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Women have fought hard to be recognised as farmers. There's still more work to be done

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When we think of an Australian farmer, we often still conjure up an image of a bloke in a hat, perhaps leaning on a fence post. If women make an appearance at all in this picture, it's usually as a support to the male farmer.

Women's labour has long been central to the success of Australian farming. But farming itself is still largely seen as a "masculine" job. That's why the Australian women in agriculture movement has fought hard to change this perception.

Our research has reviewed the story and impacts of this movement over the past 40 years.

There have been some big wins for women – particularly in terms of cultural recognition. But they still do not have equal access to the economic rewards of farming.

Not just the farmer's wife

Australian farmers get much less government support than in other advanced economies, including very low subsidies for agriculture.

The viability of farming in Australia has long been reliant on the flexible and often underpaid work of family members, including wives, daughters-in-law and daughters.

Even so, this contribution hasn't always been visible or officially recognised.

In the 1990s, rural women started meeting and formulating agendas for change at what were known as the "Women on Farm Gatherings".

Recognition as farmers was at the top of the list. But before making demands to be recognised as farmers, they first needed to self-identify in this way.

As one participant, Elaine Paton, is quoted as saying:

I went to a Woman on Farms Gathering as a farmer's wife and I walked away a farmer.

In 1994, the movement was successful in challenging the existing legal status of women on farms as a "sleeping partner, non-productive".

This impacted women's position in divorce and injury settlements, impinging on their claims that they were contributors to the farm business and deserved recognition as such.

The movement was making gains in disrupting the masculine idea of what it was to be a farmer. But it also faced backlash.

For example, when Tasmanian Women in Agriculture formed in 1994, it was reportedly "seen in some circles as either a threat or a joke".

Progress stalls

Like many Australian women's movements, the momentum of the rural women's movement stalled from the late 1990s onward.

The movement had been supported by the establishment of rural women's units in state and federal government departments from the 1980s onward. These were focused on building the skills, recognition and confidence of women in agriculture.

But access to policy makers in the government via these organisations became constrained.

Agriculture itself was undergoing a policy-driven economic restructuring at this time. Government supports, subsidies and services for farmers all declined.

Farmers were encouraged to "get big or get out" to maintain farm viability. They were also encouraged to become more professional and entrepreneurial.



Agriculture underwent a major shake-up in the 1990s. Lukas Coch/AAP

Recognition, but few rewards

Effectively making claims on the government depended on rural women's groups supporting the broader agricultural policy of economic restructuring.

The rural women's movement argued it was a "valuable, Australian resource" that could help the agriculture sector and rural communities adjust to this change.

Policies targeted at women in agriculture and women in rural areas focused on tapping into rural women's potential to make farms professional and less reliant on government support.

This included building skills related to the farm office. These programs helped to legitimise the policy of economic restructuring, as it was seen to be empowering for women.

These programs did little to improve women's access to the economic rewards of agriculture. Key politicians still appeared to see women as secondary farmers.

For example, in 2013, then federal agriculture minister Barnaby Joyce said agriculture would "fall flat on its face without the prominent and incredible role that women play", but then described that role as "basically as the assistant farm labourer, with the partner or with the husband".

Where we are today

Women's on and off-farm labour is crucial for family farm viability in Australia, but they still do not share equally in the economic rewards of farming.

The flexibility and underpayment of family labour is arguably one of the key reasons Australian farming remains largely in family rather than corporate hands.

Our research has explored how contemporary Australian government policies targeting women in agriculture present women in three ways:

- the supportive wife holding the farming family together

- the entrepreneurial farm partner
- the builder of resilient rural communities.

This does not recognise women as independent farmers in their own right. It also reinforces and normalises women's contribution to agriculture and rural communities as underpaid or unpaid.

It also fails to recognise the diversity of Australian agriculture and the role of the construct of the white middle-class farming woman in colonisation.

Future proofing the Australian agricultural sector will rely on governments recognising that the sector is reliant on women's work and introducing policies that aim to strengthen women's economic positions.

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