



RRR NETWORK



**What  
Western  
Australian  
RRR Women  
Want Survey**





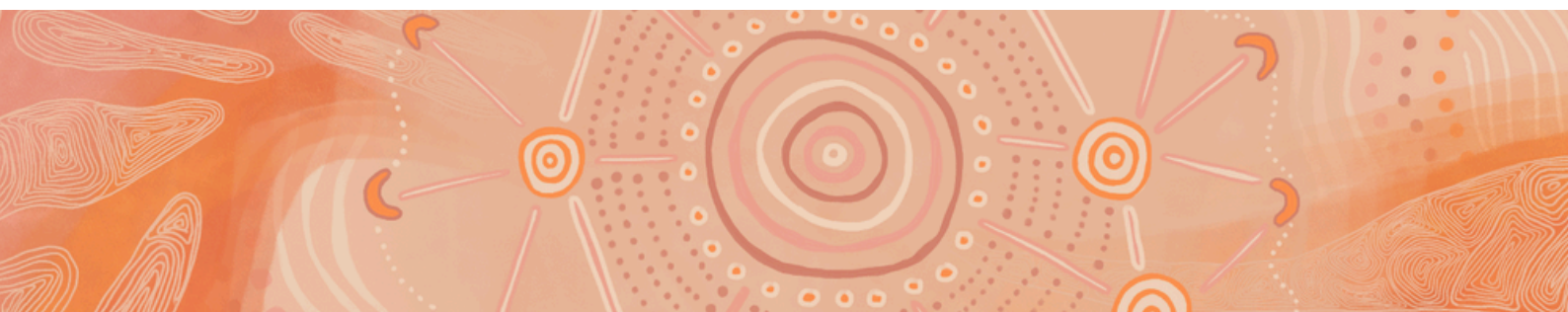




**WE WOULD LIKE TO  
ACKNOWLEDGE  
THE PAST, PRESENT  
AND FUTURE  
TRADITIONAL  
OWNERS AND  
ELDERS, WHOSE  
CULTURES AND  
CUSTOMS HAVE  
AND WILL  
CONTINUE TO  
NURTURE THE LAND  
ON WHICH WE  
WALK AND LIVE.**

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# 1. Executive Summary

This report explores and discusses the social and economic opportunities and challenges of regional Western Australia (WA) through the lens of rural, regional and remote (RRR) women.

To further understand these opportunities and challenges, the RRR Network released its inaugural annual survey “What RRR Women Want”. This survey is the RRR Network’s primary advocacy platform with the findings informing annual strategies and activities. The survey findings also provide a demographic roadmap for RRR women: the priorities they have for their community and for themselves; the services they can access or are problematic; what they value in living regionally; and the drivers that may cause them to leave.

The RRR Network survey was distributed in early 2024 to RRR members, and the public via online platforms, and received a total of 367 responses state-wide, with the Wheatbelt, Midwest and Pilbara regions being the most represented.

The survey results highlighted major themes of concern, such as access to health and other essential services, housing, cost of living and community infrastructure. Survey participants also suggested these issues would ultimately contribute to women leaving the regions for the city in the future.


Additionally, the findings revealed that women personally prioritised increased access to education, training and other professional development, opportunities for social connectedness, having financial independence and a greater need for digital access, affordability, and capability.

Finally, women shared that the top priority for the RRR Network should be advocating on major issues impacting RRR women and their communities.





## 2. Rural, Regional, and Remote Western Australian Women Survey Snapshot



WA is the second largest state in the world, covering an area of 2.5 million square kilometres. There are approximately 2.9 million people living in WA, with 572,000 (20%) of those living in a RRR location. There are approx. 217,525 RRR women aged from 15-64 residing in WA.

**Living in a RRR location should not define career choice. Our regions are extremely diverse, and so are its people, especially its women. What most RRR women have in common is isolation and this represents a unique intersection into their lived experience. Understanding the varied experiences of RRR women is essential to the consideration and development of future economic, social and infrastructure strategies.**

### Survey Demographics

- 83% Australian/Caucasian.
- 10% German, American, Chinese, English, Indonesian, Canadian and Sinhalese.
- 3% New Zealand.
- 2.5% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.
- Less than 1% culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD).



### Regional representation

- **37% Wheatbelt**
- **17% Mid West**
- **13% Pilbara**
- 8.5% Goldfields-Esperance
- 7% Kimberley
- 7% South West
- 3% Gascoyne, Peel and Perth



### Survey participants by age

# 72%

Women most represented in this survey were those aged between 31 to 60.

- 12% - 61 to 70
- 10% - 20 to 30
- 4% - 71 above.



### RRR women: a satisfied life?

For RRR women aged 20 to 70, 'satisfaction in life' was separated by only ten percentage points. This data exposed a stereotypical journey of a woman as she ages.

- 59.5% 20-30 yr old's
- 54% 31-40 yr old's
- 62% 41-50 yr old's
- 53% 51-60 yr old's
- 52% 61-70 yr old's



### Top priorities RRR women have for *their* communities

- Health
- Education
- Housing

Vulnerability and concerns for health exponentially grew with age. Health was the top priority for all age groups, but health did increase in priority from 78% for women aged 31-40 to 95% to women aged 61-70.



### Top priorities for RRR women for *themselves*

- Education
- Employment
- Social connectedness



**Top two priorities for the RRR Network as suggested by RRR women -**





## Top two employment industries for Wheatbelt and Mid West women

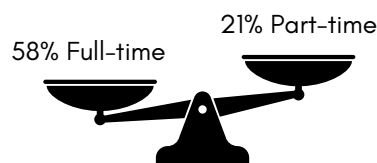


### Agriculture and Education

The Mid West and Wheatbelt region data revealed similar employment patterns. 27% worked full-time for each and part-time was 18% for Mid West and 19% for the Wheatbelt.



## Full and Part-time status of RRR women surveyed



WESTERN AUSTRALIAN RURAL REGIONAL  
REMOTE WOMEN'S WORKFORCE  
PARTICIPATION RATE  
(BCEC 2022)

# 64.01%

## Women in Agriculture

- Revealed correlation between employment and housing stability and agricultural industry employment for women in the regions.
- In the 2021 RRR Network Survey, agriculture was the top industry of employment for Wheatbelt women with 61% working in the sector.
- In the 2024 RRR Network Survey, only 27% of Wheatbelt women were working in the agriculture sector.

Decrease in Wheatbelt women working in agriculture over recent years could be because:

- Different datasets from 2021 to 2024.
- City to regional migration due to the pandemic opening labour markets and diversifying our RRR audience.
- Increased rate of hybrid or remote work since the pandemic.
- **Women who once were only using their skills for the farming enterprise were now able to offer their skills remotely elsewhere.**



## Highest level of educational attainment in 2024

- Bachelor Degree at 32%
- Secondary School at 19%
- TAFE at 14%
- VET at 13%
- Masters Degree at 11%

In 2021, 43% of RRR women's highest level of education was a Bachelor's Degree.

## Social Isolation

52% said that 'social connectedness was a priority for RRR women' and 61% said that 'strengthening connection between RRR women across the state through membership, professional development, collaboration, and networking events' should be a priority of the RRR Network.



## Access to Essential Services

Access to health services was the most problematic with 60% of participants citing lack of access to healthcare and/or other essential services as a precursor to leaving RRR WA and a further 62% outlining the challenge in accessing General Practitioners (GP).



Survey participants mentioned other services they struggle to access, impacting regional liveability. These included -

- cultural and art experiences
- entertainment/restaurant
- exercise classes
- trades services
- swimming pools
- EV high speed chargers
- safe socialisation locations for teenagers
- fresh produce outlets
- experienced teachers in schools
- reliable internet services and
- outdoor recreational spaces for non-team sport activities, such as safe walk tracks and bike trails.





# 3. Introduction

The Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) uses the term 'remote and rural' to describe all areas outside Australia's major cities. This includes areas that are classified as inner and outer regional (RA2 and RA3 respectively) and remote or very remote (RA4 and RA5 respectively) under the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS).<sup>1</sup> The RRR Network is an organisation that is dedicated to the rural, regional and remote women that live outside of Perth.

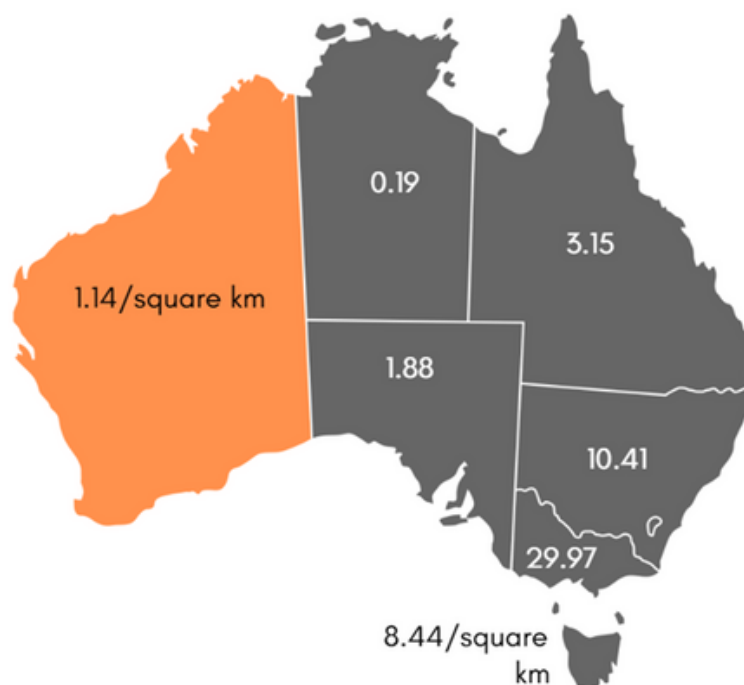
According to ABS there are approximately 275,000 females living in RRR WA. WA is the second largest state in the world, covering an area of 2.5 million square kilometres: about 40 per cent of Australia's total land area. There are approximately 2.9 million people living in WA, with 572,000 (20%) of those living in a RRR location.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, the population density of WA is 1.14 persons per square kilometre (km), which is second to Northern Territory at 0.19 per square km, followed by South Australia at 1.88, and Queensland at 3.15. Then it jumps significantly, with Tasmania at 8.44, New South Wales at 10.41 and Victoria at 29.97, however, regional WA is 0.23 persons per square km.<sup>2</sup>

Living in a RRR location should not define career choice or way of life. Our regions are extremely diverse, and so are its people, especially its women. What most RRR women have in common is isolation and this represents a unique intersection into their lived experience. Understanding the varied experiences of RRR women is essential to the consideration and development of future economic, social and infrastructure strategies. This report provides that roadmap.

Low population density and isolation is one of WA's most valued assets. It leads to a reduced environmental impact, in turn maintaining this States beautiful natural landscape. It also contributes to less overcrowding, bestowing those who live there with a more peaceful experience. However, it is also having a major

**Figure 1. Population Density by States, Australia**



negative impact on essential service delivery. Isolation reduces the capacity for RRR people to participate in education and other professional development opportunities and to access various health services including emergency services and childcare services and even reliable digital technology. It also impacts ability to secure meaningful employment and or be exposed to a choice of occupational opportunities. Finally, isolation also increases the risk of those living regionally and remotely to gender-based violence, to pursue justice, and much more.

Due to small populations as just discussed, RRR areas commonly experiences inconsistent community, business and service opportunities and as a result, less is available. The expectation is that RRR people must travel to the city to receive those services, or they go without. However, travelling by car to WA's capital city - Perth from a RRR location is not an easy task. For example, Esperance to Perth is approximately seven hours, and from the Broome to Perth is 22 hours.

[1] Royal Flying Doctor Service, 'Defining Rural and Remote' Available at <https://www.flyingdoctor.org.au/what-we-do/research/defining-rural-remote/>

[2] .idcommunity 'Regional WA: About the profile areas', 2023. Available at <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/about?WebID=220>.



For many, travel by road takes too long and is costly. Others opt to fly; however, flights are not regular or reliable and can be expensive. Those who travel in WA to achieve their goals, whatever they may be, do so at a considerable cost and for many this not attainable, especially women who are less likely to be financially independent. This then becomes a gendered issue: RRR women are vulnerable to economic, financial and social disadvantage in attaining personal and career goals.

The RRR women's workforce participation rate is lower than that of metropolitan women.<sup>3</sup> For many RRR women, accessing stable and/or meaningful employment is not an option even though they wish to do so. This is largely driven by limited to no childcare services and restricted labour markets. Physical access to a workplace could mean travelling more than 100 km's by vehicle which is not sustainable economically or socially. As a result of all or some of these barriers, many women rely on their partners income and abstain from work or are underemployed. Men are much more likely to

find work in regional WA due to male dominated industries underpinning regional economies such as agriculture, mining, construction and trades, and so it is their ability to work and earn an income that keeps many RRR women financially insecure and out of the workforce.

**It is this mix of social and economic issues that drives purpose for the RRR Network.**





## 4. Who we are: the RRR Network

The RRR Network is the peak women's body in WA representing and engaging with RRR women. Over the RRR Network's 28-year history (20 years within WA State Government as a Ministerial Reference Group and eight years as an NFP and Incorporated Association), the RRR Network 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.

Our purpose is to understand and advocate on key issues that affect RRR women across WA. We provide connection and empowerment that inspires leadership, and we support women to achieve their goals.

The RRR Network has 300 financial members and an online following of 14,500 across its social media channels and Newsletter subscribers. The RRR Network leverages the knowledge and lived experience of its members on important issues for the benefit of all RRR women as well as to influence policy development with the WA State Government. In addition, the RRR Network provides women's feedback to industry to improve service delivery.

The RRR Network assists in improving the visibility of RRR women and their communities to key decision makers, thus contributing to positive outcomes for RRR WA.



RRR Network CEO – Kendall Galbraith

## This inaugural report will:

Examine the demographic data, so we may better understand the opportunities and challenges of RRR women.

- Utilise survey findings to explore social connectedness and mental wellbeing of RRR women. In learning more about satisfaction levels with the lives they lead, a more comprehensive picture of regional living is provided.
- Review service challenges and consequences for regional WA and women.
- Provide recommendations for key decision makers with the goal of improving the lives of RRR women.
- Outline key strategies and actions for the RRR Network's next year of operations.



RRR Network Chair – Naomi Evans



## 5. Survey Demographics

99% of survey respondents were women and less than 1% were men, non-binary and/or preferred not to say. Culturally, participants identified as:

- 83% Australian/Caucasian.
- 10% German, American, Chinese, English, Indonesian, Canadian and Sinhalese.
- 3% New Zealand.
- 2.5% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.
- Less than 1% culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD).

First Nations, migrants, and CaLD populations represented 13% of the survey sample: less than hoped. However, in Regional WA, only 8.7% of people used a language other than English at home in 2021<sup>4</sup> and majority of people born in non English speaking countries lived in metropolitan Perth in 2016.<sup>5</sup> In regional locations such as Kalgoorlie Boulder, 24% of the population was born overseas and has the highest number (1,733) of CaLD women in WA.<sup>6</sup> Other regional locations with increasing CaLD populations of women are Bunbury, Albany, Greater-Geraldton, Busselton, Harvey, Karratha, Port Hedland, Broome and Augusta Margaret River. In the top ten regional Local Government Areas there is a total of 11,605 CaLD women.<sup>7</sup>



## 6. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women

In the 2021 Census of 'Population and Housing', Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represented 3.3% of WA's population – 89,000 people. Outside of the Perth region, there are approximately 22,510 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and almost 50% reside in the Kimberley region.<sup>8</sup>

Less than 2.5% women in the survey identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. When we consider the overall representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in WA and their most populated areas – such as the Kimberley and Perth regions – these are two locations in which the RRR Network maintains a limited presence.

In recent years, the RRR Network recognised its limited engagement with diverse women and commissioned the 'Diversity and Inclusion Roadmap' (2022) for all RRR women. This



[4] .id The Population Experts, 'Regional WA: Language used at home', 2021. Available at <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/language?WebID=220chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://www.omi.wa.gov.au/docs/librariesprovider2/statistics/wa-cald-profile-2021.pdf>.

[5] Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries: Office of Multicultural Interests, 2021. 'Census 2021 Snapshot: Western Australian Women from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds'.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] ABS '2021 Census Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people QuickStats'. Available at <https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/IQS510>. 2021.



roadmap sought to engage RRR women regardless of their race, gender, size, age, economic and social standing or ability.

Since then, the RRR Network appointed its first Aboriginal woman to the RRR Network Board and survey contributions from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women has doubled since 2021. Disappointingly, the number of survey responses from Indigenous women remains too small to offer any insightful discussion.

**The limited engagement in the survey suggests the need for a different consultation approach. Whilst the RRR Network's 'Diversity and Inclusion Roadmap' presented a set of indicators in how to strengthen relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, these will need to be revisited in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RRR women.**

The survey data received, albeit limited, does reveal some insights from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women enjoyed 'connection to environment' living in RRR WA.
- The top three priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were 'community', 'health' and 'housing'.
- Top personal priority centred on 'employment opportunities'.

One major insight in the RRR Network survey findings was that there were no noticeable differences between the responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and other participants. They all possessed the same level of educational attainment, demonstrated similar employment profiles, had housing stability, had same essential service access challenges, and would indefinitely live in the RRR WA. In terms of demographic profiles, they were all aged between 30 to 70.

A point of difference in the survey results was why they were living in RRR WA. 62.5% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women did so because they grew up in the regions



compared to 36% of Caucasian/Australian women. In addition, 'connection to environment' achieved its highest score with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (75%) compared to 44% for Caucasian/Australian women.

Whilst it could be assumed that the challenging history and present-day economic and social issues of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women would manifest in our survey findings, this was not the case. However, we are mindful of the limited participation rates in the survey and therefore are not in a position to utilise the findings to represent the very serious and isolated issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and conversely their opportunities.



## 7. Inclusive Language

Why did our survey not capture a more culturally diverse audience of women?

Essentially – words matter. The Diversity Council of Australia (2023) highlighted the importance of using inclusive language and have recently mooted changing the use of the acronym ‘CaLD’ to ‘CARM’ – Culturally and racially marginalised. See the below definitions taken from the Diversity Council of Australia website<sup>9</sup>

### CARM

*We use the term culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) to refer to people who cannot be racialised as white. This group includes people who are Black, Brown, Asian, or any other non-white group, who face marginalisation due to their race. The term “culturally” is added because it recognises that people may also face discrimination due to their culture or background. For example, a woman who is a Muslim migrant from South Sudan may face discrimination because of her race, religion and cultural background.*

### CaLD

*This is a term that many Australians would be familiar with as it has been used by government for some time. CALD is a much broader category than CARM, and often extends to people who can be racialised as white, even if they are not from an Anglo-Celtic Background. For example, a Ukrainian migrant or someone who was born in Australia to Ukrainian parents. CALD people see themselves (or their parents) or are seen by others as being from a non-English speaking background, and/or being from a non-Anglo-Celtic cultural background. This term prioritises cultural and linguistic explanations of difference and is therefore insufficient for any meaningful discussion or understanding of race and racism. In fact, the term “CALD” is rarely used to describe race in an Australian context.*



Whilst the RRR Network acknowledges the recommended language shift, our survey referenced ‘CaLD’ thus it will continue to be used throughout this report.

**However, in the future we will consider changing this and as part of our due diligence consult with Western Australia’s Multicultural Services Centre of WA for their feedback and advice.**

In comparing data from our ‘Leadership Survey’ in 2021 and from our 2024 survey response rates, a higher number of participants identified as CaLD women (3.7%) in the 2021 survey. The 2021 survey differed from the current as it was an isolated project on leadership: “What does Leadership mean to you?”.

Please note, that nearly all RRR Network surveys capture demographics enabling benchmarking. As such, the 2021 survey (What does leadership mean to you?) is referenced in this report where applicable.

One possible reason for the higher response rate in 2021 may have been the marketing strategy adopted. The marketing campaign for the 2021 survey was designed with multiple promotions. Two included images of CaLD and First Nations women. In contrast, the 2024 survey ‘What RRR

<sup>[9]</sup> Diversity Council of Australia, ‘Words at Work: Should we use CALD or CARM?’, 2023. Available at <https://www.dca.org.au/news/blog/words-at-work-should-we-use-cald-or-carm>.



Women Want' had only one image for the entire campaign: a white woman with her arms crossed expressing power and expectations of equality. Upon reflection, the survey title, combined with the strong image of a white woman may have inadvertently excluded CaLD and First Nations RRR women.

**The inclusion of diverse imagery and inclusive language may have attracted greater diversity in the response rates. This will be taken into careful consideration for future research undertaken by the RRR Network.**

**A further action from this report will be for the RRR Network to collaborate with cultural organisations to ensure authentic and sustainable relationships are formed and social impact is achieved for more audiences of RRR WA women in our research and activities.**





## 8. Dominant Survey Demographic – or not?

The initial scan of the survey data indicated that the most common demographic picture was that of a woman aged between 31-40 who identified as Australian/Caucasian. She had a bachelor's degree, worked full-time in the agriculture, forestry, and fishing industry, lived in the Wheatbelt region, and owned her home. However, this is not an accurate reflection of the data and should not be reviewed as the study's dominant persona. Upon further analysis and cross tabulation of data a very different picture emerges. In fact, there was only one woman who fits the above descriptor. See Table 1 below:

When applying multiple filters to the data, such as age group, industry and status of work and regional location, no clear pattern of demographic profile emerged. Whilst there are some clear singular data points, such as a higher representation of Wheatbelt women, the data diverges. This reflects the diversity of women living in RRR areas and how their experience can be remarkably different as they age, where they live and what services are accessible to them.

**Table 1: Demographic Assumptions vs Reality**

94/367	Aged 31-40
81/367	Caucasian/Australian
40/367	Bachelor's degree
16/367	Works full-time
5/367	Lives in the Wheatbelt
2/367	Works in Agriculture
1/367	Owens her own home





## 9. Survey participants by region

The RRR Network survey received responses from all WA regions –

- 37% Wheatbelt
- 17% Mid West
- 13% Pilbara
- 8.5% Goldfields-Esperance
- 7% Kimberley
- 7% South West
- 3% Gascoyne, Peel and Perth

The above percentages do not mirror the RRR Network's membership data by region, suggesting that survey participation was more than likely a mix of members and non-members (the public). This is important to note because typically a membership organisation has its own culture and unique value proposition that attracts a particular audience and potentially a shared view of the world. In the case of the RRR Network, it does have a legacy and reputation of being represented mostly by women farmers.

However, their experience is understandably different from those not living and working on a farm.

In recent years, the agricultural focus of the RRR Network has significantly shifted, opening to more RRR women, regardless of industry and region. As a result, the RRR Network's activities and voice has become increasingly diverse and more reflective of RRR Western Australia as demonstrated in this survey's results.

On average, people living in Inner regional and Outer regional areas are older than those in Major cities. For Inner regional areas, 22.1% of the population were aged 65 years or older in 2022 compared with 15.5% in Major cities, 14.7% in Remote and 10.3% in Very remote areas. Areas such as the South West, Wheatbelt and Midwest are examples of those regions with 22% or higher populations aged 65 years and over.





Whereas areas such as Goldfields-Esperance, Pilbara and the Kimberley have less than 14%. Areas with greater portions of the 65 years or older are at serious risk of population decline when this cohort actively source essential health care services.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, since the pandemic there has been a trend of millennials leaving capital cities for cheaper regional living and taking up remote work opportunities. The Regional Australia Institute's latest Regional Movers Index revealed Northam was the nation's top performing region for annual growth in net capital city to regional migration with a 250% uplift, year-on-year.

Albany, four hours south of Perth, was also represented in the nation's top five Local Government Areas for annual growth in net capital city to regional migration with an impressive 120% increase.<sup>11</sup>



[10] Rural and Remote Health, 'Profile of rural and remote Australians', 2024.

[11] Perth Now, 'Cost-of-living pressures drive Perth city-dwelling millennials to unlikely WA regions'. 2024. Available at <https://www.perthnow.com.au/business/property/cost-of-living-pressures-drive-perth-city-dwelling-millennials-to-unlikely-wa-regions-c-14865190>



## 10. Survey participants by age

**Figure 2. Participant Age Distribution**

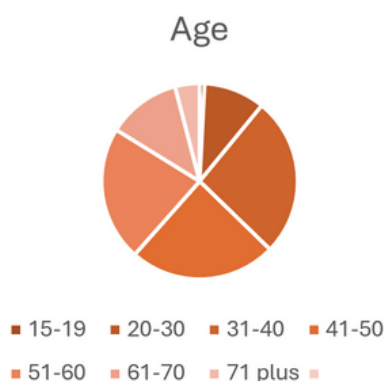


Figure 2 outlines the age distribution of those participating in the survey. In summary:

- Women most represented in this survey were those aged between 31 to 60 (72%).
- Women 61 to 70 represented 12% of survey participants, followed by women aged 20 to 30 (10%) and 71 and above (4%).
- There was less than 3 percentage points separating age groups 31-40, 41-50 and 51-60 offering almost equal contribution to this study over three ten-year age brackets.

The least represented in our survey were young women aged 15 to 19 (less than 1%). Although, this was expected, as our work tends to focus on women from university or early career onwards. However, the limited representation in the 20-30-year-old age group (10%) was disappointing as this is likely to be mirrored in the RRR Network's membership.

The latter suggests the need for the RRR Network to develop a membership pipeline strategy. In order for women to successfully navigate meaningful employment and careers, effective and appropriate networks need to be established to assist with dealing career challenges and opportunities as well as sourcing primary caring responsibilities and taking up leadership opportunities in the regions. As most



of these actions occur for women in their late 20s and 30s, it is essential that the RRR Network provides resources, opportunities and advocacy services for this cohort.

The RRR Network has a strong operational objective to work with emerging RRR women leaders and as a result we currently have two Regional Ambassadors in this age group.

**The RRR Network acknowledges a need to increase its engagement with younger women and this will form an action from this report. This is because young women offer a unique diversity to the decision-making table and are our future leaders.**

Evidence suggests that women aged 31 to 60 are the RRR Network's most active and visible cohort: attendance at education workshops and social events; guest speakers at events or active online followers. This presents an invaluable benefit to the RRR Network membership and wider community as these women not only network effectively but are valued members of the community for the knowledge and skills they possess.

# 11. Employment and RRR women

The 2024 RRR Network survey findings indicate that 78% of women were participating in the workforce at the time of survey completion. The remaining approx. 22% were:

- 3% unemployed.
- 1.4% underemployed.
- 9% retired.
- 2.4% not employed and not looking for work.
- 2.7% were on maternity leave.
- 1.9% student.
- 1% had an injury preventing ability to work.

The Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre reported in 2022 that the Women's Workforce Participation (WWP) rate specifically for WA RRR women was 64.01%: only slightly under WA's overall rate of 64.6%.

The above-mentioned participation rate of 78% (RRR Network) is not to be confused with the 'women's workforce participation rate'. The WWP rate is the total number of women 'employed' plus 'unemployed' divided by the working population aged 15-64.

As of July 2024, the WWP rate for the 'Rest of WA' (outside of Perth) was 63.1%. Deeper statistical analysis of the 'Rest of WA' reveals the following WWP rates for regional locations as defined by ABS<sup>12</sup> –

- 64.4% for 'Outback North and South' which is the Kimberley, Pilbara, Goldfields-Esperance & Mid West regions.
- 62.4% for 'Wheatbelt North and South' which includes Albany.
- 62.3% for 'Bunbury' which includes Augusta Margaret River and Manjimup (South West areas).

Since 2022 there has been an overall reduction of the 'Rest of WA' women's workforce participation rate. This is confirmed with RRR women in Wheatbelt North and South and

Bunbury (South West) experiencing such a reduction. However, 'Outback North and South' is performing better than in 2022.

The ABS data for the last twenty years also supports this reduction, with the rate dropping as low as 55.4 in 2008 to 65.7 in 2017. The present cost-of-living crisis and high inflation rates suggest that a greater number of people would be seeking stable and increased employment options, resulting in an increased official, registered unemployment rate and decreased workforce participation rate.

Our survey results indicate that 3% women were unemployed and looking for work: under the 2024 unemployment rate of 4.1% (April 2024).

The RRR Network has monitored the employment status of RRR women since 2019 with three data points to reference. These are cited in Table 2 below.

**Table 2. Employment Survey Responses: 2019 to 2024**

	Full-time	Part-time	No of responses
2019	56%	26%	92
2021	61%	26%	163
2024	58%	21%	367

The RRR Network's reach has increased since 2019, with an expansion of both numbers of women and the locations they represent. In 2019, the survey data was sourced from Northam, Busselton, Geraldton, Esperance, Manjimup and Bridgetown via face-to-face engagements. Both 2021 and 2024 survey data were captured online and received participants from all WA regions.



Table 3 provides a snapshot of the RRR Network regional full and part-time employment data from 2021 and 2024. It is important to not assess these figures in isolation to other data findings.

**Table 3. Work Status 2021 – RRR Network.**

Region	Full-time %	Part-time %
Kimberley	69	23
Pilbara	83	17
Gascoyne	75	25
Mid West	27	27
Wheatbelt	73	21
Peel	71	29
South West	52	32
Great Southern	73	20
Goldfields-Esperance	53	29

It can be seen that the lowest labour force participation rates were in the Mid West region – by twenty-five percentage points. However, this may not be indicative of overall employment patterns in the region with only 15 women participating the 2021 survey. Similar problem exist with assessing the data from the Kimberley and Pilbara regions with limited survey participation.

**The RRR Network aims to increase future survey responses to better understand women’s workforce participation across Western Australia with an aim of at least one hundred women in each regional location.**

Table 4 provides a snapshot of the 2024 survey findings, with higher response rates offering more meaningful insights (367 compared to 163). The Wheatbelt, Mid West and Pilbara regions received the highest volume of responses allowing for deeper analysis (coloured regions in the table below). Extrapolation of the data findings was more difficult for all other regions due to low response rates, such as the Peel region which received only four responses who all worked full-time.

**Table 4. Work Status 2024 – RRR Network**

Region	Full-time %	Self-Employed %	Part-time %
Kimberley	54	23	15
Pilbara	47	11	23
Gascoyne	0	60	20
Mid West	27	27	18
Wheatbelt	27	26	19
Peel	100	0	0
South West	27	19	27
Great Southern	37	41	11
Goldfields-Esperance	19	29	39

The Mid West and Wheatbelt region data reveals similar employment patterns. The top two employment industries for women in both the Mid West and Wheatbelt was agriculture and education. For Pilbara, it was education and mining.

The highest employment rates across all modes were in the Kimberley (92%) and the Pilbara (81%) demonstrating a significant difference to the rates in the Mid West and the Wheatbelt. This may be because the Pilbara region had the greatest number of women moving to the region for the purpose of work and one of the lowest residing there for lifestyle purposes. This suggests that Pilbara is a work destination rather than a lifestyle choice and why more women here are employed. Interestingly, the Mid West full and part-time data from 2021 to 2024 is consistent.

**In summary, unravelling the workforce participation rate of RRR women is complex and yet a benchmark the RRR Network wishes to capture. Moving forward, the RRR Network would like to report on the WWP rate for WA’s nine regions (excluding Perth). To make sense of this data, the RRR Network will consult with the Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre prior to the next publication of the Women’s Report Card and seek clarity on developing a comprehensive RRR WWP rate data set and discussion.**

## 12. Level of Education

There is abundant research evidence to support the correlation between educational attainment, upskilling and higher rates of employment and employability.<sup>13</sup> As such, it is encouraging that almost 80% of our survey respondents had completed university or TAFE education equivalent, with the 32% possessing a bachelor's degree (Table 5).

**Table 5. Highest level of Educational Attainment: 2021 and 2024**

Highest level of education	2024 %	2021 %
Bachelor degree	32	43
Secondary School	19	7
TAFE	14	16
VET	13	13
Master's degree	11	12
Other (Diploma)	5	2.5
Associate degree	4	4
PhD	0.82	3
Primary School	0.27	0

When examining the levels of education for RRR women we were able to link educational attainment to employment. For example, for the group whose highest education level was primary or secondary school – 44% were employed and 5.71% were looking for work. Whereas women who had university or TAFE equivalent – 82% were employed and 2.35% were looking for work. Also, RRR women who held a master's degree and or VET qualifications had the highest full-time employment rates.

However, as highlighted in Table 5, we found a decrease in RRR women attaining a bachelor's degree qualification. In 2021, 43% of RRR women surveyed held a bachelor's degree, but this reduced to 32% in 2024. Figures remained similar for VET in 2021 at 13% and then 14% in 2024. For TAFE it was 16% in 2021 and then a decrease to 13% in 2024.

The above data mirrors the Australian Federal Government's concern of a decline in Australian's achieving higher education qualifications.<sup>14</sup> Possible reasons for the decline were the disruption to higher education enrolment as a result of COVID (such as course availability and structural changes to delivery), increased cost of living, financial stress associated with high cost of university studies and associated concerns about student debt and most recently the economic crisis.<sup>15</sup>

Living regionally can impact or reduce one's access to education with significant differences in higher education attainment between major cities and regional areas. We found that among the RRR women who moved to the country and or moved there to enable their partner's work:

- 38% of them had a bachelor's degree.
- 14% had a master's degree.
- 12% had TAFE and same again for VET.

Whereas women who grew up in the country –

- 31% had a bachelor's degree.
- 25% secondary school certificate.
- 15% TAFE qualification.
- 14% VET qualification
- 8% had a master's degree.

This data suggests that those who live in a RRR location have had less exposure to higher education. This is further evidenced by the results of the question we asked, 'What services you find challenging to access', with 48% of participants indicating 'higher education/TAFE'.

This is not unexpected given the limited opportunities for physical access to higher education in the regions coupled with small employment markets opportunities.

[13] Department of Education, 'Integrated Data Research, Benefits of Educational Attainment'. 2024. Available at <https://www.education.gov.au/integrated-data-research/benefits-educational-attainment>.

[14] Cassidy, C. 2023. Number of Australians enrolled in bachelor's degrees falls by 12% in less than a decade. The Guardian. 16 November 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/nov/16/australia-higher-education-university-enrolment-decline-falls-why-cost>

[15] Ferguson, H. 2022. Regional and remote higher education: a quick guide. Parliament of Australia.

[https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/rp2122/Quick\\_Guides/RegionalRemoteHigherEducation#:~:text=Attainment%20by%20regionality,remote%20and%20very%20remote%20areas](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp2122/Quick_Guides/RegionalRemoteHigherEducation#:~:text=Attainment%20by%20regionality,remote%20and%20very%20remote%20areas)



The recent Australian Universities Accord acknowledges the RRR challenge in accessing higher education, reporting that those from regional areas have much lower educational attainment than those from major cities. The report also highlights the need for more tailored courses that matches the evolving needs of current and emerging regional industries.<sup>16</sup>

**The RRR Network welcomes opportunity to participate in consultations with government, universities and industry that aim to unpack and ultimately address the shortfall of regional students. Our contribution would share the nuanced lived experience that inhibits university participation of RRR people.**



## 13. Industry of Work

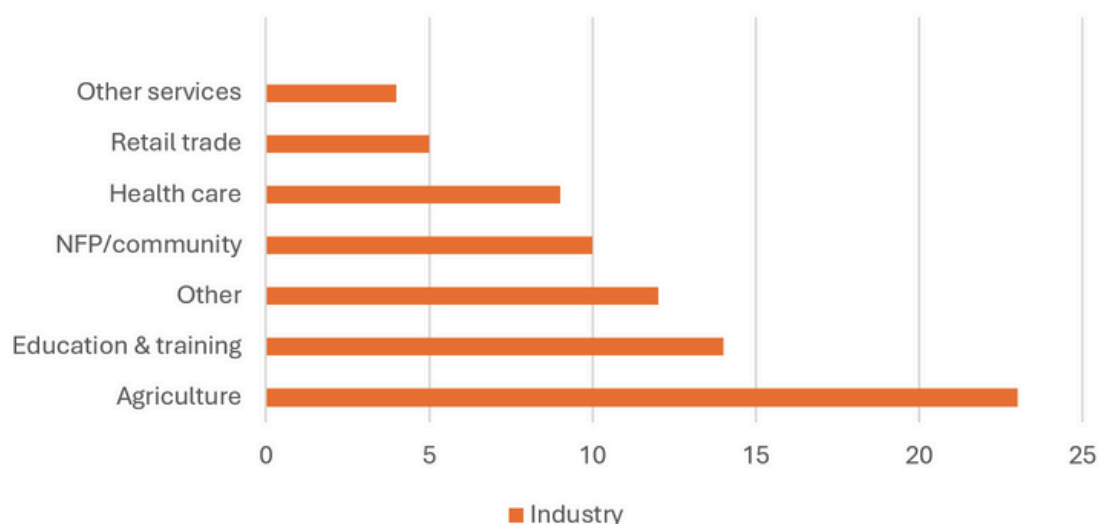
RRR women were represented in each of the 19 industry options listed in our survey. However, as highlighted in Figure 3, representation was limited with 12 of the 19 industries having no more than 18 RRR women, and one industry (electricity, gas, water and waste services) had just one.

Not surprisingly, the highest level of industry representation was agriculture at 23% (industry average is 32%),<sup>17</sup> followed by 'education and training' (14%). The balance of representation across the 17 remaining industries was minimal (one to 12%). As expected, these tended to be male dominated industries (as defined by Australia's Workplace Gender Equality Agency - WGEA). What is surprising is the limited representation in the traditionally 'feminised' industries such as health, arts sector and information media and telecommunications.

However, the limited representation correlated with limited employment opportunities in these sectors regionally. In conducting a Seek job search for 'advertising, arts & media' there were no jobs presently available in Bunbury, Albany, Margaret River, Geraldton, Port Hedland or Broome.

In 'construction, manufacturing and mining,' there were only 13 RRR women. WGEA data indicates that these industries, as well as 'electricity, gas, water, waste services, transport, postal and warehousing' typically employ less women: 12 to 30%. It is worth noting however, that many of WA's largest industries operate in the regions, suggesting that access remains an issue for regional women.

**Figure 3. RRR Women's Industry Representation (RRR Survey)**



*Note: 'Other' included local government, legal, retired, tourism, IT and more.*

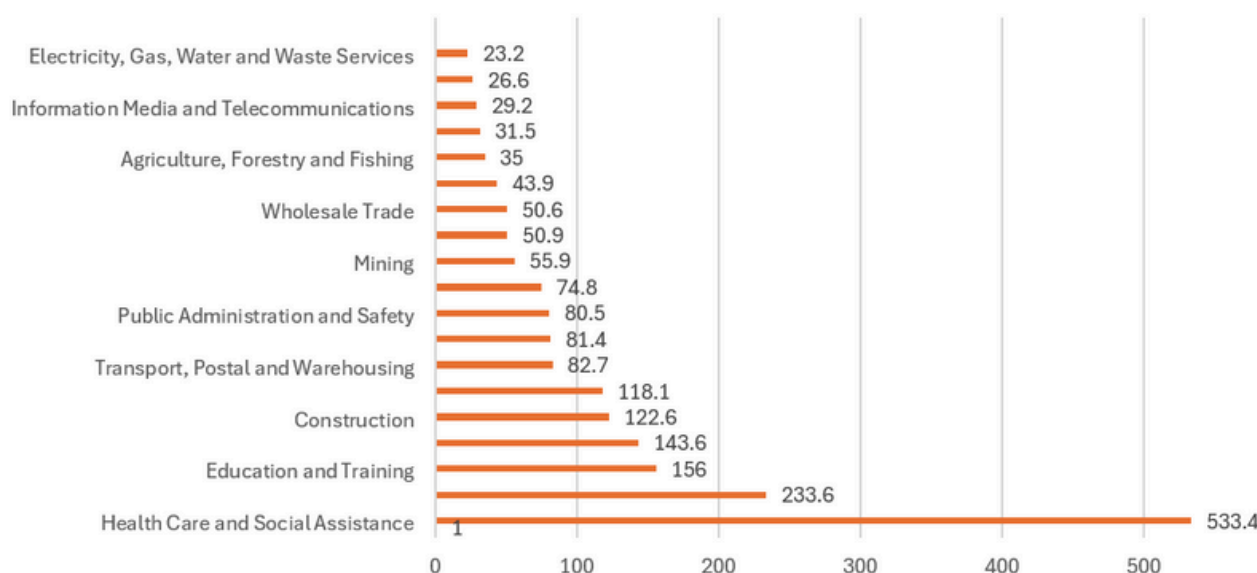
[17] Australian Institute of International Affairs, Alders, R. 'Women Working in and Sustaining Agriculture Worldwide'. 2024. Available at <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/women-working-in-and-sustaining-agriculture-worldwide/#:~:text=In%20Australia%2C%20women%20represent%20about,of%20leadership%20roles%20in%20agriculture.>



In discussing strategies to boost the employment of women regionally, consideration also needs to be given to both the projected employment growth by sector along with the needs for educational and skill development. The Australian Accord report outlines the areas of projected growth (Figure 4) and suggests that significant changes need to be established to produce the skills and knowledge required for these industry demands.



**Figure 4. Employment Growth by Industry: Ten Year Projection ('000)**



Source: Jobs and Skills Australia, 'National employment projections', 2023

**It is evident that there is appetite from women to work in the regions and direct access to regional industries and therefore more work needs to be done in connecting RRR women to major regional based industries such as mining, renewable energies and manufacturing. This would include bringing industry leaders and RRR women together to unpack the barriers to participation in the industry.**

**In addition, as the RRR Network connects largely with women working in the agriculture industry and the industries overall low representation of women there is need for continued advocacy to enable and empower more women to work in agriculture.**

As outlined, the second largest industry of work for our respondents was 'education and training'. An analysis of the data provides the following snapshot of the employment and living arrangements for these women:

- 46% were part-time.
- 37.5% worked full-time.
- 2% were self-employed.
- 4% were looking for work.
- 56% of sector lived in accommodation that they owned (compared to 80% of those in agriculture).
- 27% were renting.
- 16% were in accommodation that was provided to them.

This snapshot suggests that there is a correlation between employment, housing stability and agricultural industry employment for women in the regions. The structural and physical characteristics of the agricultural industry would support this, with most who operate in the sector residing on the property where their business operates. Compared to those working in sectors such 'retail' or 'not for profit', whereby employees are vulnerable to precarious work arrangements, fluctuating economic conditions and small regional markets, it continues to make economic sense to support the agricultural sector as an employment market.

Table 6 lists the unemployment rates by industry for our RRR women as shown in our survey.

**Table 6. Industry Unemployment Rates Regionally**

Industry	% unemployed, looking for work
Retail trade	11
Not for profit	9
Public administration	7
Education and training	4
Health care	3
Agriculture	2.4





## 13a: Women in Agriculture

Women working in the agriculture industry were represented in all WA regions except for Perth. The top three regions being the Wheatbelt (41%), Mid West (21%) and the Great Southern and Goldfields-Esperance were equal third (8.5%). The data also indicates that 80% of the agricultural survey participants lived in accommodation they owned. The industry also had 96% identifying as Australian/Caucasian and only 2.5% as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

In 2021, agriculture was the top industry of employment for Wheatbelt women with 61% working in the sector. Furthermore, 74% of that agricultural workforce were full-time and 22% part-time. Less than 11% worked 'outside' and the balance worked in their home/office, shared working spaces and or a mixture of outside and home. This recent dataset indicates that the role of women in agriculture remained largely 'indoors' such as in administration and management of the farming enterprise.

Whilst the data suggests that women in agriculture are generally still working in stereotypical 'female dominated' role, there has been a dramatic change from 2021 to 2024 in our Wheatbelt women's employment and industry patterns. In 2021, Wheatbelt women selected only seven industries out of the 18 listed with agriculture ranked the highest. However, in 2024, Wheatbelt women's industry of work had diversified, and they were now represented in 16 industries including construction, mining, manufacturing, transport, accommodation and food services. In addition, only 27% of Wheatbelt women in 2024 were working in the agricultural industry with 53% of them full-time or self-employed and 19% part-time.

This decrease in Wheatbelt women working in agriculture over the past few years could be for several reasons. One, the data sets are not longitudinal in nature, meaning the same participants were not targeted across the time



periods, and as such may be different cohorts. It could also be a result of city to regional migration due to the pandemic opening labour markets and diversifying our RRR audience. Finally, it could be due to the increased rate of hybrid or remote work since the pandemic. Women who once were only using their skills for the farming enterprise were now able to offer their skills remotely elsewhere.

The latter unpacks an interesting insight. The 33% reduction from 2021 to 2024 of women working in the agriculture sector is significant, suggesting a shift in career direction and increased opportunities or something else entirely. Are RRR women navigating and developing careers that are independent from the farm? This does not necessarily mean that women no longer contribute to the farm but perhaps with remote access opening doors to work and upskilling opportunities, are RRR women's career options expanding, and they no longer define themselves just by their farm roles?

**The RRR Network recommends further research into the changing demographics of women in the agricultural sector to better understand their roles, and if and how their work has diversified or changed altogether.**

## 14. RRR women: A Satisfied Life?

For RRR women aged 20 to 70, 'satisfaction in life' was separated by only ten percentage points (as highlighted in Table 7). This data exposed a stereotypical journey of a woman as she ages.

**Table 7. Life Satisfaction Percentage by Age Group**

	20-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70
How 'satisfied' are you with the life you lead?	59.5%	54%	62%	53%	52%

Survey participants in their 20s had a relatively high level of life satisfaction with 80% of them working, 10% on maternity leave, 5.5% studying and less than 3% were not employed and not looking for work. They valued 'community' and said they would stay in the regions 'indefinitely'.

As they progressed their life journey, women in their 30s had almost the lowest satisfaction rates. This decrease could attest to the changing life events related to career pursuits and shifts, concentrating on economic and family growth/stability or perhaps even career shocks and shifts, including upskilling: all of which can be busy, costly and stressful. They may also be paying off HECS debts reducing their available disposable income – at a time when they may be investing in a mortgage. Women in their 30s may also have young children, limiting their ability to work and socialise. Women in their 30s valued 'lifestyle' and it is this age group that is one of the most active with the RRR Network.

By the time women reach their 40s they had the highest satisfaction levels. This may be because they have settled into their careers and, completed studies and as a result have increased income, thus potentially financial and family stability. They may also have children who are increasingly self-reliant (physically, emotionally and economically) allowing for career exploration opportunities. They also valued 'community', and this correlates to this age group's active involvement and visibility with the RRR Network.



Previous research on leadership conducted by the RRR Network (2021 survey) demonstrated that women in their 40s had increased their 'community committee' participation by 7% more than women in their 30s, and by more than 41%<sup>187</sup> for women in their 20s. This confirms the proposition that RRR women in their 40s have greater flexibility to contribute not only to themselves but to others.

By the time women are in their 50s, there was an approximate 10% drop in 'satisfaction with the life they lead' compared to the decade earlier. Our study showed that 'health', 'social' and 'cost of living' were priorities for RRR women aged from 50 and up. Women in their 50s also valued 'community', however their 'community committee' participation dropped to 49% compared to 70% the decade earlier. The latter adds to an all-well-known story of a woman's journey of increased concern and vulnerability for her economic and social stability as she ages, limiting capability or access to community engagement. An outcome that could be improved upon with increased workforce participation of women, greater equity in childcare responsibilities, and therefore greater equity in superannuation.

Based on our data, we can only surmise as to why women may have a decreased level of satisfaction with the life they lead. Wider research also indicates economic vulnerability with women commencing retirement from the paid workforce with an average of 25% less superannuation than men. Even more concerning is that women aged 50 plus are the largest growing cohort of Australians experiencing homelessness.



In 'Risk of Homelessness in Older Women' it reported that between 2011 and 2016, there was an increase of 31% of women in this age group, and given the ongoing shortage of affordable housing, the trend will continue to rise<sup>19</sup>. This report also highlights the complex factors leading to this: family violence, mental health issues, informal support options, lack of housing options, lack of stable income and lack of savings. These factors are likely to be intensified in RRR locations due to limited employment and housing options.

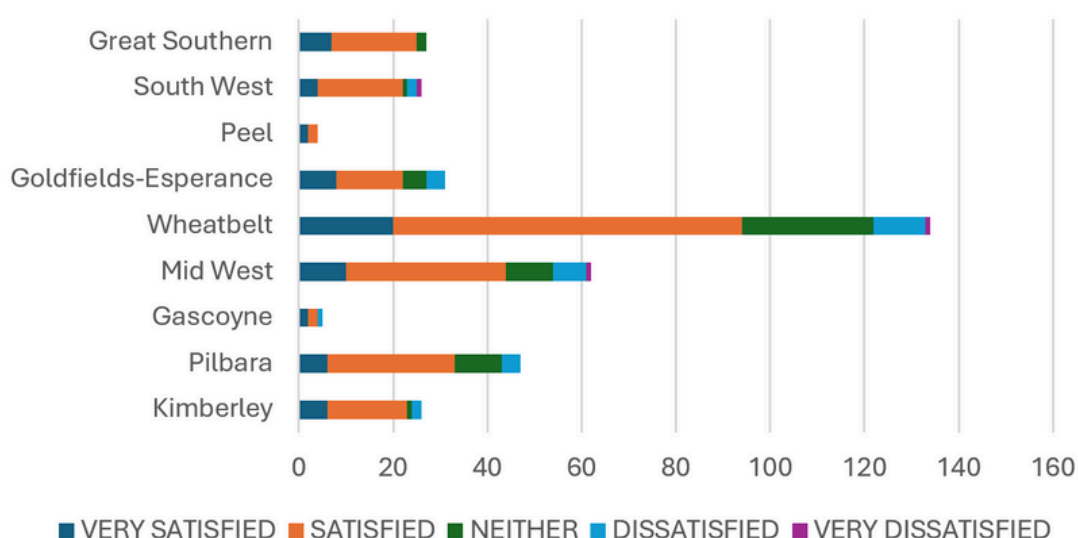
Vulnerability and concerns for health also exponentially grows with age. Table 8 highlights how health was the top priority for all age groups, but health did increase in priority from 78% for women aged 31-40 to 95% to women aged 61-70. Social and education networks also increased in importance with age: spheres of activity which are a focus for the RRR Network. Advocacy was considered to be the priority for the RRR Network.

**Table 8: Top Priorities for RRR Women by Age Groups**

Question	20-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70
How satisfied with your life?	59%	54%	62%	53%	52%
Top two priorities for RRR community.	Health (89%) & Education (67%)	Health (78%) & Education (66%)	Health (83%) & Education (66%)	Health (81%) & Housing (60%)	Health (95%) & Cost of living (57%)
Top two priorities for you as a RRR woman.	Education & Employment	Education & Social Connectedness	Education & Social Connectedness	Social Connectedness & Education	Social Connectedness & Education
Priority of the RRR Network.	Advocacy & Education	Advocacy	Advocacy	Advocacy	Advocacy

When it came to assessing the data on the correlation between where women lived and how satisfied they were with the life they lead, Figure 5 displays that nearly all regions expressed 'very satisfied' (orange).

**Figure 5: Life Satisfaction by Region**





The Wheatbelt demonstrated the highest level of satisfaction with the life women lead. It shows us that 15% are very satisfied, 25% satisfied, 7.5% neither way, 5% dissatisfied and less than 1% very dissatisfied. At this stage, we have no prior data to compare this against but moving forward we will be able to monitor this.

From a country perspective, Australia did make the top 10 in the World Happiness Report (2024) although there was reported decline in Australian youth happiness and an increase in those aged 60 and up.<sup>20</sup> How the report measured happiness is largely dictated by the country's prosperity, but other criteria included life expectancy, social bonds, personal freedom and corruption.

Presently, Australia is experiencing a cost of living and housing crisis and therefore it is expected that current satisfaction levels for some RRR women would be lower than previous data measures.





## 14a: Social Connectedness

The Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre (BCEC) found that interpersonal trust is highest in remote areas and that people are 12% more likely to help their neighbours in remote areas than in major cities.<sup>21</sup>

Although, social isolation is a common feature of living in a RRR location, it does tend to be linked more to the concept of loneliness. The BCEC also reported that in remote areas, social connectedness is lower than in major cities and regional areas, and that women score higher than men on social connectedness across all ages.<sup>22</sup>

Loneliness is defined as an aversive and subjective feeling of social isolation that arises when an individual perceives that the quality or quantity of social relationships that they have is less than what they desire.<sup>23</sup> Loneliness is not equivalent to social isolation, which is an objective measure of the number of friends, family, or other social connections that an individual has and the frequency of contact with these social connections.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, a person may be socially isolated but not lonely, or socially connected but feel lonely.

The World health organisation has declared loneliness a global public health concern. 1 in 3 Australian reports feeling very lonely and 1 in 6 severe levels of loneliness.<sup>25</sup>

Loneliness leads to poorer health outcomes. Such as, being at higher risk of stroke, anxiety, dementia, depression, suicide and more.<sup>26</sup>

Research also reports that a lack of social connection is equal or even greater in risk of an early death by other well-known risk factors – such as smoking, excessive drinking, physical inactivity, obesity, and air pollution.<sup>27</sup>



In the RRR Network survey, 52% said that 'social connectedness was a priority for RRR women' and 61% said that 'strengthening connection between RRR women across the state through membership, professional development, collaboration, and networking events' should be a priority of the RRR Network.

Just as loneliness can lead to poorer health outcomes, so too can social isolation. For example, rural women are potentially at greater risk of postnatal depression. Research demonstrates that the biggest risk factor for postnatal depression is a lack of support making RRR women vulnerable after giving birth.<sup>28</sup> This is because there is typically a lack of available mental health services and professionals in RRR areas, there are perceptions of stigma associated with mental health issues in small communities, as well as the often-vast distances they must travel to access appropriate health services. Each year, 1 in 5 Australian women suffer from perinatal anxiety and depression. Up to 50% of these women are never identified and only 10% of women actively receive treatment.<sup>29</sup>

[21] Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre, 'Stronger Together: Loneliness and social connectedness in Australia', 2021.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ending Loneliness Together, 'Ending Loneliness in Australia White Paper'. Available at [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://endingloneliness.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ending-Loneliness-Together-in-Australia\\_Nov20.pdf](https://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://endingloneliness.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Ending-Loneliness-Together-in-Australia_Nov20.pdf), 2020.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ending Loneliness Together. Available at <https://endingloneliness.com.au/>. 2024.

[26] World Health Organisation, WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. 'WHO launches commission to foster social connection'. Available at <https://www.who.int/news/item/15-11-2023-who-launches-commission-to-foster-social-connection>.

[27] Ibid.

[28] ABC Heywire, 'Regional mothers isolated and disconnected from postnatal depression help'. Accessed <https://www.abc.net.au/heywire/2019-trailblazers-zelma-broadfoot-tolley-post-natal-project/10871512>, 2019.

[29] The Parent-Infant Research Institute, 'Mental health in rural, regional and remote areas'. Available at <https://www.piri.org.au/perinatal-mental-health-supports-in-rural-regional-and-remote-australia/>. 2022.



## 14b: Connection through Education

Education is a priority for RRR women and that is why it is a core activity of the RRR Network to collaborate with training providers to deliver bespoke education to RRR women across regional WA.

From 2021 to 2023 the RRR Network partnered on two major federal grant projects with a total value of \$1.2m. These two projects saw the RRR Network and its partners travel regional WA meeting with 320 women to impart education on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) and a micro credential university course called 'Designing Your Life' to build career resilience.

At the time of writing this report, in 2024 the RRR Network connected 28 women to education and scholarships valued at \$75,000 with a further \$30,000 and 20 more women set to receive education by a University partner by the close of the year.

Through education, RRR women are able to upskill, network and reduce social isolation. The RRR Network also subsidises the education making it accessible for women.

**The RRR Network plays an integral role of leadership, connection and education for many RRR women who typically would not engage in such pursuits because of cost and or accessibility.**

Social isolation is also a tactic of coercive control used by perpetrators to control their victims, who are predominantly women and children. Such isolating measures ensure the victim does not hear other people's perspectives by controlling the information they receive, reduces their help-seeking opportunities, and controls victim's ability to leave abusive relationships.<sup>30</sup> For RRR women coercive control tactics can be even more harmful due to physical social isolation. When access to services can be vast distances away, coupled with small-town relationships with police and health-care workers, many women abstain from reporting.

These findings were supported by the survey data whereby 26 shared additional comments regarding the desperate need for accessible health services. The most prominent challenge reported by all RRR women was accessing a General Practitioner (62%).



[30] Australian Institute of Criminology, Boxall, H & Morgan, A. 'Experiences of coercive control among Australian women', 2021.

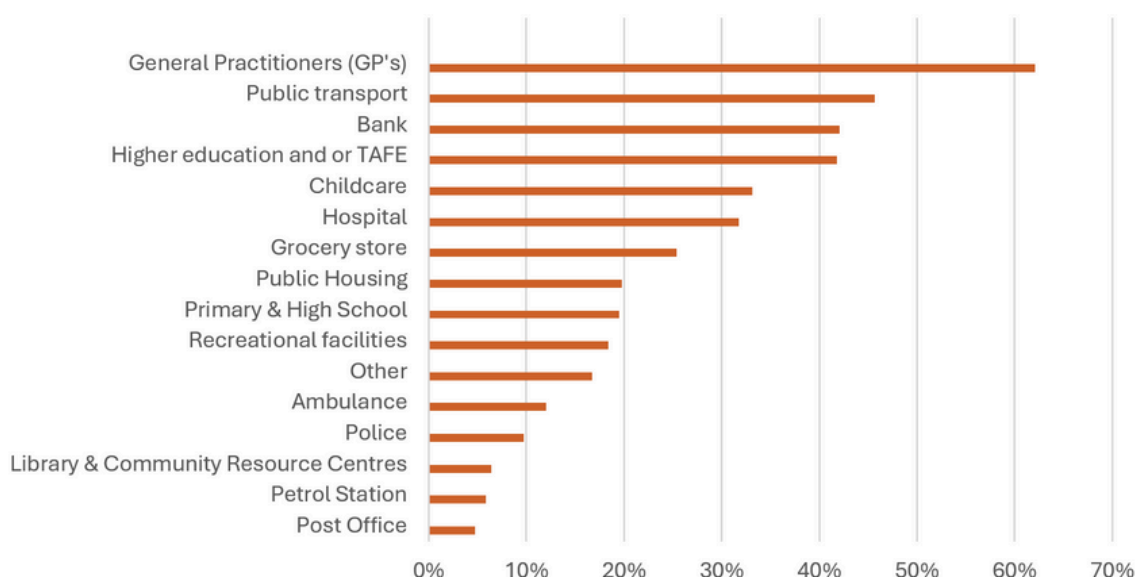


## 15. Access to Essential Services

Nearly all survey participants cited difficulty in accessing essential services regionally (Figure 6). As outlined earlier in this report, access to health services was the most problematic with 60% of participants citing lack of access to healthcare and or other essential services as a precursor to leaving RRR WA and a further 62% outlining the challenge in accessing General Practitioners (GP).



**Figure 6: Access to Essential Services**  
**Services RRR Women find challenging to access (RRR Survey)**



The health sector, an industry under considerable pressure to provide services with limited resources, was cited to be inconsistent, absent or difficult to engage with by RRR women. For example:

- Breast cancer screening is recommended for all women aged 50 to 69 at least every two years or annually for those at risk every 12 months. In addition, women aged 40 to 49 with a moderate risk of developing cancer

should also be screened every one to two years. (Cancer Council guidelines). However, there is only one permanent clinic across regional WA: Albany.

- Accessing cancer treatment, such as immunotherapy and chemotherapy, could mean living in Perth for up to three months, isolating families during difficult times and attracting significant housing and loss of income costs.

- Regional hospitals cannot guarantee lifesaving medicines are available, such as insulin, requiring those in need to drive long distances to obtain urgent medication.
- Due to limited or no obstetricians in many RRR locations, such as Margaret River, Exmouth and Carnarvon – women are redirected to hospitals who can deliver at low risk. Although, this could be a great distance from one's home. This not only impacts women and their families financially, but also creates significant anxiety and stress associated with making alternative decisions about their birth and necessary travel arrangements. There are also significant health risks, for both mother and baby, associated with a lack of access to regional facilities.

Other access challenges were associated with financial institutions. Survey participants cited issues with accessing banks as many had either closed branches or had reduced hours of operation. This created significant issues in the ability to access cash, a preferred mode of currency for older residents. In 2023, the RRR Network wrote a submission to the 'Inquiry into Bank Closures in Regional Australia' and was called as a witness to it's Senate Hearing. The RRR Network undertook research into the physical need for regional branches uncovering varying need but an overwhelming concern for the elderly.

There are currently only 23% women working in the police force.<sup>31</sup> The impact of this from a regional woman's perspective can be profound. For instance, if a RRR woman is seeking justice from Family Domestic Violence (FDV) or assault and prefers the counsel/support of a female officer, this is unlikely to be guaranteed, and therefore a potential barrier to reporting.

If a RRR woman has been sexually assaulted and is seeking justice through means of forensic evidence, she is required to travel to the Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC) in Perth. This entails a woman sitting on paper (or similar) to ensure evidence is maintained. She perhaps would drive herself and most likely be traumatised.



Not all regional areas have phone access. If there is an accident, or a natural disaster, calling for an ambulance or help might not be possible. This was evidenced during Cyclone Seroja when Mingenew was impacted, and residents and services were unable to communicate. Women shared with the RRR Network how terrifying this experience of isolation really was.

The survey participants mentioned other services they struggle to access, impacting regional liveability. These included –

- cultural and art experiences.
- entertainment/restaurants.
- exercise classes.
- trades services.
- swimming pools.
- EV high speed chargers.
- safe socialisation locations for teenagers.
- fresh produce outlets.
- permanent school teachers.
- reliable internet services.
- and outdoor recreational spaces for non-team sporting activities, such as safe walk tracks and bike trails.

The lack of access to essential services places RRR people at risk of increased isolation, health and safety issues. This in turn impacts overall regional liveability, thus increases the risk of declining regional populations which in turn impacts overall regional economic viability. Even though most women indicated a desire to remain in the regions, a lack of access to healthcare and other services will over time impact decision making.

[31] The West Australian, Rintoul, C, 2024. 'WA Police has lowest proportion of female officers in Australia, Productivity Commission data reveals. Available at <https://thewest.com.au/news/police/wa-police-has-lowest-proportion-of-female-officers-in-australia-productivity-commission-data-reveals-c-13415301>



## 15a: Childcare

Accessing childcare remains a national crisis but in regional Australia it is an even more critical issue, and has been referred to as 'childcare deserts'.<sup>32</sup>

33% of those surveyed reported that accessing childcare was a significant challenge and was in the top five essential services that RRR women found challenging to access. This finding was supported by an earlier RRR Network survey (2023) which specifically focussed on Childcare access. This survey revealed –

- 22% of RRR women did not live within a 20 minutes' drive of a childcare.
- 14% were currently on a waiting list.
- 61% had to forgo working at some stage because they were unable to access or afford childcare.

Earlier this year, a Great Southern RRR woman reported there were more than 100 families on a childcare waitlist where she lives and this is not an isolated example, with our Network receiving many similar testimonials.

A lack of availability or access to childcare is preventing women from working in the regions. Combine this service shortage with small labour markets, the ability of an RRR woman to participate in the workforce, and be financially independent, is remarkably difficult – and in some cases – not possible.

**RRR women not being able to fully participate in the regional workforce means that our RRR communities and it's industries lack diverse voices.**



[32] Mitchell Institute, 'The Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare in Australia?' Available at <https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute/early-learning/childcare-deserts-oases-how-accessible-is-childcare-in-australia>. 2022.

## 16. Where to from here?

By the RRR Network undertaking this research it paved a path, not only for it's advocacy but for it's operations and strategic direction.

From this work, we now know the top priorities of RRR women for themselves and also for their community. We understand which services they find most difficult to access, what they value most about living in regional WA and what might cause them to leave.

We've also made evidence of our organisational gaps, such as our survey engagement with CaLD and Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander women.

**However, our research raised more questions...**

To fully understand the issues raised by RRR women we must dig deeper. For example, why was the General Practitioner at 62% the most challenging service to access, and why has there been a reduction in women working in the agriculture sector in the Wheatbelt?

**The learnings thus far shape our conversation with leaders, strengthen our knowledge of WA's regions and its people, and sets our advocacy initiatives moving forward.**

**Our next step is for continued research and focus groups with RRR women to unpack some of the major problems identified.**





## 16a: Suggested advocacy initiatives raised by RRR Women for key decision makers

- Permanent, experienced school teachers in RRR WA.
- Better regional roads and transport options within community and beyond.
- Improved access to women's health care and more female GP's in RRR WA.
- More aged care facilities in RRR WA.
- Domestic violence services and more refuges in the Wheatbelt region.
- Increased family and children support services and childcare.
- More employment opportunities for RRR women -improve engagement between regional industries and its women.
- Housing for single mothers with children.
- Apprenticeships in trades for RRR youth.
- Supermarkets for groceries – fresh produce that lasts and affordable in RRR WA.
- Access to fitness and well-being activities in our RRR areas.
- Community resources and infrastructure – investments that lift vibrancy and cultural experiences.
- Health services that can fully service its region.
- Education for boys and men on respectful relationships with women in RRR areas.



## 17. Conclusion

Whilst this report is not the first RRR Network research and advocacy paper, it is the start of an ongoing overarching piece of work that will determine our annual advocacy initiatives and operational activity focus areas.

The intention of this research has been to better understand RRR women and ensure that, as a peak body, we are not operating in silos – or making assumptions – when speaking on behalf of RRR women. When we speak from data, the testimonials and the evidence of contributions made by RRR women, only then are we able to advocate accurately and impactfully.

This research paper highlights the value of unpacking the unique lived experience of RRR women. What is clear is that as much as RRR women loved where they lived, they have been able to articulate and identify the shortcomings and sacrifices they have had to make to stay. RRR women will often go without what most would consider to be a part of ‘normal’ living in Australia: ability to access essential services, recreational pursuits, education and the ability to participate in the workforce and develop economic independence.

The latter forms part of the complex puzzle of developing and sustaining regional liveability in Western Australia. The findings and recommendations outlined in this report will assist in the development and implementation of strategies encompassing industry support, housing provision, community infrastructure, small business development and service support. With stronger regional economies more RRR women can work, upskill, innovate and bring community together which benefits us all.

**Our regions stand on the shoulders of RRR women.**





## 18. Improvements for future reporting:

- Consult with Western Australia's Multicultural Service Centre for advice and feedback on appropriate language to use in our future reports to attract a more diverse population.
- Future RRR Network research projects need to carefully consider marketing imagery and strategies to ensure cultural inclusion.
- Actively collaborate with cultural organisations and agencies to ensure a wider and diverse reach to RRR WA women.
- Implement strategies to increase engagement with younger RRR women.
- Engage with universities to analyse survey data to develop a more nuanced understanding of women's workforce participation rate by region. This will then enable more comprehensive benchmarking of future data.
- Aim for at least 100 responses in each region location to increase survey data rigour.
- Engage in further research concerning changing demographics of women in the agriculture sector to better understand their roles, and if and how their work has diversified or changed altogether.
- Advocate on behalf of RRR women specifically in agriculture to enable and empower more women to work in the industry.
- Consult with stakeholders to better understand the barriers to higher education for RRR women and how we may improve access.
- Explore ways to connect regional industry leaders with RRR women to improve the number of RRR women working in sustainable employment sectors within reasonable travel distances from home.
- Review the RRR Network's 'Diversity and Inclusion Roadmap' to ensure its strategy resonates with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.



**Disclaimer**

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