



RRR NETWORK

# Women's Leadership in Rural Regional and Remote Western Australia



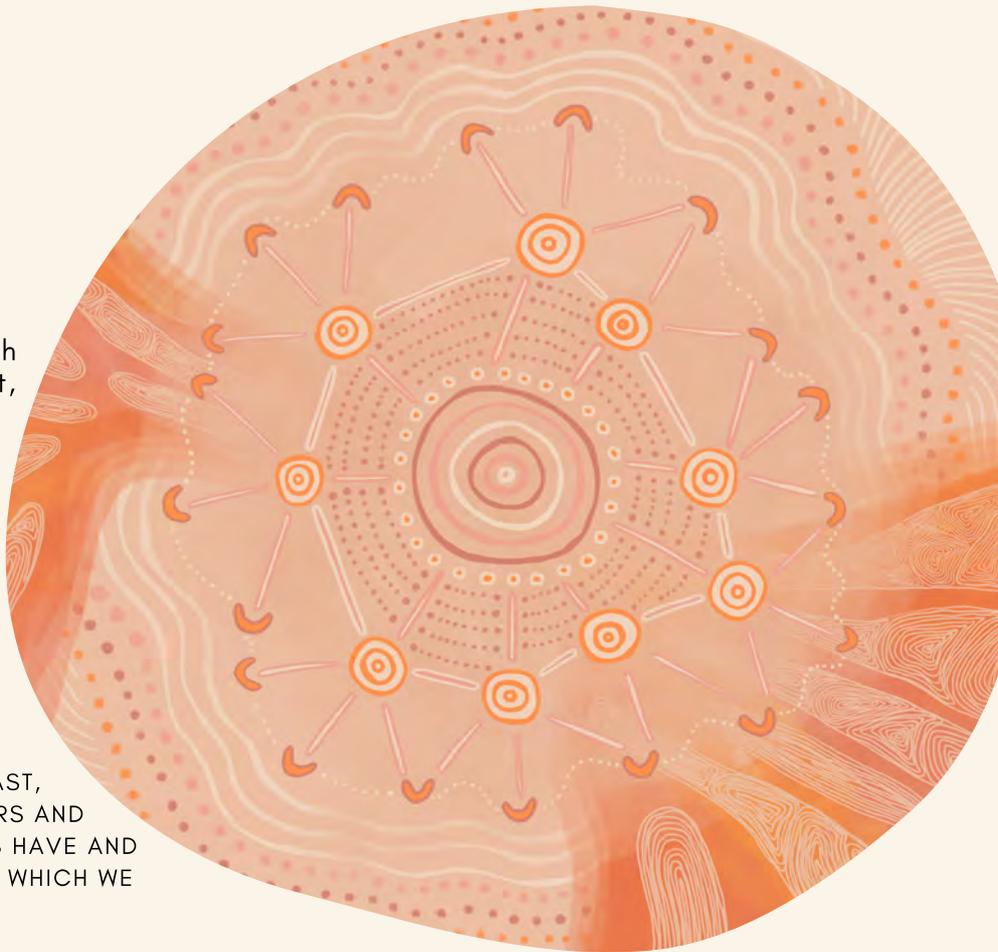
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This artwork represents the connection and importance of each individual, no matter how far apart, giving strength to women of the RRR Network of WA and passing on the learning back into their homes and rural regional and remote communities.

ARTWORK BY RICKIESHA DEEGAN

WE WOULD LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE TRADITIONAL OWNERS AND ELDERS, WHOSE CULTURES AND CUSTOMS HAVE AND WILL CONTINUE TO NURTURE THE LAND ON WHICH WE WALK AND LIVE - WOODITCHUP (MARGARET RIVER), WADANDI BOODJA.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Women's Leadership in Rural Regional and Remote Western Australia" was funded for \$10,000, by the Department of Communities in 2020 under the Grants for Women.

This project was a result of the work conducted by the RRR Network in 2019 under the 'Women's Voice's' forums and the disconnect in discussion observed on the subject of leadership.

The agreed outcomes of this project were:

- Increase awareness of the lack of female representation in dominant regional industries.
- Explore experiences and achievements of women currently in leadership roles in RRR environments.
- Identify potential pathways to leadership for future women leaders in RRR areas.
- Reflect on the outstanding social and community effort of women in RRR areas.
- Women are encouraged to consider their potential in becoming a leader within the community.
- Increase widespread opportunity for RRR women to work within the State Governments' Stronger Together: WA's Plan for Gender Equality framework.

## The key findings of this report were:

- There is evidence of rural regional and remote (RRR) women in senior levels of leadership exceeding metropolitan women in influential industries such as local government and politics. Further research into other industries is suggested.
- Working at a grassroots level in RRR communities builds a woman's skill and experience to obtain remunerated work in community development and possibly leadership roles at local government or politics.
- Women volunteer on an average of 5.9 hours / week across the RRR not only for personal interest but to ensure their communities continue to be active, sustainable and meaningful places to live. Volunteering is more of a responsibility rather than an act of enjoyment.
- Based on 5.9 hours /week, this equals \$247 /week. For 100 women this equals \$1.2m /year that women are providing of service, for free, to benefit WA's regional communities.

## Key recommendation to the Department of Communities:

Investigate and deliver programs for women in RRR communities that aim to build skills in effective volunteer practice where resources are limited, learn how to manage small community relationships in the context of volunteering, find balance between personal and community and create remunerated pathways for women through community and volunteering.

# REPORT'S KEY FINDINGS



**RRR women are excelling in leadership.**

*Women's Pathway to Leadership*  
is rarely a straight line.

28 out of 59 members of the lower house are women (2021).



71% of regional electoral seats in the lower house are occupied by RRR women

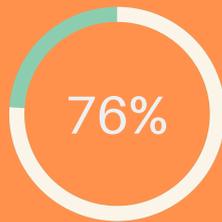


35% seats in the lower house held by RRR WA women.

RRR women volunteer on average 5.9 hours per week.



RRR vs. Metro Women LG CEO's



76% WA women LG CEO's are in RRR WA



Volunteering is valued at \$42 / hour.

100 RRR women provide \$1.2m in free service each year across WA.



community leaders

remunerated leaders

## Women Leaders



DIPLOMATIC  
negotiate PASSION  
SELFLESS CONFIDENCE RESILIENT  
cautious SACRIFICE  
resilient empathy  
positive TEAMWORK  
GOOD LISTENER  
PASSION TRANSPARENT  
compassion HONEST  
PERSEVERANCE  
optimistic CONFLICT  
FORESIGHT RESOLUTION

TRUST YOUR SELF  
authentic COURAGE  
HUMILITY HARDWORK SELFLESS  
enabling CLASSY agile  
resilient flexible  
GOOD COMMUNICATOR  
CREATIVE SINK OR SWIM ethical  
VALUE OTHERS INTEGRITY  
humility ADAPTIVE  
PUT EGO ASIDE  
persistence OWN YOUR MISTAKES  
PERSEVERANCE

## CEO'S FOREWORDS



How is leadership characterised in the regions? It was evident in 2019 when the RRR Network of WA participated in the 'Women's Voices' project, that the topic of 'leadership' was nuanced, creating inconsistent and difficult conversation among regional women.

'Women's Voices' provided a unique opportunity for us to directly connect with women across the regions. It was enlightening to learn first-hand, the diverse and complex experiences and challenges that women face.

Although, in nearly every forum we facilitated, when 'leadership' was raised, there was one of those moments when the room went silent.

It was as if the topic - *leadership* - in one word, pointed out the stark inadequacies and emphasised the reality of gender inequality that perhaps some did not fully appreciate or had noticed.

Leadership was then usually discussed in the absence of being remunerated and community leadership became the focal point. This is where women could shine and share their experiences, discuss their family responsibilities, and speak of leadership through a lens of a volunteer or a mother.

The disconnect between regional women and leadership was a fleeting but powerful insight and what sparked the RRR Network to explore further.

Increasing the number of women in leadership positions has proven to be beneficial to a wide range of stakeholders by the Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre (2020).

Having women in leadership positions and hence engaged in high-level decision-making can, for example, support cultural change, provide role models for future generations, and expand opportunities for flexible working arrangements.

To support the progression of gender equality there needs to be a greater emphasis on women achieving leadership positions - where leadership is defined as when an individual is typically remunerated and is enabled to contribute to high-level decision making.

However, as mentioned, the 'Women's Voices' consultations and discussions about leadership opportunities and experiences, identified a widespread problem relating to the perceived lack of women in leadership roles across WA's regions.

The RRR Network acknowledges and values women who are not remunerated but are outstanding community leaders. Their social commitment and guidance allow others to overcome difficulty or realise their potential.

This report therefore, explores rural regional and remote leadership both remunerated and in the community. This was achieved by speaking with women and men in regional, metro and community leadership positions and hearing their stories of becoming leaders.

I hope by reading this report you are inspired by WA's women leaders, especially those from the regions. With inspiration comes bravery, innovation and participation, all the qualities we need our rural, regional and remote women - a globally recognised marginalised audience - to uphold, to strengthen their journey.

This report has inspired meaningful connections between regional and metro women and as a result, new and diverse friendships have formed. With more activities such as this, the gap between regional and metro women will continue to close.

I would like to thank Professor Julia Richardson from Curtin Business School for volunteering her time to support this research. Julia advised on best practice research methodology, themes, and how to interview and what types of questions to ask.

Also, from Curtin University, we were supported by Professor Siddier Chambers with the survey design.

Lastly, I wish to acknowledge the Department of Communities and the Hon. Simone McGurk MLA for funding this project. Their relentless commitment to enhancing women's leadership and achieving gender equality in Western Australia continues to inspire the RRR Network of WA to do more.

**Kendall Galbraith, Chief Executive Officer**  
*Rural Regional Remote Women's Network of WA Inc*

# BACKGROUND

'Women's Voices' led by Western Australia's the Hon. Simone McGurk, the Minister for Child Protection; Women's Interests; Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence and Community Services, was an initiative to support the WA Labor's State Government 'Stronger Together' campaign and their commitment to strive for and achieve gender equality over the next ten years.

'Women's Voices' encouraged women from community groups, organisations, individuals, friends, and family all over Western Australia to attend forums or conduct forums under a structured framework. The aim was to better understand a woman's experience, improve understanding of Western Australia and gender inequality, and to inform a body of work that would shape future policy.

The framework for the forum discussions was easily structured. It was focused on four priority areas. It was understood that these four priorities were the key pillars for us to achieve gender equality. They were health and well-being, safety and justice, economic independence, and leadership.

## **Each priority had its goal...**

For **health and well-being**, it was that women are healthy, active and lead fulfilled lives.

For **safety and justice**, it was that women live safely and have appropriate access to adequate legal protections.

For **economic independence**, it was that women can be financially independent across all life stages.

Lastly, for **leadership**, it was that women's skills, achievements and strengths are valued, enabling them to participate equally in the community, including at leadership levels.

The RRR Network of WA took this initiative on with gusto. We felt it necessary to deliver the regional experience and ensure that the views and experiences heard were not metro centric.

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

The experience was invaluable to say the least. Our learnings continue to inform our organisation's strategy and operations and they also provided a baseline for our advocacy conversations with our Network and stakeholders.

# OUR DISCOVERY

At our forums there were either very little or no women who could speak from senior levels of leadership experience. Typically, more men than women are in such positions and this is evidenced across various industries and is widely reported on. Furthermore, the representation of high-level leadership positions in the regions are few and far between, or better than that, just the one – the local government CEO or President who is typically a man.

The fact that leadership caused a disconnect in conversation encouraged the RRR Network to explore further.

As a result of little connection to remunerated leadership in our forum discussions, conversations naturally explored leadership through community where women excel.

Delving deeper into community leadership prompted the RRR Network to ascertain the economic value of *community leadership* carried out by Western Australian RRR women.

We did this to empower and sustain the work conducted by community leaders but also to remind those in positions of power that *community* is an engine and without the right parts or petrol, it is likely to fail.

When we discuss leadership we understand it in two ways...

For the most part we are focused on remunerated leadership - those who are enabled and contribute to high-level decision making. This is because we are more likely to role-model off such individuals. For example, women politicians, councillors, CEOs, board directors or managers.

Secondly, leadership is understood through the lens of community, where it is typically unpaid (and not expected) as it is an act of 'volunteering'. It also, unfortunately lacks resources, structure and recognition for its value and importance.

## THE RESEARCH

Our research focused on rural, regional, and remote women in Western Australia and their inexperience or limited access to remunerated leadership and in contrast their contribution to community.

We acknowledge that a lack of leadership is experienced by many women regardless of their location and our focus does not suggest that RRR women are the only women with limited access to leadership.

In the contrary, leadership for many is unattainable and very much desired. Or the opposite and possibly not even given a second thought or care.

Leadership can also be difficult for women who are among it and are striving for it – a situation often referred to as the 'glass-ceiling'.

At the end of the day, it remains the case that leadership is a complex labyrinth, and possibly one of the four priorities (health and well-being, safety and justice, economic independence and leadership) in the race for gender equality that will drag its feet.

**We had four simple outcomes of this research.**

**First to explore if and why women in the regions are less likely to be in leadership positions.**

**Second to learn of the leadership pathways of women who are in leadership positions.**

**Third, to share these learnings with RRR women in a gentle and relatable way.**

**Lastly, to educate and inspire RRR women to become leaders, because we need more of them!**

## THE INTERVIEWS

The calibre of men and women we spoke with was truly inspiring.

The below participants were all interviewed by Zoom in the post pandemic period between July 2020 to January 2021.

The original research proposal (pre-pandemic) suggested face to face interviews however the ease in which online meetings took effect in 2020, allowed for greater diversity in whom we could interview and as a result strengthened our outreach.

It was fascinating to speak with so many women and men about their pathways to leadership and I would like to recognise them all (in no particular order) for their contribution.

- **Rebecca Tomkinson - CEO of Royal Flying Doctor Service**
- **Erin Gorter- Director of Agvivo**
- **Lisa Shreeve - CEO of Busselton Jetty**
- **Kat Lombardo - Community Leader, Margaret River Farmers Markets**
- **Brianna Peake - Chief External Relations Officer of CBH**
- **Tracey Lefroy - President of Moora Council**
- **Rebecca McCall - CEO of Shire of Dowerin**

- **Barb Howard - Community Leader, Business Owner of BeExceptional**
- **Caroline Robinson - Community Leader and CEO of WBN**
- **Nicole Batten - Community Leader, Board Member and Councillor**
- **Stephanie Addison-Brown - CEO of Shire of Augusta-Margaret River**
- **Leoni Knipe - Principle of Avon Toyota**
- **Michelle Fyfe - CEO of St John**
- **Natalie Manton - CEO of Shire of Corrigin**
- **Sasha Pental - CEO of Early Start Australia**
- **Naomi Evans - WA Regional Manager of NBN**
- **Tanya Rybarczyk - General Manager of CSBP Fertilisers**
- **Pauline Bantock - Shire President of Victoria Plains Council**
- **Deborah Clarke - Community Leader, Lake Grace**
- **Rob Leicester - DPIRD**
- **Tim Shackleton - CEO of Rural Health West**
- **Ralph Addis - Director General of DPIRD**
- **Cara Peek - 2019 Rural Women's Award Winner**



## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview participants were categorised by their leadership type. This also determined the questions they were asked:

- Regional Leader
- Community Leader
- Metro Leader

Questions sought to understand an individual's history related to leadership, where they lived, their education or training, what skills or characteristics they felt leaders had and their personal pathway to leadership.

Some questions also explored the leadership differences (if any) between a regional leader and a metro leader.

It was observed that this question set a tone for the interviews and there was a great deal of respect from metro leaders regarding the experience of a regional leader. In contrast regional leaders felt a sense of envy about metro leaders.

More specifically, regional leaders felt that metro leaders could momentarily escape the people they lead or represent. Regional leaders explained that in small communities they are known by nearly everyone, meaning they often are accountable to their leadership position even when they are not working, and at times this was exhausting.

## PUBLIC ONLINE SURVEY

To support the research and to extend beyond the views of our interviewed leaders we asked the RRR Network – what does leadership mean to them?

We received responses from 161 women and two men.

The survey questions were constructed after the interviews to delve further into the themes uncovered in the interviews.

In addition to the questions asked in the interviews, the extent in which community leadership is undertaken across regional WA became a focal point to our research and therefore attempts to unravel this were included in the survey questions.

For example, we asked what community groups people were involved in, did they have a leadership role with this group and how many hours a week did they volunteer to support others in their community.

Both the survey results and the interviews have helped us to better understand the regional context around leadership; the way leadership is achieved and what role women play.

The data received from this survey will continue to be referenced by the RRR Network to support our work. We could not include all data in this report but have made the results available online. See References.

## EMERGING THEMES

It was evident early in the interview period that the same themes were emerging even though participants came from various industries.

Each interview was unique, and the personal stories were rich in experience. Perspectives and stories came from the telecommunications, police, agriculture, hostage & ransom training, local government, public sector, healthcare, tourism, community, indigenous, small business and not-for-profit sector.

Collectively, they all contributed to three outstanding learnings that offer insightful perspectives to promote regional leadership.

- 1) There appears to be increased opportunity for women to become remunerated leaders in the regions.**
- 2) Pathways to leadership for women were dynamic and unpredictable.**
- 3) There is very little difference between a community or remunerated leader.**

This report will explore how each of the above three learnings promote regional leadership.



## COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

Community leadership is assigned to those who are typically undertaking volunteer activities to support their community. It is unpaid labour, considered a choice and mostly understood to be a leisure activity.

- Community leaders are those who can facilitate effective action, those who can voice concern, those who can build effective networks, and those who can find common ground in the community while maintaining certain values of fairness and social justice. They are people who are willing to take initiative and make a difference (M. Creyton, 2004).
- Very broadly, volunteering means any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or organisation. (C. Overgaard, 2019).
- More women than men volunteer. (ABS).
- The socio-economic and cultural value of volunteering to Western Australia in 2015 is conservatively estimated to be \$39.0 billion (Volunteering WA).
- 79% of our survey participants have not been paid for their community activities (RRR Network Survey)

The value of volunteers in the regions, and their community leadership extends beyond the meaningful. It plays an

integral role in their economies, builds community development and capacity and drives effective social action.

Furthermore, a focus on community contributes to social sustainability, citizen interest and participation.

Although, associating volunteering with 'leisure' is debatable, particularly in the regions. At the 'Women's Voices' forums, women expressed how supporting their communities at times, was a responsibility, even a burden and often they felt guilty for being resentful for the expectations that were placed on them.

The Hon. Kerry Sanderson AC said -

**"Volunteers are significant contributors to the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of Western Australia and the true measure of their impact is not often fully appreciated or utilised".**

It is difficult to separate gender when discussing the true measure and recognition of volunteering. Community leadership appears to be diluted economically not only by society in general, but those who undertake it based on its unpaid nature and the fact that more women than men participate in this type of activity.

Community leaders are invaluable and improved recognition of such should elevate more women into leadership roles, improve social impact and edge us closer to gender equality.

This report offers an economic argument with a hope to change the way in which community leadership is viewed and valued, not only by community leaders themselves but by key decision makers.

In this report, we encourage our readers to place equal value on community and remunerated leaders. This is because they are both committing time for a greater purpose, to benefit others and typically on a large scale - i.e., community or company for example.

Furthermore, the motivations and characteristics portrayed of both types of leaders revealed in our interviews, and survey, offered very little difference. More than half of our remunerated leaders interviewed believed that technical skills were less of a requirement.

The only thing that separated our women leaders was *remuneration*.



## IDENTIFYING AS A LEADER

How can RRR women progress with the rest of society towards gender equality if a key priority to its achievement – *leadership* is in itself - problematic?

Obviously, gender equality in its entirety is problematic and stands to reason why gender parity is more than 100 years away, but to reduce this we must keep questioning and identifying gaps when we see them.

The issue we found with leadership is that women struggled to identify themselves as leaders regardless of their position of power - community or remunerated leader.

- Leadership is often confused with authoritarian approaches, with hierarchical structures and with directive approaches (M. Creyton, 2004).

The women interviewed for this study, who were remunerated for the leadership were humble but clearly owned their leadership position. Although when we discussed leadership traits, the discussion nearly always shifted focus to the people who surround them.

Leadership for them had transient powers. It was their responsibility to enable others into leadership. They sought to share the responsibility and work as a team. So whilst the leadership label was accepted it was quickly shared.

Women leaders also spoke of self-doubt, second guessing, sabotage, imposter syndrome, opting out, lacking assertiveness and they thought that women struggled to sell themselves compared to men.

- 69% of survey responses were not confident in asking for a pay-rise and 66% were not confident in asking for a job opportunity beyond their expertise (RRR Network Survey).

For our regional community leaders, owning a leadership label was difficult or even rejected. Women were concerned of being unfairly judged or criticised for labelling themselves as leaders in small communities.

When we workshopped the 'leadership' label with a small group of regional women there was a sense of discomfort. The desire to not attract attention is why the top tier membership at the RRR Network is called 'Connector' not 'Leader', i.e., they connect the dots.

Regional women demonstrated an attitude of just getting on with things, and acknowledging a 'leadership' label was not necessary.

Regional women have limited to no access to leadership training. A possible explanation for not *owning* leadership and stepping into it with confidence.

- 91% of women surveyed understood that additional training was key to elevating their leadership skills, but for community leaders based in the regions, this is unlikely to occur. (RRR Network Survey).

Overall, leadership is a complicated achievement underpinned by gender, access, and opportunity.

When it is of a community nature, it is viewed more as a responsibility, possibly a burden, generally not paid narrowing a woman's economic independence and lastly, she fails to recognise her community contributions as valued leadership.

In the regions, leadership challenges are heightened causing a disconnect for WA's gender equality strategy. The gap in RRR leadership calls for attention.



# 1 INCREASED OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE REGIONS

It was a discovery within the local government sector that caught our attention and guided our initial research.

Local government provides an interesting avenue to explore regional leadership as it offers consistent high-level leadership across the regions regardless of population sizes.

The RRR Network discovered that out of the 145 Local Government Chief Executive Officers across Western Australia, that only 21 of them are women (Local Government Professionals WA). This totals a very low 14.5%. Although, representation of women as Councillors is much better, almost 43.8% (ALGWA).

On a national scale for Council representation, Western Australia is the third highest to Victoria and New South Wales is the lowest at 29% (ALGWA).

**What was more telling from this statistic was that out of the 21 women Shire CEO's, 16 of them are from the regions.**

Until this point, we had accepted that our rural regional and remote areas were behind the starting line for most things, such as access to essential services, digital equality, day care facilities, entertainment, and notions of gender equality.

**So why is it that the women who are at the highest level of local government, 76% of them are based in the regions?**

There are a few possible explanations. To begin with, and not a very empowering one, is that after speaking with some of our local government CEO interviewees, there was a thought that some men would do a less desirable regional appointment as a strategy to get experience and then apply for roles back in the city. With men exiting, this arguably creates opportunity for women in the regions.

Overall, this is an insufficient explanation. Firstly, the regions are an amazing place to live and work! On a more serious note, this is suggesting that regional Shires cannot find suitable men when the data shows that men outweigh CEO appointments across all WA locations.



Further to that, it implies that Shire Councils are left with only women applying. To be a Shire Council CEO you require specific skills and experience to get the job and so there is a small market of men and women who are in fact suitable.

The women CEOs from the regions who participated in this research were all very accomplished women, educated with extensive and diverse careers. For one woman there was almost 50 applicants for the CEO position she applied for. She went on to become the first woman CEO to be appointed to that Shire Council. Her gender and regional location could not have contributed to her appointment.

From a demographic perspective, it is not the case that there are more women in the regions than men. According to ABS, men outnumber women outside of Perth with every 104 men to 100 women.

Also, leading industries in the regions are agriculture, mining, and manufacturing all of which are dominated by men and as a direct result some regions in WA there are disproportionately higher numbers of men to women.

Such as in Ashburton where there is 243 men to every 100 women, and in East Pilbara there is 289 men to every 100 women.

However, perhaps the presumed *less attractive* regional context has merit when it comes to men not applying for roles located in the regions and creating more opportunities for women.

Interestingly, women serve as Heads of State or Government in only 22 countries out of 193 UN member states. Out of those 22, only one of them – Germany, is included in the top 20 for GDP globally. Women are leading 22 countries, but 21 of them are comparatively not influential or leverage power on the global stage. Countries such as Estonia, Gabon, Moldova, Nepal, and Toga.

Again, it cannot be the case that there are no experienced or interested men in an entire country. Also, we cannot underestimate the skill required to lead a country, but nevertheless, can a correlation of the women leaders at low leveraging countries and women leaders in our WA regions be made?

Meaning, if the leadership position lacks leverage or power, less men are interested in applying, whereas women will take their opportunity where ever it may be.



A more plausible and empowering reason for higher percentage of women regional Shire Council CEO's is that they tend to come from a background involving community development and, in the regions, community participation is almost mandatory for women. So when an opportunity comes up in the regions where they live, they confidently apply drawing on their community reputation and experience.

While women are volunteering, they are acquiring a range of skills, building a reputation, and obtaining experiences to become community leaders and potentially putting them on a path to secure a remunerated position, such as a Community Development Officer and then later a Shire Council CEO or even a politician.

Our survey collected written responses as to why women participated in volunteering leadership roles. Many of them referenced, building skills for their CV, or they already had the skills but no one else was putting their hand up to help, and lastly, to support their community.

When more women than men volunteer, it would seem that regional women are yielding social and economic power through their community leadership. The type of leadership we are referring to is helping others complete forms for government benefits, advising them of their rights or what they should be able

to access, how to go about solving a serious issue, which professional to go and see, mentoring, providing counsel, offering transport, childcare, healthcare, emergency support, and then on top of that - volunteering at events, sports clubs and on community committees and more.

- We found after asking 100 RRR women that they are providing on average 5.9 hours a week of informal service support to members of their community, which according to Volunteering WA and ABS (2021) it is worth approx. \$42 per hour.
- Based on 5.9 hours per week, this equals \$247 per week and based on just 100 women this is \$1.2 million per year that women are providing of service, for free, to benefit WA's regional communities.
- There are 265,000 RRR women living in Western Australia. If we were to be conservative and say only 1% of RRR women are in fact supporting their communities with targeted support and assistance, and only for half of what they claim (2.95 hours per week) this would still equal \$17m per year.

**RRR Women are reducing the burden on essential services each week across WA's regions by filling the gaps.**



***We should keep in mind that many volunteer freely and do not consider their commitment to community as 'unpaid work'.***

Why is that RRR women support their communities to this level?

WA has an expansive regional environment meaning there is limited essential services across the state. RRR women are therefore, integral to sustaining their populations by resolving social and economic issues when they arise and by making them vibrant places to live through their active participation and commitment to their community. We have always known this anecdotally but had never understood it from an economic perspective.

**Is volunteering and community participation edging regional women towards leadership and remunerated leadership?**

To make sense of the high representation of women regional Shire Council CEO's and to support a theory that the regions have increased leadership opportunities, we looked at other sectors for similar patterns that offered senior level leadership positions across the regions.

There are nine Regional Development Commissions (RDC), however only three out of their nine CEO's are women.

Although, women are represented in senior level management teams across all nine RDC's.

Politics offers another significant leadership opportunity across the regions.

At the recent 2021 WA State Election, 28 out of 59 Legislative Assembly seats are occupied by women and 10 of those 28 are women from the regions. This equates to 35% of women in the Lower House are from the regions.

Furthermore, out of those 59 seats, 14 of them are based in the regions, and 10 of those 14 seats are occupied by women.

**This means that 71% of regional WA electoral seats are held by women.**



- The CEO of one of WA's biggest NFP's the Royal Flying Doctors is a woman - Rebecca Tomkinson who grew up in the regions.
- The only woman Toyota Dealership Principle in Western Australia is from the regions - Leoni Knipe and she is one of a handful nationally.

### **How is it that RRR women are emerging to be competitive in senior levels of leadership?**

**Did you know?** In 2014, the Australian Financial Review discovered that "country kids are punching well above their weight in the office towers of corporate Australia, with 21 per cent of our top chief executives from regional towns".

Cara Peek felt that the regions have enabled job diversity, and this is one way that regional women are standing out. Cara said -

**"There is more resilience in RRR leaders because they have to work harder to achieve the same goals. They have to find a way".**  
**Cara Peek.**

Due to isolation, resilience, long distances and small employment markets, women are looking beyond the regions for opportunity.

Improvements in RRR digital connectivity, technology and long distance education options would also contribute to the rising competitiveness of RRR women. When RRR women are surrounded by male dominated employment sectors such as

agriculture and mining, they are both forced and encouraged to look elsewhere for employment. As a result, many undertake online education and training to enhance their skillsets.

Women continue to outperform men in obtaining Certificate III or above and Bachelor Degrees'.

- Attainment for Bachelor Degrees' for women increased 10.7% (from 26.4% in 2010 to 37.1% in 2020) (ABS).
- Attainment for men increased 7.0% (from 22.4% in 2010 to 29.4% in 2020) (ABS).
- Western Australia also has one of the highest labour participation rates in the country. From 1991 to 2009, WA women living outside of Perth had significantly higher participation levels than women living in Perth, with the mining boom driving higher participation rates in these regions.
- As of 2018, women living outside of Perth slightly exceeded both Perth women and women across Australia for labour participation (Women's Report Card, 2019).

***Can we hypothesise - that in Western Australia , the nation's largest state, with a vast and expansive regional environment that has limited access to essential services and with small employment markets, demands more of our regional women, to volunteer, educate and train others, support community - builds resilience, patience and drives leadership?***

Or is there more to it? More broadly, there is a pattern of women fulfilling roles that men do not enter for varied reasons.

For example, during war time when the men left to fight, women took up roles that men would have normally done to support the war efforts. Such as working in the factories making bomb casings, tanks, and parachutes. Women were paid less than men and when the men returned it was no longer acceptable for women to work in such roles.

How about women running for marginal or unwinnable seats? Gillard and Okonjo-Iweala (2020) refer to this type of scenario as the 'glass cliff'. Where a woman takes on a high-risk position because unless she seizes the opportunity and challenge, she is unlikely to be offered another job or opportunity at that level. Whereas for a man with more options, the smart choice may be to say no.

A study by the University of Pittsburgh found that when they asked men and women to volunteer for non-promotional activities at their workplace, men did not volunteer and only in the last seconds, did women reluctantly say, "I'll do it" (L. Babcock, 2019).

Stephanie Addison-Brown, the CEO of the Augusta Margaret River Shire mirrored this research when she reflected on her career and said that she just kept putting her hand up.

Stephanie's persistence and willingness to do more regardless of promotion or outcome, did ultimately secure her senior level leadership.

It seems that women are more likely to be flexible, take on positions, or tasks that are considered risky or possibly a lesser value because they have either identified opportunity or they are just willing to get on with things. There is also an indication of strategy to strengthen image and obtain experience to increase opportunity in the future.

Women possibly embrace the consequences because of limited opportunity or small employment markets. We know that women are equally motivated as men are, equally skilled and more in fact have higher-education degrees, but perhaps they recognise due to gender, that the path to the top requires a long game. Particularly if women are navigating children.

What we have learnt is that while RRR women are a marginalised audience and undoubtedly have layers of disadvantage compared to metropolitan women, there is possibly more leadership opportunity for RRR women than we fully appreciate.

In saying that, RRR women need leadership education and support for them to realise their potential, regardless if it results in being paid or not.

## 2

## PATHWAYS FOR LEADERSHIP ARE DIVERSE AND COMPLEX

Pathways to leadership for nearly all in this research was complex, rarely a thought-out plan and full of challenges.

Such as -

- undertaking various roles at once.
- need for ongoing professional development and education and associated costs and time.
- challenges with recognition of transferrable skills.
- gendered issues.
- being Aboriginal and above the 26th parallel.
- imposter syndrome.
- childcare.
- travel.
- plenty of sacrifice - family, friends, personal time.
- always needing to be strategic about next steps.

Many of the women had more than one role (including family commitments). They were on several boards, committees, were also a Shire Councillor or had a small business whilst working for another. They did this mostly because they saw a gap and knew how to close it, are natural leaders and very ambitious.

It was evident from nearly everyone interviewed, that leadership was a long and windy road and if you are prepared to stay on this "weird and wonderful path" (Tanya Rybarczyk) your leadership qualities will flourish and you will continue to climb the leadership ladder.

**"Looking for opportunity, that's how I work".  
Kat Lombardo.**

We found that nearly every woman we spoke with regarding their pathway to leadership, it rarely followed a straight line but this in some respects was advantageous as it delivered diversity and accumulated vast networks.

For the men interviewed when asked how did they get into their leadership role they were currently in, two of three said that they either applied or were mentored into that leadership position. Their responses were short and simple, quite a contrast to the women's experience.

Their pathways comparatively to the women appeared to offer less diversity. Although, they had achieved sustained periods of time in the one position. This in itself strengthened their leadership capacity and their current professional roles reflect this. It must be noted that we only interviewed three men and therefore did not have sufficient evidence to compare pathways of men and women into leadership positions.

Women who were in local government all started their journeys similarly - *in the community*. This means that their pathways to leadership slowly developed over years. There was patience, determination, hard-work, and a willingness to take up opportunity when it arose - whether it be in the regions or in the cities.



Most women we interviewed knew they had leadership qualities very early on. Over time, they developed their skills and became more determined to achieve senior level leadership.

**"took me time to understand who I was as a leader".**  
**Rebecca Tomkinson.**

When regional women were asked if they had plans to continue climbing the ladder and would they move to the city, most women said 'yes'. Although, a disheartening reality for many who loved living in the regions.

Pathway to leadership included being mentored and on-going professional development related to their field. Women expected hard work, long hours, leaning on others for advice, and sacrifice.

**"I'm not lucky. I worked hard and learned quick".**  
**Michelle Fyfe.**

Although sacrifice was an interesting discussion. Nearly every participant interviewed acknowledged sacrifice was necessary to achieve their leadership goals.

The types of sacrifice experienced were mostly related to lost time with family and personal time, but it was typically and quickly retracted and explained from an alternate view. For instance, the benefits seemed to regularly outweigh the losses.

**"No material sacrifices...calculated risks? Decisions, choices".**  
**Sasha Pandal.**

For example, one woman believed that her work ethic was evident in her children of whom she is incredibly proud of in their schoolwork and careers.

**"Sacrifices can sometimes be a gift"**  
**Erin Gorter.**

Another woman explained that sacrifice comes with anything you do, you may stay home and sacrifice a career that you had once envisioned, or you to go work and lose time with loved ones.

All women felt that the passion for what they did meant that there was very little feeling of true sacrifice experienced.

On the discussion of sacrifice, community leaders came from a slightly different angle. Community leadership work is "often tedious and mundane, more about dialogue and consensus seeking, networking and community education" (M. Creyton, 2004).

Our community leaders were equally passionate and motivated to our paid leaders, but they also felt an exhausting sense of responsibility and duty which at times was difficult to sustain.

Learning of the various pathways to leadership reinforced the idea that we cannot expect to reach our goals overnight. That even the women leaders we look up to in Western Australia have all taken years to obtain senior levels of leadership.

Furthermore, part of their journey was undertaking jobs and doing tasks that at the time may have seemed menial but each time they did, they acquired new skills, experience and grew their networks.

Finally, the pathway to leadership is one thing. Next, is what to do when you're there. Naomi Evans said -

**"If you have a seat at the table, the worst thing is to say nothing".**



### 3 COMMUNITY & REMUNERATED LEADERS THINK THE SAME!

At the end of the day, good leadership is good leadership. What separates our leaders is the where, who and how many they are leading. Some are leading teams under five, or 10 and some are leading hundreds.

The context of leadership, i.e., community or a corporation for example, is less important. It remains all relational as it is just working with people. Kat from the Margaret River Farmers Markets, Natalie from the Corrigin Shire, Ralph a Director-General, Caroline from 150Square, to Tanya from CSBP Fertilisers, all lead but for different purposes.

What unites our leaders excludes all notions of influence, leverage, and money, it is simply - effective leadership.

It goes to say then, that leaders think the same, whether they are from the bush, or from the city, leading multi-million-dollar companies, or coordinating a 'Tidy Town' day they all exhibit characteristics that inspire others for a common purpose.

Overall, our men and women interviewed, valued nearly the same leadership qualities. At least half of our remunerated leaders also mentioned how they believed that technical skill was not always a prerequisite. Some of this can be learned on the job.

The men and women interviewed who also considered themselves at the top rung of their leadership ladder, did not refer to buzz words like, 'effective governance', 'strategic negotiations' or 'stakeholder management' to describe their ideal leader. Useful skills no doubt, and what possibly separates the best from the best but underlying all of that was a need for something much more.

Qualities like, empathy, resilience, integrity, courage, and humility. All words that our leaders used to describe their ideal leader.

Rebecca Tomkinson shared a wonderful analogy about leadership. Rebecca likens a leader to the conductor of an orchestra. She went onto explain, that the conductor does not play the many instruments that form the band, it is their sole task to bring them together for one purpose.

Rebecca reflected on this personally, as the CEO of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Rebecca said that she is not a pilot nor a doctor and does not need to be. Rebecca values collaboration, capacity building and communications.



Whilst our leaders expressed similar qualities of their ideal leaders, there was an obvious theme difference between community and remunerated leaders.

Community leaders identified more of a need to be able to work effectively with community that includes diverse stakeholders, personal relationships, and limited resources. Words such as 'diplomatic', 'negotiate', 'transparent' and 'conflict resolution' all related to their stories of working closely with community.

With our remunerated leaders, there was a need to 'put ego aside', 'work hard', 'be authentic', 'value others', 'bottom-up approach not top-down' and always be 'professional'.

The one word that resonated strongly across all our leaders was 'resilience'. A word that very much related to our previous discussion on pathways to leadership. That pathways to leadership can be long and windy, complex, diverse and throw all sorts of challenges at you. To stay on track, you need to be flexible, agile, and *resilient*.

The key learning from this exercise was (arguably!) that a community leader could be placed in any one of the professional and dynamic leadership environments of our remunerated leaders and give it a good shot. Their

ability to bring people together for a common goal, communicate effectively and problem solve meant that they had a solid foundation to be successful.

Furthermore, if our community leaders continue to be leaders, and recognise that they exhibit similar features to those at the very top, that their future is full of potential.

COMMUNITY LEADERS

DIPLOMATIC  
negotiate PASSION  
SELFLESS CONFIDENCE RESILIENT  
*cautious* SACRIFICE  
**resilient** empathy  
positive TEAMWORK  
GOOD LISTENER  
PASSION TRANSPARENT  
compassion HONEST  
PERSEVERANCE  
*optimistic* CONFLICT  
FORESIGHT RESOLUTION

REMUNERATED LEADERS

TRUST YOUR SELF  
authentic COURAGE  
HUMILITY HARDWORK SELFLESS  
*enabling* CLASSY agile  
**resilient** flexible  
GOOD COMMUNICATOR  
CREATIVE SINK OR SWIM ethical  
VALUE OTHERS INTEGRITY  
humility ADAPTIVE  
PUT EGO ASIDE  
*persistence* OWN YOUR  
PERSEVERANCE MISTAKES

## CONCLUSION

The RRR Network of WA undertook this research to shine a light on Western Australian rural, regional and remote women. To demonstrate that their contribution to community, workplace and family *is* recognised and it *is* valued.

Leadership is an integral component in achieving gender equality and yet, leadership is intangible, an ideal, or a characteristic belonging to an individual if they wish to exercise it. Therefore, one of the biggest barrier's to leadership we found in this study was *ourselves*.

We must lean into leadership and take opportunities when they arise. Whilst some men can be more strategic and wait for better opportunities, at this point in time, women should also be strategic, think about the long-game and consider all their options, including within community.

We encourage women to recognise the value of their community participation. To consider that any activity that delivers leadership experience, whether it be in your community or workplace strengthens your personal and professional assets.

RRR women are making headway into remunerated leadership. We know this by reflecting on local government CEO's and Politicians.

The unpaid and volunteer work of women in the community is measured, and whilst at times it may be difficult to sustain, please know that this contribution is invaluable.

The RRR Network will continue to advocate for women regarding the extent to which they support their communities unpaid. We do this so we may increase investment into our RRR women and community.

RRR women need more resources and leadership training so they can become effective leaders and improve their community experience. At the same time, put them on a path towards remunerated leadership.

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RRR NETWORK

RURAL REGIONAL REMOTE WOMEN'S NETWORK OF WA INC.  
ABN 42 246 101 482  
PO BOX 1244 | MARGARET RIVER WA 6285  
0410 785 726 | 08 6316 0407  
CEO@RRRNETWORK.COM.AU  
RRRNETWORK.COM.AU