


# THERE IS REASON TO BE CONCERNED

## ABOUT WOMEN ON THE LAND

**Dr John Ashfield**

*(taken from Rural Women's Network Newsletter, Issue 1 2009)*



FINANCIAL AND GENERALIST **COUNSELLORS** ARE REPORTING A SIGNIFICANT **INCREASE** OF SEPARATING COUPLES AND **FRACTURING FAMILIES**.

Gauging the impact of drought on the mental health of rural and remote communities is not as straightforward as it may appear. As many people on the land will tell you, two seasons of drought for people in 'good' farming country, can sometimes have a more adverse psychological effect than many seasons of drought in pastoral areas where people are more hardened to surviving with meagre rainfall, small resources, and in very difficult conditions. But there does appear to be one thing which otherwise diverse communities have in common - their experience of powerlessness.

Drought has stripped away years of hard-earned gains; it has shattered dreams, broken relationships, and severely diminished people's sense of control over their lives.

In my work as a psychotherapist, I see similar numbers of women and men. Both have their own characteristic ways of coping, of handling stress, and dealing with emotion. Both tend to exhibit gender-specific ways of not coping.

Though women generally tend to excel at expressing and verbalising emotion, this is not always an advantage, because they're also inclined to ruminate and go over and over problems and their associated feelings, the pitfall of which can be under-regulation of thoughts and emotions. Not surprisingly, women tend to be more susceptible than men to depression and anxiety.

Men, particularly in times of difficulty, tend instead to 'batten down the hatches' and focus on problem solving; they distance themselves from the emotional content, putting emotions on hold in order to remain action-focused until things feel more under control. Though they appear to be better at emotion and thought regulation than women, the pitfall for men can be over-regulation, failing to deal with and disperse emotions put on hold. Men are more susceptible than women to 'self-medicating' with alcohol, and are much more highly represented in suicide statistics.

A disturbing trend in rural and remote communities, and one that is becoming more pronounced, is that of marital breakdown. Financial and generalist counselors are reporting a significant increase of separating couples and fracturing families.

Women are generally the first to know when relationships are under serious strain and at risk of going past the point of no return. Often it is left to them to have to be assertive in the relationship about seeking assistance. Men do of course care about their marriages, but all too easily get locked into survival mode - a kind of blinkered stoicism that needs to be firmly challenged with sometimes unequivocal language, like: "if we don't get some support with what is happening to us, our marriage will end."

Keeping up the role of trying to preserve relationships and the emotional well-being of a family is a big responsibility, particularly for those women whose own sources of social and emotional support are rapidly diminishing. With a common trend towards larger land holdings in many areas, not only are more families experiencing increased isolation, but many women, who mainly derive their support from other women, are feeling particularly alone. Add to this, the diminishing morale and attentiveness of their menfolk, and the grief associated with children moving away for better opportunities, not surprisingly, some women are becoming seriously depleted and vulnerable emotionally.

There is reason to be concerned about men on the land. If their presence on the land is to be sustainable into the future, then we will have to think and act creatively to ensure they are adequately supported, and that their needs are not permitted to be overshadowed by seemingly more important practical and economic issues.