

TASMANIAN WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE – History

In May 1994, the Scottsdale Business and Professional Women joined the North East Dairy Women's Discussion Group to organise the first Tasmanian "Women on Farms" gathering at Scottsdale. Over 140 women from across Tasmania, representing all industry levels attended. Many of them didn't really know what this '*gathering business*' was all about. However it was a chance to hear well known author Christina Hindhaugh speak.

At the gathering something magical happened. Here were other women who thought the same thoughts and had the same likes and dislikes. It was suddenly obvious that *I* wasn't the only woman who pulled calves or put tarps on headers at 2am in a nightdress.

The gathering was proof of what could be achieved when everyone worked as a team. A quote at the time was '*too late to shut the stable door, the mares have broken out!*'

Following Scottsdale twenty women were then inspired enough to attend the inaugural International Conference for Women in Agriculture convened in Melbourne that same year. The First International Women in Agriculture Conference was held from 1 to 3 July 1994, at the University of Melbourne in Victoria. It attracted over 850 participants from 33 countries, and was the largest agricultural conference held in Australia.

It was following these two events that meetings of interested women were held at TFGA House in Launceston and from these meetings discussion groups in regional areas around the state began to operate; Tasmanian Women in Agriculture was formed. The women approached the Dept of Primary industries, Water and Environment and sought help. The Department quickly recognised the value of supporting women as an effective way of reaching a further 50% of its client base. It believed that to continue to target only the male members of farming partnerships, did not reflect how modern farm businesses operated. It also helped in keeping the lines of communication between, government and grass root farmers well and truly open.

As the name suggests TWiA is designed for all agricultural women, who live or work within the industry sector. Until recently the organisation boasted a flat structure, with five executive members who represented the Organisation and liaised with the Government supported facilitator based within the Dept of Primary Industries on the day to day policy matters and training needs. This type of structure best met the needs, aims and objectives of the grass roots membership.

Since those first initial meetings Government has played a critical role in supporting rural women with the provision of staff. Initially, Rowena Bell, followed by Ruth Paterson, Caroline Brown and currently Kierny Deutrom.

During that time, the role of the facilitator has evolved and changed with the organisation from development, maintenance, strategic and now assisting the organisation to operate in a more structured manner without ongoing Government support. To facilitate this change the organisation has in 2010 altered the constitution and structure to include the election of a President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer and three Executive Members.

From very early days, communication to meet the needs of rural women for rural women was vital. A bi-monthly newsletter entitled The Bluegum was posted to the growing membership list. The title of the newsletter was chosen by members in recognition of Tasmania's floral emblem. Bluegum contains articles of what was happening; photos', articles for forthcoming events and always the

most popular section '*Blooming Where You Are Planted*', the inspiring stories of rural women and the lives they lead in all sectors of the Tasmanian agricultural sector.

It must be remembered that during these early days of the organisation it was very rare for women to be featured in publications or in the media in general. In 1995 when the Project Officer position was created a search of the Departments photographic collection, found only two photographs of women working on farm. Subsequent research of early government Journals regularly featured articles of '*leading farmers*' who single handily were developing their properties. Ironically upon closer inspection the accompanying photographs included women in the background undertaking tasks such as feeding calves. Despite this photographic evidence there was absolutely no mention of her contribution to the development of the farm in the body of the article. This perhaps has led to women working in agriculture being described as the *invisible farmers*.

Early work for the Project Officer was to rectify this, by taking 100's of photos of rural women undertaking their daily duties on farm. It still surprises many people that in 1994 the legal status for women on farms was '*sleeping partner – non productive*'. Hiding the role of farm women was actually a legislative direction. At the foundation of the Commonwealth of Australia, the founding fathers decided to remove the recording farm women's work from the official statistics so as not to blemish the new country with a third world status of women labouring in the fields.

It was also important to challenge the attitudes of the women themselves. Culturally they had been conditioned to view their own important contributions to their individual farm businesses as *just helping*. For example *I just do the books*. The word *just* glossed over the fact that in many cases doing the books meant being responsible for million dollar turnovers. The off farm income the majority of which is undertaken by women continues to keep many farms viable during successive downturns or droughts. Despite contributing the vital regular cash flow to ongoing farm viability the importance of women's off farm work remains frequently ignored.

However the most important factor which needed to be acknowledged was that women were often listed as joint guarantees for financial loans as well as taxation purposes. Taking an interest in what was happening had become essential as in the eyes of bankruptcy courts, paper ownership of half the assets also meant women were responsible for half the debts. Instead of marking forms, home duties, these women now recognised themselves as farmers and along with their husbands were in the business of farming.

Blugeum remains an excellent communication tool which is read not only by women, but the whole family. Its readership peaked at 1000 editions.

There is no joining fee to be a member of TWiA. This decision was quite deliberate by the founding members. As farm women themselves often managing on a limited income, these women understood the importance of reaching out to the membership without the need to contribute money or time. Financial support to undertake the work of the organisation has been provided by sponsorship and donation.

Following that first Gathering in at Scottsdale in 1994, the baton has continued to be passed onto to women on rotation in other regional centres across Tasmania:

- Ulverstone 1996,
- Conningham 1998,
- Poatina 2000,
- Smithton 2002,
- Triabunna 2004

- Bridport 2006
- Ulverstone 2008
- Hobart 2010

The enthusiasm for both the volunteer organising committee and participants for these events have not wavered. Programs vary, however they usually contain an element of learning, inspiration and farm tours. It is interesting to note that other organisations have since copied this successful format for their own conferences.

Members of the organisation have also attended International conferences in Washington DC and Madrid. The organisation has also forged exchanged programs with Nebraska USA, Cumbria UK and Ireland.

The list of programs the organisation has undertaken is lengthy and varied:

- Paddock to Parliament forums – the opportunity to lobby all levels of government on behalf of country families
- Safe driver training and ATV course for members
- Child safety days
- RIRDC Rural Womens Award – sponsorship of an encouragement award
- Marcus Oldham Leadership Award Scholarships
- UTAS Science Awards
- Boot and Drought and Boot the Blues programs for rural women
- Junior Farmer Competitions
- Beyond the Farm Tours
- Succession Planning Workshops
- GST and Quality Assurance Workshops
- Computer Training
- First aid training

Members have also represented the organisation on task forces, boards, and committees. Women also played a key logistic role in the Fair Dinkum Food Campaign tractor rally, organising all the transport, accommodation, freeway permits, etc, requiring members voluntary commitment for seven days per week over the 10 week period of the Campaign.

Input into key government policy on such issues as the impact of asset testing on farm families so they may access to social security payments especially Austudy. However it is the submission that allowed for the exemption of stamp duty for passing on the family farm that remains a key and proud achievement.

Local discussion groups continue to meet once a month and the format may contain a guest speaker, visit to a local value adding venture or a training component. However, the most important element of the format is the time for a cuppa afterwards, enabling members to network and support each other.

As an organisation the State Meetings of TWiA are held every two months. Any member can attend and their input is always welcome, so that the following objects and purposes of Tasmanian Women in Agriculture continue.

OBJECTS AND PURPOSES OF TASMANIAN WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

1. To raise the profile of Agriculture as a forward thinking and vibrant industry that is vital to our state's economy.
2. To encourage women involved in the industry to realise their full potential and support them in decision making areas.
3. To provide a forum to gain knowledge and understanding about agriculture at state, national and international levels.
4. To be acknowledged as a legitimate voice where advice and input is sought on relevant issues by government and industry organizations.
5. Working to ensure the survival of agriculture for future generations.

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(with help from Ruth Paterson & Jan Richardson)

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