Re-masculinising agricultural space: Men’s response to women’s farm networks

Barbara Pini
John Curtin Institute for Public Policy
Curtin University of Technology
GPO Box U1987
Perth WA 6845
Tel.: +61 8 9266 3721
Email: b.pini@curtin.edu.au

Word count: 3020 (including abstract and references)
Re-masculinising agricultural space: Men’s response to women’s farm networks

Abstract

One of the most widely engaged strategies to address women’s marginal position in agricultural organisations has been to establish women-only networks. This paper identifies and describes four discourses by which men in agricultural organisations have sought to discredit these networks. These are through trivialising, masculinising pathologising and sexualising them. The paper explains that women leaders in the farm networks have attempted to counter these discourses by drawing on traditional gender discourses which position the women’s groups as existing to support and assist men, their families and their communities.

Key words: Agricultural space, agricultural organisations, women’s farm networks, gender discourses
Introduction

The paper asks how men in a mainstream farmers’ union have responded to the establishment of farm women’s networks as a gender equity strategy. Focus group interviews with women involved in the networks provide rich data on the types of derogatory discourses by which agricultural men have sought to discredit the networks and the women involved in them (see Pini 2002). It is argued that collectively these discourses represent a ‘mobilization of masculinity’ by the elected members (Martin 2001), as they re-inscribe normative definitions of femininity and masculinity and act in powerful ways to regulate and contain women’s involvement in agricultural management.

Background to the farm women’s networks: Sites of resistance

The two farm women’s networks discussed in this paper were established in 1993 and 1998, respectively, with the central aim of increasing women’s participation in agricultural leadership in a mainstream farmers’ union. The Farmers’ Union is one of the nation’s largest. At the time of the study it had 181 positions of leadership and all were held by men. Both women’s networks have elected Executive committees which meet every second month. In the intervening months, open meetings are held which typically feature a guest speaker and a question period. Between 40 and 60 women attend most meetings. The networks have also convened successful conferences, training programs and symposiums for local women.

Methodology

This paper draws on focus group interviews that have been outlined in detail elsewhere (Pini 2002; 2004). In summary, 16 initial and follow-up focus groups were held in both
Districts A and B with approximately 80 women in total.

**Men’s resistance to the farm women’s networks**

In her powerful study about women in educational leadership entitled *Troubling Women*, Jill Blackmore (1999: 136) also focuses on organisational resistance to gender equity, and particularly men’s struggles and contestations to retain masculine hegemony in educational workplaces. She labels the discursive practices men use in this process ‘discourses of denigration’. In the following sections I take up Blackmore’s (1999) terminology as a means of identifying the ways in which men in the Farmers’ Union resisted the women’s networks. As this discussion will demonstrate, these discourses operated as potent devices to regulate and control the behaviour and actions of farming women.

**Discourses of denigration: Trivialising women and their networks**

When the networks were first established they had to deal with what one focus group member called ‘a lot of teething problems’. One such ‘teething problem’ she described was being denied resources by the mainstream organisation to conduct business. This was magnified by the fact that there was (and still is) no formally established policy on the relationship between the women’s networks and the Farmers’ Union. For example, one of the Network women in District B explained the difficulty they had in attempting to advertise an education and training forum:

> Kay: It sounds petty, but they were supposed to put flyers in the newsletter to advertise the women’s forum, but they didn’t. They said they got lost or they forgot. They put an ad in the newsletter but it was really small. (District B, Focus Group 2)

Women reported that being denied resources by men was not such a difficulty for them once, as one said, ‘we learned to work around it’. For example, Kay explained that
following her difficulties in advertising the women’s forum using the resources of the Farmers’ Union, she subsequently advertised the meetings using local extension staff employed by the government.

Another early difficulty experienced by the networks was being ridiculed by male leaders. The District A group, for example, was called the ‘knitwork’ rather than being referred to as a network by a number of male elected members. In addition, elected members used diminutive terms to describe/talk about the Network such as asking women, ‘What’s your little group up to?’. One long term woman member reported running into some Farmers’ Union elected leaders as she left an Executive meeting of the Network. One of the leaders asked, much to the amusement of his colleagues, ‘Have you women solved all the big industry problems? Can we go home now?’. Clearly, the very idea of women attacking issues of magnitude, let alone solving them so that men are organisationally redundant, was comical in the extreme.

The factor that marked a noticeable change in the relationship between the women’s networks and the Farmers’ Union was financial independence. This occurred when money came from external sources including an agricultural research and training organisation and government departments. The fact that the farm women’s groups had needed to ask for money from the managerial men of the Farmers’ Union had kept them in their designated place. Having the monopoly on resources meant the male managers could enact what Cockburn (1991: 215) called ‘institutional impediments’ to equity, such as failing to distribute advertising about women’s group meetings. However, once the women’s networks had possession of their own resources they could bypass such impediments. It is not surprising to find, then, that after the women’s networks had financial independence some male leaders of the Farmers’ Union sought to attack them
with new and more hostile ‘discourses of denigration’ (Blackmore 1999) which were much more akin to an authoritarian mode of masculine management.

*Discourses of denigration: Masculinising women and their networks*

Blackmore (1999: 136) argues that the ‘discourses of denigration’ dominant in the educational settings she studied were those directed at ‘femininity in general and feminism in particular’. These types of masculinising discourses were also directed at the Network women in Districts A and B through derisive name calling. These names positioned the Network women as the very embodiment of masculinity. That is, as ‘having balls’, being ‘ball busters’, ‘those women in pants’ or simply ‘men’. What Bartky (1990: 74) calls the ‘disciplinary power’ of such a discourse — which ‘inscribes femininity on the female body’ — was not just felt by women in the Network Executive, but by all women associated with the industry in the district, as the following demonstrates:

Jessica: What worries me about women getting into these roles is you don’t want to lose your femininity. You don’t want to be known as someone with balls. I hate that saying. You’ve got to keep your feminine side, but you’ve also got to show that you can be smart and clever.

Interviewer: How would you lose your femininity?

Jessica: Being cast as one of the blokes.

Leanne: She should have been a bloke, the men say.

Libby: What Leanne said has already gone around town about the DEFOS women. That some of the ladies should have balls. (District B, Focus Group 4)

In attempting to undermine the feminine subjectivities of Network women and to masculinise them, Farmers’ Union leaders referred to them as ‘feminists’. The discourse of ‘feminists/feminism’ engaged by the Farmers’ Union leaders mobilised around notions of authoritarianism, oppression, extremism and separatism. Elected leaders referred to the women Network Executives as ‘bra-burners’, ‘man-haters’ and
‘rough and angry’. This is a discourse that is implicated in wider public and popular discourses which condemn feminism and is therefore one that is readily available as well as powerful (Gough and Peace 2000; Riley 2001). One woman explained why the men she knew were critical of the Network in her area:

Greer: The perception is out there that they are a bunch of radicals trying to blow men up, thinking they can live without men … that they want to do everything separately and not work as a team.

(District B, Focus Group 3)

Embedded in Greer’s statement is a further dimension of the farming leaders’ ‘discourses of denigration’ (Blackmore 1999) about the Network women. That is, that they are dangerous and power-hungry. This discourse of pathologising women is discussed in more detail below.

**Discourses of denigration: Pathologising women and their networks**

Another of the defensive responses the male agricultural leaders enlisted as a means of marginalising the women’s networks and reinscribing their patriarchal privilege within the Farmers’ Union was to pathologise the women involved. At its most fundamental, this discourse asserted that because it was ‘normal’ for women not to be interested in agricultural politics, those that were must be ‘abnormal’. Women involved in the networks were seen to be different and deviant. This point was made on numerous occasions as elected members of the Farmers’ Union pointed out to me that, compared with the total number of women in Districts A and B, only a relatively small proportion were involved in the networks. Their point was that because ‘most’ women (including in all instances their wives) were ‘not interested’, those who were represented an aberrant category.

Another trajectory of the pathologising discourse was one which suggested that women wanted to usurp men’s roles on the farms and ultimately their positions in the
Farmers’ Union. This theme was similarly evident as another woman explained the reaction she had from a male relative who questioned her involvement in the Network:

Emily: One said to me, ‘What do you want to do, get on the tractors and take over our jobs?’ That was said to me, and I said, ‘No. We just want to learn about the industry and help you with your job’. I think in this area a lot of men just want to protect their women… Not to rough them, look after them in general. That the physical type of work is a man’s job and the women shouldn’t have to get their hands dirty. (District B, Focus Group 7)

A further way in which the Network women were pathologised was by presenting them as devious and dangerous. Those women involved were considered to be pushing their own interests for individual gain to the detriment of the industry as a whole. One woman (whose husband was a Farmers’ Union leader) articulated this position in explaining her negative reaction to the women’s network in her local area:

Fiona: I question the motives for the Network as having a hidden agenda for their own political life. I am interested in working collectively not in pushing your own barrow. (District B, Focus Group 5)

Farmers’ Union leaders used a vocabulary of terms such as ‘ratty’, ‘radical’, ‘manipulative’, ‘negative’, ‘there for the glory’ and ‘damaging’ as a means of pathologising the women’s networks and their membership. This discourse, of course, was strongly connected to discourses condemning the women’s alleged lack of femininity.

Discourses of denigration: Sexualising women and their networks

Elsewhere (Pini 2008), I have emphasised the way in which discourses of sexuality were utilised by the Farmers’ Union elected members as a means of constructing and consolidating a collective identity and also as a means of excluding women. Deploying discourses of sexuality was also a strategy to control and contain the women’s networks. It is difficult to separate these discourses from other discursive strategies such as those which pathologised and masculinised women, as a (hetero)sexist undercurrent
ran through most derogatory statements made about the women’s networks. That is, the women involved are sexually unattractive to men. Men would not want to be seen with or be with Network women who were depicted as far removed from normative definitions of heterosexual femininity.

Thus, asked about one of the Network women who had stood for election, a Farmers’ Union leader replied laughing, ‘I don’t have a problem with Doris … Wouldn’t want to be married to her though.’ Women in the networks claimed such comments were common. A young female Farmers’ Union secretary confirmed that, much to her discomfort, it was customary for similar remarks to be made at the all-male meetings of the Farmers’ Union district Executive when the women’s Network was discussed. She attended to write the minutes and was specifically instructed by the Chairman not to record any disparaging remarks made about the women’s group members.

Women Network members were also sexualised by elected members who suggested that their political activism was a response to sexual frustration. One Network woman, for example, described the reaction she had received about her involvement from a male relative who was also a Farmers’ Union leader. This interaction occurred at a large family gathering:

Rosa: He said, ‘What have you been deprived of at home?’ I said, ‘My husband hasn’t deprived me of anything.’ And he said, ‘Well, why get involved with it?’ (District B, Focus Group 5)

This discourse which suggests women’s channelling of their energies into the public sphere/politics/leadership/work is inappropriate/unnatural and therefore representative of sexual frustration is one that has often been directed at powerful women (DiTomaso 1989). Here, the male elected member exerts power by making Rosa’s sexuality not just a problematic matter, but also a public matter.
Farm women’s networks: Responding to the discourses of denigration

The key strategy the Network women utilised to counter the men’s disparaging construction of them was to highlight their commitment to the sustainability of family farming. This repertoire focused on threats to family farming and positioned the women’s networks as integral to the battle for an agricultural future. In this battle very traditional (and paternalistic) notions of woman as helper/supporter to men were deployed. Women Network members distanced themselves from feminist labels, expressing the view that they would not be involved in anything that was branded as such. They expressed similar sentiments about discourses which attempted to position them as ‘taking over’, again emphasising their desire to work alongside men rather than in opposition to men. One stated:

Cynthia: I’m all for the women’s network, not from any bra burning aspect … I would be the first one to pull out if it was them and us. As far as I am concerned we’re just another branch. We’re the women’s side. With the men working together. It should be a united thing for all the community. We should be all working together because we’re all the same thing, aren’t we? (District B, Focus Group 5)

In seeking to exploit discourses about ‘family farming’ to promote the women’s networks, prominence was given to the education and training aims of the groups. It was through knowledge that women were going to be best placed to assist and help in the struggle to survive on family farms. The language of partnerships, collaboration, and co-operation was constantly highlighted. The fact that these were networks first established for ‘women’ because men dominated leadership in the Farmers’ Union was repeatedly played down. Indeed, the word ‘women’ does not even appear in the networks’ names, while promotional material for meetings was directed at ‘men and women in the industry’ rather than women alone. On many occasions, Network women attempted to present themselves as gender neutral and/or minimise the importance of the
gendered nature of the networks as the following quotation from a Network Executive
member demonstrates:

Kim: We want to improve women’s knowledge, understanding, skills and self-confidence through
organized education programs at a local level. In doing this we have been accused of being radical
feminists, who want to take over, but there is nothing further from the truth. We are just farmers who
happen to be women. (District B, Focus Group 8)

Attempts to de-gender the networks appear nonsensical and contradictory given
that we are talking about ‘women’s networks’, but demonstrate the women’s continued
strategic attempts to rework the derogatory discourses that had been used against the
groups.

Conclusion

This paper has examined men’s discursive resistance against women’s entry to
leadership in agriculture. Four key ‘discourses of denigration’ against the women’s
networks were identified (Blackmore 1999). These are summarized in Table 1 as
trivialising women, masculinising women, pathologising women and sexualising
women. Men’s access to extensive resources within the Farmers’ Union as well as their
75 year claim to power in the organisation have provided them with considerable means
of circulating these derogatory discourses. Men’s engagement of such negative
discourses about the networks has not simply been directed at censuring women. Their
discursive task has been much broader than this as they have also been attempting to re-
gender the terrain on which farming women have trespassed. What we see is
reminiscent of Burton’s (1991) phrase, ‘masculinity protection strategies’. As Agostino
(1997) and Prokos and Padavic (2002) have demonstrated, these strategies work to
recuperate masculinities when they are threatened by women’s presence.
References


Masculinity Lessons in Police Academy Training’, *Gender, Work and Organization*
Table 6.1 Farmers’ Union leaders’ discourses of denigration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse of denigration directed at the women’s networks</th>
<th>Representations of women/the women’s networks contained within this discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trivialising</td>
<td>Unimportant/inconsequential Short-lived/transitory Comical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculinising</td>
<td>Confrontational/aggressive Man hating/separatist Radical Angry/rough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathologising</td>
<td>Dangerous/threatening Abnormal/unnatural Power-hungry/self-serving/untrustworthy Taking over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexualising</td>
<td>Unattractive/unwanted by heterosexual men Sexually frustrated/unsatisfied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>