

More than a farmer's wife: rural women's forum

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A real farmer's wife: fashion designer Leila Sweeney has her own successful label that she runs on a property in a community of less than 400 people. Image: Andy Rogers.

By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] W
[/dropcap]hen you think of a farmer's wife, what comes to mind?

A clichéd 'reality' TV show? A woman in sensible shoes slaving over a wood stove to feed the shearers? Or a highly capable, multi-tasking soul who milks – sometimes literally – the best out of life on the land?

A rural women's forum to be held in Dunkeld next month (May 13) called **Farming Fantasies-Rural Realities**, seeks to connect

those women who are very much the latter, but who because of distance, or a shortage of time, may not know each other exists.

Among them will be women who are not only involved in the running of their farming property, but also running their own businesses, raising children, organising community events or working to improve farming practices – and sometimes all of the above.

“There are so many women right across this region who are doing amazing things,” says **Marty Gent** from the Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Authority that is coordinating the day.

“This forum, which is a first for us, is aimed at bringing them together, sharing their experiences, building networks, providing support for each other and, hopefully, leading to other events down the track.”



From the farm gate to fashions on the field: Leila Sweeney at her Tatyoon property. Image supplied.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] T
[/dropcap]he sort of inspirational women Marty is talking about include **Leila Sweeney**, a 27-year-old fashion designer

raised on a NSW farm who has since returned to farming life at Tatyoon, near Ararat.

Tatyoon has a population of 326 which drops to 323 when Leila, her husband **Sean McDougall** and four-month-old baby **Vincent** go travelling, but despite its size and rural location, Leila successfully negotiates running her fashion label, [Leila Sweeney](#), from their 1620ha sheep, cattle and cropping property near the town.

“I grew up on a farm and even when I was living in Sydney (on a fashion design scholarship) I was a country girl in a big city,” Leila says.

“To be honest, I love designing fashion, but I am not a fashionable person at all,” she laughs.

Having a small child meant Leila missed being involved in Melbourne Fashion Week this year, but she still nipped down to Melbourne to “keep an eye on what’s happening”.

She is also working toward releasing her next collection of wool garments by September next year that will, she hopes, be produced entirely on Australian soil. At the moment Leila has her range knitted in Singapore where she is, oddly enough, guaranteed the use of 100% Australian wool.



All class: some of Leila Sweeney's designs that have featured at the Melbourne Cup carnival. Image supplied.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A5CECD;"] A [dropcap]side from running her own business, Leila also teaches textiles at Monivae College, Hamilton, and runs the [Live Rural](#) charity with Sean (are you exhausted yet?) to support Australian farmers.

Yet Leila believes she is not as atypical as what she sounds.

"There are a lot of women out there on farms who are running their own small businesses and doing their own thing alongside the main farm production, such as things like raising boutique lamb," she says.

Yet despite all the creativity, skills and innovative ways that women bring to farm life, they are still rarely first in line to inherit the farm from their parents, even if their brothers show no interest.

The Farming Fantasies-Rural Realities forum may also be another step toward changing this tradition that remains more

stubborn.

Leila will be one of three guest speakers at the forum, alongside **Lisa Dwyer** – Chair of WestVic Dairy and a non-executive Director with the Australian Livestock Export Corporation Limited – and **Naomi Turner** from the Tarrington Progress Association and one of the driving forces behind the Swamp Stomp and the Woolly West Fest.

The free forum will also include discussions on community leadership, confidence and change; sustainable farming and soil health; business management and marketing; and farmer and family health and safety.

[box]The Farming Fantasies-Rural Realities forum will be held from 10am-4pm on Friday, May 13 at the Dunkeld Community Centre, 14 Sterling St. Free but RSVP essential by May 9 to Marty Gent at: m.gent@ghcma.vic.gov.au We must also mention that this project is supported by Glenelg Hopkins CMA, through funding from the Australian Government's National Landcare Program.[/box]