



AGRICULTRICES
DU QUÉBEC

Committee on the Status of Women and Gender Equality

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women

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Introduction

Agricultrices du Québec is a modern organization, open to partnerships and networking. It's the only women's farm organization in Quebec and a member of the Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA), an umbrella group of 26 federations and specialized groups. In 2020, roughly 600 women, as members of one of ten regional women farmers' groups, support our mission by choice.

Our mission is to empower all women working in agriculture and forestry while supporting the development of their individual and collective entrepreneurial abilities by recognizing their economic contribution.

Agricultrices du Québec has been involved in gender equality issues since its creation in 1987. It's advocacy work focuses on women in positions of power and influence, work-family balance, access to financing, access to agricultural land for women, and health and safety prevention on farms. It also develops partnership networks with other groups of women and entrepreneurs to share ideas and build expertise.

And the Agricultrices — who are they?

Who are Quebec's women farmers? There are 29,000 farms in Quebec, with generally one woman per farm. Women living on farms question their status and feel the need to clarify it. Whether they work full-time or part-time in the business, have shares in it or not, receive income or not from their participation in the production or management of the business, many women are reluctant to identify themselves as farmers. They still feel that they are "helping" their spouse/owner, doing their fair share for "the family" or fulfilling their duty as a wife, mother or grandmother. Women who have jobs off the farm and who still devote several hours of work per day to the farm business also feel this way.

In 2016, Quebec had just over 42,000 farmers, 15,200 (36%) of whom generated gross revenues of less than \$50,000 per year.

Women account for 27% of Quebec business owners or co-owners, but less than 5% are sole proprietors. They are more likely to start a new business than men, and also tend to establish themselves later.

Cultivez les possibles, a paper published by Quebec's Conseil du statut de la femme, reports that women still tend to have a harder time accessing farm assets, especially when starting new businesses. They also face challenges breaking down the myths of traditional male roles.

Farm families have an average of 2.9 children, compared to 1.7 for all Quebec households. Not surprisingly, women are still primarily responsible for household chores (64% versus 27% for men) and child care (64% versus 30% for men), as is the case in most Quebec families (from *Femmes et*

ruralité, 2016).

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Quebec's women farmers

Background

Agricultrices du Québec conducted a short survey in June 2020 to determine the impacts of closing daycares in rural areas during COVID-19 and possible solutions to explore once the health crisis is over.

A total of 291 people with children under the age of 5 responded, 1/3 of whom were men. This made it possible to conduct a comparative analysis based on respondents' gender. One question was what means did parents use to maintain work activities while having children at home. Overall, 27% of farmers brought their children directly to the farm, 13% changed their work schedules, 40% cut their hours on or off the farm, 5% hired additional staff, and 17% had an immediate family member babysit their children.

As Table 1 shows, the difference in responses by gender is similar for all the means used to deal with closed child care centres, except for the reduction in the number of hours worked. There was a marked difference between men and women. 22.5% of women reported that they had cut the number of hours they worked off the farm, compared with 9.9% of men. Regarding the reduction in the number of hours spent on the farm, 51.0% of female farmers and 32.4% of male farmers reported reduced hours. Another interesting fact is that 13.6% of women reported that their spouse had cut their number of off-farm hours, while 53.5% of men reported that their spouse had cut them. For number of hours cut by spouses on the farm, it was 13.6% and 18.3% respectively.

Table 1. Solutions to closed child care centres

You are	Took children to the farm	Changed work schedule	Cut hours (off farm)	Cut hours (on farm)	Spouse cut hours (off farm)	Spouse cut hours (on farm)	Family member babysat	Hired additional staff
A woman	111	54	33	75	20	20	67	22
	75.51%	36.73%	22.45%	51.02%	13.61%	13.61%	45.58%	14.97%
A man	48	21	7	23	38	13	32	9
	67.61%	29.58%	9.86%	32.39%	53.52%	18.31%	45.07%	12.68%
Total	160	76	40	99	59	33	100	31
%	27%	13%	7%	17%	10%	6%	17%	5%

Fewer hours worked by women

These figures are striking. They support the fact that women are the first to feel the financial impact of the current crisis since a decrease in work directly results in a decrease in income. If there were a second lockdown and child care centres shut down again, 83% of women said it would have a significant financial impact on their business, and 86% said it would have a significant impact on their mental health.

Federal support programs poorly adapted to the agricultural sector

Women face more than reduced hours. The emergency wage subsidy, the flagship program for businesses, is not adapted to the agricultural sector. The vast majority of farm businesses — considered essential services — continued to operate during the crisis. As a result, many were able to maintain sales at pre-crisis levels. However, most of them incurred additional costs during this time because they had to keep animals on the farm longer than expected due to the slowdown in slaughterhouse operations or increases in the price of certain inputs, which significantly affected their profitability but not their cash receipts. They are therefore not eligible for the emergency wage subsidy because they did not see a significant drop in revenue.

It’s too early to know what the actual financial impact of COVID-19 will be on women farmers. However, the impacts are being felt, and women are sometimes facing serious mental health crises.

Impacts on mental health

The closure of schools and child care centres has certainly put an additional burden on all farm families, but even more so on women who have had to juggle their work and family responsibilities. Regions spared during the pandemic's first wave in the spring face even greater uncertainty. Many teenagers are at home part-time, not to mention the regular school closures for 14 days at a time. Subsidized domestic help is often non-existent in rural areas. This situation leads to marked increases in stress and mental health problems, with no chance for a break.

According to Au cœur des familles agricoles (ACFA), calls for help have increased in recent weeks. This situation coincides with the end of intensive farming operations. Farmers are seeking help mainly because of drops in annual income, family conflicts associated with managing the business, work overload, and issues between the younger generation and their parents. Normally, most calls come from dairy farmers. This year, ACFA is seeing a sharp increase in calls from other farmers. Problems stem mainly from labour shortages and major droughts. Unfortunately, ACFA has not done a gender-based analysis. However, the average age of those seeking support is 43, which is very young compared to the average age of agri-entrepreneurs.

Child safety on the farm and lack of child care in rural areas

At the start of the crisis, the agricultural sector was quickly deemed an essential service, yet child care centres for farmers weren't kept open. The survey was conducted after child care centres were partially reopened, and farmers were asked if they had a space. 30% kept their children home as a precaution, 32% sent their children back and had a space, and 38% wanted to send their children back but did not have their usual space. Another 20% said they did not send their children to child care. Among them, 43% are waiting for a space, more than a quarter said that the hours aren't suitable, and almost one in ten families said that the child care location was too far from home.

So, even after child care centres re-opened, 68% of parents had to juggle work with children under the age of 5 years at home and, notably, on the farm, while 79% of them (83% of women and 71% of men) have concerns about their children's health and safety when working with children around.

In Canada, five children die each year from farming-related causes, 80% of whom are boys. 72% are the owner's children and 36% are under the age of 6. The two main causes of death are due to being run over or pinned under heavy machinery (42%) and drowning (17%). In other industries, most victims are workers between the ages of 18 and 65. Farms are unique in that children suffer a significant number of serious work-related injuries, and most accidents happen while children are accompanying their parents on the farm.

Possible solutions

In light of the above, Agricultrices du Québec recommends massive investments in mental health to hire women outreach workers in all regions of Quebec as a preventive approach. ACFA is an essential resource for Quebec's farming sector, and should serve as a model across Canada.

Moreover, threats to our children's safety are real. Solutions are needed now so that farm families have access to safe child care services that are tailored to rural areas, both in Quebec and across Canada, regardless of the crisis situation. Agricultrices du Québec recommends implementing pilot projects for home-based child care or outreach child care centres to reduce the mental burden on women farmers.

Domestic help should also be made available to women agri-entrepreneurs to reduce the workload associated with COVID-19 among women.

Finally, we encourage you to maintain and enhance assistance grants for women entrepreneurs. Agricultrices du Québec obtained funding under the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy. This type of initiative makes it possible to develop concrete and sustainable projects for all women in the agricultural sector.



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