

# Farming Women On Their Wellbeing

## Research Summary 2018



## Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the lead researcher Dr Allan Wyllie, from Wyllie & Associates, plus Trish Hudson-Howie, Wendy Coup and Bronwyn Campbell who assisted with the interviewing.

Thanks also to Farming Mums NZ, Dairy Women's Network, Beef + Lamb New Zealand, Rural Women New Zealand, Agri-Women's Development Trust, Farming Women Tairāwhiti and NZ Young Farmers for their support during the research design, interview recruitment and survey promotion phases.

Finally we want to thank all the farming women who so kindly participated in this research.

# Introduction

Farmstrong is a nationwide rural wellbeing initiative for farmers and growers. Farmstrong's purpose is to help those working in farming maintain and increase their wellbeing so they live well, farm well and cope with the ups and downs of farming. Through its website, presence at agricultural events and its initiatives and rural channels Farmstrong shares farmer-to-farmer tips and resources informed by the science of wellbeing.

In early 2018, Farmstrong commissioned research to better understand the wellbeing needs of farming women and identify the things they see would make the most difference to improving their wellbeing. The research also asked about: the wellbeing topics of most interest to women, the best communication channels to use and the link between wellbeing and injury. This document is a summary of the research findings. A copy of the detailed 60-page research report is available on request from Farmstrong.



There were three phases to the research:

- A review of relevant literature
- In-depth interviews with 26 farming women from five different regions, and
- An online survey completed by 786 women that was promoted through farming women's social media and organisational networks.

The large response to the survey showed the high level of interest in wellbeing issues among farming women. The research included all types of women engaged in farming, from those working fulltime on the farm in any role, to those living on a farm but working off farm. Of the women participating in the survey, 54% said they 'worked most of the time on the farm or farming business', 30% 'some of the time' and 14% 'a little'.

There was a good mix of farm type – 60% were sheep and beef farmers, 47% were dairy farming and 22% other. In terms of age, 41% were under 35 years, 48% were 35 to 54 and 12% were over 55. Women over 55 years were under-represented compared to the other age groups, probably due to the online nature of the research.

The following is a summary of the main findings including a selection of the women's insights and strategies to improve their wellbeing. Together, they represent a compelling picture of the priority wellbeing areas and women's topics of interest, along with solutions that are working for them. The findings also underline that addressing the wellbeing needs of rural women will undoubtedly bring wider benefits for the whole sector.



## What We Found Out

### Key Findings

- The following wellbeing issues ranked highest in terms of having a 'large' or greater negative impact:
  - 'My workload/ fitting everything in' (40%)
  - 'Feeling fatigued/exhausted' (34%),
  - 'Not enough time for myself' (32%),
  - 'Lack of sleep or poor quality sleep' (32%),
  - 'Not enough time off the farm (either by myself or with family)' (29%),
  - 'Challenges with important relationships (i.e. husband/partner, parents, in-laws, farm owner, workers)' (27%).
- The top three things women thought were most likely to contribute to increase their wellbeing were: 'more time off the farm', 'getting more or better quality sleep', and 'getting more exercise'.
- The wellbeing topics that women expressed 'high' interest in the most were: nutrition (26%), exercise (25%), self-confidence, self-worth, self-compassion (24%), thinking strategies to deal with ups and downs (22%), happiness (22%), mindfulness and relaxation techniques (21%).
- The group reporting the highest levels of reduced wellbeing were women working fulltime as sharemilkers/contract milkers. The interviews particularly highlighted the vulnerability of younger women trying to navigate their way through early careers in farming. Challenges mentioned included: new relationships or lack of close relationships, the expectations of parents or in-laws, living away from family support, working long hours with little or no regular time off, being a new mum, dealing with mental health issues and financial stress.
- There was also a link between injuries and wellbeing issues. A fifth of the women reported having an injury on the farm in the last 12 months and, of these, 61% felt a wellbeing issue had contributed to their 'worst injury' in that time.

*For more detail on the key findings see graphs and tables in appendix.*



## Workload and Fitting Everything In

### Challenges to Wellbeing

*"During calving I still have to do the dinner – like housework is not a job ... you feel like a one-man band trying to hold everything together and on social media you have to act as if everything's perfect."*

*"You never finish what you want to get done... some days I have a melt-down – but only to myself – cos no one else is listening."*

As noted above, there were high proportions of women reporting negative impacts relating to workload and trying to fit it all in, fatigue and ability to get enough time off for themselves.

In terms of farm roles, two-thirds of sharemilkers/contract milkers and over half of dairy farm owners identified more time off the farm as one of the top three things that would contribute to their wellbeing. Over a third of married women also mentioned this.

The interviews revealed that while women realised the importance of getting time off the farm, for most, this was happening much less often than was desirable. Their partner or husband's workload was often an issue. Some women mentioned not feeling they could go out if their partner was busy working, or feeling guilty if they did so.

Having more time for themselves and getting time off the farm are obviously closely related, but the two are not always the same. A third of women surveyed thought that getting more time off farm by themselves or with their family would improve their wellbeing. A quarter just wanted more time for themselves.

### Strategies to improve wellbeing

*"Other friends in the same boat – we all talk about it."*

*"(I play sport)... because it forces you to go out – it's a set time."*

*"The biggest thing about farm life, that will improve your wellbeing, is getting off the farm."*

Women reported using a range of strategies to get time off. Among the most commonly mentioned were; taking time off with friends or family, engaging in hobbies or sports or going to holiday homes. *"Scheduling in things to look forward to"* worked for one woman interviewed. Getting off the farm was seen as key to improving wellbeing, *"It can be as simple as getting off farm for the night"*.

In terms of managing workload, learning to say 'no' was a strategy being adopted by some women, although those interviewed did talk about how difficult this could be to do. One young woman, on five local committees, had to get to the "point of no return" before she would turn down a request for assistance. Another strategy to deal with work overload was planning and prioritising, such as using a diary or whiteboard to keep track of everything, to focus on the essentials and to relieve pressure. Other women also mentioned making the most of slow times of the year to "just do what is essential and have time for myself".



## Relationships and Social Connection

### Challenges to wellbeing

*"We aged out of young farmers, lost our social group and moved to a new area, which made it so much harder."*

*"Moving to a rural community is very difficult and I'm unsure how to improve it, as I don't have children to meet other adults through school and sport in this area is a minimum."*

Developing supportive relationships, being able to talk things through with others and dealing with physical and social isolation are significant issues for many rural women.

Fifty-one percent of women mentioned 'challenges with important relationships' (husband/partner, parents, in-laws, farm owner, workers) as having a least a 'moderate' negative impact on their wellbeing and, of this number, 27 percent said the impact was 'large' or greater than large. Twenty percent mentioned 'not having enough people to talk things through with when I need to' as having a 'large' or greater impact. Those aged 55 years and over were more likely to mention 'challenges with important relationships'.

Sixteen percent of women also mentioned 'challenges developing relationships in a new community' as having a 'large' or greater negative impact. Some of the women interviewed talked about leaving jobs in the city that they had trained for, that they no longer had as source of satisfaction and to boost to their self-esteem. Some also had no experience of farming.

### Strategies to improve wellbeing

*"Going to the pub where people can talk about how they are feeling and what shit is going on farms and at stress times – not hiding what you are going through any more."*

*"I like being involved in the community, having the human connection and helping people out."*

Women mentioned the importance of having friends and neighbours *"a friendly ear who will listen who understands how things are going ... and has often been through the same thing."* Some also mentioned face-to-face support – *"someone to come to my door ... [asking] how are you getting on."*

One strategy many women are already using is contributing to their community – fundraising for local schools, coaching sports teams or joining local committees. These types of 'pay it forward', 'helping' activities are a chance to meet fellow volunteers and learn new skills.

For those with children, contacts with other parents at schools and play centres were important. 'Farming Mums' on Facebook was also an important source of support for some. Other women found NZ Young Farmer clubs and events organised by Dairy Women's Network and Beef and Lamb useful. Other women used sports as a way to get off the farm and enjoy social contact with others. Agri-Women's Development Trust workshops were also seen as creating new networks of farming women.

In terms of friendships, younger women who had grown up and worked elsewhere were more likely to have friends outside their community. However, they reported maintaining relationships with city friends can be difficult, because of their lack of understanding of farming life and distances to travel.



## Stress and Coping

### Challenges to wellbeing

*"Women don't shut down like men, but you lose yourself – it's all about everyone else, not you – kids, husband, farm. It's not healthy."*

*"I try to be positive and take some of the pressure off him... I don't tell him everything I think he doesn't need to know and sort it out... It's tricky – you put more pressure on yourself, which you know is not a healthy thing to do."*

Issues to do with managing stress, finding happiness and purpose – the 'why' of farming – also featured prominently in women's feedback. Just over half of the women sampled mentioned that the stress of coping with the ups and down of farming was having at least a 'moderate impact' on their wellbeing, and of this number 24 percent said it was 'large' or greater.

Nearly a quarter (23%) of women who had an injury in the last 12 months thought that feeling stressed had contributed. One in six women surveyed identified 'new strategies or new ways of thinking to cope better with the ups and downs of farming life' as one of the top three things which would improve their wellbeing. The same proportion mentioned having more 'meaning/purpose in their life' and thirteen percent 'knowing what I need in order to be happy'.

The need for a confiding ear was also evident, as discussed above. Some of the women interviewed talked about being the main support for stressed husbands/partners. This added to women's workload and stress because they were trying to alleviate issues, so their partner didn't have to worry about them.

### Strategies for improving wellbeing

*"My biggest thing is having tools... How do I teach my brain not to go into negative mode ... to learn how to keep someone else's problem their problem - not mine."*

*"We tend to think we are the only ones going through difficult times. Sharing our stories is helpful."*

*"You need many coping strategies, which can be small but very impactful."*

Most women interviewed relied on talking to their partners as a key strategy for dealing with stress. However, if their partners were also stressed, the women often placed supporting their husband's needs above their own.

There was a high level of interest among women in wellbeing topics to help deal with stress. Over a fifth of women reported 'high interest' in receiving tools and information about 'thinking strategies to deal with ups and downs', and 'happiness' and 'mindfulness/relaxation techniques'. 'Interest in resources that would build 'self-confidence, self-worth and self-compassion' was greatest among under 35 year olds (28%).



## Exercise, Nutrition and Sleep

### Challenges to wellbeing

*“Calving is hell if you're not fit for it.”*

Sleep, exercise and nutrition are top of mind for many women when it comes to improving their wellbeing. Thirty-two percent of those surveyed were concerned about the large impact of ‘lack of quality sleep’, 23 percent about ‘not getting enough exercise’ and 18 percent mentioned the large impact of ‘not eating well’.

Sleep and fitness were also seen as contributors to injury. Seventeen percent attributed lack of sleep or poor quality sleep to their worst injury in the last 12 months and 15% thought that not being particularly fit had contributed to their injury.

A third of those surveyed thought the most beneficial things to improve their wellbeing would be ‘getting more exercise’, and ‘more or better quality sleep’. And a fifth were keen to ‘eat healthier’. Married (36%) and middle aged (35 to 54) women (39%) were more likely to mention ‘getting more exercise’, while younger women (under 35) were more likely to mention ‘eating healthier’ (26%).

### Strategies for improving wellbeing

*“I believe nutrition and mindset are so closely related. You have to eat well to think well.”*

The interviews revealed the benefits of doing something physical and keeping active every day, and that physical activity can be relaxing and help clear the mind. Some women were using fitness machines while others were getting fit by working on farm. Another, who was training for a marathon, said it made her feel healthy and gave her a sense of accomplishment.

However, needs around sleep, exercise and nutrition were clearly linked to the reality of ‘trying to fit it all in’. A range of competing demands sometimes results in women not getting sufficient time for themselves to focus on these aspects.

There is a high level of interest among farming women to learn more about these topics. Out of the eight wellbeing topics surveyed, nutrition and exercise ranked highest – a quarter of women put them top of the list for ‘high’ interest.





## Looking After Others

### Challenges to wellbeing

*"When you prioritise things, you think farm, husband and kids – you're down the track."*

*"If the husband is depressed, the woman has to be the support person, but women are forgotten."*

The research confirmed women play a key role in managing the wellbeing of others – partners, children, other family members and employees. Juggling these multiple roles and responsibilities can be a challenge.

Forty-one percent of women mentioned that 'managing and meeting the needs of children' had at least a moderate impact on their wellbeing, and of this number 19 percent said it was 'large' or greater. For women with children at home, especially pre-schoolers, the stress associated with looking after children added to all the other stresses associated with the farm. Conversely, some women with a demanding farm workload felt they were missing out on time with their children.

Thirty-five percent of those surveyed mentioned that 'dealing with the ill health of a husband/partner, children' had affected their wellbeing at least moderately and 17 percent said the impact was 'large' or greater. Several women interviewed reported that their husbands/partners had experienced depression. One woman reported that when her partner gets "moody", she felt as if she had "to pick myself and him up".

Many women also reported that having staff contributed to their wellbeing issues. If staff leave, this puts added pressure on the others, particularly the managers. One young dairy farmer mentioned that managing a larger herd meant she was dealing with more workers. She shared that she did "break down a few times last year... tears, not feeling the best." Another young woman, who was managing a farm and workers on her own, reported having had a year of depression, with staffing issues being a major contributor.

Balancing these demands with the need to feel "useful and wanted" was another recurrent theme. Some women commented that they felt their partner did not adequately acknowledge their farming skills. For others 'feeling useful' meant working off farm – one young woman reported that she felt better about herself when she was working off the farm, but she also felt guilty if her husband was left on the farm by himself.

### Strategies for improving wellbeing

The research confirmed women were usually the key support for their husbands/partners/families and tended to notice wellbeing issues before the men acknowledged them. One described "keeping an eye on the signs", as part of the role of the woman on the farm as "men are bad at bottling it up".

Many of the farming women interviewed also presented a picture of partners who "toughed it out" and neglected their wellbeing, unless personal crises forced them to. For example, one young woman noted that her father-in-law only started taking breaks from the farm once he developed

heart problems. This had resulted in a greater willingness for all members of the family to take time away from the farm.

Encouragingly, many of those interviewed felt they could influence their partners to manage their wellbeing better, so the better informed the women are on wellbeing matters, the better off their families are likely to be. Women also thought they could play a role to some extent in improving farm safety by discouraging risky behaviours when they know their husband has wellbeing issues.



## The Farming Business

### Challenges to wellbeing

*"Equality is what we want in pay and recognition."*

*"It's a male-dominated world, and you never seem to be taken quite so seriously."*

Some women wanted more focus on strategies to address equity issues, including getting "more respect from men" for what they do. Twenty-four percent of those surveyed also felt 'not having my role and contribution valued enough' affected their wellbeing in a 'large' or greater way. Under 35-year olds were more likely to mention this 'large' or greater impacts (27% versus 16% for others).

Some women felt that their farming skills were not adequately acknowledged, *"I can feel micromanaged on the farm... I'm not out there enough to have my say... not in charge, despite my experience"*, and another said, *"Don't assume women are just mums and wives, some of us are high-achieving farmers in our own right."* Others wanted more recognition that farm-related work done in home, such as paperwork, is just as valuable as that done outside. Some women interviewed with young children were often desperate to be able to get out and take a greater role on the farm.

A young woman share-milking commented that *"you get indoctrinated into we are the lesser species... A man going for a share-milking job will get it rather than a woman."* Another commented *"there are a lot of young women were entering the Young Farmer Competition awards, but farmers often relate to them like – she'll make a great farmer's wife one day"*.

One woman challenged the use of the term "farming wife" preferring "woman farmer". Others commented that most male farmers are used to their wives being a support person, so they don't know how to handle a woman who is the main farmer. Others talked about men needing to learn how to be more supportive *"women sometimes just need a hug, offer to make dinner"*.

The research found that women's wellbeing is also affected by farming challenges that are out of anyone's control, such as the weather or market prices. Forty-six percent of those surveyed mentioned that dealing with weather conditions had negatively affected their wellbeing at least moderately and, of this number, 18 percent said the impact had been 'large' or greater. Many had been seriously impacted by drought and a very wet winter, affecting incomes and their ability to graze cattle. One woman summed it up in this way, *"sometimes I compare being a farmer's wife to knowing there is another woman (farm) in your husbands life and you have no choice but to love it too no matter what a bitch she can be."*

Similarly, financial pressures, such as the ability to employ more staff to deal with excessive workloads, or take on larger herds and farms that will be more financially viable over the long term, are also a source of stress for women. Forty-five percent of women surveyed mentioned that financial issues had impacted their wellbeing at least moderately and, of this number, 20 percent said it had been 'large' or greater. To make things work financially, some women were working off farm to help make ends meet, as well assisting on the farm and raising children.

Lack of succession planning is also a source of dissatisfaction for some. A lot of women were on farms owned by their or their partner's parents or family trusts. If succession planning is not in place, it is difficult for them to know what they are working towards. One woman summed this up as feeling like a *"voluntary worker on the family farm"*.

## Strategies to improve wellbeing

*"Farming is a challenging but such a rewarding industry."*

*"(I love) seeing animals grow, everything thrive, seeing the business thrive."*

The research confirmed that there is plenty about farming life that women love despite its challenges. For many women, farming brings a genuine sense of accomplishment, reward and recognition. For some this manifested in winning 'dairy industry awards', 'hitting targets and getting good results on farm and having your name out in the farming sector.' Others liked the sense of achievement and task-driven nature of the work, 'ticking things off'.

Other women mentioned their fondness for the working environment itself, such as the pleasure of seeing things they had planted, such as trees and gardens, grow and flourish. Women often expressed the joy they got from looking after animals, whether it was *"raising beautiful calves"*, *"getting the best out of my cows"* or the satisfaction of keeping lambs alive during snow storms. They also enjoyed getting out on horses or being with their dogs.

One woman described farming being 'a passion' for both her and her husband, another loved going on the farm together with her husband.

Other things that made women feel good were getting away from the house and farm, getting exercise/ being active, giving/helping others and having time for yourself, *"I like to look after myself – haircuts, getting eyebrows done – to look good; wearing makeup – it's a dirty environment"*.

Women also talked about the opportunities farming presents to learn and grow new skills such as budgeting, financial, succession planning, leadership, management and communications. *"I have got good at budgeting. As a family we have made a competition out of it, to see how much money was left at the end of each month. The children have become very good at buying low cost items."*

Other strategies women said would improve their wellbeing were: encouraging men to support their partners more, reviewing workloads, men contributing more domestically, men valuing women's work done in-home as much as work done outside and supporting women during pregnancy.



## Injuries Linked To Wellbeing Issues

*"People make mistakes when they are tired – you don't realise you're making mistakes when you're under the pump."*

A fifth of women surveyed reported having had an injury in the last 12 months. Of these over 60 percent felt that wellbeing issues had contributed to their 'worst injury' during that time.

Some of the injuries mentioned were serious and included: coming off a four wheeler and fracturing skull, a bike flipping, getting 'smashed by a metal gate', an eye scratch from high tensile wire and someone 'nearly losing a foot' that was caught in a flywheel.

When asked which wellbeing issues had contributed most to their injury the women responded as follows:

- Fatigue 29%
- Having too much to do and not enough time 27%
- Feeling stressed 23%
- Lack of sleep or poor quality sleep 17%
- Not being particularly fit 15%
- Worrying about something else unrelated to what you were doing 14%
- Feeling frustrated 14%.

It might be expected that efforts to address these wellbeing areas for women will be likely to contribute to a reduction in preventable injuries.



## Best Channels to Reach Women

*"Facebook is more my platform – little snippets are beneficial, quick tips, not having to scroll through stuff."*

The research showed that Facebook is a key vehicle for providing information and maintaining contact with farming women, particularly the younger ones.

Ninety-four percent of women said they had used Facebook pages/posts within the previous four weeks and this included 58% who used it more than two hours a week. Part of Facebook's appeal for women lies in its ability to have them in touch with other women in similar situations. Hearing about others often makes them feel better about their own situation.

However, when asked about their preferred mode of communication for support, only a minority mentioned Facebook, even among young people. Face-to-face communication or contact by phone was seen as providing a much stronger level of connection.

The most mentioned farming-related social media/ online channels were NZ Farming (57%) and Farming Mums (52%). Farmers Weekly (56%) and local newspapers (56%) were the papers and magazines that the greatest proportion of the women 'regularly look through'.



## Findings about Farmstrong

There is a good level of awareness of Farmstrong among farming women. Seventy percent had heard of Farmstrong, with just over a quarter of these (27%) feeling they knew at least 'a moderate' amount about it. The research identified that the main sources of information for women about Farmstrong were Facebook (56% of those who had heard of Farmstrong), articles in farming magazines (54%), with 'Farmers Weekly' being specifically mentioned by 31%.

The research found that much of Farmstrong's existing wellbeing content is relevant for women, however women wanted more stories on women in farming. One woman commented that *"seeing lots of positive stories and outstanding achievements by women in the primary industries is a massive motivation for other women to strive for their best as well, and more of these need to be aired to the public and the farming community"*. Another woman wanted more stories to help those starting out suggesting, *"it might be helpful if in the media there were more stories of people who started out and what they did and have changed along the way."*

Women were also keen to have other topics talked about that they had high interest in, such as self-confidence, self-compassion, mindfulness and relaxation.



## Summary and Conclusion

This research found that the greatest impacts on women's wellbeing were in the areas of: fatigue, workload, lack of sleep, challenges with important relationships, not enough of time for myself and time off the farm. The group reporting the highest levels of reduced wellbeing were women working fulltime as sharemilkers/contract milkers. The interviews particularly highlighted the vulnerability of younger women trying to navigate their way through early careers in farming. The research confirmed a link between injuries and wellbeing issues.

The research also found that women had high levels of interest in improving their wellbeing, particularly in the areas of nutrition, exercise, self-confidence, self-worth, self-compassion, thinking strategies to deal with ups and downs, happiness, mindfulness and relaxation techniques. Women also reported a range of successful strategies that they were using to improve their wellbeing in a number of these areas.

Farmstrong (and no doubt others) will use these research findings in their efforts to improve rural wellbeing. Based on the research it is recommended that Farmstrong increasingly include within its wellbeing initiatives stories, tips and resources on the topics that women said were of highest interest to them. The research also shed light on the social, media, organisational and network channels that are best used to reach women. It is recommended that these be the priority ones to use.

Collaboration with farming women, their organisations and networks has been key to the high response rate from women in this research. It is recommended that this collaborative approach continue throughout the design and implementation of solutions by Farmstrong and others.

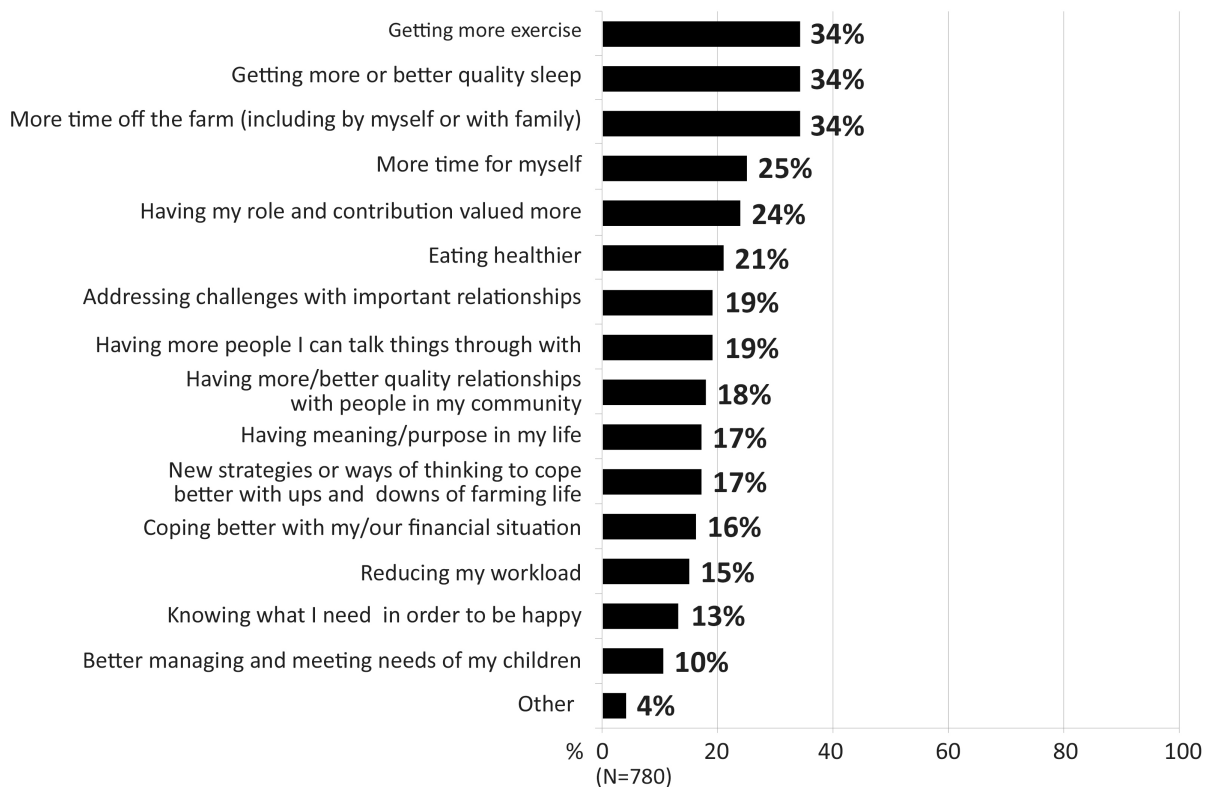
Finally we would like to thank all the women, organisations and networks that supported and took part in this research. Without your help it would not have been possible to achieve such a high response rate and compelling picture of farming women's wellbeing.

## Appendix – Graphs and Tables

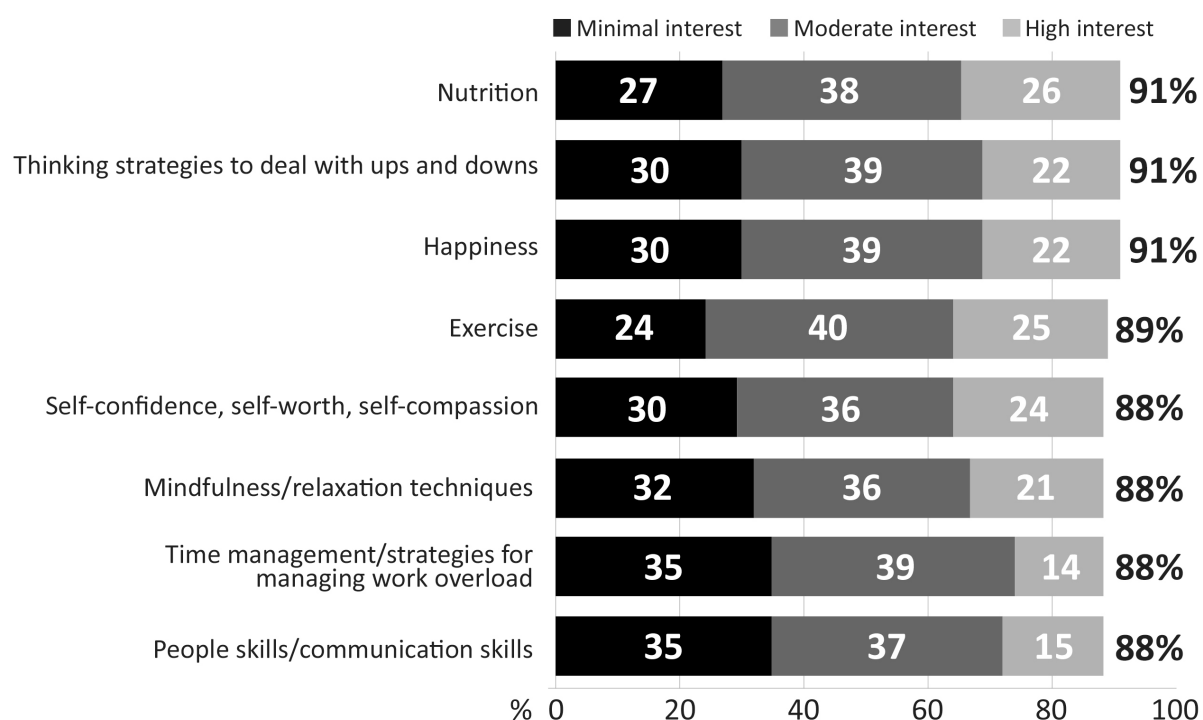
**TABLE ONE: Role of Women on Farm**

ROLE ON FARM	Survey sample (743)
Farm owner	38%
Part owner	13%
Leaseholder	3%
Share milker/ contract milker	14%
Manager	11%
Assistant manager/ ZIC	4%
Farm worker	10%
Other	7%
	<b>100%</b>

**GRAPH ONE: Things Contributing Most to Wellbeing Improvement**



**GRAPH TWO: Interest in Wellbeing Topics**



**TABLE TWO: Proportions Reporting Higher Levels of Negative Impact on Wellbeing**

SOURCES OF 'LARGE' OR GREATER NEGATIVE IMPACTS ON WELLBEING	TOTAL WOMEN SAMPLE *
My workload/fitting everything in	40%
Feeling fatigued/exhausted	34%
Not enough time for myself	32%
Lack of sleep or poor quality sleep	32%
Not enough time off the farm (either by myself or with family)	29%
Challenges with important relationship (i.e. husband/partner, parents, in-laws, farm owner, workers)	27%
Not having my role and contribution valued enough	24%
Feeling stressed coping with the ups and downs of farming life	24%
Not getting enough exercise	23%
Not enough people to talk things through with when I need to	20%
Financial issues	20%
Managing and meeting the needs of children	19%
Not knowing how to make/keep myself happy	19%
Dealing with weather conditions	18%
Not eating well	18%
Dealing with ill-health of husband/partner, children, or my own	17%
Challenges developing relationships in a new community	16%
Not having meaning/purpose in my life	16%
* Sample size varied between 790 and 837	