

## Woman of the Land Changing the Future

Cathy McGowan is a farmer, academic, community worker and business woman. Her epiphany occurred when, at the age of 30, she bought a farm in her native Indigo Valley, in North East Victoria.

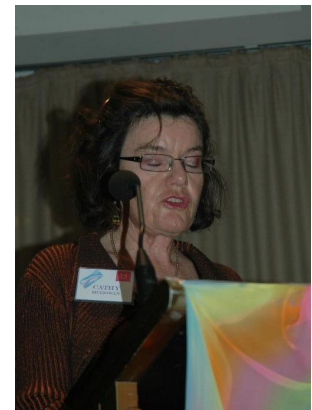
The descendant of five generations of local farmers, Cathy discovered that although she knew many things about the jobs that girls and women did on farms, she knew little about farming itself.

So in 1993, Cathy and several other women farmers formed Australian Women in Agriculture and set about correcting the imbalance.

The group began lobbying and working with major providers of education in agriculture, and introduced a series of popular training courses for women covering subjects such as driving tractors, fencing, engine maintenance, calving and bookkeeping.

A huge change has taken place over the past 15 years, Cathy says,

*“The Victorian Farmers Federation has gender balance on almost all its committees and women in agriculture have become much more confident. WE regularly go to Canberra to lobby the Government on issues which are important to us. The skill levels are there, the networks are there and now we understand how the system works. It just takes a little strategic intervention and big changes happen”.*



After her term as president of Australian Women in Agriculture, Cathy was appointed chair of the inaugural Regional Women’s Advisory Council, set up by the then deputy prime minister, John Anderson, in 1999. In 2001 she was invited to be a community representative at the 4<sup>th</sup> Ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Doha. Cathy is now taking her knowledge internationally and working with women in Ireland and PNG to set up organizations for women in agriculture.

Cathy is also active in her local Catholic community. An interest which she says has been fuelled by her involvement in WATAC.

*“I first came to WATAC when I was studying for my Masters Degree in Agriculture and Rural Development at the University of Western Sydney. Bernice was our guest lecturer talking about community activism, organizational change and the patriarchy. In this very non-catholic audience she was inspirational and won a standing ovation. She made a strong impression on us all. I was inspired to find out more about Bernice and this group of women who could bring change, who could work in a most strategic fashion, and so obviously enjoy life.*

*Since that time I have regularly gone to WATAC conferences, some times as a speaker or panelist on matters relevant to rural Australia. I am always enthused and energized by the content and participants. But most useful of all is the theory and practice gained during these conferences of how to bring change in our world and ensure women’s voices are heard.”*

Cathy has a particular interest in education. She is currently Chair of the Council which oversees the governance of the four Catholic schools in Wodonga. She is proud that there is gender balance on this Council as well as among the school principals. And she thinks the vision of Catholic Education Wodonga of providing ‘Outstanding Catholic education committed to community’ will keep her out of trouble for a few years yet.