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Oh gosh, having someone to talk to. Yeah, I really feel like it's about having a connect of some sort with anybody and being able to talk about it. Having a safe space to talk about it as well where you feel like you're not being judged or for someone that understands as well that's got an

understanding of the situation that you're in. It's sort of when you talk to someone that's got no idea about farming or the stresses over the course of the year, yeah you might, I don't know, just a place where you know that you're going to be able to feel that connection and feel heard and understood.

If someone is in distress and really not coping they need to be able to sit and have someone there for them and with them...All of a sudden you are in contact with other women who are either going through the same thing as you or just you know are there for support, or just friendship really and that made a big difference and really turned things around I think.



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



In public discourse, the psychological and emotional distress of farming women has largely been overshadowed by a focus on the distress of farming men. As a result, there is limited knowledge in the mental health space about farming women's mental health and suicide ideation (Bryant, 2020a, 2022; Carruth & Logan, 2002; Fullagar & O'Brien, 2018; Melberg, 2003). What we do know from research on women's experiences of farming, is that distress arises from caring for the mental health and wellbeing of their male partners and that women are also impacted by the known factors implicated in male farmer distress associated with occupational identities, and the social, environmental, and political economy of farming. However, there are also gendered experiences of farming particular to women that may shape women's lived experiences of distress (Melberg, 2003). Unlike for men in farming, there has not been the same commitment to targeted and tailored approaches to mental health support and suicide prevention informed by lived experience for women in farming.

This project was designed to hear and document farming women's lived experiences of distress and suicide ideation and collaborate with women to create tailored suicide prevention and wellbeing strategies. The research design addressed the following aims:

Develop an in-depth understanding of the factors that contribute to and inhibit wellbeing and possibilities for suicide ideation and potential suicides of farming women;

Develop tailored co-designed strategies with farming women to increase farming women's wellbeing;

Share co-designed resources and tools within the sample communities and other interested parties and make these available on the Tailoring Suicide Prevention IT Platform www.TakingStock.Community for all rural communities to access at no cost.

A participatory action research project was undertaken in five phases:

Engagement Interviews Co-design Co-production Online @ Taking Stock

The research was conducted in two case study regions in South Australia: the Riverland and Yorke Peninsula. Two Suicide Prevention Networks – Riverland Community Suicide Prevention Network and SOS Yorkes – took part in the research. Through community engagement and recruitment methods (see Appendix A for recruitment materials), 9 women farming on the Yorke Peninsula and 6 women farming in the Riverland volunteered to participate in in-depth qualitative interviews with the research team. Participants ranged from 22 years to 69 years of age, and 5 participants (33%) were either first- or second-generation migrants from Greek, Turkish and Croatian backgrounds. Women in the Riverland were engaged with viticulture and horticulture while women from the Yorke Peninsula were from broadacre and livestock farms. In depth interviews (see Appendix B for interview guide) explored the women's lived experiences of challenges to mental and emotional wellbeing related to farming and non-farming and of support and coping strategies. The interviews also canvassed ideas about how to support women in farming and what community groups could do to provide support.

There were 7 key issues impacting on mental health and wellbeing raised by the women in farming:

"Superwoman" in silence: Intense workload pressure across multiple domains.

Impacts of geographic and social isolation on mental health and wellbeing.

Unmet emotional and psychological support needs.

Barriers to mental health services and support.

Lack of support for farming women from CALD backgrounds

**Restricted financial independence** 

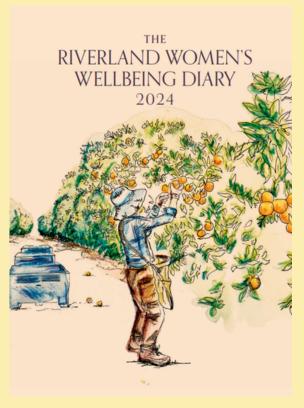
Farming family succession issues

A co-design workshop was facilitated in the Riverland and one in the Yorke Peninsula with groups of women in farming. Prior to each workshop, the participants were provided with a brief report (Appendix C) outlining the key issues impacting on wellbeing for women in farming derived from the individual interviews. They were also provided with the instruction to consider which issues they would seek to prioritize in terms of cocreating resources at the workshop. The workshops were facilitated by the research team in terms of asking guiding questions, providing suggestive prompts and sharing inspirational ideas. Through the discussion, groups of women posed ideas, brainstormed strategies, opportunities and challenges, and came to consensus on a specific approach they wished to develop for implementing in their community.

Women in the Yorke Peninsula decided to progress with co-designing a 'Women's Gathering' in response to isolation, loneliness and limited social engagement. Following the co-design workshop, the research team reached out and engaged two of the community champions identified by the women through a collaborative Zoom meeting. Consequently, a place for the gathering was identified and the strategy for implementation was further developed. This strategy involved employing a local woman on the Yorke Peninsula to drive implementation by setting gathering dates, organising the gathering group focus, inviting facilitators and advertising/promotions. The women's gatherings were held in February, March and April 20024 and places were filled within 12hrs of advertising with demand exceeding the number of places.



The women's gatherings were social in nature but organised around an experience of being taught new skills in art, craft and wellbeing. Women participating in the gatherings expressed that they were attracted to the gathering not just because of an interest in the activity, but as an opportunity for an enjoyable day out from farm, work and family responsibilities and to socially connect with other women. The women utilized the space for learning, enjoyment, sharing stories, meeting and reconnecting with local women, and respite from the demands of everyday life. Women expressed a desire for more opportunities to socially connect through activities and regarded their experiences at the workshops as conducive to mental health and wellbeing.





Women in the Riverland elected to co-design a 'Riverland Women's Wellbeing Diary' to raise awareness of wellbeing for rural women, provide information about available wellbeing services and supports and offer a tool for wellbeing practices. A graphic designer was engaged to produce the diary prototype. In doing so, they were provided a brief to create a functional diary that incorporated wellbeing elements based on Riverland women's experiences, and with aesthetic qualities that resonate with the landscape and primary industries of the region. An illustrator was engaged to create specific graphic illustrations. During the development of the prototype, women in the co-design group were provided opportunities for feedback and to contribute further ideas and information. Some of the diary content, such as the short quotes, was derived from the interviews with women in farming in the Riverland.

The diaries were launched at a community event in December and disseminated across the Riverland to rural women and women in farming in time for the new year. Community feedback revealed that the diaries were very well received and valued as a personal resource and for highlighting the importance of wellbeing and the availability of local supports. The community have decided to produce an updated diary in 2025 utilizing the template co-designed in the project.





This pilot study has provided the first step to inviting farming women to share their personal stories of lived experience of distress and managing mental health and to capture their perspective on how rural communities could co-create community-led and based supports tailored to women in farming. The rural women who participated in this study provided clear insight into the silent struggles of women, working hard across multiple paid and unpaid roles, often to bridge financial gaps created by fluctuations in farming, with little recognition or support. The social isolation felt by many of these women was identified as a key challenge impacting on their wellbeing, alongside geographic distance, responsibilities for childcare, limited finance, restricted time for themselves and limited local opportunities, present culminative barriers to addressing their need for social connection and the social and emotional support of other rural and farming women.

These findings echo those found in the literature on women's experiences of farming. However, this study directly ties those issues to impacts on mental health and wellbeing and uses those findings to tailor and target mental health and wellbeing initiatives specifically to farming women. This pilot study demonstrates how collectives of farming women are capable of co-designing innovative place-based and tailored mental health resources and initiatives for their communities and provides a basis for scaling up this approach and its reach across Australian agricultural communities. Strengthening the wellbeing of farming women will strengthen their families, rural communities and Australian agriculture.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings and conclusions of this report lend themselves to the following recommendations:

Invest in further research to expand this pilot study by increasing sample size and community engagement sites at a State and National level.

Interview and engage with rural women to invite their stories of lived experience and capture the threats to mental health and the practices that support their wellbeing.

Work alongside rural women and community groups to tailor strategies and resources for community-based support to women in farming.

Create a resource pool of shared stories, successful design prototypes and tailored resources that can be shared with women's groups and networks across Australia.

Create spaces and places for the social and cultural expression and support of rural women's wellbeing that are in alignment with those available to men

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## BACKGROUND





Suicide rates for men in farming remain disproportionately high and as such research and practice have overwhelmingly focused on the mental distress of farming men (Arnautovska et al., 2014; Bryant & Garnham, 2017; Bryant et al., 2022; Judd et al., 2006). Wellbeing for men in farming has been closely connected to a series of economic threats to farm viability caused by local and global climate and agricultural conditions (Bryant & Garnham, 2017). In addition, men in farming are characterised as stoic, resilient and capable of withstanding intense hardship in order to ensure the continuation of farming (Bryant & Garnham, 2015; Vayro et al., 2023). Alongside the stigmatisation of mental illhealth, these qualities have been considered potential barriers to help-seeking for mental health among men in farming. To reach men in farming a plethora of tailored support interventions and initiatives have been rolled out including Taking Stock, the Ripple Effect and Are you Bogged Mate?

Farming men, however, do not suffer alone or outside of their families.

The mental wellbeing of farming women has been mostly overlooked, (Bryant, 2020b, 2022; Carruth & Logan, 2002; Fullagar & O'Brien, 2018; Melberg, 2003). While the suicides of farming men necessitate a significant response, rural women's experiences of distress and suicide 'often pale into insignificance with the attention given to youth and men's suicide.' (Fullagar & O'Brien, 2018, p. 2). It is understood that agriculture presents a unique constellation of stressors associated with risks of primary production. It stands to reason that the wellbeing of women in farming is impacted by these stressors alongside men.

Health-based research in the UK, based on surveys of agricultural communities, found that 23.3% of farming women met the criteria for generalized anxiety disorder (Wheeler & Lobley, 2023) and that farming women scored higher than men in anxiety, depression and mental distress (Booth & Lloyd, 2000; Wheeler & Lobley, 2023). These findings were echoed in Canada, in recent work undertaken during the pandemic that revealed 'increased levels of anxiety, depression, perceived stress, emotional exhaustion, and cynicism among farmers compared to the Canadian public, particularly among farming women' (Thompson et al., 2022).

Across geographical contexts, studies of women who farm in productivist agriculture have documented gendered experiences and circumstances that impact on wellbeing. These include social isolation, conflict arising from farm succession and integrational transfer of property, multiple work roles and responsibilities including farm work and offfarm work, volunteering whilst also providing care for family of origin, creation and in-laws (Bryant & Pini, 2011; Charatsari & Istenic, 2016; Inwood & Stengel, 2020; Pini, 2004; Ressia et al., 2020; Scheyette et al., 2024). In addition, farming women have taken on activist roles, leading new initiatives that bring women together and create change in agriculture and agricultural communities (Liepins, 1998; Pini et al., 2007).

Much of this literature on women's experiences in farming has not entered the space of mental health and suicide prevention. This means that whilst women's experiences in farming have been documented, there has been less attention oriented to understanding their lived experience of mental health issues and their needs and preferences for mental health and suicide prevention supports. Fullagar and O'Brien (2018) explored rural and farm women's recovery from depression and found that interaction within informal care spaces, through social support and by working in gardens, visiting parks and engaging with leisure and wellbeing pursuits, aided recovery for rural women. In a New Zealand survey, farming women expressed needing time off the farm and an interest in social support and health and wellness activities to manage their wellbeing (Farmstrong, 2018).

This research project was designed to directly explore farm women's lived experiences of distress, mental health issues and suicide ideation, contribute new insights about women's preferences for community-based wellbeing support and case studies of community-led initiatives targeting the wellbeing of women in farming.





- 1) Develop an in-depth understanding of farm women's lived experience of distress, mental health challenges and suicide ideation;
- 2) Develop targeted co-designed strategies with farming women to support farming women's wellbeing;
- 3) Share co-designed resources and tools within the sample communities and other interested parties and also make these available on the Tailoring Suicide Prevention IT Platform www.TakingStock.Community for all rural communities to access at no cost.

## RESEARCH DESIGN, PROCESSES AND FINDINGS



Human Research Ethics approval was sought and granted by the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee in September 2022. The participatory action research comprised of five phases (as show in the figure below and detailed in what follows).



## **STUDY SITES**

The research was conducted in two case study regions in South Australia: the Riverland and Yorke Peninsula. The case study sites were selected to provide diversity in terms of agricultural industries and economic context but also due to community relationships and social capital of the research team required for participatory research.

The Riverland is in the central eastern part of South Australia and covers the Murray River corridor. Primary production in the region is supported from irrigation derived from the river. The region produces over 60% of the State's wine grapes and is the largest producer, by volume, in Australia contributing \$400 million value to the national. It also accounts for over 90% of the State's citrus and almond production (PIRSA, 2023). At the time of the research the wine industry was experiencing a significant economic downturn due to a wine glut and trade freeze with China as well as environmental challenges. The downturn was the worst since 2006-2007 at the apex of the millennium drought (The Australian Wine: Production, Sales and Inventory Report, 2023).

The Yorke Peninsula is one of Australia's prime agricultural regions producing high quality crops (barley, wheat, lentils, canola). The region produces 25% of the State's grain harvest each year on just 12% of the State's cropping land. It also produces lamb and fine wool (PIRSA, 2023). Grain yields in the region have been average for the past two seasons and producers have received good prices (PIRSA, 2021,2023). Land prices in the region have surged in recent years due to strong operating profits and tightly held property reducing supply.

## **ENGAGEMENT**



Two Suicide Prevention Networks (Riverland Community Suicide Prevention Network and SOS Yorkes) took part in the research. A member of the research team attended the Annual General Meeting of the Riverland Community Suicide Prevention Network. Network members were particularly supportive of the project and indicated that they would engage with the research team going forward. The research team also attended a Riverland Community Services Alliance meeting as a guest speaker to talk about the Women in Farming project. Members of the suicide prevention network 'SOS Yorkes', who were previously engaged in the Men in Farming (Bryant et al., 2022) research were also involved in promoting the research through their networks. Both SPNs promoted the research through social media, email lists, and word-of-mouth. Other local service providers and stakeholders promoted the research and potential co-design outcomes for the community (demonstrated through the distribution of the Taking Stock website link: https://takingstock.community/).

Throughout the recruitment and interview phases, women were reaching out and endorsing the need for the research and volunteering to be involved in some capacity (interviews or the co-design process). Some stated that they are grateful for an opportunity to share their story of mental health and distress.

## INTERVIEWS

Interview participants consisted of 9 women farming on the Yorke Peninsula and 6 women farming in the Riverland. Participants ranged from 22 years to 69 years of age (average age of participants was 47 years). Five participants or 33% of the sample were under the age of 40 years. Five participants (33%) were either first- or second-generation migrants from Greek, Turkish and Croatian backgrounds. Women in the Riverland were engaged with viticulture and horticulture, while women from the Yorke Peninsula were from cropping and sheep farms.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

Participant	Age	Cultural background	Context	ntext Farm type	
Riverland 1	35	Anglo-Australian	Married a farmer, separated. Farming family background.  Mixed commodities including livestock.		
Riverland 2	59	Greek, second generation	Grew up in the Riverland on fruit blocks. Married and bought a property.	cks. Married and bought a	
Riverland 3	59	Greek, second generation	Married and bought a property.	Vineyards	
Riverland 4	52	Turkish, second generation	Moved from city as a child to a fruit block. Married and bought a block. Sold and bought properties with the ups and downs of the industry.	Fruit blocks and vineyards.	
Riverland 5	61	Turkish, 1st generation	Grew up on property and, husband a farmer.	Fruit blocks and vineyards.	
Riverland 6	69	Greek, 1st generation			

YP 1	29	Australian	Married into farming family.	Wheat, barley, lentils, chickpeas, beans and sheep.
YP 2	59	Australian	Married a farmer.	Barley, wheat and sheep.
YP 3	46	Australian	Grew up on a farm, helping from a young age.	Broadacre
YP 4	55	Croatian Australian		
YP 5	22		Grew up on a farm and now partner is a farmer.	Cropping and sheep.
YP 6	55	Australian	Married into farming, currently living on and involved in farm work.	Broadacre: wheat, barley, lentils. Sheep.
YP 7	35	Caucasian	Partner is a farmer, recently moved to live on farm.	Wheat, barley, lentils.
YP 8	32	Australian	Farming background and married a farmer.	Wheat and lentils.
YP 9	41	Irish	Not from farming background. Married into a farm.	Cropping.

In-depth semi-structured interviews with the women in farming focused on:

- ·Demographic and contextual information;
- ·Typical daily and weekly activities;
- ·Plans and goals for work and home life;
- ·Challenges to mental and emotional wellbeing related to farming and non-farming;
- ·Experience of support and coping strategies;
- ·Ideas about how to support women in farming and what community groups could do to provide support.

## KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED IN INTERVIEWS WITH WOMEN IN FARMING

There were 7 key issues impacting on mental health and wellbeing raised by the women in farming:

"Superwoman" in silence: Intense workload pressure across multiple domains.

Impacts of geographic and social isolation on mental health and wellbeing.

Unmet emotional and psychological support needs.

Barriers to mental health services and support.

Lack of support for farming women from CALD backgrounds

Restricted financial independence

Farming family succession issues

# "SUPERWOMAN" IN SILENCE: INTENSE WORKLOAD PRESSURE ACROSS MULTIPLE DOMAINS.

Farming women's workload often comprises 'three shifts' undertaken across roles and responsibilities for on-farm work, off-farm work and domestic work (Elliot et al., 2018; Gallagher & Delworth, 1993). In addition, these roles are not confined to a traditional workday or work week and often overlap with competing demands. In addition, compared to urban women, a high proportion of farming women hold volunteer roles to support and sustain community organisations (Ressia et al., 2020). As Cathy explained, the roles and responsibilities in farming remain gendered with rigid expectations for women that now include off-farm employment:

I guess being married to a farmer, like I said, I loved the lifestyle, loved all that, but it was quite a fixed mindset about roles and responsibilities, and even – yeah, I guess I'll leave it at roles and responsibilities – and the expectations on you, as the farmer's wife, I think sort of grew a lot more than the previous generation, as in we were expected to do everything they did, plus work full-time. And things were quite tight, so it's managing the finances of that and everything like that, sort of creates stress in the relationship. Cathy

As Cathy notes, off-farm employment has risen among farming women and is now undertaken alongside traditional responsibilities for farm and domestic labour. Women in farming undertake off-farm employment for many reasons including having an independent career away from farming for the social and financial benefits. Frequently however, women's paid employment off-farm is undertaken to subsidise the farming enterprise and generate necessary income for the household.

Because the income on the land wasn't enough I started studying and I got my Certificate III and just left at the end of a diploma, and I worked as a bilingual assistant and teachers aid. Nicole

You just feel like you're not getting anywhere. You feel like you're stuck in a hole. That's how I feel, I've been like that for last 10 years or so. Not getting anywhere in my life. I should be working less and I'm working more. It affects me because of my shift work, when my husband gets cross with me because I'm working and we don't go anywhere. That's what he says, tells me off for working, and I've tried telling him, well, I have to work because we have to get some money. And that makes me cross because he's cross at me because I'm working. It gets me frustrated...I find off-farming work to survive. Pat

In these circumstances, off-farm employment is less about choice and independence of career and more about a financial requirement that adds to women's existing responsibilities for farm, domestic and volunteer labour.

All interview participants described the struggle of undertaking multiple roles across the domestic, farming and community spheres. Women described themselves as having to 'do everything' and 'the stuff that men won't do.'

I worked in the bank ... I was the treasurer of the Catholic school and also the soccer club, I got involved in all the kids' activities ... swimming and all that sort of stuff. And finance, I used to do all the paperwork here and the BAS tables and everything....I was working [off farm] on the weekends, I was working here [on-farm] ... There was no holidays, didn't have a holiday ... Caring for the children and the shopping and cooking and cleaning...I do all the house-type duties still, like cleaning, shopping, washing, everything ... He sort of does a bit more that I don't do out on the land, but I still have to know how to start the machinery and tractors and how to plough, dig up vines and things. Helen

I was working double shifts. I was working daytime, being a support worker. So, I did that and then at night-time, I was packing oranges. So, I finished my day job, go to my night job and maybe be lucky to get five or six hours sleep and go to ... my next job again...Even when I was doing [community care], I'd take time off over Christmas, four weeks, so I could be in the shed cutting apricots, and I'd have workers and I would have to be there. I'd be up at 5:30 in the morning to organise the water, the teas, the coffees, everything, so I could be in the shed by 7:00am when the workers came. Rosie

This interview data illustrates the work that farming women are engaged with on-farm, off-farm, in the community and in the domestic sphere. Further, the work schedule of farming women intensifies during harvest periods or shearing, when women support their partner and farming activities in addition to pre-existing responsibilities and managing the consequences of the longer work hours their partner is putting in on the farm.

I do five lunches and five meals during that 44-day period [the harvest] for everyone...It is such an issue ... You're feeding people all the time, but if you don't have the convenience of takeaway or quick meals, you're always cooking from scratch. Meredith

Before I started working outside the farm, it was getting up early in the morning, the children would be still in bed and we would go and pick the grapes or whatever fruit and then I would come back and get the children ready for school and then they would go to school and then we would still continue working, and if we had any workers I had to prepare breakfast, lunch, and dinner for them... So my typical day was always working and now I'm still working and also caring for my partner and doing house duties. Women have to do everything... it was rush, rush, here, there, everywhere just to earn an income. Nicole

Providing meals is a common way in which farming women support their partner and farm workers over busy periods of farm work. Many also contribute to the farm labour like supporting the shearing or fruit picking and packing. These additional duties are undertaken in conjunction with existing roles and responsibilities including care for children.

When describing their heavy workloads and multiple competing responsibilities, women shared that there is a culture that silences protest and presents this as a 'women's lot' in farming life.

I allowed that expectation to continue you see. I didn't say look no this – we're going to have to change or work together or whatever …especially when you are so busy with the children, but the expectation is that lunch is still provided whether you have been up all night with them or not. You know what I mean, that's just pushed under the carpet, but you've still got to get lunch whether you're been up all night or not. Leanne

I'd say that a lot of farmers' wives my age and a bit older now, when they often talk to me they'll be like, it's that suffer in silence type of thing, because the lifestyle's good, financially they're well off and all the rest of it, and they feel that they have to suck it up now, where things aren't right, they don't have the resources or the support to talk it through or work out how they can make it better, but they feel like there's no escape for them... it's definitely suffering in silence and feeling it's just their lot in life and they have to put up with it for a lot of the women...I think it is really tough...we felt like we had to have this persona of superwoman, I can do it all sort of thing, so you know, quietly inside you're screaming, thinking I can't cope with this, but on the outside you had to – I don't know, you rarely showed that there were any chinks in the armour. And that's difficult, because how do people even know that you need help at that time. Cathy

You never really know what people are going through, you don't know with women, you think that they're okay and they have the world on their shoulders don't they and farming family's especially and they have to do everything they've got to cook, they've got to look after the kids, you know it's not as easy as people think. And you know what you just do it, that's what I do, you know you just keep going... Women, I mean the farming women. You've got to do everything if you know what I mean. Helen

These excerpts suggest that farming women are expected to take on the 'persona of superwoman' and comply with the heavy workload and varied responsibilities expected of them. Moreover, the interviews revealed that the resulting intense pressure is a key feature underpinning their experience of distress.

## IMPACTS OF GEOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL ISOLATION ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING.

Geographic and social isolation emerged as significantly impacting the mental health and wellbeing of farming women. Women stated that they infrequently had visitors at home because of their geographical isolation and often had to travel long distances to attend medical appointments and other essential services.

The simple things of going to a doctor's appointment became quite difficult, because of trying to fit it in, like when my husband could be home to look after [the kids], or I could get someone that might be okay to just keep an eye on the kids while I went. Little things like that became stressful. Going to the shops, all that kind of stuff was always a bit of an ordeal. Tasmin

The distances from the farm property to important services had a severe impact on women's time, as travel to and from shops, schools and services takes significant amounts of time, and thus contributes to the pressure of women's workloads.

Whilst travel time placed an additional burden on women's workload pressures, it was social isolation that women identified as really impacting on their mental health and wellbeing. Social isolation and loneliness are extremely detrimental to mental health and wellbeing (Healey, 2020). Social isolation was connected to the geographical isolation of living on a farm and the distance from sites of community connection such as schools, shops, and meeting places.

We live - the closest town is 20 kilometres away. So, I can't just walk down the street and get a coffee. Emma

You might live on a dirt road 20 kilometres from the town and no one will visit you out there. People don't drive past. It's really quite isolated. Leanne

The women interviewed described often experiencing feelings of isolation and loneliness at home, especially while their husband is out working on the property. And this sense of loneliness increased during seasonal harvest periods when their partners were working longer hours on the property.

we kind of joke and we say oh we're harvest widows, you know you don't see your husband for weeks. But it was such a long harvest this year, so you really were single parenting by yourself, kind of not seeing your husband and – oh unless you know going out for the occasional header ride or dropping food out. But you never – you don't really get that time and then when they come in and they might be stressed and tired and they're probably a bit agitated because it's been long hours for them. Yeah it can be a bit challenging kind of – and like I said before that isolation and I think as well the isolation is like a bit of a double-edged sword because if you are feeling a bit down and you don't want to see people and you don't want to be out and about. Sally

Sally describes the experience of farming women during harvest as intensely isolating and how depressed mood can further supress social connection. She also brings to the fore her experience of looking after children on her own during the day and then her husband's stress and fatigue in the evening. For farming women domestic work and childcare located within the home contributes further to their experience of social isolation.

There were times I'd be home all day with the kids and my husband would actually see more people than me, even though he was on the farm. Karin

Its well-recognised that farming can be a socially isolating occupation, but as this quote from Karin reveals, in her experience, her husband would see more people on the farm than she did at home with the children.

Women who had married into farming, and moved into the community from elsewhere, expressed particular difficulties with social isolation in the absence of family and pre-existing social networks. Lucy shared her experience of moving into farming and the region through marriage and the absence of social connection to the community.

when I think wellbeing, I think like physical health and community engagement and socialisation, which is far and few between. You know, I won't often notice that something's on until it's been on or after it's on. So sort of no communication between the farms, so I haven't really met people. Lucy

I would say there is kind of two sets of women in the country. There are those that have grown up themselves in the country, and have family around them, and there are women who have moved onto farm from other areas, and I think there are two different experiences there – the ones that have kind of grown up in the country and have family support tend to, and this is a very you know, an observation, it might not actually be true, but they tend to seem to do better because (a) they're used to country life, and (b) they have the support around them, and then I find that the women that move onto farm are from other areas, they might not have that family support. The move is big and can be hard. Not only are you moving into an environment that can be quite foreign, but you are also moving away from your own family, and then the support, especially as you have children can be lacking and that can be tough. Tasmin

Tasmin draws attention to the difficulty women can experience moving into a new region in terms of social connection and the contrast with women who have friends and family established in that region. Women particularly pointed to the amplified impacts of geographic and social isolation during postnatal experiences and a lack of parenting and childcare support.

You're working and you're with people, and all of a sudden, you're home with a baby, that's – it's really hard. You've got no one else to talk with and [ask], "How do we do this? Why is the baby crying?" Helen

I struggled a lot with postnatal depression with all of my kids ... My first daughter was born ... just before seeding. So, first-time mum, had a very traumatic birth. And then [my husband] was gone, straight into seeding. There was no one ... It's just very isolating...one of my biggest struggles is lack of support. So in rural areas we have no access to child care – very minimal. My kids were on the waiting list for 2 years, and we get 1 day a week. So there's one. And I have to drive 30 minutes each way to drop them off, and then back again. So I basically spend 2 hours in the car dropping and picking up when I have the day off. So yeah lack of support I think is massive. So when I had my third child I had a 3 year old, a 1 year old, and a newborn. So that was in September, obviously coming into harvest. So – and I guess once it gets to harvest, it's just me. There's – it can't be, can you come home, I need a hand? I had to do the 6 week immunisations, and all that stuff by myself with 3 kids. There's no one to watch your kids while you go to the supermarket, or go to a check up appointment, or anything like that. So I think personally I would say the lack of support. Emma

Primary responsibility for childcare while their partner was working on the farm often left women describing their experience as akin to 'sole parenting'. In addition, lack of social support or childcare opportunities meant that women with children were required to manage on their own.

## UNMET EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT NEEDS.

Social support for emotional and psychological distress is key to buffering the impact and onset of mental health difficulties (Dozois & Dobson, 2023; Lakey & Orehek, 2011) and for mental health recovery (Bjørlykhaug et al., 2022). In rural communities, people are more reliant on their family and confidants for their mental health (Butterworth et al., 2014). During the interviews, many of the farming women revealed a lack of emotional and psychological support from those around them when they were experiencing distress.

Q: How do you cope with when you're distressed or times when you're emotionally distressed?

A: I don't know, I don't really - I don't really say anything. I don't say anything. Pat

I had episodic experiences of depression which have continued throughout our marriage. And I always felt that my husband was supportive but in recent years it's more supportive in the sense that he had no expectations on me during those times. But there was no actual support to try and get better, which is really hard but I know there's lots of people in those situations because there's not really much you can do to help people get better and you don't know what to do. But I guess I got a sense that he wasn't trying to do anything. Karin

Pat shared that she works in a role where she provides care and support to others but does not have people who check in on her and has not accessed professional services, relying instead on her own resources to cope. Karin's experience was one of having a husband who recognises when she is experiencing mental health difficulties but does not support her needs for emotional and psychological support. Karin also described struggling to access social support while she was unwell which aligns with the understanding that depression is associated with social support erosion (Ren et al., 2018). Sally shared how she felt abandoned by her husband during challenging circumstances because they coincided with busy times of seeding and harvest.

I would say when my third son was born, particularly he was born – everything was fine but he – at 24 hours after he was born, he – they found a heart defect, so we had to fly interstate straightaway for emergency surgery and that was seeding time. So yeah it was just a bit of a shitshow really. There was a problem on the farm. So, my husband, while being in Melbourne was constantly on the phone trying to sort it out and then it got to the point where he said, I have to get home, it's seeding, I've got to go home. So, I got left in Melbourne by myself, like 4 days after giving birth with a son who had to have heart surgery... ... I think I'm probably pretty good at putting on a brave face, but I think the impacts of that have sort of carried on for me Just almost feeling a bit abandoned and I guess you kind of do feel like that being a farmers wife a lot of the time. Like you come – you're almost second to the farm a lot. Sally

Given that farming women are often socially isolated, the only person they are regularly in contact with can be their husband or partner.

Farming women described how they often provide crucial emotional and psychological support for the mental health of their partner during challenging times in farming.

you have to be mentally well to support your partner. You know when they're down you have to say well you're okay, you have ... and you're hoping that you will be better and just kind of just supporting them as well... I'm not happy about the situation and I know [my husband]'s not, but if I be negative as well then, he's going to get more negative and more depressed about the situation. I try to say, "Oh well, it's just a bad year, hopefully we've still got our kids, they're healthy and everything... Obviously, I feel it as well financially and emotionally now, like when I see my husband upset and depressed about it obviously it does affect me as well" Fiona

And that's why I was so distressed when my husband then was diagnosed, because I knew it's not, you're screaming on the inside and no one can hear you and there's no quick fix cure...I couldn't hug him at the right time, I couldn't say the right thing, I walked on eggshells because you didn't want to upset...so I just kept quiet. Jacqui

Fiona described the emotional labour of supporting her husband to maintain a positive mindset, and both she and Jacqui shared that they had to manage her own distress in the context of their husband's mental health difficulties.

A lack of social support for women's experiences of emotional distress were particularly pronounced for women who moved into the region through marriage to a farmer and don't have close family or established social networks.

I just think if you've got trouble with your marriage or whatever – because I was the one coming in here. All of [my husband's] family was surrounding him but I couldn't speak to them if you know what I mean because they are supporting him and I didn't really know many people. So that was more of a feeling of isolation I think, and that's generally what happens is the farmer has his family here or her family here, and then the person coming in if they don't marry locally, is definitely on their own really. Leanne

I moved over onto the farm and haven't had family support, and not even from my husband's family because they have all moved away. At first the change was exciting and then it was difficult because it was very isolating, and trying to make new friends when you're an adult can be a little bit tricky, so it was quite lonely as well, and then having children kind of made it very overwhelming. Tasmin

Since family support is particularly significant for mental health in rural areas, Leanne and Tasmin's experience illustrates how difficult it can be for women who marry into farming to access social support.

Support for emotional and psychological distress is also available in the community and through mental health care services. However, given their heavy workloads and varied responsibilities, farming women pointed out the difficulty they face in making time for mental health and self-care.

Quite literally the psychologist that I was paying \$200 and whatever an hour told me that I needed to make more me time. And I needed to do something for me. And I'm like, and what do you suggest I do with my children while I'm doing that? And your husband – my husband get him to come home from work at lunchtime. If he has to take half a day off – I'm like you just don't get it. It's just not an option. I know I need more me time, don't you worry, I know that. I don't need you to tell me that though. Emma

A lot of women in my community are real do-ers, they're very active and say yes to everything. Sometimes I think it's a real struggle for them to step back and take a break and find activities that are slower, that give them self-care. Karin

The intense workload demands experienced by rural women (see previous theme) restrict access to holidays, leisure and self-care activities that would support mental wellbeing as well as opportunities to access social support or mental healthcare services and supports.

## BARRIERS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND SUPPORT.

A number of barriers limiting access to mental health services and support were raised by women, including prohibitive costs, the inconsistency of services in rural areas, lack of services oriented to women, and a lack of knowledge about specific services and how to navigate the service system.

I don't know how much help there is here for women, really. Pat

I guess I wouldn't know where to go locally if I needed help. I'd have no idea. So not knowing that – I guess that's a bit average, not knowing what supports are actually here or if I could actually – if I go to the GP, if I'd actually get help or just get turned away. So – yeah, yeah. And that's pretty daunting, not knowing where to go for help locally. Lucy

Maybe it is clear, and I'm just not aware of it, but knowing who/what the steps are to get help ... not just a number, like, you say, "Well, call Lifeline," or whatever, but maybe it's about explaining what happens. I think people can be apprehensive to ring or to do things because they are not quite sure what that involves. Do I just talk to someone once off? Is it something they connect me with? Is it just for suicide?... 'If you really are having suicidal thoughts then this is the number ... but if it's just something like I'm feeling a little bit flat today, or I'm overwhelmed with what's going on ... it's a fluctuating thing, I find. Like some weeks I just find everything so overwhelming, and I don't – my mental state is just full, and I don't know what next. Tasmin

There has been much emphasis on mental health and suicide prevention awareness raising and messaging to the community about reaching out for help. However, when people are struggling, the mental burden of trying to navigate an unclear and fragmented service system can prevent women from accessing support. Even those women working in the mental health and health services could appreciate the extent of these issues.

I work in a field where I know a lot of what the supports are, and I don't think everyone has that same insight into what's available ... I'm not really sure where they would reach out to first. I think people rely on their peer and family supports a lot, so if those aren't strong, you're in a tough place. Karin

Others who had hoped to access mental health services through their local GP had unsatisfactory experiences citing a lack of nearby psychologists they could be referred to, the expense of psychological services, a general lack of sensitivity towards them regarding their mental health and lack of effective support for themselves and those they are caring for.

The times when I've struggled with my mental health, you go to the GP, you get yourself a mental health care plan. There is not one psychologist within one hour of me. There's one in Kadina, I believe. But you also know them. So, I was ... doing Telehealth with a psychologist in Adelaide. The mental health care plan covers \$88 of it, and you pay \$240. So, it's just not sustainable. It's just not an option. And they say, "Yeah, we'll see you next week." Then, during your psychologist appointment, you've got three kids climbing on you, because you've got no-one to watch your kids for you. So, it's just like: Why am I doing this? Emma

One thing I did find quite distressing and difficult was finding a supportive GP to take over my care. So like they kept handballing me...and no-one really wanted to take me over and – then the judgement from the GP in relation to my mental health and my decisions ... that was very distressing actually... And then, you know, wanting to get support, but without then having the perception of doctor shopping or, you know, being in a small area, knowing that, you know, they work at all the different clinics and they obviously all know each other... But I still don't even know what psychologists and psychiatrists there are locally – like Google doesn't really come up with too much and I guess I don't feel comfortable speaking to the GP, to be honest. So that leaves me in a bit of a rough position. Lucy

Social proximity could also pose a barrier to engaging with support for some women.

a few people have recommended counsellors that are in the community but I do not want to talk to people that I'm going to be seeing down at the supermarket. Tasmin

There were mixed opinions regarding whether women preferred to access local clinicians and services in-person, or use tele- and internet-based support to preserve their anonymity but the overarching narrative was one of a lack of mental health care in their rural community.

You can be admitted to hospital, and have a Tele-psych with a psychiatrist. But same thing: they ... might prescribe a medication, send you home from hospital, and follow up with your own psychologist. It's not ongoing care at all. Emma

Whilst tele-health offers a bridge to rural mental health service delivery, it does not address systematic issues pertaining to affordability of psychological therapies and appropriateness or effectiveness of care received by the client in those therapies. This finding demonstrates that rural mental healthcare is a more complex issue than technological solutions to geographic barriers imply.

## LACK OF SUPPORT FOR FARMING WOMEN FROM CALD BACKGROUNDS

The challenge of social isolation was pronounced for Riverland women who were first generation migrants from CALD backgrounds. Migration itself, although stressful, does not cause poor mental wellbeing. Rather, settlement experiences relating to accessing employment, income/poverty and and experiences of stigmatization, racialization and family separation are contextual factors for mental distress (Muñoz & Bain, 2021). In our interviews, language barriers were cited as producing social isolation and difficulties accessing employment or services as well as contributing to a lack of voice and representation in the community.

Only the English-speaking people get assistance like psychologists or psychiatrists, they need interpreters for the people that can't speak English...I haven't interpreted for anyone to a psychiatrist or psychologist, so I don't know whether they use the ... telephone interpreter service either...There's no interpreters in the hospital as well. It's difficult for them. Fiona

It's very difficult when they take their family members, son, husband, wife, daughter, and sometimes the message doesn't get across right. My next-door neighbour was saying that. She was saying, "I take my husband and he doesn't interpret whatever I say, and whatever the doctor says back." She doesn't know what's going on. There's no interpreters in the hospital. Nicole

Women reported that there were not sufficient opportunities or consideration for the additional needs of rural/ farming women from migrant or culturally diverse backgrounds, particularly in relation to addressing issues of isolation, loneliness, and limited opportunities to engage in community, education, training, or off-farm employment.

I did a front-line management course ... A lot of these women were actually stay-at-home Mums and after taking that course they actually went into the work force, because a lot of them are now working and did further studies as well. I think something like that would be good again to have in the region...You know the Country Women's Association? Something like that but [for] ethnic women ... because a lot of them are wives or partners of farming men, but they've got their own skills to bring. Fiona

There was discussion that local councils could be doing more and that community groups may not be considering the needs of community members from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Volunteer work in the community was described as a primary strategy for accessing social support and integration and barriers to volunteering therefore entrenched social isolation.

I am working in the community voluntarily as well as interpreting and earning a little bit of income...I think I'm lucky, looking at other women, they're not very independent ... If they're going through a rough time, women miss out...If [women] don't have a driver's licence and don't have the English language they are just obsolete, they don't have a voice. They need interpreters for the people who can't speak English. Nicole

Within the multi-cultural context of the Riverland, women described how social groups and social organisations are divided along ethnic lines and how this further entrenches their separateness.

An Indian community, a Sikh community, they're fine between themselves, okay. But to connect them with ... another nationality ... it might not work because their beliefs are different when it comes to religion, to family, to this and that. It's a bit harder to knit them together. You'll find Mediterraneans knit together better because we're on similar backgrounds, but some of our beliefs ... are a little bit different, and that plays a role in how we connect... When I was working for lifestyle club, we had an Italian table, a Greek table, and a Turkish table. Even though we all spoke together, we all interacted, got our meals together, we all sat at our own tables with our own friends and did our own thing. So, it was multicultural, but separate. Because everyone feels more comfortable with their own nationality to talk and discuss, because of the language barriers. Not everyone could talk the other language, or English enough to connect, except for "Hello, how are you?" Rosie

Rural community dynamics of inclusion and exclusion enacted socially along cultural lines have a profound impact on feelings of belonging (Webb & Lahiri-Roy, 2019). Rural places in Australia with non-Anglo-celtic migrant settlement of ethnic minorities have witnessed intra-group solidarity and inter-group tensions and separation (Jordan et al., 2009). It is important therefore, to recognise the complexity of rural communities in terms of heterogeneity in experiences of geographic and social isolation.

## RESTRICTED FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

Unsurprisingly, financial stress emerged as a theme. Economic pressure and the financial security and viability of the farm has long been understood to form the crux of distress for male farmers (e.g. Gray & Lawrence, 1996; Perceval et al., 2017). Women in this study elucidated current financial stress as arising from across a range of sources. Many described rising overheads including agricultural inputs amid complex regulations or downturn in commodity demand and pricing.

There's been more expenses as the years have gone by. We're finding there's more costs now and everything's going up; the fuel's gone up, fertiliser's going up, we've got more water rates to pay...'I don't think we're going to sell our grapes this year. Or next year. Pat

You're just in the hands of the wineries ... You take care of your fruit all year and then a week or two weeks before harvest, they tell you, "Oh, we're taking you in at this price." You don't know what you're going to get paid...This season hasn't been good. I feel it as well. I'm not saying I'm coping perfectly with it. Fiona

In terms of restricted finances, women talked about working off-farm to subsidise financial loss and managing domestic expenditure:

The finances [are] the hardest part....For many years I did double shifts because the money I was making wasn't enough for us to get through....I'd sit down and say, "Right, this is the money coming in this week (or this fortnight), and this is all you can spend." Being able to keep the household together and where's the next meal coming from, you know? How much money have we got for shopping? How are we going to look after the kids? Rosie

Some women in farming described restricted access to financial information and income due to farm finances being managed by their partners or in-laws and the expectation that they undertake unpaid labour which reduces opportunity for paid labour.

I think I'm lucky looking at other women, they're not very independent. There's women that look out for hand outs from their husband, whereas we are partnership with my husband and whatever money we earn we share, but on the other hand if they're going through a rough time the women miss out. They're given a certain amount of money to do shopping and that... So they just carry out their home duties unpaid, so there's no payment to look after children and to keep the house. They just have to make do with whatever they've got for spending, the money that they're given so it's very difficult for some. Nicole

'Being in the country, married to a farmer, the whole money situation is very interesting. You're either sent out to work, or you don't know how the family farm finances are, or you're limited ... if you want to go out and get an investment because you're connected to the farm, the parents might turn around and say, "Oh well, you can't go get your own separate loan." Meredith

These findings indicate that whilst women are subject to the same financial stress connected to the economy of farming as men, there is additional financial stress connected to restricted income for managing the domestic economy of the household, including care and provision for children.

## SUCCESSION PLANNING

Succession planning was regularly cited as a significant cause of distress, whether women had been disadvantaged through succession planning themselves, were worried about their children's financial future and opportunities to farm or didn't have a clear vision for their partner's exit from farming. Gendered issues arising from patrilineal norms of farm succession are widely recognised in agriculture (Luhrs, 2016; Sheridan et al., 2021). The impact of these issues on mental health and wellbeing for farming women was evident in our interviews. Jacqui, a broadacre and livestock farmer on the Yorke Peninsula, that despite her contributions and interest in farming, when her father passed away the farm and its associated engineering business were inherited in their entirety by her brother.

I helped my father from a very young age on the farm, driving headers, tractors, going out and tending to cows, did all the farm duties with my father ... My father passed away nearly two years ago, and basically because I'm one of five children, so there's four girls, I'm the second eldest daughter, and then there's the son on the end. And we just, you know found out through the will that nothing was really left to us daughters, so it was all just given to the son ... And we haven't just got a farm, we've got an engineering business as well, attached to it ... He got everything. Jacqui

Jacqui goes on to share that whilst she had learnt many skills from her father relevant to the business, she was excluded from any formal involvement and perceived that the expectation was that she marry and move on.

I know how to weld, spray paint, work on a forge, and very, very physically demanding and very, very hands on, I was with my father, absolutely loved it, and would have loved to been asked to be involved or be involved with the business but never was. Sort of my duty was, I got married and moved on.

A lack of succession planning was cited as a significant source of stress for women, with messy family situations emerging amongst the grown-up children of farming families after the death of the family patriarch.

A ... lack of succession planning was done. My husband's dad – it was probably suicide, it's never known as to what – he crashed his car, but out the front of the house on a very straight road ... There was just no succession planning. And it's messy, and it's stressful. And everyone's very protective, and snappy. And it's not a fun time... There's three families. So, there's a grandparent, his mum, and then us [my husband and I]. But then he's also got two sisters who are quite financially reliant on the farm as well. Emma

Succession issues in farming can therefore create ruptures in family relationships and when combined with intergenerational proximity, can be a source of considerable stress and distress. As Baker et al observe, 'If not properly handled, the transfer of the farm between generations can lead to confusion, uncertainty, suspicion and can result in deeply damaging divisions between family members' (Baker et al., 2012, p. 21). The women interviewed expressed a wish for succession planning to be spoken about more openly and more often to support their wellbeing. Many said they wished it was spoken about more among farming women where women would be able to share experiences, stories and advice.

## **CO-DESIGN SUGGESTIONS AND SOLUTIONS**



Some of the combined co-design suggestions and solutions reported by women during the interviews:

- 1. The importance of opportunities specifically for women:
  - Short courses, training, certificates to build confidence, skills & reduce isolation.
  - Opportunities generated from being able to participate in short courses, training, programs that were designed for rural women.

#### 2. Women's groups and networks:

Many women noted that there was still a widespread hesitation to 'open up' and a tendency for keeping matters private and not sharing due to shame and stigma, 'saving face', and wanting to create an image of doing well.

- Informal and formal peer support and organised social groups to address the issue of
  isolation, facilitate opportunities for talking, sharing, 'opening up' about issues, and
  normalising common challenges experienced by women in farming. Social
  connection, to "rally together", hear each other's stories, in a safe space, free from
  judgement.
- Community support & relationship strengthening.
- "Not just sports clubs" e.g., Gardening club, walking/exercise group, arts and crafts
- Neighbourly check-ins.
- Organised support groups for different ages: for young mothers, for over 60's.
- Car-pooling to events.
- Groups to be held online and/or in-person (or alternating/or in-person a few times a year with online meetings in between).

#### 3. Community arranged supports:

Women reported that often the best support results from community members getting together to support each other through difficult times. Women spoke about the need for women to check in on or reach out and visit those who are distressed, withdrawn or isolated.

- Outreach, home visits, phone calls, care meals, check-ins- coordinated through an organised group.
- Community arranged childcare options: As childcare was a frequently mentioned challenge for women in farming. Women suggested an informal model of women supporting other women, including the idea of older women volunteering to support young mothers, as well as mothers supporting other mothers and rotating childcare within the community.

#### 4 .Information about support options:

Reported lack of information and awareness about available supports and pathways led women to emphasise the need for accessible information sharing about support options, and a need to create resources to share this information. Women suggested various avenues to share this information:

- GP training
- Flyers
- · Newsletters- community and school
- Magnets
- Notice boards
- Information sessions
- · Women's groups
- Sporting organisations
- Social media
- Using Ag Bureau to raise awareness about supports.

Women also wanted resources to provide an explanation of what would happen, and what to expect if you accessed a particular service or called a particular number.

#### 5.Information sessions, events & workshops specifically for women:

- Events/sessions about health and wellbeing issues, tax, GST, financial education, succession planning.
- Where different service providers could share what they do and provide opportunity for women to ask questions.
- Marketed as supporting the woman to help her better support her family (otherwise they might not prioritise something for themselves).
- Running events where different groups are linked in e.g., the SPN and the Ag Bureau running event together.
- Organised carpool to activity/event to encourage attendance.

#### 6. Social media:

- Used for creating groups and networks.
- · Connecting women in farming.
- Sharing information about supports, services.
- Sharing information about how different women are coping with or managing their challenges.
- Reducing shame and stigma by sharing & normalising stories of distress and helpseeking.
- Connecting isolated women and young mothers who are feeling stuck/withdrawn and unable to leave the property.

#### 7.Other ideas and suggestions:

- Women reported wanting it to be known and celebrated how much farming women go through, what they carry and what they achieve.
- Book of stories of women's experiences and histories.

## **CO-DESIGN**



Co-design is an approach to innovation that draws on design-led processes and uses visual and creative participatory methods (McKercher, 2020). A design-led methodology encompasses Design Thinking, a human-centred, dynamic, constructive and solution-focussed approach to complex social problems (Oswald et al., 2023). Design Thinking is typically understood in terms of phases of activity - empathise, define, ideate, prototype and test – through which problems and solutions co-evolve (Oswald et al., 2023).

Throughout the iterations of these processes, visual and creative methods offer tools for innovation and co-creation. Whilst the primary focus of the co-design team concerns the object of innovation, which might comprise a model of service delivery, a new or existing service or a resource, co-design is also intended to build the capability of those participating in the design process (McKercher, 2020).

A co-design workshop was facilitated in the Riverland and one in the Yorke Peninsula with participating women in farming. Prior to each workshop the women were provided with a brief report outlining the key issues impacting on wellbeing for women in farming derived from the individual interviews. They were also provided with the instruction to consider which issues they would seek to prioritise in terms of co-creating resources at the workshop.

The goal of the co-design workshop was to brainstorm potential strategies, ideas and resources in relation to the prioritised issues, and then refine the focus to one or two resources for co-design into production. The workshops were facilitated by the research team in terms of asking guiding questions, providing suggestive prompts and sharing inspirational ideas. Through discussion the groups of women posed ideas, brainstormed strategies, opportunities and challenges and came to consensus on a specific approach that they wished to develop for implementing in their community.

## **CO-PRODUCTION**



The next stage involved developing the design prototype and costing for each as well as the engagement of specialists depending on project requirements.

## YORKE PENNINSULA



The Yorke Peninsula women's co-design group decided to address social isolation through the creation of a women's gathering social group. One impetus for this idea was a locally based men's 'shed night' that supports the mental health and wellbeing of men in farming. The idea driving the women's gathering was providing a space for women to experience meaningful connection. The women determined that for women it should be held during the day and that guest speakers and 'pop up talks' on topics of interest could be incorporated and that the basis of the gathering could be craft workshops. The importance of providing childcare and transport were agreed on and strategies were brainstormed. Key champions in the community were identified by the group for engagement, as well as existing opportunities and resources that could be leveraged.

Following the co-design workshop, the research team reached out and engaged two of the community champions identified by the women through a collaborative Zoom meeting. Through this meeting, a place for the gathering was identified and the strategy for implementation was further developed. This strategy involved employing a local woman on the Yorke Peninsula to drive implementation by setting gathering dates, organising the gathering group focus in terms of crafts, inviting crafts women to facilitate, and advertising/promotions.

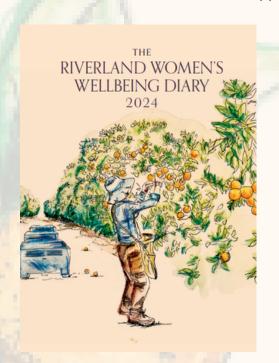
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The women's gatherings were held one day in February, March and April 2024. The focus of the gatherings were working with watercolours, learning basketweaving and a wellbeing day. The watercolour workshop was facilitated by a local artist who guided the women to learn and experiment with a variety of techniques followed by an invitation to create several designs. The basketweaving was facilitated by a local craftswoman who provided natural fibres sourced from her property and taught the women to create a small hanging basket. The wellbeing day presented a variety of offerings including yoga, massage, facials and a sound bath for women to engage with as they chose. Observations and feedback from the women participating in the workshops revealed that women were attracted to the gatherings for the activity as well as the opportunity to socially connect with other women in a learning/recreational space. Women expressed gratitude for the opportunity to relax and have fun and that they experienced the day as welcome respite from their roles and responsibilities for work and care for others. It was evident from our observations and conversations with the women that there were established friendships in the groups as well as women who were connecting with others for the first time. Women expressed a desire for more opportunities to socially connect through activities and regarded their experiences at the workshops as conducive to mental health and wellbeing.

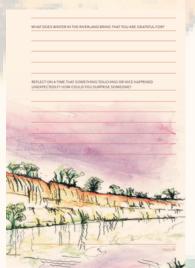


## **RIVERLAND**

The Riverland women's co-design group elected to co-create a Riverland Women's Wellbeing Diary. The group emphasised the functionality of the diary, including a size that would readily fit into a handbag with a week to a page spread as well as the intention that women could engage with it as a wellbeing resource. The group brainstormed ideas such as including short quotes from farming women, traditional cultural recipes, and information about services and supports.



A graphic designer (Chloe Katopodis) was employed to produce the diary prototype. In so doing, they were provided with a brief to create a functional diary that incorporated wellbeing elements based on Riverland women's experiences, and with aesthetic qualities that resonate with the landscape and primary industries of the region. An illustrator (Dr Alex Seret) was engaged to create specific graphic illustrations. During the development of the prototype, women in the co-design group were provided opportunities for feedback and to contribute further ideas and information. Some of the diary content, such as the short quotes, was derived from the interviews with women in farming in the Riverland. 1000 copies of the diary were printed.







A launch event was held in December 2024 in the Riverland in conjunction with the local suicide prevention network. Rural and farming women from across the Riverland were invited to attend., attendees received a copy of the diary and volunteers took copies to disseminate through their organisations and community networks. The Riverland Suicide Prevention Network provided feedback on the distribution and success of the Riverland Women's Wellbeing Diaries. All the diaries had easily been distributed with demand and appreciation for the diaries being expressed by the community. The network also requested the template and costings for the diary so that they might seek funding to continue the initiative in 2025 and perhaps longer term.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**



The mental health and wellbeing of rural and farming women has been overshadowed in public discourse, policy and practice due to the overwhelming focus on male farmers, which has been an appropriate response given the disproportionate suicide risk. However, women in farming shoulder responsibilities for caring for their partners through challenging times, are exposed to the same contextual stressors as their partners; and experience specifically gendered challenges to their mental health and wellbeing.

This pilot study emerged from community engagement work oriented to designing mental health and suicide prevention resources targeting men in farming through which women approached the research team with their own experiences, challenges and concerns for mental health. The current study was the first step to inviting farming women to share their personal stories of lived experience of distress and with managing mental health and capture their perspective on how rural communities could co-create community-led and based supports tailored to women in farming. The rural women who participated in this study provided clear insight into the silent struggles of women, working hard across multiple paid and unpaid roles, often to bridge financial gaps created by fluctuations in farming, with little recognition or support. The social isolation felt by many of these women was identified as a key challenge impacting on their wellbeing and geographic distance, responsibilities for childcare, limited finance, restricted time for themselves and limited local opportunities, present culminative barriers to addressing their need for social connection, and the social and emotional support of other rural and farming women. This finding is in alignment with research that revealed women in farming experience higher rates of burnout than men in farming (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2022).

While the small number of interviews provided some much-needed insight into farming women's experiences, much more needs to be done to address what has largely been a silent crisis, and to implement supports that will strengthen the wellbeing of agricultural women, their families and communities. The women involved with the study provided an array of strategies their communities could develop and implement to effectively support local women. Through this pilot project, we have been able to design and deliver prototypes in two rural communities that can be shared at a national level through the Taking Stock platform. In particular, the Yorke Peninsula Women's Gatherings offers an opportunity to both expand and scale-up community-based support for rural women's wellbeing in a way that is targeted and tailored to those women.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings and conclusions of this report lend themselves to the following recommendations:

- 1.Invest in further research to expand this pilot study by increasing sample size and community engagement sites at a State and National level.
- 2.Interview and engage with rural women to invite their stories of lived experience and capture the threats to mental health and the practices that support their wellbeing.
- 3. Work alongside rural women and community groups to tailor strategies and resources for community-based support to women in farming.
- 4.Create a resource pool of shared stories, successful design prototypes and tailored resources that can be shared with women's groups and networks across Australia.
- 5.Create spaces and places for the social and cultural expression and support of rural women's wellbeing that are in alignment with those available to men.



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## APPENDIX A: ENGAGEMENT MATERIALS





## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE**



Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview. Our interview will take approximately an hour. Our project will produce community-based strategies for suicide prevention that are specifically designed for women in farming occupations (farmers, women in farming families, farm labourers etc.).

We are speaking to women in farming occupations and families who are willing to tell us about their experiences of distress, mental health and wellbeing or give us their perspective on what others have experienced and what local communities can do to support the wellbeing of women in farming.

- ·Have you read the study information? Any questions?
- ·To confirm with you, the interview today and all the data will be confidential and your identity will not be revealed in any way. With your permission I would like to record the interview so that I can transcribe it into notes because I analyse the written transcripts. Your name will not be linked to the recording or transcript. Is that ok with you?
- ·Also you can skip over any question you don't wish to answer and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Background/ demographics So just to begin, I will ask you some general background information. How old are you?

What is your relationship status? Single/ separated/ married/ de facto/ partnered What is your ethnicity or cultural background?

Can you please tell me about your background or involvement in farming/ farms? And a bit about the farm that you have been involved with?

Prompts: e.g. commodities; location; size; how long farming; how came to farming. How long have you been in farming, or worked on /owned a family farm?

What type of farm do you or your family own or work on? Eg: Dairy Broadacre Sheep Beef/Cattle Poultry Horticulture Viticulture/Vines

What does a typical week look like for you? OR when you were on the property/properties, what did a typical day/week look like for you?

Prompts: What would a typical daily schedule look like for you during the working week and on weekends? Including:

Farm labour
Farm admin
Farm management
Domestic labour
Childcare
Community work
Off-farm work

What plans or goals have you had or currently have for your working and home life? How do you decide on your plans and goals?

#### Prompts:

Has anything got in the way of your plans?
What has enabled them?
How are decisions made on the farm?
How are decisions made about who works off-farm?
How are decisions made about who looks after the children?

#### Focus on challenges & wellbeing:

So, in this project, we are interested in learning about the experiences of women on farms around their own mental health & wellbeing or the mental health of others. We understand that farm life and living rurally has lots of challenges- I'm wondering if you can tell me a bit about what it's been like for you or if you prefer, other women in your community/ region?

What do you think are some of the greatest challenges to farming women's mental and emotional wellbeing?

#### OR

Could you share with me a little bit about your experiences in relation to the topic of mental health and wellbeing- either your own experiences or maybe what you have observed / aware of among other women.

Has there been a time in your life that has been particularly challenging in relation to farming and being part of a farming family, causing you to feel unwell or distressed?

Prompts: Can you tell me more about that time?; how long ago was this?; Were you/ was she supported - if so, how and by whom; did you/ she receive help?

Has there been a time in your life where you have felt emotionally distressed due to factors that might be outside of farming?

Supports, services & suggestions:
During these times did you/they have support?

Prompts: If so, who? If not, who would you have liked to support you?
Have you accessed any services or had support from a someone in a professional role?
What was you experience of the services/supports you had during this time?
Types of support that might be relevant to probe more about:

- ·Practical support (people cooking meals, buy a bale charity, agronomist, rural financial counsellor)
- ·Social support (sporting clubs, community events, the pub, community groups/networks)
- ·Emotional / psychological support (peer support, counsellors, psychologists, GP)
- ·Spiritual / religious support (church, church groups)

What has helped you to cope with distress? What do you think helps others?

In this project our goal is to work with community groups for mental health and wellbeing and suicide prevention to design strategies and resources based on what women in farming need to better support their wellbeing.

In your opinion how can farming women be best supported when:

- a)They are distressed
- b)Recovering
- c)Maintaining wellbeing (prompts: talking, walking in nature?)

Do you have any ideas for what community groups can do to better help support women in farming who are experiencing distress?

Is there anything else you would like to share about the wellbeing of farming women?

### APPENDIX C: CO-DESIGN SUMMARY



#### Women in Farming and Wellbeing: Co-Design Workshop

Our project: To understand women's experiences of wellbeing in farming, we interviewed 15 women with current or past involvement in farming who live in the Riverland and in Yorke Peninsula (YP). Our goal is to now use what we have learned from the interviews to hold workshops to create resources and strategies to further wellbeing and reduce distress.

The resources for use in the Riverland and YP will also be placed on the site Takingstock.community which currently houses co-designed resources for men in farming. The site Taking Stock enables us to share resources so that they can be adapted and used by other farmers in other parts of Australia.

Thank you for helping us create resources and develop strategies for women in farming in your community and other farming communities in Australia.

The co-design workshop: The workshop will be held in a local venue as per the invitation you have received. The workshops will be very informal and will give us a chance to share morning or afternoon tea and discuss the key findings (listed below).

Please read the complete list of key issues and think about which themes you might like to prioritise to create co-designed resources at the workshop. We've also included some of the ideas and suggestions that women had during the interviews. Due to funding constraints, we can't address all the issues- therefore please pick two or three which are most important to you. At the workshop we will focus on the themes which interest most of the group.

Our goal is to brainstorm, create a list, and together prioritise 1 or 2 co-design resources. We can employ artists, film makers, photographers or any other specialists required to create a 'mock up' of the resources we decide upon. After that we will have time to change and refine the resources, so they are most suitable to your community.

## Key issues identified by women in farming in SA to inform co-design of wellbeing strategies/ resources.

There were 8 key issues raised by women in farming that are summarised below. Please note that the issues raised by women in farming are not listed in any order of importance. The questions under each finding are to help you consider what resources might be created.

#### 1. Financial

Many women in farming were responsible for farm finances / bookkeeping and carried a large portion of financial stress. Farm financial stress related to the business of farming and directly impacted their wellbeing, as well as that of their partners.

How might we create a resource to help women get advice or support for financial stress?

#### 2. Isolation and belonging

Isolation and Ioneliness were significant challenges for women who had grown up on farms, as well as those who had married into farming. Women spoke about it being particularly isolating when their children were young, and they felt 'stuck' at home. Loneliness increased during seasonal demands when their partners were working longer hours on the farm.

Women who had married into farming also spoke about an additional sense of isolation as they felt they were not part of the community and did not always know how to integrate or connect.

How can we bring women together either virtually or in person to decrease loneliness among farm women with younger children?

What strategies or resources could we create to decrease loneliness during busy seasonal times on the farm?

How can we help women new to the area who have married into farming connect with other women and the broader rural community?

#### 3. Numerous roles and responsibilities

Women took on multiple roles such as work on the farm (financial, admin, farm labour etc), volunteer work, off-farm employment and caring for generations of family members. Women also provided emotional support for partners and others who might be struggling. Lack of access to childcare was repeatedly mentioned as a challenge which resulted in women having limited time for themselves. This negatively impacted their wellbeing and ability to attend to their own needs.

Intergenerational impact of farming: Women discussed their mother's emotional stress resulting from the many roles and responsibilities taken on by women and how this impacted them by normalising these experiences and suffering and establishing a pattern that was then repeated by daughters.

How can we support women's wellbeing while they are working so hard for family, the community, and the farm?

What strategies might be useful to enable women to have time to themselves?

4. Quiet achievers and non-recognition for their work and support needs
Farm women often felt undervalued and not recognised for how much work they do and the responsibilities they carry. Women felt that governments and organisations focus more on initiatives to support the wellbeing of men in farming with women not having the same access to services and support. Women spoke about the exhaustion of needing to 'stay strong' or 'keep positive' during difficult times.

Women's own needs were often described as less of a priority compared to the needs of the farm, their partner, or their children. Women rarely had time for rest and self-care or to access supports/services.

As men have been the focus of mental health in farming, how can we bring a focus to farm women's wellbeing?

#### 5. Distance, geographical isolation, lack of time

Distance, lack of time or being too busy were significant barriers to engaging more with community and town-based events.

How can women be supported to attend local events and activities when they are time poor? How can distance and time to travel be accommodated for farm women who need support?

#### 6. Limited access to and knowledge of services and support

Women spoke about the limited mental health and wellbeing supports in rural communities. Many women said they were unaware of what supports were available or how to begin to look for support. Many described inadequate experiences with GPs and mental health professionals (e.g., GPs showing limited understanding of and sensitivity about mental health &/or support options, and other professionals lacking understanding of what life is like for farming women resulting in unhelpful/unrealistic advice and support).

There were mixed opinions regarding whether women preferred to access local services/clinicians or a visiting service or tele/ internet- based support due to a preference for anonymity. There was consensus that women felt it was important that support professionals understood farming life.

How can we increase women's understanding of support services available to them locally and virtually?

How do we help medical and mental health professionals understand women's lives on the land?

#### 7. Succession planning

The stress of succession planning was reported by several women- both in the context of engaging in the process as they move towards retirement, as well as being impacted by it as children of farming families. Many said they wished it was spoken about more among farming women and that women were able to share experiences, stories and advice.

What strategies and resources could we create to help women be heard in succession planning?

What strategies and resources could we create to support women during difficult family conversations when succession planning occurs?

8. Lack of community support for those from culturally diverse backgrounds (Riverland) Women reported that there were not sufficient opportunities or consideration for the additional needs of rural/ farming women from migrant or culturally diverse backgrounds, particularly in relation to addressing issues of isolation, loneliness, and limited opportunities to engage in community, education, training, or off-farm employment. There was discussion that local councils could be doing more and that community groups may not be considering the needs of community members from diverse cultural backgrounds.

What resources or strategies could we create to help local councils and community groups consider isolation, further education and other needs of Riverland women in farming from culturally diverse backgrounds?