

Farm Women

The Hidden Subsidy in Our Food

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Les agricultrices n'ont jamais tant contribué au revenu de la ferme par leur travail tant en dehors de la ferme, sur la ferme ou comme chef de famille. Il résulte que ce travail non rémunéré et non reconnu qui maintient les fermes actives, subventionne le prix des aliments qui sont plus bas au Canada, au détriment de la santé et du bien-être des familles rurales.

On February 8th 2005, Canadians were able to observe Food Freedom Day. This is the calendar date that represents the point in the year at which time the average Canadian has earned enough income to pay her or his individual grocery bill for the entire year. In 2005 it was 39 days into the 365 day year ("February 8 is Food Freedom Day."). Although food prices for consumers have gone up over the years, the percentage of disposable income Canadians spend on food has steadily decreased. According to Statistics Canada, in 2003 Canadians spent 10.6 per cent of their disposable income on food, a small percentage when compared to other fixed costs such as housing, utilities, or taxes (see Figure 1).

Between the years 1997 and 2003, the price Canadian consumers paid for food increased by 13.8 per cent. By contrast, the average price received by farmers for their produce increased by only 2.1 per cent (Sta-

tistics Canada). This means that the price paid by consumers increased over six times more than the prices received as a return for farmers. Figure 2 illustrates how the price of bread has gone up between the years 1975-2002 and how the price paid to the farmer for wheat has remained relatively stable.

Other examples of the difference between the costs of the processed end product and the income of the primary producers are the price of milk, corn, and beef. In 2003, the average retail price of a litre of milk was \$1.66, but farmers received only \$0.64 a litre. A box of corn flakes in the stores cost approximately \$3.50 but the farmer who grew the corn received only \$0.11 while the prime rib sirloin steak that costs \$14.00 returned \$1.83 to the beef rancher ("Compare the Share").

How do farmers in Canada survive? The simple answer is many of them don't! There has been a large exodus of people leaving the farm over the last few decades because, for many, it has not been possible to make a viable living by farming (Stirling 2004). Others remain farming but at a cost to themselves, to their family, and to their health. Figure 3 illustrates the decline of the total number of farms in Saskatchewan since 1951.

We often hear in the news and read in the papers about how the govern-

ment or Canadian tax payer is subsidizing farmers in Canada. I would contend that our food is being heavily subsidized by farmers. In particular, much of the labour of farm women enables Canadians to purchase quality food at low prices, contributing to the high standard of living we enjoy in Canada today.

This paper will attempt to link some of the structural changes that are occurring in agriculture to the (often unrecognized) contributions of farm women to the economy. It is based on a qualitative and quantitative study on the *Changing Roles of Farm Women* that I conducted on the Canadian prairies in 2002 (see Kubick 2004). The study (n = 717) utilized an exploratory, multi-strategy, multi-stage approach combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies directed by a feminist standpoint perspective to systematically explore the lived experience of farm women in the province of Saskatchewan. Eighteen preliminary interviews were conducted with individuals who worked with and represented farm women. The findings were then employed in the development of a 20 page questionnaire focusing on 10 subject areas 1) healthcare; 2) health status; 3) social support; 4) well-being; 5) lifestyle and activities; 6) stress; 7) work; 8) female and male roles; 9) demographics; 10) farm issues. Subsequently 20 in-depth interviews with

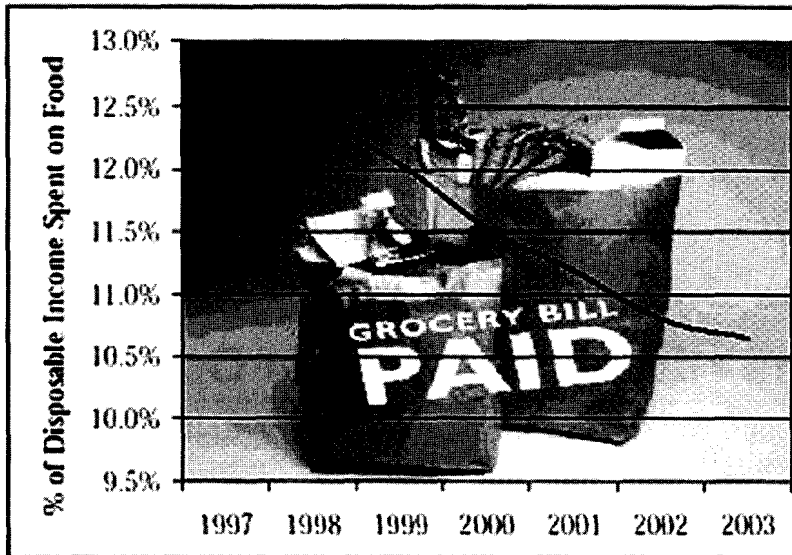


Figure 1. Canadian Federation of Agriculture, 2005

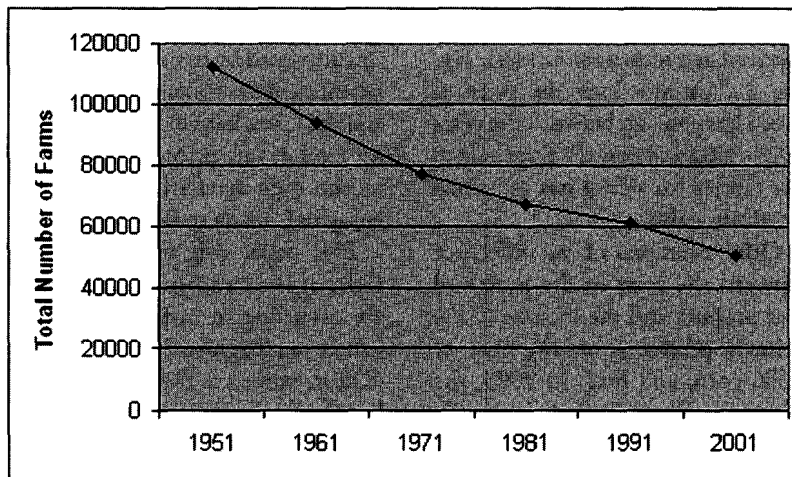


Figure 2: National Farmers Union

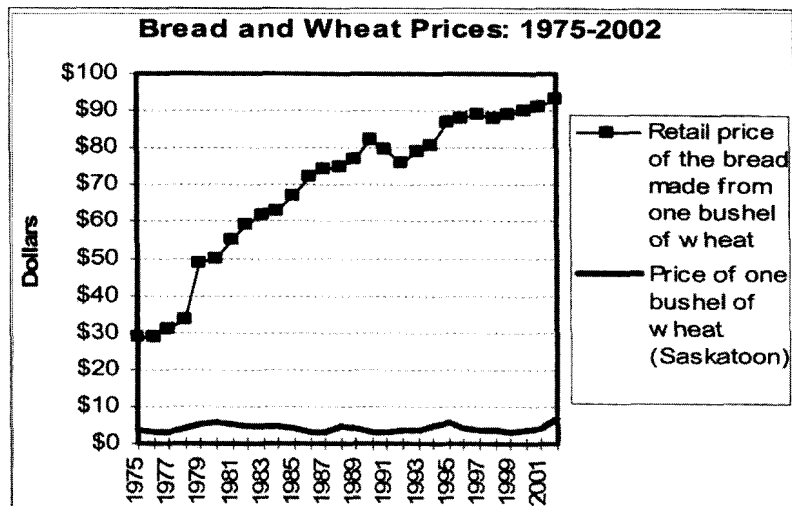


Figure 3: Total number of farms in Saskatchewan (1951-2001).
Data from Statistics Canada

20 farm women from across the province were undertaken. The farm stress line and Saskatchewan Women in Agriculture (SWAN) were the community partners in the research.

Women's Unpaid Labour on the Farm

Farm Work

Contributions to the farm economy by farm women has increased over the last 20 years for a number of reasons. In order to remain viable most farms have increased in size over the last few decades, however, even with larger and more efficient (and expensive!) machinery this generally translates into more work for the farm family (Jaffe). Because of the low prices farmers receive for their products it is not viable for most families to hire extra help. Consequently, extra help comes from members of the farm family. More women are doing more farm work today than in previous times (Smith). The number of women who engage in farm field work tasks on a regular basis has increased by an average of 12 per cent while the number engaged in farm management tasks on a regular basis has increased by 22 per cent from 1982 to 2001-2002 (Martz and Brueckner).

It is difficult to count the work that farm women do. Such labour is often viewed as "helping out" and not seen or counted by their spouses or themselves as farm work at all. Women are often viewed as the "on-call" labour particularly around seeding and harvest time. Many times, especially if there are children in the family, a farm women will be multi-tasking, doing work for the farm and home simultaneously (e.g., driving for parts for the tractor, groceries for the household, and taking her children to hockey practice). This obscures the farm work she is doing as well. Her work is contributing to the farm but because she is doing other things as well, it is hidden labour (Reimer; Wiebe; Cohen; Fox).

Sandra,¹ one of the farm women

interviewed, illustrated the work expected of farm women and the resulting stress that she incurred:

Farm women are labour. Even when they have children they are used for trucking, for taking meals to the field; they often do the books, They are the "go-fers": whatever needs to be done they are the ones that do it. Farm wives also have the family and the home and that's a major one. That is a job within its self. Often they would have the farm, the family, the finances, the accounting end of it, and sometimes even to the extent of it that they would work off the farm and so they have major stress.

Household Work

In spite of their increasing workload on the farm, and for many, their work off the farm, farm women generally remain responsible for the majority of household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare (NPHS). The *Changing Roles* study documented that farm women were responsible for at least 80 per cent of the household labour with the rest being completed by various other family members. Women continue to do the majority of housework regardless if they have an off-farm job or if they are increasingly contributing to the farm labour. Forty per cent of the farm women interviewed indicated that their average work day was over 13 hours long.

Many of their household "jobs" overlap the home and farm (e.g., bookkeeping, looking after livestock, growing and preserving produce from a large garden, etc.). Typically, women farmers are not paid for this work even though it subsidizes the farm and frees up a large portion of the farm's consumption costs. I suggest that their unpaid labour, in the home and on the farm, also subsidizes the low prices we pay for food when we go to the store.

Carrie describes a typical day during harvest:

I have to make dinners and sup-

pers all at breakfast time before I go to the field so I would get up early. If I happen to have some of that done or had leftovers, I would be unloading grain and then I would go to the field and I'd be in the field until about 7:00 or 8:00 at night. Then I would come in, put on the supper and do whatever I have to do around the house that I can get done, and then when the men come in, feed them or else I take meals out to the field at night. If it's seeding time then I'm moving equipment around or maybe going for fertilizer, or going for grain and trying to help. In calving time, we could be up all night.

The majority of labour on a family farm that supports the farming activity is not wage-labour, it is the labour of family members. Family farmers are independent commodity producers, that is they own some of the productive resources (land and machinery), however they and their families work for profit on the farm without re-numeration in the form of a salary. Bill Reimer shows that the tendency to focus on "productive" labour has caused women's indirect contribution to the farm to be overlooked. This concept of separate productive and domestic spheres then has the tendency to make women's work in the home invisible. For farm women, whose work is characterized by an intertwining of household and farm work, both work in the home and the work contributing to the agricultural enterprise has often been overlooked (Shortall; Wiebe; Smith).

Many women felt that a lot of their farm or household work was not acknowledged or recognized as making a major contributor to the farm. Pat summed it up by noting:

Women work hard making a living for themselves and their family and out of that I think most women would like some recognition. I think a lot of women, even if they are not active out in the field or with the animals, are still playing

a large role by having meals and raising the family, gardens and yard work, accounting, going for parts and those kinds of things that they don't get recognized for.

Women's Paid Labour and Off-Farm Work

In order to make a viable living on the farm, more women are working off the farm than in any other time in history. The *Changing Roles* study found that 51 per cent of the farm women worked off the farm in order to have the money necessary to cover household expenses, while the labour of 32 per cent of the women working off the farm contributed to farm operating costs and repairs. By paying for household expenses and helping with farm costs with money earned on off-farm jobs, farm women are continuing to subsidize the farm, and by extension, the food we buy in our grocery stores. Mary, who was juggling off-farm, on-farm, and household work described what it was like for her.

I work off the farm in a job that is very stressful and very demanding. You come back and there is so much to do.... You've got your housework, you've got your yard work and plus we have cattle and a mixed farm.... You can only stretch yourself so thin and you are always running around and there are always loose ends and you can never be a totally organized person. There is just too much expected and I think we are a generation so close to the generation where the women stayed home and they were able to fulfil all these duties and it is a real flip-flop because our generation can't. I think that is where there is the biggest change in farm women and their roles.

Women who have off-farm jobs often need to commute long distances, in all types of weather, often in isolated areas with poor roads.



Audrey Dixon who farms near Rocanville, Saskatchewan. Photo: Wendee Kubik

Extra money is needed for gas and car upkeep. More often than not it is difficult to find a job that utilizes one's skills or pays well (Kubick 1996). However, in spite of these difficulties, for many farm families, off-farm work is an economic necessity.

Conflict and Pressures of Being a Traditional Farm Wife

In the quantitative portion of the *Changing Roles* study the farm women were asked if they felt there were any particular expectations placed on them as farm women. Thirty-six percent said the largest expectation they felt was to be a "traditional farm wife." When asked what this meant, several offered descriptions similar to this one by Erin:

The traditional farm wife is going to cook and clean and raise the kids and do all the yard chores basically. If you have chickens, they are your responsibility. The garden is your responsibility. Chasing after your husband whenever he snaps his fingers, like run, that to me is a traditional wife. You are there 24 hours a day to dote on them and your life revolves around the children, your house and husband. You're expected to be here and do everything and that's it.

Even though the women had a view of what constituted a traditional farm wife and experienced pressure or expectations from various sources to try and fulfill this role, they felt they did not measure up to it. Women on the farm have expanded and increased their work on the farm as well as off-farm work, while continuing to be responsible the majority of household work and childcare. The structure of the traditional farm family is perpetrated today even when farm women are working off the farm in record numbers and doing more on-farm work than in the past (Statistic Canada 1999). Since this is seen as the "normal" farm family relationship, expressions of dissatisfaction with the arrangement are viewed as atypical or as not being a "good" farm wife.

When asked about what job title they would give themselves only 17 per cent of the women in the questionnaire placed themselves in the category of farmer, rancher, manager, owner or boss. Darlene explained why many farm women are reluctant to do this.

Most of the time they see themselves as homemakers and that's so ironic because they are out there running the equipment and stuff. But you sit and talk to a circle of women and they are not

saying.... [she speaks here in a deep voice] "yeah, I got to get out and plow that back forty." What they're saying is their kid was sick last night and they are busy sewing Halloween costumes. They are not going to take that away from their husbands... that wouldn't look proper.

Forty-two per cent of the women in the quantitative portion of the study reported that they had experienced conflict in the household over sharing of available resources. The issue that caused the most conflict was the necessity of the "farm always coming first" in terms of monetary decisions. Farming is a business and in order for the business not to "go under" many farmers exploit themselves by working harder and longer hours, and cutting expenses wherever they can. This means any available surplus is put back into the farm and because the household is interlocked with the farm it often suffers. Suzi described her situation:

In the spring, when the crop is going into the ground, don't ask for anything. Buy groceries, that's it, because all of the money is going into the land. Well, actually it is from April until the end of September when harvest is done, that is the priority. Anything else takes a backseat. In fact, my husband has gone so far as to say playfully, but with a grain of truth to it, "women who ask things of their husbands during harvest become statistics," meaning don't ask me. I've got lots on my mind, you know, I'll talk to you, I'll do that later. So yeah, those decisions are, everything for the farm first and then secondly, the household. But the farm always comes first.

Doing without within their own households—in order to ensure the ongoing operation of their farms—is yet another way that farm women subsidize their farms, and our food.

It is not surprising that the many

hours that farm women spend working, the lack of income they encounter, and the pressures they experience in their everyday lives cause them to experience a great deal of stress. The *Changing Roles* study documented the amount of stress women reported and compared it to the National Population Health Survey conducted by Statistics Canada. Fifty-five per cent found their lives “somewhat

ing women’s farm work is an example of how women’s subordination in the farm family is structured and perpetuated, making farm women our society’s “invisible farmers.”

Farm women illustrate the nature of the social relations that characterize socio-economic systems that are both capitalist and patriarchal. The relationship of independent commodity producers to both the input

outcomes are exceptionally high levels of stress linked to physical and psychological problems.

The incorporation of the concept of patriarchy into the study of health and farm women is sorely needed as patriarchal attitudes are prevalent in rural areas. New models of work that accounts for the diverse interlocking work that farm women contribute in the home and on and off the farm

“I’d be in the field until seven o’clock o’clock at night. Then I put on the supper, do whatever I have to do around the house, and when the men come in, feed them. If it’s seeding time I’m moving equipment around or maybe going for fertilizer, or grain.”

stressful” compared to 37 per cent in the NPHS; 29 per cent said their lives were “very stressful,” compared to the NPHS’s 28 per cent. Only 16 per cent said their lives were “not very stressful,” far less than the 35 per cent in the NPHS. The most frequent symptoms were difficulty sleeping, having trouble relaxing/feeling anxious, and feeling sad or depressed. The most common major stressor for farm women is economic hardship (Fromback; Martz and Brueckner; Women on Farms Initiative).

Conclusions

The essential role that women play in the production of food and the survival of the key institution of food production—the family farm—has often been overlooked. The *Changing Roles of Farm Women* study has demonstrated that women are key to the production of the food on which society relies and, ironically, their labour plays an important role in maintaining the patriarchal system.

Definitions of farm work are often narrow and many times work that does contribute to the farm (e.g., book-keeping, running errands for the farm) is not defined as farm work simply because it is a woman who does it. The dominant view surround-

and output side has been well documented by Robert Stirling (2001) and Murray Knuttila. As larger and larger multinational corporations dominate each side of the process, farmers are forced to pay more for inputs while, very often, the same corporations, are the major players on the output side, paying farmers very little for their product. As a result, family farmers, as independent commodity producers, are squeezed to the margin and beyond. In terms of gender relations and practices, Canadian farm families are typically organized as patriarchal institutions. As a result farm women are required to work within structures and ideologies that typically undervalue their work and contributions, regardless of the actual existing realities of the situation.

The long hours of work (off-farm, on-farm, and household) done by these invisible women farmers does not result in a larger paycheck for farm women. Instead, the many hours of work contributed by farm women in Canada enable us to observe Food Freedom Day earlier and earlier each year. I have argued that their labour thus subsidizes the farm economy and the food produced by farm families. While we pay less and less of our total income for food, farm women’s

would make visible the many contributions made by farm women.

We are at a crossroads at the present time regarding the type of food production we are willing to support in Canada. Do we want our food to be produced by corporate farms? Or do we develop alternative ways to produce and market our food products that recognize philosophically and monetarily the people (particularly the large role of women) who produce the food?

Wendee Kubik completed her Ph.D. on “The Changing Roles of Farm Women and the Consequences for their Health, Well-being, and Quality of Life” in Canadian Plains Studies at the University of Regina in 2004. She is an Assistant Professor of Women’s Studies at the University of Regina.

¹All quotes are from interviews conducted for the *Changing Roles* study. Names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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This material is designed to improve the health of rural remote and northern women across Canada by making sure that women have a say in how health programs, plans and policies are developed. The community kit is already providing the basis for local rural women's meetings across Canada.

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