



## Submission: **Creating sustainable economic growth in rural and regional Australia**

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## Acknowledgement of Country

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.

## About the National Rural Women's Coalition

The National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) is a national advocacy organisation representing women in regional, rural and remote (RRR) Australia. We advance gender equity in health, education and economic opportunity by amplifying the voices of RRR women and ensuring their unique challenges, such as geographic isolation, limited service access and economic disparity, are recognised and addressed through policy advocacy and targeted programs.

NRWC works to reduce systemic inequities affecting women, children, families and communities across RRR Australia. We recognise that gender inequality is shaped by entrenched power structures that disproportionately impact rural women, and we advocate for targeted policy reform that dismantles structural barriers and promotes genuine social and economic inclusion.

## Introduction

The NRWC makes this submission to the inquiry on creating sustainable economic growth in rural and regional Australia to the Joint Standing Committee on Trade and Investment Growth. Our submission focuses on unlocking economic growth by recognising rural, regional and remote women as central economic actors whose entrepreneurship, innovation and leadership underpin the future of Australia's agricultural and export economy.

We thank the Minister for Trade and Tourism for the opportunity to provide a submission informed by the lived experience of rural, regional and remote women, and we acknowledge and thank these women for generously sharing their expertise and experiences.

## Terms of Reference

The inquiry into creating sustainable economic growth in rural and regional Australia has particular regard for:

- improving domestic and international marketing efforts to promote Australia's 'clean and green' agriculture, food and drink sectors;
- identifying opportunities to promote and support Australian rural and regional small and medium businesses in domestic and international markets through enhanced branding, labelling and certification of products and services; and
- aligning tourism with food and drink experiences in rural and regional Australia to enhance Australian agriculture exports.

## Rural women driving economic growth

Rural, regional and remote women are key drivers of Australia's regional economies, contributing significantly to agricultural productivity, export value and place-based innovation. Across farming enterprises, value-added food and beverage production, small and medium businesses, and agritourism, women are leading diversification and strengthening the resilience of local economies. They play a critical role in translating Australia's 'clean and green' reputation into high-quality, traceable and marketable products and experiences for both domestic and international markets. Through their entrepreneurship, community leadership and deep local knowledge, rural women are not only sustaining industries but also shaping new economic opportunities that enhance regional competitiveness and long-term growth.

## Marketing and recognition

Rural women are significant contributors to agriculture, regional business and diversification, yet remain under recognised in industry leadership and marketing narratives. Women comprise a substantial share of the agricultural workforce and are heavily involved in value-adding, diversification and off-farm income generation.<sup>1</sup> However, they remain underrepresented in leadership and decision-making roles across agricultural industries.<sup>2</sup> Increasing visibility of women aligns with global demand for transparent, ethical and sustainable production systems.

### Recommendations:

- Encourage international and domestic marketing campaigns to profile women-led enterprises, including campaigns by Austrade, Tourism Australia, industry-led branding initiatives and provenance-based food marketing.
- Fund targeted branding initiatives showcasing women's leadership in sustainability and provenance. This could include dedicated funding to develop and promote stories, labels and campaigns, and support women-focused product lines, regional branding programs, digital storytelling, and inclusion in premium export marketing.
- Introduce gender reporting requirements in export and marketing programs to improve visibility of business participation and identify gaps in access to growth opportunities.

## Business growth and export capability

Women are more likely to operate small and micro-businesses, particularly in value-added food, beverage and agritourism sectors.<sup>3</sup> These enterprises are critical to regional economic diversification but face persistent barriers in accessing finance, scaling production and entering export markets.<sup>4</sup> Evidence shows that improving women's access to capital and business support increases productivity and regional economic resilience.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES). (2023). *ABARES Insights: Issue 3*. Australian Government. October.

<sup>2</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency. (2025). *Australia's gender equality scorecard 2024–25*. Australian Government.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman (ASBFEO). (2025). *ASBFEO small business pulse*. Australian Government.

<sup>4</sup> Productivity Commission. (2023). *5-year productivity inquiry report: Advancing Prosperity, Inquiry report*. Australian Government.

<sup>5</sup> UN Women. (2024). *Facts and figures: Economic empowerment*. Accessed 26 March 2026 at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>

### Recommendations:

- Establish dedicated funding streams for women-led small and medium sized enterprises to address gaps in access to capital and support business growth. This could involve grants, concessional finance and co-investment models targeted to support business growth.
- Deliver targeted export readiness programs for rural women-led businesses. This may include training, market development support and pathways into trade missions and export programs.
- Expand mentoring and advisory services for rural women in business to provide access to networks, industry expertise and tailored business development support.

### Market access and infrastructure

Digital connectivity and freight systems are key constraints on rural economic participation. Rural businesses experience lower digital access and higher freight costs, limiting their ability to engage in e-commerce and export markets.<sup>6</sup> These barriers disproportionately affect women, who are more likely to operate small-scale, home-based or digitally enabled enterprises.

### Recommendations:

- Invest in digital connectivity to support rural women-led enterprises, which requires reliable broadband and mobile coverage across regional Australia.
- Improve freight efficiency and supply chain systems for small-scale producers to reduce costs and increase reliability. This can involve support for affordable freight, aggregation models and cold-chain infrastructure.

### Branding, labelling and certification

Premium export markets increasingly rely on certification, traceability and provenance systems, yet these often impose high compliance costs that exclude small producers.<sup>7</sup> Women-led enterprises, which are more likely to be small-scale, face disproportionate administrative and financial burdens in accessing these systems.

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<sup>6</sup> Morris, J. P., Morris, W., & Bowen, R. (2022). Implications of the digital divide on rural SME resilience. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 89, 369–377; Schrobback, P., Zhang, A., Muller, J., McAllister, R. R. J., Wu, W., & van Klinken, R. D. (2025). Agri-Food Export Barriers: A Comparative Analysis of Australia's Meat, Horticulture, and Aquaculture Sectors. *Journal of International Food & Agribusiness Marketing*, 37(2), 270–295.

<sup>7</sup> Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment. (2022). *Consultation findings report*. Australian Government. May.

### **Recommendations:**

- Simplify and streamline certification and labelling systems to reduce administrative burden and improve access to premium markets.
- Develop regional branding frameworks that enable collective participation, including women-led enterprises. This will strengthen regional identities, increase market recognition of Australian products and allow small producers to access premium markets.
- Provide technical and administrative support to help businesses meet certification and compliance requirements.
- Streamline and align certification systems to reduce duplication and enable access across domestic and export markets. This will lower compliance costs and improve efficiency, particularly for small and growing enterprises.

### **Tourism and regional growth**

Tourism linked to food, wine and agriculture is a major contributor to regional economies. Food and wine tourism accounted for a significant share of regional visitor expenditure.<sup>8</sup> Women are highly represented in tourism and hospitality businesses and play a leading role in agritourism experiences that connect consumers to Australian agriculture. Integrating agritourism into export strategies strengthens both regional economies and global brand recognition.

### **Recommendations:**

- Invest in women-led agritourism and regional tourism infrastructure to strengthen connections between agriculture, food and visitor economies. For example, invest in farm stays, food experiences, visitor facilities and local transport connections.
- Support coordinated regional food, wine and agritourism experiences featuring women-led enterprises, which would strengthen demand for local products and place-based brands. This could involve marketing, partnerships and destination development initiatives.
- Align tourism and export strategies to promote women-led regional experiences as a pathway to international market development.

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<sup>8</sup> Department of Creative Industries, Tourism, Hospitality and Sport. (2024). *Beyond the icons: Review recommends shift to experience-led tourism*. NSW Government website. Accessed 26 March 2026 at <https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/dciths/ministerial-media-releases/beyond-icons-review-recommends-shift-to-experience-led-tourism>

## Enabling participation and systems

Structural barriers, including limited childcare, transport, digital access and workforce participation opportunities, continue to constrain rural women's economic participation.<sup>9</sup> In addition, women's economic contributions in agriculture and family businesses are often undervalued or not captured in data, limiting policy visibility.<sup>10</sup> Addressing these barriers is essential to unlocking productivity and inclusive growth.

### Recommendations:

- Improve access to childcare, transport and digital services for rural women. This requires place-based solutions that support workforce and business participation.
- Invest in leadership, governance and export capability programs for rural women, such as providing training, representation and pathways into industry and export leadership roles.
- Support rural women's participation in sustainability and natural capital markets to unlock new income streams. This would enable access to carbon, biodiversity and environmental markets and associated certification systems.
- Strengthen gender-disaggregated data collection across agriculture, small and medium enterprises, exports and tourism. This should improve measurement of women's economic participation, including unpaid and informal contributions.

## Conclusion

Sustainable economic growth in rural and regional Australia depends on recognising and enabling the full contribution of rural women across agriculture, business and tourism. This requires coordinated action across marketing, investment, infrastructure, and systems to remove structural barriers and unlock participation in higher-value domestic and export markets. By embedding a rural women lens in economic policy and program design, Australia can strengthen regional productivity, resilience and global competitiveness.

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<sup>9</sup> Productivity Commission. (2023). *5-year productivity inquiry report: Advancing Prosperity, Inquiry report*. Australian Government.

<sup>10</sup> Suri, S. & Thawaney, S.S. (2026). *Invisible hands: Women's critical role in agricultural value chains*. Observer Research Foundation website. Accessed 26 March 2026 at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/invisible-hands-women-s-critical-role-in-agricultural-value-chains>

## NRWC member organisations

