

5. Rural and Country Women

Overcoming isolation

Teaching in rural and country locations provides very rewarding professional and personal experiences for women teacher unionists. However women teachers in rural and country areas do need to ensure that they are aware of the professional, industrial and financial support available to them as rural teachers. They also need support and encouragement in becoming or remaining active members of our unions, as remoteness from a central union metropolitan office can present possible difficulties.

Women teachers want to become more active in their union need inventive strategies to overcome potential obstacles to their activism such as distance and isolation, or having potentially more limited access to union information and assistance.

Teaching in rural and country areas can often also provide opportunities for union involvement that are unique to non-metropolitan areas. An often high turnover of teaching and executive staff in many rural areas means that there can be a constant infusion of new ideas and interaction of enthusiastic staff at workplaces in rural and country locations.

Networking

Women teachers need to develop strong networks in order to support and encourage one another both on a personal and professional level. In areas where the numbers of women teachers are small, a successful strategy may be to join in and engage with other local women's networks, whether these are union groups, community groups or other groups from the broader women's movement.

Information

It is important that rural and country women have access to information from their employer about allowances and incentives as well as sufficient information and assistance with issues such as housing and relocation. The union plays an important role in both ensuring that these needs are met by the employers and ensuring that women teachers communicate and discuss with the union the needs and issues for women teachers and their families.

The reality of isolation can mean that women teachers also need access to information about violence, harassment and safety, so that as women teacher activists we have an important role in ensuring that our colleagues are supported on these issues and provided with appropriate advice and union expertise.

It is important that unions ensure that new and beginning teachers are provided with advice on union membership as well as their rights and working conditions before they commence in a position in a rural or country school, as obviously once they have taken up their position the access they have to relevant employment and union information may be limited. It is great when experienced women teachers in country areas extend help to their newer union colleagues when they first arrive in a new workplace.

Voice

Women activist in country areas also need to ensure that issues that particularly affect women teachers in the country are on the agenda both within their own unions and with their employers. Such issues could be due to isolation such as limited access to professional development or an acute shortage of relief teachers to cover for colleagues who need to access leave. At the same time, women activists in the country need to be encouraged to remain aware that issues for other teachers, either on a state or federal level or issues that affect metropolitan teachers also depend for solutions upon the strength and solidarity of their colleagues from rural and country areas.



What Can I Do?

Activism for Rural and Country Women

- Start a local women's action group network – hold meetings on a regular basis and invite women teacher unionists as well as women from local community groups. Invite speakers to generate discussion and action, whether they are your state (or federal) union officers, local politicians or women active in political and social campaigns and activities.
- Make sure that you are regularly updated with information from your union and that you find an appropriate means of keeping other women at your workplace and neighbouring workplaces updated as well. This will probably mean being pro-active about checking union journals and newsletters, regularly checking the union website, attending your local branch/area union meetings etc.
- Circulate information to other country and rural women through whatever means are most appropriate. This could mean noticeboards in workplaces or community locations, advertisements in local newspapers, using chat rooms on union websites, gathering together email contact lists of active women etc.
- Make sure that you communicate with your union on a regular basis and those ideas and opinions and campaign plans from the women in your area are shared and communicated to other women in your union on a state or federal level. This may involve speaking up at local branch /area meetings, nominating for and attending women's conferences or state councils and conferences etc.
- Encourage other women in their activism and assure them that their contribution is valuable to the union. Empower others by giving them advice about where to look for information, who to speak to about a problem or provide them with reassurance about speaking up about issues rather than solving the problem immediately for them or always acting as the union advocate yourself. Once you have empowered one woman to be active on an issue or solve a problem encourage them to then embolden others to also become active
- Know who your regional union organiser is and seek assistance in organising union events and activities. Ask them about what other union women are doing in your area or across the state and share with them your stories of successful activities and events. Ask for assistance in terms of accessing union resources e.g. fax and photocopying or contact details for local media as well as help in circulating information to other women teacher unionists.
- Find out what funding is available from your union to assist rural and country women in attending union meetings and events (This could include assistance with childcare, reimbursement for travel and accommodation costs to attend conferences etc). If such funding assistance is not available to country women teachers then take steps within your union to allow for this to occur. Make sure that you access trade union training provided by your union and ask your union to provide union education opportunities in country as well as metropolitan areas
- Think of strategies to make sure that distance from a major city in your state does not prevent you from taking part in union media campaigns etc. Often a wonderful advantage in country areas in terms of media coverage for union issues is that either the media is more likely to take up stories about teachers and their profession or else the cost of advertising on local TV or radio is much cheaper. Use this advantage to help with local and national union campaigns.
- Take steps to engage with other local women's networks, whether they are other union group's community women's groups, or groups from the broader women's movement. Invite these people to your area to speak, share information, celebrate success or gain strength and support for the women teachers in your area.

Get involved in, or set up equal opportunity local groups. Support networks for bisexual, lesbian, gay, intersex and transgender educators and/or students, or other marginalised groups can be particularly imperative for well being and celebrating diversity in communities.

