preparation reduces the number of decisions required on busy mornings and provides reassurance that core family needs will be met even if the day unravels. One respondent commented that they “plan, meals, schedules, premade food, but I end up staying up late doing this.”

This forward planning indicates an awareness that farm demands may escalate at any moment, leaving little capacity to manage basic household logistics on the day itself.

- **Use of Lists, Calendars and Visual Systems to Contain Mental Load**

Almost all responses reference lists, diaries, calendars, whiteboards and phone reminders. These tools are used to move tasks and obligations “out of the head” and into visible or digital systems. Many women keep multiple lists for different contexts (e.g. town trips, farm jobs, weekend tasks), alongside shared family or work calendars to coordinate competing demands. A survey respondent said that they “Write lists, set alarms, utilize a calendar.”

This externalisation of information reduces memory strain and anxiety around forgetting tasks, appointments, or commitments – an important mental load management strategy.

- **Routine as a Stabilising Structure in an Unpredictable Environment**

Many participants rely on strict routines – such as regular wake times, morning and evening sequences and set days for administrative or household jobs – to anchor their days. Routines provide predictability and help preserve mental energy when external factors like weather, animal health or staffing cannot be controlled.

However, the responses also show that routines are frequently disrupted, requiring women to constantly reset and adapt, which itself adds to the cognitive load.

“I’m not very good at organising my day because I’m always called on to “help.” In the yards, on the tractor, move a mob, roll up an electric wire, etc.”

- **Early Starts and Late Nights to Create “Thinking Time”**

A significant number of women organise their days around early mornings and late evenings, often waking before children or staying up after they are asleep. These times are used for planning, admin, meal preparation and organising the following day.

Many survey respondents and interviewees indicated that the first thing they do in the morning is go for a walk/run, attend the gym or just have a coffee to make the most of some quiet time, have some processing time and listen to a podcast while ensuring they get some exercise for the day. Even if things didn’t go to plan for the day, they had enjoyed some time for themselves.

This pattern reveals that mental load management often happens outside of visible work hours and frequently replaces rest or leisure time.

- **Task Prioritisation and Acceptance of Trade-Offs**

Women consistently describe organising their day by prioritising non-negotiables first – animal care, milking, children’s needs, urgent farm tasks – and allowing less critical tasks to wait or be dropped altogether. Some respondents explicitly mention learning to “pick battles”, let go of housework standards or accept that not everything will get done. One survey respondent said that coping was “being happy dropping some balls.”

This prioritisation reflects an ability to be adaptive to a changing plan or changing environment.

- **Delegation, Shared Systems, and Teaching Independence**

Where possible, women reduce mental load by delegating tasks to partners, staff or children and by empowering children to manage their own responsibilities. Shared calendars, family discussions and household task systems are used to distribute cognitive labour, though many respondents note this is easier when children are older or additional support is available. One survey response on this question was “Delegate! My kids are teens now, and I expect more of them than my urban friends expect of theirs. They just have to be self-sufficient.”

Despite these efforts, many women remain the central coordinator, carrying the mental responsibility even when tasks are shared.

- **Organisations as Constant, Ongoing Cognitive Work**

Importantly, several respondents state that organisation never fully works because rural life is shaped by short notice demands. Women describe frustration at carefully made plans being undone by urgent farm needs, while still recognising that planning is essential to prevent complete overload.

This highlights a key insight: organisation does not eliminate mental load for rural women – it contains and manages it, often at personal cost.

- **Emotional Regulation and Self-Management Strategies**

Some women incorporate walks, brief exercise or quiet moments into their routine to help clear their mind and emotionally reset. However, these strategies are often fitted around work rather than protected in their own right, reinforcing how mental load management is secondary to farm and family needs.

8.4 What rural women are doing for themselves daily

Survey respondents described small but meaningful daily practices they associate with “time for themselves.”

While many note challenges in finding uninterrupted time, clear patterns emerge around simple, restorative activities that fit around demanding rural lives, work, family and farm responsibilities.

- **Coffee or Tea as a Daily Ritual**

The most dominant theme is drinking coffee or tea. Often described as first thing in the morning, a reason to pause however brief or a moment of quiet or solitude. This ritual is less about the drink itself and more about the permission to stop, sit down and breathe. Many

women specifically mention sitting outside or on the deck, enjoying the view, paddock, animals or morning light and even just having the drink alone without devices.

- **Exercise and Movement**

Exercise is one of the most frequently mentioned intentions, though often an if or a but is added. "If I can," "doesn't always happen," "first thing to go when busy or tired." Common forms of exercise include walking (often with dogs), gym or Pilates, yoga, short workouts (10-20minutes), step goals (10,000-15000 steps) or training for specific events (e.g. Ironman). Managed exercise is described as a stress relief, essential for mental health and a way to "move my body" rather than being performance focused.

- **Showers as Personal Time**

Although a core form of self-care, a long, uninterrupted shower appears repeatedly as a "peaceful" and relaxing tool for personal time. To "shower alone", in a "hot" shower at the "end of the day" was highly valued. For some it includes skincare, relaxation or the transition from work mode to rest. A very reliable form of daily personal time with privacy and sensory comfort.

- **Quiet, Stillness and Solitude**

The need for mental rest not stimulation was highlighted in our respondents' desire for silence and to be unneeded even if only briefly. Sitting in silence for 5-30 minutes, sitting outside without interruption, watching livestock or animals, sitting in the paddock or garden or "catching my breath" all showed as being restorative and emotionally important in otherwise demanding days.

- **Reading, Audio Books and Podcasts**

Reading is widely enjoyed but often limited by fatigue and time. Night-time reading is common "if I don't fall asleep." Audio books and podcasts are popular because they fit around chores. Some note reading only a few books per year despite loving it. Reading is associated with winding down, escaping mentally and sleep routines.

- **Connection with Animals and Nature**

A unique rural theme is time with animals and the land, described as "deeply therapeutic", spending time with horses, watching cattle, walking barefoot on grass, wandering around the gardens and giving animals pats were some of the moments seen as emotional resets, calming and perspective giving.

- **Sleep and Rest**

Often lacking but frequently mentioned with a subtle sense of humour going to bed early, power naps or simply "sleep" are also acknowledged. Many recognise chronic tiredness and a lack of consistent rest. Sleep is highly valued, but often insufficient.

- **Creative or Personal Interests**

Some women mention knitting, craft or paint-by-numbers, journaling, genealogy and brain puzzles. These activities are usually for a short stint of 10-20 minutes, done when energy allows and are comforting rather than productivity focused.

- **Not Having Time**

Seen by a minority of responses simply state "I don't do anything for myself", "don't even know the answer" or "never have." For me this highlights a gap between desire and reality for some rural women.

All these themes were reiterated through those interviewed. These are small practical steps, but many also discussed the importance of professional development, where they had invested in themselves and worked on developing strategies to ensure they managed their mental load. Knowing the importance of knowing your own values, knowing your why and having a purpose made it easier to say "no," to be able to ask yourself if a role or a task was a good fit. "So, if you clearly know what the purpose is of why you're here and why you've been asked to do things, you know whether it aligns to your value set or not."

We are ultimately in charge of our own time, one of my interviewees commented "as a workaholic there has to be some checks and balances and you're the only one that can do that, I mean your partner and your friends can help, but ultimately it's got to come from you."

8.5 What would help reduce mental load

Based on the survey responses, rural women describe mental load as a combination of constant responsibility, planning, anticipation and emotional labour, layered on top of physical work, paid work, family life, farming and community expectations. The following themes consistently emerged as what would most meaningfully reduce that load.

- **More Practical Help**

The most frequently mentioned factor was having more hands to share the load, particularly with tasks that are constant but invisible. This included but were not limited to; a cleaner or housekeeper; a nanny, childcare or help with school-aged children; extra farm staff or a reliable worker; bookkeepers or admin support; someone to help when the farm is busiest.

Many women noted this help is desired but often unaffordable or unavailable in rural areas, which adds frustration on top of the existing load.

- **Partners Taking an Equal Share of the Mental Load**

Across the responses, women were very clear that help is not just about doing tasks but about thinking, planning, noticing and anticipating needs. Women described needing:

- partners who take responsibility without being asked
- shared planning for children, household and farm logistics
- less explaining, reminding and managing
- equal ownership rather than helping out. "Sharing it with someone, but not having to tell them, have them know/anticipate... e.g. seeing things that need doing - unloading dishwasher, putting something on grocery list, putting on dirty washing etc"

Several responses explicitly stated that even when partners do physical work, the mental load remains with the woman.

- **Saying No and Having Fewer Commitments**

A strong recurring theme was the pressure to sit on committees, volunteer in the community; support school, sports and local organisations and be “the reliable one.” Many women expressed guilt about stepping back, especially when they feel no one else will step up.

Mental load would reduce with permission to say no both internally and externally; dropping community roles or reducing involvement; less expectation that rural women “do everything.”

- **Less Work and More Financial Stability**

Money and workload are deeply intertwined to mental load. Women identified relief would come from; being able to work fewer hours off farm; not needing multiple income streams; reduced debt and financial pressure; stable income that allows outsourcing help and less micro-managing of finances.

Several noted that financial stress forces them to do everything themselves therefore increasing mental fatigue. Many of those interviewed discussed that we have a culture of in New Zealand of rewarding people that can burn out. We live in a society that looks up to those that work all the hours under the sun and thinks that they work so hard and are doing so well and this may not always be the case.

- **Better Childcare and Family Support**

Childcare was one of the most clearly defined needs. The need for childcare to be closer to home, flexible or part-day options, supportive during peak farm times and family help is not often available but can be so helpful.

Without childcare, women described being unable to catch up on tasks, rest, attend appointments or to focus fully on work. If childcare was available, availability did not always reflect on farm hours i.e. early starts or late finishes.

- **Better Systems, Planning and Organisation**

As seen, many women already use strategies to cope such as lists, weekly planning, calendars, mind-dumping and prioritising tasks. They identified that mental load would reduce further with clearer systems, better communication (especially from schools and organisations), more notice for events and deadlines, digital or admin tools, fewer surprises and last-minute demands.

- **Reduced Bureaucracy and External Pressures**

Women repeatedly mentioned frustration with compliance paperwork, red tape, farming regulations, school expectations on parents and external organisations not understanding farming realities. They described much of this work being done after hours, adding to mental fatigue.

- **Understanding, Support and Being Seen**

Emotional support was as important as practical help. Women identified relief through understanding from partners, family and others; being acknowledged for the load they carry, talking with others in similar situations, access to counsellors who understand farming life and community members offering help without being asked.

- **Time, Rest and Slowing Down**

Many responses boiled down to needing more time in the day, less things to juggle and the ability to slow down, some time to rest or recover physically and an ability to switch off mentally, especially at night. The reality of this though is that there is actually no more time in a day.

Several women linked mental load directly to physical exhaustion or health issues.

Self-help strategies described in interviews were practical, routine-based and often small. Daily actions included early morning walks or exercise, planning and list making, meal planning, carving out short periods of quiet (a coffee, five minutes of reading), limiting social media, getting off-farm and using boundaries to protect family time.

Those interviewed were clear that what would most reduce mental load is not another task, but fewer competing demands; shared responsibility at home (including the “making the list” work), reliable childcare, realised expectations from communities/sector, permission to step back from volunteering and easier access to support without fear of judgement or negative consequences. Developing interventions that encourage cognitive labour sharing (not just physical task sharing) is essential for gender equality.

A consistent theme from interviews was the “invisible” work women take on in farm management – bookwork, compliance, accounts, people management, scheduling and planning – often alongside hands-on farm tasks. Several interviewees noted that these responsibilities can be underestimated by others, but they significantly contribute to mental load, particularly when combined with childcare, community roles and the expectation to be emotionally steady for the family.

8.5 Leaving a paid job or career to focus on your family or farm work

Responses to this survey question revealed a strong, consistent pattern among rural women; leaving paid employment is rarely a simple preference or short-term choice. Instead, it is most often a rational, values-driven and necessity-based response to the realities of rural living, farming systems, motherhood, limited infrastructure and gendered expectations within farm businesses.

Across the survey responses 60% (*Appendix 3.15*) of women said that they have left a paid job or career to focus on family or farm. Women describe structural constraints rather than individual failure, highlighting that rural life creates conditions where stepping away from paid employment becomes the most viable option.

Key Themes Emerging from Rural Women's Experiences

- **Caregiving, Motherhood and the “Invisible Job” of Rural Life**

The dominant reason for leaving paid work is children and caregiving, particularly during early years, school transitions, health needs or neurodiversity. Rural women repeatedly frame their decision as a desire to be present, available and hands-on. The realities of long distances to childcare, school and workplaces; the fact that farm work is unpredictable and cannot be “paused” and partners working long, inflexible hours during calving, lambing, milking,

groundwork or seasonal peaks. Many women describe a constant state of rushing, stress and exhaustion when attempting to combine off-farm work with family and farm responsibilities. Leaving paid employment is often described as the only way to protect family wellbeing and mental health. One respondent said “I wasn’t sacrificing time with my children to enhance my career” while another commented that “a job is a job, but I won’t miss my baby’s milestones”

This language reflects a deeply held rural value: family presence over professional advancement – but often at personal and financial cost.

- **Childcare as a Critical Rural Barrier**

Childcare is repeatedly named as unavailable, unaffordable, requiring long travel distances or inflexible making paid work impractical. Specific rural challenges include long travel times just to access daycare; costs negating wages earned; incompatibility with farm hours (early mornings, late finishes, weekends); lack of care for children with additional needs. For many women the “choice” to leave work was economic common sense as one commented “most of what I earned went on childcare and fuel.”

This highlights that rural childcare access is an employment issue, not merely a family one.

- **Farm Labour Needs and Gendered Expectations**

A significant number of women leave paid work because: the farm needs more labour; paid staff are unavailable, unreliable or unaffordable; partners are under pressure and struggling.

Women step in as unpaid or under-recognised labour, often absorbing responsibility for calves, paperwork, compliance, accounts, staff coordination and crisis response.

Several respondents explicitly state that they gave up careers to support their partner’s farming commitment, their contribution is essential but unpaid and that their career progression was deprioritised in favour of the farm’s survival. This reflects a persistent gender dynamic in farming, where women’s paid careers are more likely to be sacrificed to stabilise the farm business.

One of my interviewees even stated that sometimes a women went farming because she loved farming and didn’t particularly enjoy paperwork either. However, as the women were often the default parent or had their role seen as being more inside, they automatically became the bookkeeper as well, which wasn’t always a role they enjoyed, it just happened by default.

One survey respondent commented “when you have a farming business and you are a woman it is challenging at times. I feel like people make me feel like I am a farmer’s wife/cook and cleaner. But when I had a career off farm, I felt valued and respected. There are numerous occasions in farm meetings where I have been made to feel like the farm is only my husband’s business despite us working together in our business and sharing all business decisions. I work big hours on the farm for 6 months of the year, but the workload reduces in January.”

An idea also shared in the findings of the Farmstrong Research was that most women interviewed relied on talking to their partners as a key strategy for dealing with stress. However, if their partners were also stressed, the women often placed supporting their husband’s needs above their own. Farmstrong Research Summary – Farming Women on Their Wellbeing (2018).

- **Geography, Distance and Isolation**

Physical location plays a critical role. Commutes of 1-2 hours each way, limited local job options, especially in specialised professions and a loss of confidence when out of industry for extended periods all lead to reasons behind responders' decision to leave a career. Distance turns even part-time work into a logistical and emotional burden. One survey response noted that "by the time I drove, milked, worked, picked up kids and fed calves, there was nothing left" and another "part-time employment is very stressful and limited to find."

Rural isolation also compounds mental health strain, professional isolation and loss of adult social and intellectual engagement. Some women describe missing connection and personal satisfaction, even while valuing their family-farm role.

- **Burnout, Mental Health and Breaking Points**

Burnout appears frequently in responses. Comments of severe mental health episodes, physical exhaustion and breakdown from carrying "too many plates." For some having children provided a socially acceptable exit from unsustainable workloads "burnout.... Having kids was almost a 'get out of jail free' card".

Women describe leaving paid work not as retreat, but as self-preservation.

- **Career Sacrifice, Identity Loss and Re-shaped Ambition**

Many respondents speak of giving up long-trained professions such as teaching, accounting, banking and animal science. They speak of reduced career momentum due to repeated moves for a partner's work and accepting lower-level roles or reduced hours later.

As a positive approach to this though they do also speak of pride in building farm businesses; diversification, self-employment, tourism or industry good roles. The satisfaction in the flexibility and the alignment of farming with their identity has shone through immensely.

Collectively the responses have shown that leaving paid employment is usually rational and it has shown that rural women carry disproportionate unpaid labour. It has also emphasised that current systems of childcare, employment flexibility and recognition of farm roles are not designed for the reality of rural living. Women have shown that they are highly adaptive, resilient and values driven.

This was also seen in the Farmstrong research that confirmed that there is plenty about farming life that women love despite its challenges. For many women, farming brings a genuine sense of accomplishment, reward and recognition. For some this manifested in winning 'dairy industry awards,' 'hitting targets and getting good results on farm and having your name out in the farming sector.' Others liked the sense of achievement and task-driven nature of the work, 'ticking things off'. Farmstrong (2018)

8.6 Support needed

Discussions with interview participants found support to be information and relationship based. Interviewees commonly described relying on partners (where supportive), close friends and extended whanau to share decisions, childcare and household tasks. It certainly takes a village and where this existed it reduced isolation and enabled women to seek help and enabled

investment in personal growth earlier; where it did not, women reported carrying issues alone until they reached capacity.

Formal support (e.g. Rural Support Trust, counselling, Farmstrong, counselling and programmes) were recognised as valuable, but participants noted that visibility and messaging often felt male-oriented, and that practical barrier (time, childcare, travel and cost) determine whether support is usable in day-to-day rural life. “Lots of the mental health support for rural families focuses on men. Women need support too.” One survey respondent commented that “if my father-in-law tells me, ‘lucky you’re so strong’ one more time I won’t be responsible for my actions!”

Current support ranged from practical help partners cooking, sharing farm and household duties, older children contributing to emotional support friends who “don’t judge”, mentors and trusted peers. Participants emphasised that support is easiest to access when it is woven into existing routines – quick check-ins, community-based conversations and local connection points – rather than clinical or highly transactional services that require appointments, travel or meeting a crisis threshold.

It’s important that when we look at what support is needed that we consider the barriers that exist for support.

8.7 Barriers to support

Over half of respondents indicated (Appendix 3.14) that it was extremely difficult (7%) or somewhat difficult (47%) to access healthcare, childcare or mental health services. Only 19% indicated that access was somewhat easy or extremely easy. Leaving 27% indicating that it was neither easy nor difficult. It would be useful to break this down to find whether there was a difference in access to these areas individually. Accessibility could be difficult due to availability, affordability, location and hours.

Barriers described in interviews centred on the compounding nature of rural women’s roles. Participants spoke of balancing farm work (often including paperwork/accounting/HR), childcare and school logistics, household management, community volunteering and in many cases paid work or business interests off farm. The pressures of rural life included distance limited public transport, seasonal workload peaks, small-community visibility and judgement, and reduced access to services and these intensified both practical barriers and the emotional load. Cost of living increases, travel costs and time constraints were repeatedly linked to reduced social connection and reduced uptake of support or professional development even when women recognised these as protective factors. One interviewee described that she had an annual budget set aside for professional development, she utilised activities that came at no cost and prioritised those that had a cost to reflect where she felt her need was mostly situated.

There was also a cultural barrier to support. Culturally, stigma about counselling, fear of repercussions (e.g. firearms licensing/insurance implications) and community judgement (including perceived expectations to “cope” and to prioritise farm and family above self) discouraged help-seeking.

8.8 Investment in self grows confidence

One of the key themes that stood out through my interviews was the importance of investment in yourself. These were seen as the strongest and most consistent ways of growing confidence. This was framed as both a protective factor and an early casualty of pressure. Women described using leadership programmes, mentoring, values-based decision-making and learning to say “no” as key tools to manage capacity. These forms of investment were not simply about skill acquisition; they were confidence building mechanisms. Engagement in these structured development opportunities gave women the language, tools and validation needed to trust their own judgement, navigate complex decisions and set boundaries to ensure self-care.

However rising costs and tight seasons meant personal development, social connection and even basic self-care were the first things to drop off – at the same time as worry and expectations increased. Interviewees suggested that making development affordable, locally available or online and linking to practical outcomes (confidence, foundational management skills, peer support etc) would increase uptake and reduce the sense of isolation. More courses in more areas would mean more women and more growth. Affordability is not just the cost of the course, it's the time away from business, family and farm, it's the need for childcare and it's travel costs to get there. Individuals are far more likely to be able to attend a one- or two-day course than a week long course.

Importantly, interviewees highlighted that confidence is not built in isolation but through connection and exposure to new perspectives. One interviewee reflected “I think a lot of the stuff where I've learned it is sometimes who I surround myself with and connection outside rural communities, leadership, investment in yourself.” This underscores that investment in self includes not only formal training but also relational learning – expanding networks, engaging with diverse voices, and gaining perspective beyond immediate environments. These connections help normalise challenges, reduce feelings of isolation and reinforce a sense of capability.

Manikam, L (2022) explores the central message that you can be a loving mum, wife, and farming partner and still prioritise your own growth, wellbeing, and joy. Supporting this shift is critical, as confidence is not an inherent trait but one that is continually strengthened through deliberate investment in learning, connection and self-worth.

8.9 Overcoming guilt

Interview responses suggest overcoming guilt is a key strategy for reducing rural women's mental load, because guilt keeps women saying yes, staying on in positions they are not enjoying and carrying invisible responsibilities, even when they are already at capacity.

Women described “digs” and judgement from others (e.g. in-laws/community) about not being on-farm or not conforming but also emphasised that much of the guilt becomes internalised and self-policed. Discussion was had around expectations that others have of us but that we also put on ourselves.

Society has conformed to position the woman as the “default parent.” This creates guilt when women can't be in two places at once due to multiple children and/or commitments, which reinforces the mental burden of constant planning, emotional caretaking and coordination.

Perfectionism and comparison fuel guilt. Social media and “keeping up with the Joneses” increase pressure to appear competent and thriving, making women judge themselves against unrealistic markers (e.g. a spotless house) which adds unnecessary cognitive and emotional load.

Guilt is reduced by changing our approach to a more gratifying point of view. A pivotal shift described was recognising “there’s nothing wrong with me” and “women can be anything but not everything.” This change reduces shame/resentment and allows women to prioritise their own wellbeing, without interpreting it as failure or selfishness. Or as one interviewee said changing our mindset to one of “I get to do this not I have to do this.”

Boundaries are seen as a practical strategy to reducing guilt. Learning to ask for help, saying no including using “stall tactics” to avoid automatic yeses and stepping back from duty-bound roles (PTA/boards/volunteering) directly increases “headspace” and prevents overload.

For many of the interviewees, the process of reducing guilt had been a long journey, an investment of personal development and continued growth in confidence, knowing their values, their purpose and their why.

Discussion with another interviewee about the importance of setting expectations early on in a relationship. If you want to continue with your career, if you want to share the housework or if you want to take turns with dinner then setting these expectations clearly right from the start is important, as when it’s affecting a relationship it becomes very hard to change it then. You should be able to have a career and be supported with what you would like to do without guilt.

On the other side of that, if you choose to not pursue an off-farm career then this should also be supported without guilt by your friends, family, community and society.

8.10 Volunteering

Interviewees cemented the reality of small rural communities means that there is often a high expectation and low population. The same families are repeatedly relied on which creates an ongoing sense that volunteering is not optional – it’s required to keep services and events running.

This adds invisible coordination work. It’s not just the hours at the event, it adds administration, planning, communication and responsibility that sits in women’s heads alongside farm, work and family tasks.

Leadership roles multiply the load. Taking on a position like chairing is experienced as disproportionately heavy “every time you chair something that’s worth 3 other jobs.” Which increases cognitive burden and emotional responsibility.

Values and boundaries are used to manage the load. Some women actively step back (e.g. not joining kid’s activities because it doesn’t meet my values) and name limits clearly “my volunteer capacity is full” to protect wellbeing and reduce overload.

Volunteering can restore identity and belonging. For some, volunteering provided purpose, connection and a sense of self, helping them feel grounded and valued beyond the farm/home roles.

Women recognised benefits such as connection, role-modelling and pride in community contribution, but these sit alongside the reality that volunteering competes with already-full

capacity and can compound stress when workloads swing seasonally. "If you give to a community, you will get back from the community"

8.11 Comparison

"Comparison is the theft of joy," was a comment made in one of my interviews and it also came out in some of the survey responses. This is not just a mindset issue; it is deeply tied to identity, expectations on self and by others, visibility and mental load. Rural women are already balancing multiple, overlapping roles – farmer, caregiver, business partner, community contributor often simultaneously. When comparison enters this environment, it stacks on top of an already full "carpark." Comparing productivity "they seem to manage everything better," comparing households "their house looks perfect," comparing parenting or involvement and comparing success in farming or off-farm careers.

Because mental load is largely invisible and unacknowledged, comparison often happens without full context – making others appear to be coping more easily than they are. One interviewee commented "they used to be a headless chook and some days I do look like a swan on top but I'm a duck underneath."

Comparison intensifies the internalised expectation for women to "do it all" and appear like they are coping. It does this by reinforcing unrealistic standards, driving overcommitment "others are doing it, so I should too." It creates a feeling of failing if you don't meet perceived standards and judging yourself against others' outputs rather than your own limits. It's important to understand that as individuals we all have different thresholds and these should be supported by everyone.

We've identified that rural communities often involve small populations, high visibility and repeated interactions with the same people and research has noted the pressure to present an "idealised version" of rural life – a successful farm, a thriving family, and an active community involvement. This creates not just an internal comparison, but one that is socially reinforced.

My interviews have highlighted "keeping up with the Joneses," and an increased pressure to appear capable and successful creates a disconnect between what rural women are experiencing with high fatigue, competing demands and unpredictability.

The risk of comparison is that it erodes identity and self-worth. A key finding in my research is that "they lost who they were" amid roles and responsibilities. It shifts the focus from what matters to you as an individual to how do you measure up against others. This thought process tends to reduce confidence, question personal value and cause disconnect from your purpose and values.

Comparison also discourages people from seeking help. If everyone else is seen to be coping, then you automatically assume that you should be able to handle it. We don't want to appear as "not coping" which makes it harder to ask for support, access services and be vulnerable.

This research has shown that if you understand your purpose, values, and priorities it makes it easier to say no and reduce overload. Setting boundaries reduces guilt, reduces mental load and limits unnecessary commitments by breaking the comparison cycle.

8.12 Mental health of men

Throughout the interviews there was a lot of discussion around the mental health of men in the rural space. There is a lot of awareness about the mental health of men, but not so much about the women that bear the responsibility of looking after them. "Again, if they're okay then we are okay." One interviewee commented that when dealing with the mental health of my partner "it means lows at different times, is usually stress related and the women carry this load. The man's mental health is incredibly important but sometimes a man doesn't want everyone to know, and you can spend your time protecting your kids, covering up from the neighbours, clients, staff and the banks".

One interviewee commented that "in Christian teaching men feel loved by being respected and women feel love by being loved. So, when partner is in a tough spot and you are making all the decisions you feel like you are undermining them. As everyday people we are not typically trained in mental health, but women end up dealing with it. They tend to notice it before the partner does and sometimes seeking help or acknowledgement is driven by the women". One described it like "tiptoeing around the outside, walking on glass." One woman even spoke that they had perhaps had burnout and maybe some depression but didn't say anything as didn't want partner worrying while they were going through it themselves.

8.13 Sleep

In the literature review the impact of sleep on mental health was explored. The graph (*Appendix 3.10*) shows the number of hours sleep per night that survey respondents had.

Based on responses there appears to be a strong relationship (*Appendix 3.11*) between the average hours of sleep had per night and where people feel that they sit on the mental health continuum model? The less hours of sleep had per night the more likely you are to sit in reacting moving into injured then ill of the mental health continuum model the less you get.

It is important not to underestimate the importance of sleep. Setting an alarm for bedtime and prioritising sleep will help function at our highest level every day.

8.14 Priorities, exhaustion and too many tasks

Women surveyed were asked where they put themselves on a list of priorities (*Appendix 3.16*). It was great to see some women putting themselves at the top of the list, but it was only 5%. While 10% saw themselves as the last thing on a top 10 priority list and 61% saw themselves in the bottom half. Conducting this research highlighted the importance of women being a priority to themselves. Consistently deprioritising themselves has a significant impact on wellbeing, relationships, decision-making and the sustainability of our farming businesses, our own business and the whole family system. These results indicate that self-neglect is not just occasional.

Findings show that 54% (*Appendix 3.12*) of respondents often feel that they have too many tasks to manage at once and none of the respondents said that they never had too many tasks and just under three quarters of respondents felt mentally exhausted without having done any physical work more than half of the time (*Appendix 3.8*). When compared with the mental health continuum model, it appeared to show a strong relationship between how often women feel

mentally exhausted if they haven't done any physical work and where women feel they have sat on the mental health continuum over the last 6 months (Appendix 3.17). This indicates a lower overall wellbeing and quality of life. It also shows a reduced capacity for clear thinking and decision-making with an increased risk of burnout.

9. Conclusions

This research began with a lived experience of operating at full capacity; a “carpark” with no available spaces and confirms that this experience is not isolated but widely shared amongst rural women. What initially presented as a personal moment of overwhelm has been validated through both literature and research findings as a broader, systemic issue.

Mental load as identified in the literature, is not simply the accumulation of tasks, but an ongoing and largely invisible combination of cognitive and emotional labour. This includes anticipating planning, organising and supporting others that is disproportionately carried by women and intensified in rural contexts.

The findings of this research demonstrate that rural life significantly compounds this mental load. The blending of home and workplace, geographic isolation, limited access to services and the expectation to fulfil multiple roles creates a constant state of responsibility with little opportunity to disengage. Rural women are not only solely or equally sharing in operating farm operations and creating off-farm income but are also the primary coordinators of family life, emotional wellbeing and community engagement. This results in a load that often exceeds individual capacity.

A key insight from this research is that the issue is not simply the volume of work but the concentration of responsibility. Even where tasks are shared, the planning, organising and emotional oversight remain predominantly with the women. This reflects the persistence of gendered expectation and highlights the ongoing invisibility of much of women's contribution. The literature reinforces that this cognitive and emotional work is rarely recognised or valued to the same extent as physical or paid labour, despite being essential to the functioning of households, farms and communities.

Importantly, while rural women demonstrate high levels of resilience and adaptability using organisation, planning and targeted self-care practices these strategies largely serve to maintain functionality rather than reduce the load itself. The findings clearly show that when pressure increases, women are often the first to be deprioritised, reinforcing cycles of exhaustion, reduced wellbeing and diminished decision-making capacity. The Mental Health Continuum results further highlight the consequences of this, with the majority of women operating in a state of “reacting” or “injured” rather than thriving.

Emotionally, women report persistent guilt – especially when taking time off the farm or prioritising personal wellbeing. There is a strong sense of internalised expectation to “do it all,” compounded by fear of letting others down. Many respondents recognise themselves as their “own worst enemy,” frequently saying yes beyond their capacity due to ingrained expectations and cultural norms.

This research clearly identified the barriers such as limited childcare, inflexible work systems, geographic distance and cost of support services to an inability to addressing the mental load and getting support. Societal expectations and cultural norms have created the normalisation of

overload which makes it difficult to be understood or addressed as an individual issue alone. It is embedded within the wider systems and expectations that shape rural life.

At its core, the mental load is not caused by one problem – but by too much responsibility sitting with one person for too long. According to the survey responses, rural women say their mental load would reduce if they had;

- Shared responsibility, not just help
- Fewer roles and expectations
- Reliable childcare and support
- Financial breathing room
- Practical help that is accessible in rural areas
- Better systems and fewer bureaucratic demands
- Understanding, validation and emotional support
- Time to rest and recover.

Ultimately, this research confirms that the “carpark” is not just full; it is consistently over capacity and that has real and ongoing impacts on wellbeing, identity, relationships, productivity, decision-making and quality of life. Addressing this issue requires more than encouraging individual coping strategies. It requires a deliberate shift towards recognising and valuing invisible labour, redistributing responsibility, improving accessibility and affordability to personal development and the enablement of women to prioritise their own wellbeing without guilt.

My findings have highlighted the need for rural-specific employment and childcare solutions; greater recognition of women's unpaid contributions to farming businesses; flexible, remote-capable and seasonal work options; stronger mental health support for rural women and a cultural change in recognising women's careers as equally important to farm viability.

Through interviews the key theme was that giving the women the confidence to invest in personal growth and development, to learn their why and their values with full support and without guilt would create the change that is so desperately needed. Acknowledging that a mental load exists and that it was okay to say no is about sustaining the health and future of rural families, farms and communities. When women are supported to move from simply coping to genuinely thriving, the benefits extend far beyond the individual they strengthen the entire system. Small steps will improve quality of life, better health outcomes both physically and mentally.

Although the vast majority of my findings are covered in the conclusions above, I do acknowledge that there are situations where the load is shared and the mental wellbeing of rural women is great. These situations are more the exception, rather than the rule.

Seen through interviews as women grow in confidence – through understanding their values, setting boundaries and recognising that they cannot be everything to everyone – they begin to redistribute their load, say no without apology and prioritise their own wellbeing. This shift moves them from survival mode towards sustainable functioning.

10. Recommendations

My recommendations will be many and varied. The topic is personal and emotional and what works for one will not work for others. It is not a one size fits all approach, and differences can be made at an individual level but also at an industry level.

It is time for the industry to stand up, take notice and implement ways to improve both, the recognition women feel, as well as proactive ways to help them reduce the need to have such a constantly high mental stamina.

1. Acknowledgement of mental load and collaboration

We need to increase recognition of mental load as real work. A key finding of this research is that mental load is invisible, gendered and undervalued. I recommend that industry leaders, organisations and communities join in acknowledging the mental load and make it visible. I identified many networks across the industry all working in sometimes competing areas. Collaboration of these networks to better enable the direction of funding to key development as opposed to competing for funding to similar avenues offered by different networks. Developing workshops through these networks or leadership programmes that explain what cognitive labour is and how it differs from physical work.

2. Shared responsibility

Encourage early conversations within relationships about expectations and roles. Promote ownership not just task sharing of household, childcare and farm coordination so that the whole experience is shared not just helped after the thinking has occurred.

3. Childcare solutions

Get our industry bodies to advocate for more flexible, rural-specific childcare models (e.g. seasonal, part-day, mobile or in-home care).

Work with other mums in your area taking turns helping each other with childcare on set days per week.

Incentivise childcare providers to operate in rural communities and encourage availability with farm working hours.

4. Increase accessibility and affordability for professional growth and development

Target training models that cover more areas for less days. When facing barriers women are more likely to attend a two-day course than a one week course and within a half hour drive as opposed to a one hour drive.

Target training venues where childcare is an option.

5. Tell our story

We need to tell and sell our story. Levy bodies are more likely to invest when outcomes are tied to productivity and sector performance. Instead of "coping" we need to position mental load as impacting:

- workforce retention
- women's participation in the sector

- decision-making quality
- farm business sustainability

Therefore, advocating for mental load initiatives to be considered “industry good” investment.

6. Support Services

Support services exist but we need to ensure that messaging explicitly includes and targets women.

7. Reduce administrative and compliance burden

- Simplify compliance systems where possible
- Improve communication and planning timelines from schools and organisations
- Provide tools or support to reduce administrative workload

8. Strengthen community connection

Community is both a support and a source of pressure through volunteering expectations. It's important to encourage shared community responsibility rather than reliance on the same individuals. You can do this by creating low-commitment opportunities for connection. Asking for assistance with little jobs so that it doesn't just fall on one person.

9. Early intervention

Most women are operating in a “reacting” or “injured” state on the Mental Health Continuum Model. Increasing awareness and use of tools like the Mental Health Continuum Model will encourage early action, rather than waiting for crisis points. Wellbeing practices should be embedded into daily routines and our family and farming cultures.

10. Invest in personal development

Be strong as individuals to what your expectations are. Invest in yourself daily through prioritising yourself and also invest in training. Be part of creating a culture that means prioritising yourself is essential not selfish, a belief that it is okay to say no and set boundaries. Be part of societal change that gives you the confidence to be okay with saying no and realising that you are at capacity. Create your values, know your purpose and work within these.

11. Encourage cognitive labour sharing

Developing interventions that encourage cognitive labour sharing (not just physical task sharing) is essential for gender equality. Make the invisible visible. Use a mental load audit for households/farm businesses to map who currently does the planning, remembering, organising and follow-up. Include childcare, school logistics, meals, household supplies, farm compliance and admin, appointments, community volunteering and communications. Make a shift in ownership from this point. Not helping but owning the responsibility. Have regular planning meetings to ensure ownership is happening and visible. This will promote behavioural change through the change of habits that promote noticing work without being prompted. ie unloading the dishwasher when it is seen not being told to do it. Becoming proactive not reactive.

12. Create local support systems

Develop local, low-barrier support systems that are practical, visible and easy for rural women to access before they reach crisis point. In rural communities, support is often hardest to access not because it is unwanted, but because it is too far away, too formal, too expensive or does not fit around farm and family life. Creating local support systems would help reduce isolation and mental load by making it easier for women to share responsibility, access encouragement and ask for help earlier.

These support systems do not need to rely solely on formal services or permanent physical centres. They could include regular local drop-in spaces, peer support groups, informal coffee groups, facilitated wellbeing check-ins, shared childcare arrangements, community noticeboards for practical help, or trusted local connectors who can help women navigate what support is available. In small rural communities, even simple and low-cost models can be effective when they are local, relational and consistent.

The value of local support systems is not only emotional support but also practical relief. They can create safe spaces where women feel seen, understood and less alone, while also helping to coordinate shared solutions such as meal support during busy seasons, transport assistance, childcare swaps, or temporary help during times of high pressure. This kind of localised support reduces the burden of having to carry everything alone and helps move support from being reactive to preventative.

Importantly, local support systems should be designed to fit rural life. They need to be flexible, community-led and low judgement, recognising that many women may not seek out formal counselling or structured services but will engage with trusted, familiar spaces and people. Building these systems within existing rural networks, schools, playgroups, farming groups, women's organisations, churches and community hubs would improve visibility, reduce stigma and strengthen the sense that support is a normal part of rural life, not a sign that someone is failing.

Over time, stronger local support systems could improve wellbeing, reduce isolation, encourage earlier help-seeking and create more sustainable rural communities by ensuring women are better supported to cope, contribute and thrive.

Gender equality will remain limited while women continue to carry the invisible work of anticipating, planning, coordinating and emotionally managing family, farm and community life.

Ultimately recognising invisible labour, redistributing responsibility, improving structural supports and enabling women to prioritise themselves will help shift rural women from coping at capacity to genuinely thriving, strengthening not only individuals but rural families, farms and communities.

11. Limitations of this study

A large number of survey responses were from Southland which could be my ability to reach the Southland population due to where I live and my community involvement i.e. my own Facebook page and Hokonui Gold radio interview.

Main avenues of survey spread were through Facebook such as Farming Mums NZ, NZ Farming etc which could limit exposure to other avenues of rural women such as service industries, young women or limit age demographics.

If someone is juggling mental load at the time of viewing my survey it may have affected their responses or their need to respond.

The scope of this project is very far and varied. For the purpose of this research and due to time constraints, I have focused on my key survey questions as insight and research into the topic.

12. References

- Agri-Women's Development Trust website <https://www.awdt.org.nz>
- Barigozzi, F., Biroli, P., Monfardini, C., Montinari, N., Pisanelli, E., and Vitellozzi, S. (2025). *Beyond time: Unveiling the invisible burden of mental load* (IZA Discussion Paper No. 17912). IZA Institute of Labor Economics.
- Chu, Tsz. (2022). Psychological Differences between Men and Women: Nature vs. Nurture. *Journal of Student Research*. 11. 10.47611/jsrhs.v11i4.3549.
- Dairy Women's Network website <https://www.dwn.co.nz>
- Daminger, A. (2022). *The mental load: Building a deeper theoretical understanding of how cognitive and emotional labor overload women and mothers*. *Community, Work and Family*, 25(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2020.1775423>
- Dean, L., Churchill, B., and Ruppanner, L. (2022). The mental load: building a deeper theoretical understanding of how cognitive and emotional labor overload women and mothers. *Community, Work and Family*, 25(1), 13–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2021.2002813>
- Gary, J., (1992). *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*.
- Haupt, A., and Gelbgiser, D. (2024). The gendered division of cognitive household labor, mental load, and family–work conflict in European countries. *European Societies*, 26(3), 828–854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2271963>
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.
- Jarrett, C., (2016). Do men and women really have different personalities? <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20161011-do-men-and-women-really-have-different-personalities>
- Jaye, C., McHugh, J., Doolan-Noble, F., and Wood, L. (2022). Wellbeing and health in a small New Zealand rural community: Assets, capabilities and being rural-fit. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 93, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2022.04.005>
- Little, J. (1987). *Gender relations in rural areas: The importance of women's domestic role*. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 3(4), 335–342. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167\(87\)90052-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167(87)90052-0)

- McLean, C., Musolino, C., Rose, A., Ward, P., (2023). The management of cognitive labour in same-gender couples.
<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0287585>
- Manikam, L. (2022). *The rural women dilemma: Be the loving mum, wife and farming partner you want to be, OR start doing more for you?*
- Mental Health Foundation – <https://mentalhealth.org.nz/te-whare-tapa-wha>
- Ministry of Health (2023) Pae Ora Strategies
- Minister of Health (2023) Rural Health Strategy. Wellington: Ministry of Health
<https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/2023-07/rural-health-strategy-oct23-v2.pdf>
- Minister of Health (2023) Women's Health Strategy. Wellington: Ministry of Health
<https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/2023-07/womens-health-strategy-oct23.pdf>
- Nowakowski S, Meers J, Heimbach E. Sleep and Women's Health. *Sleep Med Res.* 2013;4(1):1-22. doi: 10.17241/smr.2013.4.1.1. PMID: 25688329; PMCID: PMC4327930.
- Oláh, L.S., Kotowska, I.E., Richter, R. (2018). The New Roles of Men and Women and Implications for Families and Societies. In: Doblhammer, G., Gumà, J. (eds) *A Demographic Perspective on Gender, Family and Health in Europe*. Springer, Cham.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72356-3_4
- Rural Women NZ website <https://www.ruralwomennz.nz>
- Rural Support Trust website <https://www.rural-support.org.nz>
- Scott, K., (2026). The four stages of the mental load explained.
<https://www.rnz.co.nz/life/relationships/family/the-four-stages-of-the-mental-load-explained>
- Schirmer, A. (2013). *Sex differences in emotion*. In J.-M. Armony and P. Vuilleumier (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of human affective neuroscience* (pp. xxx-xxx). Cambridge University Press.
- Stone KL, Xiao Q. Impact of Poor Sleep on Physical and Mental Health in Older Women. *Sleep Med Clin.* 2018 Sep;13(3):457-465. doi: 10.1016/j.jsmc.2018.04.012. PMID: 30098759; PMCID: PMC6092035.
- Zhu, N., and Chang, L. (2019). *Evolved but not fixed: A life history account of gender roles and gender inequality*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1709.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01709>

The AI tool of Microsoft Copilot was used for grammar checks and refinement.

Appendices

Appendix 1

NZ Defence Force Mental Health Pocketbook

WE NEED A HELPING HAND

Don't wait for a crisis. Early help seeking will speed your recovery.

Resources include:

- Defence health personnel: Psychologists, Medical Officers, Chaplains, Leaders, Medics, Social Workers, Defence Community Facilitators.

Where to go for help

0800NZDF-4U (0800 693 348)

Confidential national service line for all NZDF personnel and their families.

VITAE 0508 664 981

24/7 Advice line for civilian personnel

Support for veterans 0800 483 8372

Lifeline 0800 543 354

Confidential national service

Headline 0800 611 116

24/7 support line

Text or call free 1737

24/7 free telephone support/counselling

Date of issue: Xxxxxx 2018

A FORCE FOR NEW ZEALAND

Tools for managing mental challenges and being at your best

Tactical breathing	Flexible thinking	Optimism	Healthy Habits
Rules of 4 - Inhale to count of 4 - Exhale to count of 4 - Practice for 4 minutes - Breathe gently into the bag again	First identify thoughts that are bothering you. What are you telling yourself? - Challenge thoughts - Is this thought helping me be successful? - What evidence do I have that this thought is true? - What would I say to a friend in this situation?	Good and bad things can occur at the same time. What are you telling yourself that are happening? - Identify three good things that occurred recently. - Why are they important to you? - How can you use these experiences often?	When you have a healthy lifestyle you will cope with challenges better - Identify the healthy behaviour you want to implement - Identify the barriers to continuing this behaviour - Make a plan to overcome those barriers

Exercise regularly

Eat well

Positive self talk
I can do this!

Make time for activities you enjoy

Break things down into manageable pieces
plan to overcome obstacles

SMART Goals*

Time with family & friends

Rehearse and imagine success
You're doing this!

TE WHARE TAPA WHĀ

Sometimes life can be tough. Staying well means caring for your body, soul, mind and whānau

TE WHARE TAPA WHĀ

1. TETAHU Physical health

2. TETAHU Spiritual health

3. TETAHU Psychological health

4. TETAHU Family health

Build a solid foundation. Nurture all aspects of your Whare

*Te Whare Tapa Whā, Model of health - Mason Durie (1982)

SUPPORTING OTHERS

Look for changes in moods and behaviours

When to pay special attention

- Relationship issues
- Grief and loss
- Family concerns
- Training failure
- Illness
- Disciplinary action
- Financial problems
- Traumatic event
- Career setback

What can I do?

- Offer support
- Ask what would be helpful
- Don't take moods personally
- Encourage them to seek further help
- Don't suggest they "toughen up"
- Don't take moods personally
- Encourage them to seek further help

TE WHARE TAPA WHĀ

Sometimes life can be tough. Staying well means caring for your body, soul, mind and whānau

TE WHARE TAPA WHĀ

1. TETAHU Physical health

2. TETAHU Spiritual health

3. TETAHU Psychological health

4. TETAHU Family health

Build a solid foundation. Nurture all aspects of your Whare

*Te Whare Tapa Whā, Model of health - Mason Durie (1982)

Check out these Apps:

HighPass

Tools for managing stress

Calm

Tools to sleep, meditate and relax

Virtual Hope

Resilience tools

HeadSpace

Guided meditation

Force Fit

Making fitness your thing

Res Co

Resilience Tools

Living Well

Tools for living a healthier lifestyle

Some of the many useful websites:

- www.mentalhealth.org.nz
- www.thelifebase.co.nz
- www.supportingfamilies.org.nz
- www.sanctuary.org.nz
- www.calm.auckland.ac.nz
- www.livingwell.org.au
- <http://life.ease.a.gov.au>
- <http://veteranaffairs.mil.nz>
- <http://nzdf.mil.nz/families/default.htm>
- <http://nzdf.mil.nz/families/default.aspx> (NZDF Internet)

NZDF health website (internet):

<http://health.mil.nz>

Appendix 2

Interview Questions

Introduction points

- You are an industry leader in your chosen field; I would love for your insight and feedback for my research project.
- All shared experiences will be kept confidential and anonymous.

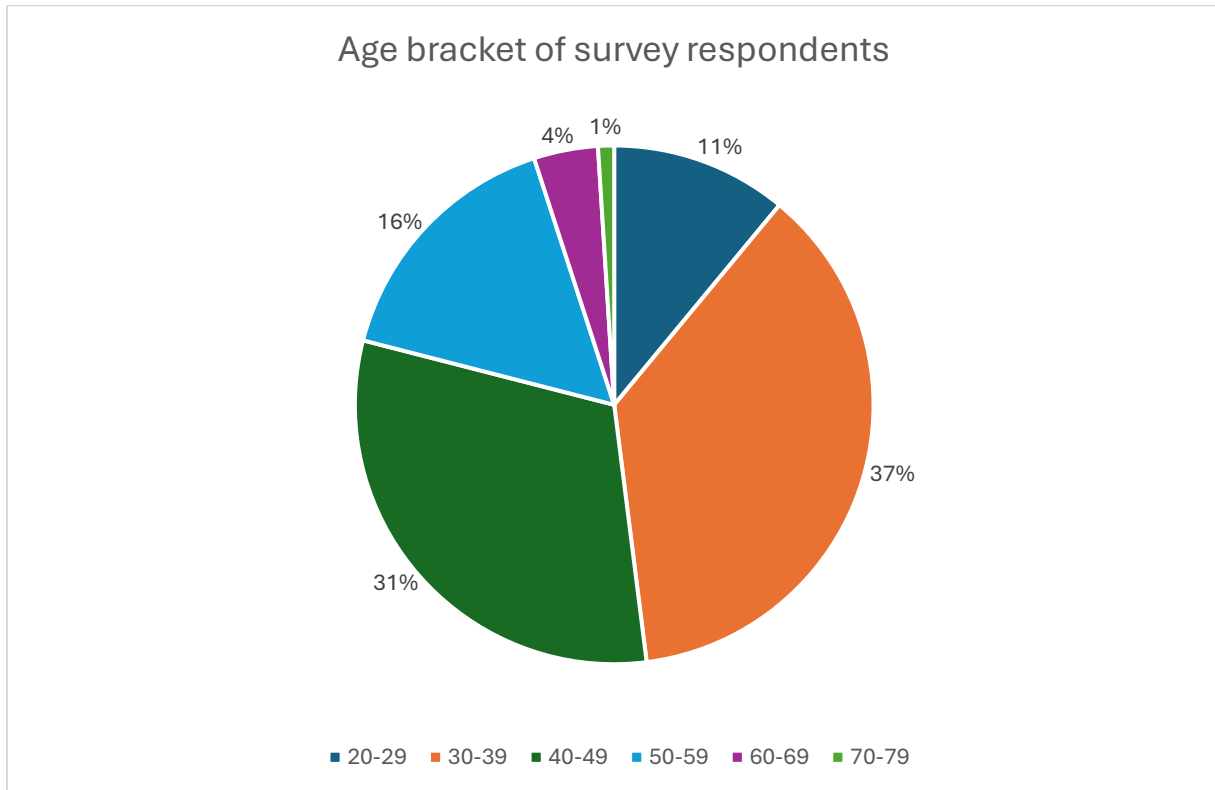
Proposed questions

- You are seen as a women of influence due to your various roles or your work with women, how do you feel about that and how have you made it work?
- From your perspective, how would you define “mental load” in the context of rural women’s daily lives.
- What would be the key factors that make the mental load for women living and working in rural communities different to those in urban environments?
- What is the biggest challenge that you see rural women face?
- What effects have you observed the mental load having on rural women’s mental health, decision-making and overall wellbeing?
- How does the mental load influence participation in the rural workforce, leadership opportunities and career progression?
- Have you noticed any generational difference in how rural women experience or talk about mental load?
- As an industry leader what do you feel are the responsibilities of our industry in recognising and acknowledging the mental load for rural women?
- If anything what is missing from current workplace policies addressing mental load?
- In your view what are some barriers that compound mental load for rural women?
- Do you have any suggestions for initiatives that would be effectively implemented into our industry?
- How can leaders create conversations currently not happening in the rural sector?
- Do you feel that there are any existing platforms that could be tapped into to grow the awareness and visibility of mental load in rural women?
- Do you have any personal learnings that have helped you understand and shaped your views on the mental load of rural women?
- Is there anything else that you would like to share that would be beneficial to my research project?

Appendix 3

Survey responses graphed.

Appendix 3.1

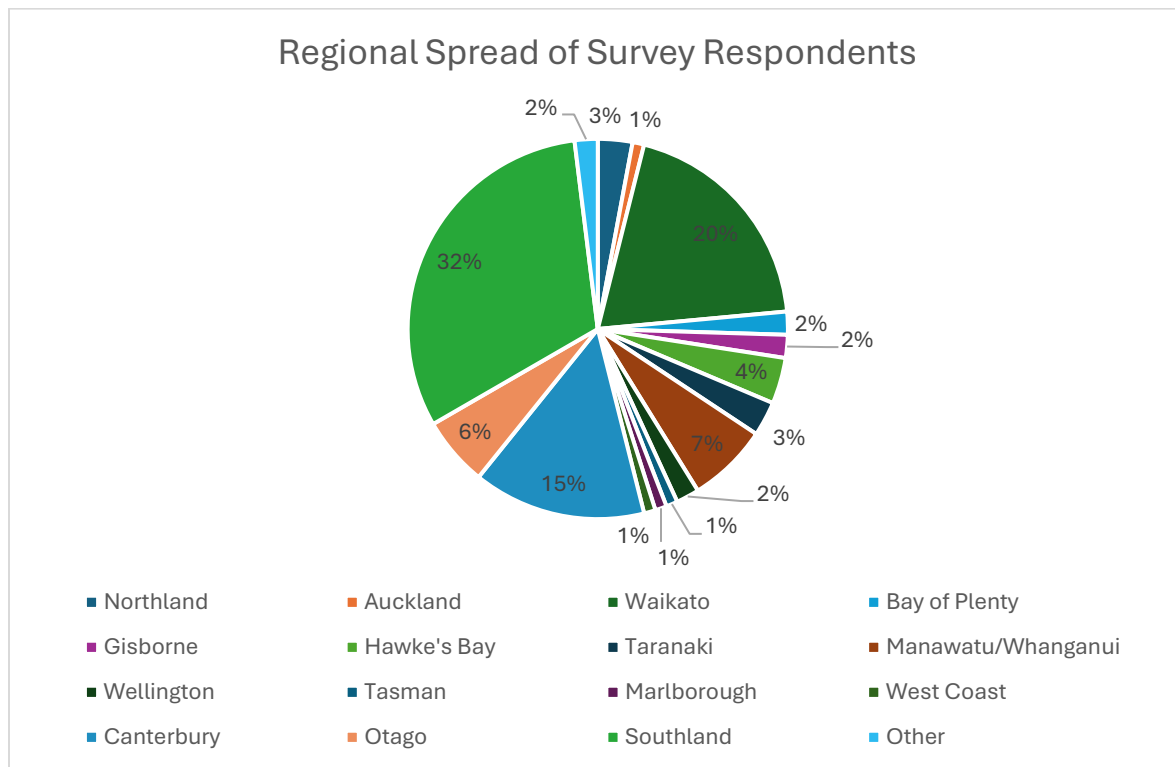


Appendix 3.2

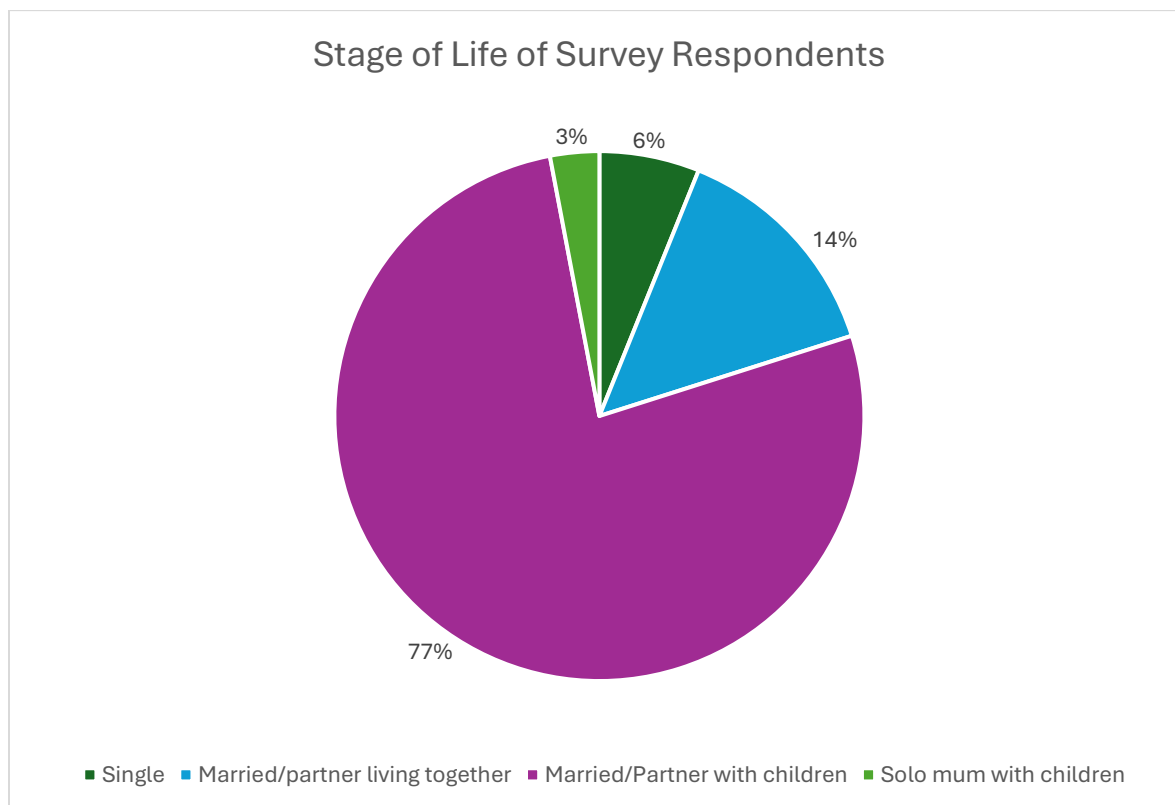
Statistical significance of age and where women have seen themselves on the mental health continuum model over the last six months.

Age	Green-healthy	yellow-reacting	orange-injured	red-ill
20-29	13.5%	8.9%	15.0%	0.0%
30-39	18.9%	41.1%	45.0%	0.0%
40-49	37.8%	30.4%	22.5%	100.0%
50-59	24.3%	14.3%	15.0%	0.0%
60-69	5.5%	5.3%	0.0%	0.0%
70-79	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%	0.0%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

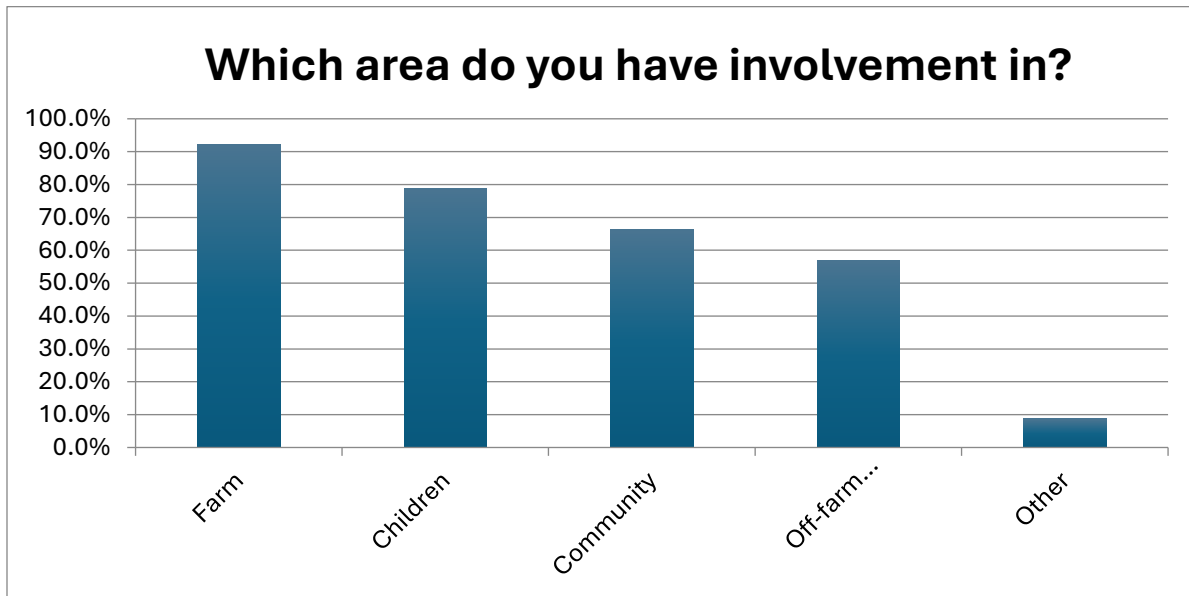
Appendix 3.3



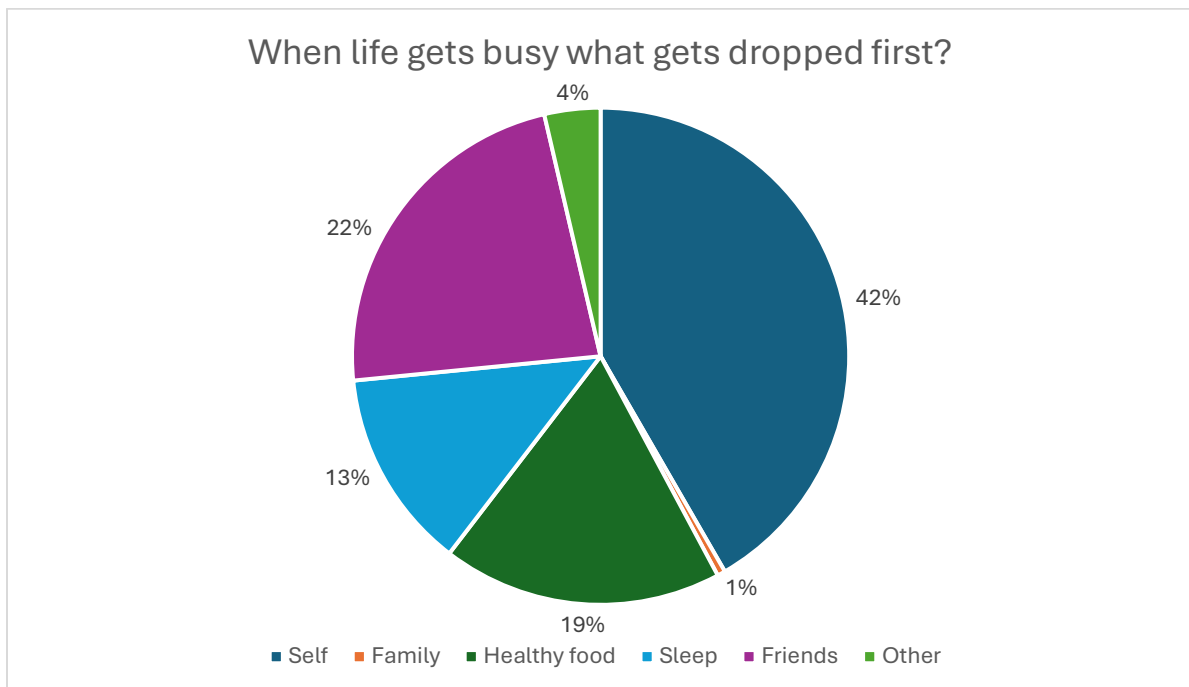
Appendix 3.4



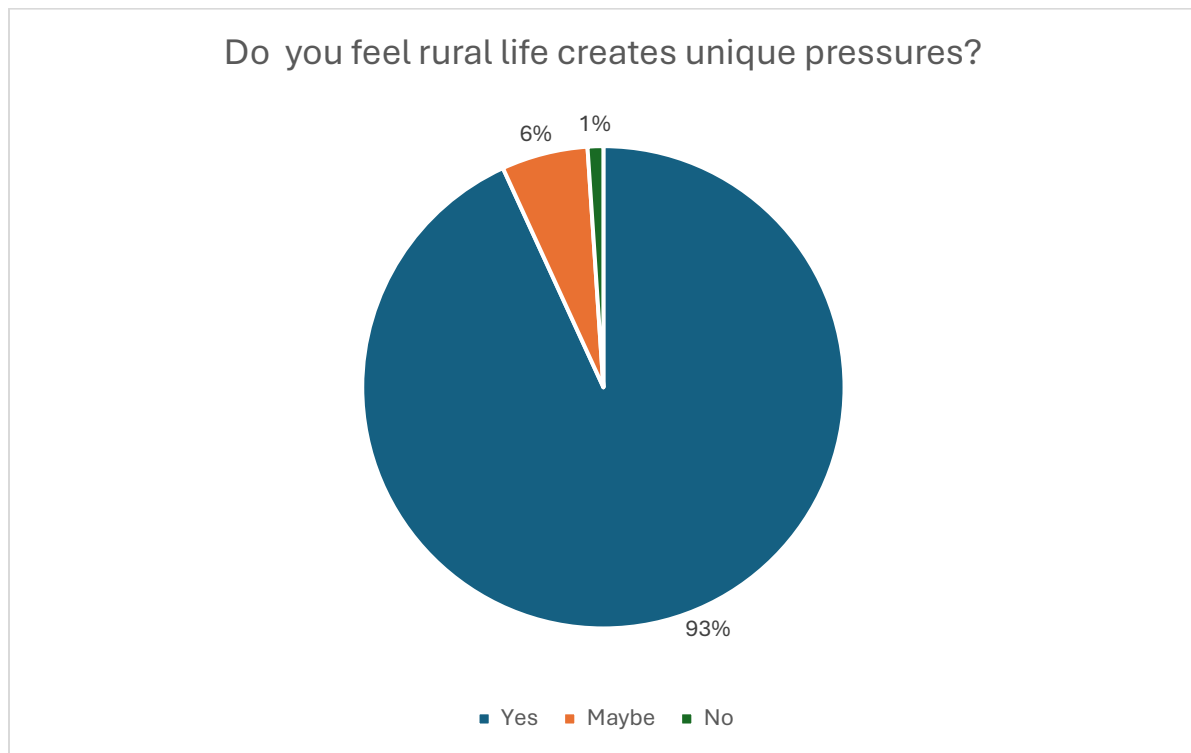
Appendix 3.5



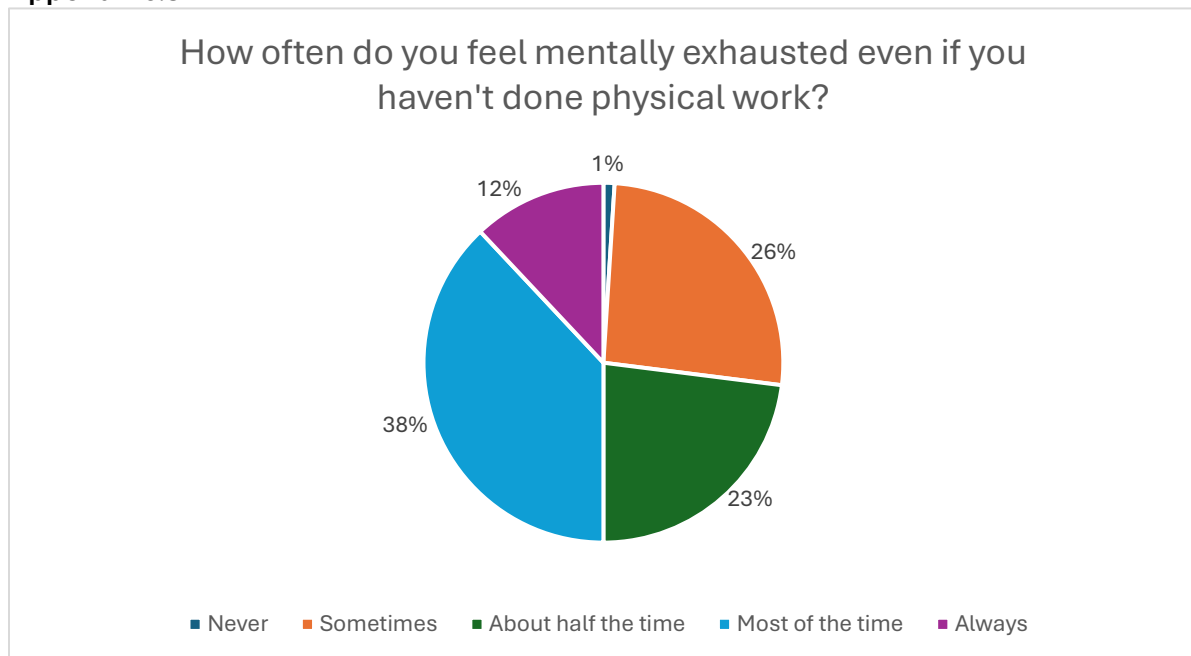
Appendix 3.6



Appendix 3.7



Appendix 3.8



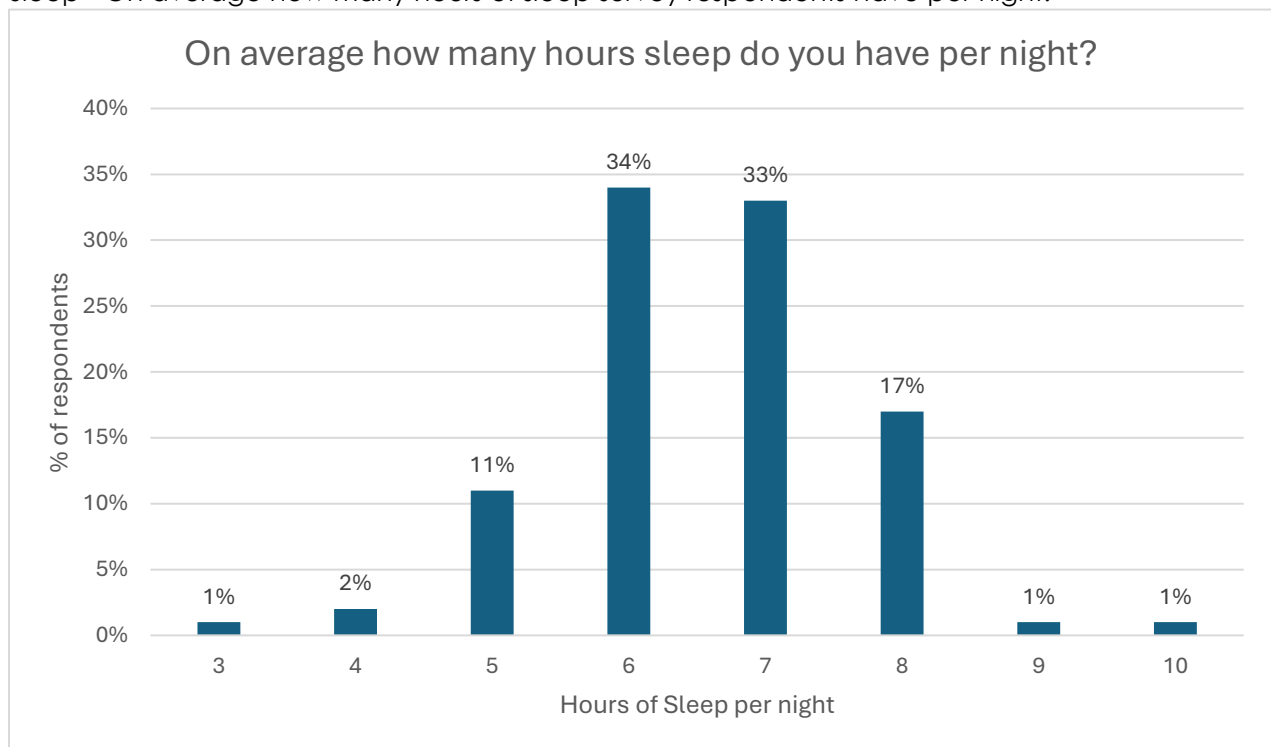
Appendix 3.9

The significance of what stage of life you are in versus where you sit on the mental health continuum model over the last six months.

Stage of Life	Green - healthy	yellow - reacting	orange - injured	red - ill
Single	2.7%	5.3%	10.0%	50.0%
Married/partner living together	13.5%	13.3%	15.0%	0.0%
married/partner with children	78.4%	80.5%	67.5%	50.0%
solo mum with children	5.4%	0.9%	7.5%	0.0%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Appendix 3.10

Sleep - On average how many hours of sleep survey respondents have per night.



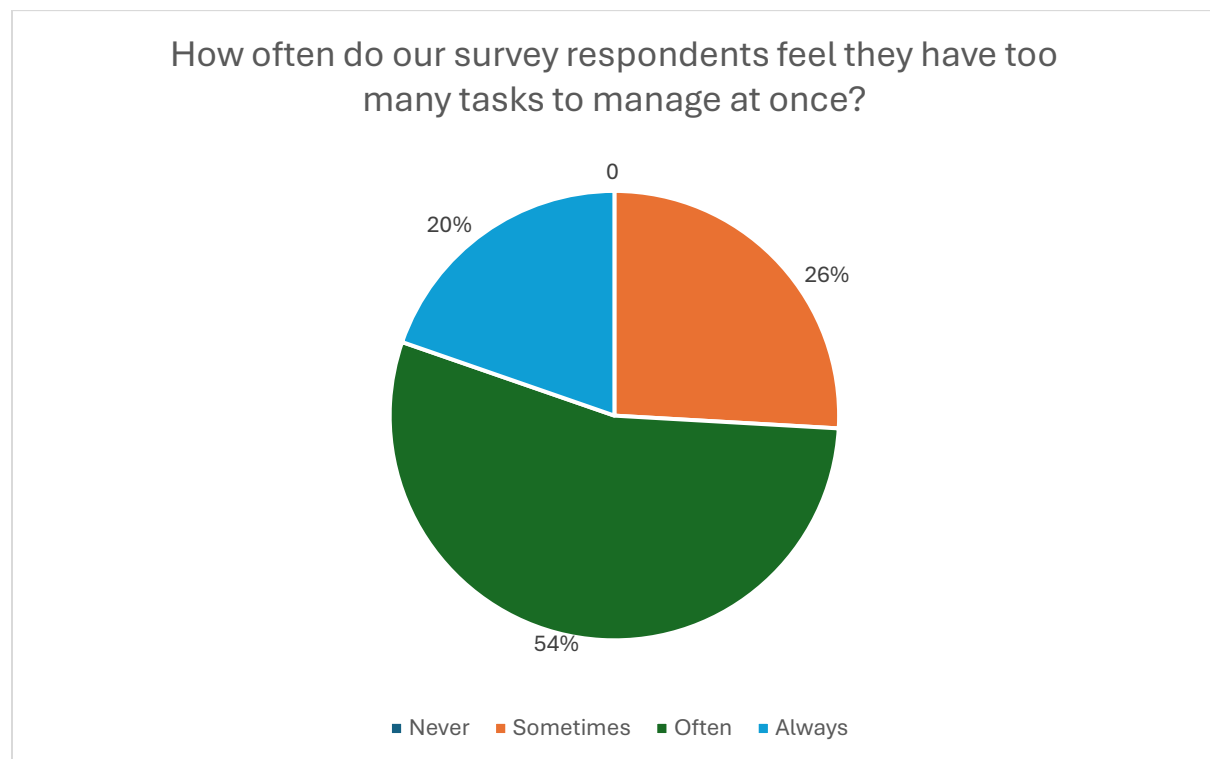
Appendix 3.11

Significance of the average hours of sleep per night and where you have sat on the Mental Health Continuum Model over the last 6 months.

Average hours slept per night	Green - healthy	Yellow - reacting	Orange - injured	Red-ill
3	0.0%	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%
4	0.0%	1.8%	2.5%	50.0%
5	2.7%	8.8%	25.0%	0.0%
6	28.9%	38.1%	27.5%	50.0%
7	23.7%	38.1%	30.0%	0.0%
8	42.1%	12.4%	5.0%	0.0%
9	2.6%	0.0%	7.5%	0.0%
10	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%	0.0%
	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Appendix 3.12

How often do our survey respondents feel they have too many tasks to manage at once?

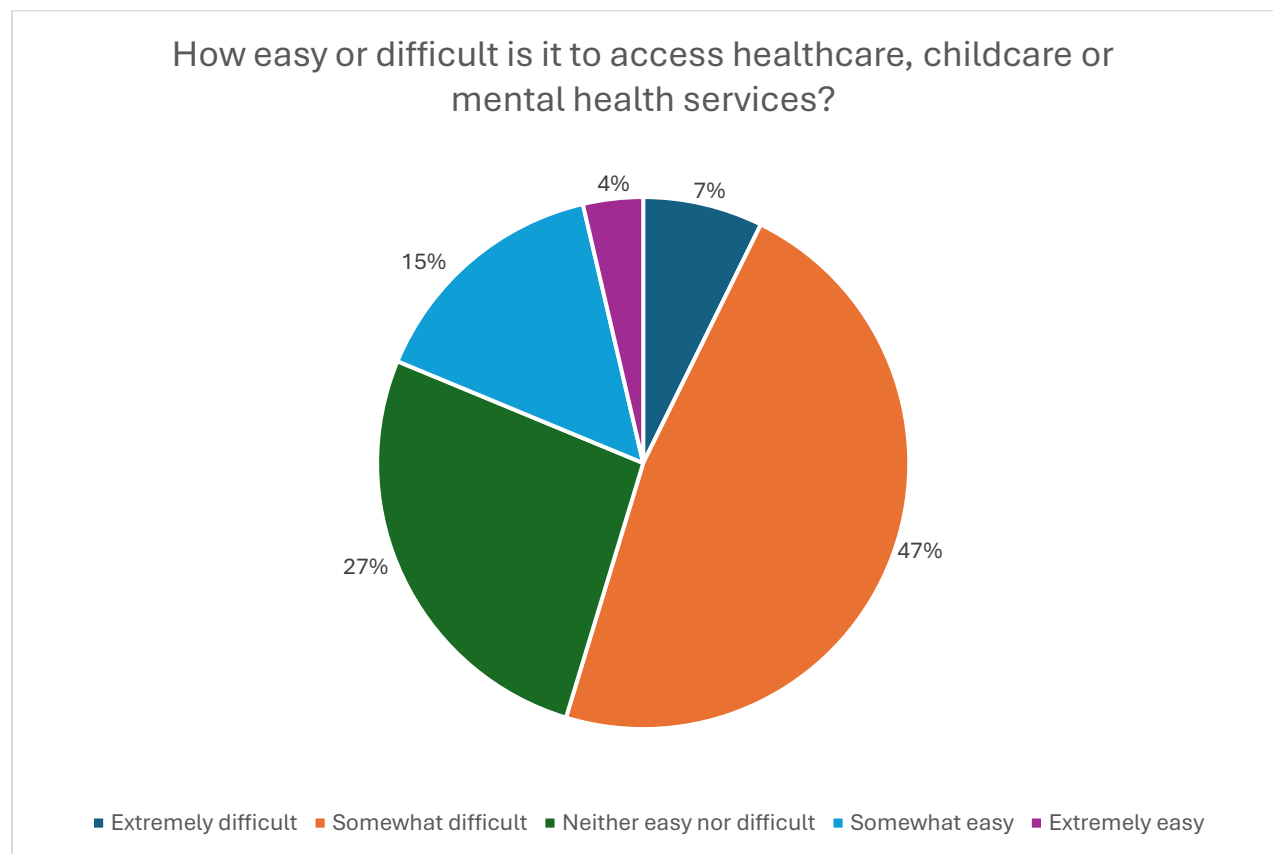


Appendix 3.13

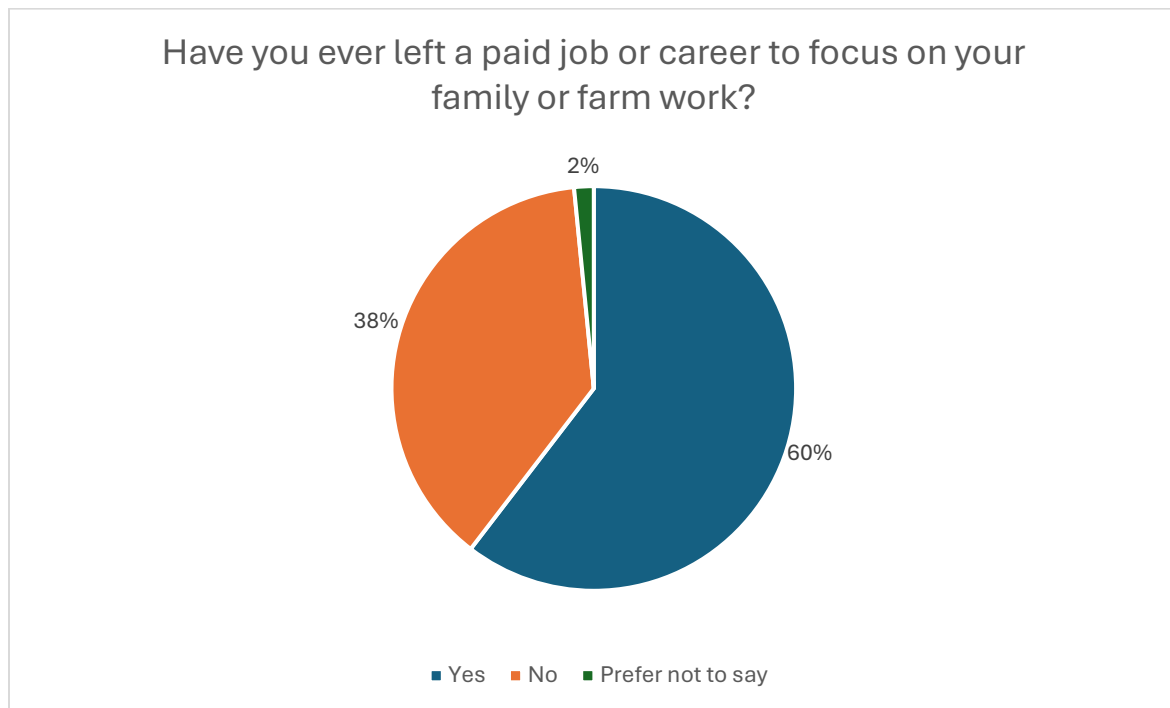
Significance of how often women feel that they are mentally exhausted even if they haven't done any physical work versus where they see themselves sitting on the mental health continuum model over the last six months.

Mentally Exhausted	Green - healthy	Yellow - reacting	Orange - injured	Red - ill
Sometimes	44.7%	25.7%	7.5%	50.0%
Often	50.0%	54.0%	60.0%	50.0%
Always	5.3%	20.4%	32.5%	0.0%
	100.0%	100.1%	100.0%	100.0%

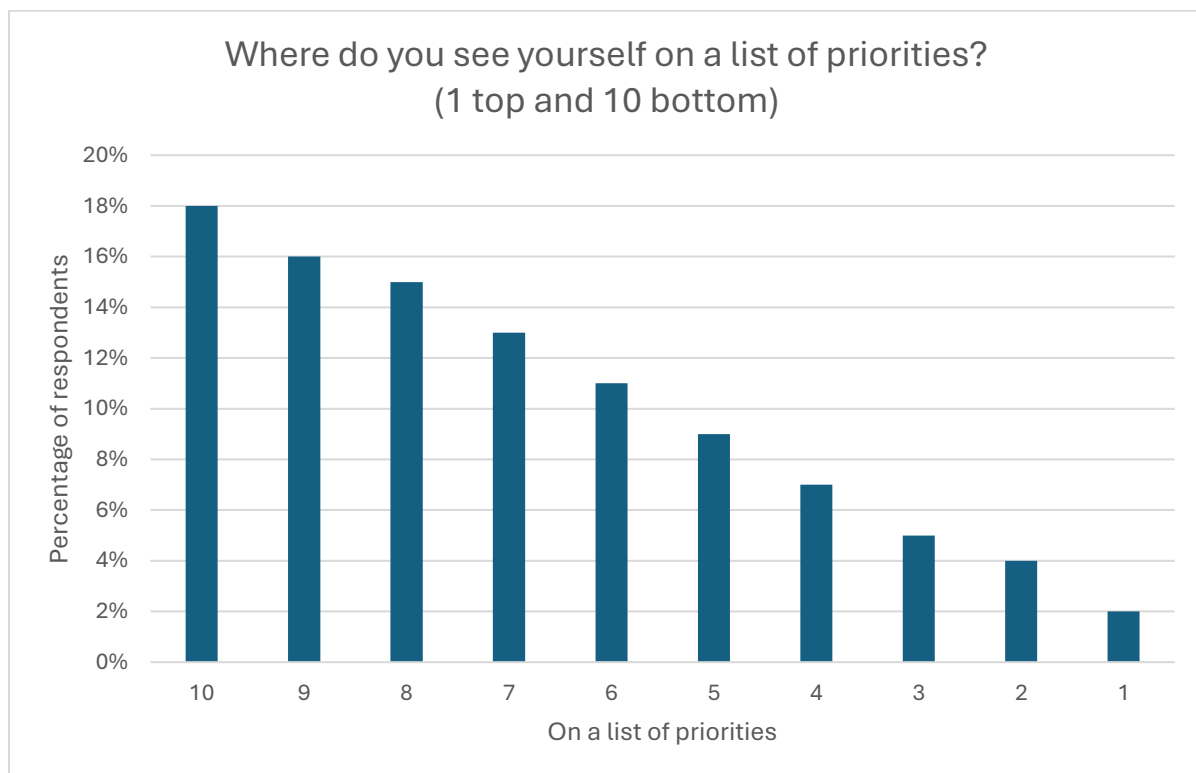
Appendix 3.14



Appendix 3.15



Appendix 3.16



Appendix 4

Survey

I would like to invite you to participate in a project entitled Is the "Carpark" too full - is the mental load of rural women affecting every day life, how can we support it?

The aim of the project is to investigate the mental load experienced by rural women, understand how it is affecting their everyday lives and identify practical strategies, supports and community initiatives that both ease this load and enable women to maintain meaningful careers so their skills and expertise can remain within the sector.

If people want to be part of the project, they need to be a woman currently involved in the rural industry and be over the age of 18. Participation in this study requires the completion of a survey that will take approximately 8 minutes. You are not required to participate. Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you have the right to opt not to complete or submit the survey.

The results of the project will be published on the Kellogg Rural Leaders website and may be published in an academic journal or presented at a conference.

However,

the survey is completely anonymous. To ensure confidentiality, your data will only be seen by me and will be stored in an electronic form with password protection. Only aggregated data will be presented in any publications. This study has been reviewed and approved by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee (HEC2026-10). If you have any questions about participating in the project, please contact me or my Course Examiner; we would be happy to discuss any concerns you have.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this project!

Kaylene Bennett

Email Kaylene@beachvalley.co.nz

Course Examiner: Dr Craig Trotter, Faculty of Agribusiness and Commerce Email craig.trotter@lincoln.ac.nz

Phone 03 423 0254

- Q2
1. I have read and understood the description of the project above.
 2. I have been given enough time to consider whether or not to participate in the project and to ask questions.
 3. I understand that I am not required to complete the survey, but after it has been submitted, I cannot withdraw as the surveys are anonymous.

☐ I consent to participate in the project and the publication of the results (which may include my anonymised information) (1)

☐ No - Thank you for reading this far, you don't need to go any further. (2)

Q3 Please select which age bracket you fit into:

☐ 0-19 (1)

☐ 20-29 (2)

☐ 30-39 (3)

☐ 40-49 (4)

☐ 50-59 (5)

☐ 60-69 (6)

☐ 70-79 (7)

☐ 80 + (8)

Q4 Which region do you live in?

- ☐ Northland (1)
 - ☐ Auckland (2)
 - ☐ Waikato (3)
 - ☐ Bay of Plenty (4)
 - ☐ Gisborne (5)
 - ☐ Hawke's Bay (6)
 - ☐ Taranaki (7)
 - ☐ Manawatu/Whanganui (8)
 - ☐ Wellington (9)
 - ☐ Tasman (10)
 - ☐ Nelson (11)
 - ☐ Marlborough (12)
 - ☐ West Coast (13)
 - ☐ Canterbury (14)
 - ☐ Otago (15)
 - ☐ Southland (16)
 - ☐ Other (17) _____
-

Q5 What stage of life are you in?

- ☐ Single (1)
- ☐ Married/partner living together (2)
- ☐ Married/partner with children, how many? (3)
-
- ☐ Solo mum with children, how many? (4)
-

Q6 Please tick which areas you have an involvement in:

- ☐ Farm (1)
- ☐ Children (2)
- ☐ Off-farm business/employment (3)
- ☐ Community (4)
- ☐ Other (5) _____

Q7 On a list of daily priorities where do you see yourself? (1 being the top, 10 being the bottom)

1 2 3 4 5 6 6 7 8 9 10

Priority (top) (1)	
--------------------	--

Q8 When life gets busy what gets dropped first (pick one)?

- ☐ work priorities (1)
 - ☐ self (2)
 - ☐ family (3)
 - ☐ healthy food (4)
 - ☐ sleep (5)
 - ☐ friends (6)
 - ☐ other (7) _____
-

Q9 How easy or difficult is it to access healthcare, childcare or mental health support in your area?

	Extremely difficult (1)	Somewhat difficult (2)	Neither easy nor difficult (3)	Somewhat easy (4)	Extremely easy (5)
How easy? (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q10 Do you feel rural life creates unique pressures that others may not understand?

☐ Yes, if so what are some of these unique pressures? (1)

☐ Maybe, please expand on why? (2) _____

☐ No (3)

Q11 How often do you feel mentally exhausted, even if you haven't done physical work?

☐ Never (1)

☐ Sometimes (2)

☐ About half the time (3)

☐ Most of the time (4)

☐ Always (5)

Q12 What are some of the things that you do to help organise your day?

Q13 What is one thing that you like to do for yourself everyday?

Q14 On the above colour scale where do you mainly see yourself on a daily basis over the last six months?

- ☐ Green - healthy (1)
- ☐ Yellow - reacting (2)
- ☐ Orange - injured (3)
- ☐ Red - ill (4)

Q15 How often do you feel you have too many tasks to manage at once?

- ☐ Never (1)
 - ☐ Sometimes (2)
 - ☐ Often (3)
 - ☐ Always (4)
-

Q16 What would help reduce your mental load?

Q17 Have you ever left a paid job or career to focus on your family or farm work?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Prefer not to say (3)

Q18 If you have given up your career, please describe what influenced your decision and what are the limitations to going back?

Q19 On average how many hours sleep do you have per night?

- ☐ 1 (1)
- ☐ 2 (2)
- ☐ 3 (3)
- ☐ 4 (4)
- ☐ 5 (5)
- ☐ 6 (6)
- ☐ 7 (7)
- ☐ 8 (8)
- ☐ 9 (9)
- ☐ 10 (10)
- ☐ 11 (11)
- ☐ 12 (12)
- ☐ 13+ (13)

Q20 Thank you so much for assisting me on my Kellogg Project, I really appreciate your help and feedback. Is there anything else you would like to share about your journey or experiences? If you or anyone you know feel under pressure please reach out for support to the Rural Support Trust, Farmstrong or your local GP, friends and family.

End of Block: Default Question Block