

## **Women as Leaders in Agriculture – Still Not Seen, Still Not Heard, Still Not Recognised**

(Short running title - **Women as Leaders in Agriculture**)

### **Abstract**

This paper reviews the outcomes and deliverables since the publication of the *Missed Opportunities* report (Elix and Lambert 1998) which aimed to quantify the contribution made by women to the Australian agricultural sector and develop strategies to ensure that women occupied key leadership roles in the industry. The *Missed Opportunities* report attracted international interest for its comprehensive coverage and its audacious goals. This paper updates the quantification of women's contributions to the agricultural sector based on 2006 Census data, and explores whether such analyses can be conducted across all industry sectors.

It identifies where women are located across occupations and industries in the Australian paid workforce and examines the reasons for women's continued low representation in formal leadership positions in agricultural and regional organisations. It concludes with recommendations for improving the proportion of women in formal leadership roles and enhancing women's leadership experiences.

### **Keywords**

Agriculture, leadership, work value,

## 1. Introduction

Primary industry, most particularly agricultural production and mining, is the most important source of international trade income in Australia and is the second largest employer in the nation. Further, while most Western world economies have been undermined by the worst global financial downturn in decades, the Australian economy has maintained growth, (albeit marginal), and skilled labour continues to attract premium prices causing staff shortages and production bottlenecks. Farming and mining have not been immune. The agricultural sector continues to be dominated by family owned enterprises and small businesses which struggle to compete for labour against large international corporate organisations such as mining and resource companies.

Women have always been involved in Australian agricultural production (Alston 1995; Lake 1999) and increasingly have a role in a variety of other industries located in non-metropolitan locations. Their value and contributions have not, however, been properly accounted for or recognised and not surprisingly, women are the minority in the senior management and leadership positions of agricultural organisations. We know that this is a global issue (Liepins 2000; Shortall 2002; Davison and Burke 2004; Oberhauser and Pratt 2004; Grant and Rainnie 2005; Sealy, Vinnicombe et al. 2008).

This paper reports on the achievements, or lack thereof, of a national research project launched in 1998 which aimed at not only quantifying the value of women's contribution to agricultural production in Australia but also developing strategies to ensure that women occupied key leadership roles in the industry. This research project, *Missed Opportunities: harnessing the potential of women in Australian agriculture* attracted international interest for its comprehensive coverage and its audacious goals. This paper reports on a project undertaken by the authors to assess the real impact of *Missed Opportunities*, and whether,

despite the fanfare and stated commitments from all levels of the public sector and industry peak organisations to actively seek out and include women in the leadership of agricultural industries in Australia, change did in fact occur. The project was jointly funded by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) and the (then) Department of Transport and Regional Services (DoTARS), commencing in 2008, a decade after the release *Missed Opportunities*.

The paper begins by providing contextual information around both the initial project and the subsequent work undertaken ten years later, followed by a brief overview of the methodology by which the assessment and comparative work was done. An evaluation of the outcomes of the *Missed Opportunities* is presented followed by data regarding women's contribution to the agricultural sector ten years on, and their role as managers and leaders in the sector and their communities. Using Eagly and Carli's (2007) metaphor of a labyrinth for the difficulties women face in accessing senior positions, including women in regional and remote Australia, we show that the obstacles to women attaining leadership is the result of the sum of discrimination that operates at all levels of organisations. This is further borne out in interviews with women who have achieved a leadership role as well as though who might be considered nascent leaders. We conclude the paper with recommendations regarding what needs to occur if there is a real desire to ensure the full potential of the social and economic capital within regional Australia is realised and that there is a more equitable distribution of women in leadership roles in agricultural peak industry organisations.

## **2. Background**



In 1998, an Australian national research project, *Missed Opportunities: harnessing the potential of women in Australian agriculture*<sup>1</sup> (Elix and Lambert 1998), funded by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation and the then Commonwealth Department of Primary Industries and Energy, was released. After a decade of groups such as Australian Women in Agriculture (AWiA) and individuals writing and reporting about the barriers women face in agriculture and agitating to have women's role in agriculture more formally recognised, this report made visible the issues surrounding the barriers women faced in accessing leadership positions.

This project generated considerable excitement amongst women in regional Australia at the time as it seemed that, finally, due recognition was being afforded to women's substantial contributions to both farm output and the social fabric of rural communities. There also seemed, at the time, considerable enthusiasm for the report's recommendations in public sector circles, particularly in government agencies responsible for primary industries.

The quantifying of women's contributions to total farm output and their off-farm work, both paid and in volunteer work in community service organisations provided 'hard' evidence that women 'contributed 48% of total real farm income' (Elix and Lambert 1998, p. 11). The report concluded with a range of strategies identified to 'assist in increasing the role of women in leadership and management in the sector' (Elix and Lambert 1998, p. 113). It seemed to those women in agriculture who had been lobbying for many years to have women's roles recognised that there was scope for real change to occur around women's access to formal leadership roles in the agricultural sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Elix, J. & Lambert, J. 1998. *Missed opportunities - harnessing the potential of women in Australian agriculture*, Volumes 1 and 2. Eds Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation & Department of Primary Industries and Energy, Canberra. It will be referred to throughout this paper as *Missed Opportunities*.



In planning for this project, we identified the importance of extending the focus of the original report beyond women in agriculture. Women living in regional and remote Australia are not only active in agriculture – they are represented across all industry sectors and occupational roles to varying degrees (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007). The findings provide a timely opportunity to reinvigorate the quest for enhancing the capacity of regional Australia to face the future in a truly inclusive and innovative manner, by more fully understanding women’s current roles in regional business and services and the factors limiting their further participation in formal leadership roles.

### **3. Methodology**

A variety of both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to:

- Evaluate the outcomes of *Missed Opportunities* and subsequent implemented strategies,
- Update the economic modelling of the value of women’s contribution to the agriculture sector,
- Assess the capacity of existing data collections to allow for the ongoing monitoring of women’s diverse economic activities in rural and regional Australia,
- Document women’s roles in rural and regional Australia by occupation and industry,
- Determine the extent and nature of the barriers and cultural and socio-economic factors that still affect women’s contribution to rural and regional businesses and services, especially their participation in innovation, leadership and decision making, and
- Determine the strategic, long-term capacity-building initiatives required for all levels and types of leadership for women in rural and regional Australia.

Given the significant work that has been done relating to women in leadership generally in Australia and internationally, as well as that focusing specifically on women in agriculture, including a number of government-sponsored reports, we conducted an extensive literature review, trawling the existing work to identify key themes. We also drew on existing, publicly

available data to describe women's roles in rural and regional Australia data. At the most detailed level, the Women in Social and Economic Research group (WiSER) updated the econometric modelling conducted in *Missed Opportunities* to quantify women's contribution to the agricultural economy. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data from the 2006 Census were then explored to chart the occupational and industry distribution of women across rural and regional Australia, by remoteness indicator. In the primary research conducted for this project, a sample of 'successful' women's stories were also collected and analysed in light of the major themes to emerge from the literature. Together, these data sources have shaped our thinking about what strategies can be implemented to achieve real change to women's representation in leadership positions in rural and regional Australia.

#### **4. An Evaluation of *Missed Opportunities* Outcomes**

The release of *Missed Opportunities* in 1998 was significant in its quantification of the contribution women made to the agricultural sector and regional communities more generally. In its efforts to move beyond the readily quantifiable roles related to paid work, by quantifying in economic terms the nurturing roles, the 'gofering' roles, the support roles that women take on, and the volunteering in their communities, *Missed Opportunities* recognised this 'social glue' as an important factor in the ongoing sustainability of communities and agricultural industries. Without this 'social glue', the functionality of businesses, organisations, and communities would fail, at great cost to agricultural industries.

There is no doubt *Missed Opportunities* was a great contribution to the public record around women's contributions. But what was not apparent following this strong foundation was the political will to act on the findings. *Missed Opportunities* was a valuable tool, detailing steps that could be taken within government related organisations as well as the private sector, but after the initial excitement following its release, there was little will within the public or



private sectors to value this external information, assimilate it, transform it to be meaningful in their own context and apply it. Instead, the shift to gender mainstreaming led to the focus on women all but disappearing by the late 1990s, and as we have seen in Australia, and internationally, a plateauing, and in some cases, decreasing representation of women in formal leadership roles.

In *Missed Opportunities*, the constraints surrounding women's limited access to leadership positions in agriculture were identified as being similar to those experienced by women more generally in the corporate world, and were summarised as:

- 'The culture within the sector, which is seen to be male-oriented and unwelcoming, or even exclusive of women as leaders and managers
- The competing demands of work within the sector and family responsibilities, the overwhelming burden of which still falls to women
- The extent to which women's self-perceptions or lack of confidence inhibit their progress to positions as leaders and managers within the sector' (Elix and Lambert 1998, p. 114).

This list can be seen to capture, in order, the organisational, the social and the individual factors limiting women's access. Somewhat disappointing was the focus on the individual factors – 'women's self-perceptions or lack of confidence' as inhibitors to their progress – as this is based on an overly simplistic view of the category 'women' and in many ways reproduces the stereotypes which the study was aiming to dispel.

Since 1998 a significant body of research that has built up detailing the importance of contextual, structural and organisational constraints on the intertwining, and complexity of, life and career choices (Benschop 2006). This complexity is captured in the metaphor of a labyrinth that Eagly and Carli (2007) have drawn on in framing the barriers women face in accessing senior management. Their rejection of the glass ceiling metaphor is based on the implicit assumption that there is a single barrier facing women as they try to enter the most



senior ranks. Eagly and Carli (2007) argue this is too simplistic, as there are multiple barriers that women face at all levels of their professional endeavours.

The range of strategies identified in *Missed Opportunities* focused on:

- grower and producer organisations – local branches, state and national organisations
- government agricultural agencies
- agriculture related R&D organisations
- agribusiness.

Having identified these constraints and where action should be taken, strategies were

suggested for achieving change in women's representation. These included:

- selection on merit, with merit being more broadly defined than has traditionally been the case for senior management positions
- selection criteria which encompass not only agricultural and traditional business management skills, but also communication and other social skills, as well as ensuring a diversity of representation, reflecting the range of interests in a vertically integrated industry
- replacement of traditional interview processes for selection, with a range of interview, presentational and other processes which explore the communication, problem-solving and other skills of the applicant
- selection panels which encompass diversity of views required in senior positions
- training for decision-makers to make them aware of the potential for judgmental bias in their approaches to recruitment and selection and assist them in addressing those biases.

Each of these recommendations concerns changing current practices within these organisations. Part of the brief of the project undertaken by us was to assess how effective these strategies had been. At the macro level, a simple answer is 'not very' if one looks at the continued numerical dominance of men in the leadership roles in those organisations identified in *Missed Opportunities* as where change should happen – grower and producer organisations (at all levels), government agricultural bodies, agricultural research and development corporations, and agribusiness.

Elix and Lambert (1998, p. 90) reported that ‘less than 20 per cent of boards of management and Executive Committee positions are held by women’. Similar figures were reported for staff management positions within agricultural organisations. As reported in *At the Table*, and from a review of the 2006/2007 annual reports of these organisations as presented in Table 1, it is clear that little change has been effected.

Place Table 1 about here

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We argue that numerical representation should **not be the only measure** employed to assess the outcomes – rather, analysis needs to be extended to how substantive representation of women occurs. However, as a starting point for assessing how effective the recommendations for change have been, they are very illustrative. It seems there has been no significant change in women’s representation.

Following *Missed Opportunities*, further work was done by Dimopolous and Sheridan (2000) in *Missed Opportunities: Unlocking the Future for Women in Agriculture, Stage 2 Report*. The focus of the Stage 2 report was to apply the ‘strategies identified in Stage 1, and other agreed change management strategies, in two case study organisations, in order to identify those strategies most likely to succeed’ and to ‘utilise the outcomes from the case study activities to develop ‘best practice’ models for increasing women’s input and influence in organisations within the sector review of two case study organisations’ (Dimopoulos and Sheridan 2000: 3). Their case study organisations were the South Australian Farmers Federation (SAFF) and the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF). In 1999, women’s representation in the VFF appeared to be one of the highest within the sector. Their case study explored the effectiveness of the Women’s strategy employed by the VFF which was based on many of the recommendations of *Missed Opportunities - Stage 1*. The *Missed Opportunities - Stage 2* case study described how in the implementation of the strategy, the



Steering Committee attended to regional activities and agreed that the focus should be on community, not women. While it was women members who were recruited to organise the forums, and there was commitment to providing venues and catering 'suitable for women' including the provision of childcare, there was clearly a decision not to draw attention to the focus on women. Surprisingly, this rather telling shift was not considered by the authors of the report to be problematic. The support of the VFF President was seen as a major contributor to VFF's commitment to making their processes more inclusive and the apparent success of the VFF's efforts. In the report it was noted that there were some immediate changes to women's representation as a result of these efforts. While the increases in women's representation have been sustained, and the VFF continues to have one of the highest levels of representation of women in office bearing roles among Australian agricultural organisations, the momentum has not been ongoing. See Table 2 for the representation of women in office bearing positions in the VFF in 1999 and 2008.

Place Table 2 here

Before we leave the analysis of the numerical representation, it is worthwhile reflecting on the efforts of the National Farmers' Federation (NFF), which is the peak national body representing farmers and, more broadly, agriculture across Australia. Alston (2003, p. 476), reporting on her study of women's representation in the Australian rural context noted that in 1998 'the National Farmers' Federation, has only one woman on its 30 member board'. In 2001, Anna Cronin was CEO of the NFF and they were articulating a goal of 30 per cent representation of women on Council and Committees by 2005 (Cronin 2001). With this goal in mind, a review of the number of women on NFF Council in 2008 is disappointing, with only one woman among the 18 Policy Council members, no women among the seven NFF



board members and one woman among the four member executive management team, and she's not the CEO. *Plus ça change...*

In reviewing the effectiveness of the strategies identified in *Missed Opportunities*, we are cognisant of the policy environment which followed its release. While the report contained many sensible recommendations consistent with best practice at the time, these were not supported through clear accountability for delivery of better outcomes for women. At the same time as the report was released, there was a gradual dismantling of women's units – or the 'women's machinery' (Maddison and Partridge 2007, p. 35) in the public sector.

Following the 1995 UN 'World Conference on Women' in Beijing, there was a growing momentum internationally for gender mainstreaming. The focus of gender mainstreaming was away from women's supposed disadvantage to mainstreaming gender across organisations (Alston 2006, p. 123). This direction change was, it seems, in response to the apparent failure of women-focused policies to address gender disadvantage. With the demise of the women's unit within the Federal Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF), and in many of the state departments of agriculture, it seems there was a step back from the commitment to effecting change in the representation of women in agricultural organisations. Alston (2006) attributes this disappointing result to the poor understanding of what gender mainstreaming is by those charged with its responsibility. While the National Rural Women's Secretariat was established in 2002 by the Office of Women 'to support input from rural women into government policy', the loss of formally recognised women's units in the government agricultural departments, as a result of gender mainstreaming (Alston 2006), has meant a reduction of continuing resources available to draw on in implementing any of the strategies, as well as a symbolic loss of commitment to 'women's issues'. This is reflective of the broader trend in the Australian labour market, and

internationally, of a stepping back from equal opportunity policies designed around specific targeted groups to the more generic managing diversity policies (Strachan, Burgess et al. 2007; Gatrell and Swan 2008). Alston (2006, p. 143) warns about the dangers of gender mainstreaming, noting that while '[a] move to gender mainstreaming would appear to be a positive initiative ... there are huge gaps between rhetoric and action at national levels'. A significant problem with the gender mainstreaming approach has been the failure to support the ongoing collection of data monitoring women's contribution to agriculture and regional communities more generally, so well begun with *Missed Opportunities*. In the current public policy environment that depends on evidence-based information, this would have provided the necessary 'facts' to underpin strategies and policy development and implementation that had the potential to ensure the *Missed Opportunities* recommendations were brought to fruition. We did not see this happen.

Clearly, the shift to gender mainstreaming because of the apparent failure of women-focused policies to address gender disadvantage has itself been a failure. The period in which the women's policy units operated saw more numerical progress in women's representation than has been the case since their demise. That women's progress had stalled and was even going backwards was raised at various points in the past few years, and there have been some *ad hoc* responses to calls for more attention to be refocused on women's representation.

To conclude this section then, a significant outcome of *Missed Opportunities* would have been the systematic collection of data about women in regional and remote locations which, if necessary, had the flexibility to allow women to report their participation in several industry sectors as well as at least their formal leadership roles. In the current public policy environment that depends on evidence-based information, this would have provided the necessary 'facts' to underpin strategies and policy development and implementation that had



the potential to ensure the *Missed Opportunities* recommendations were realised. We did not see this happen. Rather, there have been various ad hoc responses to data collection pertaining to women's representation in leadership positions in the intervening decade, each pointing to the continued poor representation of women in formal leadership positions within agricultural and regional organisations.

On reflection, it is not difficult to understand why *Missed Opportunities* failed to make a significant difference. It recommended that structural changes be made to a variety of key positions in public and private peak organisations. Clearly, this would have required a substantial change in thinking and practice and no doubt would have threatened long term power and leadership cohorts. If business and government were truly committed to the implementation of the recommendations, significant time, incentives and other resources were required to enact the recommendations from *Missed Opportunities* and embed the principles in organisational design and structure and we did not see this happen. The only area where we have seen sustained attention and resources being directed is to developing women's leadership skills, with the focus very much on women's deficiencies, rather than addressing the tougher issues around the gendered nature of the workplaces and leadership in particular.

## **5. The Results**

### *5.1 The Economic Modelling*

The model developed for economic analysis in the 1998 report was used as the basis for the analysis of data but there were considerable differences in data collection, sources and availability over the ten year period that meant a simple re-run of the original model with updated data was not possible or appropriate. Consequently there were differences in the models and the results. In most cases the assessments of women's contributions of the



agricultural sector are not directly comparable. Therefore, the two modelling exercises must be treated with caution due to the use of very different data sets. However, despite the limitations of comparability, the two models provide significant points of commonality. Both models serve to highlight women's continuing and significant contribution to agricultural industries and communities. Further, by updating the assessment of women's contribution to the agricultural sector, the analysis addressed three main issues. **Firstly**, it provided a more recent assessment of women's contribution to both on-farm and off-farm work in rural and regional communities. This aspect of the discussion reflects women's contributions both directly to on-farm activities and their paid work both on- and off-farm and within farm households. **Secondly**, it updated assessments of the contributions of women's unpaid labour to household, community and volunteer activities in rural communities, reflecting women's unpaid contributions to rural and regional communities. **Thirdly**, it provided an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages associated with methods of developing such valuations and contrasts the estimates arrived at by different methods.

Although the literature on farm women's economic and social contributions has grown significantly since 1997, gaps remain in our understandings of the determinants of farm women's work, particularly their contributions to unpaid and paid work on farms and in farm households. The available literature does, however, confirm the previously identified links between women's patterns of paid and unpaid work across a range of on-farm and off-farm activities. A review of post-1997 literature suggests that the modelling approach adopted in *Missed Opportunities* in 1998 remains a valid approach for replication in 2008.

The 2006 estimates show that when a relatively full range of women's on- and off-farm, household and community work is considered, it is likely that women contribute over 49 per cent of the total value of the output that might be attributed to farming communities.

Place Table 3 here

This is a very similar finding from *Missed Opportunities* in 1998 (as shown in Table 3), which found that women contributed over 48 per cent of farming community output. Viewed from this perspective, there is little difference in the aggregate value of output from men's and women's contributions, although the composition of their total contribution differs. The inescapable policy implication is that men and women are equal partners in the viability of agricultural activities and communities.

We also recognised that women in non-agricultural industries make important contributions to regional and rural communities. For this reason, an assessment was made of the extent to which available data facilitate the construction of similar assessments for women working in other industries in rural and regional Australia. Unfortunately it is more difficult to find data sources that align industry of employment with particular geographic locations. In addition, Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics (ABARE) farm surveys provide access to detailed data about unpaid farm work and paid off-farm work which provide a level of detail not universally available through official data sources. The need for data that are specific both to paid and unpaid work contributions as well as specific geographic locations means that the model used in this project cannot be seamlessly transferred to construction of similar assessments for women working in other industries. In addition, there are strong reasons for tailoring such assessments to specific studies of industries or locations, rather than adopting a uniform approach. Clearly, there is a need for such economic assessments to be understood within the broader context of women's lives and the distinctive, qualitative contributions they make to their households, businesses and local communities.

## 5.2 *Women's Leadership Roles in the Australian Rural and Regional Labour Force*



The Australian labour force remains one of the most sex segregated in the OECD. While women's representation in the paid workforce has increased significantly over the past three decades, with women now making up 46 per cent of the paid workforce, the industry profiles remain segregated by sex. In absolute numbers, the four industries in which women dominate nationally are, in order, health care and social assistance, retail trade, education and training, and accommodation. These patterns remain remarkably consistent across remoteness boundaries, with the only differences occurring in remote and very remote locations where agriculture, forestry and fishing is the fourth largest employer of women and in very remote communities where the industry which employs the largest number of women (and men) is Public Administration and Safety. Women are represented across a range of occupational groups in regional Australia, with more than 25 per cent of employed women in regional and remote Australia found in the management and professional categories, the occupations often drawn from, for formal leadership roles (Sheridan and Milgate 2005), apparently making them well qualified to hold key leadership positions according to current common expectations. This represents a significant shift in their occupational representation of thirty years ago (Houghton and Strong 2004).

Professionals are distinguished by their skill level, which is defined as a function of the range and complexity of tasks performed. The skill level is measured by the level of formal education and training, the amount of experience necessary to perform the task and on-the-job training. Professionals can be found across all industries. Nationally, women make up 54 per cent of all professionals. Women's representation as professionals across remoteness boundaries can be seen in Figure 1. The industries in which professionals dominate are education and training (N = 434 431); health care and social assistance (N = 376 371) and professional, scientific and technical services (N = 306 570). The former two are where women professionals are most likely to be found across all remoteness areas, although the

clustering becomes more obvious in outer regional and remote areas. While nationally these two industries employ 60 per cent of women professionals, in outer regional Australia this rises to 79 per cent, 70 per cent in remote Australia and 64 per cent in very remote Australia.

Place Figure 1 about here

In aggregate across Australia, women make up 34 per cent of **managers**. In unpacking the composition of these statistics, we can see that there is a patchiness to women's representation in management across industries. The industry sectors where women have the largest share of management positions are health care and social assistance (65 per cent), education and training (56 per cent) and accommodation and food services (48 per cent) – industries traditionally associated with 'nurturing', which can be seen as highly feminised and which are often discounted as training grounds for leadership positions. What is interesting to note here is that in terms of absolute number of women managers by industry, agriculture, forestry and fishing is clearly the dominant industry outside the major cities.

In those industries more closely associated with 'masculinity', for example, construction, mining, electricity, gas, water and waste services, we see women's representation in management ranging between a mere 10 and 17 per cent. The average earnings in those industries in which men dominate are significantly higher than for those in which women dominate (ABS 2007b). These patterns reflect the continued horizontal and vertical sex segregation<sup>2</sup> of the Australian labour force. In considering management positions by regional classification, what we see is a remarkably consistent pattern across the categories. While it is often assumed that regional and remote Australia are more conservative than metropolitan

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<sup>2</sup> Horizontal sex segregation relates to the division of women and men across different professions, while vertical sex segregation captures the under-representation of women in the most senior positions of the hierarchical structures within organisations and the continuing wage gap between women and men (Benschop 2006)



locations, when considering women's representation in management across the different locations, there are no significant differences.

Women are increasingly involved in the Australian mining and resource extraction industries. They represent approximately 18 per cent of the minerals industry workforce, but just over 3 per cent of employees at mine sites and minerals processing operations. They are rarely recognised for their contribution to the industry. Women in mining have no political status or representation in government, regional or industry organisations (Australian Government Office for Women and Minerals Council of Australia 2007).

Place Table 4 about here

As can be seen in Table 4, women's representation in management across all industries is about 34 per cent, with agriculture, forestry and fishing being slightly less at 29.65 per cent and mining significantly lower at 11.55 per cent.

### 5.3 *Women in Formal Leadership Roles in Rural and Regional Australia*

In evaluating how successful the *Missed Opportunities* recommendations had been in increasing women's representation in formal leadership roles, we found that women's representation had not increased significantly over the past decade, although there were some examples of agricultural organisations where more progress had been made than others.

The barriers to women's access to formal leadership positions continue, but we recognise this entrenchment is not unique to the agricultural sector. While there appeared to be some progress and apparent openness to confronting the barriers in the two years immediately following the release of *Missed Opportunities*, this has stalled. Over the past decade we have seen the demise of the political will and necessary resources to deal with women's continuing inequality in the workplace, not just in Australia, but internationally (Gatrell and Swan 2008).

This appears to be made on the erroneous assumption that women have ‘made it’, yet all the data on leadership positions continue to point to their gross under representation. In reviewing the literature around leadership, with particular attention to the work already done on leadership in the agricultural sector, it is clear that the gendered constructions of the workplace and leadership role specifically, continue to be major barriers to women’s access, not just in the corporate sphere (Sinclair 2005; Sinclair 2007) but also in agricultural and regional organisations (Alston 2000; Sheridan, Pini et al. 2006; Pini 2008).

Instead of the metaphor of the ‘glass ceiling’ used so commonly in the 1990s, there is now a greater appreciation that the obstacles to women’s leadership are not clustered around the final hurdle into senior management. Rather, they are the result of discrimination that continues to operate at all levels of organisations. Eagly and Carli’s (2007) labelling of these multiple barriers as a ‘labyrinth’ does seem more apposite in light of our deeper understanding in the late 2000s of the barriers women face. The richness of the labyrinth metaphor lies in how it conveys the complexity of the barriers, while it allows for the reality that some (few) women do navigate it. This is the case with women in leadership positions in agriculture and more broadly in their regional communities.

## **6. The Labyrinth**

Amanda Sinclair provides a significant body of work critiquing the prevailing model of heroic leadership, in which she makes visible ‘the collective but largely unconscious images of leadership’ (Sinclair 2004, p. 9) that carry such weight in our society. In particular, she describes the leadership archetype of the ‘lone frontier settler who is stoic but resolute in the face of hardship. Such an image renders improbable a garrulous, emotionally expressive or more collectively oriented leader – women and many migrants from more group-based societies instantly struggle to earn respect in this contexts’. While Sinclair writes about the



corporate sector, the dominance of this image is particularly strong in the rural context. Pini (2005a, p. 74)) provides a rich description of the rural and agricultural images that continue to pervade the Australian psyche.

Traditional hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity play a central role in these images. At centre stage is the determined strong-willed individual the 'man on the land' - heroically, aggressively and stoically fighting the vicissitudes of nature to provide for his family, community and nation. Much further downstage is the 'good wife' who is equally strong and hard working, but whose focus is domestic life. Pini (2005a, p. 74)

Pini's research with women in leadership positions in agriculture provides important insights into how women who had 'made it' navigate their way through the spaces that are deeply ingrained with hegemonic masculinity. Pini (2005a) describes the keen awareness that these women have about the balancing they do between being perceived as too feminine, while at the same time not coming across as too masculine. Her tagging of these women's gender performances, which balance both masculine and feminine self-presentation, as the 'third' sex, reflects the complexity of their performances. The difficult process women face in managing their performance in the workplace has been considered for many years, with Deborah Sheppard's early work (Sheppard 1989) being reinforced in many studies since (Brewis, Hampton et al. 1997; Weyer 2007). For instance, Fels (2004) illustrates the experiences of women at the corporate level where their capacity to be 'real' women is assailed if they speak as much as their male colleagues in a work situation or compete for high visibility positions.

Since 1992, the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation has worked to develop and maintain a network of leaders from agricultural sectors who have demonstrated an ability to think, act and influence strategically and negotiate with a wide diversity of stakeholders; the idea being that when a leadership or board opportunity arises, there is a cadre of skilled, networked potential leaders who are available and equipped to take the opportunities. Women and other

marginalised groups have been encouraged to participate in the thorough training programs, but, while some female graduates have been appointed to boards, more male than female graduates of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation have achieved that outcome.

There is no corresponding congruence between constructions of femininity and leadership, as there is between masculinity and leadership. At the institutional level, men view themselves as natural leaders, and women, despite their major input to agriculture are still viewed in stereotypical ways (Alston 2003; p. 478). Feminists have critiqued the discourses of sameness and difference; a critique that has not been applied to the issue of leadership in agriculture. The discourses of sameness and difference tend to accept the notion that men and women are fixed homogeneous categories with no facility for effective challenges to unequal gendered power relations (Pini 2003). These categories are further problematised because they have included a stereotypical category of women leaders as typically, older, white, middle-class, property owning and Anglo-Saxon, while excluding others, such as Indigenous women, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and young women and girls. It has also categorised men so as to exclude men who do not conform to dominant agricultural masculinities (Haslam McKenzie and Lord 2001).

Implicit in many formal leadership roles in rural and regional Australia are the assumptions that business experience is necessary to be a leader (Alston 2000), and that the reason for women's poor representation in these roles is their lack of such experience (Alston 1998c). Such assumptions clearly warrant challenging given women's employment profiles and business experiences in rural, regional and remote Australia. As we saw above, women are represented across a range of occupational groups in regional Australia, with more than 25% of employed women in regional and remote Australia found in the management and professional categories, the occupations often drawn from for formal leadership roles



(Sheridan and Milgate 2005), apparently making them well qualified to hold key leadership positions according to current common expectations. Despite this, the distinction between the natural and legitimate roles of men in the economic sphere and women in the social sphere as carers and community builders is constantly being played out in our regional communities.

With respect to their role as small business owners, Houghton and Strong (2004) provide one of the few studies into women's business in rural and remote Australia. Through a national survey, interviews and focus groups, they found that the businesses owned and managed by women had a significant impact on their local economies, in terms of both employment and incomes, and extended the breadth of a region's business mix. For women in many communities, these businesses provided a strategic vehicle for diversifying the income sources, and provided a greater variety of end uses for locally grown commodities (Houghton and Strong 2004), which can be argued to be a key contributor to regional development. Similar findings were reported by Oberhauser and Pratt (2004) in their work in South Africa where they found that women's collaborative economic activities were not only beneficial for their individual well-being, but also created positive outcomes for the economic and social well-being of their communities. The beneficial flow-on effects of women-owned businesses were also evident in a recent study in a regional community in Australia (Conway and Sheridan 2005), with all participants reporting they employed local business services to support their businesses. In comparing women business owners in regional and remote Australia with their urban counterparts, one of the few differences found was that 17 per cent of the rural, regional and remote women reported that a key motivation for their decision to start the business was bringing their experience and qualifications to their community (Still and Simmons 2005). More of the regionally-based business women than their urban counterparts cited the natural integration of their business and the region in which it was

situated as important to them. In light of the pressures experienced in rural and regional communities, it seems that many women have responded to the challenges by drawing on their strengths to contribute positively to their communities to ensure their sustainability. Their business activities are diverse and often deliver the only service-type functions in small communities but as service oriented businesses, their contributions are often overlooked.

Still and Simmons (2005, p. 13) noted that ‘where on-farm women were once ‘invisible’ ..., it seems that the work and contribution of women’s non-farm activities are now invisible’ primarily because the women are sole traders, are in functional service areas not delivered by men and have little time to participate in broader policy and economic activities of communities. It seems to us the term of ‘space of betweenness’ has a particular relevance here in describing women’s economic involvement in their communities, through their linking of the private and the public, which is so critical in regional communities. For these women, there are multiple dimensions to their location in a ‘space of betweenness’; they are not only women, and so in the pervading ideology of western market economies often constructed as ‘non-economic’ (Midgley 2006), they are often involved in (service) roles linking the private and public (Staeheli 2003) and they are also in the (physical) space between the city and the farm gate. This combination renders much of their activity invisible and, as we argue, can go some way to explaining women’s continued poor representation in formal leadership roles in their communities.

Internationally, women have been identified as a largely untapped pool of entrepreneurial talent (OECD 2003). It seems that one of the reasons for them being ‘untapped’ in regional economies is their limited visibility. Between the farm gate and the city, little attention has been focused on women’s contributions to their local economies. That women’s economic activities do not replicate the traditional businesses in regional locations – that is, primary



production – but are primarily service oriented, may be a contributing factor to their oversight. The close association of hegemonic masculinity with production and management in western economies is well established (Connell and Wood 2005). In the neo-liberalist discourse pervading regional development (Shortall 2002), and the masculinist discourse surrounding regional development (Pini 2006), women’s businesses, with their service orientation, linking as they often do the public and the private, are not recognised as ‘real’ businesses. This is highlighted by the comment of a male member of a regional development body (Sheridan, Haslam-McKenzie et al. 2008), where he unreflexively reinforced the stereotypes inherent in the masculinist discourse of business when he noted:

‘I mean they [women] are more into health services whereas I, as a bloke, am probably more about thinking of economic development; of what new industry ...’

His association of women with health services and men with economic development reinforces a common dichotomy between women’s and men’s work, which works to the disadvantage of women’s business activities, because unlike male business owners in their communities, women continue to be constructed as ‘non-economic’. This discursive regime renders them invisible, ‘locked in the subordinate, under/devalued position vis-à-vis the “core” economy’ (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003, p. 151).

It is evident then that women who aspire to be leaders and decision makers in the agricultural industry and regional and remote communities are often trained and have the necessary skills and experience to be leaders. Our review of women’s representation in professional and management positions across industries and remoteness areas highlights the range of skills women exhibit through their labour market participation, which combined with the WiSER modelling of women’s participation in agricultural industries and their communities more generally, demonstrates the profound contributions women make to the economic and social

well being of regional and remote Australia. Yet despite their significant contributions, women's representation in formal leadership positions remains limited.

## **7. Interviews with 'Successful' Women Leaders**

In trying to better understand how some women have indeed navigated the labyrinth, we interviewed a sample of 'successful' women. Our analyses of their stories, and those of nascent women leaders in a remote community, combined with our extensive literature review has helped shape our recommendations for the strategic, long-term capacity-building initiatives required for all levels and types of leadership for women in rural and regional Australia. A sample of these women is captured in the Regional Women's Advisory Council (RWAC), the purpose of which is to provide independent feedback and advice to the Australian Government from women in regional Australia. Members have been chosen on the basis of:

- living and working in regional Australia
- expertise on key issues facing regional rural and remote communities
- being closely connected with a range of community groups
- having the personal qualities to contribute effectively to problem solving.

Not all of these women were involved in agriculture; they were drawn from a diversity of locations across non-metropolitan Australia, with different backgrounds and at different stages of their lives.

We interviewed a sample of these women, as well as a small number of other women who represent diverse leadership roles in rural and regional Australia. We considered the major themes to emerge from their responses as a basis for making sense of the barriers women face (the critique) for the purpose of identifying the strategies (the generative) that may enable greater inclusion of women as leaders in rural and regional industries in future.



An interesting dimension to the analysis is the comparisons we make between those women who are well connected (having been appointed to the RWAC) and those who are nascent leaders in their communities. This latter sample provide insights into the barriers as they see them which, when read in the context of the commentary of those women who are ‘there’, enable some creative connections to be made between these experiences. We interviewed eight members of the Council about how they were appointed to RWAC, their experiences on it, how they saw their roles influencing regional policy and how they were received within their communities. The key themes to emerge from their responses were:

- the lack of transparency around the appointment processes
- the importance of connections and of being a ‘known’ brand
- the time the role required, which was time they were out of their business, and away from families
- the supportive environment which this committee represented and the value of mentoring they received through this committee
- the influence the Council had
- the individual benefits they accrued through the visibility of the role and the connections made
- the limited recognition they received locally.

There was general consensus among the women on RWAC that the processes for their appointments were not transparent. None of the women were able to say, definitively, how they had been appointed. While many assumed they had been appointed because they had recently attracted some state or national recognition (which relates to being a known brand, see below) they acknowledged that the processes by which they were appointed were not apparent to them. This lack of transparency around appointment processes resonates with findings from the ARC Linkage project, *Regional Boards: Understanding the impact of gender diversity on board performance* (Sheridan, Haslam-McKenzie et al. 2008). From the

interviews and surveys of women and men board members of state based regional development commissions and boards, it was concluded that:

The political nature of the appointment process, and the lack of transparency around how board/commission members are selected, is a significant impediment to why there is not more diversity. The selection criteria are not clearly defined, nor are they explicitly seeking to capture diversity; rather they reinforce existing elites. Those people who are already well-connected, with high profiles in their communities, who can commit the time to what are essentially volunteer roles, are those who are most likely to be appointed to the boards/commissions. Men and women have been able to meet these criteria, although it does seem that for women the bar is a bit higher, with their competence not being assumed so readily. (Sheridan, Haslam-McKenzie et al. 2008: 16).

All of the interviewees assumed their high profile had been instrumental in their appointment to RWAC. This finding is not unlike the experiences of corporate women who have been appointed to boards, where they report that it is not only their knowledge, but also their contacts, and being a 'known brand', that facilitates entry (Sheridan 2002). From other work in the corporate sector, it was found that significantly more women than men attribute their appointments to their high visibility (Sheridan and Milgate 2003). In practical terms, as one of the RWAC members noted, this means:

You have to be noticed by someone. That's the main thing.

That there continues to be a lack of transparency around the appointment of board positions, even those appointed by government such as RWAC, does not readily enable access for those who are not well connected. It can foster a mystique around what the roles actually entail, whereas those who have 'made it', recognise that infallibility is not required.

An issue that was raised by the younger women interviewed, concerned the time commitment their participation involved. In the interviews with the RWAC members, this was expressed in two ways – costs to their organisations, and costs to their families. With respect to costs to organisations, the following two quotes exemplify the sorts of issues facing women employed full-time in other roles, balancing the demands of RWAC:



I would like to continue to be involved in this ... all the debate and discussion and idea generation but it is certainly a challenge for my organisation to support ... support my time away because the remuneration ... the sitting fees are generally inadequate, they don't cover the time that you actually dedicate to the job. They don't even cover your travel time really; they just cover the time that you're sitting and meeting. So financially it's something that you might not necessarily always be able to afford to do.

There was probably a 20-day commitment in total, with a lot of reading etc. which you can do on planes etc. and they were very good at paying ... they paid a sitting fee which I was told was quite good, was higher than any other women's council in Australia, but it still didn't cover not being at work. It was good and they paid for your flights which was good. So the main issue was really just being away from your business or your work or whatever you were doing for a number of days at a time.

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In considering the opportunity costs to her participation, another noted that the 'daily rate government can offer on advisory committees is a third of my daily rate'. She would not consider further government committees because of this.

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With respect to the costs to families, these were not reported by the individuals with small children themselves, but raised by women whose children were now older, but who could see the difficulties women with younger children faced attending meetings. The unequal division of labour within the household remains a barrier for women's greater participation in leadership roles in regional and remote Australia, where even if an individual is in a financial position to afford it, domestic support is increasingly difficult to access as labour shortages are endemic in regional and remote communities. The hidden costs of such participation were recognised by Alston (2000) in her research into women's representation in leadership positions in agricultural organisations, and they continue to factor into the decision-making as to whether to accept an appointment.

A key theme to emerge from each of the interviews with RWAC participants was the supportive environment which it offered. Unlike the exclusionary cultures of agricultural organisations that Alston's work revealed (Alston 2000), where sexual harassment continued, and women felt isolated, reinforced by Pini in her analysis of women's experiences in agricultural organisations (Pini 2005a) and local government (Pini 2005c), these women were all highly complementary of the RWAC culture. The relationships developed through their

Council membership were seen to be highly beneficial, particularly from a mentoring perspective. A number of examples were given where the women described how they had sought advice from their fellow members.

For those women who are not in visible leadership roles, there were some interesting themes to emerge from their responses, which reinforced the findings from other studies as to the barriers women face. In responding to the request to describe one barrier that would need to be removed for them to take on more visible leadership roles, the most common response was time. In exploring the issue of time further in the conversations with the respondents, there was a clear message that the common catch cry of the ‘skills shortage’ has an immediate impact on their time. With limited labour to assist on farms now, the costs are being felt in terms of participating in off-farm activities, especially if they are not paid. That many women lacked the confidence to take on the roles reflects a theme identified in *Missed Opportunities* and may be understood with respect to the common perception that you need to have physical experience on the farm to be able to contribute to leadership within the associations.

In making sense of the successful and nascent women leaders’ responses, it is useful to consider the model of women’s career development proposed by O’Neil and Bilimoria (2005). From their study of women career experiences over the life course, they identified a three-phase, age-linked model:

- the idealistic achievement phase
- the pragmatic endurance phase
- the reinventive contribution phase.

The application of this model to the context in which regional women work is insightful, as it offers opportunities to reflect on how to work with the reality of women’s lives and careers in



regional Australia. The idealistic achievement phase is generally linked to early career women (ages 24-35), who see themselves as being in charge of their careers and able to take strategic steps to ensure career progress. The pragmatic endurance phase is generally related to mid-career (ages 36-45), where women are doing what it takes to get it done, as they manage multiple responsibilities (work, home, community). The final phase, related to advanced career (ages 46-60), they called reinventive contribution, as women reconceptualise and reclaim their careers as ‘opportunities to contribute and to be of service to others without losing sight of themselves in the process’ (O’Neil and Bilimoria 2005, p. 184).

The women’s stories suggested they endured the change of focus for their work related activities (i.e. their careers), and saw this as a matter of necessity because of the location and lack of domestic support services that may be available to their city counterparts to help manage the work-family balance. Their location also affected their careers as their lives had become a mixture of paid-work related activities and non-paid community services, spanning as they did the private and public domains, operating in a ‘space of betweenness’. Their activities were, however, vital to the ongoing robustness of their communities as can be seen by the WiSER modelling which found 49 per cent of the value of output in farming communities was through women’s paid and unpaid work.

## **8. Implications for REAL Change**

If there is to be real change in women’s representation in formal leadership positions within regional and remote Australia, we need to see commitment from the public sector towards monitoring and reporting on women’s representation and holding current leaders accountable for enhancing women’s progress. Those in leadership positions within public and private sector organisations need to ensure their current gendered practices are scrutinised fully and redressed, to enable women to engage more fully with these important institutions, and to

ensure the full potential of the social and economic capital within regional Australia is realised. Gender mainstreaming must therefore be eliminated and a logical way to achieve that is to re-establish women's units within government departments where attention is directed towards enhancing women's opportunities in the workplace. The Federal Office for Women and the newly re-established women's units within the different government departments should be appropriately resourced and charged with the responsibility of ensuring gender analyses are conducted of agricultural organisations and regional bodies of influence. Regular reviews and communication of these gender analyses must be funded to ensure the relevant organisations are alert to their practices. To that end, we would recommend that the Australian Bureau of Statistics should be funded to produce (annually) a full set of data detailing women's contributions to agriculture and regional communities, to help inform and measure progress towards women's access to formal leadership positions. This can only occur if peak organisations and government agencies are required to gather and report relevant information.

Our research showed that women's participation on committees, advisory councils and peak industry organisations is rarely remunerated and is a significant cost to their business and family. It is important women are in these roles but they should be properly resourced to ensure the substantive representation of women occurs.

We also recommend that mentoring programs for young women students in agribusiness and rural science awards in higher education should be supported. Any appointee to the board of an agricultural or government related board with influence in regional Australia should be required to mentor a female undergraduate student in a relevant degree for at least one year of their appointment. Similarly, older women should be sought and targeted programs for



recruiting women over 45 for board positions should be implemented in any government or quasi government board relating to agriculture and/or regional bodies of influence.

The 'space of betweenness' occupied by women's activities in regional Australia needs to be recognised by policy makers as important for the ongoing sustainability of their communities. These women's businesses should be eligible for the business development support more often directed to the 'exporting' industries in which men have traditionally dominated.

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Our work has also shown that appointment processes for government related boards must be made more transparent, thus enhancing the absorptive capacity of public and private sector organisations to become more inclusive.

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## **9. Conclusion**

There is no doubt *Missed Opportunities* was a great contribution to the public record around women's contributions to the agricultural sector in Australia and it certainly raised awareness regarding the paucity of women's leadership roles in the industry. However, in the decade since *Missed Opportunities* was commissioned, our research has shown that little has changed in women's representation in leadership positions in Australian agriculture. The lack of change is indicative of the entrenched nature of the barriers women face. As a recent report by the Department of Transport and Regional Services (2005) noted, women continue to be significantly underrepresented on the boards of rural representative bodies, agricultural commodity councils, agriculture companies and rural industry research and development corporations. Their relative absence in other, 'visible', rural and regional leadership roles has also been highlighted (Haslam McKenzie, Sheridan et al. 2005; Eady 2008).

In light of the changing environment which regional and remote communities face – the ageing of the population, mobility of the population, significant economic costs to individual

farms and communities as a result of climate change, economic turbulence, land use competition, competition for skilled labour – that women have continued to be overlooked as leaders in their communities limits the potential for communities to thrive into the future. There is evidence that women play an active role in effecting successful change within rural communities (Shortall 2002), so their absence from leadership positions debilitates the regional communities and industries more generally.

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Recognising the complex spaces of organisations requires more creative thinking about the framing of women's relative absence from the most senior positions. Following Meyerson and Kolb (2000), the approach we have taken in this paper is one that is both critical and generative; critical in that we have, using a gender lens, sought to question the underlying assumptions, values and practices within the context of regional and remote leadership and generative in that this analysis is aimed at revealing possibilities for real transformation.

After a decade of relative neglect of the issue of women's access to leadership positions from a policy perspective, it is time for it to be placed firmly back on the agenda, with clear accountabilities for change.





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**Table 1 Women's representation on Australian rural and regional bodies, 2007**

Rural and regional bodies	Women %	
	Members	CEOs
Agricultural commodity councils	12	0
Research and development corporations	16	0
Rural representative bodies	13	0
Agricultural companies	6	0

**Table 2 Women office bearers in the VFF, 1999 and 2008**

	Women (N)		Total (N)		Women as % of office bearers	
	1999	2008	1999	2008	1999	2008
General Council	5	6	36	32	13.9	18.75
Policy Councils	9	9	59	31	15.3	29
Commodity Councils	16	10	186	56	8.6	17.8
Branch Presidents	12	15	255	209 <sup>a</sup>	4.7	7.2
Branch Secretaries	66	54	225	207 <sup>a</sup>	25.9	26.1

Source: 1999 data – Dimitopolous and Sheridan (2000); 2008 data – personal communication, Victorian Farmers Federation, October 2008.

a: While there are 221 branches, 12 of the presidential positions and 14 of the secretarial positions weren't filled at the time of data collection.



**Table 3 Comparison of estimated contribution of farm women to the Australian economy, 2006 and 1996**

	1996 Estimates			2006 Estimates		
	Farm women	Farm men	Women's share	Farm women	Farm men	Women's share
	\$m	\$m	%	\$m	\$m	%
On-farm income	4,042	10,489	27.8	8,558	17,206	33.2
Off-farm income	1,133	260	81.3	2,715	551	84.2
Household work	8,172	3,610	69.4	11,282	5,962	65.4
Volunteer and community work	436	315	58.1	1,046	643	61.9
Total	13,783	14,674	48.4	23,601	24,362	49.2

**Table 4 Women in management in Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing; Mining; and Total by region**

Region	Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing		Mining		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Major cities	3 565	29.89	690	12.41	269 178	35
Inner regional	17 700	30.65	177	10.2	7 800	34
Outer regional	21 894	28.87	125	9.17	51 951	34
Remote	5 254	28.97	77	10.61	10 217	34
Very remote	1 836	31.66	45	16.67	3 919	36
Other	19	21.21	3	14.29	375	34
Total	50 268	29.65	1 117	11.55	413 640	34



**Figure 1 Employed women in regional and remote Australia, by occupation (%)**

