

CRICOS Provider No. 00103D | RTO Code 4909

Final Report

**Rurality and Workforce Participation: Exploring Prevalence of Part-time and Insecure Work in Grampians Public Sector Roles**

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**Date: 30 April 2023**

**Acknowledgements:**

This project has been funded via a competitive grant provided by the Victorian Gender Equality Commission in 2022/23 financial year. The research team acknowledges the strong support from local public sector organisations, Women’s Health Grampians, Wimmera Development Association and the Victorian Gender Equality Commission in the development of this report.

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# Executive Summary

This research piece was designed to identify the structural and gendered challenges limiting the ability of rural people living in the Grampians region of Victoria to pursue a career in the public sector. Earlier research conducted by the Future Regions Research Centre (FRRC) Horsham Hub research team found that historic, cultural, and structural challenges with regard to childcare are affecting women’s workforce participation in the Wimmera Southern Mallee (Tischler, McDonald and Reeves, 2020). This finding prompted questions about the extent to which part time and casual work is gendered in the region, and choices made around workforce participation as a consequence. A key focus of this present study is whether rurality (and associated lack of supports) impacts on women’s choices to enter (or remain) in the public sector. We also sought to understand, in broad terms, the cost of limited female participation for public sector organisations in the region.

The research found that structural barriers such as early childhood education and care, and, to an extent, cultural expectations around workforce participation (for women in particular), limit the ability of rural public sector organisations to achieve the objectives of the Victorian Gender Equality Act (2020). This study also found challenges with economies of scale in rural workplaces, expectations for participation and effort, and opportunities for change and advancement were different in a rural setting, and these had a direct reference to the choices made by individuals about workforce participation and career development.

The impact of such structural and cultural barriers will need to be addressed to ensure legislation supports positive gains for rural communities, and so that the gap between expectations and achievements for urban and rural areas are minimized.

The intent of this work was to understand the different needs of rural workforces, and to highlight that the policy responses and investment actions to support gender equity in rural settings may need to be more nuanced if positive gains are to be achieved.

# Background

*The Rurality and Workforce Participation: Exploring the Prevalence of Part-time and Insecure Work in Grampians Public Sector Roles* project looked at gendered experiences within Victorian public sector workplaces in rural locations, with a particular focus on areas of divergence within workforce participation, such as a higher prevalence of women in part-time and casual employment. The research also explored the structural and cultural issues that may be driving this focus. These include a lack of structural supports to stimulate workforce participation (particularly for women), with early childhood education and care identified as a key priority for research in 2022 (Victorian Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, 2022). The Grampians is home to a highly skilled female workforce, with women living in the study area more than twice as likely as men to have formal qualifications (certificate, degree or higher) (Tischler, 2020). Despite this, Grampians women are significantly more likely to be in part time or casualised work. Qualitative research was therefore required to understand what the drivers and motivations for this discrepancy might be.

The Gender Equality Act (2020) and Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector acknowledges intersecting forms of inequality and disadvantage, and highlights this as a challenge to achieve equity. In the Grampians, ‘being rural’ can create additional impacts for rural public sector organisations to achieve compliance with the Act. Even where workplaces may be receptive to establishing gender-based targets and objectives, challenges still exist for women’s workforce participation, such as flexibility to manage family responsibilities and barriers to career advancement and seniority within organisations. In a rural setting, these challenges are understood as individual problems for individual women or families to address on their own (Tischler, McDonald, Reeves 2020). This can prevent such issues from being understood as organisational, or even community/regional structural challenges to be overcome.

Further, women’s employment in the public sector in the Grampians region is hindered by a range of cultural factors. One of the most significant issues identified is culturally embedded, gender norms regarding women’s and men’s primary roles, which designates barriers to women’s workforce success as

‘women’s issues’. For example, norms around caring for children are driving workforce exclusion and culturally, this has been understood as an individual problem for women rather than a broader structural issue requiring policy change and investment (Tischler, McDonald & Reeves (2020).

Coexisting with this, the region also faces higher levels of domestic violence and childhood vulnerability. Grampians children experience vulnerability in one or more developmental domains on school entry; at 23.2%, compared with an average of 19.9% state-wide in Victoria (2018 figures - Australian Early Development Census, 2020). Reported rates of family violence is also 57% higher than the state average for some areas of the region (2704 Horsham cases to 1555 state average – Women’s Health Grampians, September 2021). A lack of supporting mechanisms in these areas adversely affects women’s participation in the workforce, resulting in career gaps that place women’s skills and credentials at risk, while also affecting earning potential and financial independence throughout life (Sullivan, 2018; Wilcox, Greenwood, Pullen, O’Leary Kelly and Jones, 2021).

Women’s employment in the public sector in the Grampians is dependent on a range of factors, and one of the most significant issues identified in the region is culturally embedded, gender norms regarding women’s and men’s primary roles, and the supporting mechanisms that enable workforce participation.

The Gender Equality Act (2020) and Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector acknowledge intersecting forms of inequality and disadvantage. In this region of Victoria, indications are that rurality also creates challenges for the public sector to achieve the objectives of the Act.

A lack of supporting mechanisms restricts participation in the workforce, resulting in career gaps that place skills and credentials at risk. This is a significant equity issue in the region, which intersects with regional development and growth.

The Grampians region has very low unemployment (approximately 2.8 per cent (Victorian Government, 2022)), but a disproportionately high level of non-participation in the workforce in the 25–45 year range (Victorian Skills Commission, 2022), a statistic which is particular to the region, and differs from Melbourne and other major Victorian regional centres.

Further, a lack of workforce leadership representation by women also reinforces the ‘gendered nature of regions and regional development initiatives’ (Farhall et. al., 2021, p.1772), and perpetuates perspectives about issues impacting women’s work as a ‘natural outcome’ or ‘choice’, rather than a problem requiring change. Women’s ‘choices’ can be largely perceived by organisations as something to neutrally facilitate, rather than understanding that women make difficult choices due to a lack of flexibility in the work arrangements on offer. Added to this the responsibility for caring for children, limited partner and/or family support, or even violence, all prevent a level of engagement that is optimal for either the employer or the employee.

It will therefore be necessary to understand how these, and other cultural and social factors may be influencing women’s workforce participation within the region – particularly when considering mezzo level initiatives aimed at attracting and retaining women employees to the public sector.

This research supports ‘the identification of systematic causes of gender inequality in policy, programs and delivery of services in workplaces and communities’ (Gender Equality Commission, 2020) within a rural context and provides a research basis for more inclusive strategies to address inequity and disadvantage.



Figure 1: Victorian Local Government Areas – Local Government Areas included in research study are highlighted. (Engage Victoria, 2022 – map edited by Federation University).

# Research Questions

The central research questions were as follows:

* What structural gendered differences do we see in workforce participation arrangements in public sector organisations in the Grampians? (identified using CGEPS data).
* What differences exist between sectors (eg.. local government and healthcare) in the study area, and what data sets are regionally consistent?
* What are the qualitative reasons for difference identified at individual and organisational level?
* What impact does this have on individual and organisational needs?

The aim of the research was to understand the contextual drivers behind gendered outcomes for participation in rural public sector workforces. The intent was to build an understanding of the structural and potentially cultural differences found in a rural setting which may impede efforts to achieve gender equity.

A secondary aim of the research was to challenge a set of expectations about what is considered normal and natural in terms of employment outcomes, encouraging a shift in perspective about broader supports necessary in regional contexts to support greater gender equality in workforce participation.

# Method

This project used a mixed methods approach, commencing with a review of available data for the Grampians region collected by CGEPS under the requirements of the Gender Equality Act (2020), and engagement with the Women’s Health Grampians team who supported the data collection process across the study area.

As key areas of focus were identified from the quantitative data, the research team adopted a method of critical ethnography to collect qualitative data to establish information about the reasons why gendered differences are occurring. This involved individual and group interviews with employees and managers in local public sector organisations, to gather key data around the broader issues impacting upon compliance.

Critical ethnography is an approach used to understand the ‘complex of social customs, values and expectations that affect our ways of working’ (Frow & Morris, 2003, p.489). This ensured a focus on the cultural and pragmatic context in which employment decisions are made and explored the ways in which both employers and employees can engage in ‘assumptions about what is typical, normal or appropriate’ (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p.151). The research approach itself therefore creates an opportunity to challenge normative ways of thinking and consider collaborative efforts between employers and employees to resolve shared problems.

The research team contends that there are significant challenges to workforce equity in regional communities that result from issues of rurality and differing cultural and structural expectations around workforce participation and the extension of supports that apply. However, previous research by Tischler, McDonald and Reeves (2020) found significant negative internalised values in regard to expectations for support (with particular reference to childcare) encouraged individualised responses rather than consideration of problematic structures that limited or impeded workforce participation. Using critical theory as an analytical approach guided by key data sets collected by CGEPs under the Gender Equality Act (2020) allowed the research team to understand the causes of oppression and the powers structures and ideological controls that restrict change in a rural context. The goal was to bring a sense of empowerment to the community that change is possible (Thomas, 1993).

Human research ethics approval was gained in September 2022 and qualitative data collected between late 2022 and early 2023.

The research targeted both public sector organisation executive and management teams as well as staff from nine organisations within the study area. A total of nine public sector organisations based in the Grampians area participated in the study. Of these, three health services participated, and the remainder were local government and statutory authorities operating within the region. A total of 75 interviews were conducted with 39 participants engaging via executive team or staff focus groups and 36 interviews were conducted individually. A little over a third of interviewees were male (36%).

Interviews were of approximately 30 to 40 minutes duration and focus groups typically ran between 50 and 60 minutes. Participants were asked open ended questions covering issues relating to work/life balance, caring responsibilities, leadership aspirations and recruitment, promotion, and management practices in the workplace. As well demographic data, such as age, annual salary, job role, job time fraction, education and time at the organisation were collected from individual interview participants.

# Limitations

Interviews and focus groups with executives, directors and managers were sometimes attended by managers and their staff (for example, a team leader attending the same focus group as their direct reports). This may have had some impact on the level of information attendees were comfortable talking about in focus group interviews. To counter this, the researchers invited all focus group attendees to participate in one-to-one interviews if they had further issues participants would prefer to discuss in private. The research design also included a strong component of individual interviews, which were independent of focus group discussions and enabled individual feedback.

The research team also notes there was low diversity with interview participants, and invitations to participate resulted in a very low participation rate from culturally and linguistically diverse populations. As a result, this study may not adequately represent the experiences of public sector CALD workforces in a rural setting, and a further investigation of the experiences of these populations in a rural context would also be worthy of further investigation.

# Review of the Literature

## Scope of the literature review

The literature review for this research study encompassed local, Australian, and international reports and journals in the areas of gender equity, workforce participation and the public sector. This work brings together the broad range of challenges that are impacting on the ability of rural women to fully participate in the local economy through the pursuit of careers in the public sector.

The initial literature was collected via three major databases: Informit online, Wiley Science and SCOPUS. Additionally, a Google Scholar search was performed for relevant peer-reviewed articles examining rural and regional settings. Care was given to focus on an Australian and especially a Victorian, rural context wherever possible. However, literature was also drawn from the US, UK, and Europe in order to examine the broader issue of workforce gender inequality, as well as to attempt to encompass any applicable positive reforms to policy in rural settings world-wide.

The articles, reports and papers retrieved were assessed according to their relevance to the key aims of the project. The selected materials were analysed according to four criteria: the theme(s) addressed, the date they were published, their relevance to the context of workforce gender inequality and overlaid with issues of rurality. Themes were determined based on adherence to the research objectives for the project and contribution to knowledge about challenges and opportunities for reducing gender inequality in the rural workforce.

## Analysis

Of the studies that have examined the rural experience, most have come from overseas investigations, where geographical and supply issues can be similar, but public policy responses may vary significantly. The intention of this literature review is to provide an overview of the depth of understanding about addressing gendered workforce inequality in rural communities such as the Grampians. In rural settings, a lack of gender diversity at leadership level can influence the establishment of priorities and funded actions in a rural setting and discourage change and opportunity for women (Farhall et. al., 2019, Bryant & Pini, 2011).

Workplace gender disparity in rural areas remains stubbornly persistent, particularly at management levels and within certain sectors. There is also a significant disparity in the uptake of part time and casual work by gender in the region (ABS Regional Profiles, 2022). However, awareness of the need for comprehensive strategies and policies to address gender inequity in the workforce is growing, particularly at the macro level (state and federal government), and this will have implications for rural communities. This awareness has been prompted in large part by increasing evidence both internationally and in Australia that improving rural women’s participation in the workforce will have positive economic, social and cultural benefits for women, their households and their local communities (Jabeen, Haq, Jameel, Hussain, Asif, Hwang and Jabeen, 2020; Mousa, Boyle, Skouteris, Mullins, Currie, Riach and Teede, 2021; Wu, Dawson, Fleming-Muñoz, Schleiger and Horton, 2019).

The following provides a focused outline of the current literature relevant to the project.

## Women’s workforce participation – current knowledge

Internationally, the exodus of women from rural areas is now recognised as presenting a major challenge to the long-term sustainability of rural communities (Bock, 2015). Yet despite global awareness of this

pressing issue, policies to address the problem of gender inequality in the rural workforce are limited, with most workplace equity studies being undertaken within urban, large-scale contexts. This means that many

of the current theories and initiatives proposed to address gender inequity in the workplace may not be

relevant to the rural context. Similarly, there is some evidence that current initiatives designed to address gender inequities in the workforce are failing.

Research indicates that individual (often volunteer) efforts to challenge behaviour and investment norms by government, industry and small business may be critical to driving change in rural settings, but pervasive and generational cultural attitudes in rural communities can make the individual costs of doing so significant (Carney and Stanford, 2018; Kabeer, 2021; Tischler, 2020, Dempsey 1992; Bensemann, Warren &

Anderson, 2021).

In rural settings, a lack of gender diversity at leadership level can have impacts on the establishment of priorities and funded actions (Farhall et. al., 2021, Bryant & Pini, 2011). Further, women’s workforce participation in a rural area is also impacted by socially proscribed expectations, particularly around family (Bryant & Pini, 2011; Dempsey 1992) While aspects of this may be slowly shifting, as some younger men seek a greater level of direct involvement in their children’s development, and structural barriers such as childcare are increasingly understood as an economic and liveability issue for communities, the risk of challenging the status quo can have impacts on an individual’s status and acceptance within a community, and this is a particular risk for women (Dempsey, 1992).

The pervasive impacts of culture and expectations are difficult to access, and responses require nuanced strategies and a better understanding of the local cultural, structural and social norms of rural communities and the impact of these on workforce participation and inclusion. For this purpose, a gender, as well as a cultural, will lens be necessary to build a more holistic understanding of the economic, structural and cultural constraints for rural communities in improving and ultimately, achieving workplace gender equity.

## Women’s public sector employment (Australian context)

Studies examining women’s workforce participation in Australian rural and regional settings and women’s employment in the public sector in rural Australia specifically are scant. El Arnaout, Chehab, Rafii and Alameddine, (2019) undertook a large scoping review into recent studies looking at workforce gender equity in healthcare systems, concentrating on ‘workforce planning, development, and management as well as the barriers and facilitators for integrating gender equity into the health workforce’ (p.3). The authors found that most studies relied on quantitative data (75%), rather than qualitative data and were limited by their concentration on specific themes, including ‘family-work balance, working hours, and pay and benefits’ (p.7) while other important areas such as ‘mentorship, professional development and training, recruitment, retention, work experience, and spouse support’ were largely ignored. Most of the studies were also concentrated within North America and Europe.

The work of El Arnaout et al (2019) highlights that not only is there a lack of studies internationally examining gendered workforce inequities and strategies to combat such inequities in public sector organisations, but understandings of the issue within a rural workforce context is also lacking.

It is also possible to speculate that the formulation and methods of studies into gender equity in the workforce may themselves be gendered. For example, quantitative data says little about the lived experience of women in the workforce (or contemplating entering/re-entering the workforce) or allows their views and opinions to be expressed. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the subset themes ‘family-work balance, working hours, and pay and benefits’ (p.7) problematises the matter as an individual (women’s choice) issue, rather than a systemic issue. Sociological theorist C Wright Mills identified how large-scale changes at the system level are often initially problematised as ‘personal troubles of the milieu’ rather than ‘the public issues of social structure’ (p.4). By situating problems such as gender inequity as ‘women’s troubles’ society has been able to delay and even ignore the issue for generations.

There are some positive initiatives that the literature contends may assist organisations to facilitate gender equity within the public sector workforce. Baker, Ali, and French, (2019) use signalling theory to argue that those organisations that ‘signal’ good intentions (i.e., with public, observable actions such as in marketing, communications, diversity of the workforce) are more attractive to female job applicants. The authors argue that ‘the existence of equality initiatives, such as gender-based HR initiatives and work–life initiatives, signal to female applicants that the organization cares about gender equality’ (p.428) and that such entry-level

initiatives can lead to more women in management positions over time.

However, as Nash and Churchill warn in their 2020 study, *Caring during COVID‐19: A gendered analysis of Australian university responses to managing remote working and caring responsibilities*, decisions and negotiations around taking leave to care for family must not be left to individual women to navigate and manage on their own. In an analysis of 41 Australian universities, the authors argue that female academics experienced significantly more issues when negotiating work and caring commitments during the COVID-19 pandemic than their male counterparts:

Overall, the results of our desktop analysis highlight continuing challenges of combining work and care for Australian women in academia and that a lack of institutional policy supports during the pandemic reinscribes and privileges a male ‘ideal’ worker (p.841).

This suggests that the insecurity that comes with flexible work may risk problematising the balancing of caring duties with work back into the realm of ‘women’s troubles. ’Alternatively, the requirement to negotiate caring needs to juggle responsibilities outside the workforce creates difference and unwelcome complexity for employers. Another factor to consider is that such policies may privilege those within the workforce who are in positions of power (for example, full-time continuing employees or those in senior roles) and disadvantage those who are not (older women, casual, contract and junior employees). Nash and Churchill (2020) encourage Australian institutions to support female employees by actively engaging with them to co- design solutions (global policy change), rather than leaving it to individual women to negotiate.

## Gendered regional development and advocacy in a rural context

Farhall, Tyler & Fairbrother (2021) examined the relationship between gender and workforce change in Gippsland, Victoria. Using a gendered lens, the authors contend that regional development will continue to stagnate if planning and policy documents remain gender neutral, as this neutrality:

in effect privileges masculinised elements of the economy. It means that current approaches to regional development, at best, reproduce the gendered status quo and, at worst, further re- entrench gender inequality in the region, with consequences for regional labour policy (p.1755).

Kutsmus & Kovalchuk (2019) support this approach, arguing that:

formatting an effective rural development policy in a crisis of rural development objectively needs to take into account the gender parameters of the rural society, the features of the distribution of social roles, participation in production and business technologies, income opportunities and civic self- realization (p.419).

Compounding this, a lack of workforce leadership representation by women also reinforces the ‘gendered nature of regions and regional development initiatives’ (Farhall et. al., 2020, p.18), reinforcing perspectives about issues impacting women’s work as a natural outcome rather than a problem requiring change.

Work by Bryant and Pini (2011) also argue that gender and rurality should be considered within the intersectionality of ‘indigeneity, ethnicities, class, sexuality, disability and age for women and men living in Australian rural locales’ (p 1) and this should be an important consideration when considering rural workforce leadership and employment structures.

From a pragmatic economic development perspective, recent work done by the Loddon Campaspe Regional Partnership (2022) identified four key areas of focus to address rural gender disparity: economic empowerment, female leadership, safety and health. The analysis of data sets highlighted some progress, but also persistent inequality in workforce participation, leadership, safety and mental health. These two approaches considered together provide a range of touchpoints for assessing inclusion, advocacy and leadership.

## Structural challenges with achieving gender equity in a rural setting

Kutsmus and Kovalchuk (2019) argue that policy makers must take into consideration the gendered norms particular to any given rural community if they are to achieve gender equity:

gender relations in the system of rural economy are based on the well-established view of their content - they rely on the traditional for the rural society distribution of roles and responsibilities, power and resources between men and women (Kutsmus & Kovalchuk, 2019, p.419).

A helpful way of achieving this aim is outlined in Marks, Bayrak, Jahangir, Henig and Bailey’s work, *Towards a cultural lens for adaptation pathways to climate change* (2022). While not addressing gender equity in rural settings per se, this study describes how a cultural lens can illuminate community vulnerabilities and current practices that may empower or hamper a community’s ability to change. To understand how ‘adaptable’ a community is to change, Marks et al (2022) recommend policy makers consider current cultural norms ‘in place.’ When applied to current gendered norms, the following questions should be asked:

* How important is gender equity, cultural inclusion, religious/spiritual faith to the community and to how individual community members make decisions?
* How important is a sense of ‘community’ to the community?
* How conservative versus how progressive is the community?
* How and in what ways has the community diversified over the years (this may include ‘tree- changers’, CALD members and migration of young women away from the district).
* How and in what ways might local Indigenous women’s voices be included in the conversation?

In a study examining a lack of women in senior positions in accounting firms in regional Australia, Adapa, Rindfleish and Sheridan (2016) found that the intersection of gender stereotyping with living in a regional location was constraining women’s ability to rise through the ranks into managerial roles:

‘doing gender’ continues to be reinforced and reproduced as women’s aspirations are constrained by the day-to-day practices shaping expectations about women in regional small and medium sized accounting firms. The internalization of gender stereotypical beliefs about what women can do intersects with the regional and small to medium size of the accounting firms in the study to entrench a specific type of disadvantage for women (p.100).

Importantly, this study highlighted how ‘old’ gender stereotypes in regionally based firms were normalised by both male and female employees and managers, with gendered expectations (or lack thereof) of women acting as constraints on ambition and aspiration.

Adapa, Rindfleish and Sheridan (2016) also identified that cultural norms and gendered stereotypes have been internalised by professional women working in regional settings:

in terms of ‘‘identity’’ female respondents imposed their own limitations on themselves when thinking about senior roles and males felt that women had to take on part-time work and family life balance options instead of them (p.109).

It was crucial, therefore, on examining rurality and women’s workforce participation, to develop an understanding of how such internalised norms may be contributing to challenges in the recruitment of women to leadership roles in public institutions operating in the regions.

The expectation by men that women will and *should* choose part time and/or casual roles necessarily affects a) women’s finances and b) women’s workforce participation and c) women’s social and political standing. The authors of this study share several examples of how organisations can subvert gender binaries and assist women to work in senior management. These include ‘aspects such as ‘ease of communication’, the ‘sharing of dissemination of information’, and the ‘transparency of practices’’ (p.109).

**Workplace flexibility – work/life balance**

Woodman and Cook (2019) describe the research into work/life balance as ‘booming’ (p.763) as policy makers grapple with a dynamic and fast-moving cultural shift in work patterns. Many of these patterns have only become more complex since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent scholarship indicates that,

while workplace flexibility is generally seen as a net positive for women, there are negative aspects to be considered within the context of both achieving and maintaining genuine gender equality in the workplace.

A lack of policies that may assist older women to either remain for longer in the workforce or enter the public sector from the private sector represents a further significant impact on women’s workforce participation in the public sector.

Earl and Taylor (2015) analysed workplace flexibility policy and practice across financial services, the public sector and within universities in Australia. The authors interviewed over fifty HR managers about workplace flexibility that specifically targeted older women working within those sectors. According to the authors, their work revealed a significant gap between policy and practice, which was impacting on older women’s workforce participation. According to this study, workplace flexibility is generally viewed as a positive by HR managers in recruitment and retention of employees, however a risk of a ‘’flexibility for all’ approach is that it potentially overlooks the needs of specific groups of workers, particularly older women workers’ (p.218). For instance, older women employee’s needs regarding work/life balance are:

diverse and may include a combination of grand-parenting, elder care, spouse case, acute medical condition, chronic health condition, travel/commuting, sabbatical/late career break, and insufficient funds to retire (p.218).

As well, HR managers reported several organisational challenges involved with delivering workplace flexibility arrangements for older workers generally, including that many positions have limited capacity to be flexible, such as ‘front counter’ customer service roles. The authors also highlighted a lack of understanding by some HR managers as to the value of providing flexible arrangements for older working women, raising concerns around anti-discrimination legislation (not wishing to be seen as favouring particular workers or worker cohorts). Worryingly, many HR managers indicated that customer service roles were unsuitable to be undertaken part-time, which may limit older women’s capacity to apply for such positions.

Earl and Taylor (2015) reinforce the understanding that flexible workplace arrangements tend to be gendered, in that it is up to individual employees (overwhelming women) to manage their own caring and other obligations around work commitments. Unfortunately, this position runs up against entrenched views that complying with demands from women (and older women in particular) for more flexibility is somehow itself discriminatory:

managers in our study were aware that arrangements for flexible scheduling were mostly taken up by women returning from maternity leave or older women workers with other caring responsibilities, such as elder care or caring for a spouse or an adult child with chronic illness or disability. While they recognized the gendered nature of flexible working, they did not regard their reluctance to approve arrangements in terms of gender (or age) discrimination and reiterated that flexibility was available to all employees (p.220).

This is concerning as it reflects broader cultural norms that privilege male constructs of discrimination (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). To counter such norms, Earl and Taylor (2015) encourage organisations to ensure managers (including HR managers) are upskilled so that they fully understand not only policy but how to negotiate with employees when discussing flexible working arrangements. As well, managers’ own embedded biases and gender stereotyping must be identified and challenged. While this is a work around for larger organisations (such as those covered by the focus of current gender equality legislation) this is less likely to be workable solution for small businesses with much more limited access to HR support.

Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, working from home has to some extent become normalised as yet another flexible work arrangement across multiple industries. While the ability to work from home can benefit many employees (where their role permits them to do so) recent studies have revealed that working from home arrangements are exacerbating existing gender inequities through the perpetuation of the gendered division of caring responsibilities. It will therefore be incumbent on mezzo level organisations – and particularly the public sector – to set clear boundaries and expectations over what working from home means.

Cortis and Powell (2018) in a prescient piece, were raising concerns about informal working from home arrangements and the gendered division of labour prior to the COVID-19 pandemic work-from-home edicts. The authors examined data from the Australian Public Service Employee Census, and found that, for middle managers, working from home was increasingly moving from a formalised agreement between the employer and worker to support employee work/life balance into after hours and weekend work that was normally completed during business hours.

The need to perform such ‘supplementary’ work at home correlated with heavy workloads and inadequate support from employers around work/life balance. Crucially, this study found that such supplementary work was occurring more in women with caring responsibilities than their male counterparts or women who did not have caring duties within the family home. As retaining and promoting women into senior roles within the public sector has emerged as a significant challenge, strict protocols in regard to working from home arrangements

will need to be at the forefront of work/life balance policy planning.

## Casualisation and insecure work

Recent years have seen a growing casualisation of the workforce in Australia, which is resulting in ‘an increase in jobs with poor pay and working conditions, with an accompanying decrease in the share of jobs in the middle of the employment distribution’ (Esposto and Agudelo, 2019 p.71).

Woodman and Cook (2019) highlight how recent changes in employment conditions (such as the advent of the gig economy, among other factors) has created more job insecurity. Importantly, the authors underscore how this shift is impacting women more than men, mainly because women are more likely to be the ones doing the coordinating of plans and scheduling within the household. If one or both partners are engaged in insecure work with ever changing hours and days of employment, then ‘there is the added (gendered) challenge of creating synchronisation in a context pushing towards de- synchronisation’ (p.774). This issue was found to be particularly challenging for younger women in heterosexual relationships, which is important because it highlights how inequality continues to be passed down the generations, despite macro and mezzo level policy shifts designed to reduce workplace gender inequality.

There is some dated research linking casualisation to lower pay, but higher job satisfaction (Watson, 2005). Shibata (2020) identifies gig work (casualised work) to have a social narrative of freedoms for workers which may ultimately reinforce power structures for employers and create expectations of poor job security for employees.

The Sydney Business School’s first report, *Women and the Future of Work* from the Australian Women’s Working Futures Project (Baird, Cooper, Hill, Probyn and Vromen, (2018) surveyed over 2000 working women under 40, coupled with five small focus groups (*n=41*), a smaller group of working men under 40 (*n=502)* and (*n=53)* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander working women under 40 to ascertain the experience of working women under 40 in Australia. Among this report’s findings is that 96% of women surveyed cited job security as fundamental to their employment. However:

While security was the goal for most women, just under three in five (59%) said they were secure in their current job, and over a quarter (28%) were concerned that their role could be automated or that they may lose their job due to their industry shrinking (28%). However, these were greater concerns for men than for women (p.5).

How and in what ways young women’s concerns about insecure work may impact on both attracting and retaining women to public sector jobs in the Grampians will be important to understand; especially as regional Victoria boasts more tertiary educated young women than men Tischler, 2020; Ting, 2022). With higher education comes greater expectations around career choice and employment conditions, so rural public sector organisations may need to consider secure employment as a strategy to build and maintain a competitive workplace attractive to young, professional women.

Further workforce issues may include business economics, identifying issues associated with the cost of attraction of a professional worker to a rural workforce, the cost of managing turnover (Chisholm, Russell & Humphries, 2011) as well as the economic cost to workers who become ‘captured’ in a rural community, where disparities between urban and rural incomes can increase over time (Bosworth & Venhorst, 2018).

Macdonald and Charlesworth (2021) suggest that a strategy for reducing insecure work in traditionally female dominant publicly funded industries such as social and community services is radical regulatory reform. This study makes the important argument that when the funding body is at one remove from the employee (due largely to community service organisations contracting with government to deliver services) then ‘the distance of government from accountability for workers in publicly funded services directly contributes to gendered undervaluation and poor working conditions’ (p.477). To counter this, Macdonald and Charlesworth (2021) encourage the state to take a leading role in addressing gendered, insecure work in feminine sectors dominated by public funding contractual models.

## Summary

The pervasive impacts of culture and expectations on rural women’s workforce participation are difficult to assess, and responses require nuanced strategies and a better understanding of the local cultural, structural and social norms of rural communities and the impact of these on workforce participation and inclusion. For this purpose, a gender, as well as a cultural, lens will be necessary to build a more holistic understanding of the economic, structural and cultural constraints for rural communities in improving and ultimately, achieving workplace gender equity.

As well, there are few strategies or policies extant at the local and organisational (mezzo) level to assist rural communities to adapt to a changing workforce (McManus & Pritchard (2000). It will be important, therefore, that in-place cultural and social norms are identified so that advances towards gender equity in the rural economy is sustainable. The attitudes of rural working women, and their families (representing the micro level) must be understood to identify existing barriers and enablers to individual workforce participation and ensure efforts to support inclusion are linked to the real issues faced by rural workforces, which may differ significantly from their urban counterparts.

# Research Findings

Engaging with employers and employees from public sector organisations within the study area, the research provided a qualitative understanding of workforce participation to underpin the CGEPS data. CGEPS data showed a high prevalence of gendered, part time and casual work being delivered by women in grampians based public sector organisations.

The highly gendered nature of part time and casual work in rural areas is an important issue for consideration, as it has an impact on financial independence, career progression and retirement outcomes for women (Carney and Stanford, 2018; Kabeer, 2021). Within the study area, the research team was also concerned that part time and casualised work for women were less about choice, and more about necessity when structures were not in place to support women to participate in work.

## What does work look like in rural areas?

Acknowledging that this study is limited to an understanding of work in rural areas within the scope of public sector work, there are nevertheless some factors that are a defining feature of rural public sector work that must be scrutinised, particularly as rural workforces and managers have highlighted these features as distinctly different from similar roles in urban locations.

In considering the rural experience, McManus & Pritchard (2000) argue that being rural ‘is often defined by what it is not; that is – not metropolitan Australia’ (p 383). Normative focuses are often on rurality being defined as an ‘other,’ with varying degrees of disadvantage, and is used to highlight a concern for social equity (Philo, 1993). More recently, a shift towards understanding gender issues as intersectional in nature, with potential for individuals to experience overlapping forms of disadvantage, presents an opportunity for reframing our understanding of the rural in a more nuanced way (Bryant & Pini, 2011). We contend that rurality should be considered an aspect of intersectionality, as there are common issues for all people in a rural setting which contribute to additional challenges in achieving equity and access to opportunity. Identifying points of rural difference is a first step in understanding the challenges and opportunities for addressing issues for working women that are distinctly rural, and impact on workplace access and equity.

*Workloads and workforce flexibility*

Rural workforces highlighted challenges of operation with fewer financial and human capacity resources required to cover large geographical areas and meet a standard set of expectations for outcomes comparable to urban-based organisations. This is often a point of contention for rural organisations, which have limited resources to achieve outcomes for small populations across large geographical areas. Rurally based public sector organisations also face substantial external pressures and expectations around governance and regulatory compliance, which are often one size fits all in terms of the response required. This was, in fact, one of the drivers behind this study, seeking to improve knowledge about rural conditions around employment which may make it more difficult for rural organisations to achieve compliance when models and approaches are developed in urban centres with urban organisations as the standard.

Issues of workloads influence more than just reporting capacities, with limited workforce capacity reflecting a larger, sector-wide problem with resourcing for all duties. These problems can be attributed to an array of interconnecting and complex issues that are part of rural life and experience.

We found that rural roles tend to be broader, encompassing more general duties than their urban counterparts, and this was reflective of a broader issue regarding rural public sector organisations and individual employee workloads, with several managers identifying that their roles were significantly broader than similar roles in urban public sector organisations:

Recruitment is very difficult in an organisation of this size – one person has to wear multiple hats a lot of the time. I’ve seen at larger councils where a small part of my substantive role would be an entire role in a large city council. There would be a team of people doing what one person does [here].

We are a regional city, but we don't have the same resources as other [larger] regional cities. But we're still producing the same work.

In complicating the situation of a broad-duties focused workforce, we found that the geographical reality of rural life makes accessing a skilled, diverse or plentiful workforce extremely challenging. This often means that, when an organisation does find the technical expert they need, the new employee must fulfill duties that a team would normally be responsible for in an urban organisation.

If excessive workloads were not enough, management in some of the participating public sector organisations spoke of employees being personally impacted by complex intersectional aspects of living and working in a rural area:

Getting technical staff in regional areas is a big challenge. And the challenge for us is when people do move to regional areas and they're not familiar with regional living - are they going to really enjoy it or are they going to be there for a couple of months and we're going to be recruiting again? Will they fit in to the organizational culture but also into the regional context and understand how regional community's work?

It's about who applies and what the talent pool is. The most recent one I can think of is finance. There were four men who applied. No women.

From a gender perspective, there's a small pool in that engineering, technical specialist type role anyway, so one of the challenges we do have is those female candidates are likely to go with the place where their partner is working or to the bigger centres. So, it's really, really difficult to attract females from an engineering background anyway. I think there was only about 10 percent of engineers that went through university were female in the last three or four years. There's not many to start with.

It's just that tyranny of distance we were talking about. It's hard getting contractors, it's hard getting people. Even if you're in the city now, it's hard getting those type of contracts and materials ordered.

And once again, it's our location working against us in a way. So different rules apply here.

It's [the township] such a long way away [from Melbourne]. That highway does not get any shorter.

The pressure of rural organisations to be financially competitive for staff was also highlighted as a concern for employers. Councils in particular argued that a low-rate base, coupled with limited opportunities for external income streams, made competitiveness with urban and other larger regional councils quite difficult. Councils also acknowledged that their business costs were significant, and there were substantial issues around equity for rural provision of council services.

If you're trying to get somebody [employee] from Melbourne, for example, and especially because yes, we are constrained financially, it's not like we can throw a bit more money necessarily at people to try and attract them here.

No private operator with any desire to stay in business would be flocking down here.

Healthcare organisations also stressed that, as well as facing other challenges due to the ‘tyranny of distance’, smaller hospitals are unable to compete with their larger counterparts when trying to attract and retain good staff:

Once upon a time, what was attractive to potential employees was around security, was around remuneration and development. Now it's what whatever the highest bidder can bid to attract staff, and that's obviously having a major impact on all sectors, not just ours in terms of recruitment.

The flow-on issue from low staffing rates and a ‘stretched’ workforce is that workplace flexibility is compromised. Workplace flexibility is a key issue for rural families, and women in particular, to support the management of households, children, and ageing parents or family members. However, we found that where broader structures such as childcare or after-school care are not available, women are left to manage family responsibilities and make choices about the hours that can be worked with little or no assistance from a formal workplace agreement or a flexible working structure. Such agreements provide a greater level of flexibility for people juggling multiple responsibilities between work and home.

Both employers and employees acknowledged that there are positions and seniority levels within organisations that best support workplace flexibility. These roles tend to be semi-skilled or skilled mid-level roles that are not front facing with the community. These positions provide some scope to control the hours of work and workloads. However, employees in some organisations noted that there can be inconsistency in policies and procedures for flexibility within organisations. This has an impact on who can access flexible work, and makes internalised distinctions, supporting some women over others:

It’s certainly to do with levels of power. Some people have more flexibility than other people, and that's a structural and a relationship kind of proposition. I also would like to challenge the prevailing idea that if you work in customer service, you can't have flexibility. Like who works in customer service? You know, it's still women - and it's saying to that group of people, you can't have flexibility like I can. So I'm a different type of female than you females in reception.

It was a consistent finding throughout the study that women were more likely to default to part-time positions, acknowledging the impact of their personal lives on their potential to work. A further issue highlighted was the impact of jobs in different townships to the place of residence and the potential of that to shape decisions around work:

It needs to be a job that has flexibility for me to be able to deal with whatever might come up with my kids. My kids are in that really awkward age where they're not in childcare but they're not old enough to stay home alone. So it's that after school care kind of environment and that factors into decision making and working within the region.

The jobs are sometimes 40 minutes to an hour away. Making sure that you have family around so that if something happens and a kid needs to be picked up at school or whatever, that even though you're an hour away, there's someone who's ten minutes away who can respond. So setting the expectations of your workplace, your staff around your availability and their access to you and your boundaries around that split between work and family life as well is it's all part of it really.

However, some employers also noted that women tended to underestimate the effort they put in out of hours to maintain a part-time role, and it was important to manage expectations within the organisation because workplace flexibility (including part-time work) was still considered to be something that staff felt grateful for:

There are some things that I probably have become more firm on as I've gotten older. So things like people returning from maternity leave. If they want to return part time, then they have to job share. Because what I kept finding - and even in my own experience - is they would return three days or four days a week, but they would be expected to do a full-time job. We wouldn't pay them to do a full-time job. We'd pay them to do point six or point eight. But our expectations were still as if they were doing it full time as per previous to maternity leave. [That’s] actually unfair and unreasonable because that person feels like they're lucky to have their job back, that they're lucky to be working part time and so they'll go above and beyond.

Employees also acknowledged this (possibly self-imposed) expectation to work additional hours as a compensation for the flexibility you have been given by an employer needed to be managed:

A lot of part time women I talk to have that challenge where you might be home, but you'll still have your computer open and checking emails and you're making it easier for yourself, so you don't have more emails when you go to work the next day. I feel like they [employers] get good bang for buck for part time workers basically.

Employees valued flexible options highly, but some employers noted this can be to the detriment of the employee – as they end up working more hours than they are paid for.

One employer described how they had refused a request for part time work for a woman who was required to be ‘on call’ after hours, noting that flexibility during the day to manage children should be factored in when this is more than covered by work in the evenings:

She came for a job with us, and she actually said, *Oh, I need to be able to pick up my kids and, you know, take them to sports and things like that. So can I work part time?* It's like, no, you went for a full- time role. You can do full time. You're going to get phone calls at night and be answering phone calls. It's like, no, you finish - leave at three thirty because I know that you'll be taking phone calls at eight at night or somebody will be ringing you at six thirty in the morning. It just what happens.

Ultimately, this person took on a full-time role and was able to meet the personal care needs within it, which was a good outcome for the employer and the employee. However, the example above was found to be the exception, rather than the rule, as the research team identified that for many employees, choices around part time work are driven by the individual, and their concerns around managing personal commitments, rather than considered in consultation between employee and employer.

Establishing boundaries with employers around how work can be undertaken is something that organisations could do better (both employers and employees). The point of employment is often the best place to negotiate, and employees and employers are not always honest at this crucial stage. One participant spoke about employees needing to negotiate from a position of strength, around their merit as an employee:

I think there's still the perception that we should be grateful, right? Well, no. Do you want the best person? Is this a merit-based appointment? And if it is, then I'm the best person and these are my terms. That's much easier to.do when you are negotiating from a position of strength. If you are at a middle or senior management level and you're negotiating, then you should always be negotiating from a point of strength.

## Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on workplace flexibility

Employers noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had encouraged organisations to think about flexibility, however, there were significant challenges for employers in providing flexibility for employees; particularly in front-facing roles, or roles which required interpersonal contact with patients or customers. That said, some employers were considering work in non-traditional ways, and this was leading to more creative solutions around managing staffand providing greater levels of flexibility for work.

There was substantial variation in the way in which organisations approached flexibility. Some of the best approaches had a strong focus on normalising flexibility into workplace culture, as one CEO outlined:

I've always had flexibility as a really important component for my staff. For example, when I went into [organisation], they had flexibility provisions but they weren't being exercised. So I flipped it so that instead of having to ask your boss for flexibility and they being able to say yes or no, I was like, assume it is yes. And if your boss wants to say no, they have to write a report to me about why it's a no. It was an automatic yes. Unless the boss substantiated to me why it had to be a no. Because, you know, we hire adults, right? How they go about doing that job is a very little concern to me.

## Rurality and leadership aspirations

Rural areas continue to see declining opportunity to build public sector leadership roles in the region, as the government sector has a long history of consolidating workforces to larger regional centres (McManus & Pritchard, 2000). Recent redundancy approaches by State Government have also impacted rural communities and rural service delivery (Long & Summerville, 2022). For outer regional areas, any loss of senior and middle management roles has an impact on the opportunities for the in-region growth and diversity of rural workforces, and, ultimately, the diversity of skill sets available in-region.

The high rate of part time and casual work reinforces that there are gendered decisions being made around hours or work, seniority of work and managing commitments, and women in particular are managing work around competing responsibilities.

There were particular barriers for rural women in terms of engaging at senior management level identified. This was directly related to limited structural supports such as childcare and after-school care coupled with limited flexibility perceived to be within senior roles. But, such decisions also included consideration of managing career risk within the region.

For those who wish to make a career in one rural area, or are geographically tied to a rural location, (e.g., due to a partner with geographically specific work such as farming) the availability of workforce roles to allow in- region progression is critically important for career development. Career development, and indeed aspiration can plateau when people have few opportunities to build a career or see leadership roles as too ‘hands off,’ encumbered by red tape and administration, or not affording good work/life balance.

One female manager, when asked if she aspired to a director role, stated that:

I probably would say no, because I am a mum and I have three children and I don't really think I would be able to achieve the work life balance that I want being a director.

My commitment to this role is, I'm here when I'm needed, but I'm not going to work a 60 or 70 hour week just because I feel like I should. I'm also really conscious of it from a gender equity perspective because other women in this business look to us and to our DM's, and if they see somebody here that's around the clock all the time, those leadership roles are not going to be appealing to those women necessarily. And potentially that's going to be the image we're portraying, is that's what it takes is that you have to give up your family time and your social time and whatever, in order to have a leadership role within this organization.

Other women also described similar situations:

I’m looking for something a bit more challenging, but I can’t look into it until both my kids are in school. I can’t work full time until then.

The research team found significant complexity around the issue of women’s careers in a rural setting in general, and the limitations on career development and aspiration are not as simple as the above statement contends. Women are often challenged with forging a career in a single rural locus due to a husband or partner having a location specific work, such as agriculture, where the location of the business is critical and usually immovable.

I aspire to the leadership in the work that I do. But I don't aspire to move through. I suppose you could say if I look at my managers role or my director's role, I feel like [they’re] too far from making change within the community.

This factor means that rural employees must make decisions about how to progress a sustainable professional career in a thin market in one region, over a lifetime. This leads to very pragmatic decisions about which roles to apply for and what options are best for the long-term sustainability of work in one geographical area:

Like what happens if you peak too early? There's only a fixed number of positions that you can fill in that area. And if they're also fixed term because you do want to be moving on in leadership positions every four to seven years. That's good leadership practice. If you're living in a region with a smaller number of opportunities in that leadership space, so you might have three or four at five-year stints, that's 20 years. Because, you know, you need to wait for the next position to become available or do you move sideways or do you leave the region or do you not take them on until you know later so that you can stay in them longer into your career?

Another manager spoke about knowing women who won’t take leadership risks because of concerns about sustainability of their career in the region when they don’t want to (or can’t) move away to progress a career:

A really good example is my friend [name]. She won't go for a CEO role because she knows it's a fixed term contract. And then what if it ends and then there's no role for her thereafter? She just like she would make an amazing CEO. She'd be fantastic. You know she's a great leader, but she - that's why she won't do it.

Others observed that those currently in executive level roles tend to stay put for considerable lengths of time, which limits opportunities for other staff to have developmental opportunities. Many leadership roles also tend to be dominated by men:

Guys in those [management] roles have experience and have been there a long time, which is great, but [they’re] not great at embracing change generally. They’re challenged and threatened by change, because it is a predominantly male dominated workforce that have had long standing practices.

Change agents need to be supported.

While this is could be considered a ‘natural’ part of the rural experience, there is an argument that any policy focus on rural liveability should also consider the public sector’s role in supporting workforce diversity for rural areas. As this is an acknowledged focus at organisational level, we also need to consider this in a geographic context.

## Lack of childcare and after school care for women/families to work in the region

Limited external supports for workforce participation, which are largely considered outside the responsibility of employers such as childcare have a direct impact on women’s workforce participation within the region. The impact of this is a narrowing of the pool of available women workers for a regional area, which impacts on workloads, the level and quality of services available and liveability.

Childcare and after school care were issues that were highlighted by employers, as they noted it did have a significant impact on workforce participation. It was a particularly significant issue highlighted by healthcare services, who were aware of the workforce impacts this created.

Employers were very reticent to engage provision of such services directly due to the complexity of the industry. For those who are able to access care there were additional issues highlighted for some parents whose work was in a different town from the care available. This meant that parents were making individual choices about workforce participation to manage their careers in an environment that has limited, if any care supports for children:

There's a shortage of it. In regard to spaces. There's a childcare facility locally, [but] it's very hard to actually get in. That obviously has a direct correlation around the flexibility in people's choices around casual work and part time work.

I know a few small rural [healthcare orgs] have established their own childcare. I'm very mindful that we are in the business of health care and so I would happily lease some of our space to someone, but I wouldn't want personally- and this is about my preferences, it could be different for a new CEO. I personally don't want to be responsible for the childcare legislation and acts. As well as the aged care and the national standards and the disability standards. I just think that we've got enough on our plate, to take on another level of standards. At the moment.

One participant, who lived in a small rural town some 60 kilometres from her place of employment, stated that there was no formal, subsidised childcare for her two-year-old child, and the family relied on unsubsidised private care:

We don't actually have it [formal childcare services] in our town. So a girl - she's just a farmer's wife but they live in town, and she just offers to have children at her house. But yeah, just, you know, cash in hand.

## Cultural norms of motherhood in rural areas

While both parents can, and do, bear responsibility for managing family and other caring obligations, this research study found such needs are impacting on the careers of rural women more significantly. For rural working mothers, there is an inherent contradiction in how caring responsibilities are at once seen as of primal importance yet are considered secondary to paid employment. This finding was consistent for mothers working in most of the participating public sector organisations:

It's not sufficient enough of an excuse for why I can't make the meeting, like you always feel like if someone says I've got another meeting, or I've got an all day workshop, or I've got a deadline, whereas me saying I've got to pick up my kid from school, they'd be like, Well can't someone else do that? But it's a commitment that I want to make as his mum, that I do that twice a week and then I come home with him.

I can't have time to go for an hour walk every day, like, I just don't have time to do that. But then you know that that's something that you need to do for your physical health. And I sort of think to myself, well, that's time with the kids. If I want to go for a walk between five and six, that's like one of the 3 hours that I spend with them for the day.

For some rural women, a lack of childcare as outlined above was also compounded by partners being unable to share caring duties due to managing farming properties. In all instances, women who worked in public sector organisations who were married to/living with male farmers placed their work secondary to that of their partners:

I don’t have any after [school] care for my daughter. I work til five, so my husband has to pick her up, But during harvest and things like that, it’s not going to work.

Note that this participant spoke of the issue of no after school care as being her issue, not the family's issue. This speaks to the extant cultural norms in rural areas around motherhood and child rearing – something which was repeated in interviews and focus groups with both men and women.

Other women expressed similar views:

I don’t know of anybody where the husband does the main caring role. This is a farming community so it’s even more that women have to be at home.

My kids used to come with me all the time, ‘cause my husband's a farmer and I couldn't just leave them on a farming situation with him.

There is a different perspective around agriculture, in that it is not considered a job for the male partner, but something more significant. In farming, intergenerational ties exist, and commitments to the farm are often honouring one or more previous generations as well as building a foundation for children. While women’s external employment may now be much more supported for the cash flow and financial security it can provide to a family otherwise reliant on the benevolence of the weather for financial returns, work must still revolve around the time-specific needs of agriculture.

Employers noted challenges with managing staffing through harvest season (November – January) and acknowledged the importance of being flexible about work to manage people’s personal needs during peak periods on farm:

Remote work might be the flexible arrangement that supports that sort of lifestyle for us the most.

## Gender Equity as someone’s job, rather than a culture

Without question, gender equity was something of interest to all organisations involved in this research. There was, however, a spectrum of views around the importance of gender as a consideration for employment, and organisational design and delivery. At leadership level, most organisations were focussed on achieving merit- based employment outcomes, often expressed as a critical outlook towards gender quotas. This is attributable to the logistical problems quotas would create as staff recruitment is already extremely difficult in rural areas. Yet, the merit argument, when promoted from leadership, had the effect of management believing that their recruitment practices and policies in general were ‘naturally fair.’

Certainly, diversity is really important for the organization. Currently, it's kind of organic and I guess we don't have to actually talk about it because it kind of just falls out. It'd only be a problem if we had a new management team come in that didn't have that same set of values, I think.

We haven't needed to do anything more than just have an open mind really.

To put somebody into a position just because you're of a certain gender or just because you are forced, that there should be a certain ratio... I don't believe in ratios and colours and genders and stuff like that. I just look at the person and look whether that person is qualified or not.

I think there's a bit of work that needs to be done in relation to how we advertise roles, and obviously it needs to be gender neutral and needs to be sensitive in other of areas as well, of course. And I think how you word that has an impact on who you attract. We need to do a little bit of work around that. But generally, … it's completely gender neutral.

This attitude from leadership and upper management has wider ramifications for gender equity beyond the single practice of whether or not to introduce quotas. We found that this particular attitude builds an organisational culture that fosters within it a false positive; that merit, which is conceived of as an objectively positive trait, is an important value that all staff in the organisation should take on in how work is conducted day to day.

The idea that procedures and policies are ‘naturally fair’ because ‘everyone deserves to be in their role’ ignores the whole scope of gendered barriers to work success, from recruitment and promotion, to relegation of caring for children to women to ‘figure out’, to a punitive approach to women working flexibly with policies that ban parenting while working from home as if this, based on merit, would somehow be unfair to those who are working without the side-hustle of minding children. While this applies to urban and well as rural organisations, it further hinders rural organisations’ ability to recruit and retain female employees and compete with larger, urban organisations:

In the organisations we examined, we found that an inclusive and motivated attitude towards gender equity was not present in leadership and management positions in a significant enough way to cause change. This was most commonly seen through an almost study-wide practice of treating gender equity as a job for someone to do. It is noted that this stretch differs from larger urban organisations that can allocate teams to do this work. For smaller, rural public sector organisations this work is often assigned as an additional responsibility to an individual with an already substantial workload. Most commonly across the participating organisations, this additional work was assigned to a woman. This can be linked to other findings here, that show the cultural concept that gender issues are ‘women’s issues’:

Unfortunately, we just weren't to set up to be able to produce the data sets easily. So that meant that just that piece of work itself, the original or initial analysis, took months to do. Hundreds of hours. So yeah, it was very challenging.

I think everyone who's working in that space wants to deliver a service that all the community have equal access to, but instead it's become this imposition or this extra piece of work we have to do before we do a project, and something where we can tick a box. And that doesn't have the desired effect.

There's a structural problem with the way the GIA's [gender impact assessments] are being done. It's pointless having a single person do a GIA because they're just perpetuating their own biases.

In engaging with public sector organisations to conduct this research, it was demonstrable that, at this stage, most organisations have responded to requirements for gender impact assessments and completion of gender equity reporting requirements by including this responsibility within the organisation as a responsibility for an individual, and often built as a component of a larger role. This is particularly an issue for rural organisations, because they do not operate with the same economies of scale around workforces as their urban counterparts.

Look at the gender impact assessments that we have to do. I don't want people doing pages and pages and this being this huge imposition, but really, you're doing it at a point when you've already actually mapped out the project. And if you were going to change anything significantly, you would have already considered that. So let's make it a two page thing or just, you know, six questions that you consider at the beginning that actually have an impact on the way that you deliver the service or the project, because I think everyone who's working in that space wants to deliver a service that all the community have equal access to, but instead it's become this imposition of this extra piece of work we have to do before we do a project and something we can tick a box. And that's not you know, it doesn't have the desired effect.

It's a tick and flick exercise.

However, despite these challenges, some participants also acknowledged the importance of assessments and reporting as part of the process of addressing the nuances of structural inequality:

The Gender Equity Act or piece of legislation that the Victorian Government has passed is gold. And from that designated organisations have to do gender impact assessments [GIAs]. I'm not sure how well they're being done, but I can say I've done a few at council because just about everything I do requires a GIA. I think I'm fairly informed and fairly aware. But what I've found is that I'm not. And and that's been really confronting.

Noting the challenges that exist around workloads already for rural staff, the additional challenges posed by reporting expectations in the gender equity space are a significant additional workload impost on rural organisations. Managing this to support the inculcation of gender equity into rural workplaces may be necessary to ensure change is sustainable.

# Discussion

Work in rural areas has points of difference for both genders but more particularly for women. Limited resourcing and expectations for service across wide geographies with small populations mean that employees of both genders experience significant expectations to manage often broad responsibilities, that in urban areas would be managed by a team, rather than an individual. Rural workers understand this, and the research team saw internalised expectations from many workers about delivering outcomes for their community that delivered a sense of purpose for their work, but also to an extent, a willingness by some to extend themselves beyond what might be reasonably expected by an employer.

This has both positive and negative consequences for rural workplaces. While it can enable the delivery of more outcomes from less resources (which is a win for employers) it also can hide the real cost of doing work and providing services in a rural area. Some employers were aware of this and were providing a focus on managing expectations for employee workloads, but this was not universal.

In what is in part an unintended consequence of this, the research team found that there was a reluctance by many rural employees to take on additional responsibility and seniority in workplaces, as this was linked to more professional risk and time commitment to the workplace. Senior roles were also perceived to have less

flexibility, which was a particular consideration for women. This is a point that should be further considered by employers in rural areas, as it is an area which is likely to be impacting on the diversity of candidates for positions.

Further, employees also acknowledged that longevity in the region as an employee requires careful consideration of career development, and senior roles can be less attractive because of concerns around limited opportunities for future progression in-region. From the research, it is possible to state that many women in the region are self-imposing a career ceiling on themselves as a way of ensuring the longevity of their employment. This has impacts on the potential for leadership development and growth of skills and experience from within the region’s existing population. The long-term nature of some senior positions as public sector roles are consolidated back to urban areas, also means that there are limited opportunities to develop middle and senior management skills in-region.

Coupled with this, women are identified, and self-identifying, as primary caregivers for children and other extended family members, and this impacts on individual choices around the hours women can work. Limited childcare and after-school care within the region is also having a major impact on women’s ability to work additional hours. Inherent challenges with existing funding models for childcare, which are predicated on market viability, are severely limiting on the ability of rural communities to change this outcome. The challenge is to understand childcare as a significant economic, workforce and liveability issue for these communities.

When this is understood, policy changes are needed to shift funding models to create and sustain better structural supports for women to participate in rural workforces. Ultimately, this may improve options for families to better balance parenting expectations between genders as external supports have the potential to increase the normalisation of women’s workforce participation.

All of the above factors were found to be contributing to high numbers of part-time and casual employment for women within the rural study area. Part-time and casual work is an important consideration for managing personal responsibilities to households in rural areas. However, the research found that women are largely making decisions about the hours they can work independently of employers, which may be limiting the opportunities for employers to work collaboratively with their employees to explore options for greater flexibility that would improve women’s workforce participation.

Farming enterprises also have an impact on women’s workforce participation, but impacts are seasonal, meaning that for some women, additional flexibility may be necessary to manage peak periods on farm. Employers are largely cognisant of this, but the impacts on rural health services are a particular issue, as scaling of healthcare work around peak seasons is limited.

More effort needs to be applied to considering flexible work as an option at all workforce levels. As previously stated, a lack of flexibility can be considered a deterrent for employees in considering senior management. Yet it is also a challenge for front-facing positions, such as reception work and customer service – which are still viewed as female roles. Additional consideration needs to be given to how positions can be made more flexible to ensure that flexibility isn’t just for women with certain skill sets or in certain job roles.

Gender equality legislation has placed additional impost on workers and organisations in rural areas to manage compliance and is often done with a very thin workforce with many other responsibilities. In some organisations, it is possible that this role is undertaken by one person as part of a much broader role. Cultural change to embed considerations of gender equity will therefore require support to embed this thinking at all levels of the organisation, and challenging existing ideas about merit and inclusion will be crucial.

# Recommendations

For rural areas to achieve more equitable outcomes in the gender space, indications from this research are that flexible work opportunities at all levels within organisations is necessary. In addition, the provision of structural supports such as childcare and a focus on addressing hidden barriers to leadership are also crucial.

Flexible work is also needed to support people in rural areas to manage broader responsibilities including volunteer commitments, which can be significant for those living in rural areas. Volunteering is an increasingly necessary part of community function in communities where workforces to complete activity are stretched.

While exploration of these issues was largely outside the scope of this work, it is having an impact on workforce participation decisions for some employees, and further investigation of volunteering and its relationship to workforce participation for rural people would be of value.

The inherent contradiction that exists in rural communities (and likely more generally) around the normalising of care by women, whilst simultaneously drawing a line around this in workforces is forcing people to think individually about care needs and make individual workforce decisions as a result. Much can be done to reduce gendering of expectations by normalising conversations around care in workplaces.

The recommendations proposed are for organisations and policy makers. The research team acknowledges efforts of organisations can only go so far without the support of policy reform at State and National levels to address some of the barriers that exist around the structure of work, and the limitations of external supports.

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| RESEARCH FINDINGS: | RECOMMENDED ACTION |
| Employees are making decisions about the hours they can work independently of workplaces.For most employees, this is not understood as a conversation that can be had collaboratively with employers | Create opportunities to re-structure work within organisations to normalise flexibility where it is possible to do so, acknowledging the fact that many employees require a level of flexibility to manage their responsibilities to work and family |
| Some employees have more access to flexible work than others.This is having an impact on potential for career progression and also creating workforces that are increasingly divided with a sweet spot for workers in roles that are not front facing (eg. customer service) and not in senior management | As above. |
| Employees are making decisions to resist engaging with more senior management roles within organisations over concerns | Models of leadership within organisations need to normalise and role-model flexibility and collaboration, to create an environment where future leaders feel |

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| about flexibility, individualised responsibility and longevity for a place- based career | supported to develop and take next steps in career progression. |
| Limited childcare & afterschool care in rural communities is having an impact on workforce participation, and increasing the extent of part-time and casual work in rural communities | Advocate for & support funding changes to better support the sustainability of rural childcare & supporting mechanisms for school aged children, including after-school care |
| The focus on gender equity in rural organisations is currently largely considered as an individualised responsibility and is not embedded culturally within organisations | Addressing issues such as workplace flexibility (see above) as a cultural change for organisations will have a significant impact on changing hidden barriers to equity in workplaces and create space for both genders to engage more deeply in caring responsibilities |

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