

WORKING TO ORGANIZE RURAL WOMEN IN CANADA



Ukrainian women picking cabbages, Manitoba (1916)

Credit: Manitoba Archives

Liz Willick

Liz Willick presented this paper at the Forum '85 "Women and Food Production" Workshop.*

Liz Willick, dont la famille gère depuis deux générations une ferme de céréales au Saskatchewan, présente cet article à l'atelier "Les femmes et la production de la nourriture" au Forum 1985. Elle y examine la situation sinistre confrontant les fermes familiales au Canada. Le travail des femmes sur les fermes et dans les communautés – ainsi que dans leurs propres foyers – n'est pas reconnu, et on ne tient pas compte de leurs besoins particuliers. Cette situation a mené à la formation, par un petit groupe de femmes de milieu rural au Saskatchewan, d'un projet pour les femmes rurales. Elle décrit leur organisation et leurs activités, et fait un sommaire des questions décisives pour le développement d'alternatives pour les femmes dans le cadre du développement rural.

First, I wish to say that I am both honoured and humbled to be here at this

incredible gathering of the global sisterhood of women – and to have the privilege of speaking to you and with you.

Here in Kenya, I am a wealthy woman. At home in Saskatchewan, Canada, I am not. There, most farmers are involved in large scale, highly mechanized, capital intensive agriculture, not subsistence or self-sufficient cropping. At home, as in many parts of the world, the priority in agriculture is on export crops for profit and foreign exchange – not on food for people.

Government policy and multi-national corporate control of marketing, distribution, fertilizers, herbicides and so on means that Canadian family farmers are a disappearing breed. We are caught in what we call the "cost-price squeeze:" that is, constantly rising input costs and prices for our products that do not keep pace or which even fall.

I am from a (relatively) small two-generation family grain farm. Generally, the farm income covers input but no labor costs. In other words, it does not provide us with a living wage. Most Canadian

farmers can no longer survive without a relatively large cash flow. So I have a full-time paid job. I'm fortunate to work as a rural staff member of a small international development education NGO. As is true here at the Forum, I often learn more than I teach in working with farm and community groups.

Many Canadian farm women are not even aware that there has been a Decade for Women. But my work and my situation as a farm woman have led me to study the role of women in food production in the less developed countries of the South, as well as in Canada. Their efforts to organize themselves and to improve the lives of their families in countries such as Kenya are a source of inspiration and hope.

In my province, our history as white farmer-settlers is barely a century old. It has been shaped by agrarian populist/social democratic struggles by rural people. But in looking at the record of that history, women's work on farms and in communities is not recognized – it is rarely even mentioned. Yet rural women's concern for family welfare and their voluntary community work was in many ways the basis for our present social systems – public health care, libraries, schools, community colleges. The credit for establishing these systems was entirely appropriated by governments – by men.

As farms got bigger and rural population declined, the rural community has had less and less clout with governments. Development of community and social services lags behind that of urban areas. Economic pressure on farm families has steadily increased. Alcoholism, drug abuse, family violence, suicide and stress-related health problems are all on the rise within rural communities.

Although most farm women have labour-saving devices such as freezers and washing machines in their homes, the time they spend on housework has not declined. Most are responsible for gardening, food preservation and small livestock. Most also play a major role in farm financial management, machinery operation and all other aspects of the family farm. One hundred-hour work weeks are

the norm, though very few women are paid for any of this work.

This situation led a small group of rural women to establish a short-term Saskatchewan Rural Women's Project. Its members are separated by hundreds of miles. Most of us are farm women. Most of us have children. Most are responsible for the organization of the household. Most are active in farm work. Most also have waged jobs.

In seeking funding from government and NGO agencies, we identified particular requirements related to time, work loads, cost, distance and children. We budgetted for travel and child care expenses, for phone and postage, and for a part time co-ordinator. We scheduled meetings to avoid seeding and harvest and set times to allow us all to get to and from meetings in one day.

Our focus is on contributing to an educational and organizational process through which rural women can seek alternatives to the present deterioration of rural communities. We feel that rural women, who live in a particularly conservative and traditional sector of society, need to recognize our very major economic contribution to agriculture and our immense organizational skills at the heart of household, farm and community work.

So we prioritized research – into rural women's history, both organizational and in terms of the social and economic contribution of our work. We also began to look at the very new efforts of Canadian rural women in self-organization and the much longer organizational history of rural women in 'less developed' countries. We looked particularly for appropriate methodologies – like kitchen meetings and localized workshops – which are close to home, designed to fit into women's heavy work schedules and to accommodate the ever present children.

We felt that some existing organizations – both women's and mostly male, urban and farm-based – could play an important role in linking rural women and facilitating their involvement, education and organization. Because rural women are largely unorganized, we targetted our work toward improving and facilitating the activity of these existing organizations with and for rural women. We hope it will provide a common base of information and practical tools for co-ordinated or at least complementary work by a wide range of such groups.

Unpaid Work



Illustration by Catherine O'Neill

Credit: Agenda for Women's Equality (Ottawa)

In order to be appropriate, alternatives for women within rural development *must* be defined by rural women themselves. Some of the things we feel are crucial to that process are familiar to most of you:

- We need space in our lives to get together to discuss problems, needs, hopes, possibilities. Minimally, this requires support from our families especially our men.
- We need alternatives to individual mothers' near-total responsibility for children.
- We need recognition (including monetary) of the economic and social value of women's work – by women themselves, by our families, by society at large.
- We need access to appropriate training in crop production, financial management, mechanics, machinery operation, etc.
- We need to develop educational processes through which we can situate our lives and work in a global context. As women and as food producers we need a better understanding of political and economic factors which affect our lives so deeply and over which we present-

ly have no control whatsoever. We will need help to develop appropriate educational tools.

- We need organization and mutual support as women and as food producers with farm, women's and other political organizations.
- We need links with the world-wide women's movement in seeking equality, development and peace within the family, the local community, Saskatchewan, Canada and the world beyond.

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