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MINISTERIAL ROUND TABLE ON WOMEN

DUMAS HOUSE, 9TH JUNE 2020

RRR NETWORK STATEMENT

For those who are not familiar with the Rural Regional and Remote Women's Network (RRR Network) of WA - I will provide a quick summary. From 1996 until 2016 the RRR Network existed as a Ministerial Reference Group. For 20 years the RRR Reference Group provided advice and feedback to both the Minister for Agriculture and the Minister for Regional Development on issues impacting women and their communities in rural and regional WA.

In 2017, the RRR Network became incorporated and is now a Not for Profit with a primary aim to Engage, Influence and Develop RRR WA women. Today, we extend beyond agriculture and engage with women from various backgrounds, expertise, skills, ages, industries, and connections that we all leverage off and gain from.

We are a Network – a place to belong - of approximately 4000 women. More broadly, we advocate for the 265,000 RRR women of Western Australia. We are their conduit to relay important issues impacting them to various stakeholders. We strive for improved economic independence, increase their opportunity, encourage, and empower leadership and work towards gender equality.

The RRR Network relies on its membership base, funding, or partnerships to deliver, facilitate, and liaise on services, projects and social impact research that directly benefits RRR women and their communities.

Now to the issue at hand – the pandemic and RRR women.

First, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight that 'isolation' is something that many RRR people live with every day. Isolation determines little to no essential services when you need them. For the rural and very remote, there is no one to be there - to hear you - from one day to the next. You must continually solve issues on your own, do without and accept less, whether it be your health, your relationships, your aspirations and last, your opportunities. It is tedious and can be oppressive.

Knowing this, the RRR Network has been offering fortnightly free webinars, podcasts, making phone calls and providing weekly blog content that highlights the efforts and ingenuity of RRR women and the issues impacting them.



The pandemic has been a great motivator to deliver and communicate not only when there is a new project or issue, but weekly, and the response has been overwhelming with support and thanks.

The negative impacts. In mid-2019 we conducted ten regional forums to support Minister McGurk's Women's Voices initiative. Our final [report](#) identified six issues impacting women. I raise this because the issues pre-pandemic remain today, only now they have been heightened, made more complex or exhaustive.

For example, we identified a lack of jobs for women in the regions compounded by child-care difficulties. The pandemic saw women disproportionately affected either through their employment, increased burden of caring responsibilities and limited to no access to childcare. There was also a reported increase in both family assault and threatening behaviour offences in March. And, due to a lack of essential services, therefore vulnerable and already isolated communities, it is arguable that, the impact of the lockdown experience on the regions has been much greater than on their city counterparts.

We [found](#) that COVID-19 has triggered mental health, stress, and anxiety. Our survey found that 69% considered mental health to be their biggest concern for their community. Women have been seeking coaching, counselling, mentoring, relationship, and financial advice and even simply conversation opportunities because of isolation and fear of the virus. For example, someone from our Network reported that she conducts wellness coaching fortnightly and in the thick of the pandemic these sessions went to weekly and her online class doubled in size.

However, there has been some positive (potential) developments for RRR women in two areas. Ironically, the pandemic was a strange leveller for regional and metro people because every individual was placed into isolation and people were encouraged to work from home. This has been one of the most positive changes of the pandemic for regional people. That is, an increased awareness and acceptance that working from home is possible and it can be effective.

What opportunities will this shift in thinking create for regional people, and for city people? Will more people consider a life and a career outside of the city? Will more women consider further education and upskilling in preparation for increased remote work opportunities?

Can the Public Sector lead the way in regional and remote job creation and offer short courses that will service these types of roles?

In saying that, unreliable internet and phone coverage in the regions remains, making working from home not always seamless. But relief was offered and quickly, such as NBN Satellite increased their 150GB monthly allowance to 190GB for people on remote stations in the far north.

Another positive, there has then been an uptake of telehealth and Medicare rebates. Moving forward, we expect more RRR women to receive health services they typically would forgo, because of the long-distance travel to a city to receive it.

The pandemic has demonstrated that we are capable of rapid pivots with positive outcomes. Our collective challenge is - how can we ensure they are here to stay?

We are here to help the State Government and to offer our Network to leverage off to deliver services and communicate important messages with an aim to strengthen our regional areas. For example, we will start promoting itthink to our Network to encourage more community participation in WA's Recovery process and planning.



We have identified recovery opportunities such as:

- 1) We have recently presented a project to Department of Primary Industry and Regional Development to roll out over the next 12 months that will see 180 businesses across the state build capacity and understanding on how to adopt remote work, and to train 270 professionals in how to work remotely. We do this in the hope that we will see more women working from home and pursuing leadership or professional roles.
- 2) Improved digital connectivity to the regions and home support infrastructure schemes, such as web cams or IT that will encourage more women to connect, learn and build careers from home.
- 3) Regional forums – like the Women’s Voices for women to come together to discuss the pandemic and their community – to respond to mental health, grief, stress, and uncertainty of the future. Share information and assist each other.
- 4) Create a one-stop-shop package for women that provides access to mentoring or coaching, financial literacy advice, mental health check-in and future resilience planning for either business or self.
- 5) Empower community leaders – make them Ambassadors for their regions or community and if possible, for these individuals to be aligned or to operate within existing organisations/entities across the state. Create go-to women that are trained on how to best connect people to the local services or help they require that meets the ‘one-stop-shop’ package initiative. We have 43 women who have indicated to us that they are keen to volunteer to assist their communities through the pandemic and would reach out to these women if the State Government would be interested in supporting the idea.

Thank you for including the RRR Network of WA in the Ministerial Round Table on Women. The road ahead is not easy, and the negative impacts have been deeply concerning, such as increased racism, unemployment, spike in mental health and domestic violence, hard-hit industries such as culture and the arts, tourism, and hospitality and more. But I am confident that the unexpected wins experienced during the pandemic, women will embrace and seize their opportunity, and lead us closer to gender equality.