

Entry type: Organisation
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Country Women’s Association of Australia

(1945 -)

Born	1 January, 1945
Occupation	Community organisation

Summary

The Country Women's Association of Australia was founded on 7 June 1945. Delegates from the six State Country Women's Associations, voted to form the national body. The purpose of the newly-formed body was to: “enable Country Women’s Associations throughout Australia to speak with one voice on all national matters, more especially concerning the welfare of country women and children”. The first state branch of the organisation had been formed in New South Wales in 1922. All other mainland states followed suit by 1928 with the Tasmanian branch being founded in 1936. It is a non-sectarian, non-party-political, non-profit lobby group working in the interests of women and children in rural areas. Given its national scope, large membership and longevity, it was arguably the most influential Australian women’s organisation of the twentieth century.

As of 2004, the Association comprises44,000 members and 1855 branches. It is the largest women’s organization in Australia.

Details

A national federation of the existing Australian state-based Country Women's Associations was first proposed in 1928. Discussion continued the following year with the formation of the first international rural women's organisation-the Associated Country Women of the World. But the state organisations were wary of losing their independence and identity to a national body. These fears and problems were resolved during several wartime meetings and the Country Women's Association of Australia was officially founded in 1945. It was agreed that the federal body would consult with all state organisations on issues of policy and that the presidency, and annual national conference, would rotate between the states. The foundation president was Mrs Helen Marfell, then the Victorian state president.

In each state, numerous local branches formed in rural areas, and metropolitan branches were also formed. There were considerable differences between the various state branches in terms of their activities and priorities. The National body, however, allowed concerted action on issues on which there was general consensus.

The CWA is a generally conservative organisation with an almost exclusively white membership. Historically, it was, however, also a progressive force in many ways. Particularly in its encouragement of country women to take an active part in public affairs. It has also been outspoken on environmental issues. As early as 1936, for example, the NSW branch passed a resolution in favour of equal pay for women. Although advocating a greater public role for country women, the organisation also in many ways defended traditional gender roles.

Early issues which attracted the attention of the national body in the 1940s included: the provision of basic utilities in rural areas; provision of home nursing; married women's right to retain their own nationality; the introduction of domestic science into the university curriculum. More recent concerns have been rural poverty and unemployment, and strengthening rural families. As of 2004, its aims are 'to improve the conditions for country women and children and try to make life better for women and their families, especially those women in rural and remote Australia.' Its functions are:

1. To enable the Member Associations to speak with one voice on national and international matters through the National President.
2. To represent the concerns of Member Associations to the federal Government, Non-Government Organisations (NGO'S) and other national bodies.
3. To do such lawful things as are incidental or conducive to the above aims or any one of them, as considered necessary or desirable by the required majority of Member Associations.

And its aims and objectives are:

TO RAISE the standard of living of rural women and families through education, training and community development programmes.

TO PROVIDE practical support to its members and help them set up income generating schemes.

TO GIVE rural women a voice at international level through its links with UN agencies.

Given its national scope, large membership and longevity, it was arguably the most influential Australian women's organisation of the twentieth century. The organisation flourished in the years after WWII when many other urban women's groups went into decline. It is only in recent years that its position has become somewhat less secure-with the emergence of other rural women's organisations. Nevertheless, as of 2004, the Associated Country Women of the World (with which the Country Women's Association of Australia is affiliated) is the largest international organisation for rural women in the world with around nine million members across 70 countries.

Published resources

Edited Book

Directory of Australian Associations, Heywood, Anne, 1998

Book

The Many Hats of Country Women: The Jubilee History of the Country Women's Association of Australia, Stevens-Chambers, Brenda, 1997

Getting things done : the Country Women's Association of Australia, Country Women's Association of Australia, 1986

She's no milkmaid : a biography of Dame Raigh Roe, D.B.E., Erickson, Rica, Haywood, Rona and Oldham, Jan (sketches by), [1991?]

Finding Aid

Guide to the Records of the Country Women's Association of Australia, National Library of Australia. Manuscript Section, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-245100431/findingaid>

Report

Life has Never Been Easy: report of the survey of women in rural Australia / Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Office of the Status of Women and the Country Women's Association of Australia, 1988

Book Section

A view of the Australian consumer movement from the middle of the Web, Brown, Robin and Panetta, Jane, 2000

Journal Article

Second wave feminism in rural Australia. -The main elements and characteristics of the rural women's movement of the 1990s-, McGowan, Cathy, 1997

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

Dame Raigh Roe interviewed by Gail O'Hanlon in the Australians of the year oral history project [sound recording]

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

Records of the Country Women's Association of Australia, 1945-1969, 2003 [manuscript]

State Library of Victoria

The Country Women's Association [sound recording] : Australia's largest women's organisation / researched and presented by Ros Bowden

Author Details

Jane Carey and Anne Heywood

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