

**FARM WOMEN**

*Western Student*

# Latest survey shatters stereotype of farmer

Today's 'farmer' could just as easily be a woman in a business suit or one riding a tractor.

By Howard Burns  
*The London Free Press*



Donna Lunn likes to ask school kids to close their eyes for a moment and envision a farmer.

Then she takes some delight in trying to alter the usual mental image conjured up of a solitary older man in overalls standing in a farmyard.

She tells her young audiences the picture could just as easily be of a woman in a business suit — or riding a tractor or doing a cost breakdown at a computer terminal.

This, says Lunn, is the reality of modern agriculture: Women working shoulder-to-shoulder with their male partners, or, increasingly, on their own farms.

"I talk (to school kids) about the role of women in agriculture. I tell them I'm a farmer and on this farm we divide our roles."

It's been a bit of a tough sell. Until now.

**NEW CENSUS:** Lunn, a Belmont-area dairy farmer who shares the duties with her husband, Brian, and their children, says stereotyping will still go on, but a new agriculture census shows women count — in a big way.

The information may change farming's traditional image as an economic activity shaped and defined solely by men.

The Statistics Canada report says 29 per cent of Ontario farm operators are women, the second highest proportion next to British Columbia (about 35 per cent) and slightly better than the national average of 26 per cent.

Most run farms with male partners, but provincially, 2,710 women were in charge as lone operators of their own farms.

"This is the first time ever that it will be recorded that women are actually heavily involved in operating agriculture. It's a real historical thing," said Lunn.

**MAYBE HIGHER:** "Perhaps, it (the provincial total) is even



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higher than that," said Lunn, the past president of the Ontario Farm Women's Network.

While each case is different, farm women in Ontario commonly help call the management shots, look after the books and care for livestock, said Lunn, also a nurse.

For Connie Bontje, who farms with her husband, Mike, near Thorndale, it's overdue public recognition for the hard work that has been done by women for years.

"It's going to be good for the political figures to see (the numbers)," she said from her pig farm.

In 1991, for the first time, the agriculture census invited families to list each "operator" of a farm to better reflect the often hidden role women play.

It said that despite the tough economic times on Canadian farms in the last five years, only a third of farmers reported off-farm income. Some farm groups have said they expected the number to be higher than 50 per cent.

## THE COUNT

- Last year's agriculture census, held June 4, was the first time Statistics Canada attempted to find out how many women were actively involved in operating farms. A regional breakdown was not available Tuesday.
- The 1986 census asked only about the main farm operator. In most cases, the male partner or husband listed himself. It found that 4.5 per cent of farmers were women.
- The census is conducted every five years. The first national one was held in 1871.
- The information provides a detailed picture of Canadian agriculture and is used by governments and businesses to plan new programs and services.

## ONTARIO FARMS

- There were 226,750 people living on Ontario farms last year, 2.2 per cent of the total population.
- More than one-quarter of the 68,633 Ontario farms can be found in the counties of Lambton, Kent, Middlesex, Oxford, Elgin, Perth and Huron. The region's farmers produce agricultural goods valued at more than \$2 billion a year.