

What you said

Results of the 2012 rural women's 'snapshot' issues survey



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A short online survey was conducted by open invitation through the Rural Women's Network's Rural Email List (REL), to Twitter/Blog subscribers and Country Web readers. The aim was to gather some specific 'intelligence' from a random sample.

Respondents were invited to tell us what was the number one issue rural women faced today; suggest something that needed to change; and how things would be better once the change had been made.

The survey was open from 22 July to 14 September and 82 responses were received and we thank all those who took the time to send us their thoughts.

Some respondents raised more than one issue but we have endeavoured to place responses under one common theme around what was perceived to be the primary issue raised.

51 respondents voluntarily supplied their email address for further follow-up if required.

The two most highlighted issues focused on health and wellbeing (19¹%) and mining, the environment and the right to farm (19%). Italic text represents direct quotes from the words of some of the respondents.

Health and wellbeing (19% – 23 responses)

Access to quality health/medical care services and the need for more rural doctors and specialists was most mentioned in this grouping.

- *We need to encourage doctors to work in rural areas. Support for specialists and training facilities in regional hospitals. Also money to be allocated to regional hospitals to bring them to the standard of the best city private hospitals. Health care is in a dire state – and even worse in regional areas.*
- *More doctors and nurses in local hospitals and more funding for reproductive service (IVF) and rural maternity units.*

There were also concerns around mental health, cancer treatment and the challenges such as stress, time, isolation from loved ones and cost of travelling huge distances to access even basic health care.

- *The ability to get into a doctor's appointment is ridiculous. I recently had to wait over 3 weeks to get seen for an injury as the appointment time that I had booked (2 weeks from booking time) was cancelled as the only GP was called away to the hospital for an emergency, and was going on leave 1 week after that day. The only way we get an appointment is to have my whole family attend one appointment time (usually a 1-2 week waiting time) and rush us all through.*

¹ Percentages have been rounded down or up to the closest full number

One person also mentioned the difficulties of patient support after treatment away from home:

- *Communication between GP's and specialists to patients. GP's need to be more proactive in following up post procedure/ post visits when rural patients have travelled to major cities to visit GP's or have procedures done. Too often after being in Syd/Melb for procedures/treatments when returning back to rural areas, the medical support is not there. Too easy for patients to slip through the cracks and not have services provided to help recovery. Too often GP's don't understand what ongoing treatments have been put into place, and what hardships it causes a family.*

How suggested changes could make things better:

- *Women would have a contact with someone who knows them and their children.*
- *People wouldn't have to travel to the city to visit the doctor, specialists and hospitals (I even travel to Sydney (3 1/2 hours) to see my GP)*
- *Women and rural communities will feel as supported as their metro counterparts and not have to travel such huge distances for basic health care.*
- *When people can access health care appropriate to their needs - at their closest regional centre without having to travel to cities where they are isolated from their families and support systems and face incredible expenses every rural community, not just the woman will be happier.*
- *Preventative health care not Reactive health care.*
- *Women and community members will not have to travel 30-50 km for medical service especially the elderly. Women and their families will have affordable public transport to the nearest rail service.*
- *Easier for child care options if mother doesn't have so far to travel. Reduced fuel & time cost. Greater probability of parent to follow through with appointments. Earlier intervention due to ease of travel requirement.*

Mining, the environment and the right to farm (19% – 23 responses)

There were fears about the impact of mining (and coal seam gas in particular) on air, water and land/soil quality and the future of farming and food security.

- *The anxiety of mining companies coming in to ruin our land/water/air and take over or imprint heavily on our properties.*
- *The threat of mining over our land particularly coal seam gas. The pressure this industry is placing on our farming land, to our communities is beyond belief. I hear old farmers in despair as I walk past them in the street. I am very worried the stress will be too much for some. Our land is our land, yet we are forced to have a possibly dangerous Industry walk right in over the top of us... Farmers need the right to say no to CSG, all landholders should have the right to privacy, to run their land the way they want to without this threat. Who is going to produce our food if all our land is taken away with mining?*
- *Rural women must band together to pressure/lobby energy partners to invest in renewable non fossil fuel reliant projects. We need to push for retention of bio significant forests, woodland and national parks. The Leard forest, NW NSW is an example of a new open cut mining development when we as a nation should be investing \$ into renewable solar farms or wind turbines.*

The direct impact of mining on families, their health and farming/food security were also raised.

- *The power and rights of the landholder needs to be tightened so that these big mining and multi-nationals cannot just waltz on in and ruin our prime lands.*
- *Protect farming land so that agriculture can continue so that Australia can maintain food production in a changing climatic environment.*
- *Coal mining and coal seam gas destabilising the family structure and the constant fear of losing your home and the effect on the water supply... Governments need to stop grabbing for the short term dollar and mine with respect to families, the environment and farming. Force mines to dig for deeper coal rather than opening new mines.*
- *Fair price for commodities produced in rural Australia and recognition by Australians as a whole of the need to protect our food security.*

Some respondents didn't feel they were being listened to by decision makers:

- *Consultation, not *con*sultation, by governments, their agencies/corporations and companies involved in community- and life-affecting, in some cases life-destroying, road building and mining schemes.*
- *Many rural women (including myself) are spending hours every day researching these issues, establishing groups, holding forums, demonstrating and informing others of the potential threats, which will change the region from a thriving agricultural and tourism area to a polluted industrial wasteland. How can it be sensible to make a quick buck at the expense of people's health, communities and presently sustainable industries?*

Others felt abandoned by non-farming communities and felt a need for everyone, especially city people to value farming as essential to Australia's future:

- *Showcasing food production to the general public and funding to teach farmers how to promote themselves and that they grow high quality food. Establishes a connection between farmers and end users...creates an awareness of what we use water for...to grow food.*
- *Feeling undervalued by our city cousins. Equality - we should be entitled to the same health care, educational standard, standard of living, cost of electricity, fuel as anyone living in the city. Respect & Recognition for the role we play in national food security, contribution to Australian economy and improving the environment. We will feel valued for the important contribution we make to society*

How suggested changes could make things better:

- *Well for one, my family will have me back in the sense of I will not be busy writing letters and reading up on how I can fight this battle. The land will be unscarred for future generations of Australians to enjoy. The social fabric of our towns will remain without the constant stream of FIFO's and orange vests. We will have our husbands at home - perhaps earning less - but giving more.*
- *We will be left with a healthy community and thriving rural/tourism industries that could continue to support this region for hundreds, or thousands, of years to come. The change would also reduce the serious stress levels of so many people I know who are terrified of the future here if these industries are allowed into the area.*
- *Awareness of the facts. . .not just the spin. Acknowledgement of people's basic needs. . . i.e. safety, security, food, water and health. . .not just big business. A balance in people's basic rights and big business profits. Government actually working for the best interests of the people. An understanding that without our land and water. . .our survival is threatened.*
- *Protection of agriculture and long term food production*
- *Rural folk will be able to get on with their lives, producing food for the table. There is enough pressure with land rezonings, price wars at the supermarket, weather issues, to deal with without this threat of CSG day in day out.*
- *We will have confidence that our families can continue to make a living and a life from the land. Less division in the community.*
- *I will be able to resume my quiet country lifestyle instead of being a busy knitting nanna against coal seam gas*
- *We can sleep at night knowing our area will be safe and that our children have a bright and healthy future here. Our land will be protected and left for generations to farm and enjoy in the future.*
- *Development of farmers' knowledge of current methods of communicating - media, Facebook, twitter, websites etc. We need to be able to respond to questionable or bad publicity promptly. Farmers have been quiet too long - often thinking that if we ignore it, it will go away. This has been proven very wrong in recent years and the need for countering mis-information or simple misunderstanding will improve the relationship between town and country.*

Work and financial security (17% – 14 responses)

Distance, debt, climate change and time were major challenges for women trying to balance work, family and community activities.

- *Balancing work life commitments with family obligations, work commitments and community expectations. E.G as a working mum, who runs a company, works a second job (which is just under an hour commute each way, 4 days per week) and is volunteer Chair of a community committee, I cannot attend a fundraising event for the school during the day. I cannot attend "parent evenings" at 7.30 at night and also make cakes for the school fair*

tomorrow. I cannot attend the work training session in Oona woop woop (as they are the regional centre, and it is a 3 hour trip each way to get there or more) BUT I am expected to be fully involved in all of these events and give my all! Those 24 hours in a day only go so far.

- *Speaking as a farming woman - the number one issue is lack of suitably skilled, reliable labour. This is causing enormous pressure due to long hours, back logs of work, no time off. The resultant levels of stress mean that people are susceptible to illness and accident, family & relationship difficulties occur and of course productivity suffers.*
- *Carrying the burden of financial difficulties, mental health, and farming men who can not face the tough decisions in their business.*
- *Uncertainty of income. Weather, international market prices, etc make life on the land precarious.*

Government intervention was deemed to often make farmers feel powerless:

- *If the government stops trying to intervene in our lives, we will be able to manage them better ourselves. At the moment we are like rabbits in the headlights - frozen and uncertain of what to do next. Just sitting and waiting which is wasting away our lives.*
- *Recognition and support from the city and government would go a long way. Have politicians visit rural areas more often to get a real feel for how things are in the bush. Rural people are dependant on many things outside of their control. By having politicians tuned in to where the food is coming from would help take away some of the isolation and make farming a respected occupation.*

Access and costs of childcare were seen as impediments to women working:

- *The government telling us to go back to work but the price of childcare is starting to outweigh what we get paid. That's if you can get into a day care, the waiting lists are huge! Childcare needs to be means tested. Someone earning 35k a year needs to get a better discount than someone earning 150k a year.*

An appeal for all Australians to support producers was seen as a practical way forward to securing financial futures for farmers:

- *Stop cheaper imported produce being sold that under-cuts our produce that can't be produced for the same price. It would be more sustainable to stay and work the farm.*

How suggested changes could make things better:

Access to paid work from home was seen as a possible solution:

- *Better internet access and people wanting to employ rural women to undertake paid work from home. Allow a lot more flexibility for women to raise an income, better internet will allow more opportunity for women to create their own business as well from home.*
- *Perhaps more highly paid professional jobs based in the city needs to be more flexible and allow women to work from a regional base? Young, talented, skilful and enthusiastic women will want to stay in regional areas, meet someone, have a family and commit to an area long term. Right now, that can be difficult if you want career options.*
- *Access to income generating ideas, businesses or jobs. Opportunities to learn about innovation in business for rural women - how to do it, from home and make money easily.*
- *Reduction of debt reduces stress.*

Developing ways of attracting and keeping skilled labour was important as well as promoting agriculture as a career for younger people and sustaining healthy communities:

- *We need new innovative ways of either attracting & keeping the appropriately skilled labour and/or substitute other cooperative arrangements (with other farmers) to account for the lack of labour. AND we need the DPI (or someone) to facilitate development of these ideas because we are all too stretched to have the time or energy (or the money for that matter) to put into researching and developing a range of alternatives.*
- *Fully integrated education programs into our schools with clearly defined career paths. Many senior roles in agribusiness need to be filled from outside the industry. Higher profile of agribusiness in Australia with highly talented people to take farming and agribusiness forward.*
- *A local website for easy access and availability of workmen.*

- *Clean, healthy environments and rural communities and networks that can supply themselves with good healthy food without relying on the Woolworths trucks to come to town.*

Isolation (11% - 9 responses)

Isolation was exacerbated by distance, lack of access to health and education services along with career/job opportunities.

Some respondents felt loneliness was a major issue:

- *Personally I find isolation to be the biggest fact. It can be incredibly lonely if you live rurally.*
- *The number one issue for myself (I can't speak for others) is isolation because I don't fit the local farming stereotype – I have a Master's degree in Rural Science, am not married (not by choice) and manage the family property on my own, trying to convert to a more holistic approach.*
- *Activities in smaller communities.*
- *More agencies/ support for women who live in regional Australia. Women will have more of a voice and will have a better understanding of the needs of other women – not too dissimilar to their own.*
- *Networking and getting together... Hopefully finding new friends and opportunities to feel comfortable to communicate and earn some money.*

How suggested changes could make things better:

- *These continuing changes [technology] open up possible ways of communication and lessen the divides. Personally, connecting with other women and mothers online reduces the feelings of isolation.*
- *More people in communities to help; more socialising and fraternity; more networking locally; more people to care about social issues and problem solving.*
- *[With better communications] women will be able to network more easily and discuss their joint issues, both on a personal basis and a work related basis.*

One respondent offered the idea of having women live together to share expenses and build community:

- *Women coming together and considering sharing housing/farms, expenses and chores rather than living, and coping, alone. The Women's Communal Living Project is a good example of this. Women who are ageing and living alone will feel less isolated, more supported, feel less worried about their future and enjoy the company of other like minded women who want to do the same. A national database could be established to facilitate, and vet, such connections. See www.womenscommunallivingproject.com*

Gender Equity and Leadership (7% – 6 responses)

Respondents raised some specific gender-related issues such as the treatment of women on rural based boards, committees, councils and in the workplace:

- *The attitude of male focussed boards and the lack of diversity this inequality brings. In the city it may not be an issue anymore but in rural areas it is. Whether it is acknowledged by male board members is a different matter. They would probably say I'm wrong but I have seen this happen - it is almost a mild form of bullying.*
- *Not getting enough support from male counterparts as they don't believe we can do the job as well as them.*

Self confidence and lack of recognition and a need to feel empowered as a farming woman were also raised:

- *Professional development training [needed] not leadership programs.*
- *Too many roles to fill when marrying a farmer. Courses that enable us to learn how to keep farm books, keep country gardens, attend to stock work, look after house/children, help stressful partner etc*
- *Stress of managing a family, and often full-time work off the farm. Pressure to still work on the farm and be the backup to hubby-house, paddock, ordering supplies etc. Oh did I forget being a mother in the mix as well as meeting the requests of time from friends and community.*

Safety and Access to Justice (5% – 4 responses)

Domestic violence was mentioned and a need to educate perpetrators as well as ensuring women knew where to go to access different services:

- *Educate the men and change the paradigm, particularly in Aboriginal families.*
- *More advertised information on where to get support and services. Legal Help with Children Contacts when separated with partner.*

The condition of country roads was also an issue:

- *Abysmal local road infrastructure which is infrequently maintained by the responsible Shire Council.*

How suggested changes could make things better:

- *The children will embrace a future without fear.*
- *Infrastructure will be maintained and kept up-to-date for rural producers to transport their livestock, grain, cotton, and machinery. There would be less impact on the undercarriages of sedans. We wish we had a grader blade on the front of our Holden Calais sedan to clear the windrows of gravel as we travel forward to Gunnedah once a week for necessary grocery shopping. I am unaware of any requirement for rural residents to own a four-wheel drive vehicle to navigate roads which were designed and constructed in the days of the horse and cart/sulky/dray. Most of these 'tracks' are well past their use-by date having been constructed prior to the days of semi-trailers and road trains and lower slung motor vehicles. A motor cyclist must find these roads a nightmare - almost impossible to negotiate, as they are for a cyclist.*

Education and learning (4% – 3 responses)

There was a need for professional development opportunities for women and more outreach services and delivery of courses in flexible modes to help create stronger businesses, farms and economies as well as developing more fulfilled individuals.

Lack of quality educational choices for rural children remains an issue:

- *Their children's education and lack of choice re schools etc. Most situations there is only one local school to choose from.*

How suggested changes could make things better:

- *Quality teachers encouraged to teach in rural areas. Rural teachers get to stay in the same job for most their lives and don't adopt new methods and resources. Children's learning is suffering.*

Disclaimer:

This report has been compiled by the Rural Women's Network a program within the NSW Department of Primary Industries.

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