

Sharing the load: improving technical skills and competencies of women on farms

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Abstract. The vast majority of farms are family owned, with accelerating complexity and size to maintain viability. More than ever, partners in farming businesses need to work together to observe, discuss and be actively involved in farm business decision making. Men and women often see issues from differing perspectives that can complement one another and work for a more optimal solution. As extension practitioners seeking to engage women in agriculture, we see a need to run women's events that pose a genuine learning experience. Women from the Corangamite catchment in Victoria were invited to a workshop series covering fundamental technical topics: soil, climate, crops, pasture and livestock management. Women were encouraged to ask questions, practice new skills and share their experiences to answer each other's questions. Feedback showed that the aspect of the workshops most appreciated by the women was the quality of the learning opportunities through the presenters and practical activities.

Keywords: decision making, workshops, rural women

Introduction

Farms in Australia are still predominantly run by families, with the National Farmers Federation declaring 99% of farms are family owned (NFF 2017). The resulting overlap of family, farming and business lends a complexity to decision making that is not often experienced in other industries (Fulton & Vanclay 2011). While on the one hand it is a challenge, on the other it is a strength, with diverse perspectives and personalities providing the opportunity for more robust and multi-faceted decisions.

Women contribute around 48% of the economic output from farming communities across Australia as found in independent survey data (Elix & Lambert 1998) and validated as 49% in the 2006 census (Sheridan & Haslam-McKenzie 2009). Yet when it comes to making decisions, it is estimated that less than 20% of farm decisions are made by women; an imbalance that Elix and Lambert (1998, p. 2) suggest 'reduces the diversity in leadership needed to improve performance, both domestically and in a competitive global market'.

The question stands to be asked: if women are equal economic contributors in farming communities, what underpins the disparity between this and their involvement in the decisions being made?

Underestimating the role that women play

The Elix and Lambert (1998) report estimated that, on top of the \$1.1 billion in off-farm income that women contribute annually, women in farming communities contribute \$8 million to rural economies through unpaid housework and at least \$0.5 billion in volunteer work each year. These two activities are vital for small communities and the functioning of households, but their unpaid nature makes it difficult to quantify their value and do justice to the role they play. Many women will comment when asked what they do that they '*just* help out around the farm', or they '*just* do the books', when in fact they are making significant contributions to the farm, business and family. McGowan (2011, p. 143) comments that

The replies given by many farm women when asked the question, 'What do you do?' – such as 'Oh, I don't work, I just help on the farm', or 'I don't work, I am only a housewife' – helped reinforce a stereotype that women do little serious farm work.

Different pathways into farming

Traditionally, it has been the man that inherits the farm and his partner shifts there to join the farm (McGowan 2011). Even if she comes from a farming background herself, the differences in the farm's operation, growing environment and culture can be a barrier to her being involved in decisions. Woody Allen famously wrote, 'those who can't do, teach. And those who can't teach, teach gym'. A fun quip, but not always true in that many who are good at 'doing' are not so good at teaching. When someone has grown up on a farm, the skills and knowledge acquired both consciously and unconsciously over years can easily become second nature and are difficult to explain to someone who is unfamiliar with them. In the workshops discussed later in this paper, several men strongly encouraged their partners to come along to learn from someone else, despite being top producers themselves and even an advisor in one instance. Whilst there was a willingness to get their wives more involved on the farm, the knowledge gap and the challenge of

upskilling them was a barrier that was more easily overcome when the training came from external sources.

Not wanting to be involved in the decisions

A necessary consideration is that some women on farms have little desire to be actively involved in the decision making, often because they have their hands full with other responsibilities; e.g. off-farm work and/or children (Howard, Stelling & Mahoney 2011). It appears that often when women do want a role in decision making it is more likely to be at the strategic level; e.g. buying land, taking on staff. However, it can be difficult to be involved in those discussions if knowledge of the tactical and operational aspects of the farm is limited.

Technical workshops for women

There is a growing call for increased involvement of women in agriculture. This looks quite different on a corporate and political level to the farm level. The general feeling among the women on farms involved in these workshops was that they did not feel hard-done by or discriminated against for being female. There was an eagerness to be better equipped and confident to vocalise opinions. This was with a view to being able to collaborate more with their partner in the running of the farm.

A farmer from Inverleigh commented that she thought 'the best way to get women involved is to give them an educated voice. Talking to your partner and agronomist, no one wants to be the woman who only half knows'.

With this in mind, a series of workshops were designed to provide women in the local area with a stronger understanding of the technical aspects of the systems they farm. The following topics were covered in four workshops and replicated across two locations:

- understanding soil and climate
- crop production
- pasture management
- livestock systems.

Each workshop followed a fairly simple formula (Figure 1), beginning by gauging the participants' existing knowledge level before covering the basics required for understanding the topic (e.g. what is climate? how do plants grow?). Presenters were conscious of providing more than a tokenistic learning opportunity, and by the afternoon the group would be using technical language to ask questions, applying practical skills like condition scoring animals, and answering each other's questions with their own experiences and knowledge.

Figure 1. General structure for the workshops



Knowing the target audience

The sessions were pitched at a fundamental level, so that there was equal access regardless of prior knowledge and understanding of technical language. The workshops were targeted for women on commercial farms; with 85% of the participants identifying themselves as such. Another 8% were on smaller properties (lifestyle blocks). The others were bankers, students and researchers. The majority of the participants came from various localities in the Corangamite catchment in Victoria.

Most of the women had children at home and many held jobs off farm in addition to their work on farm. With busy schedules it was often difficult for women to attend each workshop. There were four women who were able to attend all four workshops; 10 women who attended three workshops; 20 who attended two workshops and 20 who attended one workshop. This was also a factor of people not hearing about the workshops until towards the end of the sessions as the network grew and word spread. The workshops are being repeated in another area at the time of writing, with several of the women joining those groups to catch the sessions they missed previously.

Three tips for running technical events for women

Certain elements proved to be more important than others in the running of the workshops. These were identified through a mix of trial and error, sharing with others working in this space and reading. Three areas are presented here that arose in the current workshops. For further thoughts on ways to engage women in agricultural extension exercises, see the paper by Howard, Stelling & Mahoney (2015) that draws on work from Australian Wool Innovation.

High quality learning opportunities Importantly, the content presented to a women's group should not be any different than for any other group. We wanted to communicate to the women coming and their partners that this was an event where they would be respected and have genuine learning opportunities. In the branding for the events we avoided overt appeals to the feminine audience – there was no pink or call outs to 'girls'. In the right context these can be useful branding tools, but for a technical event we opted for more conventional, less gender-orientated methods.

Having well-respected presenters that were clear communicators was a key draw card for women coming along and having their partner's encouragement. Figure 2 shows this was by far the favourite aspect of the workshops – with 46 respondents commenting on their feedback form about the quality of the learning opportunities through the presenters and practical activities. It was common for women to make comments like 'I don't think my husband knows this', and 'I actually know more than I give myself credit for'.

Physical comforts The pasture workshops fell in the middle of winter in some of our coldest weather. We learned the hard way that having people sit for several hours in a tin shed with a concrete floor when it was 9°C was less than conducive for learning. After that, if the weather looked like it might be cold, we made a point of bringing patio heaters, hot food and plentiful cups of tea.

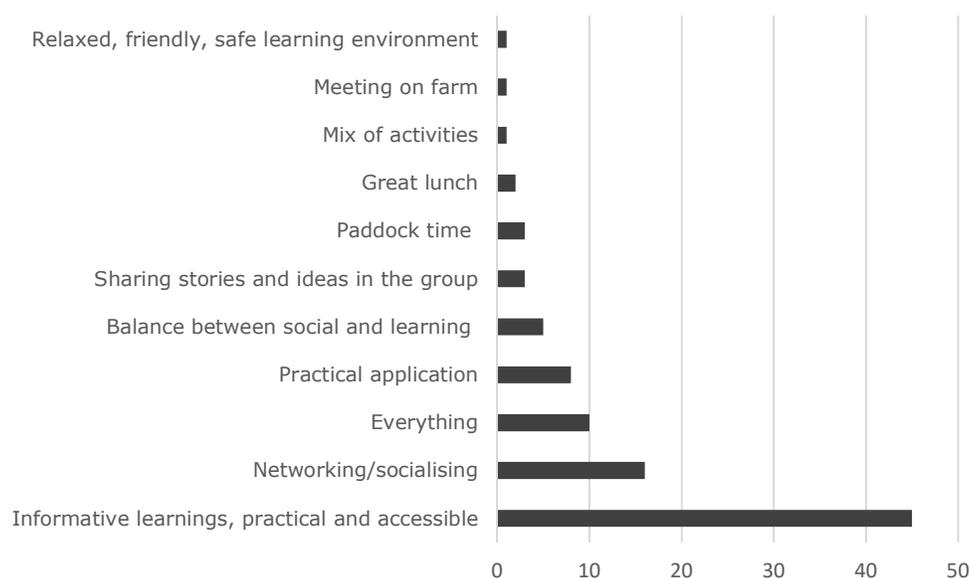
Food was also an important part of the day. The women were vocal in their appreciation of the home-made soup, fresh salad rolls, fruit and cheese platters and plunger coffee. It required more preparation than a packet of biscuits but helped impress that we believed the workshops and participants were worth the effort.

Social considerations With 35% of the participants sitting in the 31-40 year old age bracket, there was a high proportion of mothers in the groups with young children. Considerations around child minding and getting children to and from school and kindergarten were significant for most of the groups, and it was important to accommodate these considerations where possible. For these workshops this meant running during school hours (9.30 am to 3.00 pm) and providing space for prams and children if they came along. One person commented in the feedback that it would be good to provide child minding, which is a consideration for future funding applications. We also had feedback that earlier advertising of dates would be useful in getting time off work and arranging babysitting.

Meeting other women from the area in similar situations was an important aspect of the workshop, with 16 comments in the feedback relating to its importance (see Figure 2). To this end, it is important to have time and space for chatting and meeting new people. It worked well when there were a few people who were more vocal and willing to speak up both in the sessions and be the 'playmaker' in the break times, introducing women who did not know one another and inviting friends to future workshops.

Future directions

The future form of the Women on Farms groups in the Corangamite catchment has deliberately been left open to interpretation and adaptation. With many of the women involved in these groups having other commitments in their communities and busy lives at home and work, there was a hesitancy to form another group that required a time investment to maintain. The intention is to keep it as an informal network that is driven by suggestions from review meetings with key participants. The funding applications, event planning and organising will continue to be borne by groups such as Southern Farming Systems and Catchment Management Authorities.

Figure 2. Participants' favourite aspects of the workshops

When asked what they would like to do in the future, the workshop participants' top ranked options were:

- visits to other properties and processing operations
- book keeping and office management
- pasture management and maintenance
- wool classing
- machinery operation.

More than remaining an isolated group though, the hope is that it will be a springboard for women to get involved in other specialised industry groups. One woman commented that 'the workshops gave me the confidence to get a consultant in to help me draw up a plan to start building up my own Merino flock'. She also went out and joined a local Bestwool Bestlamb group, which came about through meeting women at the workshop who are involved in the group.

Summary

There is increasing dialogue around how we increase the involvement of women in agriculture. There is reasonable documentation and supporting literature for this at the policy and corporate level, encouraging women into positions of leadership across the industry. However, there is reason to believe that the extension approach to connect with women on farms differs, with more of a focus on complementary roles on farm than seeing a rise of women in leadership.

Resilient farm businesses require resilient families. By equipping women to better understand the technical aspects of their farm operation, we begin the shift towards more robust systems where the decisions can be understood and shared by all parties involved in the process. Running technical events where women feel safe to share their opinions and questions validates the role that they have to play on farms.

One woman commented after a workshop that she had not noticed how often she used the word 'just' to describe the work she does around the farm. The importance of the language used cannot be underestimated in promoting a shift in this paradigm. Language of respectful collaboration and inclusion is highly important in the way we talk about the work that women are doing on farms and the role of the men on farms too.

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