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Rural Industries Research Development Corporation

## RIRDC Short Report: Networking Systems for Rural Women

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### THE FULL REPORT

This is a comprehensive summary by Sam Leone of the full research report *Networking Systems for Rural Women* by Margaret Grace. RIRDC Publications No 97/4 (March 1997). It is available from RIRDC for \$15 plus \$6 p?h  
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## Different models of networks, their benefits to women and implications for women's participation in rural industry organisations

This short report highlights the key findings of a research project funded by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation and conducted in 1995 by the Centre for Policy and Leadership Studies in Education, Queensland University of Technology in association with the Rural Extension Centre, University of Queensland Gatton College.

The aims of the project were to identify different models of networking systems for rural women in Australia and overseas, and to assess their benefits not only to rural women but also to rural industry organisations.

### Key findings

- The formation of networks by and for rural women is a global phenomenon which has gathered momentum since the 1970s.
- In Australia rural women's networking has been given impetus by the establishment of special units within government departments in some states, and more recently in the Department of Primary Industries and Energy, Canberra.
- Rural women's networks aim to promote positive change in the status of women generally as well as provide benefits to individual women.
- Four differing models of rural women's networks and their distinctive features can be identified.
- Strategies for enhancing rural women's networks need to be context specific.
- While involvement in rural women's networks can provide training in leadership and growth in confidence which will assist those women with ambitions to participate in decision making in the public arena, women's networking organisations are not primarily a training ground for such participation, nor are they in direct competition with producer organisations.
- Levels of participation by women in producer organisations are low, especially at

- senior levels.
- Both structural and cultural barriers to women's greater participation in producer organisations are identified, and strategies for enhancing their participation put forward.
- There are some indications that circumstances conducive of the achievement of a better gender balance in producer organisations exist.

## What are rural women's networks?

The formation of networks by and for rural women is a global phenomenon which has gathered momentum since the 1970s. This movement is largely an expression of the desire of women in agriculture for recognition and visibility and for a greater role in decision making, but it is not confined to agricultural interests. The rural women's networking movement also encompasses the diversity evident in rural women's lives, and addresses a wide range of social as well as economic issues.

In terms of their benefits to women, rural women's networks provide many advantages for individual participants, but their greater overall benefit lies in their capacity to promote the broader social movement for change in the status of women.

Crucial issues for rural women's networks are:

- The relationship between community-based rural women's organisations and government.
- The politics of identity. The latter includes the networking of diverse groupings and interests, and the management of the tension between the push for change in gender relationships and the affirmation of traditional rural cultural values.

## Different models of rural women's networks

Four different models are identified in the report, which is based on information gained by postal survey of rural women's networks in Australia and overseas, and on detailed case studies of two networks in Queensland.

### Model A

The Model A network is a state government initiative. The networking of diverse rural women's organisations and informal groups is coordinated by salaried staff located in a special unit within a government department, usually with a consultative committee drawn from the rural community. Operational costs including salaries and the production of a widely distributed magazine are government funded.

The network is a linking agency rather than an organisation, is inclusive of diversity within the rural female population, and promotes social change through community development.

In Australia this model was first developed in Victoria and has since been used with some variations in other states except Queensland.

### Model B

The Model B network is community-based, usually driven by an incorporated community organisation and maintained by volunteers. Such networks are funded by member subscriptions sometimes supplemented by financial or in-kind support from government and industry sponsorship. While such organisations may have networking as a major aim and activity, they are likely to be special interest groups with a fairly specific agriculture-related focus.

The organisation called Queensland Rural Women's Network is an example of this type. Available information suggests that most, if not all networks overseas are of the Model B type.

## **Model C and D**

Models C and D are both industry-specific networks of farm women.

In Model C the establishment of a network of women's groups is a 'Target 10' initiative, designed to enhance an industry-specific producer culture and thus the profitability of the industry.

In Model D the women's group is initiated by women in the producer community, but closely associated with and supported by an existing producer organisation.

## **Comparative advantages and disadvantages of models**

Crucial issues in comparing these models are the degree of 'ownership' of the network by 'grassroots' community members, and the resourcing of the network or organisation.

Rural women may not feel as committed to the aims of a network which is driven by government or by a rural industry as they are to an organisation they have initiated. However, resourcing is a major problem for women's community based volunteer organisations.

Given these issues, the networking of diverse rural women's groups by a special unit in an appropriate government department appears to be a very good model, provided that the unit is very receptive to input from the community.

## **Strategies for enhancing networks and networking**

It was decided that, to be effective, proposed strategies for enhancing rural women's networks need to be contextually specific. Two sets of strategies, appropriate for two different kinds of networks, were produced and evaluated by the case study participants. These strategies are detailed in the full report.

## **Relationship between rural women's networks and rural industry organisations**

Rural women's networks were found to be different from producer organisations in their overall purposes and in their modes of operation. The view that the establishment of distinct women's organisations and/or networks represents the fragmentation of energy available to address the serious problems confronting the rural sector was found to be unjustified.

The main benefits of rural women's networks to rural industry organisations are:

- They encourage women in agriculture to identify as farmers and to take more active roles in family farming businesses.
- They can provide training in leadership and growth in confidence which will be of assistance to those women with ambitions to participate in decision making in rural industry organisations.
- They provide contexts within which a shared, woman-centred, more holistic vision of rural issues is progressively being developed and articulated. This vision

integrates health and wellbeing, community development and agricultural sustainability, and could be a source of innovative solutions to pressing problems.

## Levels of participation by women in rural industry organisations

In January, 1995, when the then Federal Government reiterated its intention to increase the level of participation of women in agricultural boards, the current rate of participation was estimated at 6%.

For this study a survey of nine producer organisations and the Queensland Landcare Council was conducted. Most were unable to supply much of the information sought, since comprehensive records of attendance at branch, regional and state levels had either not been kept or had not been analysed by gender. While participation by women varied, the information that was supplied indicated that overall the percentage of women office bearers was very low. The office most commonly occupied by women was the ancillary one of secretary.

## Barriers to women's greater participation in producer organisations

The following were identified as barriers:

- Rules for eligibility for membership.
- Competitive selection processes for office bearers.
- Lack of on-the-job training.
- Career interruption for childbearing.
- Lack of a critical mass of women.
- Entrenched 'old boy' cultures, networks and exclusion practices.
- Traditional patterns of marital partnerships.
- Attitudes of other women.
- Women's confidence and knowledge base.
- Women's inhibitions about public speaking.
- Timing and location of meetings.
- Lack of childcare provision.
- Exhaustion
- Sexual politics and harassment.

The reader is referred to the full report for explanation and elaboration of these points.

## Positive signs

A number of positive signs which point towards change in the direction of a better gender balance in producer organisations were noted.

These include:

- Goodwill towards women's greater involvement and active promotion of greater gender equity by some senior personnel.
- Mentoring. The presence of some women in both elected and senior staff positions who encourage other women and serve as role models and mentors.
- Convergence of interests between women and some producer organisations on the issue of promoting the sustainability of family farming as a mode of agricultural production.

## Strategies for industry organisations wishing to enhance women's participation in decision making

- Identify women as a specific client/member group.
- Workshop gender equity concepts and perceptions with senior management.
- Conduct a gender equity awareness campaign at all levels of the organisation.
- Develop policy and seek endorsement at State Conference.
- Select relevant strategies for implementing policy from those recommended in the full report.

## Conclusion

The present time is a very interesting one for rural women and potentially, for established rural industry organisations.

The developments taking place present challenges and opportunities for both. However, the potential for the rural women's movement to contribute positively to the management of change in rural communities will not be realised without a willingness by both men and women to accept cultural as well as structural changes.

Such changes are not easy to achieve, and will require time for negotiation and adjustment at personal as well as organisational levels.



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