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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Recognition but few rewards: a 40-year review of the impact of the Australian women in agriculture movement

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ABSTRACT

Despite women's contribution to the viability of Australian family farming, there is gendered inequality in access to cultural recognition and economic rewards. This article examines the extent to which the Australian rural women's movement challenged the state to respond to this inequality. It focuses on the period 1983–2024 and finds evidence of effective claim-making by the rural women's movement for cultural recognition as partners in the farm business. It does not find evidence of claims for greater access to economic rewards. Effective claim-making depended upon supporting the broader economic policy of agricultural restructuring and supporting the viability of the family farm. This limited the movement's ability to make claims for economic rewards as doing so would necessitate a challenge to the gendered power relations of Australian agriculture. This study offers a rural perspective to the broader body of literature on the efficacy of women's movements in neoliberal states.

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Gender equality policy; women's movements; Australia; agriculture; rural women; neoliberalism

Introduction

While women's on and off-farm labour is crucial for family farm viability in Australia (Alston, Clarke, and Whittenbury 2017; Sheridan and Haslam McKenzie 2009; Suess-Reyes and Fuetsch 2016), their access to recognition as autonomous farmers, land, credit, networks and training remains limited (Newsome 2021; Sheridan et al. 2023). Their access to farming is predominantly through marriage, and this limits their autonomy and economic power, as does the masculine construct of farming (Alston 2012; Bryant and Garnham 2015; Newsome 2020; Newsome et al. 2024).

This article seeks to understand the extent to which the Australian women in agriculture movement challenged gender inequality in Australian agriculture. It analyses the claims that this movement made on the state from 1983 to 2024. It examines the effect of this claim-making in terms of the resulting policies, programs and shifts in political discourse. We draw on Nancy Fraser's (1995) categorisation of gender equality claims as cultural recognition and socio-economic redistribution. We draw on extensive

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document, media, archival and website analysis. We use Liepins (1998) identification of the women in agriculture movement. It is defined as informally connected networks, groups and organisations with the objective of improving the recognition and involvement of Australian women in agriculture.

We find that the movement was successful in accessing greater cultural recognition as secondary farm partners but did not pursue socio-economic redistribution, for example, improved access to farmland. Cultural recognition as farm partners depended on being committed to economic model of the family farm. The claims made by the movement were for state support of family farming, for example through investing in the human capital of women farmers. This did not challenge gendered power relations within family farming. Women farmers were only legitimate if they supported the masculine project of family farming. Like the broader women's movement in Australia (Harris Rimmer and Sawyer 2016; Sawyer and Andrew 2013), the rural women's movements were limited to making claims that fit with neoliberal policy platforms. This constrained the politicisation of the movement and its ability to challenge the underlying economic model. Rural gender equality policies and programs were used to legitimate the extensive agricultural economic restructuring of 1983–2024 (see also Pini and Brown 2004).

This paper contributes a rural case study to the broader women's movement literature. It demonstrates the difficulty of challenging economic inequality within the family, especially when the viability of the family business and the economic security of one's family members depends on women's under-rewarded work. This study nuances the finding of the broader literature on gender equality policy under neoliberal governance (for example Brown 2015; Elomäki and Ylöstalo 2024) that women's reproductive labour is not analytically visible to the state. In this study women's labour became more visible and recognised by the state but remained outside of the wage-market nexus and thus economically under-rewarded.

We begin with an outline of a conceptual framework. This is followed by an overview of the qualitative methodology. We then consider a range of materials produced by (and about) the women in agricultural movement to understand the progress that has been made over the last forty years. It concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this study and the work that still needs to be completed.

Rural women's movement's claims for gendered recognition and redistribution in the context of neoliberal governance regimes

To understand rural women's movement's claim-making on the state we draw on three fields of literature. First, Fraser's (1995, 2000, 2014) work on the relationship between women's movements' seeking of cultural recognition and socio-economic redistribution. Second, a recent framework developed by Elomäki and Ylöstalo (2024) to explain gender equality policy making in neoliberal states using concepts of economisation, depoliticisation and neoliberal governance. Third, the literature on rural women's movements' claim-making on the state.

Fraser (1995, 2000, 2014) contributes an analysis of the link between cultural recognition and socio-economic redistribution to social movements literature. Cultural recognition aims to overcome the injustice of social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication that leads to cultural non-recognition, disrespect and domination

(Fraser 1995). When social actors are marginalised, excluded, invisible or seen as inferior it leads to misrecognition and signals the existence of a subordinate status (Fraser 2000). Fraser (1995) espouses the view that political actions against cultural injustices can be both affirmative (agitating for positive recognition) and transformative (criticising the underlying discourses and structures). Despite its affirmative and transformative potential, cultural recognition can constrain improved access to material rewards. Socio-economic redistribution is a change in the allocation of disposable resources to actors (Fraser 1995; 2000). Economic injustices can be met through a demand for redistribution within the economic system or through a more transformative demand for a new economic order (Fraser 1995). The ability for political and social movements to make claims for economic justice may be impeded by capitalist property relations (Fraser 1995).

Within neoliberal governance regimes, such as Australia, gender equality policy development may be constrained by economisation, depoliticisation and strategic governance (Brown 2015; Elomäki and Ylöstalo 2024; Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). Through these processes the meaning of gender equality ‘bends’ and ‘shrinks’ (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). Economisation centres economic rationality in neoliberal governance, rendering the gendered labour that sustains markets analytically invisible (Brown 2015). In neoliberal states, gender equality claims that fit with the logic of the market are more likely to gain traction (Elomäki and Ylöstalo 2024; Harris Rimmer and Sawyer 2016; Kantola 2010). Elomäki and Ylöstalo (2024) identify depoliticisation as the denial of gendered power relations, ideologies, conflicts and political interests. Strategic governance sets fewer policy objectives and manages the achievement of these objectives with short term, achievable goals and measurable results. The processes of economisation, depoliticisation and strategic governance inhibit the challenging of complex gendered power relations over the longer term (Elomäki and Ylöstalo 2024).

Edge and Barker Devine (2014) identifies three keyways that rural women’s movements differ from urban women’s movements. First, the focus on collective rather than individual needs. Second, the requirement to prioritise the farm’s financial viability and thus to limit claims for economic redistribution. Third, remaining relative silent on claims for women’s rights that echo the broader women’s movement.

This study focuses on the extent to which the Australian women in agriculture movement sought and received cultural recognition as farmers and socio-economic redistribution. When considering the extent to which socio-economic redistribution has been achieved, we focus on access to agricultural land and profits from agriculture. Access to property such as agricultural land is increasingly a major determinant of economic security in Australia surpassing other factors such as employment and education (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2020). Claim-making by the Australian women in agriculture movement 1983–2024 is likely to be shaped by processes of economisation, depoliticisation and neoliberal governance. In the sections that follows we outline a methodology for answering this question.

Methodology

We seek to capture the movement of ‘reconstitutive feminisation’ in agriculture (Byrne et al. 2014), where new spaces were created to empower women in agriculture. As such we focus on claim-making against the state by women-only agricultural and rural groups in

Australia. We recognised the agency of women in this movement in contrast to the historic tendency to present women as passive (Byrne 2003).

This paper was completed through archival research, webpage and document analysis and the study of secondary documentation. The forty-year timespan necessitated a two-pronged approach. Evidence of the activity of women in agriculture groups in the earlier periods (particularly the 1980s and 1990s) of this study were gathered through the National Library of Australia's Trove database and various other repositories. Trove was first released in 2009 and contains a wide range of sources, including newspaper, website and organisational materials (Holley 2010). We were also able to review some media interviews with women in the movement. We began by searching relevant terms on Trove filtered to reflect the study's timespan. We then examined a range of resources that were available online or through interlibrary loan. The archival documentation was not exhaustive of the full range of conferences, forums, workshops and other materials generated during the forty-year period under investigation. However, this approach provided a good snapshot of key themes, activities and dialogues from this time.

In addition to searching through established databases we also examined government websites and documentation as well as the websites of relevant organisations. These groups included Australian Women in Agriculture (AWiA), Women in Seafood, Queensland Rural Regional and Remote Women's Network (QRRRW), Meat Business Women, Encouraging Women in Horticulture, Women in Farming and Tasmanian Women in Agriculture, amongst other organisations. We analysed webpages to understand recent activity by the women in agriculture movement. We also looked at relevant position statements from these groups. Some had websites but did not include publications such as annual reports or strategic plans. Groups such as Women in Dairy were excluded as they are part of Dairy Australia and their remit seems to be to connect to education and social support, rather than to engage in political activism (Dairy Australia 2024). The Country Women's Association, the National Farmers Federation and some state-based groups have been excluded for similar reasons. It is important to note that while the Country Women's Association has been active in promoting support for rural women, they have not specifically engaged in activism for women in agriculture.

We note that this methodology is limited by the researchers' subjectivity. Both authors are white feminists in a colonised nation. The research topic of predominantly white women's groups seeking access to land perpetuates colonisation and erasure of First Nations' peoples never-ceded sovereignty of Australia (Moreton-Robinson 2021). The meaning of land is taken from the Western perspective. One researcher's positionality is as a white woman from an agricultural background, with family in agriculture for many generations, and living in a rural area. This no doubt influenced her interpretation of these documents. To mitigate the impact of this positionality we aimed to gather a comprehensive data set for cross referencing.

Agency, impact and constraints: The Australian women in agriculture movement relationship with the state 1983–2024

The women in agriculture movement's demands for cultural recognition as secondary farm partners were largely successful (Alston 2012; Alston and Whittenbury 2013;

Bryant 1999; Coldwell 2007; Fincher and Panelli 2001; Liepins 1998). The state could 'bend' (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009) the demand for cultural recognition of women as farm partners to fit with the broader economic policy of restructuring agriculture (see also Liepins 1996; Pini and Brown 2004). The movement made claims in support of family farming, the cornerstone of Australian agricultural policy, which limited its claims for socio-economic redistribution (see Fraser 1995).

To understand how the Australian women in agriculture movement's relationship with the state changed over the four-decade period we analyse three key periods of government: 1983-1996; 1996-2007 and 2007-2024. This reflects the three major changes in Australian governments over this time. These were the Hawke/Keating Labor Government (1983-1996), Howard Liberal/National Coalition Government (1996-2007), Rudd/Gillard Labor Government (2007-2013), the Abbott/Turnbull/Morrison Liberal/National Coalition Government (2013-2022) and the Albanese Labor Government (2022-present). While there have been small differences between government agendas, agricultural policy in the period from 1983 to 2024 is characterised by progressive market restructuring while taking into account non-economic considerations (Botterill 2016). There remains a high level of community support for the state to support farmers (McAllister 2009). With the deepening of neoliberalism, gender equality policy, too, has become less variable across governments (Harris Rimmer and Sawyer 2016).

Mobilising for cultural and legal recognition: The Hawke/Keating years (1983-1996)

The women in agriculture movement was effective in collectivising and making claims on the state for cultural recognition as partners in farming during the Hawke/Keating years. The movement was successful in influencing legal recognition of women farmers, improvements in data collection on the contribution of rural women, improved analysis of policy impacts on rural women, the creation of government-supported rural women's networks and the setting of targets for women in agricultural leadership. Developing gender equality policies and programs for rural women helped to legitimise the restructuring of agricultural markets (Liepins 1996). While the movement was aware of inequalities in women's access to the economic rewards of agriculture, it did not make claims for socio-economic redistribution.

During the years of the Hawke/Keating government, narratives of economic change and crisis helped to legitimise women's participation in farming (Liepins 1996). Policy objectives shifted from farm income stabilisation and rural community sustainability to adaptation to global market forces (Tonts and Jones 1997). Farmers and rural communities were encouraged to be more self-reliant and entrepreneurial (Higgins 2001). The state saw women as having a particular role in helping farms transition in this new policy environment (Pini and Brown 2004).

Bouyed by a supportive policy environment, women in agriculture engaged in collective action and made demands for cultural recognition as farmers. This is detailed in Dale-Hallett and Forge's (2003) useful timeline on the development of the rural women's movement. One of these developments was the Women on Farm Gatherings, which began in 1990. These gatherings helped to create a common identity among

women farmers, and gave women an opportunity for networking, training and information sharing (Liepins and Schick 1998; Pini, Panelli, and Dale-Hallett 2007). As one participant, Elaine Paton, stated ‘I went to a Women on Farms Gathering as a farmer’s wife and I walked away a farmer’ (Henningham 2014).

Another major development was the establishment of AWiA in 1992 (Australian Women in Agriculture 2015), consistent with an international trend toward the creation of spaces of empowerment for rural women (Byrne et al. 2014). Teather (1996) argues that the AWiA represented a departure from the key body representing rural women, the Country Women’s Association, which positioned itself as representing traditional gender roles associated with the home and the community. On the other hand, Barbara Pini (2008) argues that rural women’s groups such as AWiA differentiated themselves from male farmers by positioning themselves as farmers who were speaking as community members and wives.

Groups such as AWiA were important for creating a shared identity amongst members as women farmers (Liepins 1996). For Cathy McGowan, (board member AWiA 1995–2002 and later Federal Member of Parliament (Indi) 2013–2019), AWiA gave her permission to farm in a different way. This method did not rely on brute physical strength but was still valid (Fidler and McGowan 2020).

The key demand of the women in agriculture movement on the state, through groups such as AWiA, was recognition of their contribution to the family farm (Alston 2003; Bryant 1999), which they argued was undervalued (Liepins 1996; 1998; Teather 1996). They sought to destabilise the cultural narrative that farmers’ wives were not productive contributors to the farming business (Bryant and Pini 2011). The movement also demanded a voice in agricultural policy making (Pini, Brown, and Simpson 2003). A founding member of AWiA, Dorothy Dunn, states that:

It’s [ingrained in] rural culture that a farmer is male ... It’s actually taken us right out of rural and agricultural policy, because we are not seen to count. We were only counted as housewives and homemakers. We had no recognition whatsoever of the work that we actually did on farms. (cited in Marslen 2015)

Claiming space in rural and agricultural policy was met with a degree of backlash in rural communities. For example, the Tasmanian Women in Agriculture Blue Gum Newsletter reported that:

[w]hen TWiA [Tasmanian Women in Agriculture] formed in 1994, it was seen in some circles as either a threat or a joke. In fact, it was not uncommon to be told ‘you women should stop trying to be more powerful in farming than the men and stop in the social issues where you belong’. (cited in Tasmania Department of Primary Industries Water and Environment and Tasmanian Women in Agriculture 1995)

During the Hawke/Keating years the movement made claims on the state for legal recognition, successfully challenging women’s status as ‘sleeping partners’. The status of sleeping partner impacted women’s position in divorce and injury settlements and led to an Australian Law Reform Commission investigation on these matters (Liepins 1998). The resulting report found that women in the rural sector had been misclassified as ‘sleeping partner – non-productive’ and that they contributed significant work to farm businesses (Australian Law Reform Commission 1994). This, and other major developments in government policies and initiatives, related to women in agriculture, are set out

Table 1. Major government policies and initiatives targeted at women in agriculture 1983–1996.

Year	Event
1985	The New South Wales Women's Advisory Council produced a pamphlet highlighting the role of women in agriculture.
1986	Review of the Victorian Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs demonstrates that, out of a budget of \$50 million, \$100 had clearly been spent on women (Henningham 2014).
1986	Victorian Rural Women's Network under the auspices of the Office of Rural Affairs in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs established, as a result of the review above (Butler 2018). Two part-time women's officers appointed.
1992	New South Wales Rural Women's Network formed under the auspices of the state agricultural department (Lo Po cited in NSW Agriculture and Rural Women's Network 1998).
1992	<i>The Invisible Farmer – A Summary Report on Australian Farm Women</i> commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Primary Industries and Energy (Pini and Brown 2004).
1993	Queensland Rural Women's Network established by Queensland State Government (Grace and Lennie 1998).
1994	Australian Law Reform Commission investigation into the misclassification of women in the rural sectors as 'sleeping partner – non-productive'.
1994	The federal Minister for Agriculture, 'agreed that 50 percent of all agricultural and rural board positions would be held by women by 2000' (Alston 2014, 197).
1995	Tasmania Government established rural women's unit (Alston 2006).
1995	National statistical study, <i>Women on Farms</i> , published (Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics (ABARE) 1995).
1995	Commonwealth Department of Primary Industries and Energy develop a women's policy unit
1995	The NSW government announced its intention 'where possible to ensure that at least 50% of new appointments to government boards, councils and committees are women' (Lo Po cited in NSW Agriculture and Rural Women's Network 1998, 6–7).

in Table 1. This includes improved data collection on farm women, improved analysis of policy impacts on rural women, the creation of government-supported rural women's networks and the setting of targets for women in agricultural leadership.

The movement benefited from the creation of the development of women's policy machinery and rural women's units at a state and federal level (Alston and Wilkinson 1998; Butler 2017). The focus of rural women units was building the skills, recognition and confidence of women in agriculture (Alston 2006; Fincher and Panelli 2001; Mitchell 1994; Panelli and Pini 2005). An example of recognition building strategies was the publication of *The Invisible Farmer – A Summary Report on Australian Farm Women*, a report commissioned the Commonwealth Department of Primary Industries and Energy with the support of the Country Women's Association (Pini and Brown 2004).

In Victoria, women ministers in the Cain Government, Joan Kirner (Member for Williamstown 1988–1994) and Caroline Hogg (Member for Melbourne North Province 1982–1999), used their role on the Rural Affairs Committee of Cabinet to insist that the newly established Office of Rural Affairs have a strong focus on the needs of rural women. Its first major project was appointing two staff members to develop the Rural Women's Network, to encourage women to develop a more active voice in government decision-making (Butler 2017).

Despite the gains made by the movement through collective action, at the level of the family, making claims for recognition, and even more so economic redistribution, was fraught. While the movement questioned gendered inheritance patterns and unequal access to agricultural land (Liepins 1998), it did not make claims for improving women's access to land. Founding member of AWiA, Alana Johnson, cited in Haslam Mckenzie (1998, 54), argue that '[w]ith the land held in the man's name and all wealth

held in this one asset, women have no real worth with which they can decide their own destiny'. However, Alana Johnson also commented that 'Those sort of revolutionary feminist acts didn't get to the bush for a long time' and that 'Women found it really difficult to be 'radical' when they were in a farming family, because the most important thing to them was supporting their families ... disruption was not something that came easily' (Broom 2024). The movement realised the difficulty that women may face when going home to their families and raising issues of their disadvantage and gave women the personal choice as to whether they did this. An interviewee in Liepins (1998) study said, 'it's a potential minefield for those women when they go back home, and if our aim is to support and encourage women, then we also don't want to make their life hell'. Margaret Alston (1995, 23) notes that 'hostility towards men is unacceptable in a system that depends on a high degree of cooperation' and that feminism was met with suspicion as it was seen unlikely to improve women's power within the farming household.

During the economic restructuring of the Hawke/Keating years women developed a stronger voice in rural spaces and political processes. They gained cultural recognition as farm partners but baulked at making claims for economic justice, such as improved access to agricultural land. During the years of the Howard Government rural gender equality policy focused on women's leadership and the movement became more depoliticised.

Women's leadership of agricultural boards and the depoliticisation the rural women's movement: The Howard Government years (1996-2007)

During the years of the Howard Government gender equality initiatives targeted at women in agriculture 'shrunk' (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009) to quantifiable policies, such as increasing women's leadership on agricultural boards. Depoliticisation and strategic governance limited the influence of the women in agriculture movement and the rural women's policy machinery.

Agricultural market liberalisation continued under Howard's Liberal/National Coalition (Cockfield and Botterill 2013) and rural community governance was devolved to a regional level (see McGrath-Champ and Searle 2005). The women in agriculture movement successfully argued for policies and programs aimed at increasing the representation of women on agricultural and rural boards (Pini and Brown 2004). This claim fitted with the narrative that economic restructuring was empowering for women, helping to legitimate this policy (Pini and Brown 2004). The 1998 National Plan for Women in Agriculture and Resource Management had the stated aim of increasing women's involvement as leaders and clients of agricultural departments (Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management 1998). Furthermore, in the 2007 federal budget the NRWC received \$4.5 million for women's leadership programs (Alston 2009). Other claims, such as those related to social policy changes, were not as well received by the Howard Government. Pini (1998) and Pini and Shortall (2006) argue that women in agriculture presented themselves as having the necessary skills to assist the industry to adjust to a restructured economic environment, such as communication and holistic thinking skills. For example, when Fran Rowe, a rural financial counsellor and chair of the Rural Women's Network State Advisory Committee 1994-1996, met with the Prime Minister, John Howard in 1996 on World Rural Women's Day she argued:

We are different Prime Minister, not because of any particular characteristic, but because we are a valuable, Australian resource which is unrecognised, under-utilised and which has the potential to assist regional Australia to achieve our vision of an energetic, thriving rural sector. (Rural Women's Unit 1996)

Women made claims for increased representation from a relational rather than individual or gendered position, framing the benefit as being for their communities and for farming families (Pini 2008). This is consistent with the dominant social construction of rural women as community and family oriented (Sheridan, McKenzie, and Still 2011).

The rural movement's capacity to leverage the rural women's policy machinery to make political gains declined during the Howard years (Fincher and Panelli 2001; Pini and Brown 2004; Pini, Brown, and Simpson 2003). The rural women's units in the rural Department of Agriculture and Department of Transport and Regional Services, were downsized, renamed and its remit was reduced (Alston 2009). Nonetheless, women in agriculture and rural women's groups fared better than most women's groups during the Howard Government years. Rural women successfully lobbied the government over lack of representation, fruitfully arguing for funding for a fourth secretariat (the National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC)) in 2002 and 2005 (Sawer and Jamieson 2014). The secretariat structure limited the influence of groups outside of the NRWC. The NRWC comprised of the Country Women's Association, AWiA, the Australian Local Government Women's Association, the National Rural Health Alliance, the Women's Industry Network Seafood Community, Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women and 'a rural Indigenous woman' (Foundation of Australian Agricultural Women 2003 in Maddison 2004). The funding of the NRWC is likely to be due to the influence of the Nationals within the Liberal/National Coalition Government (Sawer and Andrew 2013). The activities of the NRWC, like those of the other women's secretariats, were restricted, for example by limitations on media involvement and on ability to conduct research, what was termed 'gag clauses' (Maddison and Partridge 2007).

The policy emanating from the rural women's policy machinery during the Howard Government years has been negatively critiqued by feminist rural scholars. Alston (2009) argues that the policies maintain the gender norms of agriculture and shrink gender equality objectives to fit within these norms. Alston (2009) further argues that the policies embedded the notion that women are not equal contributors to the family farm. Similarly, Pini and Brown (2004) argue that these policies did not challenge gendered power relations in agriculture.

During the Howard Government years, the rural women's movement was depoliticised and its influence limited to advocating for the development of policies that supported women's leadership on agricultural and rural boards. This limited the scope for transformative cultural recognition as well as socio-economic redistribution.

Recognition but not redistribution: Depoliticised, economised rural gender equality policies 2007–2024

From 2007 to 2024 family farming remained the cornerstone of agricultural policy (for example Commonwealth of Australia 2015, 1). The key objective was to improve profitability, resilience and sustainability. The claims made by the women in agriculture movement that gained purchase with the state were those for greater investment in women's

human capital so they could be engaged farm partners and community leaders. This supported family farming and did little to redistribute the economic rewards of agriculture or recognise women's unpaid and underpaid work (Newsome [forthcoming](#)).

The claims made by the women in agriculture movement 2007–2024 were centred on improving their capacity to contribute to the viability of their family farm, rather than seeking to challenge the underlying structures and discourses of family farming to achieve socio-economic redistribution. The claims made by the women's movement at this time were for a strengthening of rural communities and farm businesses, rather than strengthening rural women's individual economic security (for example Australian Women in Agriculture ND; QRRRW 2023). Groups such as Tasmanian Women in Agriculture (2021) and Women in Seafood Australasia (2020) argue for greater inclusion of women in agriculture based on the need to harness a valuable economic resource. Compared to the 1990s, the rural women's movement's influence had dissipated (Marslen 2015). This reflects the trend in the broader Australian women's movement identified by Sawer and Andrew (2013).

New groups were formed around particular commodities (for example, horticulture, wool, beef, wine and seafood). These groups also made claims on the state for human capital development such as skill building (for example Meat Business Women 2025) and mentoring and networking (for example Encouraging Women in Horticulture 2023; Women in Seafood Australasia 2020). The development of these groups reflects the rise of vocationally based organisations in non-traditional areas of employment identified by Sawer and Andrew (2013).

The state responded to this claim-making by distributing funding to women's groups and professional training bodies to provide training to women as farm business managers and leaders on agricultural boards. This included the NRW (2016) e-Leaders Grow, Innovate and Sustain Program. This reflected a trend toward outsourcing of public policy functions to the non-government sector. Direct government policies and initiative to support women in agriculture are detailed in [Table 2](#).

Women in agriculture were seen as key agents in creating resilient and entrepreneurial farms and rural communities (Newsome [forthcoming](#)). For example, David Littleproud, Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management (2017–2022) stated in a press release in 2020 that:

While it has been a year of challenges for regions, female leaders continue to be at the forefront of innovation and building the productivity and resilience of rural communities. (Department of Agriculture Drought and Emergency Management 2020)

The rhetoric of some politicians also failed to recognise women as independent farmers. For example, Federal Agriculture Minister, Barnaby Joyce (2013–2015) said at AgriFutures Rural Women award in 2013 that:

It's about making sure that people stand up and are counted and the world understands that agriculture in Australia will fall flat on its face without the prominent and incredible role that women play, whether that role is basically as the assistant farm labourer, with the partner or with the husband. (Bettles 2013)

Newsome ([forthcoming](#)) argues that these policies and programs did not recognise women as farmers in their own right, nor did they facilitate more equal access to agricultural resources such as land.

Table 2. Selected government policies and initiatives impacting women in agriculture 2007–2024.

Year	Event
2007–2024	NSW Department of Primary Industries Rural Women's Gathering.
2008	National Rural Women's Summit to 'strengthen the voice of rural women in shaping rural and regional policy' (Plibersek 2008).
2009	<i>Revisiting Missed Opportunities- Growing Women's Contribution to Agriculture</i> commissioned by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation. Women's contribution to family farms calculated as 49% of real farm income.
2011–2016	Commonwealth Office for Women with the NRWC- e-Leaders Grow, Innovate and Sustain Program.
2012–2024	Department of Primary Industries and Regions South Australia – Stepping into Leadership Program.
2013	Commonwealth Office for Women launched the NRWC Weather the Storm Toolkit.
2018–2024	NSW Department of Primary Industries Generating Regionally Outstanding Women Program.
circa 2020–2024	Agriculture Victoria – Victorian Rural Women's Leadership and Mentoring Program.
circa 2018–2024	Federal Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development and Cities- AgendHER PLUS – Remote, Regional and Ready for Boards.
2021	Department of Primary Industries and Regions (South Australia) (2021) – Profiles of women in agriculture.

Adapted from Newsome (forthcoming).

From 2007 to 2024 the women in agriculture movement's claims on the state were focused on seeking support for individual human capital investment rather than collective action for recognition and socio-economic justice. Effective claim making continued to depend on making claims that fitted with the logic of the market, reflecting economisation effects. The splintering of the movement through the development of commodity-based groups, the focus on individual development and the reduced strength of the women's policy machinery relative to the 1990s served to depoliticise the women in agriculture movement at this time.

As neoliberal agricultural economic policy and governance matured, rural gender equality policy became more economised and depoliticised. The claims by the women in agriculture movement that resonated with the state from 1983 to 2024 were those that legitimised agriculture restructuring policies and supported the viability of the family farm. As such, the meaning of gender equality bended toward economic growth (Rönblom 2017).

Discussion

This study has examined the claims that the women in agriculture movement made on the Australian state 1983–2024, with a focus on those that were successful. It did so through the lens of Fraser's work (1995, 2000, 2014) on cultural recognition and socio-economic redistribution. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Brown (2015) and Elomäki and Ylöstalo (2024) it sought to contribute to our understanding about women's movements' ability to influence gender equality in the context of neoliberal governance.

The women in agriculture movement effectively pursued affirmative cultural recognition of their contribution to family farming (see also Alston 2012; Alston and Whittenbury 2013; Bryant 1999; Coldwell 2007; Fincher and Panelli 2001; Liepins 1998). The movement did not pursue transformative cultural recognition to challenge the underlying masculine discourse and structures associated with family farming. Claim

making shifted towards investments by the state in the individual human capital of women farmers. Legitimacy as secondary farm partners depended upon supporting the farming as a predominantly masculine pursuit. As such gendered power relations of family farming, whereby farm viability is dependent on the underpaid work of women remained intact. This limited the capacity to make claims for socio-economic redistribution.

The capacity for the Australian agricultural women's movement to seek economic justice was impeded by capitalist property relations (see Fraser 1995). The financial viability of family farming often depends on keeping the farm intact during farm transition and succession processes. This means that one, usually male, successor is likely to dominate (Sheridan et al. 2021), which reproduces the masculine gender order in Australian agriculture.

Like women's movements in Australia (Harris Rimmer and Sawyer 2016; Sawyer and Andrew 2013; Sawyer and Jamieson 2014) and internationally (Elomäki and Ylöstalo 2024; Kantola 2010), the Australian rural women's movement made claims that fit with supporting the neoliberal economy and neoliberal governance. Gender equality objectives 'shrunk' (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009) to fit with the logic of the market, reflecting the mechanisms of economisation, outlined by Elomäki and Ylöstalo (2024). This finding echos international research from the Swedish agricultural industry (Andersson et al. 2018), that under neoliberalism women's agency is required to fit in with the logic of the market. This limited the recognition of women's contribution in financially, socially and culturally reproducing the family farm. As Brown (2015) argues economisation makes the gendered labour that sustains the economy analytically invisible.

Over time, the movement was depoliticised, limiting its transformative potential. Claim making shifted toward the state making investments in individual human capital of women farmers. The movement splintering into smaller, commodity-based groups. Furthermore, the power of the rural women's policy machinery diminished. As strategic governance became embedded, rural gender equality initiatives became narrower in focus and more short-term and quantifiable. For example, the state focused on human capital investment and increasing women's representation on agricultural boards. This limited the scope of policy to confront long term, complex gendered power relations (Elomäki and Ylöstalo 2024).

The women in agriculture movement made claims from their position as family and community members and did not challenge gendered power relations in these sites. This may have been to fit with the dominant discourse. However, research has also shown that rural women political agency is expressed from a relational rather than individual perspective (Egge and Barker Devine 2014). Furthermore, as Shortall (2014) observed, gendered power relations in family farming are often invisible to those involved.

Conclusion

Despite gains in cultural recognition of Australian women farmers, unequal access to the rewards and resources of agriculture persist. In Australia, access to agricultural land and property more broadly, is a key determining factor of economic security (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2020).

This paper contributes to the theory of gender equality claim making in neoliberal states. It demonstrates how cultural recognition for women in agriculture depended upon supporting the economic model of family farming and the economic policy regime of agricultural restructuring. Both depend upon women's work being under-rewarded. Providing a rural study nuances the broader literature on gender equality policy under neoliberal governance (for example Brown 2015; Elomäki and Ylöstalo 2024), which points to women's unpaid work as being analytically invisible to the state. In this study women's unpaid work was recognised and culturally rewarded by the state, but this did not lead to transformative recognition or socio-economic redistribution.

A key limitation of this study is normalising the whiteness of the women in agriculture movement and failing to adequately critique the role that studies of white women's access to unceded First Nations' land has in perpetuating the colonial project. In doing so this paper presents the normative rural community as white, erasing Indigenous experiences (Ramzan, Pini, and Bryant 2009). The Australian women in agriculture movement has been critiqued as representing a narrow group of white women in owner-operator family units (Liepins 1998). The study risks homogenising and universalising the white feminist experience and white feminist scholarship (Moreton-Robinson 2021). Future work that takes a decolonial approach is needed. The second key limitation of this study is that it does not reveal the dynamics that took place within government machinery, political parties or within the rural women's movement. In-depth interviews with key actors within these spheres would shed important light on this issue.

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