

Beyond 'get big or get out': Female farmers' responses to the cost-price squeeze of Australian agriculture

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Research question

How are female producers responding to the cost-price squeeze of Australian agriculture?

Productivist agriculture

- Economies of scale, inputs from other sectors in the community such as fertiliser and chemicals, substituting land and labour with capital and increased specialisation (Bowler 1992; Lockie 2015; Boulton and Chancellor 2019; Ilbery and Bowler 1998).
- Dominance over nature.
- Greater political and financial support than sustainable agriculture.
- Marginalises women from spaces of knowledge and decision making roles (Alston 1998; Sachs 1983; Jellison 1993).
- Women are shut out of the political, economic and social institutions associated with productivist agriculture and therefore more likely to challenge the status quo (Goldsmith et al. 2013).

Sustainable agriculture

- Four key dimensions: decentralisation, independence, working in harmony with nature, community (Beus and Dunlap 1990; Lyson 2004; Chiappe and Butler Flora 1998).
- More empowering and accessible for women (DeLind and Ferguson; 1999 Trauger 2004).
- Lower barriers to entry.
- Working in harmony with nature to manage climate variability.
- Difficult to achieve personal sustainability due to the increased responsibilities of marketing.
- Increasingly profitable.
- Emergence of new food systems - conceptualised by Sachs et al's (2016) Feminist Agrifood Systems Theory

Dimensions of sustainable agriculture (Beus and Dunlap 1990; Lyson 2004; Chiappe and Butler Flora 1998)

Decentralisation

- ▶ Food quality derived from local embeddedness and production in harmony with nature
- ▶ Dispersed control over land, capital and resources
- ▶ Reliance on local knowledge and local markets

Independence

- ▶ Smaller production units
- ▶ Lower capital investment
- ▶ Lower labour and energy inputs
- ▶ Land intensiveness
- ▶ Independence from the global market
- ▶ Reduced reliance on technology and external sources of credit

Dimensions of sustainable agriculture (Beus and Dunlap 1990; Lyson 2004; Chiappe and Butler Flora 1998)(cont)

Harmony with nature

- ▶ Promotion of biodiversity
- ▶ Protection of soil and water
- ▶ Building community's capacity to face environmental challenges

Community

- ▶ Connection between self and place
- ▶ Food production based on trust, transparency, reciprocity and accountability
- ▶ Food is seen as more healthy and natural
- ▶ Cooperation with other producers
- ▶ Promoting farming as a rewarding way of life
- ▶ Improving social sustainability
- ▶ Builds local food systems
- ▶ Actions to build agricultural literacy

Methodology

- ▶ Semi structured, open ended, in-depth face to face and phone interviews were conducted with **35** female agricultural producers across Australia: New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory.
- ▶ Businesses included: conventional and organic beef production; vegetable market gardens; hydroponic and organic vegetable, fruit and herb production; dairy goats and cheese; conventional and free range pork production; free range poultry and egg production; and wool production.
- ▶ Women were not selected on their production or marketing type.

Findings

- ▶ Sustainable agriculture is more empowering and accessible for women
- ▶ As consumers reject aspects of industrial agriculture, new market opportunities have emerged for producers (particularly alternative producers).
- ▶ Women are turning to the intensive production of niche, high quality, sustainable and ethical produce
- ▶ Farmers are also reducing their use of inputs to reduce costs, which is consistent with organic, alternative and sustainable production which will be less reliant on external sources of fertiliser, less mechanised etc
- ▶ Farmers are turning to the direct marketing of niche products to increase profitability

Sustainable agriculture more empowering for women

- ▶ Operating in two worlds- accepted in their farmer identity in sustainable agriculture, seen as hobbyists in conventional agriculture
- ▶ Strong networks of alternative and sustainable producers, both online and face to face
- ▶ Lower land and capital costs and high touch environments which is more accessible and aligns with women's needs and values
- ▶ Financially empowered by consumer demand for local, niche, sustainable, healthy, high quality products which enables them to connect with producers

Intensive production: Higher quality, sustainable, niche products

- ▶ Organic and sustainable attracts a premium + lower cost of inputs + niche, high quality product that can be marketed directly
- ▶ Higher costs associated with producing organic food (eg seed), production is often slower and it is more labour intensive.
- ▶ Some markets are closed to small producers
- ▶ Can be hard to access finance as banks will prefer productivist approaches

Reduced use of inputs

- ▶ Smaller production units - decreased reliance on external sources of capital
- ▶ Labour intensive
- ▶ Reduced use of machinery
- ▶ Integrated farm systems to reduce use of fertiliser and chemicals
- ▶ Reduced use of chemicals and fertiliser through organic and holistic production
- ▶ Using renewable energy, reducing packaging and reusing food waste
- ▶ Reduced reliance on contractors or external services by tapping into the sustainable agriculture networks.
- ▶ Cooperation rather than competition

Producing in harmony with nature

- ▶ Food quality derived from producing in harmony with nature
- ▶ Reduced costs of inputs such as fertiliser and chemicals
- ▶ Capitalises on consumer backlash against the perceived environmental impacts of productivist agriculture.
- ▶ Improves drought tolerance

Transparent production

- ▶ Connects consumers with the place of production
- ▶ Selling more than the farm product (Trauger et al 2010)
- ▶ Important for maintaining ethical, sustainable branding
- ▶ Social media
- ▶ Open farm policy
- ▶ Certification through Organic Australia or Humane Choice
- ▶ Farm tours
- ▶ Also helps to build agricultural literacy

Diversified and integrated sustainable farms

- ▶ Important for addressing cash flow issues
- ▶ Holistic management through complimentary grazing practices eg poultry and beef
- ▶ Supplementing production income with non-production income eg farm tours and farm tourism.
- ▶ Value adding

Direct marketing: Attracting a higher price

- ▶ Direct marketing through Community Supported Agriculture Schemes, selling directly to niche supermarkets or restaurants, farmers' markets
- ▶ Improves profits
- ▶ Access to stable markets and stable prices
- ▶ Easier to direct market niche products
- ▶ Creates a connection to consumers - not just selling a product but connecting them to 'the moral imaginary of food' (Goodman and Goodman 2009).

Selling locally

- ▶ Reduced cost of transport
- ▶ Stronger connection with customers
- ▶ Selling locally is supported in regions that market themselves as food destinations
- ▶ Strong connection with other local producers

Social media

- ▶ Cost effective marketed mechanism
- ▶ Overcomes the tyranny of distance
- ▶ Connects consumers to their food
- ▶ Enables transparency and accountability with customers
- ▶ Enables customers to follow a story about sustainable farming
- ▶ Connects to a growing trend of consumer activism as people seek to give their money directly to producers
- ▶ Instagram 'the right way to access the right people that were interested'

Risk management

- ▶ Start off small and grow slowly to manage the costs of making mistakes
- ▶ Connection with customers reduces risk as customers remain loyal
- ▶ Diversified business - eg having eggs to offset the initial slow growing time of cattle
- ▶ Holistic management to reduce climate risks
- ▶ Maintaining networks to manage risk

Cooperation rather than competition

- ▶ Mixed experiences amongst those interviewed in setting up distribution schemes for local organic produce
- ▶ Experiences of both conventional and sustainable producers cooperating or viewing other producers as a threat.
- ▶ Farmers' markets viewed as competitive rather than collaborative
- ▶ Some positive experiences in co-ops
- ▶ 'Not enough people in the market to make it feel competitive'
- ▶ Sharing knowledge with young farmers and promoting the idea that sustainable agriculture is a rewarding and viable career choice.

Creating new food systems

- ▶ Building community's capacity to face environmental challenges
- ▶ Food production based on trust, transparency, reciprocity and accountability
- ▶ Builds social sustainability
- ▶ Building new food systems that provide an alternative to productivist agriculture through cooperation rather than competition
- ▶ Building community's capacity to face environmental challenges

Key messages

- ▶ Sustainable agriculture is more accessible and empowering for women than productivist agriculture
- ▶ Women find it easier to claim the farmer identity in sustainable agriculture
- ▶ Women are shaping the creation of new food systems which may build environmental and social sustainability
- ▶ Women are exercising agency as they shape their food production businesses.
- ▶ Even though the message of Australian agriculture is that you need to 'get big or get out' I find that there is a thriving small producer sector which is riding the wave of consumer backlash against productivist agriculture.
- ▶ Supports Sachs et al's (2016) Feminist Agrifood Systems Theory