

Engaging Farm Women from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds in Education and Training

Parker F E*, Flood K & Jarecki S

University of Western Sydney, Australia

Abstract

Although farm women play an integral role in farm management in general they have little access to information, education and training. This is particularly acute for women from diverse cultural backgrounds with limited formal education and English language skills, and who are socially and geographically isolated. There are around 2000 market gardens in the Sydney Basin, supplying 90 per cent of Sydney's perishable vegetables, with an economic value of over \$200 million per annum. They are family farms, where the contribution of women is essential to the economic and social well being of their families, the industry, and the region. However, women are socially isolated and marginalised, despite their proximity to a large city, Sydney, in Australia, an industrialised country. Government agencies have relied on industry associations, in which women have a very limited, if any, participation. This paper describes and analyses the specific strategies developed to engage women from a range of cultural backgrounds (Lebanese, Chinese, Vietnamese and Cambodian) working on market gardens in education and training essential in their role as farm managers, including safety and the safe use of pesticides. It describes the advantages and problems of working in partnerships to engage the community, government and non-government agencies, and industry associations, and draws on the experiences of including women in the development agenda in 'developing' countries.

Introduction

Women contribute an estimated 48 per cent or \$14 billion of real farm income in Australia (RIRDC 1998), with an integral role in farm management, but limited participation in education and training (Kilpatrick et al. 2000), although female farmers in general have higher formal educational levels than their male counterparts (Boughton 1997; ABARE 1995). Increasing attention to the role of women in Australian agriculture (Dempsey 1992; Franklin et al. 1994) has not included women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CLDB), also described as non-English speaking background (NESB). They are generally invisible despite some focussed studies in rural areas (Huber 1977; Andreoni 1989; De Lepervanche 1975; Missingham 2003; Wilkinson 1998) and periurban Sydney (Parker and Suriyabandara 2000; Parker 2004).

CLDB women in the Sydney Basin, described as the "backbone of the industry" (Parker 2000), are socially and geographically isolated. Many have little, if any, English language or literacy, often with limited formal education, often lack transport, and are time poor, working long hours on the farm, together with childcare and household responsibilities. They have limited, if any, contact with either mainstream or ethnospecific organisations, or with industry associations, which are the main avenue used by government agencies to engage with or transmit information to farmers.

CLDB farm women lack access to education and training and information which is essential for their well being, such as occupational health and safety, including the safe use of pesticides. Although pregnant women are recognised as a vulnerable group in terms of pesticide exposure (Sanborn et al. 2004), CLDB pregnant farm women spray pesticides (Parker 2000), and training courses and pesticide instructions generally do not include this information. Farms are high risk work places and one of the most difficult to reach with the policy instruments available to government (Sandall and Reeve, 2000). Governments have built up a wealth of expertise in multicultural information, but little use is made of appropriate communication strategies in New South Wales (NSW) workplaces (Alcorso 2002). CLDB farm women have not participated in education to enhance their contribution as farm managers, although women in some cultural groups are more literate in English than are their husbands (Parker 2004).

The need to specifically engage with farm women is important from a social justice and human rights perspective, and their “right to know”, but also for the efficient operation of farms, economically, socially, and environmentally. Information that is transmitted to men is not necessarily conveyed correctly, if at all, to women. Merely saying that “*women can attend*” does not mean that they will do so, as they need to be specifically targeted and involved (Missingham 2003).

This paper uses a narrative approach to describe strategies to engage CLDB women on market gardens, working in partnership with government and non-government agencies. Education and training was not seen as an end in itself, but rather was used as a tool to decrease social isolation, and increase the empowerment of CLDB farm women.

Engaging with CLDB farm women poses particular difficulties in that they must be located before they can be engaged. Engagement with each group of women evolved differently, demonstrating there is no blueprint or cook book approach (Ife 2002). Every community is different, each worker is different, and each intervention follows its own unfolding “story”. Striving for a single action plan or its equivalent that will somehow meet the needs of an entire community are signs of ongoing simplification in the use of participation in community development (Guijit and Shah 1998).

CLDB farm women must be considered in the context of their social reality. Most CLDB farm women see themselves as wives, mothers, and farmers. Many approaches to community engagement focus on the whole community, which often means the male community (Maguire1996), or solely on women. The community engagement described in this paper included the whole community in order to specifically include women. The general approaches were: ethnography, to understand the culture from the perspective of the participants; participatory action research (PAR), which focuses on the learning of all participants, action, the interrelationship of theory and practice, and aims to democratise the research process (Selener 1997; Greenwood and Levin 1998); and narrative approaches to portray the life experiences of CLDB women in Sydney Basin.

Setting the context: Agriculture in the Sydney Basin

The common stereotype of the Australian farmer is that of a white male producing wheat and sheep “west of the divide”, rather than a periurban (mixed rural-urban land use) “non-Anglo” male or female

market gardener, but especially a woman. Agriculture, with an estimated value of more than one billion dollars, is the single largest industry in the Sydney basin. An important feature of periurban agriculture in the Sydney basin is the importance of CLDB farmers, with farming providing an important settlement strategy for successive waves of immigrants (Parker and Suriyabanadara 2000). The Sydney region contains the highest number of horticulturalists of any region in Australia, and the largest number and proportion of CLDB farmers. Industries with significant numbers of CLDB include vegetables (market gardens) (80–90 per cent) cut flowers (95 per cent), poultry (40 per cent), turf (50 per cent), orchards (~20 per cent), and nurseries (15 per cent) (Parker 2000; Sinclair et al. 2003). There are an estimated 2,000 market gardens employing a minimum of 5,000 people. Market gardens in the Sydney Basin are small (5–15 acres) family farms which produce 40 per cent of the vegetable production in NSW, and 90 per cent of Sydney's perishable vegetables. Each ethnic group tends to specialise in particular crops (Parker and Suriyabanadara 2000). Maltese and Italians arrived before and after the Second World War and now include second and third generation farmers producing field brassicas, hydroponic tomatoes and lettuce; Arabic speakers, mostly from Lebanon, arrived since the 1970s and the civil war in Lebanon, and more recently from Iraq, and Assyrians from Syria, and produce Lebanese cucumbers and hydroponic tomatoes; Cambodians, Vietnamese and Lao arrived since the 1980s, many as refugees, or through family reunion and produce herbs and melons; Chinese farmers produce leafy Asian vegetables, and include descendants of Chinese remaining after the gold rush, and more recently arrived migrants. Many Chinese come from the one area in China, but there are Cantonese and Mandarin speakers, and Chinese from Vietnam, Cambodia, Hong Kong, and Malaysia and Singapore. More recently Koreans have commenced farming, as well as Japanese, while Sudanese refugees are providing casual labour.

Many of these farmers worked in factories or restaurants, driving taxis, or on other farms to build up capital to lease land for a market garden. Many commenced farming while working elsewhere, renting land while living in adjacent urban areas, hoping eventually to buy their own land. Many farm because it allows them "to be their own boss", or the lack of alternative employment opportunities, often because of limited English, and to avoid being on "social security" (Parker and Suriyabanadara 2000). Farmers work extremely long hours, working on the farm during the day, seven days a week, with men going to the markets at 1 to 2 in the morning.

Historically CLDB market gardeners in the Sydney basin have had little contact with either mainstream or ethnospecific organisations (Parker and Suriyabanadara 2000). Most cannot read English, which is problematic in terms of community engagement. Missingham (2003) challenged the view that immigrant farmers "bring with them cultural attitudes of suspicion towards government because of their historical experience of repression and authoritarianism in their countries of origin", but rather these "developed though immigrants' experiences and interactions in Australia...(which) has a long history of racism and discrimination against NESB immigrants".

The dominance of urban issues in service provision, and the failure to recognise the importance of agriculture in the Sydney region further increases the marginalisation of CLDB farmers. Urbanisation has increased pressure on farmers, particularly women, increasing the necessity for effective community engagement and education and training to address these extra demands (Parker and Jarecki 2003).

Engaging this community is problematic because of its fragmentation, cultural diversity, limited English language, working conditions, and lack of any coordinated organisational structure to access individual farmers. Farm women comprise the most socially marginalised component of this already marginalised community, since many rarely leave the farm.

Community engagement and participation

The concepts of community engagement, participation, and the very notion of "community", are often used simplistically, romanticised, and viewed naively. To engage is defined as "to occupy the attention or efforts of, to secure for aid, employment or use, to attract or please, to bring into conflict, to cause to become interlocked"; to participate is "to take part or share"; community is a "social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government and have a cultural and historical heritage, or the public"(Macquarie Dictionary).

The word *community* hides many differences and divisions (Guijt and Shah 1998, p. 7), with multiple and value laden definitions. Its use by government agencies is inherently problematic, in that they use the word '*community*' as if it covered a homogenous, idyllic, unified population with which professionals interact unproblematically. It is a concept often used by the state and other organisations rather than the people themselves, and it carries connotations of consensus and 'need' determined within parameters set by outsiders (Nelson and Wright 1995, p. 14). Communities are neither homogenous in composition or concerns, nor necessarily harmonious. The mythical notion of community cohesion hides a bias that favours the opinions and priorities of those with power and the ability to voice them publicly (Guijt and Shah 1998). Participation is embedded in power. It is important to consider who participates, how, and why, and whose voice is heard.

The word "*community*" often used in seemingly inclusive terms, all too often refers to the male community (Maguire 1996, pp. 29-30) with an inadequate understanding of internal dynamics and differences, including age, economic, religious, ethnic and gender differences, that are crucial to positive outcomes (Maguire 1996). The interlocking nature of oppressions creates different opportunities, choices, privileges and inequalities, rewards and life styles for different groups of people (Maguire 2000, p. 59). The resulting interlocking system of oppression is not simply additive as double or triple oppression but complexly interdependent.

Missingham (2003, p. 77) notes that it is important for government agencies to be clear about the nature and identity of the community that they aim to reach and involve, since individual farmers and their families may place a high value on their cultural background, ethnic origin, and language, but in addition, they may have shared interests in relation to economic or production concerns which may be more important than ethnic, cultural and linguistic identity. Labels such as ethnic may be interpreted as "marginalising and excluding", and they may not feel a "sense of belonging" to an immigrant, NESB or CLDB community, "which are identities and labels that governments attribute to groups, but make no sense to particular individuals or groups". Economic differentiation must be considered, since issues of socioeconomic position and class may be more important than culture or language (Missingham 2003, p. iv).

In this paper “*community*” is used to describe CLDB farming women with a similar ethnic or cultural background, and does not imply that these groups are harmonious or cohesive. There is considerable variation within some cultural groups seen as culturally homogeneous by “outsiders”.

Barriers to the inclusion of CLDB farm women

The multiple and cross-cutting barriers to the inclusion of CLDB women interact in a complex and interdependent way (Maguire 2000) and are not simply additive as indicated by the terms double or triple burden (Missingham 2003, Wilkinson 1998). Further, it is simplistic to assume that their position is due to a patriarchal system. Barriers include: the failure to acknowledge the contribution of CLDB farmers in agriculture although they comprise 30 per cent of the Australian horticulture industry; the failure to fully acknowledge the contribution of women to Australian agriculture, including family farms (gender/women); policy development and implementation has generally not acknowledged the importance of peri-urban agriculture, in this case Sydney; and historically, the horticultural industry, because of its diversity and fragmentation, has less political influence than “broad-acre” agriculture.

Policy initiatives

In 1995 a paper entitled “*Whose responsibility is it, whose problem is it, is there a problem?*” (Parker and Bandara 1995) presented to then NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission highlighted the marginalisation of the sector, including access to information on the safe use of pesticides. This triggered the formation of the cross sectoral *NSW Premier’s Task Force on Market Gardening by people of Non English speaking Background* (Report released in 2000), and, together with another initiative from NSW Agriculture, the *Education and Training Plan for Sustainable Agriculture in the Sydney Basin*. The marginalisation of CLDB farmers was encapsulated in media coverage in the Sydney Morning Herald (April 2001) which coined the phrase, “*Sydney’s Forgotten Farmers*” (Parker 2000).

Although our research had consistently highlighted the need for community engagement, community development, and the need to specifically include women, in general government agencies focussed on the provision of technical information, usually to men. There was little or no participation of CLDB farm women in the subsequent education and training organised by government agencies as a response to the policy initiatives from the Premier’s Task Force. There were no specific strategies to include CLDB farm women, who remained essentially invisible.

Engaging CLDB farm women

A grant from the NSW Department for Women for a project entitled “*NESB farm women: Developing innovative access strategies through partnerships*” enabled us to focus on CLDB farm women, consolidating and building on previous engagement with the community and networks with government and non government agencies. Given the previous invisibility of CLDB farm women this community engagement was embedded in a concern for social justice, and the need for advocacy. Many mothers do not know how their children are getting on at school or whether or not they are in trouble with the police, because they cannot read English. They cannot communicate with their doctor. The community engagement described in this paper aimed to assist individuals wherever possible, while addressing the

structural issues underpinning their marginalisation. The latter demands that women are not seen as “statistics” but as people with a past, present and future, with hopes and dreams, disappointments, and sometimes overwhelming tragedy, but nevertheless living their lives with courage and resilience. This demands the ethical response of “telling women’s stories”, using their voices wherever possible so their “voice” is heard.

The initiatives described in this section, which focus on specific strategies to include women, built on a long period of engagement with CDLB market gardeners (Parker and Suriyabanadara 2000: Parker 2000; Parker 2005)) which aimed to link grass roots community development with policy initiatives and used a partnership approach with government and non government agencies.

Chinese women

Engagement with the Chinese community began in 1990, to develop an understanding of the community and to improve their access to resources, but this was generally with men, with only limited contact with women (Parker 2000). In 2000 we organised pesticide training for 160 growers using interpreters, but only 4 were women. Clues as to the extent of the involvement of women in pesticide use became clearer through the training. For example, one male farmer attempted to change his wife’s practice:

“My wife does the spraying because I am at the markets in the morning when there is very little wind. By the time I get home it is too windy to spray. I wear a mask now, because I know I should, and I try to make her wear one too. She keeps her head down because she is embarrassed and doesn’t want anyone to see her. And if I make her wear a mask I have to wear it too, to set a good example.”

Stepping Stones In Community Engagement

a) Small beginnings: pilot program in pesticide training for Chinese women

Engaging women in pesticide training was extremely difficult as men had attended accredited training to obtain the certification required to buy restricted pesticides, and in their view only one certificate per household was needed. Although most Chinese women operate family farms with their husbands or parents, some are forced to farm alone when their husband dies, or is incapacitated, sometimes through farm accidents. The injustice, and danger of failing to include women in pesticide training was highlighted by specific encounters with Chinese farm women, as illustrated in the following narratives:

“We hoped that Maggie, a highly articulate, outgoing Chinese woman in her twenties with excellent English could link us with other women. However, her family, especially her mother was not keen for her to leave the farm. She sprayed everything, without protective equipment, and only showered in summer after spraying, not to remove the pesticide, but because of the heat.

Lee, a Mandarin speaking Chinese woman was operating an orchard after her husband's death. She was spraying without protective equipment, when her tongue and month would become numb, (a sign of pesticide poisoning). She came to the attention of the multicultural health worker,

who attempted to gain some technical advice to assist her in managing the orchard, including the safe use of pesticides.”

The personal commitment of community development workers, key community members, the university, and individual government professionals (rather than their agencies), resulted in a small pilot program in accredited pesticide training, attended by five women and five men from different areas in Sydney, and held at the home of a community member. This program was a “risk”. The trainer was concerned about the assessment, as the language background of the participants included Cantonese and Mandarin speakers, requiring two interpreters. It was important, however, to build on the willingness of these women to participate and maintain the momentum. This pilot program, although small, was a critical stepping-stone in the subsequent wide spread participation of women in accredited pesticide training.

Possible strategies to increase the participation of women included small groups in different geographic locations (close to home), sometimes on farms, but male community leaders emphasised that “women don’t need much, only what is necessary, just a little bit”. At this stage men saw the major reason for training as the certification required to buy pesticides, rather than the associated OHS issues, and the right for women to have access to knowledge. A Chinese female community member suggested holding an information day, to increase “community engagement”.

b) Information day: public recognition of women’s success in pesticide training

The five women who had successfully completed accredited pesticide training received their Pesticide Certificates at an information day, held at the local bowling club, and, which was attended by 250 people (men, women and children of all ages) and service providers. It was organised by a partnership of government and non-government agencies (Strong, Macdonald and Thomson 2001; Sydney Basin Market Gardening Project 2003). This public recognition provided legitimacy and acknowledged the value of women being trained, and increased the momentum of the community engagement, as well as encouraging several agencies, such as NSW Health, to further engage the community. Its success as a social and educational event was attributed to the provision of Chinese food, transport, lucky door prizes, and ongoing outreach to encourage attendance.

c) Building on the momentum: Increasing the relevance of pesticide training

The requirement of mandatory training under the 1999 NSW Pesticide Act provided an important impetus in further engaging Chinese women in the training programs. Women were located through the combined and ongoing outreach by a male Chinese chemical supplier, a bilingual male farm liaison officer (FLO) implementing a technical project on farms, the male Market Gardening in a Culturally Diverse Society project officer (a cross sectoral project which resulted from the *NSW Premier’s Task force into Market Gardening by Non English Speaking People*), and a Chinese woman whose husband worked with Chinese farmers. The farm chemical supplier, who was highly respected by the growers, was invaluable in locating farms, interpreting community dynamics to outsiders, and encouraging participation by women. The farm chemical supplier himself increasingly acknowledged that women had a “right to know”.

The accredited pesticide training was modified and translated to meet the specific training needs of Chinese farmers. Momentum increased, so that participation in the training courses became not only acceptable, but also highly desirable, as it also provided an opportunity for social interaction in a non-threatening environment. Over 300 growers attended (in three different geographic locations), of whom 40 per cent were women, with family groups of husbands, wives, children and grandparents. Outside speakers were invited to increase the growers' knowledge of other agencies. The atmosphere was highly interactive, supportive, and growers enjoyed the social interaction.

Key ingredients in its success were: the quick and timely response to the community; the provision of language support, including translated material, interpreters who knew the language and farming "jargon" used by growers, which differs from that of urban based accredited interpreters, and "literacy helpers" who assisted individuals who required extra assistance, thereby increasing their confidence in their ability to successfully complete the training; transport; childcare; and a Chinese lunch. In addition, a specific health module was developed in association with NSW Health. This had a profound effect on engagement, as the curriculum was immediately relevant. This included toxicology information on the specific pesticides used, specifically including the potential effects of pesticides on women and children. Existing pesticide training programs were "gender blind", assuming that men and women are the same, with no specific advice that pregnant and breast feeding women should avoid pesticide exposure, or the higher sensitivity of children to pesticides. Our knowledge of production practices increased from interacting with farmers during the training, and most significantly we learnt that women routinely sprayed most herbicides, believing that they were not toxic as they only killed plants, when they are some of the most toxic chemicals they used.

Symbiotic community engagement

The engagement initiated through the pesticide training assisted a range of partnerships between government and non government agencies, including preschools, women's health and local government, to increase their engagement with growers. and increased access to language classes through TAFE (Market Gardening Project 2003). The pesticide training and the complementary community engagement activities reinforced each other in furthering community engagement.

Cambodian women

Most Cambodians lease their farms, and many work as casual workers and labourers on other farms, particularly in cut flowers, and also vegetables grown in greenhouses, where some experience serious OHS breaches. Community relationships within the Cambodian community are complex, with several subgroups or "factions" which are difficult for an "outsider" to fully understand. Gaining the engagement of Cambodian women was extremely difficult, but provides useful insights into engaging marginalised communities who have suffered extreme torture and trauma, and the relationships between men and women. All of the Cambodian farmers were refugees, or were subsequently sponsored by them, having survived the genocide of Pol Pot, and years in the refugee camps in Thailand. Pittaway (1990) reported that 80 per cent of refugee women have suffered from trauma and torture, with a high incidence of rape.

Our long period of engagement (over 10 years) with Cambodian farmers, working with male community leaders to establish the Australian Cambodian Growers Association (Parker and Suriyabanadara 2000), meant that we could locate farms, but we had only limited contact with women as men generally “spoke” to outsiders. Previously only two women out of a total of 40 had participated in “training”. Men claimed that women did not spray, even saying this to us as a woman was removing the chemical knapsack.

Establishing contact with female farmers: The role of the community development worker

Finding a suitable bilingual female community development worker to visit farms was extremely problematic, for a variety of reasons. Building on our successful experience with Chinese women where a bilingual Chinese woman, who knew the farming community but was not herself a farmer, we attempted to find a Cambodian women with similar attributes. Some did not have the time, as their contribution to the farm is essential, or did not want to become too involved in the internal politics of the community; others had insufficient English, lacked knowledge of the farming community or could not drive. Furthermore, it was only a short term position. Eventually Mony (a French language teacher in Cambodia) who had some limited association with the farming community, but was not herself a farmer tentatively agreed to assist us. Mony and a male farm liaison officer (FLO) working on an Environmental Trust project visited farms together. This had a dual purpose: the FLO acted as a chauffeur, as Mony did not have a driver’s licence, as well as building legitimacy and trust, since a woman arriving alone onto a farm to talk to women may have created suspicion. Technical issues were discussed by the FLO, while Mony talked with the women “To give them a little more confidence”.

Although successful in establishing contact, the FLO soon felt that he was “wasting his time”, while Mony felt “judged”. Nevertheless, this approach provided legitimacy for the Mony to “engage” women directly to establish a personal relationship with them, to hear their stories, and assess their need: “You have to talk gently, politely, with the heart and they will give. You smile and their heart becomes soft. I invite all the family to sit nearby and listen. I just smile”. It also “empowered” Mony, in that she felt impelled to obtain her drivers licence.

Mony was very cautious in what she reported, as she did not want to “bring shame onto the community”. An important insight was that “outsiders” are sometimes preferred as professionals:

“Cambodians are scared of criticism, who can be trusted, sick people can’t...they never trust. Everyone thinks that Cambodian workers are no good. If ask for help from an Australian it’s better – if ask for help from a Cambodian you won’t get it.”

The Interaction between engagement, social context, and needs assessment

Past experiences, and current experiences in Australia with government agencies, such as auditing by the Australian Taxation Office and regulatory activities of the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA), profoundly influenced engagement with the Cambodian community. Negative interactions between farmers and government agencies sometimes provided the opportunity for advocacy, thereby improving our credibility with the community, but on occasions project officers were also accused of being “spies”. After one such incident a male community leader commented “Pol Pot said he wanted to help us and

three million people were killed.” These past experiences have an ongoing impact on the community and particularly the lives of women, limiting their ability to access services:

“I studied at university in Cambodia, foreign trade, marketing and planning, for 3 years, 8 months and 20 days. I remember it in my head. The bad story, separated from our friends, and never saw them again, never saw our family or friends. Now I am traumatised, depressed, nervous, a little bit of marital problems. We don’t trust anyone, 80% - 90% of people doesn’t ask for help from the community especially men. People are very scare.”

Some women were very angry with men:

“Even if I study a lot to control myself, but I can’t. I hate men; I don’t want to work with men. Leader/men, all the same, power in their hands-they underestimate women, that women can’t do things, even here. But the farm business helps them forget. I work hard for me”

“I am very depressed – I don’t want to live, I can find a job easily in Cambodia, but not here.. I’m not socialised. I can’t use my skills. For women, there is no job, no nothing, English is the main factor, the main problem. If they’ve got English everything’s done. They don’t need the husband, the children to come to the doctor, they want English, especially for the doctor, particularly want to be vocal to see the doctor, how to go to the bank to deposit the money, taught about letters from school.”

Engagement with women is limited by a variety of beliefs. It appears that many men “don’t want women to interact with government, because they need to protect them- and if something is wrong then the husband is responsible”. Some men stated that “Women and children here have too many rights. In Australia women don’t respect men. Women can leave, and therefore it’s Centrelink’s fault”, but others appear to limit their wife through a lack of encouragement: “if the woman asks she can go (to English classes), but the husband doesn’t encourage her”.

The position of sponsored women appeared very difficult, even with other Cambodians:

“He married a Cambodian from Cambodia but scared of Cambodians here because may get easily separated. Very careful with sponsored women, they keep her in the house and won’t let her leave, or learn English as they are frightened she will have freedom and know her rights”... “Men who sponsor try to control them too much, no rights for two years, temporary visa, and the women are two years under prison. Women can’t live under this pressure, men complain that the women don’t respect them, and treat them badly because they (women) know their rights, and use these rights in a wrong way, but they treat them like slaves- men go everywhere, and don’t tell women, and complain women can’t look after them. (These) women are here alone with no relatives”

Women are essential for the livelihood of the family through their contribution to the farm. A marriage breakdown, or the ill health of the wife often means that the family leaves farming. Consequently, there is pressure so that “Not many on the farm are separated or divorced — men on the farm are very hard working”. After separating from his wife one man had to sell his farm, rent another and was living in a

shed. Some women farm by themselves, sometimes with their children, and do all the spraying, but for others:

“They don't want to farm, it's too hard. They just want to stay at home and work. It's just like being under Pol Pot, work for 10 days with one day holiday, but in the family (there is) no holiday. (You) work 8 days a week.”

There is an enormous and obvious unmet need, and cases of extreme hardship, with some living in tin sheds:

“Their son is using drugs, they have 5 children, they rent the house, which is very expensive, the crops are not growing well and are burnt by the sun, drought, and damaged by hail. They applied to Centrelink, (for help) but haven't heard. He asked the female worker for help. He couldn't ask anyone else. His wife can't speak any English, but has a three month old baby, they have no car.”

Very few, however, ask for help, as there is no expectation that this will be met and as Cambodians "have no power the issues remain hidden". Despite obvious need, 50 per cent of women said that they were busy and didn't need anything.

“Cambodians are the youngest and poorest community, many work as labourers, and are not well paid. They are poor but better than in Cambodia, They are happy and grateful for what they have, and they are safer here.”

Community engagement through addressing needs: dilemmas and outcomes

After considerable encouragement some women attended pest and disease identification workshops, held on different farms to engage different community factions, but most spent the entire time cooking for the subsequent social interaction which followed the workshop.

Our ability to address needs in a timely and effective manner was limited by the lack of resources and government policy. There is an expectation of assistance if people are asked what they need, but the inability to achieve positive outcomes creates false expectations:

“The Project doesn't help farmers: we promise drought relief, but the Red Cross can't help then, [we and they] spend time for nothing. We can't organise English class; our promise is not done. I'm doing it for our honour and I don't like that our promise is not done. It's hard for me- I want to stop many times- want to give you good results, and not spend the money for nothing. I'm in the middle- between you and the people. They don't believe in us — therefore can't apply for drought relief” (Mony).

a) Drought relief

The leaders of the Cambodian Growers Association appeared unwilling to inform their members of the availability of government assistance, despite the extreme hardship of some growers. We organised a public meeting with Centrelink, who appeared unaware of the presence or plight of farmers in the Sydney Basin and their need for drought relief. However, for many there was no response to their drought relief applications:

“2-3 have got the money, but there are cases of real hardship. A family started farming 2-3 years ago; there is not enough money to feed the family. This family is facing real hardship. His wife says, please help me, but I don't know how to. We told them we would help them, but we have nothing to help them, there is no solution.”

b) English classes: The need to sustain community engagement

Lack of English language is a key barrier to engagement and empowerment. Women were keen to learn English since if “we learn English first, then after that we can do anything”, “to be able to talk to the doctor ourselves”, “to get our drivers licence, to be able to fill out forms”; another because she was totally dependent on her husband and could not leave the farm. The women had been in Australia from three to 15 years, some had young babies, and others were grandmothers. Some had tried to learn English unsuccessfully, but had to leave classes when they had a baby, or they needed to earn money first, but one woman wanted to learn English because she wanted to study at TAFE, and was very lonely here. The inability of parents to speak English, unlike their children, gives children power over their parents. Some:

“Have teenage children who have become involved in drugs. Their son bought drugs, and is gambling. His father has to pay his debts, even though he is very poor, as otherwise his son would die. They are very good parents. But because she can't read English she couldn't read the letters from school informing her about her son, so now she wants to learn English. She didn't know English at all and when the police came she was very surprised. They don't know whether or not their children are attending school.”

It was impossible to organise English classes through the normal avenues, because the women did not meet current government eligibility guidelines, and a lack of appropriate resources and outreach programs. As a "stop-gap" measure to meet the women's expectations and maintain trust and credibility Mony, although not formally qualified as a teacher of English as a second language, commenced teaching English for everyday purposes. English Classes for 10 women ranging from young women, who brought their children, to grandmothers, were held in the packing shed. The atmosphere was one of total engagement, dedication, and cooperation, with women helping each other. Teaching English increased Mony's own sense of empowerment. The shed became too cold in winter, and after considerable difficulty the class relocated to a community centre, which was another step in increasing their engagement with the broader community. However, only one community faction participated in the classes.

Pesticide training

We were unable to engage Cambodian women in pesticide training through their husbands, the male FLO, or community leaders, but only through directly engaging women in the English classes. One young woman took the lead, and persuaded the others to attend. On learning of the harmful effects of pesticides they were angry with their husbands that they had not been provided with such important information previously. They encouraged other women to attend pesticide training, with small groups and a female trainer and female bilingual trainer.

Maltese and Lebanese women

Maltese and Lebanese women are considered together because they formed mixed groups in both NW and SW Sydney. After the initial pilot course in SW Sydney only the Lebanese women continued, whereas in NW Sydney the group remained mixed.

Formation of women's groups

Women's groups, established in SW and NW Sydney, evolved differently, as a consequence of our ability, or more commonly, our inability, to access appropriate resources. In SW Sydney, after farm visits indicated interest in computer training, a pilot program, advertised through local churches and schools, with an overwhelming response, was attended by Maltese (Christian) and Lebanese (Muslim) women. Although the women wanted to continue with computer training only resources for first aid training were available. There was a constant battle to access appropriate resources through TAFE outreach programs as we were in competition with other groups who were seen as "more needy". The Lebanese Muslim women subsequently completed only limited computer training because of difficulties in accessing equipment and appropriate teachers.

In NW Sydney farm women were located and personal relationships established through several on farm visits by a female project officer and a male community worker with agricultural expertise, providing legitimacy for the initial contact. As subsequently noted by one woman "None of this would have happened if you hadn't knocked on my door". Mandatory training under the NSW *Pesticide Act* was a trigger for engagement, with most of the conversation with male farmers. Women participated gradually in subsequent visits. The personal contact and on farm visits increased the participation of women in pesticide training, but not to the same extent as for Chinese women. Some Lebanese women in NW Sydney attended pesticide training, but at that stage Maltese women showed little interest.

Social activities for the community as a tool for community engagement

Social activities with the entire community were used as a stepping stone for community engagement with farmers who had little previous contact with government, except in a regulatory framework. Activities held in what farmers perceived as "remote" venues (such as in nearby urban centres) or for which growers did not see their purpose, were unsuccessful.

Activities included a farm day, which focussed on the provision of technical advice. Women were encouraged to attend, but it was attended mainly by men as the timing, organised around the technical advice and held in the evening, meant that women left to care for children. A Christmas party, however, was highly successful as it encouraged social networking between farmers from different cultural backgrounds who had no previous contact with each other.

Training in business and farm management

Farm visits identified the need for English language and literacy, and computer training. Women identified their need to use computers not solely in the context of developing business skills, but rather to "help their children with their homework", and to "keep up with things". Some women were aware that information was available on the Internet, but didn't know how to use it, and were unaware of the

extensive information available on the Internet for farmers. They recognised the importance of computers, but expressed their inadequacy saying, "its easier with sprays than with computers", and felt unable to do anything about it. Some had left farming with the introduction of the GST and their inability to do the "book work". A key reason why they are farming is because of their lack of English, and their limited formal education.

Despite their interest during the farm visits many women were not prepared to come, even though their husbands had said they could come. The initial group in NW Sydney consisted of grandparents, cousins, in-laws and neighbours, with several not knowing anyone else in the class, and some men to obtain the required numbers for TAFE. Some men came to "keep an eye on their wives".

Sustaining community engagement with women through training: Work Opportunities for Women

In NW Sydney a successful partnership with TAFE led to an ongoing program, Work Opportunities for Women (WOW) for a group of Maltese and Lebanese (Christian) women ranging in age from young women in their twenties with children, to grandmothers in their sixties. An initial segment on personal development to develop confidence was followed by information technology and OHS courses selected by the women. The personal development component encouraged the women's ability to reflect on their own learning, particularly their strengths, and to understand their own learning needs, using techniques such as collage. The educational concepts and language were quite alien and challenging: "but I came to learn computers, not this!" Initially they lacked enthusiasm: "If you want me to play cutting out OK I will". It was seen as a waste of time, when they are extremely time poor, with many working from 4 am before coming to the class. However, after engaging in this learning they said: "It helped me discover more about my everyday life and appreciate it", "It was good to organise my thoughts and reflect on ...how much I have learned by listening to other people"; "It clarified how I felt about myself and how I saw myself in the world – what I saw as being important in my life." "It named a number of skills I took for granted and made me feel better about myself".

The information technology course used a successful approach for women with low English literacy. Women wrote their life stories, to integrate learning computer skills, literacy, and self development and business skills.

What made the program a success?

The success of these programs was attributed to:

a) Social interaction

The women supported each other, so that the atmosphere was one of camaraderie. Women emphasised the importance of this social interaction: "If you have a full time family- I lost the ability of communicating with the outside world", "I didn't know how to communicate- it really got to me". "I don't want to stop, its nice to get together and learn at the same time, and we can recognise our problems". This is not only a matter of women having confidence and "feeling good" about themselves, but it affects every aspect of their lives, including their ability to interact with the "outside world" in a business context. The social support was essential, but social interaction alone would not have legitimised the attendance of the women; they had to be seen to be "doing something useful and of value to the farm". During the course

some were "pulled back" to the farm because they were "needed". The social contact enabled networking, and the exchange of farming information, and the discussion of farming practices

b) Family groups

These included mothers with their daughters-in-law, sisters, cousins, mothers and daughters. These family groups did not know each other before the course. When asked to tell each other about themselves all started by saying how many children they had, and then what they produced, indicating that they saw their primary roles as mothers, and as farmers. Attendance by several members of the one family made it easier for women to attend, as it was more difficult for men (husbands and sons) to refuse or discourage women from attending if relatives that they knew were also attending. It appeared to be more difficult for a woman to attend by herself, and sometimes husbands turned up, to "*check on them*" and see what they were doing.

c) Ability of the teacher to adopt a flexible learning approach appropriate to the needs of the women

The women started very tentatively as all had English literacy difficulties. Some had left school many years ago, many in another country, and/or had not been very successful academically at school. There was a multiplicity of levels and abilities amongst the women. Successful teachers met women they were at and adopted a multiplicity of teaching aids, using visual techniques, and practical demonstrations, rather than an abstract, theoretical approach. Sometimes women said "this is just too hard", but "Trevor [the teacher] was very patient". Teachers needed to be responsive, flexible, and non-threatening, confident, and experienced enough to adapt the curriculum to the learning needs of the women, rather than adhering to a pre-existing curriculum. Some inexperienced teachers found this difficult, feeling that they were required to satisfy the assessment requirements, rather than meeting the women's learning needs.

d) Holistic approach to learning

The women did not compartmentalise their learning and knowledge- it occurred in the context of their whole lives, and built on their skills. Women used their computer skills to access information on the internet; to "keep tabs" on their accountants, when previously they suspected that they were being "ripped off", showing their increased empowerment in a practical context; to do their tax, business management and budgeting; but also to send emails to their daughters who were interstate; to read the Maltese Herald in Maltese (which they could not access locally); to make calendars and birthday cards, store recipes, and photos.

e) Language and literacy support

Women acknowledged that their biggest stumbling block was their inability to converse fluently in English. Although invaluable, this support was often difficult to access.

f) Relevant curriculum

The multiple responsibilities and background of the women meant that courses need to be flexible with multiple entry and exit points. The content and approach needs to be flexible and learner centred, using the principles of adult learning, including: needs assessment; safety (trust in the competence of the

teacher and design of the program, ability to say what they do and know without fear of judgment); sound relationships; sequence and reinforcement of information and skills; praxis, action with reflection; respect for learners, recognising ideas, feelings and actions; immediacy, learning needs to be immediately applicable; clear roles; teamwork; engagement, requires relevance and immediacy; accountability (Parker and Suriyabandara 2000, pp. 173-4). The curriculum sometimes lacked relevance in that it was often more suitable to large scale farming, rather than small intensive farms.

g) Offering course locally rather than on the TAFE campus

This was not only due to actual distance, but also reluctance by these CLDB women to attend a formal institution.

h) Length of course, time at which offered and childcare

Women did not have the confidence to commit to a long course, especially at the beginning. In addition, it needed to fit into their work requirements. Child care was essential but was often difficult because of insurance requirements and lack of funding.

i) Coordination by an outside catalyst

This was essential, and beyond the skills of the women themselves. It was a logistical nightmare to balance TAFE requirements for a minimum class size with the availability of a suitable teacher, and enough notice for the women to attend, and enough women, given their work and childcare responsibilities. Although it is useful in terms of community engagement to begin with a small number, so that others will come as they see women growing in confidence, TAFE requirements often prevent this.

Effect of community engagement through education on the lives of women

Community engagement with CLDB farm women through education and training increased the women's empowerment, and self-confidence. A Maltese woman was "Just a farmers wife", at the beginning of the course, but after successfully completing the initial course she said, "I never thought I could do it...."

The key ingredient is to recognise how the women learn. In their words: " By listening a little bit, but mainly by doing things. We talk a lot, there's lots and lots of laughter "; "All communication is about getting on with other people, in small groups like this"; "Farmers don't have higher school certificate, they go straight from school to farming, they don't know this legal stuff, this government stuff."

The combination of the supportive social environment with training in business skills had real advantages for women, which spread into all aspects of their lives. One woman became secretary of a club providing social and cultural services to her community, another learnt to drive, increasing her mobility, leading to increased empowerment and the ability to access outside services, including education and training; another learnt power point, and found it valuable in her off farm work.

The key dilemma is how to create sustainability without dependency, and without creating false expectations for marginalised communities with little access to resources. A Lebanese woman said: "I felt very depressed, inferior, my English isn't very good. I try to improve my English. I've never done it before,

how do I continue to get the results. I don't want to stop. It's nice to get together, we can recognise our problems."

Arabic speaking/ Lebanese women and pesticide training

Lebanese women are amongst the most vulnerable to pesticides, as they work in hot enclosed plastic polyhouses, and many have young children. Pesticide training commenced with an initial group of women located through the computer classes. They were keenly interested. The daughter of one commented to her mother *"have you got your certificate yet"*, indicating the importance of recognition. This is clearly work "in progress", which requires ongoing community engagement, for which we have "sown the seeds". Maltese women, however, initially were less interested in pesticide training, seeing it as their husband's responsibility. However, this is changing slowly with ongoing community engagement.

Vietnamese women

A few Vietnamese women attend technical training with their husbands, and some appear to play a key leadership role in the association. However, it has not been possible to engage Vietnamese women in general, although some farm by themselves. Our role at this time is to mentor Vietnamese women as potential leaders, to engage further with this community.

Developing leadership, capacity building, and advocacy

CLDB farming women had little knowledge of government processes and resources. We worked with growers as advocates with local government planning regulations, environmental requirements, access to hail, bushfire and drought relief, while increasing the engagement of CLDB farm women with the broader political system through facilitating their engagement in national meetings and conferences, such as National Women in Horticulture.

Lessons learnt for successful community engagement

The narrative approach and the inappropriateness of a blueprint approach means that each community engagement has evolved with its own story, so that the "learnings" are woven throughout the stories and narrative. Nevertheless there are important general lessons from these stories of community engagement. The most important finding was that it is possible to engage women, but it is extremely difficult, frustrating and often impossible to access the appropriate resources in a timely way, including language and literacy support which is essential for successful community engagement. This leads to community expectations which cannot be fulfilled, and a potential loss of credibility and trust. Further, although professionals often attribute difficulties to cultural differences based on ethnicity or race, a more important cultural difference may be that between CLDB farm women and the organisational culture of government agencies and professionals.

The key issue is the need for organisational and policy change to address the following cross-cutting issues which are essential for successful community engagement with CLDB farm women:

Recognising the complexity of community dynamics

While it is important to understand the community, it is important not to be paralysed into inaction because of the complexity. Rather it is important to recognise that as outsiders our understanding may be only partial, but will increase with ongoing community engagement, that we learn through acting with community members.

The need to take risks, as the outcome is not assured

It is often important to start with a small “stepping stone”, rather than waiting for widespread engagement. The unfolding stories, which all started in a small way where the outcome was unknown, are at different points along the path of engagement between CLDB farm women with government agencies and the broader community.

Using multiple entry points and access strategies. Outreach with farm visits is essential.

The male dominated grower associations did not assist significantly in locating or engaging women in education and training. While it is of critical importance to negotiate with male community leaders and family members (husbands, sons and brothers) it is important to be aware of their role as gatekeepers, and to talk directly with women wherever possible with whatever opportunities are available.

Process used to implement education and training

The need for education and training emerged from a needs analysis in some communities, in others education and training was used as a trigger to “engage” women to reduce their social isolation, and in others it was the researchers’ belief, acting as outside “catalysts,” that women had a right to know how to use pesticides safely.

The nature of the education and training

As described in detail earlier in this paper the role of the teacher is critical. Programs need to be relevant, to provide a safe learning environment which recognises the needs of women, take an holistic, flexible and responsive approach to learning which recognises the importance of the social interaction, together with important logistical arrangements such as the timing and location of the programs, and the provision of childcare. In addition, given the complexity of arranging courses with the government bureaucracy, it is important to have an outside facilitator or catalyst. CLDB farm women cannot do this, as they lack knowledge of the system and its structure, as well as being fully committed as wives, mothers, and farmers.

The need for timely responses to build on community momentum

This is often impossible because of the lack of resources and the nature of the bureaucracy, but it is a crucial factor in sustaining community engagement.

The need for sustained community engagement

It is important to build on previous contacts and interventions, and recognise the importance of continuity and a sustained engagement with the community, and the central importance of personal relationships and trust. The importance of continuity was highlighted by a young Vietnamese woman who had

established relationships with successive government officials, whose positions had not been renewed, when she said “I haven’t got time to establish a relationship with someone else — its all about trust you know.”

Sustainability and the need for long term funding

Sustainability requires long term approaches and funding. Many government agencies with their current focus on productivity and outcomes, although sometimes using the rhetoric of participation, collaboration, and community engagement, in fact often take a short term approach, which fails to recognise the requirements for successful outreach and community engagement, including the complexity of community dynamics, meeting the community where it is at, addressing community priorities, and the time required to build and sustain community networks, but rather assumes that marginalised communities can be accessed through “generic” communication strategies. Consequently, although community and capacity building are critical to the success of community engagement they are rarely funded adequately, but rather appear to be “taken for granted”, or alternatively seen as “too hard” and not part of the core business of government.

It was impossible to build on initiatives to create sustainable outcomes because of limitations in government policy, which favour short-term projects. Building up expectations, which cannot be fulfilled or sustained, is not only a waste of resources, but leads to a lack of trust and willingness by the community to become engaged in future initiatives.

Despite access and equity strategies CLDB farm women are not a priority of government agencies

Although their contribution is essential in creating economically, socially and environmentally sustainable outcomes it was extremely difficult, often impossible, to access the necessary resources in a timely manner. Some government professionals were in the invidious position of deciding “who is the most needy?” A key barrier to community engagement with CLDB women is language and literacy, and yet it was impossible to access the necessary resources, particularly English language classes. This was exacerbated because these women were unable to access resources available for rural and remote women, and were in competition for resources with the urban population.

The need for organisational change and the role of individuals in organisations

The successful partnerships between the many government and non-government agencies contributing to the interventions described in this paper were not based on formal memoranda of understanding between agencies, but rather on the goodwill and personal commitment of individuals. This was both a strength and a weakness. The strength lay in the innovation, flexibility and personal commitment of individuals. However, the complexity of the community dynamics and working for agencies which do not have a community centred approach and for whom CLDB farm women are not a priority places pressure on individuals, and goodwill can disappear. Maintaining goodwill and trust between team members and partnerships takes time, which may be limited. A further weakness is that the sustainability of community engagement requires organisational change in government agencies. Individuals working with marginalised communities who lack power and as a consequence are unable to exert influence on

agencies to have their needs addressed, may not have the support of their organisation, limiting their ability to act. Further, advocating for marginalised communities may in turn lead to their own marginalisation in the bureaucratic structure if these communities are seen as unimportant. Importantly, changes in personnel, with new staff lacking the knowledge or commitment to the issues may result in key agencies ceasing to contribute to the partnership. In addition, partnerships may be hampered by individual personality differences between professionals, and by inter and intradepartmental territoriality.

The role of the community development worker

Community workers, who can establish and maintain contact with CLDB farm women through outreach are essential. The role is a complex and difficult one since, as they become more familiar with a community and more of an "insider"; they may be under pressure from conflict and internal community dynamics. Community workers need a supportive and responsive institutional environment, since if government agencies fail to deliver, they are the ones who interact directly with the community. A key issue for community workers is setting the boundaries, how to remain sustainable and not "burn-out". Often there is insufficient time for reflection and a lack of written material on the nature and dilemmas of community development Kenny (1999, pvii) and engagement.

Community workers require the necessary language and literacy support to work effectively with CLDB farm women. They may be bilingual, but not necessarily so, as this depends on the community. They must be able to develop trust, knowledge, and rapport with the community, and if they lack the complex set of skills required, they may need to work in partnership with project officers who are experienced at accessing resources. Selecting a community worker on the basis of language competence, professional skills and certification alone is not enough, as they must have the necessary personal skills to enable them to develop trust and rapport with their respective communities. As stated by a young Vietnamese woman, "They have to be really genuine, and what to really help us- not just in it for themselves, for their own career. They have to have a commitment to growers. They have to care about us."

Conclusion

The central role of CLDB women on farms is exemplified by one young Muslim Lebanese woman with five children, who plays an active role in farm management: "It all falls back on the woman". This paper has used a narrative approach to demonstrate that engaging CLDB farm women in education and training decreases their social isolation and increases their empowerment, but there is no blueprint for success. Community engagement moved beyond traditional needs analysis and education to incorporate advocacy and mentoring potential leaders, and to address the structural issues underpinning the marginalisation of CLDB farm women.

Successful engagement with CLDB farm women may not be based principally on ethnicity or race, as they may have more in common with each other, including limited English language, and working conditions, than they do with government agencies. The major factor limiting engagement with CLDB women is not the community, but the nature of the bureaucracy in that it fails to recognise the need for outreach, and for sustained community engagement. This requires long term funding and coordinated action, as many of the issues are crosscutting, both within and between government agencies. Both

technical and social aspects need to be considered together in a holistic approach, as this is both more efficient and more equitable. Technical production aspects are critically important, as women play an important role in farm management, and ultimately farms need to survive economically to ensure the health and well being of women and their families, but this must be considered in the social context. Professionals from a production/technical background, however, appear to favour a blueprint/control approach, when community engagement and development is unpredictable, and depends on personal trust, and a focus on whose interests are being served.

The community engagement described in this paper is closely related to the concepts of popular education, and participatory development, which aim to increase the involvement of socially and economically marginalised people in decision making over their own lives. The assumption is that participatory approaches empower local people with the skills and the confidence to analyse their situation, reach consensus, make decisions, and take action so as to improve their circumstances. The women described in this paper are at different points along this journey of empowerment.

The multiple barriers facing CLDB women in the Sydney Basin mirror those described when gender is included in development in non industrialised countries (Kabeer 1995). These include: the failure of professionals to recognise that women are farmers, only seeing them as farmer's wives; lack of information and access to resources; the domination of technical agencies by men who transmit information to men, and a failure to include women in education and training. Indeed, given that Australia is an industrialised country with equal opportunity legislation, the exclusion of CLDB farm women is unconscionable, particularly their lack of access to information on the potentially harmful effects of pesticides. Women at all levels of the socioeconomic spectrum are disadvantaged, though social and geographic isolation, lack of access to leadership opportunities, as well as all basic services, including health and education. They live in an information vacuum. Critical issues must be examined in terms of their social, political, economic, and their environmental implications. Engaging CLDB farm women is important for them personally, but also for the improved well-being of farm families, and the broader community. Successful community engagement is possible, and facilitated through partnerships of committed individuals and organisations, but this requires policy initiatives to implement long-term sustainable strategies. The key issue is how to bring about organisational change so that effective community engagement is institutionalised.

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