

Submission
No 6

INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: The Rural Woman Cooperative

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Submission to the Standing Committee on Social Issues: Addressing Loneliness in NSW through the Advancement of Rural Women and Girls

Introduction

The Rural Woman Cooperative (TRWC) is a leading organisation committed to advancing the lives of rural women and girls across Australia. Our vision is that when a rural woman blooms, all around her bloom too—creating a powerful ripple throughout her community. As such, we believe that investing in the advancement of rural women and girls is critical to tackling loneliness and isolation across New South Wales (NSW).

Our submission highlights the challenges faced by rural women and girls, particularly in relation to loneliness and social isolation, and outlines evidence-based solutions that can be implemented to create sustainable change.

We are pleased to offer insights and specific recommendations for the inquiry's consideration, particularly in relation to empowering rural women, fostering social connections, and leveraging digital platforms to bridge isolation. This submission addresses the key terms of reference while aligning with TRWC's strategic priorities.

The Prevalence and Impact of Loneliness among Rural Women and Girls

(Addressing Terms a, b, and c)

Rural women and girls in NSW are particularly vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation, with unique geographic, social, and economic factors exacerbating the issue. **According to the National Rural Health Alliance (2018)**, rural women face a higher prevalence of mental health challenges, often linked to geographic isolation, limited access to healthcare, and financial insecurity. In addition, women in rural areas, particularly those from First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, experience compounding disadvantages, including social exclusion and underemployment.

The **Australian Institute of Family Studies (2015)** reports that rural women are more likely to experience domestic and financial abuse, further isolating them and contributing to chronic loneliness. This is particularly concerning for women who face barriers in accessing support services due to distance and a lack of anonymity in smaller communities. As these issues persist, transient loneliness often becomes chronic, leading to significant long-term psychological and physiological impacts, including increased rates of anxiety, depression, and cardiovascular disease.

Recommendations:

1. **Conduct a comprehensive statewide survey and stakeholder engagement process** to capture data on the extent of loneliness and social isolation among rural women and girls, particularly focusing on marginalised groups. This will provide a clearer understanding of how different populations are affected and help inform targeted interventions.
 2. **Fund tailored mental health outreach programs** that provide rural women with access to mental health professionals via telehealth services or place based group activity. These programs should be culturally sensitive, particularly for First Nations and CALD women.
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Linking Social Connection to Physical and Economic Health

(Addressing Terms d and f)

There is a well-documented link between social isolation and poor physical health. Research from the **Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019)** indicates that social isolation significantly increases the risk of chronic health conditions such as heart disease and diabetes. Moreover, the economic costs of loneliness are substantial, with isolated individuals often experiencing reduced workforce participation, leading to lost productivity and increased healthcare costs.

For rural women, these costs are amplified. **The National Rural Women's Coalition (2018)** highlights that when rural women are financially insecure and disconnected from their communities, the ripple effects are felt across families and local economies. However, addressing loneliness among rural women presents an opportunity for economic growth. Studies such as those from the **McKinsey Global Institute (2015)** show that empowering women economically leads to increased productivity and broader community benefits, as women reinvest in their families and communities.

Recommendations:

1. **Invest in local social enterprises** that focus on connecting rural women and girls. These enterprises can offer training, mentoring, and entrepreneurship opportunities that reduce isolation while contributing to local economies. Programs such as TRWC's digital community platforms can serve as models for leveraging technology to create meaningful social and economic engagement.
 2. **Support financial literacy programs for rural women**, particularly targeting urban, First Nations and CALD rural women, to improve their financial independence and capacity to contribute to local economies. By addressing financial insecurity, these programs also reduce one of the key drivers of social isolation.
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The Power of Digital Connectivity and Community-First Technology

(Addressing Terms j and i)

TRWC believes that the antidote to isolation is connection, and digital technology can play a pivotal role in fostering social ties, especially when used with a community-first approach. Our experience running digital platforms specifically for rural women has shown that, when used wisely, the internet is a powerful tool for combating isolation.

For example, TRWC's **online community platforms** connect rural women from across Australia, offering peer support, mentoring, and educational resources. The success of these platforms highlights the potential for technology to overcome geographic barriers, particularly when combined with targeted initiatives to support mental health and well-being.

While digital platforms are not a complete solution to isolation, they are a critical component in a broader strategy that includes place-based support systems and access to physical services. However, digital literacy remains a barrier for many rural women, particularly those in older age groups or from CALD communities.

Recommendations:

1. **Develop a government-funded digital inclusion program** for rural women and girls that provides training in digital literacy, safe online practices, and tools to connect women with virtual support networks.
2. **Expand investment in rural digital infrastructure** to ensure reliable internet access in remote areas, enabling rural women to participate in digital communities and access vital services like telehealth and e-learning.

Inclusive Succession Planning and Leadership Opportunities

(Addressing Terms e and g)

Inclusive succession planning and leadership development are critical to ensuring the economic and social advancement of rural women. **Research by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (2014)** found that traditional gender roles often exclude women from decision-making roles in family farms and businesses, perpetuating financial and social dependence, which contributes to chronic loneliness and limited agency.

However, when women are included in leadership and succession planning, the benefits are far-reaching. Women-led farms and businesses are more likely to adopt innovative practices, contribute to community resilience, and invest in local economies.

Recommendations:

1. **Implement targeted leadership and business development programs** for rural women to equip them with the skills needed to take on leadership roles in family businesses and community organisations. These programs should be tailored to address both gender and geographic barriers.
 2. **Provide financial and legal support for women** involved in family succession planning, ensuring that they have equal access to land ownership, decision-making power, and financial resources.
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Collaborative Approaches and Policy Alignment

(Addressing Terms g, h, and k)

TRWC recognizes the importance of collaboration between government, non-government organisations, and community stakeholders to tackle loneliness and isolation effectively. As part of our advocacy work, we focus on ensuring that the voices of rural women and girls are heard and that policies reflect their specific needs. Our engagement with local, state, and national representatives is central to promoting gender and geographic diversity in decision-making processes.

Recommendations:

1. **Establish a cross-sector working group** that includes rural women's organisations, government bodies, small businesses providing services and healthcare providers to co-design solutions that address loneliness in rural communities. This group can develop practical strategies that integrate both digital and place-based initiatives.
 2. **Develop a state-wide action plan** for rural women's advancement that aligns with NSW Government goals around gender equality and rural economic development. This plan should include measurable targets for reducing social isolation and increasing women's participation in leadership.
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Conclusion

By focusing on the advancement of rural women and girls, NSW has a unique opportunity to address the root causes of loneliness and isolation while driving economic and social growth. TRWC is committed to supporting the NSW Government in this endeavour, providing leadership, advocacy, and community-first initiatives that ensure when a rural woman blooms, all around her bloom too.

We welcome further discussion on these recommendations and are eager to collaborate with the NSW Government to implement these solutions.

We also welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the committee in further refining and advancing these recommendations, working together to ensure that the needs of rural women and girls are effectively addressed and that meaningful, lasting solutions to loneliness and isolation are implemented.

May you bloom where you are,

Rebel Black
Chairperson
THE Rural Woman Cooperative