

## 1. Socio-Economic Disadvantage and Inequality in Regional Western Australia

Regional WA communities are often characterised with disproportionately high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and inequality. In 2016, approximately 39 per cent (203,210) of country residents live in the highest areas of disadvantage (those areas classified as levels one and two)<sup>1</sup>. In contrast, very few metropolitan residents live in localities classed as level one and only 7% (136,429) live in localities classed as level two.

A range of factors have been identified in research as contributing to this systemic disadvantage and inequality including:

- Negative or slow population growth.
- Rapid population ageing - the total number of people aged 70 years and above has increased 23 per cent in the five years to 2018, to almost 50,000.
- Highly distributed and decentralised population raising challenges for the ability of service providers to sustain access to high quality services across the state.
- Reduced life expectancy and higher burden of disease.
- Disproportionate exposure to the negative environmental, social, and economic impacts of climate change.
- Disproportionate exposure of economic prospects to global commodity cycles, particularly in agricultural and mining related sectors.
- Exposure to a smaller pool and reduced diversity of education and employment opportunities, resulting in reduced income.
- Large share of the resident population identify as Aboriginal. Aboriginal communities and population continue to experience disproportionately negative health, life expectancy, economic and social outcomes, with implications for the wider regional communities.
- Above average rates of homelessness, with more than half of the people experiencing homelessness on census night being in regional and remote areas of WA.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Role of Gender in Driving Socio-Economic Disadvantage

The gendered impact of structural change in regional labour markets is one of the major causes of economic inequalities across industries and sectors, with long term impacts to the

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<sup>1</sup> ABS (2017) SEIFA Index 2016, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra

<sup>2</sup> Based on research by WACHS and WALGA, compiled and summarized by RPS Group (2021)

social capital of community. Understanding the determinants of gender gaps is essential to promoting a balanced pattern of economic growth.

This is particularly important in the current environment with previous research indicating that gender inequality in regional workforces' increases during periods of wider economic volatility (such as from the COVID-19 Pandemic), with women's participation rates and income falling, increasing the overall gender pay gap. Women's overall contribution to household income is therefore reduced relative to men's income, which in turn will represent a higher proportion of household income.

Family and domestic violence continues to have a profound and devastating effect on individuals, families, and communities in regional and remote WA. It is a complex and persistent social problem that has no easy solution. There is an undeniable connection between domestic violence and experiencing homelessness. Family violence can force individuals and families to leave home suddenly, without proper supports in place.

Women's empowerment and economic development are interrelated. On one side, economic development improves women's conditions and reduces inequality between woman and man, on the other hand, the involvement of women is a key engine for growth.

### **3. Role of the RRR Network of WA**

The RRR Network is the peak women's body in Western Australia (WA) representing and engaging with rural regional and remote (RRR) women.

In every Australian state and territory there is an equivalent of this organisation of which all run under different models. These organisations formed in the 1990's and continue to this day. Some are within state government, NFP's and or are volunteer led. They were spawned from the devastating impacts of drought and identifying the burden of social isolation in RRR Australia with a primary focus on women. It was understood nation-wide that women play a vital role in sustaining RRR family and community during difficult times.

The case remains today, that women are the social fabric of community and the more we support them, the more we will strengthen RRR economies and promote gender equality.

Over its 25-year history (20 years within WA State Government and five years as NFP), the RRR Network of WA has established a large and diverse network following. A strong reputation and trust with local and state government, the education and private sector, and other industries.

The RRR Network:

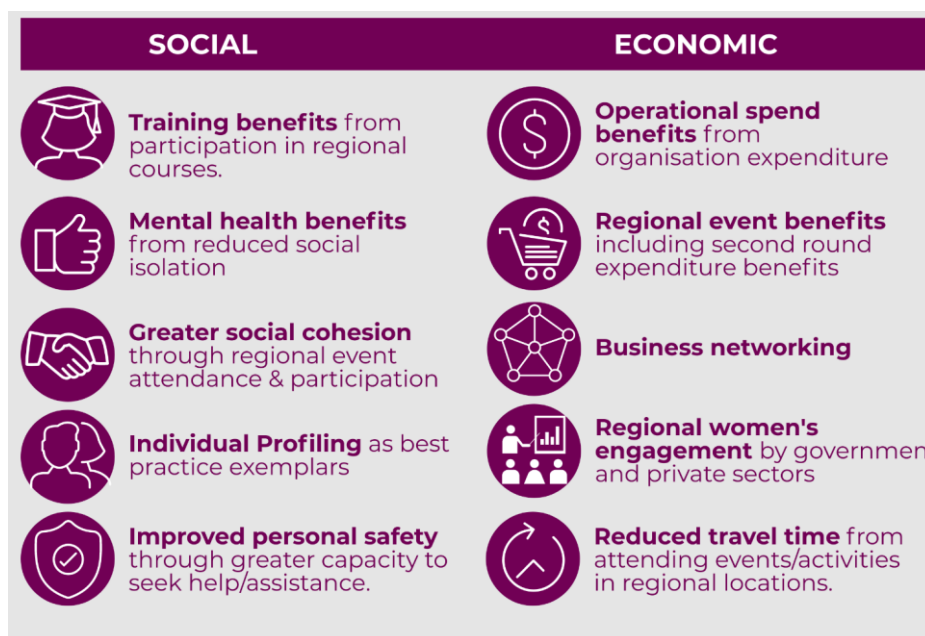
- Specialises in rural regional and remote gender equity and equality.
- Inspires leadership and empowerment of WA RRR women.
- Has identified the value of RRR women in their communities; that is, RRR women are the change we need to drive a better future for our regions, and for women.

- Can leverage off key relationships that span Australia’s largest state at any given time to accelerate key learnings and advocacy initiatives among women.

The RRR Network represents the largest landmass of RRR women in the country with currently 12,000 followers and reaching more than 60,000 monthly online engagements.

The RRR Network offers several health, social, welfare, economic and industry benefits that have accrued to the regional WA communities and economies from operation of the RRR Network. These benefits range from individual mental health benefits to improvements in wider community and social cohesion and regional and metropolitan women’s networking benefits.

Similarly, economic benefits range from flow on effects from expenditure by the organisation, facilitation of events, promotional activities on behalf of private organisations and regional small business creation and growth.



Annually, it is estimated that the RRR Network of WA generates over \$600,000 in non-financial economic and social benefits for members, partners, regional women and the regional WA economy and communities.

## Problem

COVID-19 aside, rural regional and remote Western Australia (RRR WA) continues to experience socio-economic disadvantage as previously mentioned. Although, the inclusion of a once-in-a-century pandemic – RRR WA is experiencing heightened disadvantage, inequality, and social complications. Such as:

- The labour force participation gap between men and women is the highest in WA's regions. On average, during the year 2018, there was an 11.8 percentage point difference in labour force participation between men and women in Perth, while this gap reaches 14.3 percentage points in the rest of the state. For Australia, the gap is 10.5 percentage points<sup>3</sup>
- Border closures have increased movement of people from metro to regional areas placing pressure on RRR supply chains, emergency services, facilities and RRR people to deliver. In 2020, Western Australia had its first annual net gain since 2013 of people moving to the region<sup>4</sup>.
- Increased movement of people to the regions is sustaining a regional housing crisis with many now homeless or living with friends and family.
- Increased health risk of COVID-19 infiltrating regional areas which local health systems cannot support. This is of particular concern to WA's 200 remote Aboriginal communities in the mid to northwest regions.
- Regional residents leaving home and community for treatment (COVID included) for extended periods of time for city locations, such as Albany, Bunbury, but mostly Perth – impacting employment, primary caring responsibilities and with increased expenses.
- Vaccine mandates preventing employment of some in childcare, healthcare, teaching, building industry and more. This is creating skills shortages for small business owners and the regional public sector, reducing capacity and income where there are only small populations to refill positions from.
- Pressure on regional digital services with increased dropouts, impacting business, personal and education outcomes.

## Solution

While not all the above problems are easily fixed and/or gender specific. There are 265,000 rural, regional, and remote women currently living in Western Australia to support and strengthen our regional economies. Many of whom with skills that are not utilised and are willing to participate, but unable to fully participate due to a disconnect between their skills and regional industries willing to employ them, little opportunity for remote and flexible work and lack of childcare facilities.

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<sup>3</sup> BCEC, Womens Reports Card (2019) p 16

<sup>4</sup> ABS, "Net migration to the regions highest on record" (2021) <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/net-migration-regions-highest-record>

These women need encouragement, skills, and opportunity to participate and the RRR Network is the only organisation dedicated to advocating and mobilising this cause on a mass scale in Western Australia spanning all its nine regions.

The Australian economy will grow by about \$25 billion if we support more women into work. In 2012, the Grattan Institute found that if there were an extra 6 per cent of women in the workforce, we could add up to \$25 billion, or approximately 1 per cent, to Australia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Women continue to represent invaluable opportunity to fill employment gaps and boost economies and not just in WA, but nationally and globally.

The RRR Network of WA is an essential organisation that is dedicated to encouraging RRR WA women to reskill, educate, start-up small businesses, apply for board and other leadership positions and support their social and economic well beings.

RRR women help other RRR women to achieve their goals, mentor each other and create opportunities to participate.

In addition, the work conducted by regional women's networks, strengthens a regional woman's resolve to support community particularly during times of crisis. During times of disaster and tragedy, women promote rebuilding, sustainability and inspire gender equality through leadership and action.

## **Federal Budget Recommendation**

Organisations, like the RRR Network of WA that are committed to strengthening regional women, informing state and federal policy of the issues impacting them, delivering targeted programs, and promoting gender equality in the regions should be seriously considered in the Federal Budget.

In the 2021 Women's Budget, 'regional' is mentioned only nine times in an 87-page document. While benefits to women are expected to be applied broadly, the lived experience of rural, regional, and remote women does not appear to be fully considered when allocating funds and program design.

For instance, the value of reducing social isolation and building greater cohesion among RRR women is not evident in previous budgets or within grant opportunities. This is a hugely important social pathway for regional women's empowerment that is underestimated.

State and Territory *RRR Network* organisations are the backbone for RRR women with most working under extreme financial pressure, and or by volunteers, compromising the consistency and talent the organisation requires to achieve its full potential and deliver on its mission.

We recommend a national investment consideration of these organisations that is project specific to ensure that RRR women remain visible, connected, informed, and empowered.

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