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POSITION STATEMENT

GENDER EQUALITY IN REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA

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Introduction to Gender Inequality in Australia

The impact of gender inequality in Australia extolls a tremendous social impact and presents a great paradox: whilst Australian women are the most educated in the world, they rank 70th in terms of economic participation and opportunity, lagging behind Kazakhstan, Serbia and Zimbabwe (World Economic Forum, 2021).

This apparent failure to support and capitalise upon the ambitions and strengths of Australia's women, and support them to succeed, also has significant economic consequences. According to the McKinsey Global Report, lack of gender equality results in a global loss of over \$12 trillion of Gross Domestic Product (Australian Government, 2023b).

While there have been improvements in workplace gender equality since the passing of the Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 (WGE Act), Australia still faces a gender pay gap of 22.8 per cent (Australian Government 2022). On average, Australian women earn \$26,596 less than Australian men each year, regardless of the industry they work in (Australian Government, 2022). This pay gap persists even in female-dominated industries such as healthcare and social assistance, and education and training (Australian Government, 2022).

Within rural, regional and remote Australia, this disparity is even greater with many women facing additional challenges due to increased levels of discrimination, stigma, poor health literacy, lack of accessible services, gender expectations, socio-economic disadvantage, geographic location, and residency status (Australian Government, 2023b).

On 12 September 2023, the National Rural Women's Coalition held a Gender Equality Roundtable, bringing together women across Australia, to discuss the state of gender inequality in rural, regional, and remote Australia. This report aims to outline and expand

upon the discussions held during the Roundtable, to shed light on overarching themes, and to identify proposed solutions.

Women's Safety in Rural, Regional and Remote Australia

Rural, regional and remote women in Australia bear a disproportionate burden of family and domestic violence, compared to women in metropolitan areas (Ivory, 2023). Australia ranks 99th globally for health and survival (World Economic Forum, 2021) and approximately one in three Australian women experience physical violence in their lifetime (Our Watch, 2023). This is particularly prevalent in rural, regional and remote communities, where factors such as community stigma, reduced emergency and healthcare services, lack of critical infrastructure and geographical isolation exacerbate risk of harm (Ivory, 2023). Within First Nations communities, rates of gender-based violence are even higher, with First Nations women 27 times more likely to experience hospitalisation due to violence (Australian Government, 2023c).

Access to emergency and support services is crucial in preventing violence against women and providing essential safety interventions when they are needed most. However, stigma surrounding family and domestic violence is also often more pronounced in small rural communities, where the impacts of disclosure can spread farther. In small communities, emergency service personnel and healthcare workers have often developed personal relationships with perpetrators, creating extra complications (NRWC, 2023). Limited access to police officers often forces rural Australian women to seek safety and care at healthcare facilities and hospitals, placing additional strain on an already stretched workforce (NRWC, 2023).

Within First Nations communities, intergenerational trauma contributes to disproportionately high rates of domestic violence (Yasmin, 2023). Women often require relocation from their own communities for their safety (NRWC, 2023). Women also face greater challenges in coming forward about their experiences, particularly when the perpetrator is known and respected within the community (NRWC, 2023).

Women are also disproportionately affected by the lack of infrastructure in rural areas, as highlighted by the NRWC's annual "What Do Rural Women Want?" Survey (2019). For First Nations women, this lack of infrastructure poses a critical barrier to Closing the Gap (Yasmin, 2023). First Nations women often face significant threats to their safety when performing basic tasks, such as grocery shopping, especially in very remote areas (Yasmin, 2023; NRWC, 2023). A lack of safe and affordable housing also presents a significant and disproportionate disadvantage to women fleeing from domestic and family violence, as it limits their actual and perceived viable options (NRWC, 2023).

Lack of both actual and perceived safety has significant ramifications upon the economic participation and opportunity of women and adds considerable strain on health services (NRWC, 2023). Addressing gendered violence is a critical aspect of improving gender equality, and requires a comprehensive approach that includes community education, support services, and cultural sensitivity (NRWC, 2023). It is essential to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of all women, regardless of their geographical location or cultural background.

The Burden of Care

Despite some changes in traditional caring roles, women continue to bear the burden of care in family and community life in Australia (Ivory 2023; Australian Government, 2023b), with only 4 per cent of families reporting that a man usually or always looks after the children (Australian Government, 2023b). Similarly, women often take on the responsibility of caring for ageing family members and people with disabilities in Australian communities (Australian Government, 2023b; Ivory, 2023).

Women in rural, regional and remote Australia bear an even greater burden of unpaid care responsibilities in family and community life due to entrenched gender roles and expectations (Ivory, 2023). This burden is further exacerbated for First Nations women and women of colour, highlighting the intersectionality of gender and race (Yasmin, 2023). The impacts on women in rural communities are far-reaching. Economically, women experience limited opportunities for economic independence and face higher rates of financial strain than women living in metropolitan areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016; Ivory, 2023). Socially, they often experience isolation and have limited social networks, which can negatively impact their mental and physical health (NRWC, 2023). Limited access to services in rural areas further compounds these challenges (NRWC, 2023).

This pattern of care is reflected across patterns of employment. Across Australia, women are more likely to be employed in part-time and insecure casual work, while men overwhelmingly hold full-time employment (Australian Government, 2023b). In line with this, the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's 2022 Employer Census revealed that a lack of flexibility from employers often leads to qualified and capable women working in less senior roles and fewer hours (Australian Government, 2023b). Similarly, many men who desire flexible leave options are deterred by entrenched gender norms (Australian Government, 2023b).

The above statistics highlight the unequal distribution of care responsibilities, with women shouldering a larger portion of unpaid care work. This imbalance has significant implications for women's participation in the workforce and their overall wellbeing (Australian Government, 2023b). Addressing this burden of care is crucial in achieving gender equality and creating a more balanced society.

To address these issues, the National Rural Women's Coalition recommends reducing gender inequality in unpaid care; promoting work-life balance; and advocating for flexible employment options. Enhancing support services for unpaid caregivers is also crucial, as it can alleviate the economic and social burdens faced by women in rural areas.

Community initiatives and grassroots movements are vital in empowering women in rural communities. Many rural volunteer organisations, such as the Country Women's Association, as an example, support the leadership and development of women by building solidarity, amplifying women's voices, and advocating for change (Ramsey, 2023; Country Women's Association of Australia, 2017). These initiatives can contribute to dismantling patriarchal structures and challenging gender inequality in unpaid care.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many changes across Australian workplaces, including increased flexible working conditions (NRWC, 2023). While many challenges persist, this shift highlights increased potential for workplace change and progress towards economic equality. By addressing flexibility in the workplace and supporting women's educational opportunities, we may begin to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

Representation in Leadership and Decision Making

The top five industries for women in rural Australia are health and social assistance; education and training; retail, accommodation and food services; and public administration and safety (Ivory, 2023). Yet, even across female-dominated industries, men still hold the majority of leadership and decision-making positions (Australian Government, 2022). This underrepresentation of women in leadership and decision-making roles remains a persistent issue, with a lack of rural representation on decision-making boards leading to the inappropriate application of city-based solutions in regional and rural areas. Establishing varied and visible role models for women across industries is a crucial aspect of addressing gender disparity, as it provides younger generations with a sense of expansion and viability of their visions (Australian Government, 2022).

Entrenched gender roles and expectations influence women's uptake in leadership and decision-making positions. As an example, a qualitative analysis of considerations surrounding metropolitan-to-rural migration conducted by Dufty-Jones (2023) identified that women's decisions are often influenced by factors that extend beyond their own interests to that of the family unit, with women more likely to seek their partner's agreement and consensus in their decisions. Whereas men, in contrast, tended not to seek consensus from their partner in their decision-making.

To promote gender equality in rural Australia, it is crucial to create a society that supports women in making decisions that align with their own aspirations and wellbeing, free from the constraints of gender stereotypes. This can be achieved through education and awareness programs that challenge traditional gender roles and promote gender equality. Additionally, providing accessible and comprehensive support services is essential in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all women, regardless of their location (NRWC, 2023).

It is also critical to ensure that the strengths of female-driven leadership, such as cooperation and consensus building (Hsu et al., 2022), are championed and supported to flourish (NRWC, 2023). These approaches, whilst less common in Australia (particularly in cultures of hegemonic masculinity [Tyler et al., 2019]), have the potential to improve the social standing of both genders. True leadership (versus managerialism), after all, is less about our needs, and more about the needs of the people we lead (Mahmood, 2015).

Cultural barriers that hinder women's workforce engagement, especially when returning to work from maternity leave, should also be identified and addressed, with cultural support systems for women strengthened (NRWC, 2023). The introduction of governance structures that provide access to talent pools, rather than relying solely on established relationships, can also help promote gender diversity in leadership positions (NRWC, 2023).

By addressing these issues and implementing proactive measures, we can create a more inclusive and diverse leadership landscape that reflects the talents and perspectives of Australian women. It is essential to foster an environment wherein women sense equal opportunities to contribute and lead in various sectors and decision-making processes – an environment wherein women may be supported and encouraged to not only enter leadership and decision-making positions, but also feel valued and respected for the unique perspectives and contributions they offer through female leadership models.

Health Outcomes and Access to Services

Sex and gender have a significant impact on health outcomes and access to services in rural Australia. Women, especially those living in rural areas, experience higher rates of mental illness and chronic health conditions compared to men (Australian Government, 2023b; Ivory, 2023). Unfortunately, systemic issues in healthcare delivery and research contribute to poor outcomes for women, including delayed treatment and overprescription of medication. Additionally, the use of fly-in, fly-out service providers in rural areas disrupts continuity of care, particularly in First Nations communities, and contributes to health disparities (Yasmin, 2023). Stigma and cultural barriers also affect the mental health outcomes of LGBTQI individuals in rural communities (Whitthaus, 2023).

Health services in rural areas face many challenges in providing continuity of care due to a mobility-based service model that relies on fly-in, fly-out providers. This model fails to address the need for consistent and reliable healthcare services (NRWC, 2023). In First Nations communities, the use of fly-in, fly-out providers disrupts continuity of care and hinders trust-building within the community (Yasmin, 2023). Entrenched and well-documented racism within justice, health, and child protection systems further exacerbates health disparities for First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse Australians living in rural areas (Yasmin, 2023).

Suicide rates among LGBTQI people, especially those living in rural communities, are significantly higher compared to non-LGBTQI individuals (Whitthaus, 2023). Stigma and a culture of stoicism remain significant barriers to positive mental health outcomes, and there is a need for low-cost and no-cost healthcare options that address the exclusion of those who do not fit societal norms (Whitthaus, 2023). Engaging with LGBTQI individuals who have local lived experience is also crucial to understanding and addressing their unique healthcare needs (Whitthaus, 2023).

There is a shortage of healthcare and nursing professionals across Australia, particularly in rural and remote regions. As a result, there is a push for increased digital health services, although regional and remote connectivity remains a challenge. However, hands-on care and rural-specific treatment plans are still necessary. Quality advocates and navigators are essential for rural and regional areas, especially in critical services like cancer care (NRWC, 2023). Recruitment strategies need improvement to advertise effectively and market positions available in rural and regional areas (NRWC, 2023).

While telehealth can bring significant benefits to rural, regional, and remote areas, it should not be relied upon solely for healthcare services, especially psychological services (NRWC, 2023). The National Rural Women's Coalition cautions against over-reliance on telehealth due to the need for effective coordination and the limitations of digital connectivity in rural areas.

Addressing the impact of sex and gender on health outcomes and access to services in rural Australia requires a multi-faceted approach. It is crucial to address systemic issues in healthcare delivery and research, improve continuity of care in rural areas, and tackle stigma and cultural barriers. Additionally, efforts should be made to attract and retain healthcare professionals in rural and remote regions, while also providing support and resources for individuals transitioning from metropolitan to rural living (NRWC, 2023).

Recommendations:

1. The development of place-based service policies for regional, rural and remote Australia to:

- Better support students on place-based healthcare training and graduate programs to encourage them to stay in regional, rural and remote areas.
- Improve health services and outcomes in rural, regional, and remote (RRR) areas.

2. Specialised healthcare coordination

- Develop a specialised Regional, Rural and Remote Coordination Service focused on addressing the unique healthcare needs of rural communities.

3. Migration Requirements

- Continuation and expansion of place-based visa and citizenship requirements for migrant health workers, to increase the availability of medical services in regional, rural and remote Australia.
- Continued and increased funding of rural, regional, and remote university centres to encourage more students and young people to migrate to these areas.

4. Recognition of telehealth services in rural, regional and remote Australia as supplementary service models rather than adequate replacements.

- A commitment to continued investment and focus on in-person healthcare and infrastructure in regional, rural and remote Australia.

5. Increased safety for Female Police Officers and Emergency Services

- Greater investment to ensure that female police officers and emergency services in rural areas receive adequate support and resources.

6. Increased safety for Female Health Workers

- Greater investment into the improvement of safety measures for the regional health workforce, and the provision of appropriate lighting, backup staff, and nearby support and emergency services.

7. Recognition of the high levels and increased risk of domestic violence in rural, regional, and remote areas, including:

- Greater investment into safety measures to support volunteer groups working in domestic violence agencies in rural, regional, and remote areas.
- Greater investment into refuges for women, while also addressing the root causes of violence.

8. Ensure policies and directives support the needs of rural, regional and remote women.

- Prioritise the inclusion of rural women in decision-making processes by increasing quotas of rural, regional and remote women on state and national decision-making boards.

9. Support Existing Workforces

- Provide additional resources and a supporting workforce to ensure the longevity of volunteer organisations working in rural, regional, and remote communities, particularly those at risk due to the support of women escaping family and domestic violence.

Panellist Details:

Alexandra Gartmann, Victorian Agriculture and Climate Change Council

Aunty Serena Williams, Ngunnawal-Wiradjuri Woman and Traditional Custodian

Carolina Merriman, Young Rural, Regional and Remote Women's Advocacy Panel,
National Rural Women's Coalition

Charlie Aves, Irrigation Farmer's Network

Daniel Witthaus, CEO, Rural Pride Australia

Doss McPherson, Office for Women, Prime Minister and Cabinet

Dr Alexandra Murray, Research Agronomist, Kalyx Australia

Dr Nicola Ivory, Charles Sturt University

Dr Rae Dufty-Jones, Director, Social Advisory and Research, RPS Group

Jacqueline Brotherton, Transport Women Australia Ltd

Jan Clifford, Secretariat, National Rural Women's Coalition

Jingyi Chen, Optometry Australia

Jo Stewart Rattray, Vice President, National Rural Women's Coalition

Julie Venamore, Older Rural, Regional and Remote Women's Advocacy Panel, National
Rural Women's Coalition

Keli McDonald, CEO, National Rural Women's Coalition

Leonie Noble, President, National Rural Women's Coalition

Nicole O'Reilly, National Rural Health Alliance

Penny Stewart, National Rural Health Alliance

Sarah Davies, Optometry Australia

Sarah Parker, Former Vice President, National Rural Women's Coalition

Yasmin Johnson, CEO, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Women's Alliance

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