

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SUBMISSION

The RRR Network is the peak women's body in Western Australia (WA) representing and engaging with rural regional and remote (RRR) women. Over the RRR Network's 26-year history (20 years within WA State Government as a Reference Group and six years as an NFP), the RRR Network established a large and diverse network following. The Network has a strong reputation and trust with local and state government, the education and private sector, and other industries.

The mission of the RRR Network is to actively engage with and advocate for WA RRR women to strengthen their economic and social security, inspire leadership and inform the gender equality policy with government, private sector, civil society, and the media. More simply, our vision is a diverse, strong, connected, and influential network of WA RRR women who strengthen and enrich the lives of each other through advocacy.

The RRR Network regularly engages its Network to comment on important issues and makes state and federal submissions. This submission to the Productivity Commission addressing Early Childhood Education and Care is a joint effort with agricultural company Lawsons Grains.

Lawson Grains and the RRR Network have shared values on enabling women's workforce participation and increasing women's representation in the agricultural industry. Lawson Grains is Australia's leading corporate farmer through investments in people, environments, and best practice. Lawson Grains are committed to working with their female employees to ensure they can work in the agricultural industry without barriers.

Our submission will address safety of children aged 0-4 years on farms. It will also address the impact on women's workforce participation in the agricultural industry because of childcare deserts.

To assist our submission the RRR Network conducted a pulse-check survey of its members. We asked the following questions –

- 1) Is there a childcare within a 20 minutes' drive from your place of residence?
- 2) Are you on a waiting list for childcare?
- 3) Have you ever had to forgo working because you could not access or afford childcare?

We received 68 responses between the 11th and 16th of May 2023. In addition, 27 personal comments were also collected to the survey questions, and some have been included in this submission. All comments were provided anonymously.

Access to Early Education and Care (childcare) in regional Western Australia and how it impacts children and women in the agriculture industry

Introduction

Access to childcare in regional Australia can be difficult *or impossible*, particularly in areas of small population. Renowned study “Deserts and oases’: How accessible is childcare in Australia”¹ by the Mitchell Institute and Victoria University states that our rural regional remote (RRR) areas have the least access to childcare, highlighting systemic disadvantage for RRR people.

This submission focuses on RRR children connected to, and women working for, the agricultural sector. The absence of childcare across RRR Australia impacts children and the agricultural industry in two profound ways. Firstly, children aged 0-4 years who live on farms are exposed to various farm dangers. This submission considers ‘risk’ generally within the farming context and the subsequent increased risk to life of children living rurally - in contrast to metro children who have greater access to childcare and in turn safe spaces. This submission argues if more childcare facilities were accessible across RRR Australia, we could reduce farm related deaths of children.

Secondly, women working in the agricultural industry who have children are unlikely to maintain (to full extent) or pursue their careers, reinforcing a male dominant industry. Childcare deserts are inhibiting women’s inclusion to one of regional Australia’s biggest industries and employers. Furthermore, we know that the Australian economy will grow if we support more women into work. In 2012, the Grattan Institute found that if there were an extra 6 per cent of women in the workforce, we could add up to \$25 billion, or approximately 1 per cent, to Australia's Gross Domestic Product².

Women continue to represent invaluable opportunity to fill employment gaps, boost economies and not just in Western Australia, but nationally and globally. Access to early education and care is at the core of this problem.

Childcare pulse-check

The RRR Network conducted a survey (May 2023) to its Network and found that 22% did not live within a 20 minutes’ drive of a childcare. 14% were currently on a waiting list. 61% had to forgo working at some stage because they were unable to access or afford childcare.

Please note that the authors of this submission consider the lived experiences of rural, regional, and remote children and people to be exceptionally wonderful, rewarding and a fortunate experience.

¹ Mitchell Institute & Victoria University “Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare in Australia?” (March 2022) <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/how-accessible-is-childcare-report.pdf>

² Grattan Institute “Game-Changers” Economic reform priorities for Australia (June 2021) https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Game_Changers_Web.pdf

This submission seeks to raise awareness only on the challenges and issues related to women, children, and the agricultural industry in the absence of childcares.

Childcare Deserts

Western Australia's population is 2.7 million with 75 per cent of people living in the Perth metropolitan area.³ Regional Western Australian communities are often characterised with disproportionately high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and inequality. One survey participant said -

"When my boys were babies/toddlers I had to go on a waitlist for day care. I was a single working parent and day-care costs really hurt my budget."

Being employed in the regions can be a prized possession forcing parents to compromise and or make difficult decisions. One woman said -

"I am in a situation where I can't afford his day-care but cannot afford to lose a day of care for the future (if I was to take him out now for financial reasons)".

And this -

"I worked simply to gain experience as all money went towards childcare. Glad those years are behind us".

"Deserts and oases" reports that 61.3 per cent of outer regional Australia and 85.3 per cent of remote Australia live in a childcare desert⁴. Where childcare is available, it is not always accessible or a consistent service. According to Minderoo Foundation's Thrive by Five campaign, 16 per cent of centres do not meet the existing early learning quality standards⁵.

"I am not happy with my son's current day-care and if I could move him, I would. He is on waiting lists for other day-cares and have been for over a year".

RRR children living in a childcare desert are reliant on parent/guardian supervision until they can attend school. For some RRR children this can be an isolating experience particularly for farming families who may live long distances from their closest town. In many instances, RRR children are missing out on early education that best prepares them for school. Minderoo Foundation state that 22 per cent of children start primary school developmentally vulnerable.⁶ Childcare deserts also determine parents/guardians to be entirely responsible of their children for at least five years or until their children can attend school. Childcare and school allow time for parents/guardians to achieve work goals and provide income for their families easily while children are receiving education and care.

³ Infrastructure Western Australia "Snapshot: Foundations for a Stronger Tomorrow State Infrastructure Strategy (July 2021) https://infrastructure.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-07/Draft%20SIS%20Summary%20Snapshot%202021%20Web_1.pdf

⁴ Mitchell Institute & Victoria University "Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare in Australia?" (March 2022) <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/how-accessible-is-childcare-report.pdf>

⁵ Minderoo Foundation Thrive by Five (2023) <https://thrivebyfive.org.au/>

⁶ Minderoo Foundation Thrive by Five (2023) <https://thrivebyfive.org.au/>

“I had to be extremely inventive to get my childcare needs met whilst my kids were not yet school age. It involved a combination of family day care, kid swop days, bringing my babies to work with me, regular day-care and help from friends. I didn’t have much family support for many of the 13 years from when I started my Mum journey and to when my youngest went to school full time this February. I can’t explain the relief when I didn’t have to do this juggle anymore. Life changing”.

Greater access to childcare in RRR Australia will unlock women and regional economies, improve health and well-being of women and children, and support their critical early years development.

Child Safety on Farms

Risk plays an integral but complex theme within agriculture. From managing weather uncertainties, yields, prices and government policies to global markets and trialling new products or grain varieties. There is also safety risk when conducting standard manual tasks such as operating machinery or working with livestock. There is also another layer of risk, that is casual in nature. For example, not always wearing protective gear when handling chemicals, taking short-cuts or being alone when operating dangerous equipment. There is a somewhat normalised balance of risk in the agricultural operational environment of which farming children are innocently exposed and accustomed to.

AgHealth Australia and the University of Sydney conducted research into at-risk populations in agricultural with children being one of them. The research reports on the 2001 to 2019 period. The study found that approximately 15 children under 15 years are fatally injured on an Australian farm every year. For non-fatal injury of children on farms, over 2000 children were hospitalised due to a farm related injury in the 2010-2015 period. Furthermore, children (0-14yrs) make up almost 15% of farm injury deaths of which around 73% are male and children aged 0-4 constituted over half of all child deaths. Water bodies were responsible for over 31% of deaths, with most of those aged between 0-4 years with dams being the principal locality. Incidents involving tractors were dominated also by those aged 0-4 years and were a result of being transported as a passenger and falling off or being runover when around a tractor. Over half of the deaths occurred during the week and more than half (56.7%) had no active supervision by an adult at the time of the incident.⁷

Access to childcare not only provides critical early education but it also delivers safe spaces for children who live in vulnerable and risky home environments.

Women, children, and Agriculture

‘If you teach a man to farm, his family will eat. If you teach a woman to farm, the community will eat.’⁸ The Australian agriculture (Ag) sector is made up of approx. 32 per cent women⁹ and presently, women comprise 55 per cent of Ag science degree graduates.¹⁰ More women than men are securing education to achieve Ag careers and yet the industry as it stands is unlikely to sustain them long-

⁷ Peachey, Kerri-Lynn. AgHealth Australia – University of Sydney. “Populations at Risk” (2019)
<https://aghealth.sydney.edu.au/projects-and-reports/projects-populations-at-risk/>

⁸ Duckett, Maryellen Kennedy - National Geographic. “Empowering Female Farmers to Feed the World”
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/partner-content-empowering-female-farmers>

⁹ ABARES, Department of Agricultural, Fisheries and Forestry. “Snapshot of Australia’s Agricultural Workforce” (2016)
<https://www.agriculture.gov.au/abares/products/insights/snapshot-of-australias-agricultural-workforce>

¹⁰ Newsome, Dr Lucie, University of New England. “Hidden Agricultural workforce revealed”
<https://www.une.edu.au/connect/news/2022/01/hidden-agricultural-workforce-revealed>

term. Greater inclusion of women in the Ag industry will strengthen it and for the better, but presently it is problematic with primary caring being one of its main protagonists.

To start, pregnancy whilst working in the Ag industry is problematic. During pregnancy, concerns include chemical handling, working in the heat, standing for long periods of time, isolation on the land paired with unreliable digital services and accessing and controlling machinery and more. There is also the employer/employee relationship and negotiating appropriate and flexible duties as pregnancy progresses. Finally, returning to work once children are born when there is limited to no childcares available. All of which can influence women's employment opportunities within the agricultural industry.

The Ag industry has long hours particularly around seasonal demands. A feature of the industry that does not easily accommodate primary caring responsibilities. To adequately support mothers (and their children) working in the Ag industry they require a consistent and reliable childcare model. The below comment was offered by a mother who was grateful to have a childcare in her regional town, but the inconsistency in service was not conducive to work.

"... It caters for up to 11 children per day Mon – Thurs. We are currently undergoing some staff issues and children have been asked to stay home from day-care, it makes it extremely difficult to organise other childcare to change work hours at short notice".

With unreliable childcare deserts across rural and regional Australia, women are considering their ability to sustain an Ag career in the event they wish to have children. Many RRR women make alternative arrangements such as the use of baby-sitters or experienced au pairs/nannies from overseas. However, they are disadvantaged by a system that prevents them from accessing childcare rebates due to the use of "non-accredited" carers. One participant said, "We engaged Au Pairs for 4 years because there were no day-care places available".

The tyranny of distance for RRR families must be carefully considered when approaching a universal childcare system. If people are required to travel more than 30 minutes to drop children off to a childcare (a 2-hour time commitment and travel cost), it is more than likely that other independent arrangements will be made which excludes RRR children from early education. Taking this into account, RRR parent's/guardians should be offered access (including subsidies) in alternative ways.

In conclusion, a lack of childcare can impact an employee's ability to work - with women being the most affected. Childcare deserts limit growth and compound disadvantage. If childcare deserts are to remain, more RRR families will be forced to relocate and potentially leave the regions. Alternatively, women will either not work or select industries that do accommodate primary caring responsibilities. For the agricultural industry to sustain women who make invaluable contributions to the sector they require childcare across RRR Australia.

Finally, RRR children in childcare deserts are not accessing critical early years education that best prepares them for school. For RRR children on farms they have a unique increased risk to their health and safety. If more farming children could be in safe spaces during the week, we may see a reduction in child farm death and injury.

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