



Western Australia

## **Rural Women's Support and Empowerment Act 2019**

## **Explanatory Memorandum**

Increased support is needed for women in rural areas, who are isolated from assistance and tools available in cities and suburban areas. Education needs to be available for rural women around health, domestic violence, safe sex and relationships, and tools need to be readily accessible for women who face issues of this nature. Western Australia is physically the largest state in Australia, entailing many rural areas and communities. There is a clear need for reliable and consistent support methods for women in these communities, to lessen isolation, and to empower rural women.

Due to isolation, women in rural areas are often more vulnerable to issues such as those pertaining to domestic violence and sexual health. Many rural women are Indigenous and are 32 times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence than non-Indigenous women. 80% of STIs among Indigenous people were found in remote communities, and findings also show that women living in rural areas have higher death rates than those in major cities. In addition to this, 75% of STIs in Australia occur among young people, there being a 20% increase in the rate of STIs diagnosed amongst people aged 15–29 between 2010 and 2013. This has continued to rise particularly in rural areas.

The Women's Interests Committee has created an Act that provides support for women in rural areas. The Act establishes the Rural Women's Committee for Health and Relationships and implements a number of education and community based programs, to encourage a sense of community in rural areas, promoting dialogue about important issues affecting women. Through these programs, women can access information regarding healthy relationships, healthy lifestyles, safe sex, wellbeing and sexual health. The Act also entails funding to increase access to contraception and menstrual products, and the establishment of the Rural Women's Helpline and Rural Women's Service App, providing around the clock professional assistance to women in need.

The Rural Women's Support and Empowerment Act will support rurally located women in a non-condescending, empowering and efficient manner. The entailed measures will improve life and health for rural women, as well as promote awareness, and a sense of community and solidarity among women in rural areas. The Act provides direct means of addressing important and prevalent issues, ultimately improving accessibility to support for women; bettering their quality of life and instilling a sense of empowerment within their communities.



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# Rural Women's Support and Empowerment Act 2019

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Western Australia

An Act for —

**An Act to support and empower women from rural areas through education, increased access to resources and 24 hour assistance, and for related matters.**

## **Part 1 — Preliminary**

### **1. Short title**

This Act may be cited as the *Rural Women’s Support and Empowerment Act 2019*.

### **2. Commencement**

This Act commences on the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent.

### **3. Interpretation**

In this Act, unless the contrary intention appears —

“**Consent**” means the voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity;

“**Domestic violence**” means the physical or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty (United Nations, 1993).

“**Maternal health**” means the health of women during pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period.

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**“Rural”** means rural, regional and remote areas with populations of 25,000 and under.

**“RWCHR”** means the Rural Women's Committee for Health and Relationships.

**“RWH”** means the Rural Women's Helpline.

**“RWSA”** means the Rural Women's Service App.

**“Safe sex”** means taking measures to prevent sexually transmitted diseases / infections.

**“Sexual health”** means a state of physical, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality. It requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

**“Wellbeing”** means an individual's overall welfare and healthiness, which can specifically be physical, emotional, mental or psychological in nature.

**“Woman”** means an individual who is female or identifies as female.

**“Young woman”** means females, or female identifying individuals, of 21 years of age or younger.

## **Part 2 — Education programs for the empowerment of rural women**

### **Division 1 — Rural Women's Committee for Health and Relationships**

#### **4. Rural Women's Committee for Health and Relationships**

- (1) A Rural Women's Committee for Health and Relationships (RWCHR) is to be established.
- (2) The RWCHR will be a body corporate with perpetual succession.
- (3) The RWCHR will be an agent of the State and have the status, immunities and privileges of the State.
- (4) Proceedings may be taken by or against the RWCHR in its corporate name.

#### **5. Membership of the RWCHR**

The RWCHR will consist of 20 members who are appointed by the Minister for Women's Interests —

- (a) 1 female identifying community leader from each of the 16 non-Metropolitan electoral districts in The Western Australian Legislative Assembly
  - (i) Each non-metropolitan electoral district member will call for and reside over the selection process for female identifying community leaders to act as the electorates representative on the RWCHR - each nominee will be vetted until 4 final candidates are established, and a lottery will be used to determine the successful candidate.
- (b) 1 doctor from the Rural Doctors Association of Australia;
- (c) 1 representative from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance;
- (d) 1 representative from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies;
- (e) 1 representative of the Minister for Women's Interests;

**6. Roles of the RWCHR**

The RWCHR will perform the following functions —

- (a) Review a report of the issues and priorities for women in each rural electoral district in Western Australia as outlined by each representative;
- (b) Create recommendations for each rural district outlining what programs are to implement as defined in Divisions 2 and 3;
- (c) Delegate with the Department of Communities to co-design and implement appropriate programs in-conjunction with the specific needs of each rural district; and
- (d) Delegate resources and funding from the Department of Communities to each rural electorate based off the specific needs for women in each rural electorate.

**7. Minimum meetings of the RWCHR**

- (1) The RWCHR must have a minimum of four (4) meetings per year.
- (2) Extra meetings will be called at the discretion of the Chairperson.

**8. Presiding Officer**

- (1) The Minister for Women's Interests will select a Chairperson.
- (2) The Chairperson will preside over all meetings of the RWCHR.
- (3) The Chairperson will be notified of any conflicts of interest arising from the membership of the committee and determine the action/s taken. That is whether the member in question shall be permitted to contribute to and remain in discussions on the issue from which the conflict arose and related matters.
- (4) In the event that the Chairperson is absent from a meeting, all members present shall elect an acting Chairperson to preside over the meeting.



**9. Quorum**

All members of the committee must be present in order for a full meeting to occur.

**10. Remuneration**

All members of the committee must be present in order for a full meeting to occur.

**11. Members unable to act**

- (1) If a member is unable to act as a result of illness, absence or insolvency, the members must appoint a proxy to attend a relevant meeting in their place.
- (2) If that member is unable to act at subsequent meeting and thereafter, the Minister for Women's Interests will appoint another person to fulfil a similar capacity, either the original proxy or another person deemed fit for service.
- (3) While so acting according to the tenure of his or her appointment, that person is taken to be a member.
- (4) If a conflict of interest arises, the member of the committee to whom it relates shall notify the Chairperson in writing no less than one business day after the conflict of interest has arisen or has become known to the member.
- (5) Pursuant to Clause 8, the Chairperson will determine whether or not the member in question shall be permitted to contribute to and remain in discussion about the matter to which the conflict of interest relates

**12. Termination of members**

A member of the committee may be terminated by the Minister for Women's Interests on the advice of the Public Sector Commissioner on the grounds of —

- (a) Misbehaviour;
- (b) Incapacity; and/or
- (c) Failure to comply with the provisions outlined in Clause 11.

## **Division 2 — Educational programs**

### **13. Education Programs**

Educational Programs will be implemented in local schools —

- (a) Programs will be made by the School Curriculum and Standards Authority in conjunction with the RWCHR, The Department of Communities and local governments.
- (b) All educational programs are to be resourced by the Department of Communities
- (c) Programs will be run by schools and the local health department.

### **14. Primary School Educational Program**

- (1) An education program for all primary school students from grade four will be mandatory and implemented in all rural primary schools in WA.
- (2) Programs will teach and discuss topics including —
  - (a) Healthy relationships;
  - (b) Healthy lifestyles; and
  - (c) General wellbeing.

### **15. High School Educational Program**

- (1) An education program for high school students will be mandatory and implemented in all rural high schools in WA.
- (2) Programs will teach and discuss topics including —
  - (a) Sexual health;
  - (b) Safe sex;
  - (c) Healthy relationships; and
  - (d) General wellbeing.

### **Division 3 — Community Based Programs**

#### **16. Establishment of the Community Based Programs**

- (1) A number of programs will be implemented and run in rural communities across Western Australia to assist women in need.
- (2) Community based programs will be codesigned by the WA Rural Women's Committee for Health and Relationships, and members from each local community.
- (3) Members from local communities will apply to be representatives through their local government/council or local community committee. This body will determine the successful candidate/s.
- (4) The role of representative will come up for re-appointment every three (3) years at discretion of the local government/council or local community committee.

#### **17. Enactment of Programs**

Programs will be run by delegates from the WA Rural Women's Committee for Health and Relationships, volunteers, public servants, and professionals relevant to particular programs, including but not limited to —

- (a) Doctors;
- (b) Nurses; and
- (c) Psychologists.

#### **18. Specific Community Based Programs**

Programs will include but are not limited to —

- (1) Information sessions; for community members to speak to medical professionals and councillors about relevant issues that are affecting them. Information will also be supplied at these sessions. Topics covered include but are not limited to:
  - (a) Safe sex;
  - (b) Healthy relationships;

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- (c) Parenting;
  - (d) Healthy lifestyles; and
  - (e) Wellbeing.
- (2) Mothers groups and playgroups; information about parenting, community outreach and professional advice will be provided.
- (3) Youth meetings and activities for young women. Information about issues relevant to their age groups, including, but not limited to:
- (a) Information about issues relevant to their age groups, including, but not limited to —
    - (i) Healthy lifestyles;
    - (ii) Wellbeing;
    - (iii) Healthy relationships;
    - (iv) Safe sex; and
    - (v) Sexual health.
  - (b) There will be programs for particular age groups:
    - (i) 8-11 years old;
    - (ii) 12-15 years old; and
    - (iii) 16-21 years old.
- (4) Information sessions for new migrants that are resettling into regional Western Australian towns to equip female migrants with knowledge about the services, facilities and organisations that are accessible to them. These information sessions discuss topics that include but are not limited to —
- (i) Where and how to access different medical facilities and medical health specialists like family planning clinics, abortion clinics and psychologists;
  - (ii) Where to access intensive English language classes, learning centres or translation services;
  - (iii) Tips on where and how to find and apply for a job;
  - (iv) Australia's culture and political and legal system to further support and integrate the migrant communities in Australian life.

## **Part 3 — Access to Women's Health Products and Services**

### **19. Community Specific Funding**

- (1) Pursuant to Clause 6, the RWCHR will be responsible for delegating resources to each rural district based on the specific needs of that district, as recommended by the relevant representative RWCHR member.
- (2) Necessary funding will be resourced from the Department of Communities.

### **20. Application of Funding**

- (1) The relevant representative member of the RWCHR will work in conjunction with local government to distribute the provided funding and enact initiatives.
- (2) Funding will be used to increase access to women's health products and services for people in the rural district. These products and services include but are not limited to:
  - (a) Menstrual products;
  - (b) Contraceptives and family planning services;
  - (c) STI prevention and treatment services;
  - (d) Maternal health services; and
  - (e) Mental health services.
- (3) The use of funding distributed by the RWCHR will be reviewed quarterly to ensure appropriate application and full utilisation of funds by RWCHR members.
- (4) Pursuant to Clause 12, continued failure to use funds appropriately will result in dismissal from the position.

**21. Enactment of Initiatives**

Initiatives implemented will take into consideration the extent to which products and services are currently available in the district, causes of restricted access and other factors specific to the district. Initiatives will include but are not limited to —

- (a) Free or subsidised menstrual products and contraceptives;
- (b) Self-collection cervical screening services;
- (c) School-based STI testing and treatment referral services;
- (d) At home STI testing; and
- (e) Virtual and physical in-home maternal care.

**22. Additions to Existing State Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS)**

- (1) Cervical screening, Intrauterine Device (IUD) insertion and contraceptive implant insertion will be added to the existing Western Australian state Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS).
- (2) The program will be further advertised to increase utilization of the service.
- (3) Women living in rural areas who are required to travel 100km or more to access these services will be subsidised in accordance with the existing WA PATS program of —
  - (a) 16 cents per km for fuel; and
  - (b) \$60 per night for accommodation, if required.

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## Part 4 — Rural Women's Helpline and App

### 23. The Rural Women's Helpline

- (1) The Rural Women's Helpline (RWH) is to be established.
- (2) The RWH will be accessible across Western Australia, seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day.
- (3) The RWH will provide advice and support to women in need, and will have the ability to refer particular issues/cases, with the consent of the caller, to a variety of specialists where additional support is needed, including but not limited to —
  - (a) WA Rural Women's Committee for Health and Relationships;
  - (b) WA Police;
  - (c) Psychologists;
  - (d) Councillors;
  - (e) Healthcare specialists;
  - (f) Legal aid professionals; and
  - (g) Women's shelters.
- (4) The RWH will be advertised state wide, with particular focus on local rural communities. Advertising will occur through local radio stations, posters and television advertisements.
- (5) A head office will be located in Perth.
- (6) The RWH will be made up of a number of volunteers, in addition to a number of full time and part time paid staff members.
  - (a) Workers will receive training to work on the helpline by the WA Rural Women's Committee for Health and Relationships.
  - (b) Helpline workers will be trained to provide advice and support regarding domestic violence, sexual health, as well as broader health issues, parenting and relationship matters.

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**24. The Rural Women's Service App**

- (1) The Rural Women's service app will deal with mental health issues and will offer coping mechanisms for mental health issues including but not limited to —
  - (a) Depression;
  - (b) Self-harm;
  - (c) Anxiety;
  - (d) Postpartum depression; and
  - (e) Post-Traumatic stress disorder.
- (2) The app will work with established organisations such as the Country's Women's Association (CWA) and schools for in person and educational meetings at community centres/town halls.
- (3) The app will offer menstrual cycle tracking functions and forums to ask professionals questions regarding, sexual health, pregnancy or any other relevant issues.
- (4) The app will contain electronic versions of informative pamphlets.

**25. RWSA Contacts**

- (1) The Rural Women's Services App (RWSA) will be linked to the contact details of, but not limited to —
  - (a) The Rural Women's Helpline;
  - (b) OBGYN;
  - (c) Psychiatrist;
  - (d) Psychologist;
  - (e) General Practitioner; and
  - (f) Closest committee member.



## Part 5 — Review

### 26. Review Period

- (1) A Review of the Rural Women's Support and Empowerment Act 2019 (RWSE) by the Rural Women's Committee for Health and Relationships (RWCHR) is to commence three (3) years from the day on which this Act receives royal assent.
- (2) A timeframe for subsequent reviews will be determined by the RWCHR during the course of the review.
- (3) The RWCHR will submit a report to the Minister for Women's Interest within six (6) months of the conclusion of each review.

### 27. Review Content

The RWCHR will be responsible for reviewing the progress, efficiency and effectiveness of the Rural Women's Support and Empowerment Act and its various provisions, including but not limited to —

- (a) The provisions of Division 2 and 3 of Part 2 and 3 and other relevant clauses pertaining to the levels of demand in the community; and
- (b) Clause 5 pertaining to the composition of the committee.

### 28. Men's Issues

Upon its first review, the RWCHR will also consider the provisions of the *Rural Women's Support and Empowerment Act*, specifically clauses which concern male but not limited to, Clauses 13-18. This will mean the consideration of relevant statistics and potential programs for men. Suggestions will be made to the Minister for Men's Health at the time of review

### 29. Committee Review

The Minister for Women's Interests, The Education Minister, The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Health Minister will conduct a biennial review into the RWCHR, that consider factors including but not limited to —

- (a) Productivity;

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- (b) Efficiency;
- (c) Program creation;
- (d) Membership composition; and
- (e) Contemporary issues associated with the programs offered in this Act.