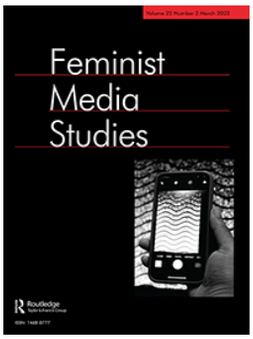

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Women as heroes, partners - or at least, hard workers? Representations of gender in New Zealand's *Country Calendar*, 1990–2015

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a longitudinal, multi-method gender analysis of one of New Zealand's highest rating and longest running television programmes, *Country Calendar*. Content analysis findings show that over a 25-year period (1990–2015), women were much less likely to appear on or be quoted in *Country Calendar*, or to be the central focus of an individual episode. Yet interviews with production staff capture female directors' commitment to "making women the heroes", and a widespread belief that the show reflects the partnership approach of many farming families. Focus group data indicate that audiences perceive the show's depictions of gender to be fair and representative, and that women are presented positively, as "hard workers". This article interrogates these perceptions with reference to selected examples from *Country Calendar*, ideas of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity, and work on subservient femininities and "real" farming women. The paper concludes with a consideration of why these tensions might still exist, some twenty years since they were previously documented, and calls for further research into this understudied area of feminist media inquiry.

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Introduction

Women's voices and narratives have tended to be invisible in cultural, mediated and historical accounts of agriculture (Nikki Henningham and Helen Morgan 2018). Representations of farming predominantly depict farmers as male and/or position women as other (farmers' wives or women farmers; e.g., Ruth Liepins 2000; Esther Peeren and Irina Souch 2019). Although New Zealand (NZ) is a farming nation, there has been relatively little research here into how gender is mediated in agricultural or rural texts, or how audiences respond to this content. In an effort to supplement this limited scholarship, this article presents a gender analysis of one of NZ's highest rating and longest running television programmes, *Country Calendar* (CC). *CC* is a prime-time lifestyle documentary series about people who live and work on the land. Broadcast for more than 50 years on state owned TVNZ, it enjoys iconic status and enduring popularity in the local mediascape (Peter Howland 2017; Nick Perry 1994). An earlier thematic analysis of

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25 years of *CC* programming established how the show combines dimensions of the rural idyll with an emphasis on progress and practice, and also observed some use of gendered language and framing (Susan Fountaine 2020). This led me to undertake a content analysis of women's presence in the show, and explore perceptions of women's visibility through interviews with *CC* producers and focus groups with farming and urban audiences. Content analysis, combined with qualitative data from these interviews and focus groups, builds a layered understanding of the gendered production and consumption of televised depictions of NZ rurality, and helps address the dearth of audience research around rural texts (Carol Morris and Nick Evans 2001).

Mediated representations of gender in agriculture and rural texts

Women's under-representation as news subjects and sources in mainstream news around the world is extensively documented (e.g., GMMP 2015; Pilar Matud, Immaculada Espinosa, and Carmen Rodríguez Wangüemert 2019), with this inequality most apparent in the reporting of traditionally male fields such as politics and business (Margaret Gallagher 2001). Further, women are "symbolically annihilated" (Gaye Tuchman, cited in Matud, Espinosa, and Wangüemert 2019) in the media through marginalisation, trivialisation and subordination (e.g., Donna Bridges and Ben Wadham 2020). The mainstream media's representations of gender tend to reinforce "hegemonic masculinity" and "emphasised femininity", acting through a relational framework to define men in terms of physical and economic strength, and women as compliant and nurturing (Raewyn Connell 1987). While not denying the existence of alternative gender identities, or the changing nature of gender identities over time, Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity—"the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations" (Raewyn Connell 2005, 76)—remains in ascendance, with femininity subordinate. Following Connell's (1987) conceptualisation of gender as a social practice, media texts become a key site for exploring how these relations are constituted, contested and revised.

The tendency for women to be underrepresented as news sources and subjects likely continues in coverage of agriculture and farming (and indeed, in the specialist farming media), exacerbated by the general neglect of rural news in mainstream media (Michael Woods 2011). Though few contemporary content analyses exist, the GMMP (2015) records less than 1% of global stories in legacy media about the rural economy, agriculture, farming and land rights, with women comprising just 20% of news subjects in this area. The gendered division of farming life is well documented in rural studies, and its discursive replication in farming media and rhetoric, and in popular culture, has been the subject of some research. For example, Morris and Evans (2001) study of the Farmlife section of UK's *Farmers Weekly* newspaper (in 1976 and 1996) provides empirical evidence of increased (surface) diversity in mediated gender identities, but also documents an underlying and highly resistant dualistic construction of gender, rooted in heterosexuality. Women achievers from rural communities were regularly profiled and their business activities increased over time but women were also not shown as fully engaged with agriculture, domestic activities "remain[ed] unchallenged" (Morris and Evans, 383) and the outdoors was constructed as a predominantly male space. Further, "biographical details of each partner tend to be dominated by reporting of the husband's activities … whether or

not they are farm centred" and there was "a greater 'worthiness' of male recreational activities" (Morris and Evans, 387). Morris and Evans argue that Connell's conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity, where men are defined as powerful and strong and women as caring and compliant, is too simplistic to explain this range of depictions over time but retains an underlying validity. They conclude by noting the absence of audience research addressing the extent to which such depictions are attractive and important to farming women.

In a similar vein, work by Liepins (1998, 2000) shows how media and organisational narratives of masculinity and femininity contribute to the gendered discourse of Australasian agriculture. In particular, three dominant narratives reflect the traditional rural spheres of physical farm work, agricultural politics, and family life: tough men doing manual work on the farm, masculine leadership and traditional farming femininity. Within the latter narrative, women are defined through marital and kinship ties, depicted as supporters and carers, and portrayed mostly in domestic spaces. Liepins (1998) also captured the existence of more marginal or alternative gender narratives comprising the "real" woman farmer (women performing the physical and business activities of farming), the sensitive new-age farmer (men demonstrating a range of masculinities including intellectual work and shared parenting), and femininity in industry politics (with a focus on women's networking and communication). However, strength and battle were still "crucial elements" in media and industry rhetoric of agriculture, with toughness remaining the key masculine signifier, and in agricultural politics, this masculine power taking the form of intellect, rationality and self-control (Liepins 2000). Similarly, Berit Brandth's (1995) well-cited study of rural masculinities and tractor advertising captures how the tractor acts as a symbol of men's enduring control over nature while also accommodating a new form of masculinity embracing science, technology and comfort.

While *CC* is factual television about farming and farmers rather than rural matters more generally, the values of the agricultural sector are clearly entwined with rurality. In the broader field of rural studies, research into depictions of the countryside (which can include but are not limited to farming), across a range of factual and non-factual media and forms, establishes a tendency towards idyllic representations (e.g., Howland 2017; Alfio Leotta 2011; Peeren and Souch 2019). The rural idyll is a dominant motif in fictive and documentary television programming about the countryside, and is characterised by a culture-specific blend of aesthetic and social factors and activities representing the idealised middle-class country life, be that pastoral lands, cultivated fields, village greens or nature walks (Ho-Chia Chueh and Yi-Hua Lu 2018; Martin Phillips 2008; Alexander Thomas et al. 2011). Although the idyll is widely considered the dominant frame for depicting the countryside, with a tendency to subsume other depictions over time (Peeren and Souch 2019) and crowd out other understandings of the rural, the idyll's form varies across nations. In NZ, ideals imported by European settlers have influenced the framing of the rural in mainstream culture; key components are hard work, close-knit communities, innovation and a tranquil, "clean and green" physical environment (Howland 2017). The only study of NZ's rural idyll in non-fiction television shows it co-exists with an emphasis on progress, influenced by the political economy of NZ agriculture and the structure of publicly funded television (Fountaine 2020). However, less dominant framings of the countryside also co-exist with the idyll, including anti-idyll framings in popular media genres such as horror and drama, or tropes of the bush,

wilderness or frontier (e.g., Leotta 2011; Phillip Vannini and April Vannini 2016). As Leotta writes, NZ landscapes are "characterised by overlapping layers of meaning" (2011, 191).

Traditional ideals of the home, (nuclear) family and community are also important constants of most Western forms of rural idyll, and are associated with conservative depictions of gender and gender relations and narrow conceptualisations of both male and female identity. Consequently, the rural idyll is also defined by what it excludes (David Bell 2006; Annie Hughes 2004), such as alternative masculinities, women, ethnic and sexual minorities and solo parents: "The countryside as an idyll in the Western world is, in generalised terms, a place for traditional gender and ethnic identities; a white, middle class, family oriented and unchanging space" (Maja Lagerqvist 2014, 34). Feminist geographers have been particularly alert to the ways in which community, as one of rurality's defining spaces, produces and maintains gender inequalities through a veneer of solidarity and mutual value (Jo Little and Ruth Panelli 2003) Women and men have traditionally played uneven roles in rural communities, with men's authority and control contrasting with the expectation that women "engage in activities and behaviours that would nurture, service and maintain traditional values, practices and relations" (Little and Panelli, 282), mirroring Connell (1987) and Liepins' (1998) arguments around hegemonic masculinity and subservient femininity.

Recent Scandinavian studies have placed less emphasis on what Susanne Stenbacka 2011 calls the gender idyll and instead document "other expressions of rural gender relations" Stenbacka (2011, 238), where women are active in countryside politics alongside paid work, and enjoy greater freedoms than in the city. But despite—or perhaps because—of its conventional associations, the idyll genre shows no real sign of waning, although different mediated versions embrace varying dimensions, and can interact with other media to create hybridised forms of the idyll, as in reality dating show, *Farmer Wants a Wife* (Peeren and Souch 2019). Indeed, Morris and Evans' observation from nearly twenty years ago remains pertinent: "a dualistic construction of gender identities has proved remarkably resilient … and extensive restructuring within the agricultural industry has done little to challenge them" (2001, 388).

Methods

Content analysis is "a formal system for doing something we all do informally rather frequently—draw conclusions from observations of content" (Guido Stempel 2003, quoted in Daniel Riffe et al. 2019, 22). The method has been widely used to document women's presence in various media formats (e.g., Bridges and Wadham 2020; Matud, Espinosa, and Wangüemert 2019; Riffe et al. 2019). Feminist researchers such as Gallagher (2001) argue for the value of content analysis for identifying and redressing gender inequality in news, and this impulse continues in the long running GMMP which captures women's underrepresentation, as sources and subjects, in mainstream news around the world (e.g., GMMP 2015). In this study, content analysis' key contribution lies in systematic documentation of patterns which are not readily apparent to the casual viewer. A limitation is the inability to fully explain these patterns or how they are received by audiences. However, content analysis lends itself to being combined with other qualitative analyses of media material (such as discourse or thematic analysis; see Tracey Feltham-King and Catriona Macleod 2016), and/or other methods such as surveys and interviews, to better understand the

conditions under which content is made and consumed, and to link content to its antecedent conditions and consequences (Riffe et al. 2019). In this study, content analysis is combined with qualitative interviews and focus groups.

This article is one outcome of a multi-method study of *CC* content, producers and audiences. The first part of this study employed qualitative thematic analysis (Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke 2006) to analyse patterns in *CC* content across a 25-year period. This produced detailed description of 20 programmes, selected randomly within a stratified sample, every five years from 1990–2015 (Fountaine 2020). The thematic analysis was based on my full verbal transcripts of the 20 programmes, which included a combination of narration, reporter questions and subject voice. Connection was identified as one of two dominant themes in *CC* over the 25 years, with subthemes of family, community, a passion or dream, and tradition. This earlier analysis noted that community connections were occasionally established in opposition to others and here, as in other parts of the show, there was a gendered subtext. Consequently, at the completion of the thematic analysis I undertook a quantitative content analysis of the sample, recording the numbers of male and female sources and subjects. This material is reported in the first part of the results section.

In the second part of the project, in 2018, I interviewed nine people involved with the production of *CC*: two producers, four directors, the show's researcher, and a camera operator and sound recordist. These wide-ranging qualitative interviews addressed questions of gender to varying extents. In this article, I draw predominantly from interviews with the show's producer Julian O'Brien and four of the programme's ten directors. Finally, three focus groups were conducted in 2019, with 21 men and women, who all self-identified as regular viewers of *CC*. One focus group was made up of urban viewers based in Auckland (age range of 30s-70s), and the two others comprised agriculture students from farming backgrounds (age range early 20s-30s) studying at my university. Participants were invited to comment on various aspects of the thematic analysis, including the depiction of women on *CC*.

Author reflexivity

I am a committed viewer of *CC*, and have been so for the past 10–15 years. I grew up in a farming family where the programme was (and still is) watched regularly. I live on a lifestyle block on the outskirts of a provincial city, and have researched and published about agricultural media and in the area of public service broadcasting generally. Consequently, my analysis is informed by my knowledge of broadcasting in NZ, and influenced by my own rural background and experiences. In nearly twenty years of studying media coverage of women in sports, politics and mainstream news, including involvement in the GMMP, I have been surprised by the lack of attention that feminist media scholars have paid to the rural and argue for closer study of rurality within both mainstream and feminist media analysis.

Results: gender of *CC* subjects and sources

Each episode of *CC* tells a self-contained story about a person (or small group of people), and runs for a commercial half hour, in a primetime weekend slot. The story is told

Table 1. Male and female subjects and sources, CC 1990–2015.

	1990 (3)	1995 (3)	2000 (3)	2005 (3)	2010 (4)	2015 (4)	Total (20 shows)
Number of named males	8	13	15	13	18	20	87
Number of named females	6	8	6	4	7	10	41
Number of quoted males	7	7	6	5	10	15	50
Number of quoted females	3	6	3	2	4	7	25

through a combination of voiceover and sources speaking to camera. This formula was consistent throughout the sample, particularly 2000–2015, and remains relatively unchanged even now (though since the mid 2010s, the roles of reporter and director have been merged and there is now one narrator who voices all shows). Gender of subjects and sources was content analysed and the data are presented in Table 1. A subject is defined here as any named person who appears in the show; a source is any named person who speaks.

In the sample, named men appeared over twice as often as named women, and men were twice as likely to speak or be quoted. The proportions of named men and women quoted in *CC* were similar: 58% of named men were quoted or spoke, and 61% of named women. These results did not simply improve over time: in fact, the 1990 programmes had the most equal ratio of named women to men, and the 1995 programmes the most equal ratio of quoted women to men. By both measures, women were least visible in 2005 and 2010. Interestingly, the more named and quoted subjects there were in a story, the lower the proportion of women. Table 2 shows the breakdown of shows in terms of the focus of the story.

Of the 20 shows, 18 were profile stories predominantly about male subject/s, female subject/s, or a couple or family. Two stories, from 1990 and 1995, had a wider focus (e.g., a local community event).

Men were five times more likely than women to be the focus of a show. In such male-focused stories, women were either completely absent, named and shown briefly in the background, or subordinate to men. An example of the latter, from 2015, showed Sarah Adam speaking to the camera from her kitchen and at a community theatre event, and in a brief outdoor appearance with her husband Peter at the end of the show. In contrast, Peter featured throughout the programme, engaging in farming and sporting activities, interacting with other male sources, and appearing with Sarah in the closing segment. At one point he acknowledged her input ("it's thanks to my wife really"), but she clearly has a secondary presence in the story.

These content data capture two important things: first, that *CC* shows are more likely to be about and to feature male protagonists, who mostly exhibit a hegemonic masculinity that emphasises the physical and business activities of farming, and second, that non-

Table 2. Focus of the show.

The show is predominantly about:	
Male subject/s	10
Female subject/s	2
A couple or family	6
Other	2
Total	20

family support people who appear in shows are almost always male. In the 18 profile stories, with the exception of named and occasionally quoted female family members, nearly all such sources were male: industry representatives, scientists, pilots, shepherds, managers and business partners/owners.

Perceptions of women's presence in *CC*

This section presents a different perspective on *CC* content, structured around two conceptualisations of women's presence on the show which emerged in interviews and focus groups: women as heroes and women as partners. There was a belief among programme-makers and audiences that *CC* reflects the way NZ farming life is structured, and that these representations of gender are fair, generally positive (in particular, that women are shown as hard workers) and inclusive of women's perspectives. *CC* staff also expressed a commitment to continuous improvement, which may partly be driven by the understanding that women are a key audience for the show.

Making women the heroes

In the course of describing their involvement with *CC*, the three women directors I interviewed spoke without prompting of programmes they had made featuring female subjects. They all discussed their increased awareness of the importance of including female perspectives and belief that farming women are capable of telling their own stories in a compelling manner.

Kerryanne Evans has been directing *CC* episodes for 12 years. A story she reported and directed in 2010 appeared in my sample and was the profile story with the most quoted women (three). She explained how a watershed story convinced her of the validity of women's stories, and spoke of her increased commitment to "making women the heroes":

> I had come across Colin … he's a deer hunter … that was the crux of my story … It wasn't actually until I was on the land that it clicked to me that his wife Marg was just as important in telling the story … And in fact, she became the hero … right alongside Colin, for the 18 years that they'd been on this property, was Marg … she was working as hard … she could shear these big sheep as well … That was my shift. That was my epiphany, really.

Here, Kerryanne equates "women as heroes" with equal importance in the storytelling, mostly reflecting equivalent labours: "she was working as hard". Indeed, references to women's "hard work" as a valid basis for inclusion on *CC* were made in two of three focus groups and several interviews. There are also overlaps in this definition with the notion of partnership, as explored below. Later, Kerryanne recalled another story with women as the central focus, where "the husband" played the subservient role:

> A woman in Rotorua had her own native plant nursery … She and her team of strong women were the crux of the whole story and her husband kind of played the bit part. So we'd actually totally turned the tables. And it wasn't because we were looking for that. It was just that we were brave enough to actually allow that story to be told … to really cement the fact that these people can tell their stories just as equally as the men.

Focus group members also recalled examples of shows where they considered women were a central focus, including a 2019 episode about Dayanne Almeida, an agricultural

scientist from Brazil working with sheep genetics in NZ, and an archival item a male farming student had seen "about this Westland lady farmer … owned her own dairy farm … you know, way back, so I think it's always been there". This student's belief that such stories have "always" been present is however belied by the overall content findings summarised in the previous section. Interestingly, the story about Almeida was directed by one of *CC*'s five female directors. While *CC* currently has equal numbers of male and female directors, and the women I interviewed felt Julian was supportive of their efforts to integrate female perspectives, just three programmes in my 1990–2015 sample featured women reporters, directors and/or narrators. There was no evidence that gender of reporter or director impacted the patterns of female representation except insofar as the sample was dominated both by male sources/subjects and male storytellers. Thus, while Kerryanne spoke passionately about making women the heroes and produced the story with the highest number of female sources in the sample, another episode from the sample, reported and directed by Katherine in the same year, included no female sources at all. Katherine reflected on the traditional centrality of the male experience to *CC* storytelling, while commending Julian's commitment to achieving a gender balance of directors. She restated the show's interest in including stories about women: "we feel that it's really good when we can and that they are probably under-represented".

In short, while there was some discussion of "making women the heroes", this conceptualisation of women's representation in *CC* was less apparent in the interviews and focus groups than the notion of partnership, explored in the following section.

Women as partners

The content analysis data show that women are far less likely than men to be the singular "heroes" of *CC* stories. However, stories featuring couples, especially where these couples worked together on the land and there were no other subjects, tended to treat male and female sources equally. In such instances, men and women were portrayed as both doing the hard work and making the sacrifices of farming, and physical tasks were shared. In my *CC* sample, the words partner or partnership were generally used to describe business arrangements, but the notion of "partnership" as an organising idea for gender relations on the farm was widely referenced, explicitly or implicitly, in interviews and focus groups with programme-makers and audiences.

All interviewees and the farming focus group members shared the view that with regard to gender portrayals, *CC* reflects the realities of farming life, which they perceive as a partnership model which values women—and importantly, their "hard work"—equally, even if they make different contributions. That this belief coexists with content analysis data showing women's lower visibility suggests women's contributions to farming life, if indeed equal, have less televisual appeal within the storytelling model of *CC*.

The two farming groups (comprising five female and seven male students) were asked how they thought women were portrayed on the show and the extent to which this reflected their experience of farming life. They said that depictions were "fair", "realistic" and that "there's no sexism". In the urban focus group with an older set of viewers, women's contributions were first discussed during a broader conversation about *CC*'s values, which again referenced "hard work":

Caroline: All of them [*CC* subjects] are brave.

Greg: And that's another thing … a lot of people, they all do something new. And the lot of them, they're all brave. I admire them.

Caroline: Yeah, they work hard.

Irene: And they've usually got a whole host of children. And you look at these mums. They're doing all this stuff and probably working and raising four kids and doing this, that and the other thing.

Edith: And milking the goats at four in the morning.

That women might bring a different—professional and academic—skillset to the farm was also noted, and this was integrated into a conceptualisation of partnership and equality:

Irene: Often a lot of the wives have had formal training … so it highlights them academically … as well as just being grafters doing the hard work.

…

Warren: And I think these days most farm businesses are set up where they are partners. So they are equal.

Two female students in one of the farming focus groups recounted a gendered division of labour captured on *CC* that rang true for them:

Belinda: There's probably a bit of variety—they had that one about that lady from overseas [the Almeida story mentioned earlier] … a bit of a focus on her and what she was doing but she didn't own the farm … she was just working there … that was a little bit different but normally it is the family, the husband and the wife, and the husband … does the farming physical side and the wife might do more the marketing … of the end product, or making it, processing it.

Tina: And I think that kinda represents how most farming families work, like the wife will do the more business side … so I think that's quite real, traditional for NZ farming families.

Another participant suggested "the wife might still have her bit to do off-farm" but two male students continued the discussion by adding examples of women engaged in hands-on farming, pointing out that "females are … becoming more involved with farming practice, in the Young Farmer [NZ's annual farming competition] there was two [finalists] … I think it's just coming through on some of the shows". Another coded reference to what Liepins (1998) identified as a discursive lag was made in the urban focus group, where it was suggested that industry and media recognition of "women as farmers" had been slow to arrive:

Greg: It's an incidental … when I was a kid they were farmers' wives. Now they are farmers.

Irene: Well, yes they are.

Greg: And they always were. But there's recognition, finally.

Greg: The rural sector was always the last one to change. Very conservative. Farmers. Very conservative.

Caroline: But this programme always did show women being really important.

Producer Julian O'Brien also referred to the farming community becoming more genuinely inclusive, with implications for *CC* storytelling:

> [In] those early shows … women tended to be bringing the scones to the shearers or looking after the children … over time that's changed hugely and we do a lot of stories that are just about women and a lot of stories where there's a very equal partnership in terms of the hands-on stuff of the farm, quite a number of stories where … a very traditional farmer married someone with a marketing background … While he was going out getting his hands dirty on the farm she was sitting in the office doing the books and … made it happen … probably contributing far more economically to the farm than he was … we haven't come up with a policy, we've just gone probably with the way that society's changed … It's also I think farming is less physical than what it used to be.

Director Vicki Wilkinson-Baker noted that in some situations the women were less involved in the day-to-day running of the farm, and consequently felt the story was not theirs to tell. However, for all the female directors I interviewed, including such women in their stories honoured their contributions to the family and was symbolically significant. As Vicki explained:

> I did a story on some Banks Peninsula wool people … She didn't work on the farm and that wasn't her thing, but I thought it was important to at least show her. She did do all the cooking and stuff like that, and then would tear off and do a full-time job … In this case, the guy acknowledged it wouldn't be possible without her … That's probably one of the few where I've had the woman in the traditional role, but I wanted to show her. She didn't really want to be in it … but I thought it was nice to have a little bit of her, to show her, because it is a whole team approach—often a family approach.

Ex-producer and current director Howard Taylor was of the view that "women control the remote control so we are very aware of that and we always try and feature women in the programme if we can". However, Howard explained that his current story would not feature the "farmer's wife and children" as it was about an agricultural training school and already contained too many different faces: his preference for the 24-minute programme was three on-camera participants. For director Katherine Edmond, a similar challenge in a story about four family members left her conflicted because of her increased commitment to inclusion:

> I can't cover six people in 24 minutes so I have focused on the four men. But I am very aware that I don't want to sideline the women or just describe them as somebody's wife. And would I have [previously] thought about that? Ten years ago you might not have had much to do with the wife. She might have made you morning tea or cooked for you, but not really been involved. And I think we're much more aware that farms are run by … everyone … I don't think that goes to putting them in a shot that they wouldn't necessarily be in but yeah, I would definitely try to include the partner and the children … And I think the farmers are much more likely to acknowledge their partner … so that has definitely changed. Many of our programmes are still men … but we're much more conscious of wanting that gender balance and looking for it.

The interview and focus group data capture programme-makers' intent and commitment to include women, as heroes and/or partners, and demonstrate a widespread view of partnership as a positive and equalising force for women's representation on *CC*. However, the easily-adopted narrative of partnership can gloss over women's ongoing

struggle to claim their own farmer identities (Liepins 1998, 380): in Australia, "older [farmer] organisations are more comfortable with a narrative of partnership, while the newer Australian groups are explicit in claiming 'farmer' identities for women". The following section explores the limits of producer and audience conceptualisations of women as heroes and partners, interrogating these views with reference to closer readings of specific stories from my sample and other research findings.

Interrogating perceptions: limits on women as heroes and partners

A closer reading of the two stories in the sample where women were a central focus—effectively the "heroes" of their episode—points to ways that *CC* storytelling about female farmers can still be gendered. In the 2005 story about the new owner of high country property Castle Hill Station, "wealthy Auckland widow" Christine Fernyhough was surrounded by men (eight male subjects/sources), including her manager. Her manager at times displayed a patronising attitude towards Fernyhough's farming skills, relaying his efforts to "explain carefully" so that she could understand what was going on, and the (male) reporter described her tractor work as going "embarrassingly wrong" and suggested "she might need a few more lessons". While commentary on female protagonists was not always or simply negative (in the other item with a female "hero", orchardist Debbie Campbell's partner described her as having "all the skills with the gardening and trees"), male sources and in some instances male reporters act as "judges" of women's farming abilities. In one of the focus groups, a female student appeared to recognise this tendency, although she offered it as evidence of fair treatment of women: "Always the farmer says [the woman] is the hardest worker I've ever seen". This quote implies that "the farmer" is male, and that his hegemonic power legitimises women's adequacy as farmers in their own right, in this instance with reference to their hard work.

Another difference between stories with male and female heroes was the emphasis on non-farming activities and off-farm interests, including parenting. While Fernyhough mentioned her family several times and was briefly shown with children and grandchildren, and Debbie Campbell's adult daughter was filmed helping in her orchard, these parenting narratives were peripheral in these two items with women as a central focus. Instead, the two strongest family narratives in the sample, both from 2015, were driven by fathers talking about their children; in these same programmes one mother (and self-described "camp cook") barely speaks and the other does not at all. This construction of male farmers as active, engaged and **visible** fathers resonates with other work showing the variances, shifts and changes in hegemonic masculinity, which constantly adapts to social conditions but importantly, maintains its ascendancy (Brandth 1995). Liepins identified an alternative "sensitive new age" farmer narrative in her 1998 study, and my research into *CC* suggests that active and engaged parenting is being absorbed into the dominant narrative of contemporary farming masculinity.

Even in stories where no children were present, men were inclined to be shown in a wider range of off-farm pursuits and lifestyles than women. In a 2000 story, the Rostrums were introduced as joint winners of the "Farmer of the Year" title and former GP Shirley Rostrum talked about her and husband Brent as a "complementary management team". While she was CEO of their joint company and ran the events and wine operations, she framed her role as one of support: "coming in behind". In narrative terms this portrayal

was mirrored in the show's structure, with the near entirety of the middle section following Brent's car rallying adventures. Morris and Evans (2001, 387) also documented greater attention to men's recreational activities, connecting this back to Connell's work on hegemonic masculinity: "Men continue to be shown participating in prestigious and conspicuous hobbies in their leisure time". Similarly, a 1995 *CC* story about the North Hokianga Agricultural & Pastoral show included five male and five female sources but it was the men who were shown shearing, axe throwing and dog trialling at this community event, while almost all the women were shown in their gardens or kitchens, preparing cakes, preserves and flowers for judging. Women's domestic skills were simultaneously valued (e.g., a long-serving female judge explained that "country women **do** do a lot of home preserves and they make a good job of it too") and mocked or trivialised, with one competitor described by the narrator as "a cooking, gardening, living nightmare for the rest of the district's housewives".

Finally, while the narrative of farming partnerships is seductive, and there certainly were stories in my sample where male and female protagonists were depicted equally, the content analysis provides a reminder that the rhetoric of partnership does not necessarily correspond with genuinely balanced treatment in a show. For instance, a 2010 story about a couple hunting thar together in the high country took an explicit "equal opportunity" angle, possibly impacted by its understanding of the predominantly female television audience, specifically foregrounding the efforts of Raewyn Hillyer in its opening sequence:

Voiceover: Hunting's often seen as a male sport but that's not always the case. For this woman it's a passion and there's nothing to match the excitement of chasing thar on Erewhon Station.

Raewyn: I like having the contrast in my life and doing things that are a little bit different and sometimes not traditionally women's roles.

Later, after an initial segment about Raewyn's partner, referencing both his work on Erewhon Station and his hunting, the narration stated, "John's had his time in the air; now it's his partner's turn to show that a woman can hunt just as well as a bloke". Subsequently, several minutes of the show were devoted to her hunting activities. In the show's closing segment, Raewyn's opening quote was reused in a brief interview with the male reporter. Yet despite this overt equality angle, Raewyn is the only quoted female in the show, alongside four men, and she is absent from the entire middle section, which features her partner taking then-All Black captain Richie McCaw on a hunting trip. Clearly then, interrogating programme-makers' and audiences' conceptualisations of women as heroes and partners, including with reference to content analysis data and examples from the CC sample, points to a more subtle gendered hierarchy of televised farming life in NZ, consistent with much earlier work in this area by Brandth (1995), Liepins (1998, 2000) and Morris and Evans (2001).

Discussion and conclusion

This multi-method study of 25 years of *CC* shows that rural women have limited visibility in NZ's televised rural idyll. About a third of stories in the sample were based around

couples and included male and female experiences and perspectives, alongside others which showcased women's farming skills, hard work and ability to undertake new, often physical and risky, challenges. However, there were also clear omissions, again consistent with earlier research by Liepins (1998, 2000) and Morris and Evans (2001). Overall, women appeared and talked less often than men, and were much less likely to be the focus of episodes. The greater number of men also permitted more variety in masculine representations, including hands-on fathers (who Liepins 1998 called "sensitive new-age farmers"), and involving off-farm interests. Surprisingly, the one show that used an overtly equal opportunity frame to introduce hunting couple Raewyn and John devoted one entire third to John and his All Black client. Even in items where women were shown as heroes or partners, the maleness of the surrounding industry affected numeric representation and tended to support a hegemonic masculinity where male sources judge women's farming skills, emphasising their subordinate status. These patterns were at times exacerbated by the constraints of commercial television-making, where directors limited their choices of those they consider peripheral characters.

However, while *CC*'s portrayal of NZ rurality is gendered, and in ways highly consistent with studies published nearly 20 years ago, depictions did not easily fall into the mode of "hegemonic masculinity" and "emphasised femininity". Men certainly were active farmers, linked to masculine traditions of high country mustering, hunting and sport and with a greater range of off-farm interests—but were also depicted as fathers and family leaders more than women. Some women had their own careers, as doctors and business analysts, and/or were shown to engage in hard and risky physical work such as hunting and scrub cutting, falling more into Liepins (1998) marginal category of "real" women farmers rather than "traditional farming femininity". It was really only in one of the few community-focused stories where femininity was emphasised through a focus on traditional domestic skills of farming women, such as preserving and gardening. However, while there was an expressed commitment among directors to, as Kerryanne put it, "make women the heroes", the real women farmers in the sample were still marginalised and judged in more nuanced ways.

Combining content analysis with the perspectives of audiences and producers allows for the interrogation of perceptions versus empirical realities, and helps explain the focal points that define an understanding of "equality" in rural storytelling. The focus group data suggest that when audiences justify portrayals of women as "fair" and "realistic" they gloss over the social construction of gender relations that underpins farming life and naturalises a patriarchal order, instead referring to this as the way things "normally" or "really" are—words echoed by the judge in the community profile story: "women **do** do a lot of preserving". This resonates with Jo Little's view that "there is a shared understanding within rural communities of gender identity. This understanding is not fixed or uncontested but it exists as a very strong influence on the way gender identities are constructed, perceived and practised" (2002, 42–43). Community traditions are a key component of rural life, linked to the rural idyll and previously documented as a key part of *CC*'s theme of connection (Fountaine 2020). The way these stories are told can also reinforce patriarchal gender relations (Little and Panelli 2003), yet this social aspect of gender was not identified or discussed by producers and audiences, who instead focused their discussions of gender around the equal or realistic representation of female sources

in programmes, and employed the concept of partnership to justify both contemporary farming practice and *CC*'s representation of farming life in NZ.

Though drawing from a relatively small sample of shows from a series that varied in length over the 25 years, the content analysis does provide some tangible evidence of patterns that are not readily visible to the committed viewer or programme producer. Indeed, TVNZ's own deputy director of content recently explained the long-term success of *CC* by referring to "three critical things in the guidebook … get a woman, a horse and a dog in the first three minutes" (Dani McDonald 2018). The empirical evidence suggests reality—at least in terms of women!—is inconsistent with this formula, though reconciling this study's multiple perspectives on *CC* representations is no easy matter. The younger farming audience regards *CC*'s depictions of women as fair and realistic; older urban viewers see the show as relatively progressive, particularly given what they see as farming's conservatism. Directors and producers report being increasingly conscious of the importance of telling women's stories, influenced by personal values, the culture established by producer Julian O'Brien, changing social norms and perhaps more pragmatically, an understanding of audience expectations. The defining value of "hard work" overlays gender, an apparent proxy of equality. There are tensions here between empirical evidence of women's underrepresentation across 25 years, which map readily onto patterns established in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the more recently captured views of production staff and audiences. It is possible that this tension reflects genuine shifts in *CC* content and industry patterns since 2015; certainly the 2019 season included at least three profiles of young women active in farming (including the Almeida story mentioned earlier), and farming leaders report notable increases in women pursing farming and agribusiness careers in NZ (Holly Ryan 2017). This study is also limited by its relatively small sample and non-representative audience groups, and its primary focus on verbal transcriptions rather than visual representations of gender. More research is urgently needed to reconcile these perspectives and help advance our understanding of gender representations in farming media, and how these align with industry and societal values, in 2020 and beyond.

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