



Plea to pay tribute to rural women tomorrow

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Rural women are vital to resilience in rural communities and families and New Zealanders should pay tribute to their role tomorrow, which is International Women's Day, a rural health leader says.

Michelle Thompson, chief executive of the Rural Health Alliance of Aotearoa New Zealand (RHAANZ), says women are often the glue which holds families together in tough times.

"They are essentially the backbone of the NZ economy. After all, about 600,000 Kiwis live in rural areas and agriculture and tourism are the powerhouses of our economy," Thompson says.

"Each year, more than two and a half million tourists visit rural New Zealand. In 2011-2012, \$40 billion, or 19 percent of GDP, was generated directly or indirectly by the agri-food sector.

"If the spending power of rural people is considered, then the contribution of the agri-food sector is \$53 billion, or one dollar in every four dollars spent in the economy. Rural women play a crucial role in making all this happen.

"Women in all walks of life suffer from the burden of historical oppression and discrimination. But in rural communities where they may be geographically isolated adding to difficulty in accessing support, where there are concentrations of high need and poverty adding to social stresses, and high levels of unemployment contributing to the challenges of poverty, the burdens can be exaggerated.

"In addition to the challenges of isolation from amenities, health services, employment, friends and family, rural women are often faced with difficulties in calling for help because of poor cell phone coverage and unreliable broadband connectivity.

"We all know rural women are big on combatting family violence and few people realise that rural domestic violence rates are higher than in urban areas.

"RHAANZ supports all efforts to reduce inequity in service delivery in rural areas, and through its network of member organisations encourages collaboration and sharing of initiatives that are making a difference.

"Several members offer scholarships that support women in leadership such as Rural Women New Zealand, Dairy Women and Farming Mums, who are an internet based support group that provides social media support for their members.

“RHAANZ acknowledges the fantastic contribution women make to all aspects of rural life and we particularly acknowledge the health and social service professionals who work tirelessly often in challenging circumstances to help keep our rural communities healthy and well.

“As a nation we must acknowledge the importance of women in rural New Zealand. The health of women in rural areas has been greatly supported by the country’s mobile surgical bus which is supported by 145 rural nurses and tomorrow celebrates its 15th-year anniversary. The bus has carried out 21,300 operations since 2002 and currently performs about 1500 surgical procedures a year in 24 towns all over New Zealand.

“We strongly support our members such as the NZ College of Midwives and Rural Women NZ who are also raising awareness about women’s issues in New Zealand. The college says New Zealand women earn 12 percent less than men when median hourly pay rates are compared.”

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Photo: RHAANZ chief executive Michelle Thompson