

Why young women say no to rural Australia

10 August 2018, by Rae Dufty-Jones And Neil Argent

When it comes to migration trends, young people aged 15-24 are among the most itinerant in Australia. According to the 2016 [census statistics](#), slightly more than half (50.5%) of people in this age bracket changed their residence in the five-year period from 2011-2016.

The rates are slightly higher for young people living in rural communities compared to their urban counterparts. But when factoring in gender, one notices a big difference between [young women](#) and men, particularly in rural Australia – 55.3% of 15-24 year old women changed their residence during this time frame, compared to 48.4% of young men.

The same split was evident in the five-year period from 2006-2011 (55.6% of young rural women moved vs. 48.7% of young rural men).

In the past, the exodus of young people out of rural areas has been interpreted as a sign of the long-term decline of rural and regional Australia. Indeed, [research reveals](#) that the out-migration of young people from six regions in South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria has led to the accelerated ageing of these areas.

But the opposite can also be true. The out-migration of young people can also [help spur](#) the regeneration of rural areas if they leave these communities to acquire the skills needed for regional development and come back.

But this assumes that young people return to rural Australia. And this is where we need a reframing on rural depopulation. The focus of our debate should not solely be on the reasons why young people leave rural communities. We need to also understand why they are not returning to these towns after acquiring suitable experience or education elsewhere.

The factors influencing this decision sometimes differ by gender. As our research finds, young women find it harder than young men to make

such a move (or return) to these rural communities.

Career concerns and compromises

As part of a wider [project](#) examining rural youth out-migration in northern NSW, we interviewed a number of 18-to-24 year olds who had left the regional city of Armidale to live in Sydney.

Our research revealed gender to be an important factor when these young people contemplated whether they would return to Armidale, or how they would do it.

For some female respondents, the potential impact on their careers was seen as a significant barrier to their desire to move back or relocate to another rural area. For the [young men](#) we interviewed, the potential career challenges did not seem as insurmountable.

As one female interviewee explained: "I am struggling with (the idea of returning to a rural location). I've thought about that because I really feel in a year's time, I could try and say, 'Yeah, I can move back to the country'. ... But my job's here ... and I love my job and I don't want to leave it."

Gender also influenced the way respondents talked about returning to rural areas for "family" reasons. Male respondents were more unequivocal about the idea of return migration for family. They also expressed wanting to return to Armidale because they felt a sense of "ownership" and "responsibility" for the town and its people. As a male interviewee explained: "I feel responsible and I want to make (Armidale) a better place. This, it's just - ... I don't own anything here (in Sydney). I'm not responsible for it."

This was juxtaposed with the responses of young women, who used terms like "struggle" and "compromise" when talking about returning to [rural areas](#). One young woman described how she felt pulled in many directions when it came to making a return move to Armidale: "...family's the big thing,

having kids, but also what your partner's doing. I don't know. It's hard that one. ... I feel like it always has to be a bit of a compromise, which is mine."

Challenge of selling rural Australia to women

Australian rural communities have a lot to offer [young people](#), including affordable housing, access to nature, easy commutes and a better work-life balance.

Both the male and female respondents in our research project were aware of these benefits. However, the young women were more sceptical of their ability to maintain a fulfilling career if they made the return.

Rural development strategies face a considerable challenge in convincing young women that moving or returning to these communities will be beneficial both in terms of lifestyle and career opportunities.

Rural communities ignore this at their peril. By not engaging with and addressing the fears that young [women](#) have about their employment prospects, [rural communities](#) will continue to see an out-flow of this segment of the population to big cities and continued uncertainty over whether they'll return.

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