

# **The future of the Australian family farm in the eyes of two generations of women**

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## **Abstract**

Between 1971 and 2006, Australian family farms have declined by 46 % (ABS 2006a Customised Data). Reasons for this decline are globalisation and increased competition, the year long drought and increased debts. Family farming makes up 99% of the farming industry and Australia relies economically on its output, therefore it is important, to consider the role women in farming. Resilience is assured by those remaining on the family farm. But can it persist? This small qualitative research project looks at the attitudes of two generations of women, mothers and daughters, at their motives for staying or for leaving the land, professional aspirations, and prospects regarding the family farm. This paper discusses two of the main findings, hardships of farming and resilience, and the consequences of globalisation, global markets and of climate change, issues over which the individual farm-owner has no influence. The study shows that the young generation does not believe that family farming offers a secure livelihood or future. Interesting is that the daughters were encouraged by their mothers to leave the farming industry, to acquire a profession, and to seek professional fulfilment outside of farming.

## **Abbreviations**

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CSU	Charles Sturt University
NSW	New South Wales

## **Introduction**

Young people provide energy, fresh ideas, future leadership, and hope. Their presence in numbers and their talent are symbolic of the future prospects of a town. Their departure for the bright lights signals the loss of these markers of likely future success, particularly if they stay away. (Collits 2007:14)

Significant changes have occurred in Australian agriculture during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

According to Alston (1995:1), until the mid-1950s, agriculture contributed 85 to 95 % to the Australian export earnings, this had decreased to 30 to 35 % by the mid 1990s, and in 2007 it had further decreased to 20 % (ABS 2008a). In 1953, 204,350 farms were listed in the census (Alston 1995:1) (it can be safely be assumed that these were

family farms), by 1971 the figure was 190,466, and by 2006 the number of family farms had decreased to 102,616 (ABS 2006a), indicating a loss of 46 %. Women currently make up 40 % of Australian farm business partners, they earn 48 % of the farm income through their on- and off-farm work, 50 % of farm families rely upon off-farm income, and 80 % of that off-farm work is performed by women (Alston 2003:477; 2004a:40). Off-farm work has become increasingly important to Australian family farms since the last drought, which started in 2000 (Alston and Kent 2004:xiii), and women usually seek this sort of work to supplement the family finances, to help shore-up the farm, or to pay for the children's schooling (Alston 1995a:530; Alston 2003:477; Alston and Kent 2004:xiv; Stehlik, Lawrence and Gray 2000:47).

Corporate farming is increasing quickly, it generates 24 % of agricultural production but represents only 1.5 % of all farms (Clark 2008). Gladigau (2007:3) found that the investment community is becoming an important player in Australian farming and that the future of agriculture and family farming is becoming uncertain. Globalisation and increased competition, exacerbated by the year long drought, bush fires and hail storms, have created a great deal of fear and scepticism by grass roots farmers. Interestingly, census data states that in 2001 the majority of farms were owned by family-operated businesses, with around 99 % of broadacre and dairy farms operated by owner-managers (ABS 2003:2). These figures are confirmed for 2006 by the National Farmers Federation (2007 accessed 18.12.08). There are other farming family businesses: the Australian horticultural industry of 30,000 growers (Horticultural Australia Council accessed 29.6.09), there are 7,500 wine grape growers, and 2,600 wine makers (Wine Grape Growers Australia accessed 29.6.09). All of these family businesses provide work for local communities.

In 2002, farming provided 3 % of the GDP and 2 % of Australian employment (Regional Surveys 2003), indicating that the farming industry is important. What is the role of women and farm wives? Farms in Australia, as elsewhere in the developed world, have traditionally been family businesses, passed on to successive generations, mainly to sons. According to the ABS (2003), in 2001, one third (52,500) of farmers in farming families were women.

The position of women in farming has been relatively unacknowledged until the 1970s when farming women became of interest to social scientists (Alston 1995a, 2004a, 2005; O'Hara 1998; Pfeffer 1987; Hannan and Katsiaouni 1977; Hannan 1982; Sachs 1983; Whatmore 1991; Bryant 1999; Pini 2005a). According to Alston (1995a), only 5 % of farms in Australia are inherited by women. However, if women do inherit the family farm, or if they do marry a farmer, their role is all encompassing and ranges from livestock care to business management, includes most of household work and responsibility for the children. Some scholars point out that farming is seen as a male occupation (Alston 1995a, 2004a), that the image of the 'man on the land' is ingrained in Australians' concept of the farmer (Gray and Lawrence 2001; Cocklin and Dibden 2005; Lawrence 1987), and that farm women are *peripheral* to the existence of the male farmer (Alston 1995a, 2004b). According to Alston (2004a), the small percentage of farms inherited by women ensures male control over farming, leaving women in a subordinate position and their work being connected to the *ideology of wifehood*.

This article is about the attitudes of two generations of Australian women with a farming background, discussing the hardships of farming, and outlining their motives for staying or for leaving the farm, their professional aspirations, and hopes regarding the family farm. Is the Australian family farm too bad to stay or too good to leave?

Why do young women with a farming background undertake university studies to become nurses, teachers or social workers?<sup>1</sup> Mothers and daughters have no illusion regarding the family farm, the young ones are aware of the hardships their mothers endured and of the problems Australian farming faces today. And the older generation is determined to steer their off-spring into a direction other than farming.

The paper is structured as follows: firstly it provides a short overview of the research method which is followed by conceptual issues such as individualisation. The literature review includes the situation of farming women in some overseas developed countries, followed by the situation of Australian women. The result section involves a definition of the family farm, background information of the participating mothers and daughters, followed by topics considering hardships of farming life, gender and farming, influences out of the farm owner's control, and opinion regarding the future of the Australian family farm.

### **Research method**

A qualitative approach was used to gain insight into people's personal and social experiences, to understand their motivations and actions (de Vaus 1995). The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Charles Sturt University; and promotion of the research was through the Charles Sturt University website, and via the local paper and community radio station. The Participants were asked to approach the researcher and were then selected at random. To establish a comparison regarding women's attitudes to family farming, mothers and daughters were invited to participate. Because participants consisted of CSU students and their mothers, there is a selection bias, despite this, it is argued that the findings present important trends regarding

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga (a regional town in New South Wales, Australia), has a large number of student nurses, teachers and social workers who come from farming families.

young women in agriculture. The information sheet, consent form and questions were mailed to the interviewees, and sixteen semi-structured interviews (eight with young women, daughters; and eight with women of the older generation, mothers) were conducted; fourteen face to face and two by telephone. The semi-structured interviews involved a series of open-ended questions about attitudes towards farming. The conversations lasted between forty-five and seventy-five minutes and the questions addressed background demographics, the interviewees' positive and negative memories regarding life on the farm, professional aspirations, and attitudes regarding the future of the Australian family farm. Transcripts of the interviews were sent to all participants. Grounded theory was used to analyse the answers, which were then coded and emerging themes fleshed out.

### **Women in farming families – exploring some concepts**

O'Hara (1998) established that social scientists have mainly analysed women in farming families by way of Marxist political economy: for example, Whatmore (1991) looked at domestic political economy, while Delphy and Leonard (1992) considered women's exploitation. O'Hara (1998:162) deduced that feminist theorising of women's subordination has led to a theoretical cul de sac whereby patriarchal structures become determinate and the ways in which women negotiate and resist them cannot be accommodated. Farming women are in subordinate positions but have achieved lessening of their subordination by husbands and have gained some power. They should now be seen as active agents who challenge and negotiate patriarchal structures.

Alston (1994; 1995) and Hogan (1994) came to the conclusion that radical feminist theory is not appropriate to farming women. Both authors explain the major problem

for the conservative women when they were confronted by feminist ideology: the stridency with which the ideas of patriarchy and opposition to men have been proclaimed, and the attacks on personal relationships with men, have been difficult for some women to understand and have alienated many. Feminism has had a limited but important effect on social structure (i.e. women have been recruited into public life from which they were previously excluded), however, basic structural changes, called for by radical feminists, have not occurred and women now find their gains under threat from the New Right in Australia.

Feminism and critical feminist theory cannot be discredited but because of the opposition by conservative women of country Australia to these approaches (Alston 1994, 1995; Hogan 1994; Teather 1994; Dempsey 1994; Poiner 1994) it was decided to apply the theory of individualisation, developed by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2005:30-60), to explain the findings. This theory is embedded in Karl Marx and Max Weber's theories of social inequality and relates to a course of action, of women having some power but not (yet) achieved equality. The theory of individualisation relates to structural transformation of social institutions and the relationship of the individual to society. Individualisation has undermined traditional securities such as religious faith and has, simultaneously, created new forms of social commitment. According to Beck (2005:202-203) women are cut loose from their 'status fate' of compulsory housework and support by a husband. Industrial society has been dependent upon the unequal positions of men and women, but modernity does not stop at the front door of family life, and the entire structure of family ties has come under pressure from individualisation and a new negotiated provisional family of multiple relationships – *a post-family* – is emerging. Besides the freeing of individuals from traditional constraints, new norms have emerged because of the

individual's dependency on the employment market. This simultaneous individualisation and standardisation of our lives is not only a private experience, it is institutional and structural. The liberated individual becomes dependent upon the labour market and because of that, dependent on education, consumption, welfare state regulations and support. Dependency upon the market extends into every area of life.

The findings of this study can be explained by the theory of individualisation. For instance, young women of this study strive to become educated and independent; and they are supported by their mothers. Their motivation relates to the fundamental changes which have occurred in women's lives over the last decades, in the family and in relation to education, work, legislation, and public life; changes which have provided women with some power and brought their lives closer to that of men. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2005:55) found that subtle everyday changes in women's lives are often taken for granted because "they contain aspects of adaptation, while also having a momentum of their own which tends to challenge existing conditions". This suggests, for example, that it is not the major systemic changes, power struggles and revolutions on which history has concentrated, but rather the many little steps in education, work and the family which have given the women's movement of the last three decades its momentum and brought obvious changes in society. These little steps have been "creating an awareness of traditional inequalities which can hardly be legitimated and are ... politically explosive" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2005:55).

## **Women and family farming in some developed overseas countries – Literature overview**

The purpose of this paper is to determine the future of the Australian family farm. In order to make sense of the overall situation, the circumstances in some developed overseas countries were considered. The effects of open markets and technological and cultural changes within the farming industry during the last decades are posing challenges to family farming in these countries. Many young people, especially women, leave the family farm in order to look for personal and professional satisfaction in larger cities. A study by Ni Laoire (2001:223) which dealt with rural – urban migration revealed that the majority of people leaving rural areas of Ireland are those with the highest educational qualifications, young women. They leave rural areas to further their education, their career, to find employment, and to leave the dominance of a masculinist pub-football culture. Pfeffer (1989:71) found that farming depends on the continued willingness of women to do farm work, however, “there are indications that such willingness is eroding”, and “a large proportion of young women object not only to the prospect of participating in farm chores, but to the very idea of being married to a farmer.”

The following short history of women’s contribution to the family farm provides some indication why young women may not be eager to stay on the farm. Until recently farm women have remained largely invisible (Sachs 1983; Alston 1995; 2005; O’Hara 1998; Bryant 1999; Pini 2005b), and most of the research available documents their non-domestic work on farms, demonstrating the way their farm labour is under-represented in official statistics. However, some empirical and qualitative studies now provide important data on women’s involvement in farming and how it is changing.

According to O'Hara (1998:3), within family farming, as well as in the wider world of agriculture, women are subordinates, and the way in which they deal with this situation has a significant effect on the evolution of family farming. An explanation for the subordination can be found in Cummins' (2005:292-300) observation of farm women in Ontario: women are socialised to believe that their role on the farm is to look after not only their own family, but the multitude of workers on the farm. They also have to be available to help on the farm, are required to manage the house and look after the children, and to contribute to decision making – not as a decision maker but as a contributor. The gender differences in family farming and especially in labour on farms represent an ideology of different *spheres*; an ideology that involves the concept that women's contribution to the farm has a spatial dimension that is distinguishable from men's work. This ideology of *spheres* assists in the perpetuation of a negative self-image, a down-playing of the importance of women's contribution to production, and encourages the hegemonic idea that a farming woman's *place* is in the home as wife and nurturer.

O'Hara (1998:5-11) produced an overview of farming women in Europe. A 1987 study of some six thousand farm households across the European Union reveals that 49 % of farm wives are working regularly on the farm. Thirteen % of farm operators in the legal sense are women, and the vast majority of these are actively involved in running their farms. O'Hara discusses in detail studies from England, France, Spain, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Ireland, Norway, Crete, and Germany. All of these discussions show similar results, namely women's important contribution to family farming but hardly any official recognition of this kind of work. There is, however, emerging evidence that women are trying to reconstruct their identity and are

renegotiating power relations by becoming professionals and by taking up off-farm work.

Sachs (1983), in a study of farming women in the US, found that the family farm as institution encourages religion, morality, democracy, and individualism, and that it is based on patriarchal authority. It has to be acknowledged here that this study by Sachs is about twenty-five years old. Do her findings hold true today? Women are involved in most aspects of agriculture, but there are no national data to compare the level of involvement of women over time. They have worked in formal (i.e. Women Food and Agriculture Network, WFAN; Country Women's Association, CWA; Women involved in Farm Economics, WIFE) or informal organisations (i.e. fund raising activities, organising sport events) but because of the patriarchal bias that operates in conjunction with the capitalist system in trying to retain women as a reserve labour force, women as individuals face numerous constraints in their attempts to make decisions in agricultural production (Sachs 1983 p.138). National Agricultural Statistics from 2002 (accessed 7.1.09) show that 5 % of women operate commercial farms; and a survey of Pennsylvania State University (Bharadwai and Findeis 2003 accessed 7.1.09) show that the percentage of working age farm women involved in off-farm work has increased from 37 % in 1985 to 62 % in 2003, and one third noted that they work off the farm to help finance the farm operation.

The literature on women in overseas industrialised countries provides an indication of their significant contribution to the family farm overseas. What is the situation in Australia?

### **Women and family farming in Australia**

In Smalltown men used the resources and labour of women for facilitating their paid work, and their leisure and prestige-enhancing activities, without adequate reciprocity. The relationships that husbands established individually and collectively with their wives in the sphere of domestic labour, economic activity, leisure, religious and service club activity were so palpably one-sided that we felt justified in describing them as exploitative (Dempsey 1994:41).

Statistical data show that at the beginning of the 20th Century, 61 % of the Australian population lived in rural areas, but at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, only 17 % of the population lived in *the bush* (Regional Women's Advisory Council 2001:16). Significant changes have occurred, out-migration is high, and we know that, according to Alston and Kent (2001:iii), 85 % of 15 to 24 year old women and 71 % of 15 to 24 year old men intend to leave surveyed rural towns in Australia. This indicates dissatisfaction with their perceived future life in rural towns and reflects the reality of lost opportunities. More conservative figures of some six years later (Collits 2007:14) indicate that 24 % of 15 to 24 year olds leave rural areas and do not return. There is a difference between intent and behaviour, however, there can be no doubt that rural out-migration has left rural areas without services, without education facilities, and without employment opportunities (Alston, 2004b:300).

The situation of farming women in Australia is similar to that of women overseas. According to researchers such as Dempsey (1994), Alston (1995b; 2004a), Bryant (1999), and Pini (2005b), farm women are not involved in key decision-making, but carry the responsibility for domestic duties and off-farm employment since globalisation, market forces, and the Australian drought have left many family farms in financial strife. This need to work off-farm and the lack of opportunities in rural

areas has led to an exodus of young people, mainly young women, from rural areas (Alston 2004b). Important is here the fact that young women stay longer in rural high schools than young men, that they are more motivated to go on to university<sup>2</sup>, but that employment opportunities in rural areas are aimed at males, apprenticeships and farm-based work. Full-time employment opportunities declined in the last decades, but full-time employment opportunities in rural areas for young women have declined to near extinction<sup>3</sup>.

Apart from employment opportunities, there is also the issue of further education for women, and the need to escape the small town milieu (Alston 2004b:300-307). Deliberating the macho culture of rural Australian society, Alston found that the secondary status of women is borne out in the male-centric conception of sport: In order to play netball and to be supported financially as a team, women's netball teams are forced to follow the men's football team to the places where the men play. The Regional Women's Advisory Council (2001:15) stated that young rural people believe that the rural life is *second rate* to urban life. Summarising there educational, cultural and economic reasons for young women to leave rural areas.

## **The Results**

A variety of definitions of the family farm emerged from the interviews. The family farm is:

“a safe place to spend the childhood”;

“an excellent place to spend time when on holidays from boarding school”;

“a wonderful place to contemplate, I can't think in the city, it's too noisy”.

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<sup>2</sup> 62 % as against 39 %

<sup>3</sup> Alston and Kent's (2001) study on young, rural people in New South Wales discusses regional development, transport, employment, education and makes recommendations regarding job creation (especially to Woolworths) in rural and regional areas.

All participants stated that the concept of the family farm is based on farm ownership, is, if possible, passed down from generation to generation, and provides residence for the family. “Dad’s management of a farm, even though we lived on that property, is not a real family farm. Farm ownership is important,” was one of the answers provided. A more formal definition is provided by Elliott (cited in Tanewski, Romano and Smyrnios 2000:15): the family farm includes ownership, place of residence, the family’s contribution to labour, the family’s responsibility for management, and the family’s rural ethos or ideology. As can be seen, informal and formal definitions are closely linked.

### **The participants**

Eight semi-structured interviews with younger women, the daughters, and eight with women of an older generation, mothers, were conducted. Table 1 provides some demographic details of both generations.

**Table 1 Demographics of participants**

Eight Mothers, aged 46 to 66	Eight Daughters, aged 19 to 42
Schooling: Year 10 – 3 Year 11 – 1 Year 12 – 4	Schooling: Year 11 – 2 Year 12 - 6
Professional: Housewife / Farmer’s wife - 1 TAFE – 2 General Nursing – 2 Registered Nursing – 2 Studying Education – 1 Ph.D – 1	Professional – Studying: Social work - 1 Nursing - 3 Psychology - 2 Nuclear Medicine - 1 Ph.D - 1
Living / working on the family farm – 4 studying education / living in town – 1 Retired / living in town - 1	Living / studying / working in town – 7 Living on family farm / working in town - 1

Table 1 shows that schooling and occupational achievements were important for both groups of women. It must be assumed that both generations had educational opportunities. The high proportion of educated women may be explained by the biased selection process of the participants, but it is believed that the findings of this research show general trends that are affecting two generations of women in rural Australian society today<sup>4</sup>.

### **Hardships of farming life and resilience**

Hardships of farming life are demonstrated by the advice the mothers gave their daughters:

“Leave the farm!”

“Move away!”

“Get a good education!”

“Go to uni or TAFE!”

“I wish I had had your opportunities – make the most of it ... don’t waste your chances!”

“Get a job which promotes independence!”

“Get an education in case the marriage breaks down!”

These emotional responses imply that the life of the older generation cannot have been easy. The mothers encouraged their daughters to leave the farming industry and to seek personal and professional fulfilment elsewhere. The daughters mentioned:

“We were always encouraged to finish year twelve, get an education and then, years down the track, come back to the farm.”

“We always had to have something behind us in case the farm was sold.”

“Why study at uni? The encouragement of mother to create as many opportunities as possible.”

“The family farm was rather restricting and university study was an escape route from my parents.”

The daughters’ responses demonstrate the power the mothers exerted, but also a rational approach to their mothers’ suggestions: education being the most useful tool

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<sup>4</sup> Further research should be carried out to relate the findings of this study to ABS Census data.

for a professional future. The last response demonstrates some resentment towards the parents and that education can be used as a strategy of resistance.

When asked whether they like living on the farm, the opinions of the mothers varied. Responses like “Yes... but...” were common: there were family ties too strong to leave, or there was “not enough money to buy a house in town.” One woman revealed that she would like to leave but there was “not even enough money to buy fodder for livestock”, which clearly limited her choices. During the interviews the mothers also mentioned that farm work is physically too hard and that they were brought up to support the husband, father-in-law, brother-in-law, but not to take over. The mothers were satisfied “to leave all the hard work to the husband”. Interesting are the traditional values, such as “girls did not farm in those days” and “daughters went away and got married”. These values affected the life chances of the older generation; their roles being defined to that of the farmer’s wife, to motherhood, and to provide support on the farm.

The young women concurred with the older generation that farm work is physically too hard, but they also mentioned increasing isolation: “More and more people leave the family farm, it would be really hard to cope with the isolation”. Physical hard work brings to mind Donna Haraway (cited in Holmes 2004:77) who argued that physical work should not be an issue as far as gender is concerned, latest technology lets women perform the same chores as men. How valid is Haraway’s argument? Has she ever tried to fit a trailer to a car or truck, has she managed heavy farm machinery or handled sheep and cattle? Despite modern technology, things may not be as easy as Haraway suggests, and it may be wise to leave the final judgement to those who have experienced farm life on a day to day basis, the mothers.

Here are some more answers of the young generation to whether they like living on the farm:

“No – too many worries - bills, irrigation, drought, and you can’t get any labour.”

“No – too hot in summer and too cold in winter. We do not have air conditioning and with the climate, it’s not comfortable out there...”

“No – but visiting yes! Experiencing the family life, the space, going fishing, horse riding, bike riding and roo-shooting.”

All participants mentioned close family relationships and an appreciation of the life on the family farm. An interesting finding is the issue of resilience: Mothers and daughters felt that resilience, a sense of hardship and adaptability, is important and that people in rural areas are more resilient than those living in urban areas. This research shows resistance of the mothers, i.e. staying on the farm, but also initiating change, i.e. influencing the daughters to leave. The younger generation embraces change – are they less resilient?

The literature defines resilience as being a positive behavioural adaptation of adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti and Becker 2000), and as a positive outcome despite constant stress (Best and Garmezy 1990). A study of young people who had grown up during farm crises of the 1980s and 1990s in Iowa, USA, shows *successful life achievements* of these young adults. In comparison, a Queensland study explains resilience in a different way. Hegney et al. (2007) looked into community and individual resilience in rural Australians and found that not all members of the community were resilient, that resilience was not a steady state within an individual, and that an individual’s level of resilience would vary over their lifetime. Internal resiliency factors as well as factors in the environment influence individual resilience. Hegney et al. found that because of increased drought, bushfires and hail storms, rural people are becoming less resilient. Alston and Kent (2004:22) concur with this and state that *psychological poverty*, produced by natural disasters, increased workloads

and lack of services, leads to a withdrawal from the community, which, in turn, leads to a loss of social capital and those social networks that are needed for resilience. The topic of resilience is important and needs further research. The younger generation mentioned that they developed a sense of hardship, that their experiences of living on the family farm had prepared them well for life's ups and downs. And the older generation interpreted resilience as *accepting life as it was*. One of the mothers elaborated:

“...the resilience of women, year after year, no holidays, one year after the other, working on the farm. And they are doing the local thing as well, always helping, doing community work... fabulous women, not walking out when things go wrong, staying with their man. It's interesting, they see the bigger picture, it's much bigger than themselves.”

### **Circumstances beyond the control of the farm-owner and the consequences**

“If the season wasn't with you, there was nothing you could do about it, it did not matter how hard you worked.”

The above citation of a mother says it all, the hardships involved in farming, expectations and shattered hopes. Both groups of women had realistic expectations regarding the family farm; they considered influences over which an individual farmer (male or female) has no control, for instance the climate and globalisation. The year long drought has ruined financially many farming families. The older generation thought farming today is too uncertain and the younger generation thought it is “easier to study and get a 9 to 5 job” because of increased competition in local and global markets. So what are the perceived threats? The older generation's fears (in order of importance) related to:

- Natural disaster(s);

- Financial difficulties;
- Increased global and local competition;
- Big corporations taking over the farm.

Anger and disappointment was voiced regarding

- Limited security (government encourages small farmers to get out of farming);
  - No government support regarding transport (railway) and regarding the 'single desk' (farmers now have to deal with different agents to arrange transport of wheat).
- The younger generation's fears regarding the family farm were very similar, but the

order of importance was different:

- Globalisation:
  - market forces;
  - increased competition;
- Natural disaster(s);
- Financial stress:
  - prices offered for wheat and livestock;
- Farm management:
  - water buy-back scheme;
  - new costly technologies;
- Negative influences on health of parents;
- Encouragement of parents (for the daughters) to leave the farm indicating problems for the farm's future.

The encouragement of parents for the daughters to become educated and leave the farming industry clearly provided an incentive to change direction. As mentioned earlier, when the responses of the two groups were compared, differences existed not in the perceived threats but in the order of importance. The concerns regarding the future of Australian family farming were offset by some positive views. Here are those of some mothers:

- The general optimism of the farming community ("After a shower of rain, they are the eternal optimists");
- Planning an appropriate marriage for the son;
- Resilience of country people.

Planning an appropriate marriage is an interesting point, one mother states "Marrying the right partner can save the family farm; my son has to marry a woman with

business skills”. This answer demonstrates some kind of resilience and an expectation that the son will inherit the farm.

Another mother was adamant that

“... the family farm will continue to exist ... there will be some small farmers drop out because the younger people don’t come back to us, that’s inevitable. At the same time, some young people are coming back to us ... their positivity and excitement is encouraging, they have got a fighting spirit.”

The younger generation echoed this positive remark:

“It’s challenging and it’s changed, but I feel if you have passion and determination, you can still make the farm a viable future for yourself and the family. But I think you’d need a double income, some cash flow, the husband needs the wife’s income.”

And

“I think we have to assume that droughts will be more frequent and that will be the normality, so we have to adjust our management to meet the circumstances. We have been doing that, we have gone into different types of sheep, sheep that can handle dry conditions, that’s just one example.”

All interviews demonstrated that both generations of women thought about the future of the Australian family farm in a realistic way. There is hope that the family farm will remain but the participants realise that circumstances beyond the farm-owner’s control require changes, in attitude, education, of planning, and in farm management, for instance “the husband needs the wife’s income” and “we have to adjust our management to meet the circumstances”. These answers show a mindset that is influenced by, and embedded in, a competitive market society.

## **Discussion**

The sixteen semi-structured interviews of women with a farming background showed that the mothers’ attitudes were influenced by continuity (resilience?), there was emphasis on the family and on traditional values, however, the mothers clearly

promoted change for their daughters. And the younger generation opted for adjustment to circumstances, for education, acquiring a profession and for leaving the farming family. These answers can be explained by the structural transformations within the institution of the family and society during the last decades. The structure of the farming family may not have changed, individual property rights still disadvantage women (Shortall 2004, Pini and Shortall 2009); however, the structural transformation which has occurred provides women with the opportunity to achieve professional status, to become independent, to delay motherhood. All participants saw these developments in a positive light.

This research discovered several concerns for both generations of women, two of which are the hardships of farming and circumstances beyond the control of the farm-owner. The hardships of farming, physically as well as psychologically, cannot be underestimated. There can be no doubt that it is hard for a woman, despite modern technology, to own and/or manage a farm on her own. As the participants indicated, “there is no labour” or “labour is hard to find.” Despite this, official figures show that “women can do it”, female farm ownership is increasing (Pini 2005a; 2005b). The circumstances beyond the control of the farm-owner raised also many valid concerns. The participants referred to the negative consequences of the global market, the global economy, and to climate change. A global market requires increased competition which is based on an efficient system, well educated farmers and improved technology, all of which may leave some family farms, especially the smaller ones, behind. In order to compete, the farmer, or his wife, would have to improve their skills, strive for educational advancement, check out world wide market trends, produce what is required and sell their produce. All of this can mean increased debts of an overall stretched budget. The consequences of globalisation, a more progressive

farm management, and climate change often lead to health issues in the owner of small farms which, in turn, affects the overall well-being of the family, often resulting in family breakdown. This concern was raised by all participants: mental illness, depression often leading to suicide, and alcoholism constituted problems in several families. And women (mothers) are expected to pick up the pieces – holding the family together and keeping the business going.

But there is also another important point which was addressed mainly by the younger generation: culture. Culture here does not only refer to gender issues and the macho-culture of Australian men, as discussed by Alston (2004b), it also refers to succession planning and to the younger generation of women who are educated and want to be included in decision making processes. The question here is would the family farm survive local and global pressures if young, educated women (including daughters-in-law!), would be granted greater power? This is hard to predict. Bryant (2002) found that increasingly women enter the occupational community of farming, and construct their place within farming as well as their identities as farm managers. But Bryant could not find any evidence that women would break down the male culture. They would, however, use their knowledge of male farming communities to gain an equal footing with their male counterparts. May be this is the beginning of change? A very important issue is gender equality. Some participants mentioned succession planning. Shortall (2004) and Pini and Shortall (2009), in their comparison of Irish and Australian farm women, found that the power of individual property rights, which is upheld and protected by both nations, disadvantages women because it is based on, and central to, the social custom of patrilineal land transfer.

Looking at present circumstances, at traditional norms and values, and relating them to opportunities available to women, should we perhaps be more realistic regarding

women managing and/or taking over the family farm? The outcome of this research may have been influenced by the selection bias of participants, but national as well as international literature shows that young people, especially young women, once educated, leave rural areas. May be Pfeffer (1989) is correct in his finding that the willingness of women to farm is eroding and that many women object to the very idea of being married to a farmer. The modern 'individualisation' path, as discussed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2005) provides a more positive future for the young women, education, training and professional achievements, step by step achieving personal goals. The women's movement has given momentum to these little steps, it has laid the foundation for ideological as well as for practical changes in western industrialised societies. These changes are institutional and structural, and, when linked to individualisation, are governed by disintegration of old norms and reinvention of new ones. Societal expectations are that women take up the opportunities offered and become independent. Looking at the women's movement and at globalisation, there can be no doubt that the latter influenced the former during the last twenty years, and that both exert pressure on women. Globalisation offers favourable circumstances but also creates challenging situations, especially in relation to the small Australian family farm. The circumstances are exacerbated by the seven year long drought. The mothers participating in this research have not had the opportunities available to their daughters but they are persuading the younger generation to channel their energies into a direction that provides them with greater security than farming would. All participants want the family farm, based on farm ownership and inheritance, to continue to exist, but they are also realistic in their attitudes, knowing that outside influences over which there is no control, jeopardize the old lifestyle, that better education and costly technology are required for more

progressive farm management, and that changes in management are inevitable. The resilience which both groups mentioned fades a little when looking at the findings rationally, but this clearly needs further exploration. It is officially predicted that the number of farms will further decline and it can be assumed that more and more young women will leave rural and remote areas to break away from the hardships of farming, to further their education, have adequate professional prospects, and to escape the macho-culture of rural Australia. The future of the Australian family farm, the way we know it, is uncertain.

During this project I could not help but thinking of one of Kautsky's (1988 ([1899]) remarks. He stated one hundred and ten years ago "To study the agrarian question according to Marx's method, we should not confine ourselves to the question of the future of the small scale farming, ... we should look for all the changes which agriculture experiences under the domination of capitalist production." For the sake of those who have fond memories of farming and would like it to remain the same, it is hoped that some way can be found to maintain as many aspects as possible of the Australian family farming system.

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