

WORK-RELATED CHILD CARE FOR FARM FAMILIES

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Introduction

'Often I took the risk and took the children to the cattle yards with me. My saviour was the four wheel motor bike. My five year old would ride the motor bike with my 18 month old on the back and I would say "keep driving" as I knew if they stopped, the young one would get off.'

These are the words of one mother and dairy farmer interviewed during the Farm Based Child Care Project conducted this year in the

Albury/Wodonga region of Australia. This project was sponsored by The Hub, the adult and community education provider in Tallangatta and funded by The Commonwealth Government. This research project reported on 'practical and sensible solutions to ensure farm and rural families have access to quality child care' (McGowan, 1994b:40). During the four months of data gathering and analysis people in the farming communities of Tallangatta and Walwa in north east Victoria and Savernake and Holbrook in south west New South Wales talked about their needs and ideas about child care.

There were two main aims:

- ï To identify child care needs for farm families, particularly farm women, and
- ï To identify flexible, accessible and affordable child care options to support specific child care needs (McGowan, 1994a:3).

The research report established the need for quality child care through various research methods including local focus groups, community meetings, a regional forum, reflections on the consultative process and the formation of a steering committee which met regularly over the four months. The draft report of this research recommended the funding of a multipurpose rural child care project for three years to be reviewed at the end of the pilot period.*

Previous research on rural women's attitudes about work and family responsibilities suggests that women 'actively negotiate their family responsibility by considering the availability of paid employment in their community, their own values about home and child-rearing, and their family's economic situation' (Sparrow, 1991:8). In an earlier study a small number of women living in rural NSW at the time their first child was born were interviewed. The words of these women suggest the transforming of old traditions and the creating of a 'new' common sense about women and child care.

* I have recently moved to this region and become aware of this project through newspaper articles during the year.

You hear a lot of people say, 'Oh, you know you shouldn't go to work because you're going to miss out so much on your children growing up and it's going to be your day care mum who will watch your baby take her first steps.' Once I would have agreed with this because, sure, my mum was home with me and looked after me and watched me take my first steps. But then that was a different generation with a different history. These days women are different and need to be so in order to survive. (Kerri, a nurse)

Battersby, et al states '...women's previous experience in paid employment,....their willingness to consider child care as a viable alternative to staying at home themselves to care for their baby...and the emancipatory effects they attributed to their intentions to return to paid employment' are mediating forces in this transformation (1989:11).

The context of this project

World-wide rural restructuring in the form of the credit-price squeeze results in low prices for exports coupled with high interest rates (Franklin, 1994:6). The introduction of 'user pays' policies and the rationalisation of rural services are signposts in the crossroads for country women (7). In recent years rural Australians have seen their

post offices, bank branches, government offices, hospitals and schools close. These closures further reduce the limited employment opportunities for both men and women in rural communities.

'Several arguments can be raised to support the premise that 'user pays' is unreasonable in rural Australia' (7). Those people living in the country have been encouraged to believe that they are entitled to the same services as their city counterparts. This ideology though belies the fewer job opportunities, lower incomes and losses due to climatic vagaries that do not significantly affect city businesses.

Alston declares the rural crisis has changed the very nature of the way women live their lives on farms (1994a: 11). Through her interviews with women in southern NSW there emerges an understanding of this 'crisis which has seen women replacing hired labour on farms; moving off the farm to work in large numbers; being forced to reassess their voluntary community efforts; reducing their leisure time and reducing their standard of living' (11). The stories of very full and often overburdened lives sound much the same as those we heard in our interviews.

So apart from bringing in the money, helping on the farm and running the kids, these women are trying to keep their husbands together enough to keep the show on the road....we're all in survival mode here.
(Sparrow, 1991:8)

As the number of hired staff employed on farms decrease women take on more of the on-farm work. A simple notion of sexual division of labour on farms is inaccurate. Alston states 'the sexual division of labour stops at the farm house door, as women are active participants in 'men's work', but the men are not crossing over and performing 'women's work' (1994b:29). Women are almost totally responsible for the domestic and child care tasks on farms.

Women characterize their lives in different ways, but 'significantly, the women under 40 are more likely to report antagonism about the inequitable distribution of household responsibilities.'

....occasionally I get cranky because, if I've worked- the day that I work, I come home, and he's worked too, but....he doesn't understand that I'm tired. He'll want me to still run around and do it....Occasionally we have a few arguments where I say 'Listen here, mate! I've worked too today!' (Alston, 1994a:15)

Social structures in rural Australia serve to quell the expression of antagonism. Women see their interests best served by making a success of their husband's career (Finch, in Dempsey, 1994:49). They thus participate quite willingly in their own subordination and marginalization. Dempsey researched gender relations in a prosperous Victorian farming community over a 15 year period in the 1970s and 1980s. Most women work a 7 day roster as they facilitate men's paid work, leisure and prestige-enhancing activities (Dempsey, 41). Women ensure men are physically, emotionally and mentally fit by freeing them from virtually all domestic work and taking major responsibility for children (45).

This enhancement of men's lives and the farm's viability is often not recognized within the farm sector nor through media images of country life. Sheridan attempts to answer the question: 'Women in agriculture - where are they?' She has assembled some statistics on employed persons in the agricultural sector which demonstrate a considerable increase in female farm employers over recent years

(1994:20).

[insert table]

But questions remain about the details behind the sketchy statistics on men's and women's real contribution to farm work. Certainly media images which target the rural population depict the farming context as

a man's world. A content analysis of advertisements in *The Land* (one of Australia's leading farm magazines) characterizes men as actively performing the 'work' of the farm and women as passive spectators (Bell & Pandey, 1989:45). Farm work is narrowly defined as physical effort with machines and animals and so 'the advertisements do not reflect the farm labour situation in that they overstate the involvement of men and virtually dismiss that of women' (48). Women are depicted as wives and mothers who were caring, dependent and decorative, regardless of evidence that over 72% of farm women regularly work on the farm.

Child care as an issue for farm families

'Farm families have essentially the same needs for childcare as towns people. The difference is where and how the care is provided' (McGowan, 1994b:40). Current child care provision in the rural cities of Albury and Wodonga 'does not include services for the relatively small numbers of children in workplaces which combine home and work, or seasonal labour requirements' (40).

The project report suggested the need for 'flexible, accessible and affordable child care options' (McGowan, 1994b:40). The importance of flexibility is a focus of other recent papers. A seminar paper 'Child care: a challenging decade' from the Economic Planning Advisory Commission and the Office for the Status of Women recently asserts the importance of affordability and flexibility. The shortage of places, affordable or otherwise for babies is stressed. The shortage of services in rural Australia has become one of the routine findings of reports on child care in Australia (EPAC, 1994; Choice Magazine, 1994).

[Insert illustration]

Government child care regulations set high standards of quality in children's services in Australia. 'The importance of maintaining minimum standards of....children's services is vitally important' (McGovern, 1994a:23). But the project report also focuses attention on some government regulations which are 'ideally suited to a densely populated urban areas, but restrict certain types of 'child care from operating in a rural community" (24).

The report recommends a model of integrated child care including a variety of children's services at different locations. The small number of children needing these options at various times reinforces the need for flexibility. Higgs in earlier research makes similar recommendations about the importance of providing a number of different services in a Koori community multifunctional centre in the Dubbo-Coonamble region (1987: 4).

The current report recommends a mix of services including long day care, family day care, occasional care, out of school hours care, a mobile service and emergency care in the home. Various community venues will be the sites of integrated care. 'Licensing considerations, regulations, availability and number of children would

all need to be taken into account when venues are chosen' (41).

The report suggests farm (home) based child care as a new service. The child care needs of dairy farmers is a case in point. Because these workers begin work at 6:00 a.m. each day a child care option similar to the home and community care (HACC) scheme in which a local skilled person assists a family with particular needs is suggested. Home based child care is seen as 'a critically important part of the total solution to child care, particularly when children are sick or there is an emergency' (McGowan, 1994b:30).

[Insert illustration]

Reflection on the research project

The report on this project states 'a significant proportion of the people who live in rural Australia have no access to funded, legal child care. As a result of this lack of service, children and parents are extremely disadvantaged' (McGowan, 1994a:3). O'Toole discusses the ideology of rural disadvantage and asserts that rurality in itself is not an adequate notion in reviewing the provision of human services (1993:8). A common feature of the diverse rural picture of service provision is the lack of infrastructure. Until recently the existence of a number of small shires in Victoria has also impeded coordinated delivery of services (p.11).

The project in establishing a steering committee representative of a number of stakeholders ensures that as much local knowledge as possible will be considered. The report recommends that a local community committee of management run the child care scheme 'along similar lines to the very successful rural counselling program' (McGowan, 1994:41).

The utilization of already-existing infrastructure strengthens the application for funding.

The amalgamation of Victoria's shires is now in progress and the disruption to the planning of human services is considerable. The record of the Rural City of Wodonga in human service development is credible and well-recognized in the region. The cooperation characterized during the project between various shires and across state borders foreshadows the possibility of developing local government infrastructure which can deliver these services.

Networking

This project results from the initial work of a small committee of farm women concerned about the prevention of injury to young children on farms. These women joined with staff members from Albury Wodonga Mobile Child Care and the Tallangatta Hub to form a network to transform concerns into action. An analysis of recent political development in rural Australia suggests the importance of country women's networks (Teather, 1994; Roberts, 1994; Tom, 1990).

Two examples of networking demonstrate some of the diversity and complexity of country women in Australia today. These networks are the Country Women's Association and Landcare.

The CWA has a 70 year tradition of non-sectarian and non-party political lobbying to bring the needs of country women to the attention of powerful interests. There has been 'remarkably little change to its central values and organizational structure' in those years (Teather, 1994:134). A brief look at the CWA demonstrates the force of

tradition within the changing rural context.

'The CWA epitomises both the competency and the conservatism of farm women' (135). In a survey done in 1988 The CWA together with the Office of the Status of Women established its priorities in lobbying government. Communications and roads were at the top of the list of rural women's needs (Tom, 1990:358). Child care was also cited as a problem in this survey particularly in conjunction with the 'high rate of death and injury among children on farms as a consequence of the juxtaposition of homes and workplaces' (360). These issues of farm safety and workplace injury continue to challenge those concerned with the provision of quality child care on farms.

[Insert illustration]

CWA efforts in lobbying governments of all political persuasions and preparing policy statements do not extend though to challenging male hegemony in rural Australia. In fact, it could be seen that rural men and women connive in retaining this pattern of male power (Dempsey, 1994; Teather, 1994). Teather juxtaposes CWA's remarkable history as a guardian of conservative values with its 'declining and aging membership' (137). Some younger women have neither the time nor the commitment to CWA'S way of networking.

Evidence suggests that women in rural and remote communities experience a sense of voicelessness and isolation.....In recent years, however, women have become more vocal in famers' federations, primary producers' groups and local government.

(House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and

Constitutional Affairs, 1992)

Farm women as leaders in the bush

Another example of networking is the growing leadership country women are taking in Landcare groups in Australia. Throughout their lives women generally demonstrate a stronger commitment to sustainable development than men do (ABS, in Roberts, 1994:128).

[insert table]

This commitment together with the opportunity for group community activity in the Landcare movement in recent years attracts many younger country women to influential positions in this network. 'Local women's ability to motivate people to participate and then to gain the cooperative support of technology experts has been central to the success of many Landcare groups' (129). Their skills in cooperative networking have been a refreshing contrast to the competitive leadership characteristic of rural organizations in the past. Their leadership style is often described as 'self-effacing, conciliatory and letting others take the credit for group achievements' (131).

Is women's subtle, less visible leadership overlooked by the image-makers of the bush? Some would argue that while women's contribution to the domestic arena is recognized as 'a necessary dimension of the good country life,' the prevailing values are those of men (Poiner, 1994:57). Alternatively environmental and child care concerns are forces which combine the efforts of men and women in order to gain some control over essential aspects of their lives. The Landcare movement and the work-related child care project are 'steps on the way to bringing women into the foreground' of this collaborative effort.

Roberts concludes his discussion of women's involvement in Landcare with an extract from a recent Northern Territory pastoral conference. This message suggests a recognition of the need for an increasingly diverse set of approaches to the complex problems of rural Australia. Child care and land management are only two of these problems. One legacy of women's activity in rural politics is an acknowledgment of links between issues which were once thought of as separate.

The improvement that has been made [in our approach to land management] has been driven, albeit perhaps unwittingly, by a new mind set---a change in attitude...this softer attitude...Our country must no longer be a frontier we need to conquer---it must be a part of nature we want to embrace. Gone are the chopper pilots...high on Avgas and low on TLC.....We need to shift our focus. (my emphasis)

Goodbye macho----welcome femino. (Roberts, 1994:133)

Note: This proposal is currently before the Commonwealth Department of Health and Community Services awaiting a funding decision. Letters of support which stress the importance of child care for farm and rural families can be sent to: Senator Rosemary Crowley Parliament House Canberra ACT 2601.

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