

'What do rural, regional and remote women want?'

Survey Results Report 2022-2023



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The National Rural Women's Coalition

The National Rural Women's Coalition (the NRWC) is a grass roots organisation, established in 2002, that works to support and grow vibrant rural, remote, and regional communities throughout Australia. We are a coalition of five peak rural alliances - the Australian Local Government Women's Association, Australian Women in Agriculture, National Rural Health Alliance, Women in Seafood Australasia and Transport Women Australia Limited. For over twenty years, we have worked to ensure better social, economic, and environmental outcomes for women in rural townships, in rural communities and in primary production throughout Australia. The NRWC provides a collaborative, powerful national voice for women living in rural, regional, and remote (RRR) Australia through:

- Representing the diverse views and voices of women in rural, regional, and remote Australia
- Providing advice to the Australian Government on policy issues relevant to the views, circumstances and needs of rural women
- Contributing to building a positive profile of rural women, their achievements, and their issues.

We believe it is important that the unique views of rural women who reside in the numerous rural, remote, and regional communities throughout Australia as farmers, businesswomen, community leaders and volunteers, have substantial input into consultations about their communities, industries, needs and issues, including any matters relating to women's rights, gender equality and discrimination.

Acknowledgement

The National Rural Women's Coalition pays our respects to the ancestors, elders and especially the women that are a part of the longest living civilisation on earth, the First Nation peoples of Australia. We acknowledge their strength and resilience. They are the custodians of the land, and we celebrate together their right to continue with cultural practices on the land and water where they live.

The National Rural Women's Coalition currently receives base funding support from the Australian Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet, through the Office for Women (OFW) Leadership & Development Program. We thank and acknowledge the Australian Government for this support.

2023 National Rural Women's Coalition 'What do rural women want?' Survey

Report of key findings

“Rural women continue to better their communities, as the women/pioneers before us.”

- Survey respondent

The National Rural Women’s Coalition (NRWC) aims to provide a collective voice for women living in regional, rural and remote Australia that is relevant and representative of their lived experiences (National rural women’s coalition, n.d.). For the purpose of this report, the term ‘rural women’ will refer to women living in regional, rural and remote areas. In order to achieve an understanding of their current experience, the NRWC asked, ‘what do rural women want?’ through their 2023 survey, made available from 23 May to 30 June 2023. The survey sought to understand directly from rural women in Australia, who they are, their perspectives on living in their respective areas, and what matters most to them, with the aim to give a voice to rural women that is meaningful and responsive to lived experiences. The response rate saw the survey answered by 535 women living in regional, rural and remote Australia, supporting the NRWC to understand what rural women want in order to inform their services. The survey was made up of rating, likert scale and open-ended questions. Open ended questions provide powerful data as respondents were able to freely describe what was most meaningful to them. For the purpose of this report, key themes were drawn from the open-ended questions asking respondents what they value most about living in regional, rural and remote Australia as well as what they valued least. These descriptions provide a launch pad for this report, using respondents’ own words to draw out the key themes. The key themes have in turn been supported by the data gathered throughout the survey through rating and likert scale questions. Using the respondents’ own words to identify the key themes ensures connection with the authentic experience of rural women. This report aims to illustrate the experiences of women in regional, rural and remote Australia while maintaining the authentic voice of respondents, in order to build understanding of lived experience, both the good and the challenging, and in turn inform the work of the NRWC.

Who are rural women in Australia?

“The majority of rural woman are amazing, resilient & hardworking people who are the backbone of their local communities. We are fortunate to have them, be them & be raising them.”

- Survey respondent

This survey was answered by women living in regional, rural and remote Australia, with notable demographic statistics emerging. All eight Australian states and territories are represented, with the majority of respondents being from New South Whales and Victoria. Of the 535 women answering the survey, only 3% identified as Aboriginal or Torres strait Islander. The vast majority of women who answered the survey, 72%, are between the ages of 35 and 65, putting them in the developmental phase of middle adulthood (Harms, 2010). Women who are married or in a de facto relationship were represented by 77% of respondents, and similarly, 77% reported having one or more children. Employment is held by 86% of respondents, either by an employer, self-employment, full time or part time. Education and qualifications beyond school education was reported as being held by 84% of respondents. Interestingly, 89% of women identified as not having a disability while 34% reported suffering from a chronic illness.

While all responses are considered with equal weighting, the majority of women represent a population that is in the middle adulthood phase of life, married with children, educated and employed, and not identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

What is important to rural women?

Women were asked, 'Thinking about your location in a rural/remote/regional area, please describe briefly what you value **most** about living in your area?'. This question allowed respondents to, in their own words, describe what they value most about the area in which they live. This was an important question that yielded powerful and clear responses. The overarching themes that emerged from this painted a picture of the importance of living rurally and the meaningful benefits that are experienced. The key themes that emerged were the environment and location, the community, and their lifestyle. Although access to services pose a huge challenge to rural women, which will be discussed in detail further on in this report, it is also evident here that what is available with regards to access is of great value to rural women.

Environment and location

The most prominent theme to emerge from the open question asking respondents what is valued most about living in rural Australia, was the environment and location. Responses highlighted the connection and access to nature, identifying the fresh air, the climate and the beauty of the areas in which they live as being of high value. Later in the survey 96% of respondents rated their environment to be between moderately to extremely important to them.

What did rural women say about their environment and location?

I am able to access beautiful environments very easily which helps my peace of mind.

- Survey respondent

I feel part of my land. I grew up and lived here during my childhood and have returned.

- Survey respondent

Living in a wonderful natural environment, with open spaces & fresh air.

- Survey respondent

Community

Responses indicated with great clarity the value of community. Communities, including family and friends, were highlighted as being a source of support and connection. Respondents emphasized the value placed on the people that they are surrounded by living in rural Australia and described their communities as being kind and friendly and providing a strong sense of community spirit. Further survey responses supported this when participants were asked how often they experience social isolation indicating that 74% experience social isolation never to only some of the time and only 10% are not satisfied at all with community connectedness, with the remainder of respondents feeling partially to very satisfied.

What did rural women say about their communities?

I love being part of the community, feeling connected.

- Survey respondent

The majority of people here have become a strong and committed community, helping each other out and bound together by the many difficult and adverse weather events we have experienced in recent times.

- Survey respondent

I love our community, the people who enrich our town and commit hours of volunteering to make it a great place to live.

- Survey respondent

Lifestyle

The lifestyle of living rurally emerged as a strong theme. Responses highlight that living in rural Australia provides a lifestyle that is quiet, serene, private and peaceful. The lower population density allows for small schools for children, limited traffic and in general, less congestion. Interestingly, when asked in the past week how often respondents experienced geographical isolation, 68% of respondents indicated never to only some of the time. This data supports the identified value of living a quiet rural lifestyle and that it does not impose feelings of geographical isolation.

What did rural women say about their lifestyle?

The peace and quiet. The ability to move around the area without congestion.

- Survey respondent

I love the freedom and the open spaces of the location.

- Survey respondent

Space around me. Space that supports my lifestyle to have horses and chooks and a large veggie patch and orchard.

- Survey respondent

Access

Later on in this report you will read about the great challenges experienced by rural women with regards to access, especially to essential services. In spite of that, the final prominent theme emerging from the question of what rural women value most, was access. This theme indicates the importance of access to services, and other necessities, that are readily available to rural women. There is great value to having these in place. Respondents referred to the importance of having access to nature, friends and family, and major cities and towns to reach essential services. They highlighted the value of access to entertainment, recreation and sport and health care, as well as shops, contractors and general services. However, the challenges with regards to access are elaborated on below.

What did rural say about access?

Easy to get everywhere, friends are close, able to access everything in town while having a nice quiet place to go home to, natural beauty

- Survey respondent

Ease of access to natural environments whilst still having most facilities nearby

- *Survey respondent*

Relatively close to major regional centre, close to lifestyle opportunities such as beaches and natural attractions, geographical position in the state to travel,

- *Survey respondent*

Final thoughts on what rural women value most

It is evident from the response to the question, what do rural women value the most, that their environment and location, community, lifestyle and access are of the utmost importance to rural women. This suggests that living rurally offers great connection to nature, people and a way of life that provides a sense of peace. With these valuable themes in mind, and in order to support rural women in preserving this for themselves, it is necessary to consider the challenges that are faced.

What are the challenges experienced by rural women?

Once the opportunity was taken by respondents to express what they value most about the areas in which they live, the question was then asked, "Thinking about your location in a rural/remote/regional area, please describe briefly what you value **least** about living in your area?". Again, this question provided an opportunity for rural women to use their own words, reinforcing the importance of their authentic voice and to gain a deeper understanding about their experiences. This question yielded clear and valuable understandings about important challenges that are experienced by rural women. Understanding these challenges will support the NRWC to direct their work in a manner that speaks directly to rural women. Emerging from this question were the key themes of access to services, predominantly access to medical services, transport and roads, and challenges with regards to employment and telecommunications.

Access to services

Access to services is the most prominent theme to emerge from the question asking what rural women value least about living in their respective areas. Access was referred to hundreds of times by respondents. Poor access to services was mentioned predominantly in general terms, with some responses using more specific descriptions regarding the areas of access that are challenging. Specific access themes emerging from the responses frequently referenced access to health services, and education and child care.

Access to health services

When specifying the type of access that is challenging, the most common reference made by rural women was to health services such as GPs, health specialists and access to mental health services. Common concerns were the long distances to travel to access health services and long wait times for appointments. In addition to this there is a concern about difficulties accessing emergency care due to their location. The value of health services is reflected further in the survey question asking respondents to rate the importance of various areas in everyday life, with 98% of respondents rating health and wellbeing from very to extremely important. In contrast to this, when asked specifically about their satisfaction in various areas of health services, respondents rated low satisfaction across all health services, aside from pharmacists with 83% of rural women being satisfied to very satisfied with this. Arguably, this indicates that pharmacists are an accessible and available area of health care

service. The lowest ratings for access to health care were for medical specialists with 74% of women rating their satisfaction as partially to not at all satisfied, and mental health services with 67% similarly rating their satisfaction as partially to not at all satisfied. Further questions also revealed dissatisfaction with attraction and retention of medical professionals, Medicare bulk billed options, and communication between GPs and allied health professionals. With rural women placing high value on health services while simultaneously rating these services with extremely low satisfaction, this is an area of concern.

What did rural women say about access to health services?

Due to my location being remote access to services requires travel minimum of one hour to four hours to access medical assistance.

- Survey respondent

Regional cities can not attract health professionals, therefore rural populations suffer as the entire region draws on the same services. Flow on effect of poor health conditions due to lack of early intervention, therefore pressure on health system and services.

- Survey respondent

Not great healthcare access or access to bulk billing services, long wait lists for specialists or having to just not pursue appointments due to the costs being unreasonable.

- Survey respondent

Access to education and child care

In addition to access to health services, responses reflected challenges in access to education and child care. When asked about the importance of education and training, 81% of rural women rated this as being very to extremely important. While some people held high value for having smaller schools available to their children, others experienced overcrowding in schools and found that there were limited options available to them with regards to support and extracurricular activities. Respondents expressed needing to take on extensive travel for their children's education or sending their children to boarding school in order to access improved educational opportunities. This was also linked to higher costs required to meet educational needs. Although respondents primarily referred to school age education, additional survey questions yielded data about further education opportunities, including tertiary education for rural women and for their children. When asked about their satisfaction with regards to the effectiveness of local training bodies to meet local needs, eg TAFE, Community College, 55% of rural women were partially to not at all satisfied. Further data also found the same rating of partially to not at all satisfied by the majority of respondents regarding their ability to access tertiary education for children nearby and ability to access further and tertiary education for themselves. In addition to this, child care needs were highlighted as a challenge. Limited child care access restricts rural women from working, putting undue strain and pressure on the family, including grandparents who may offer child care support.

What did rural women say about access to education and child care?

The lack of opportunities, having to study remote at home or having to send children away for a decent learning environment

- Survey respondent

limited support for young people impacting public school outcomes.

- Survey respondent

No access to approved childcare. This has had a huge impact on my return to work and our ability to have a secondary income for our family. My husband is a farmer and I consider my income a buffer for drought years. I didn't realize how much I would be impacted financially, emotionally and professionally having inequitable access to quality childcare in the regions.

- Survey respondent

Transport and roads

Getting around arose as the second a key theme and challenge for rural women when indicating what they valued least about living in rural Australia. Given the distances needed to travel to access important services or social gatherings, rural women are facing high travel costs. The cost of travel in petrol, flights and bus services was noted. Extremely limited options for public transport were also strongly highlighted. Respondents reported poor road conditions making travel hazardous. When asked about the importance of infrastructure, like transport and roads, 86% of rural women said that this was very to extremely important to them. However, unfortunately, there are many challenges in this area.

What do rural women say about transport and roads?

Lack of frequent public transport and suitable bike paths means a lot of driving and the associated costs.

- Survey respondent

Road access - 165km of bad dirt road and 65km up our end which hasn't been graded by the council for about 6 years.

- Survey respondent

Regional flights are expensive. Airlines that say they do specials for locals usually only have a few seats at those prices.

- Survey respondent

Additional notable challenges

Access to services, particularly medical services, and transport and roads strongly identified as key themes with regards to what rural women value least about the areas in which they live. However, additional themes were notable, namely issues of employment and telecommunications.

Employment

Although 86% of rural women answering this survey reported some form of employment, they also noted few employment opportunities and limited access to high level jobs. This may indicate dissatisfaction with the employment held. When asked about the importance of financial security and employment, 90% of rural women rated very to extremely important, confirming this to be an area of high value. Challenges with regards to accessing employment that is not too far away, diversity of

employment opportunities, employment for older people, and issues with the availability of child care are creating limitations with regards to employment. When asked about their satisfaction with employment opportunities in their area, responses indicated that 55% of women are partially to not at all satisfied. Additionally identified was the challenge for rural women to find employees when necessary as it is difficult to attract people to the area due to lack of services housing available. A significant 70% of respondents indicated being partially to not at all satisfied with the availability and skills of potential labourers or employees in their area.

What do rural women say about employment?

Hard to get employee's as there's no housing and it's too far away from services for children

- Survey respondent

Career progression is limited (need to move to metropolitan location to progress).

- Survey respondent

Employment opportunities in our area without having to travel is limited

- Survey respondent

Telecommunications

Issues with telecommunications were mentioned frequently when answering the question, what is valued least about living rurally. Poor coverage for phone and internet, the cost associated with telecommunications, and not having phone coverage in the case of an emergency were common concerns. When asked how important telecommunications are, 93% of rural women indicated that this was very to extremely important to them. With regards to their satisfaction with infrastructure such as internet and telephone services in their area in their area 67% indicated being not at all to partially satisfied. Overall dissatisfaction with regards to availability of high speed internet services and mobile phone coverage in their area was indicated.

What so rural women say about telecommunications?

Communications are limited due to the lack of mobile service access to emergency services if required

- Survey respondent

Poor telecommunications - both phone and internet services. make you feel second rate and isolated.

- Survey respondent

Final thoughts on what rural women value least.

From the responses provided by rural women regarding what they value least about the areas in which they live, a strong and clear theme came through with regards to access. This was spoken about predominantly in a general manner indicating a lack of access to services. However, when specifics were given, it was clear that the biggest challenge relating to access is that of access to health services. This is evidently an issue at the fore front of the minds of rural women. The long distances needed to travel for health services, coupled with the challenges with regards to transport and roads arguably exasperates this issue. There are possibly connections between the challenges to access services and

the lack of availability of public transport, the conditions of the roads, and poor telecommunications systems which provide significant obstacles in accessing online services in health, education and employment.

So, what does this all mean?

Women have spoken and their message is clear. The key themes discussed emerging from what rural women value most and least about living in their respective areas illustrate current lived experiences. The authentic voices of women, expressing their perspectives on living rurally have been identified and supported by further data collected in the survey. It is clear to see that while rural women find a lot of benefit through the beauty, support, and connection to both community and environment in their areas, there are significant challenges that are experienced. Limited access to an array of services and poor development of roads, transport, infrastructure and opportunities make aspects of day to day life extremely challenging. While rural women place great value on the services that they do have available, there is much that is lacking for them.

The NRWC expresses and gives thanks to all of the exceptional women that took the time to contribute to the survey. It is the hope that rural women feel that their voices have been heard and represented in a meaningful way. NRWC endeavours to use this voice to inform their work and focus on what matters most to rural women in Australia.

Thank you NRWC for your continued advocacy. You make our voices matter.

- *Survey respondent*

Reference list

Harms, L. (2010). *Understanding human development: A Multidimensional Approach*. Oxford University Press, USA.

National rural women's coalition. (n.d.) *About us*. <https://www.nrwc.com.au/about>

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