



RRR NETWORK

WOMEN'S VOICES REGIONAL REPORT

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Prepared for:

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Written by:

Kendall Gailbraith and Jackie Jarvis of the Rural, Regional
and Remote Women's Network Western Australia Inc.

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Executive Summary

The Women's Voices project led by the Department of Communities (DoC) to address gender inequality in Western Australia presented an invaluable opportunity for the Rural Regional Remote Women's Network of WA (RRR Network) to engage with the women who make up our network.

The RRR Network would like to recognise and thank the DoC for the funding received. Their financial support allowed for a comprehensive overview to be conducted in the WA regions.

Ten forums were conducted in Northam, Busselton, Geraldton, Esperance, Manjimup and Bridgetown travelling over 5000km's throughout the months of May, June and July of 2019. The RRR Network met with 142 women and received demographic data via a survey for 92.

Women's Voices provided a unique opportunity to directly connect with women across the regions and communicate the mission and initiatives of the RRR Network. It was enlightening to learn first-hand, the diverse and complex experiences and challenges that women face in the regions, under the four priority areas of Health and Wellbeing, Safety and Justice, Economic Independence and Leadership.

The forum participants often discovered that the key topics were interconnected driving robust discussions and exposed contrasting themes in different locations. From daily and monotonous long-distance travel, little to no child-care options including flexible arrangements, overwhelming sexist attitudes, untapped skills, lack of jobs and social complications for reporting of domestic violence and sexual harassment in small communities. All issues that continue to drive a wedge in achieving gender equality.

The connection and influence of the RRR Network within regions has proven to be significant when undertaking this initiative. By extending the 'Women's Voices' to regional women – the RRR Network received positive feedback and a genuine thanks for taking the time to acknowledge the regional perspective.

Furthermore, the RRR Network considers their recent and improved understanding of the regional woman to be of a benefit to the DoC when formulating its Western Australian Gender Equality Strategy.

The Main Issues for Regional WA Women identified

1. Lack of career building jobs for women and specifically professional leadership positions and compounded by child-care difficulties and geographic isolation;
2. Burden of volunteering and caring responsibilities where women primarily fulfil these roles;
3. Lack of essential women's health services in the regions;
4. Domestic violence and surrounding complications of reporting in small communities due to isolation;
5. Sexual harassment and fixed expectations to accept such behaviours with little to no effective reporting channels available;
6. Regional to metropolitan transition concerns for families when youth are pursuing education or employment.

2.0 Consultation Summary Report and Evaluation

2.1 Planning:

The RRR Network theme was the 'Regional Roadshow'. It was an opportunity to take RRR Network staff and board members to the regions to discuss issues exclusively about women with women. The immediate target audience was the RRR Network membership and subscriber base, but an invitation was extended to all women of the community. The areas chosen for the forum were determined by where the greatest number of RRR members were located and within a reasonable driving distance.

The RRR Network liaised with relevant local government Community Development Officers (CDO) in each location who circulated the forum's details to their appropriate networks, such as Women in Business or Southwest Women's Health and Information Centre. In addition, an extensive social media campaign was undertaken using Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter to promote the event. Through word of mouth, the RRR Network's efforts for the Women's Voices initiative provided additional forum opportunities in more remote locations. Some of which were declined due to being outside of funding timelines, however advice was given to other organisations on how to deliver the forum.

Attempts were made to invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women through the CDO's, but unfortunately, this did not translate to attendance at the forums.

2.2 Event Format:

The forums in each location followed the same format. Morning sessions were 2.5 hours; evening sessions were 2 hours and with tables of 4 to 6 with a RRR Network team leader taking notes. Either the RRR Network's CEO, Policy Advisor or Board Member facilitated the forums.

The first hour was an investigation and to identify issues. The final hour was solutions focused where tables would share their main points and discuss ideas on how to address the issues identified. The Women's Voice's infographic was supplied on tables, along with pens and paper for individuals to make personal notes. At the close of the evening sessions, the RRR Network held a separate sponsored Sundowner event.

The RRR Network collected data as suggested by the DoC with a survey and this was placed on the tables. Not all women participated either through choice or forgetting to do so. See survey questions below, diagram 1:

Diagram 1: Survey

| Questions | Please circle your answers |
|--|---|
| Gender | Male Female Prefer not to disclose |
| Age | 18-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 61-70 70 and up |
| Are you Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander of origin | Yes No Both |
| Are you culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) | Yes No |
| Do you volunteer in your community | Yes No Sometimes |
| What is your current employment status? | Full-time (including self-employment) Part-time/casual (including family business) Career break/family or caring responsibilities Retired Currently looking for work |
| Do you see yourself living in the same town in ten years' time? | Yes No Unsure |
| If not, what would be the primary reason for leaving? | Access to education for my children Access to education for myself Improved or alternative employment Access to better health facilities Closer to family and friends Cost of living/affordable housing Improved lifestyle Other |

2.3 Participation:

All participants were thoroughly engaged. Women expressed passion, confusion, sadness and happiness. Regional women are resilient and pragmatic; they understand that they cannot have the full range of services provided to women in metropolitan Perth, but they do feel more could be done to ease their burden of geographical isolation. It was observed that all women contributed to their tables' discussion, and that there was mostly a consensus among participants. At times, divergent views were offered, respected and considered in group discussions.

The impact of isolation and its accumulative effect was by far the largest issue identified. There was a sense that participants were overwhelmed on how to reduce the impact of isolation. For example, isolation and a small community means there is little to no private or public transport services available in the region. In turn this determines many women to not receive necessary health care, opportunities to socialise, improve well-being or be enabled to generate an income unless their workplace is within walking distance to their residence.

Lastly, the RRR Network recognised through this journey how significant, broad and subtle gender inequality can be. Based on this, constructing and delivering a gender equality strategy will be a challenge for the DoC, but the RRR Network, its members and the forum participants are eager and hopeful of the state government's plans.

2.4 Reflection:

The RRR Network strongly believe that this initiative was rewarding for all involved and therefore the consultation achieved its given principles. Specifically, women were comforted by the idea that regional voices were being heard. Through networking, speaking publicly about important issues and simply been provided with an opportunity to participate in a gender equality plan for Western Australia was empowering.

When assessing forum procedure and how effective it was; the RRR Network noticed that women felt regularly cut-off and forced to start new topics. This was unavoidable due to time constraints. The forum allowed for two and half hours, however with very complex discussion points, there simply was not enough time to allow each conversation to run its natural course.

To ensure participants left feeling that their voices were heard and respected, the RRR Network is exploring how to best continue this conversation and provide progress updates regarding the DoC's gender equality strategy. The RRR Network was previously, from 1996 until 2016, a Ministerial advisory group; providing a more formalised and supported role that did allow for more complex exploration of these types of issues. As a result of the previous government decision, made in 2016 to fund the transition of organisation into an independent incorporated entity, the RRR Network no longer receives government support or a formal mechanism to provide ongoing, regular policy advise to government on matter impacting regional women and their communities. Bridging this gap and providing feedback to government on a regular basis is hampered by our budget constraints but remains an important priority of the RRR Network.

3.0 Demographics

The RRR Network received demographic data from 92 forum participants out of 140. All participants were women, and none identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander of origin. It was observed that many women were not familiar with the term CaLD and this created confusion and some awkward moments. The term may be widely recognised in government circles but adopting plain English terms when engaging with the community may need further considerations.

Diagram 2: Demographic Data

| Area | Participants | Age | | | | | | Employment | | |
|-------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| | | 18-29 | 30-39 | 40-59 | 50-59 | 60-69 | 70 + | Full-time/ studying | Part-time or casual | Looking for work/retired or break |
| Northam | 16 | | 4 | 7 | 5 | | | 13 | 1 | 2 |
| Busselton | 10 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 1 | | 5 | 5 | |
| Geraldton | 25 | 2 | 2 | 13 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 17 | 8 | |
| Esperance | 24 | 3 | 3 | 8 | 8 | 1 | 1 | 13 | 6 | 1 |
| Manjimup | 9 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | | 1 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| Bridgetown | 8 | | | | 2 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Total | 92 | 8 | 12 | 32 | 27 | 8 | 5 | 52 | 24 | 12 |
| Percentage | | 8.70% | 13.04% | 34.78% | 29.34% | 8.70% | 5.40% | 56.52% | 26% | 13% |

4.0 Our Purpose

When developing a comprehensive ten-year plan for achieving gender equality in Western Australia it is essential that the vast experiences of all its women are considered and gender equity is pursued.

Regional people represent nearly a third of WA's population out of Greater Perth (535,708 people). Their experience is unique - living in Australia's largest state where isolation and distance and small population size is central to all-important decisions regarding health, well-being, finance, justice, safety and employment.

The issues identified in this report are expected to be universal for women no matter where they live. However, the RRR context is amplified because of geographical and social isolation. For instance:

- The female partner of a farming business has little to no choice but to hire unskilled labour to do the highly skilled seasonal farm work that she is qualified to do, such as harvester operations, because there is no childcare in her region.
- An 18yr. old school leaver cannot find work in her local community. She is forced to leave home and move hundreds of km's away to increase her chances of finding employment with a hope to build a future for herself.
- A local woman feels that she cannot report domestic violence to the local policeman because he plays football with her partner.
- A mother cannot afford to take three days off work to drive from Esperance to Perth (1400 km's return) for an essential but only a routine medical procedure for her daughter.

The RRR Network appreciates that there is contrast and equal importance to the metro and regional experience. Their relationship and understanding of the other is critical in delivering a gender equality plan.

5.0 Introduction

Women in the regions have a unique set of challenges but in nearly all instances, most of them stem from ‘isolation’.

Isolation is fluid, its irreversible, and while it continually challenges lifestyle for regional people, it should be noted that it is also enriching and uniquely rewarding. Isolation allows people to live a life that is removed from large populations, simplified and community engagement is focal and conversely expected. Additionally, it offers wide open spaces, natural landscapes as far as the eye can see and connections to the land and generating an income from it.

On the flip side, isolation can be tedious but furthermore, its multifaceted. It was evident that isolation became more of an issue when the women explored their issues together in detail.

The below themes were identified:

- An *expectation* that feminine like services are not available to women in the regions resulting in a lack of awareness of what *is* available.
- Accepting the conflicting reality that their potential and skills would not be reached because of their geography.
- A small employment market that inadvertently stabilises an economic dependence on their male partners’, who find it much easier to secure work in the regions where masculine industries dominate.

It was evident when observing these conversations that women in the regions tend to expect less, therefore ask for less and as a result, settle for less with little improvement or satisfaction.

On a far more optimistic note, it was observed that the coming together of women from diverse backgrounds where intelligent and personal conversation was encouraged was a positive and rewarding experience alone.

The RRR Network sees value in the process undertaken through face to face information sharing and the inspiring of others. On this basis, we believe community forums should be regular events for regional areas so that more individuals are empowered, and isolated communities can steer themselves towards more sustainable lifestyles.

This report will explore gender inequality of RRR women, and in the process, share with the Department of Communities what life is like for women living in the Western Australian regions.

6.0 Regional Issues to Gender Equality

6.1 Lack of Jobs and career building opportunities

The government's plan to increase jobs in WA and for the regions is to be commended and is visibly on track to meet its targets. Although, with a primary focus on infrastructure building jobs, the RRR Network sees largely immediate gains to be made by men. The RRR Network acknowledge State Government is committed to working with industry to increase opportunities for women to enter traditionally male dominated industries, such as recent negotiations with Austel¹ but this is only likely to be taken up by a small percentage of women.

WA's male to female workforce ratio is 55% to 45%². 1 in 2 women work part-time³ and WA's pay gap is the highest in the country at 23%. But what does a woman earn in the regions compared to her metro sister? ABS cannot determine this data and so understanding the lived experience of a diminished job market in the regions needs to be explored in other ways.

The unemployment rate in nearly all WA regions is comparatively low. It is worth noting that the while the WA female workforce participation rate is at 61% it is not an accurate reflection. Where women either know or accept that there are no employment options for them and subsequently rely on their male partners income, they're considered statistically to be abstaining from the workforce. Inadvertently this lowers the female workforce participation rate. From a lack of diverse, or even suitable employment options for women, many are forced to give up notional ideas of economic independence and leadership.

Women who find themselves alone in the regions are at greater risk of falling into poverty, particularly those aged above 55. WA State Government's most recent Affordable Housing Action Plan noted that median dwelling prices outside the metropolitan area have continued to increase, with South West centres like Busselton and Albany having higher income-to-house price ratios than Perth. 52% of participants aged above 50 answered 'no' or 'unsure' if they thought they would still be living in the same town in ten years' time. Citing reasons of better access to health facilities, improved or alternative employment, cost of living and improved lifestyle.

¹ <https://www.jtsi.wa.gov.au/news-media/news-detail/2019/03/07/hundreds-of-local-shipbuilding-jobs-and-apprenticeships-on-offer>

² <https://www.dtwd.wa.gov.au/workforce-development/workforce-information>

³ Women's Voices Infographic

Industry Overview

The resource and agriculture industries remain dominant in regional Western Australia. Both of which have been male led in their employment market. Mining in WA and the FIFO worker has created routine household absenteeism across the state, leaving women either alone at home and or looking after children. This is further compounded socially and economically for regional women because of isolation and small communities.

Women communicated a reduced need to source additional income for their households when their partners mining income was enough. This financial decision in many instances is a forced narrative because of a diminished employment market in smaller regional locations, and one that offers little flexibility for women. With comparatively increased household earnings from the resource industry, some male and female partnerships deliberate the necessity for an additional income generated by the female. Of the considerations addressed there is reduced child-care subsidies, the financial need and last of all - personal 'want'. The latter offering upskilling, social interactions and personal contribution to the household. Typically, and practically, it is the 'want' that is sacrificed, underpinning a woman's economic independence, health and well-being and career building opportunities to either little or none.

Agriculture Industry

Women represent 32% of the agriculture workforce⁴. Agriculture in WA offers the most obvious employment options, but it can be problematic for women. This is because agriculture is occupied mostly by men and while women remain the largest group affected by sexual harassment⁵ coupled with ineffective reporting in the workplace, both the resource and agriculture industries are systemic deterrents for women.

Structurally, agriculture production is highly seasonal in nature and therefore not entirely conducive to women who are primary caregivers. Agriculture can offer low-skilled and low-paid short-term jobs which are often taken up by unencumbered back-packers/working holiday makers (WHM) and not women from the area. 11% of agriculture workers are from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds. Women within the immediate area are seeking stability, safe working conditions and opportunities that can be integrated with household responsibilities. Unfortunately, the readily available agriculture industry is typically not so accommodating for women.

⁴ <http://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/publications/insights/snapshot-of-australias-agricultural-workforce#woman-in-the-agricultural-industry>

⁵ ABS (2016) 53% of women and 25% of men have experienced sexual harassment during their lifetime.

Innovation

To fill employment gaps and create opportunity for women in the regions entrepreneurial innovation has developed in some parts. For instance, women with artisan skills are creating multiple income revenues by diversifying, and others are value adding to existing business ventures. For example, a farming partnership who currently grow and export lupin for stock-feed are now exploring lupin for human consumption. This innovative idea was instigated by the female partner who suddenly became unwell related to diet and was required to become gluten free. It may be, that isolation can propel innovation and build niche businesses in the regions, and more importantly improve economic independence for women.

The Public Sector

A lack of public sector jobs based in the regions was raised at most forums. This discussion was further accentuated when learning from the infographic that women make up 72% of all public sector jobs. It was felt, that prime job opportunities for women led my state government (biggest employer of WA) was not extended to the regions. Women who were working in the public sector believed that they could not progress their careers if they were to remain in the regions. At the time of writing this report, a search was conducted on public sector jobs with salary levels across the regions. See below diagram:

Diagram 3: Public Sector Job Search by Region and Salary June 2019

| Region | \$20,000 - \$49,999 | \$50,000 - \$79,999 | \$80,000 - \$99,999 | \$100,000 - \$119,999 | \$120,000 - \$150,000 | \$150,000 - \$160,000 |
|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Perth Metro | 30 | 165 | 131 | 114 | 114 | 94 |
| Gascoyne | 0 | 8 | 8 | 7 | 5 | 2 |
| Goldfields-Esperance | 8 | 35 | 21 | 16 | 8 | 5 |
| Great Southern | 4 | 21 | 19 | 15 | 8 | 4 |
| Kimberly | 2 | 21 | 23 | 19 | 7 | 4 |
| Mid-West | 5 | 21 | 18 | 16 | 5 | 4 |
| Peel | 3 | 11 | 9 | 8 | 5 | 3 |
| Pilbara | 5 | 31 | 25 | 18 | 8 | 6 |
| South West | 11 | 33 | 25 | 14 | 7 | 5 |
| Wheatbelt | 8 | 28 | 23 | 18 | 8 | 3 |

The Double Bind

For women who held senior positions in the public sector or private enterprise, many of these jobs were remote from Perth. Maintaining remote work was difficult due to frequent long-distance travel to Perth or other locations. For example, one woman who was in Agri finance travelled approximately 180km's per day to first drop her child off to day-care and then to get to her workplace. Another woman would travel from Northam to Perth weekly to hold meetings with various individuals. As a result, significant time was lost on the road, but to maintain this level of work, pursue career building or leadership roles and to remain living in the regions, it was necessary. Time on the road to achieve work tasks whilst largely connected to women of senior positions can sometimes be a double bind. Professional regional women are often considered to be overqualified for jobs that are available within the regions, leaving them with little choice but to sustain long-distance travel to maintain an income and fulfil their potential. A woman who holds a university degree in science, marketing or even business can be over skilled in the regions. Unless, she is a teacher or in healthcare there are some opportunities.

The alternatives for women in the above situation are to settle for less (if there is opportunity) or relocate; however, relocation impacts not only the individual and their family but also the wider community for various economic and social reasons. Female leadership in the regions has a social importance to community growth and development, such as volunteering. It was discussed at length that a decentralisation of Perth would redefine the regional employment market, alleviate travel pressures, boost micro-economies, build capacity for business, improve education outcomes and overall sustain future regional communities. Perth could

A decade long resources boom has seen Perth become an important operating base for some of the world's largest diversified corporations, with 78 of the world's largest 500 companies operating from the Perth region. The Department of State Development (Government of Western Australia, 2014a) reports that over 400 international organisations have a strong presence in Perth. They note that these organisations either have their own projects, which they service from Perth, or they supply exclusively to the mining, energy and exploration companies in Western Australia. Additionally, Perth headquarters 35% of the ASX listed public companies in Australia, comparing with Sydney at 31% and Melbourne at 27% (ASX, 2014a). The great majority of these listed WA organisations operate in the mining and energy sector (ASX, 2014a).

explore how to expand its corporate and mining sector to the regions particularly when many of its companies are only operating bases. ⁶

The Child Care Dilemma

Access to childcare facilities in the regions can be difficult particularly in areas of small population. Like the city-based centres, there can be waiting lists for childcare facilities. Unlike the city, the second closest childcare facility could be over 50 kms away; if not further. Many small towns that do offer some form of childcare often have limited hours or just a set few days a week. Full time long day-care is non-existent in many towns. Many women simply cannot work outside of the home as a result of where they live.

Whilst in Australia we recognise the importance of early childhood education and value tertiary qualified carers as the “gold standard”, for many WA women this is simply not accessible due to isolation, small population size and lack of suitably qualified carers. Families who make alternative arrangements such as the use of trusted baby-sitters or experienced au pairs/nannies from overseas are further disadvantaged by a system that prevents them from accessing childcare rebates due to the use of “non-accredited’ carers.

Farming families are further disadvantaged by federal immigration policies impacting the ability of WA women to play a more active role in their farm businesses. Currently a backpacker/WMH who completes 88 days of agricultural work in regional WA can qualify to apply for a second year Working Holiday Visa. This highly successful program has, over a number of years seen many young international workers support the highly seasonal agricultural sector. Access to a second-year visa is highly prized by WHMs who travel to regional WA in significant numbers where the local population cannot provide the seasonal labour force need for harvest or seeding operations. Unfortunately, working in childcare on farms is specifically excluded from the second-year visa scheme. Many women we spoke with expressed a desire to play a more active on-farm role at peak times. They were willing and able to pay appropriate awards rate for childcare and accepted they would get neither a tax deduction or childcare rebate if employing a WHM - but were frustrated that they could not offer second year visa “sign-off” for someone providing childcare support at peak times.

⁶ Committee of Perth, Filling The Pool Report, 2015

6.2 Volunteering and Caring Responsibilities

75% of our participants volunteered in their communities. Age group 41 to 50 was our biggest volunteer group at 40%, followed by 51 to 60 at 26%, then 60 and up at 16% and 4.8% for 18 to 30.

Women in nearly all forums discussed the burden of volunteering combined with caring responsibilities. They understood and accepted that volunteering was incredibly important to sustain community engagement and interest. In some cases, essential services are run by volunteers, such as the ambulance and other emergency services, adding to the volunteer burden. But why must it fall primarily on women? With more women working today, travelling long distances, maintaining the conservative status-quo of their households, caring for ageing parents or children - volunteering was at a wearying level.

A woman from Bunbury explored this topic and raised an interesting point. She spoke of the past or more specifically her mothers'. A time where women were entirely expected to bake the cakes and sausage rolls for the local sports clubs, be the secretaries, set-up and clean up after special events and be the eyes and ears of their communities. These women were true 'housewives' and more importantly, were the glue of their communities. Today, the volunteering culture has remained mostly with women but, more women are working. 82.5% of our participants were either working full-time or part-time. Juggling work, the home, caregiving and volunteering is placing increased pressure on women. Women mentioned increased levels of stress, ability to increase work hours and responsibilities and to be available for promotions. It is a sacrifice that women make for the betterment of their community. More specifically, it is a causal effect of gender inequality.

What makes volunteering even more arduous is the requirement to be incorporated for insurance and funding purposes. By being incorporated every organisation is required to fill specific roles. Some women were treasurer, secretary or president for more than one organisation. The paperwork, the meetings, the communication was exhausting, and significant personal time was lost.

ABS (2014) states that slightly more women were likely to volunteer (33% compared with 29% of men). Women were also more likely to be involved in preparing/serving food (44% compared with 34% of men), while men were more likely to be engaged in coaching/refereeing/judging activities (35% compared with 19% of women), and repairing/maintenance/gardening activities (35% compared with 14%).

In saying that, many women (not all) believed that the gender make-up of their volunteer organisations comprised mostly of women. The participants thought that if more men stepped

into the volunteering culture that the overall burden on them would ease. Amusingly, but quite seriously too, encouraging reverse affirmative action for all incorporation committees was raised. One woman from Boyup Brook said the idea had merit, but their golf club was struggling to get anyone – man or woman to fulfil their positions and they would take anyone just to ensure their golf club remains.

An enforcement of affirmative action here would surely cause undue stress however offering small funding incentives for organisations could be a way to tackle the female volunteering culture.

Primary Caregiving

ABS states that women spend nearly twice, if longer than men on activities associated with unpaid work, including time on domestic activities and childcare. Furthermore, 81.7% of single parents are women⁷. Regional women echoed this experience and primarily felt that unpaid roles related to the house or family was nearly their full responsibility. The mood surrounding this conversation was mostly one of exhaustion particularly when combined with work and community responsibilities. Forum participants on more than one occasion spoke of caring for aging parents. Limited access to health services formed part of the problem because many women had to commute long distances for their parents or children to seek essential medical services. Work life balance was under duress for many of the participants. Similarly, in 2007, 42% of women and 35% of men felt they were always or often rushed or pressed for time. This was higher for those who provided care, rising to 55% of women and 46% of men. A woman's health and well-being, her ability to progress her career, pursue leadership type roles and achieve economic independence are all impacted in some way, at some point in her life because of her assumed caregiving role.

6.3 Lack of Community Understanding on Services and Improved Health Services

At all forums there was a persistent conversation about services. Do they exist? Where and when are they available? What do I have to do to get on the waiting list? And so on. Discussion would dart around the room and women would fill gaps or correct misinformation. Participants who worked in health and other services were of a great benefit to these discussions as they would enlighten many women on how to approach their issue.

⁷ ABS 2016

In many instances, what women understood to be the case was old information or simply misinformed. For example, when discussing safety and justice, some women thought that Rape Kits were not available at the nearest hospital, or that there were trained staff to administer the kit. The RRR Network board and staff made enquiries, visited hospitals and GP's and spoke with their staff to clarify the current process for a rape victim in the regions.

Early Evidence Kits appear to be available at all hospitals and are either self-administered or with the assistance of a health professional. Police officers can also provide these kits and should be trained in the process. For remote rape victims, the reporting process remains difficult and nearly impossible because of isolation. This is because the nearest hospital or police station may be a long distance away. A sexual assault victim may not have access to a vehicle or even the petrol to get her to a hospital, and when DNA evidence should be ideally collected within hours/days of the attack the current system is not easy. The pursuit of safety and justice may prove to be too difficult financially, practically and emotionally for some RRR women. Isolation becomes an overwhelming barrier to safety and justice, and sexual assault in the remote areas of Australia will only continue until reporting avenues become easier and more accessible.

Sexual Assault

The Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC) website is a useful online tool for victims. Whilst its very informative it did lack clear instructions for RRR people. There are two processes available to sexual assault victims for their evidence to be collected. First, there is the Early Evidence Kit which can be performed by nearly all police officers, trained nurses or midwives across the state. Secondly, there is the Full Forensic Evidence kit which can only be administered by trained staff and or at SARC in Perth. The latter kit is a preferred option for anyone seeking justice but for a RRR woman, both a hospital and police station could be out of reach and therefore, so is justice. While women make up approximately 20% of the police force compared with 89% of nursing, women in this situation are more likely to approach a hospital to seek the professional and trusted assistance from a female⁸.

Health Services

Access to essential health services was discussed at all forums particularly by the 60 plus age group. They were frustrated with the very little female and or culturally appropriate doctors. It was also raised that communication between health providers regarding mutual patients could vastly improve. Women felt there was an information disconnect between health providers

⁸ Various studies indicate that women prefer the assistance of a female doctor when it is personal in nature.

making for an unnecessary and chaotic health care experience. For instance, the physio or rehabilitation provider speaking directly with the GP or vice versa to ensure the appropriate care is been given. Women felt that improving communication channels between health providers would reduce the anxiety and stress of facilitating personal health.

Women were vocal about the continued pressure on them to travel to Perth for specialist appointments. They strongly believed that in many instances, that the follow-up appointment with their specialist could be performed with their local GP who is connected via phone or skype. Women mentioned extensive travel, accommodation and other expenses to only walk into their Perth appointment for less than five minutes to receive a simple confirmation or approval. Women who could not afford the travel and other associated expenses would forgo these healthcare aspects regardless of how important they were.

PATS

Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS) was also discussed and mentioned negatively at most forums. On a whole, PATS is understood to assist regional people however women communicated unrealistic eligibility issues and financial benefit or even just structural issues of completing the paperwork with their own health providers. It was evident that there was a lot of confusion related to the scheme. Bridgetown women are not eligible for PATS because their distance to Bunbury (96km) is just under the 100km guidelines, but they are regularly referred to Bunbury for health appointments.

For women who cannot drive, do not have a vehicle, who live in a town without regular public transport, accessing suitable health care remained a challenge. The forum highlighted that women are often the ones transporting dependants and elderly relatives to appointments in Perth and are the ones taking time of work, or away from family responsibilities. As a result, isolation continues to be a significant barrier to gender equality for regional women.

5.4 Domestic Violence in RRR Communities:

“We all know too much, but not enough”.⁹ Anonymity rarely exists in regional communities. Everyone knows everyone, either directly or through someone else. In most cases, this is a rewarding characteristic of regional life, but only if your life remains on a straight path. Domestic violence in the regions is complex because of ‘small town’ community relationships. The perceived social limitations of reporting domestic violence have assisted a silent culture

⁹ Comment from women at forum

around it. Common behavioural responses to domestic violence in the regions are about remaining tough, getting on with it, not airing your dirty laundry and not getting involved in other people's affairs. Unfortunately, placing trust in community individuals might not generate the desired result.

A story on being silent

One woman recalled a moment that she has never forgotten. She said that farming families in her community would go to a popular holiday spot and camp. One night, when everyone was in their tents, she and her husband heard fighting and screaming, and they knew who it was and what was happening and that it was loud enough for everyone else at the campsite to also hear it. She turned to her husband and asked if he would do anything and he responded with 'not getting involved in that'. The next morning, she remembers standing there with all the other farming families and watching this family pack up their belongings and leave. She felt of herself and everyone else at the campsite, that they were complicit to an act of domestic violence. She finished her story by saying 'if a stranger had come into the campsite that night and started attacking a woman, I'm sure all the men would have got up and defended her'. We heard other stories citing cultural silence or concerns of damaging social status and how to tackle this ingrained culture remained problematic.

5.5 Sexual Harassment and Discrimination

Sexual harassment in the regions can be casual and even expected in some environments. It was observed where participants were primarily aged above 60, sexual harassment or discrimination discourse did not surface, but where aged 50 and under the topic of sexual harassment was more prevalent.

We know that over 58% of WA women reported they have altered their behaviour at work to avoid certain people or situations because of unwanted or unwelcome behaviour. Based on current WA labour force data we know that over 320,000 WA women, have at some point, altered their behaviour at work due to a fear of sexual harassment. 135,000 (24%) have been scared to go to work because of sexual harassment. 84,000 WA women (15%) have considered resigning because of sexual harassment; and 73,000 (13%) have experienced sexual harassment but never made a report.¹⁰

¹⁰ RRR Network Sexual Harassment Survey Data (2019) with ABS

Sexual harassment has the potential to impact nearly all key indicators of gender equality - health, justice, employment (economic independence and leadership opportunities). This is more of a concern in the regions where masculine attitudes can be the most prevailing. Women spoke more of sexual discrimination at their regional workplaces specifically regarding children. Such as, the prospect of having children, duration of pregnancy and then the casual commentary of having two children in quick succession and when was that happening. Women who chose to not have children also experienced discrimination by means of suspicious questioning. It was not until women reached their early 40's that these uninvited workplace narratives by their male colleagues finally ended.

One woman said she removed her wedding ring before an interview within the agriculture sector. Once she got the job and started at work, she put her ring back on. She recalls the shock and mumbles by her new male colleagues when they discovered she was married. She was firmly of the opinion that if she had disclosed her relationship that she would not have secured the job.

5.6 The Regional to Metropolitan Transition

Research conducted by the Mitchell Institute in 2015 states that there is clear relationship between location and education outcomes¹¹. 57% of RRR students relocate to study, leaving their family, home and head to Perth. Mothers communicated concerns for their daughters when leaving home at such a young age and fearing they may fail in more ways than one. Moving to a new environment can create physical, emotional, social, and cultural pressures on students as they are withdrawn from their existing support networks. This can lead to social dislocation and threaten education pursuits.

Few regional students who move to cities live-in Purpose-Built Student Accommodation, such as university colleges. These facilities are designed to provide support networks to students. However, they're often outside of the financial reach of many families and may not be an option for those relocating to attend TAFE or other vocational training. RRR students are most likely to live in accommodation away from university support services and are at a greater risk of diminished wellbeing.

10 to 15% of RRR university students drop out before entering their second year of study. Research from the Australian Council for Educational Research indicates that, after 9 years

¹¹ <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Factsheet-6-Rural-and-remote-communities-frequently-missing-out.pdf>

of commencing a degree, only 59.5% of remote students and 69.8% of regional students graduate, in contrast to 75% of their metropolitan peers. Of these RRR university students who failed to graduate, 84% cited poor emotional health and support as the main reason for withdrawal from university, compared to 66% of metropolitan students.

RRR women who are seeking economic independence via education and qualifications are more disadvantaged than their metro peers because of isolation.

6.0 Recommendations for Government

- The public sector to lead the way in regional job creation.
- Explore ways to encourage larger corporations to shift to the regions, build job diversity and improve career building opportunities.
- Drive innovation in the regions, particularly ideas that centre around mining, technology and food production.
- Considerations to be made on how public sector job descriptions can be undertaken from locations outside the Perth metropolitan and set quotas for remote positions.
- Work with the federal government to explore greater access to childcare rebates in areas not service by accredited childcare providers.
- Work with the federal government to explore opportunities for second year WHM visa scheme to include childcare as eligible work.
- Support SARC to train more nurses and midwives across the state in administering Full Forensic Evidence Kits for sexual assault victims.
- Encourage more women to become police officers (and to the regions) so that victims of sexual assault feel comfortable in approaching a police station equally to a hospital.
- Remove the burden of being incorporated and allow organisations to still receive insurance or funding.
- Where volunteer organisations are deemed to be fulfilling a vital role in small communities provide administration support from a State Government agency if needed.
- Encouraging 'Affirmative Action' for more men to be on organisation committees and a potential policy lever could be access to State Government grants.
- Increase mobile women's health services to the regions.
- Encourage more female doctors to the regions.

- Monitor progress of Fleur McDonald’s ‘Breaking the Silence’ program that has recently received federal funding.
- The public sector to work with the RRR Network ‘Champions for Change’ program to tackle sexual harassment in WA workplaces.
- Productivity Commission to measure economic loss derived from sexual harassment in the workplace.
- A review of current WA legislation given the ‘Sex Discrimination Act’ is dated in 1984 and needs updating to ensure that legislation covers all industries, employees and it adequately reflects the present-day context.
- Support the RRR Network’s Youth Mentor Program to increase successful transition rates of young women and men who relocate to Perth to take up study or training opportunities.

6.1 What the RRR Network is currently doing

- The RRR Network demonstrates flexibility and a working remote structure for its four staff (Margaret River, Perth and Bencubbin). The Board consists of 8 members who are also remote.
- The RRR Network has partnered with Curtin Business School and offers a “Regional Women’s Leadership” program. To date the program has had over 60 women participate. The RRR Network continues to offer this programme in various regional locations subject to funding.
- The RRR Network offer a 2-day entrepreneurial skills workshop to encourage, support and motivate rural and regional business owners and start-ups. The RRR Network continues to offer this programme in various regional locations subject to funding.
- The RRR Network has developed the ‘Champions for Change’ pilot program to tackle Sexual Harassment in WA. First program was offered on the 27th July. It is a 3-day training program to leading WA organisations and employers. The program will enable organisations to support and initiate conversations about sexual harassment and other discriminatory behaviours and teach how to have the courage to champion the changes that are required so that workplaces in your industry can be safe, respectful and inclusive places.
- The RRR Network is in the process of setting up a Youth Network and Mentoring Program for youth transitioning to Perth. The free service will coordinate and offer a broad range of social activities to enable young people (under 25 years) from the WA

regions to meet others and spend time participating in activities that promote good mental health. This will provide young people, who are geographically isolated from their families, to work on building their individual resilience by being part of a community.

6.2 What the RRR Network would like to do:

- To tackle sexual harassment and discriminations in the regions, the RRR Network would like to develop a social media campaign to its 4500 online subscriber base to raise awareness and empower women to speak up.
- Roll out the Champions for Change program across the WA public sector.
- The RRR Network believes there is a lack of information sharing about what is available and how to access it. The RRR Network who is committed to connecting women all over the state will explore how we can share specialised 'services information' and improve personal knowledge of one's regional community. The wa.gov.au website is an excellent resource however it lacks community and not-for-profit promotion. We are currently developing a "Did You Know" social media campaign surrounding women's health and interests and will use the wa.gov.au website to drive this.