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An Action Research Investigation Into New Ways Rural Women in Western Australia Can Increase Their Involvement in Government Decision-making

by

Teresa Maiolo
B.A. Psych. (Hons.), Grad.Dip. (Health Sc.).

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy,
Faculty of Communications and Creative Industries
Edith Cowan University
2004

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the role of information communication technologies (ICTs) in the promotion of rural women's participation in governmental decision-making. The origins of the research lie in apparent discrepancies between the Australian government's high-level, policy commitment to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making and the continuing barriers to their participation as demonstrated by researchers such as Elix and Lambert, (1998); and Wilkinson and Alston, (1999). This research deploys a feminist action research methodology to explore new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making in Western Australian.

The first phase of the research, a phenomenological field study, investigated two research questions,

- Why are so few rural women involved in government decision-making in Western Australia? and
- What are new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making in Western Australia?

The second phase of the research explored rural women's receptiveness to the implementation of information and communication technologies and any issues they had with using them.

In phase one, 21 women from seven rural communities in Western Australia were interviewed to understand their experiences of the government decision-making system. Drawing on Covey's (1999) and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) frameworks, a Government decision-making framework was formulated to bring together the barriers and drivers that affect rural women's engagement with decision-making. This included three levels of factors that influence rural women's involvement – personal, interpersonal and cultural. Further, the Change strategies framework was developed to outline new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making. Five change strategies, targeting the personal,

resource and cultural level of the government decision-making system were identified.

Phase two of the study is a case study of an online meeting between 67 Western Australian rural women and the then Deputy Premier. It showed that rural women found the online government meeting reduced barriers such as limited resources of time and money, but, new barriers with using the technology emerged. A clear outcome is a paradigm shift from prioritising homogeneity to heterogeneity among government decision-makers is needed to address rural women's different personal, interpersonal and cultural needs.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

(ii) contain any material published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

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Date 22 November 2004

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ABBREVIATIONS

AwiA	Australian Women in Agriculture
CWA	Country Women's Association
DOB	Date of Birth
GBCs	Government boards and committees
GPO	General Post Office
ICTs	Information and communication technologies
IT	Information Technology
NESB	non-English speaking backgrounds
NGOs	Non Government Organisation
OSW	Office of the Status of Women
PhD	Doctorate of Philosophy
RRR	Rural, Regional, and Remote
SCARM	Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management
UN	United Nations
WA	Western Australia

CODES FOR RURAL WOMEN RESPONDENTS

In attempt to preserve confidentiality, respondents are not referred to by their correct name or identifying demographics.

Accordingly the women interviewed (in phase one of this research) are referred to by condensed codes which refer to a fictitious name. To provide the reader with a broad description of the interviewees the rural women's age range and the broad region of where she lives is included in the code. For example following quotations from each of the rural women interviewed the following code will be presented: [rural woman's name, age range in years, region where woman lives].

The categories of ICT use is defined later in the methodology section, on page 66.

A brief description of the 21 rural women interviewed in phase one follows:

Carmel 30 – 39 years; married; station owner in Mid West region; no dependents at home; works on station; not involved in committees, but would like to be involved; a proficient user of ICTs; and lives in isolated conditions.

Tanya 30 – 39 years, single; public servant in Gascoyne region; no dependents at home; works full time; not involved in committees, but would like to be involved; a proficient user of ICTs; and is able to contact others easily, not living in isolated conditions.

Pam 30 – 39 years; married; station owner in Gascoyne region; has one dependent child at home; works in the tourism and station business; not involved in committees, but would like to be involved; is a basic user of ICTs, and lives in isolated conditions.

Margo 30 – 39 years; married; farm owner in Great Southern region; has two dependent child at home; works in the tourism, farm business, and sometimes off the farm work; is involved in some local committees; is a basic user of ICTs; and lives in partially isolated conditions.

Crystal 30 – 39 years; married; farmer owner in South West region; has two dependent child at home; works in the farm business; is involved in some local committees; is a proficient user of ICTs; and lives in partially isolated conditions.

Dora 30 – 39 years; married; station owner in the Kimberley region; has three dependent child at home; works in the tourism and station business; is involved in some local committees; is a basic user of ICTs; and lives in isolated conditions.

Michelle 40 – 49 years; separated; an employee in the Kalgoorlie – Esperance region; has one dependent child at home; works for a local community business; is involved in some local committees; is a proficient user of ICTs; and lives in partially isolated conditions.

Lyn 40 – 49 years; married; a teacher in the South West region; has no dependent child at home; works at the local school; is involved in some local committees; is a proficient user of ICTs; and is able to contact others easily, not living in isolated conditions.

Victoria 40- 49 years; married; a farm owner in the Great Southern region; has no dependents at home; works in the farm business; is involved in a lot of state and local committees; is an astute user of ICTs; and is able to contact others easily, not living in isolated conditions.

Sally 40 – 49 years; married; a farm owner in the South West region; has two dependent children at home; works in the farm business; is involved in some local and state committees, is an astute user of ICTs; and is able to contact others easily, not living in isolated conditions.

Justine 40 –49 years; married; a farm owner in the South West region; has no dependent children at home; works in her own business as well as the farm business; is involved in lots local committees; is an astute user of ICTs; and lives in partially isolated conditions.

Vera 40 – 49 years; married; a public servant in the South West region; has no dependent children at home; works in a local community organisation; is involved in some state and local committees; is an astute user of ICTs; and is able to contact others easily, not living in isolated conditions.

Maria 40 – 49 years; married; a farmer in the Kimberley region; has no dependent children at home; work on the farm; is involved in some state and local committees; is a proficient user of ICTs; and is able to contact others easily, not living in isolated conditions.

Maja 50 – 59 years; separated; an employee in the Kalgoorlie- Esperance region; has no dependent children at home; work in a local community organisation; is involved in some local committees; is a proficient user of ICTs; and lives in isolated conditions.

Betty 50 – 59 years; married; a station owner in the Mid West region; has no dependent children at home; works on the station; is involved in a lot of state and local committees; is aware of ICTs; and lives in very isolated conditions.

Elsa 50 – 59 years; married; an employee in the Gascoyne region; has no dependent children at home; works in a local community organisation; is involved in some local committees; is a proficient user of ICTs; and is able to contact others easily, not living in isolated conditions.

Toni 50 – 59 years; married; an employee in the Great Southern region; has no dependent children at home; works in a local community organisation; is involved in some state and local committees; is an astute user of ICTs; is able to contact others easily, not living in isolated conditions.

Jennifer 50 – 59 years; married; a station owner in the Kimberley region; has no dependent children at home; works in the tourism and station business; is involved in some local committees; is a basic user of ICTs; and lives in very isolated conditions.

Rosa 50 – 59 years; married; a business owner in the South West region; has no dependent children at home; works in her local community business; is involved in lots of state and local committees; is a basic user of ICTs; and is able to contact others easily, not living in isolated conditions.

Vicky 60 – 69 years; married; an employee in the Kalgoorlie-Esperance region; has no dependent children at home; works in a local community organisation; is involved in a lot of state and local committees; is a basic user of ICTs; and lives in partially isolated conditions.

Linda 60 – 69 years; widow; retired in the Gascoyne region; has no dependent children at home; does not work; is involved in a lot of state and local committees; is aware of ICTs; and lives in partially isolated conditions.

Rural women who responded to questionnaires (in phase two of the research) are referred to by condensed codes where a number is referred to rather than a fictitious name. To provide the reader with a broad description of these rural women their age range and the broad region of where she lives is included in the code. For example following quotations from each of the rural women interviewed the following code will be presented: [RW(Number), age range in years, region where woman lives].

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The seed of this research was sown when I began my public role as a city councillor, an elected representative for the local community. I experienced being a community leader, and a woman with many other responsibilities, as challenging and at times impossible. Four years later the seed had sprouted. I was in a meeting with government representatives from three agencies when the question was asked, 'why are so few rural women involved in government decision-making?' This thesis is the fruit of four years work investigating different rural women's experiences of the government decision-making system in Western Australia (WA). Adopting a feminist action research methodology, this research investigates why few rural women are involved, and explores new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making.

This chapter outlines the significance and rationale of investigating why few rural women are involved in government decision-making. To begin with I will outline gaps in the literature regarding rural women's involvement in WA. Women's invisibility in government decision-making will be examined at the local and the international levels. An analysis of rural women's involvement in government decision-making will follow to complete the argument that many WA rural women's voices are silenced. Gaps in the literature will illustrate further discrepancies between the intentions of governments and the results of their efforts. A synopsis of the conceptual frameworks adopted, research questions and the structure of this thesis will follow at the end of this chapter.

This research will adopt the term "rural women" to mean rural women who live in regional, remote and rural areas in WA. Essentially, these are women living in non-urban locations. This definition, similar to previous researchers' (Haslam McKenzie & Lord, 2001; Lennie, 2001; Lennie, 2002a), reflects the diversity that exists among rural women. The specific focus is to investigate their involvement in

state government boards and committees (GBCs). Given the lack of specific data on rural women, the prevalence of all women's overall low level of involvement in government decision-making internationally and nationally, will serve as an indication of the breadth of the problem under investigation.

1.1 Women's Invisibility in Government Decision-making

Internationally, rural women's low level of involvement in government decision-making is understood as part of a wider examination of women's overall lack of involvement. Democratic governments, of which WA is one, have decision-makers who are elected politicians and/or are appointed as members of committees and boards. This thesis argues that women have the right to be involved in decisions that impact on them, such as the country's distribution of resources, the provision of community services, and international relations.

Feminist writers have previously established the link between the personal and the political aspects of decision-making (Robinson & Richardson, 1997; Stein, 1997). Doyal's (1995) feminist analysis makes the point that unless women are involved in the government system, their ability to determine their own life plan is limited as their issues, needs, and perspectives become invisible to decision-makers. This section will demonstrate how women's invisibility in government has been, and is still, an ongoing problem.

In the late 1800s it was illegal for women throughout the world to participate in any government processes and decisions. Suffragettes knew that if women did not vote and were not involved in the government system neither they nor their daughters would have the basic human rights of influencing decision-makers or being decision-makers (Haines, 1992). The suffrage movement in western countries resolved this breach of basic human rights and women now vote in government elections. Australian women were leaders in the suffrage movement, earning women the ability to vote in federal government elections, the same human right as men (Haines, 1992). Preceding this world-first event in 1901, women activists in two Australian States - South Australia and WA - won women the right to vote in state elections in 1895 and 1899 respectively (Haines, 1992). Notwithstanding these achievements, Aboriginal women and men were not granted the right to vote until

1962. It appears that government culture takes a long time to change, as it took extensive effort for Australian women to be granted the right to vote, and over 60 further years for voting rights to be expanded from (Anglo Australian) women, to include Aboriginal women and all Aboriginal people.

The suffrage movement had women from many different "walks of life" coming together to change the government's position on women's involvement in socio-political life. Haines' (1992) analysis of the suffragette movement identifies that women's suffrage organisations adopted a broader perspective on human rights, as 'their intention was to campaign for greater rights and freedoms for all women - married and single, working or not, and from all walks of life' (p.13). Suffragettes had transcended their differences in class, and their own differing attitudes. The strength of the movement was that women were united in their commitment to empower themselves and other women, and embraced women's differences. This united and inclusive approach was vital to gaining the vote, thus giving women further opportunities to pressure politicians.

A century later, a similar human rights issue is prevalent, as women's low level of involvement in government decision-making is being addressed at international, national and state levels. This lack of involvement threatens the representation of women's points of view in socio-political life. This research has operationalised (rural) women's low level of involvement in WA by examining the number of rural women involved in government decision-making, compared to benchmarks specified in government reports and to men's involvement. To outline the significance of this international human rights issue, a review of the United Nation's (UN) actions for addressing women's involvement or lack of involvement in government, follows.

What is perplexing is that a century ago women fought for the right to vote in government and now, when it appears that many women have opportunities to contribute to government processes in the role of a decision-maker, women are not taking these positions. To address this international concern the UN has taken international responsibility for increasing women's involvement in government

decision-making.[1] Mrs Mary Robinson, High Commissioner for Human Rights at the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, emphasised that if women's involvement in government decisions is to increase at all levels of government then changes to current practices are needed to achieve this increase (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1997). Finding new ways to involve women in government decision-making is a high priority for the UN and for the community of nations.

Table 1.1 UN actions aimed to increase women's involvement in government decisions (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1997

Year	Actions addressing women's participation in government decision-making
1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 2 & 21 women's government rights)
1966	Covenant on Civil & Political Rights (articles 2 & 25)
1975	International Women's Year, instigated by the UN General Assembly
1979	The Convention of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (article 7)
1985	Review of UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development & Peace
1995	Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action
1998	The UN World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna Fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Human Rights Year
2001	Review of Beijing Programme of Action Five Year Implementation Review of the Vienna Declaration
2001	UN Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat)

[1] With nearly every country in the world (189) belonging to the UN "all but twenty six States have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, [making] it the second most widely ratified human rights treaty" (United Nation's Statistical Division, 2000).

The UN actions aimed to increase women's involvement in government decision-making (see Table 1.1) outlines the human rights significance of increasing women's participation in these socio-political processes. Following the achievement of women's suffrage, the first international action to increase women's participation in government was The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Every decade to date has seen the community of nations addressing human rights for women, increasing women's power and opportunities. Fifty-six years have passed and the UN and community of nations are still attempting to address new ways which would increase women's involvement in government decision-making.

In 1985, the Fourth World Conference on Women: Platform for Action - which reviewed the UN Decade (1975 - 1985) for Women - concluded that equality between men and women had not yet been achieved (United Nation's Division for the Advancement of Women, 1995a). The UN called upon governments, the international community and civil society to take strategic action. Ten years later, in 1995, at the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Conference, state members again ratified a decision to implement actions to increase women's involvement in power and decision-making over the next five years. There were 168 (out of 185) state members of the UN who agreed to:

- take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making; and
- increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.

(United Nation's Division for the Advancement of Women, 1995b, para (¶) 1). (Note ¶ according to APA indicates a direct reference and it's location from an Internet references)

Table 1.2 Percentages of women's involvement in government decision-making as elected representative across world governments (UN Statistical Division. 2000).

Government decision-making positions	Average number and percentage of women involved	Average percent increase
Heads of State or Government	Only 9, 4% in 2000	No data available
Cabinet Ministers	8% in 1998 6% in 1994 (Sweden is the only country with a majority of 55% in 1998)	2% in four years
Parliamentarians	10% in 1999 9% in 1987 (Nordic and Netherlands have the highest, 33% in 1999)	1% in two years

In 1985 the UN Economic and Social Council set a target of 'having thirty percent women in positions at decision-making levels' as a benchmark for UN countries (United Nation's Division for the Advancement of Women, [UNDAW], 1995b, ¶ 3). The 168 countries, of which Australia was one, endorsed and ratified the above UN target which meant they were legally bound to put enabling provisions into practice and agreed to submit national reports at least every four years, to allow evaluation of their progress towards their treaty obligations. The question is 'Has the goal of increasing women's participation in government decision-making been met?' The UN Statistical Division (2000) concludes that since the Beijing Conference, 'women's participation in the top levels of government and business has not markedly increased' (¶ 27). Table 1.2 demonstrates that the average increase in women's participation as a Cabinet Minister and Parliamentarian is only two and one percent, respectively, with a majority of countries having a small percentage of women in elected government decision-making positions.

The human rights concern is that women are seriously under-represented in government power structures and decision-making, even though women make up at least half of the electorate in almost all countries, and women have attained the right to vote (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1997; UNDAW, 1995a; UNDAW, 2001; UN Statistical Division, 2000). Table 1.2 shows that in 1999, women globally only held ten percent of elected parliamentary positions, and less than ten percent of ministerial positions. This low representation is of particular concern when governments have agreed to comply with treaty obligations and have endorsed a 30 percent target (UNDAW, 1995b). The question needs to be asked as to why are there so few women in government decision-making positions, when governments have agreed to increase women's involvement.

Although the UN has set targets to be achieved, it is up to individual countries to determine the best way to increase women's involvement in government decision-making. At a broad policy level, the UN has recommended that women's human rights become mainstreamed in government rather than treated as a separate concern solely for women's organisations (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1997; UNDAW, 2001). Although the UN acknowledges that women have gained access to power through alternative structures, such as Non Government Organisations (NGOs), and "grass roots" organisation, it emphasises the need for women to access traditional avenues of power, such as government decision-making bodies (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1997; UNDAW, 1995a; UNDAWS, 2001). The UN also acknowledges that rural women need to be considered as a distinct group of women requiring specific strategies to address the additional barriers they experience, which can isolate and marginalise them from entering the socio-political system (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1997; UNDAW, 1995a; UNDAW, 2001).

In summary, women's under-representation in government is still a significant international human rights issue for the UN and for individual countries. Women's full participation in government has been an ongoing problem as identified by the suffrage movement. Now their low level of involvement in government decision-making is a further cause for concern. UN countries have been addressing women's low level of involvement in decision-making since 1948. It is disturbing that 56 years have passed and still only marginal improvements have resulted. To

date, UN targets set in 1985 (of having 30 percent women involved) are yet to be achieved. The question as to why there are so few women involved, when women now have the right to vote, and when governments have agreed to increase women's involvement, has yet to be resolved and needs further investigation. It is only when women participate equally in government decision-making that they can truly feel empowered. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2001) support this position by concluding that:

> Unless women are involved in the decision and policy making process at all levels of the state, changes in women's political and to some extent social and economic status will continue to be marginal (¶ 1).

1.2 Australian Governments Responsible for Increasing Women's Involvement

The UN international agreements at the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UNDAW, 1995a) called for the Prime Minister of Australia to take action to achieve a gender balance in government decision-making processes and to record the gender balance in the private and public decision-making domain. In the Australian government's reviews to the UN they confess that the targets of gender balance in government decision-making have not been met, despite specific action being implemented (Australian Government, 1995; Australian Government, 2000). This section will outline the government agencies that are responsible for increasing rural women's involvement in Australia and WA, thus providing a local context for an investigation of this global issue.

Australian government has three levels: local, state and federal. The governments who have been in power over the last decade have assigned the prime responsibility of achieving a gender balance in government decision-making to the Office of the Status of Women (OSW), which is located within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. OSW has the responsibility of increasing all women's involvement, whilst the Rural Women's Unit in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry - Australia, (formerly Department of Primary Industry and Energy) has the specific responsibility for increasing rural women's involvement in government decision-making. It is through the formation of the Rural Women's

Unit that the Australian government acknowledges that rural women have unique barriers, experiences, and value. OSW and the Rural Women's Unit work in partnership with the five states and two territories in Australia. With no federal laws established, the individual states and territories take over direct ownership of the problem and the responsibility of increasing rural women's involvement in their own government.

At the State level in WA, the Office for Women's Policy (formerly the Women's Policy Development Office) is the counterpart to the commonwealth OSW. In the previous Liberal government, WA's counterpart to the commonwealth's Rural Women's Unit was the Australian Women in Agriculture program (AWiA, within the Department of Agriculture WA). This state program was the sole responsibility of one officer. A significant commonwealth and state program titled the National Plan was designed as part of AWiA to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making (Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management [SCARM], 1998). Since the change to a state Labor government in 2001, both AWiA and the National Plan programs have been discontinued (Haslam McKenzie, 2002). Whilst the claim that the dismantling of AWiA maybe a consequence of rural women's concern being mainstreamed in the WA government, the lack of visibility in addressing their unique needs, particularly through the discontinuation of training programs (Haslam McKenzie, 2003a; 2003b), and the lack of specific data collected regarding rural women's non-participation, illustrates that the State government has rendered rural women invisible. This means that, despite the UN agreements with the Prime Minister, WA no longer prioritises or takes any specific action to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making. WA rural women are marginalised by: the transient nature of the AWiA program, the disappearance of the government officer and agency responsible for advocating their interests, the lack of specific data collected, and their minimal influence from within the government system.

The Rural, Regional, and Remote (RRR) Women's Network program is the only remaining specific rural women's portfolio within the WA government. The Department of Agriculture (formerly Agriculture WA) and the Department of Local Government and Regional Development fund the RRR Women's Network to bring rural women together, and provide a forum in which they could raise important

issues. Although the RRR Women's Network does focus on rural women's interests, its budget specifically targets the production of a quarterly newsletter and facilitating the online RRR network (www.online.rrr.wa.gov.au). The specificity of the portfolio, and the limited resources available, prevent the one full-time officer from taking responsibility for AWiA or SCARM programs, or implementing other specific programs to increase the numbers of rural women in government decision-making forums.

In summary, the Australian government's agreements with the UN to increase women's (and rural women's) involvement in government decision-making processes, has not been taken seriously by the WA government. Whilst the previous WA Liberal government spent minimal resources on the project, such as one officer to implement the entire Commonwealth AWiA and SCARM programs, the new Labor government has now abolished this token commitment to these programs. Given UN agreements with Australia, it is alarming that the current state Labor government has discontinued these specific programs, and not replaced them with alternative or better commitments. This research aims to make visible the discrepancies that exist between government reports and actions, and to highlight the specific needs of rural women that appear to have been forgotten by the government system.

1.3 Rural Women's Invisibility in Australian Government Decision-making

Despite the Australian government's agreements with the UN, and the development of numerous reports and programs, rural women are still under-represented in government decision-making in Australia and WA (Elix & Lambert, 1998; SCARM, 2000; SCARM, 2001). To outline the importance of developing specific strategies to address the issue of rural women's participation in government decision-making, this section highlights their lack of representation. With this aim, and given the sparsity of data, an examination of decision-making positions as both elected politicians and as members in government statutory boards and committees, in both the federal and WA governments follows.

Little serious attention has been paid to the issue of rural women's involvement in government decision-making (Alston, 1998c; Alston & Wilkinson,

1998; Wilkinson & Alston, 1999). This is apparent from first, the transient nature of programs and agencies looking after rural women's needs; second, the incomplete statistics recorded; and third, the lack of a "rural women" (or equivalent) category in government databases and registries. Alston (1998b; 1998c) argues that the lack of data recorded about rural women is just another dimension of rural women's invisibility in relation to public positions of power and authority. This section provides statistics on women's - and rural women's - participation in government decision-making, to demonstrate their overall under-representation.

The data on women's participation as elected politicians in Australian governments is examined here, as no specific data regarding rural women is available. Irwin's (2001) research concludes that although women's representation in Australian government decision-making as elected representatives has increased since the 1970s, this increase is disproportionately small. Women's under-representation as elected members of government is evident in Table 1.3. This table illustrates that in the year 2000 women were least represented (22 percent) at the level of state government. This is well below women's representation in the Australian population (50 percent) and the UN 's target of 30 percent. Although it is promising to discern that women's involvement is gradually increasing, the 1995 target of 30 percent of women in elected government decision-making roles has yet to be achieved. It appears new strategies are needed to increase women's participation.

Table 1.3 Percentage of women who are elected representatives in the Australian government (Irwin, 2001, p.8)

	National parliament			State parliament			Local government		
Year	**Fem**	**Male**	**Total**	**Fem**	**Male**	**Total**	**Fem**	**Male**	**Total**
1960	5 3%	179	184	3 1%	522	525	100	No data	No data
1970	3 2%	182	185	12 2%	531	543	250	No data	No data
1980	8 4%	180	188	36 6%	561	597	798	No data	No data
1990	28 12.5%	196	224	74 12%	538	612	No data	No data	No data
2000	56 25%	168	224	131 22%	465	596	1745 26%	4992	6737
Total	100 10%	905	1005	256 9%	2617	2873	No data	No data	No data

Research has found that women are represented more in local government than in state and federal government (Irwin, 2001). Table 1.3 indicates that in the year 2000 women were slightly more represented in local government than federal government by one percent, and state government by four percent. The absolute numbers of women are greater in local government than in state and federal governments, ranging from 1745, to 131 to 56, respectively. The finding that more women were represented in local government may be due to the local community nature of the role, and to rural women's preference for not spending long periods away from their homes (Irwin, 2001). It appears that women may be more able to integrate a part time decision-making position at local government level with their current demands, than the commitments of being a full time politician at state and federal levels.

Despite the relatively favourable participation of women in local government the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2001, ¶ 4) concluded that:

> While some countries in Asia and the Pacific have taken positive actions to promote the participation of women in local government and decision-making, nowhere in the region are women proportionally represented in local government, political parties or civil society organisations unless these are women oriented in nature. Even in countries where opportunities for women's representation and participation exist, women have not been able to effectively utilise these. The reasons are multiple: patriarchal social systems, social and cultural prejudices, financial dependence of women, lack of media support and exposure to political processes and limiting training opportunities for women. Women may also be discouraged from seeking political office by discriminating attitudes and practices, family and child-care responsibilities, the high cost of seeking and holding office and by the criminalization of politics.

Whilst elected representative positions are full time paid positions, decision-making positions in government boards and committees are not. To understand the nuances of this situation it is necessary to examine women's involvement in GBCs as researchers have indicated that many rural women do not have the time to be involved in full-time, decision-making positions (Haslam McKenzie, 1997; Irwin, 2001). The research reported here has bought together different data sources to illustrate women's under-representation in GBCs as a background to the discussion of strategies that rural women believe might make a difference. Table 1.4 illustrates the low level of women's representation in two arenas of government: national, and State of WA. Given these statistics are derived from a number of uncoordinated government sources (Gallop, 2002; Guise, 2001; Irwin, 2001; OSW, 2002a; WA Government, 1999) they are to be taken as "best indications" or "estimates", and not as definitive statistics (Guise, 2001).

Table 1.4 **Percentage of women who are members of government statutory boards and committees in Australia (Gallop, 2002; Guise, 2001; Irwin, 2001; Office of the Status of Women, 2002a; WA Government, 1999).**

Date	Federal	WA
1991	No data	16%
1995	30.5%	No data
1996	No data	18.4%
1999	30.9%	25.6%
2000	No data	27.6%
2001	33.9%*	26%
2002	No data	31%

Tables 1.3 and 1.4 show that women are better represented in GBCs than as elected representatives. In 1999 women were more represented (30.9 percent) as members of federal GBCs than as federal elected representatives (25 percent), in the year 2000. Also in the year 2000, women were more represented (27.6 percent) in state GBCs than as state elected representatives (22 percent). Two questions arising from this analysis are:

- Why are more women represented in GBCs than as elected representatives?
- Why are women less represented in state government compared to federal government in both GBCs, and as elected representatives?

The present study highlights that more rural women feel able to take on a part time GBCs position than a full time elected politician's position because they have minimal time and resources available to devote to interests outside their work and families (Haslam McKenzie, 1997; Irwin, 2001). Furthermore, as less government programs are implemented, and fewer resources expended, fewer women are represented in the WA State government compared to the coordinated efforts by the

federal government agencies OSW and the Rural Women's Unit, with their bigger budgets. No research has yet discussed the differences between women's involvement in state and federal government.

Despite Irwin's (2001) overall findings that indicate a healthy representation of women in GBCs, a closer examination reveals a different picture. This is because Guise's (2001) research emphasises there are many more women in WA who would like to be involved, but who are not. Guise's research is a recent WA report, written for the current Premier, (Dr Geoff Gallop). This research found women were under represented in WA GBCs as 41 percent of women registered an interest to become a member, but only 26 percent of women were members of GBCs. Women's invisibility in the WA government is further demonstrated by the fact that 26 percent of GBC members being women does not represent the approximately 50 percent ratio of women in the WA population.

Guise's (2001) research also illustrates that the WA GBC's lack diversity. This is a similar finding to Alston's (1998a) research, which concludes that older males are the predominant decision-making members. Guise's statistics show few women, few seniors and few younger people are members of GBCs in WA. Apart from the men, all other groups - women, seniors and youth - report greater keenness to be a member of these committees than is reflected in those who succeed in becoming GBCs members. Why is the pattern prevalent, where men do not experience barriers to securing their GBCs positions, whilst women, seniors and youth do? Whilst the implication of these findings indicates that GBCs have a gender bias as well as an age bias, the focus of this thesis is to established and redress the gender bias in government decision-making in WA. Previous research (Alston, 1998a; Alston, 1998b; Dimopoulos & Sheridan, 2000; Drage, 2001; Elix & Lambert, 1998; Fisher & Hutchinson, 1998; Irwin, 2001) suggests that the "boys' club" culture, contribute to the predominance of male decision-makers, and consequently affect the number of female members.

Guise's (2001) report is another example of rural women being treated as if invisible. Although Guise's report reflects the Premier's (Dr Geoff Gallop's) brief, she never mentions the uniqueness of rural women's experience or the specific barriers faced by rural women (Elix & Lambert, 1998; UNDAW, 1995a; UNDAW, 1995b; UNDAW, 2001). Whilst Guise's report is one of the few catalysts with the

potential to increase women's involvement in WA government decision-making, it seems to have forgotten to mention rural women. The research reported here highlights that Guise's report suggest all women are the same as there is no specific reference to rural women's needs and experience. This not only contradicts the UN's position, but dangerously affirms old stereotypes that one woman on a committee can represent all women's perspectives.

Table 1.5 People registered as wanting to be members, and those who are members, of government statutory committees and boards in WA (Guise, 2001, p. 6).

	Female	Male	Youth (25 or under)	Seniors (60 or over)
Total number	331	472	11	235
Percentage registered to be a member	41%	59%	1.4%	29%
Total number	1167	3340	6	570
Percentage of board membership	26%	74%	0.1%	12.6%
Percentage of WA Population	50%	50%	21%	14%

So far this section has suggested rural women's invisibility in the context of women's general under-representation, both in GBCs and as elected representatives in all levels of the Australian government. Where data was available, it showed greater under-representation of women in the state compared to federal government decision-making. Another pattern that emerged was whilst WA women were better represented in GBCs than in elected positions, there were more women registered as interested and available who were not becoming members of GBCs. Rural women in WA were not specified in most data collection, or in government reports about ways to increase women's involvement in government decision-making. An examination of the main federal - state initiatives aimed at increasing rural women's visibility in the government system will now be discussed.

Two commonwealth reports, *Missed Opportunities* (Elix & Lambert, 1998) and Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management [SCARM] (1998) were intended to counteract the general absence of rural women in Australian government decision-making. The *Missed Opportunities* report not only put a dollar value on Australian rural women's contribution to agriculture ($28 billion in one year), but also recommended that governments and the private sector take action to increase the level of rural women's involvement in government decision-making. The *Missed Opportunities* report is a highly used reference in this and Australian rural women's research, since it is one of the few reports to document rural women's uniqueness and their contribution to the Australian economy.

Following on from the *Missed Opportunities* report, SCARM marks the implementation of the five-year National Plan for Women in Agriculture and Resource Management, which commenced in 1998. This is the only coordinated Australian federal, state, and territory program that continually collects data regarding rural women's involvement in government decision-making. All states and territories have adopted the plan and its vision: 'to achieve profitable and innovative agriculture industries and sustainable resource management and vibrant rural communities by realising the full potential of women' (SCARM, 2001, p.6).

SCARM's yearly reports have also contributed to the visibility of rural women, as these have made evident their involvement in states, territories, and in the commonwealth government's decision-making. SCARM has created opportunities for the cross-fertilisation of innovative projects aimed at increasing rural women's involvement. Both SCARM and *Missed Opportunities* are landmark reports dealing with rural women's contribution, barriers, and needs, when they are involved in government decision-making in Australia.

As rural women are invisible in Guise's government report (2001), SCARM is the only data source available that permits a specific examination of rural women's involvement in WA government decision-making.[2] Table 1.6 indicates that rural women are significantly under-represented in WA GBCs. In the year 2000, 19.7% of board composition is female in government agriculture and resource management boards and committees, compared to 23 percent in a similar

[2] Due to the incomplete nature of the data collected, SCARM's statistics are to be interpreted with caution.

commonwealth agency (SCARM, 2001). These statistics suggests that more rural women are represented in federal GBCs than at a state level in WA.

Table 1.6 Percentage of rural women involved in GBCs in WA and in the commonwealth (SCARM, 2000; SCARM, 2001).

Agency	Date	Percentage of rural women as members of GBCs
Agriculture WA	1999	14.1%
	2000	No data
WA Waters & Rivers	1999	No data
	2000	19.7%
Commonwealth: Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry	1999	19.2%
	2000	23%

At 19.7 percent WA rural women's under-representation (see Table 1.6) in government decision-making is of significant concern, given SCARM's (2001) target of reaching 45 percent of rural women members in relevant government statutory boards and committees. Using the available statistics, the number of rural women participating in WA statutory bodies represents less than half of SCARM's target of 45 percent. This means the two WA government agencies in Table 1.6 face the extraordinarily challenging task of doubling rural women's participation in GBCs, as soon as possible, if they are to meet SCARM's target. Although the data source is limited, SCARM reports (2000; 2001) illustrate that first, rural women in WA are greatly under-represented in relevant GBCs, and second, drastic measures are needed if WA rural women's participation in decision-making bodies is to reach the 45 percent target.

The lack of focus and coordination between the WA and commonwealth government is illustrated by the lack of consistency with regard to the level of representation that is to be achieved by rural women. Whilst the UN deems a target of 30 percent of women to represent a benchmark for the minimum acceptable input

for women in government decision-making, the Australian government refers to a target of 45 percent of rural women on agriculture and resource committees and boards (SCARM, 1998). The WA government has a target of 50 percent of women for its GCBs, assuming that rural women fit into this general "women" target (Guise, 2001). This research highlights that despite the lack of agreement about a 30, 45 or 50 percent target, women's and rural women's representation in government decision-making has not met any of these thresholds (Elix & Lambert, 1998; Guise, 2001; SCARM, 1998; UN Statistical Division, 2000).

The present study deals with both rural women and women's representation in state and commonwealth GBCs. It suggests that rural women should make up 50 percent of relevant GBCs that address rural issues, as rural women represent 50 percent of the rural WA population. Additionally, where GBCs address both rural and urban issues, this research suggests a 50 percent target of women members on the boards and committees, since women represent 50 percent of the WA population.

WA has significantly more decision-making positions available for rural women than any other state, territory, or commonwealth agency. Agriculture WA has 2570 total positions available for rural women, compared to a similar agency in Victoria, which has the next highest number of 849 positions (SCARM, 2000). Rural women in WA are under-represented in many government decision-making processes, as they only hold approximately 20 percent of the 2570 positions available. This figure indicates that the WA government may not be aware of many rural women's issues and perspectives.

Not only are rural women in WA less represented than their counterparts in commonwealth GBCs, but they are also under-represented as is the case with women's overall involvement in WA GBCs. These data suggests that rural women in WA are under-represented in relation to men, to urban women in WA, and to rural women on commonwealth boards and committees. Whilst SCARM is a positive initiative aimed at increasing rural women's visibility, few actual increases in rural women's involvement in government decision-making have been achieved.

One limitation of the SCARM program is that only a small number of agencies have participated, resulting in incomplete data. This is made obvious by

the fact that only two government agencies in WA - Agriculture WA and WA Waters and Rivers - submitted data for one out of the two-years, 2000-1. With WA now having no government officer to implement the national SCARM plan, WA rural women are becoming "more invisible".

Leading Australian researchers (e.g., Alston, 1998c; Board, 1998; Haslam McKenzie, 1998b; Haslam McKenzie & Walker, 2002) argue that rural women's invisibility in data collection, reports, and mainstream government action is unjustified given their significant contribution to rural communities' economies and social structures (Elix & Lambert, 1998, SCARM, 1998). The problem with the under-representation of rural women is that it is a vicious cycle that continues with no specific actions justified, as there is no concrete, ongoing data to establish the significance of the problem. Consequently as previous research has argued (Board, 1998), stereotypes circulate that assume all women are the same, and are further compounded by incorrect assumptions that the reason why rural women are under-represented is because they choose not to be involved as opportunities are available if women want them.

With few rural women participating in mainstream power and decision-making organisations, rural women's NGOs such as the RRR Women's Network become one of the few channels these women have collectively to influence state government decisions (Drage, 2001; Irwin, 2001; UNDAW, 2001). As Dimopoulos & Sheridan (2000) outline this 'demonstrates that mainstream organisations have failed to be relevant and accessible to rural women' (p.1). The comparative invisibility of rural women contributes to them having a relatively small voice in changing the system to allow them to fully participate. It appears that oppressive processes similar to those that women fought against in suffrage may still be prevalent today. The purpose of this research is to explore the possible "going no-where" situation for rural women in WA, and to provide these women with an opportunity to voice any issues they may have with the government system. Adopting an action research methodology helps ensure these women become visible, by having an opportunity to inform any process of change, as well as collecting data specific to their needs.

In summary, new ways are needed to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making if the WA government is to meet the various

international and national targets: the UN's target of 30 percent, and SCARM's target of 45 percent. Rural women's invisibility in WA is implicit in the sheer lack of data collected specific to them, the few WA agencies that participated in SCARM's national project, and now the discontinuation of specific programs to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making. Rural women in WA require new strategies to actively involving them in the government decision-making system.

1.4 Contradictions in the Government Decision-making System

The Australian and WA governments "appear" committed to increasing rural women's involvement in government decision-making. The verb "appear" is used here because an analysis of the literature raised three questions: namely,

- Why have no significant increases in rural women's participation been achieved?
- Why has rural women's, and women's overall, lack of representation in government decision-making been an international issue for half a century?
- Why has there been no uniting of the government decision-making system and rural women?

This section aims to examine these problems by focusing on the government decision-making system in WA. Three paradoxes contributing to rural women's under-representation are apparent and will be discussed.

The first paradox is that whilst the Australian government agrees with the UN to increase rural women's involvement, the WA government discontinues its specific programs intended to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making. Even when the state government funded the SCARM program, minimal resources were spent, and a lack of support by government agencies was shown. This lack of government support is of concern given the UN's recommendation for a whole-of-government approach, rather than it being a women-only issue. The lack of resources, data, and agency support indicates that both the

Labor and the Liberal WA governments were (and still are) not serious about increasing rural women's involvement in decision-making.

The second paradox is although rural women want to be involved (Haslam McKenzie, 1998b) many do not have the time to be involved (Haslam McKenzie, 1997). Little attention has been given to the responsibilities and structure of rural women's lives, or how the system can change to include them in their full diversity. This thesis offers an exploratory examination of the realities of different rural women's lives, the enormous contributions they make to WA, and the few resources they have. It illustrates how rural women's invisibility is likely to continue if the government system does not appreciate rural women's different commitments, and responds to these with enabling policies.

Work and industry in rural WA is the foundation of the state's wealth as it provides more than two-thirds of the state's exports (Department of Commerce, 1999). Globalisation, however, is changing rural economies: large scale agriculture business firms, technological intervention, changing environmental conditions, and the use of information and communication technologies [ICTs] (Haslam McKenzie & Lord, 2001; Lawrence, 1998) are all impacting upon rural women and their families. Times are tough in rural communities with services, for example banking, being withdrawn and increased competition for markets, particularly against the backdrop of a drought (Haslam McKenzie, 1998a). Rural women have pivotal (paid and unpaid) roles in ensuring the sustainability of businesses (on and off the farm), industries, rural communities and their economies (Alston, 1990; Alston, 1995; Alston, 1998a; Elix & Lambert, 1998; Gibson, Baxter & Kingston, 1993; Haslam McKenzie, 1997). Given that many rural women do not have enough time to fulfil their current commitments (Haslam McKenzie, 1997), and little time for their leisure (Alston, 1990; Haslam McKenzie, 1997), how is it possible for them to take on an additional role as a participant in government decision-making?

Alston (1998a) found members' involvement in government boards can take less than five to more than 40 hours per month. A majority of members spend up to ten hours a week in government board issues if they are executive members, and less than five hours a week if they were ordinary members. Other than time, rural women have additional practical considerations that they need to consider when committing to participating in government decision-making process, such as

travelling long distances in WA. These range from a two, to 72, hours return trip to Perth, and a lack of community services such as child-care to support them in their responsibilities while they are away from home. Problems with child-care and travelling time are just two reasons why some rural women may be excluded from the government decision-making system.

If the government wants more rural women to be involved, then new ways need to be developed to allow many rural women to genuinely take up these government decision-making opportunities. Can we continue to assume that rural women are 'superwomen' (Boulding, 1980, cited in Alston, 1990, p. 36)? How can the government system genuinely involve rural women when many of these women are already overloaded with other commitments? A new approach is needed, to enable rural women to marry the commitments of the government decision-making role with other responsibilities within available resources.

A contradiction currently exists where, on the one hand, research and policy declares that more rural women need to be involved in government decision-making, but (on the other hand) few policy-makers are listening to rural women, who are saying they are already overloaded and overworked with their existing commitments. This may help explain why, despite the programs that have been implemented (SCARM, 2000; SCARM, 2001), few increases in rural women's involvement have been achieved. If the government decision-making system does not listen to these rural women who find themselves already stretched, then only the rural women who do not experience these barriers will be able to participate. This will result in a homogenous group of rural women representing, or failing to represent, the diversity of rural women.

Despite the rural women's diversity, Alston's (1998a) research demonstrates that rural women involved in Australian GBCs are homogenous in nature. Alston (1998a, p. 7) writes,

> The typical leading woman in agriculture is likely to be between 41 and 50, to be married and more likely to have no dependent children, or if she does have children, she is the primary carer and has significant problems with child-care. ... she labels herself a 'moderate' when it comes to social issues and is much more likely to vote Liberal / National. ... she does some voluntary work, although there is little time for this and has almost no leisure time. ... She is

> on at least one Board and probably several. ... she is either the only woman or one of two. She feels disadvantaged by the gender division on the Board.

If the government system does not pay attention to the different commitments that different rural women have, then their diverse perspectives and experiences will not be included in government decision-making. The result of this situation is that a few homogenous rural women represent all the diversity of other, different rural women. This situation is likely to perpetuate stereotypes, and lead to an assumption that all rural women are similar. This research aims to address this situation by enabling the voices of many different rural women to be heard, by finding out what they need to change if they are to be involved in government decision-making. Consequently, rural women are encouraged to generate their own solutions in the action research process reported here, to increase their involvement in government decision-making.

The third paradox is that, whilst the embracing of diversity has been a major driver in increasing rural women's involvement in government decision-making (Elix & Lambert, 1998), diversity among rural women has been forgotten. This is demonstrated by the inconsistencies between government targets that focus on increasing the total number of rural women (Elix & Lambert, 1998; SCARM, 1998), rather than increasing the number of new and different rural women who become involved. If more new and different rural women enter the system, then the number of total rural women involved will also increase. The converse is not necessarily true, because if there is an increase in the number of committees and processes involving rural women, it does not necessarily mean that it is new women, and new perspectives that will be involved. As Alston (1998a) reports, many rural women contributing to government decision-making processes are already taking on other government decision-making positions. This leads to an increase in rural women's participation in GBCs, but does not increase the diversity of rural women's contributions to the government system. Government reports and programs never specifically target increases in rural women's diversity but rather focus on the value of rural women's presence as increasing the diversity of contributions within the government system. This research argues that increasing rural women's diversity in government decision-making requires organisational policies and practices to be

changed to create a catalyst for the government system to increase diversity amongst contributors to the government decision-making process.

Whilst research (Lennie, 2001; Lennie, 2002a) claims that rural women have similar attributes, for example in how they approach problems, these 234,484 rural women in WA (Regional Development Council of WA, 2001) live in very different rural communities, they have different lifestyles and responsibilities, different interests, and different skills. WA is unique as it is the least populated state in Australia, with 1.8 million people, and has the largest land mass of two and half million square kilometres. Only a small, 27 percent (half a million residents) live outside the capital city, Perth (Department of Commerce and Trade, 1999), meaning that vast rural areas are hardly inhabited.[3]

To illustrate the vastness of WA, it takes approximately 36 hours to drive from Perth to its most northern rural town, Kununurra, and approximately eight hours to drive from Perth to its most southern town, Esperance. Given the large travelling distances many rural women from the far north and far south rarely meet, if ever. The vastness of WA is also illustrated by the way it extends over two climatic zones. A Mediterranean (temperate) climate exists in the metropolitan to southern regions of the state, whilst a tropical climate is typical of the far northern regions of the state. The vast distances and different climates that differentiate many rural communities mean that rural women have a range of very different lifestyles as their economies, industries, and issues are related to where they live in WA.

Rural women's diversity is also indicative of their different social demographics, including marital status and familial responsibilities. 51 percent of couples living in rural WA have children at home, 36 percent of couples do not have children at home, and 12 percent of families live as one-parent households (Regional Development Council of WA, 2001). Although rural women in Haslam McKenzie's (1997) study were of a self-selected sample, their diversity is illustrated by their different marital status. Even though a majority of women were married (85 percent), the remaining 15 percent live in many different arrangements: three percent widowed, four percent separated or divorced, four percent de facto, and four percent single.

[3] With only 0.8 persons per square kilometre (Department of Commerce and Trade, 1999)

Haslam McKenzie's (1997) research demonstrates that rural women in WA differ on other dimensions too, such as income, and occupation. 43 percent of rural women earn less than $40,000 as their total family income (before tax), whilst 18 percent of rural women are in the high-income bracket of greater than $100,000 (Haslam McKenzie, 1997). Many rural women are supplementing the farm income, with 47 percent of rural women working off the farm. More than half of the rural women in Haslam McKenzie's study (57 percent) are equal partners in the family farm, with half of these women being fully involved in business decisions concerning the farm (Haslam McKenzie, 1997). Rural women's different lifestyles and commitments affect the issues and concerns rural women have and the different socio-political areas in which they want changes.

The research reported here highlights the fact that rural women's participation in government decision-making processes needs to be explicitly defined as increasing the proportion of new and different rural women in the system, rather than solely referring to the absolute proportion of rural women to other women, and to men. The latter appears to be the main definition of diversity in government reports and research (Alston, 1998a; Elix & Lambert, 1998; Dimopoulos, & Sheridan, 2000; SCARM, 1998). Alston's (1998a) research documents there are homogeneous qualities among men, and rural women members of GBCs. The paradox exists that: if the government does not embrace the fact of rural women's diversity, then it also does not fully embrace diversity among its decision-making members. Lennie's (2001) research also supports this new direction of focussing on rural women's diversity.

In summary, three inconsistencies and paradoxes in the WA government decision-making system have been highlighted as negatively affecting increases in rural women's involvement in government decision-making. These are:

- the Australian government agrees with the UN to increase rural women's involvement, yet the WA government discontinues its specific programs to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making;

- the government wants rural women to be involved but rural women do not have time to be involved, due to their significant commitments to rural communities and economies; and

- diversity among rural women has been forgotten, even though an encouragement of diversity is a major driver in increasing rural women's involvement in government decision-making.

These inconsistencies will be addressed in this research, by asking rural women what they need from the government decision-making system in WA to become involved. The aim is to recommend changes and strategies that accommodate and embrace rural women's different lifestyles and commitments, and that address the barriers hindering their participation.

In the scope of the study one solution was selected and implemented to help bring forward rural women's voices into understanding the problem and to demonstrate action. The implementation of an online government meeting was selected as the use of ICTs was of interest to rural women, the researcher, and the two government agencies, who partly funded the study. The feminist principles guided the implementation of using ICTs, with drawing on rural women's needs identified in phase one of the study, and rural women identified using ICTs was a possible solution to increasing their participation. Nonetheless the other factors and solutions rural women raised in phase one, remain important, and given the interdependency of factors are central to include in the design of the intervention.

Extensive research and numerous reports (Green, 2002; Lennie, 2002a; Lennie, Grace, Daws & Simpson, 1999; Office of Status of Women, 2002c; SCARM, 1998; The Rural Women and ICT's Research Team, 1999) claim that there are benefits in using ICTs to communicate, network, and research, all of which are essential in decision-making forums. So, not to prejudge rural women's perspectives, this thesis will investigate the feasibility of using ICTs by asking rural women about this option. Thus while the researcher aimed to investigate the plausibility of using ICTs, she waited until her findings from the first phase of the research documented that rural women also were open to using ICTs. This ensured that the researcher at the very least consulted rural women in what their issues are with using ICTs, and that rural women were given an opportunity to outline all the possible new ways to increase their involvement in government decision-making.

1.5 Why Include Rural Women in Government Decision-making?

It has been demonstrated that rural women's involvement in government decision-making is under-represented nationally, and in WA. It has been argued that a minimal increase in women's involvement is likely to have arisen from the inconsistencies within the government system that see the same women making a greater contribution across a range of boards and committees. This section will outline why increasing and diversifying rural women's involvement is a human rights issue, and a pre-requisite for achieving good governance.

The UN, the Australian government, numerous researchers and women's NGOs (Alston, 1998a; Dunn, 1993; Elix & Lambert, 1998; OSW, 2002b; SCARM, 1998; UNDAW, 1995a) all claim that without women's voices being part of the decision-making dialogue, their unique issues and perspectives are marginalised. Human rights for women include their equal involvement in government decision-making processes, to assure the advancement of women and the inclusion of their issues and interests (UNDAW, 1995a; UNDAW, 1995b). Women's under-representation in decision-making is reflected in women's unequal political, civil, social and economic status when compared with men (UN Centre for Human Settlements [Habitat], 2001). The consequence of women's under-representation means women become dependent on other decision-makers, who are predominantly older males, to make the right decision for them.

Research has found that governments, families and industry organisations do not understand rural women's issues (Elix & Lambert, 1998; Haslam McKenzie, 1997). In WA, rural women are concerned about a broad range of economic and community issues such as education, health, telecommunications, child-care, withdrawal of services from their communities, the aging rural population, young people leaving their community, men's attitudes towards women on farms and in rural businesses; and the future of rural families, children and industries (Haslam McKenzie, 1997). A void appears when government decision-makers are not aware of rural women's collective and different issues (Haslam McKenzie, 1997). Rural women are marginalised in that their different issues and perspectives are not included in many decisions made by the WA government. This threatens their rights to self-determination. Rural women's comparative invisibility is of great concern, as

'the rural and agriculture sector has amongst the lowest representation of women of any sector of Australian society' (Board, 1998, p. 38). This problem is exacerbated by a lack of understanding of the diversity of rural women, leading people to stereotypes, and the incorrect perception of rural women as a homogenous group (Haslam McKenzie & Lord, 2001; Lennie, 2001).

It is particularly important to ensure that women's interests are represented when reviewing feminist and health literature, which documents politics as a main factor in the health and well-being of people (Brown, 1988; Brown, 1992; Doyal, 1995; Robinson & Richardson, 1993; Sen, Germain & Chen, 1994). This literature clearly indicates that politics and consequently government decisions, impact on women's health. Specific examples include the legalisation of abortion allowing women the right to choose, the battle for birth control, ensuring safe water and sanitation, confronting sexual harassment, and introducing laws against domestic violence (Doyal, 1995). Increasing rural women's involvement in government decision-making processes raises the visibility of economic, social and cultural issues uniquely experienced by women. Including women's perspectives and issues in government decision-making enhances the health and well-being of women, their families, and their communities.

Good governance requires decision-makers, as a collective group, to include different views of citizens, and to bring unique skills, perspectives and traits to their meetings. Arguably, without women's involvement in government decision-making there is no good governance. To date women and, in particular, rural women are not involved in many government decisions in WA (Dimopoulos & Sheridan, 2000). David Karpin's paper at the 1996 Outlook Conference claims that not capitalising on women's talents is problematic when improving and transforming Australian enterprises, particularly given the consequences of globalisation and the predominant use of ICTs (Dimopoulos & Sheridan, 2000). The UN argues that the inclusion of women is the key to good governance, as without the 'incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of decision-making, equality, development and peace cannot be achieved' (UNDAW, 1995b, ¶ 2).

If rural women have unique rural issues and perspectives, then the government system is effectively blindfolded to them if they do not include these women in their governance processes. One problem with this blindfold is that

governments cannot make the right decisions on behalf of rural women and their communities if they are not aware of the entire issues. In the current climate, a government's decisions may jeopardise people, communities, and economies, as rural women and women in general are under-represented as decision-making members. As Lee-Smith (1999) writes, crises are more likely to occur 'unless women's concerns become the concerns of the whole community' (cited in UN Centre for Human Settlements [Habitat], 2001, p. 13).

Women have unique ways of approaching issues and problem solving (Elix & Lambert, 1998). Board (1998) concludes that women's distinctive contribution frequently broadens the issues to hand, provides an overview of the problem and illustrates the interconnectedness of issues under consideration. Many rural women are better communicators, better educated, better networkers, and more innovative in starting up new businesses and in thriving in changing industries than their male counterparts (Elix & Lambert, 1998). Rural women's holistic, relationship focus; and their different style of leadership are needed to generate renewed agricultural prosperity (Elix & Lambert, 1998). To maximise good decision-making, both men and women are needed because they approach and solve problems differently, and because the solutions to such problems impact upon people of both genders. The following sections outlines the conceptual frameworks used in this research.

1.6 Conceptual Frameworks

As this is a phenomenological study, giving respondents an open context to describe how they see the "problem" and to develop solutions, it is not appropriate to include an explicit theory in advanced, rather a theoretical analysis will emerge from the findings. In brief, rural women will produce what best explains the participation, or low level of participation of rural women in decision-making. Is it the fact they are women? Is it their area of residence? Or other factors of social class and education, to explain these issues. This study will provide an opportunity for women to participate in and comment on the use of ICTs in government decision-making. This section will address why the use of three conceptual frameworks has been adopted in the study

Morgan (1997) describes conceptual frameworks or metaphors as ways of thinking, seeing, understanding, and managing organisations or systems. In general terms, frameworks pervade how we understand our world. Morgan explains that while metaphors are capable of creating valuable insights, metaphors are also incomplete, biased, and potentially misleading, as they focus the user on certain concepts, whilst other concepts are pushed to the background. Consequently a metaphor is inherently paradoxical, because accepting any one theory or perspective relating to the study of organisations can create distortions compared with the totality of possible perspectives. Morgan (1997) recommends that skilled leaders and managers develop the capacity to remain,

> open and flexible, suspending immediate judgements whenever possible, until a more comprehensive view of the situation emerges. They are aware that new insights often arise as one approach situations from "new angles" and that a wide and varied reading can create a wide and varied range of action possibilities (p. 4).

As no single model or metaphor will ever provide a perfect, all-purpose point of view, three metaphors will be used in this research to generate collectively a range of complementary and competing insights. This triumvirate approach will build on the strengths of different points of view and concepts, whilst allowing the analysis of findings. The three conceptual frameworks adopted in this research are:

- Covey's (1999) leadership framework;
- Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological development framework; and
- Bijker's (1995) sociotechnical framework.

Covey's leadership model was chosen given the prevalence of leadership programs (OSW, 2002b; WA Government, 1999) targeted at rural women. These courses aim to develop rural women's personal qualities, such as confidence and leadership. The programs are based on the premise that, if rural women's personal qualities are developed, then an increase in their involvement in government decision-making will be seen.

Covey's (1999) leadership framework focuses on two developmental stages. The first stage of leadership is the private victory leadership of an individual person,

and the second stage is the public victory where people can work together. Covey refers to the private victory as a paradigm of 'I', independence. Individuals who master the first stage focus on "I can do it; I am responsible; I am self reliant; and I can choose". Conversely if a person has not mastered individual leadership, they adopt a paradigm of "You" dependence. Statements of "you can take care of me; you didn't come through for me; and I blame you for the results" reflect their focus on others. The second stage of leadership is the public victory, with a paradigm of "We", interdependence. Statements such as "we can do it; we can cooperate; we can combine our talents and abilities and create something greater together" reflect individuals who have mastered the second stage of leadership. As is illustrated in Figure 1.1, the private victory always precedes the public victory.

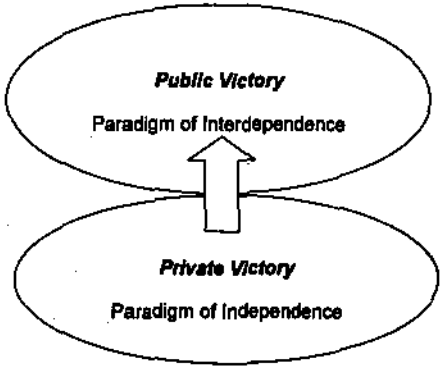

Figure 1.1 **Covey's (1999) leadership framework.**

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological development framework was chosen as it embraces the study of the context in which people develop. It brings together the macro and micro forces that impact on people. As well as personal factors, this new perspective identifies external factors such as culture, government policies, organisations, and families - all of which can affect women's involvement in government decision-making. Whilst the inclusion of personal factors is similar to Covey's model, Bronfenbrenner uniquely acknowledges the environment as a powerful force. The ecological development framework was also selected because

numerous researches (Alston, 1998a; Dimopoulos & Sheridan, 2000; Drage, 2001; Elix & Lambert, 1998; SCARM, 1998; UNDAW, 1995a) have found that broader system factors such as the government decision-making culture contribute to rural women's under-representation in the decision-making system.

Bronfenbrenner's model (1979) proposes that nested environments exist within other environments, affecting the way people perceive and deal with their total environment. For example, according to this framework women's under-representation commences with personal issues, then these issues interact with the nested environments of relationships with work, and family, which are then nested within the culture of government decision-making. These nested structures, each inside the next, are like a set of Russian dolls, and are categorised according to three systems (see Figure 1.2). These are:

- Microsystem: At the innermost level is the developing person and their immediate experiences;
- Mesosystem: At the second level beyond the individual are ecological environments in which the person interacts at work, and in the home; and
- Exosystem: The third level of the ecological environment is farther afield. The person's development is profoundly affected by events occurring in settings in which the person is not even present, including the interconnections between micro and meso systems.

Bronfenbrenner argues that "perception" rather than "what may actually exist as "objective reality" is what affects a person's development. This premise supports the research's direction that asks rural women what their experience is, and thus their perception of the government system, rather than using traditional positivist methodology. This framework's appreciation of subjective realities is consistent with the adopted feminist ideology of this research.

Figure 1.2 shows the macrosystem that reflects the entire complexity of the nested, and interconnecting systems. The macrosystem is to be viewed as a manifestation of overarching patterns of ideology and organisations of social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The application of this framework to this research enables a breadth of interconnecting systems to be examined, such as women's perceptions of themselves, their subcultures of family, rural communities, associated industries, and the government system. This research will use Bronfenbrenner's model to select different rural women, and to analyse the findings.

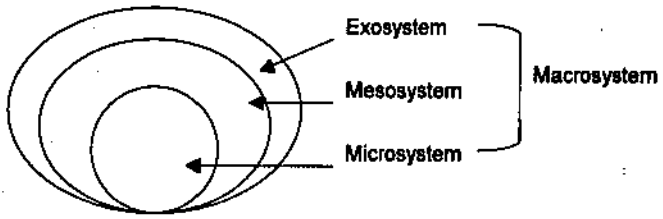

Figure 1.2 **Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological development framework.**

Bijker's (1995) sociotechnical framework has been adopted given that this research is exploring the use of ICTs as a possible solution for increasing rural women's involvement. Bijker demonstrates that social and political factors, as well as technical and engineering factors, influence the implementation of new technological solutions. This approach is termed "the social construction of technology" as it considers social, political, and technical processes (Lindley, 1997). The sociotechnical framework illustrates that technology is not value free, as it highlights the interplay between technology and group processes such as stakeholders' and participants' needs. As Figure 1.3 illustrates, for an innovative technology solution to succeed, a balance is needed between social and technology factors. It is usually the role of a financer, facilitator and/or administrator to coordinate and balance stakeholders' needs.

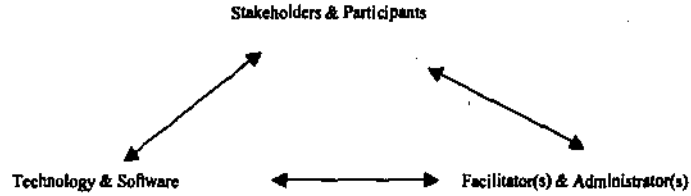

Figure 1.3 **Bijker's (1995) sociotechnical framework.**

Bijker's model is complementary to the feminist action research methodology, as it recommends that rural women's needs be included in the development and implementation of an ICT solution. Bijker's model supports the researcher's approach to this investigation as it appreciates that rural women's needs are an essential foundation in the development of solutions to address rural women's under-representation in government decision-making systems, in particular when using technological strategies such as an ICT solution. The premise here is that ultimately rural women decide whether ICTs can help increase their involvement in government decision-making. Bijker's framework will be used to analyse research findings, as well as to inform any implementation of an ICT solution, if rural women feel that this is warranted. Feminist principles can be extended to technology development as this research argues that rural women should create their own ICT solutions, based on their needs, and not biased towards technical or mainstream political agendas.

This adoption of the three frameworks in this research project provides openness and the flexibility of different perspectives to investigate reasons as to why few rural women are involved in government decision-making, and new ways to increase their involvement. Figure 1.4 illustrates the comprehensive combination and focal points of each of the three frameworks.

As demonstrated, when examining rural women's involvement in the government decision-making system, Covey's individualistic perspective on leadership will be examined. Bronfenbrenner's nested system will be used to examine rural women's development in context of other systemic factors. Bijker's

sociotechnical framework will identify rural women's needs in government decision-making with regards to the possible development of an ICT solution. These three frameworks make visible the interconnections between the personal, interpersonal, and cultural factors affecting rural women's involvement in government decision-making, and facilitate strategies for investigating a range of solutions to increase their participation.

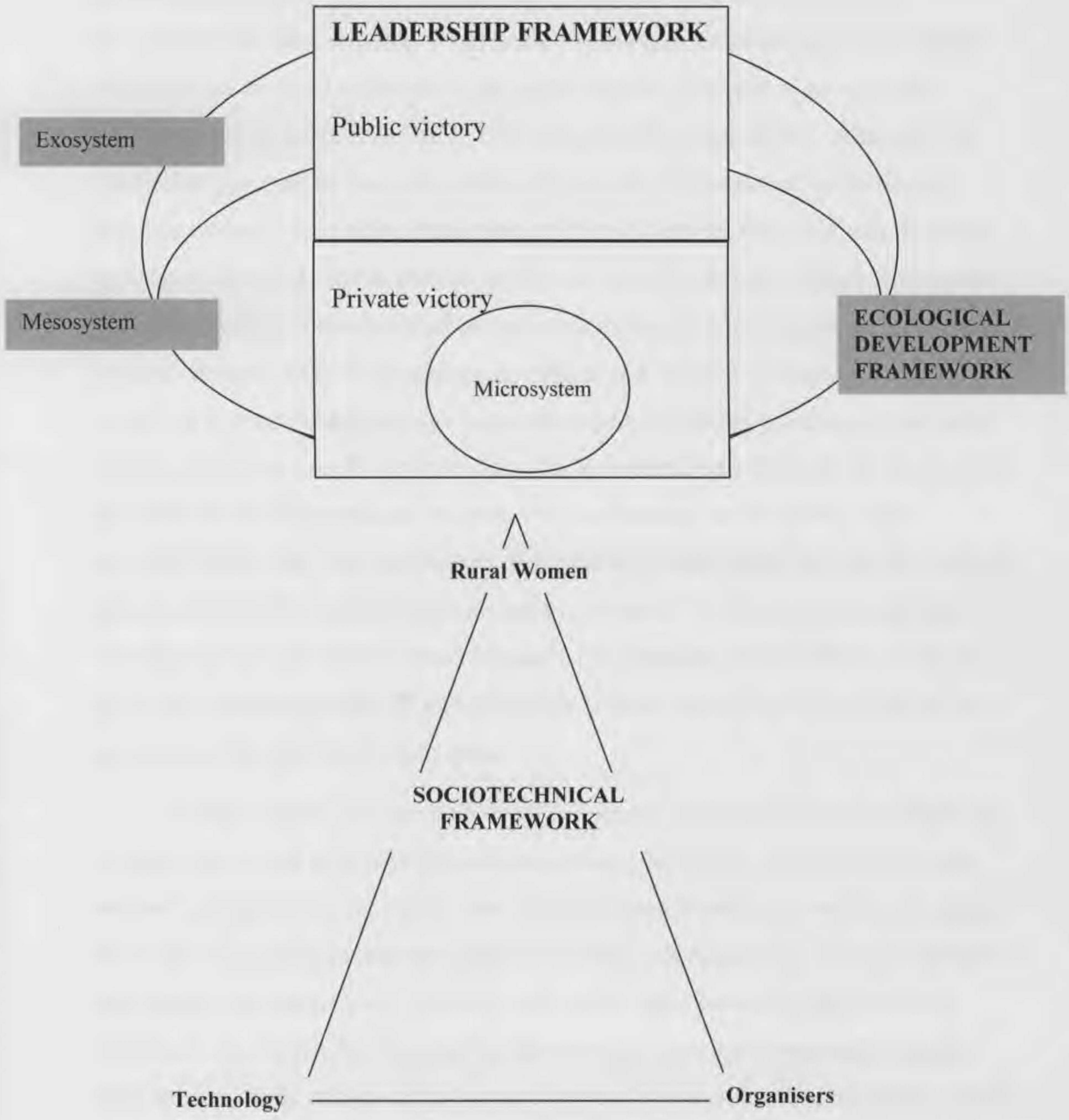

Figure 1.4 **Bringing together the three conceptual frameworks used in this research: Covey's leadership framework, Bronfenbrenner's ecological development framework, and Bijker's sociotechnical framework.**

1.7 Research Questions

Previous research has found that there is a widespread problem with the under-representation of rural women, and women in general, in relation to government decision-making. Women are under-represented among government decision-makers in all countries in the world, and at all levels of government decision-making (UNDAW, 2001; UN Statistical Division, 2000). Although the Australian government has commissioned national programs and initiatives to increase women's (including rural women's) involvement, only minimal increases have been achieved. Rural women in WA are in a dire situation which is not made visible in the data commissioned by and used in the government system. WA rural women currently have no programs, no officer and no agency to advocate on their behalf, or to create changes from within the male dominated government decision-making processes. As WA rural women have minimal spare time to be involved in government decision-making, this research has focused on increasing their involvement in GBCs, given the part time nature of these positions, and the ultimate importance of GBCs to the decision-making process. To date, no research has investigated how to increase rural women's involvement in WA GBCs, let alone doing this through gaining an understanding of rural women's experiences of the government decision-making system.

Rural women's unique social and economic concerns are predominately the jurisdiction of state government decision-making processes. Consequently rural women's perspectives are hardly ever included in such decisions as they are under-represented in state government decision-making. Documenting WA rural women's experiences, increases their visibility, and makes their issues and their diversity evident. It also highlights the need for the state government to seriously consider resourcing specific initiatives to increase women's involvement. The Fourth World Conference on Women (UNDAW, 1995b) reiterates the seriousness of increasing rural women's involvement in government decision-making,

> Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning (¶ 2).

Given the feminist nature of this study, action research will be used to achieve practical outcomes based on rural women's experiences of the government decision-making system. The three research questions investigated are:

- Why are so few rural women involved in government decision-making in WA?
- What are new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making in WA?
- If rural women are interested in using ICTs to participate in government decision-making, then what are their issues with using them?

1.8 Structure of Thesis

This thesis identifies the international and local significance of increasing rural women's involvement in government decision-making. The foci of each of the remaining seven chapters are:

- Chapter two identifies the action research methodology used and describes how the data was collected and analysed, and a description of the informants.
- Chapter three focuses on rural women's experiences of the government decision-making system. In particular, it identifies factors that influence rural women's decisions to be involved (or not) in WA government boards and committees. Barriers and driving factors affecting rural women's participation will be discussed in relation to Covey's leadership model, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model. A new model, titled "the Government decision-making framework" will be presented. This model is developed from rural women's interviews as they describe their different experiences.
- Chapter four identifies new ways in which rural women can be involved in government decision-making. A new model, titled "the Change strategies framework" is based on this understanding of the Government decision-making framework. Chapter four includes a discussion of rural

women's favourable attitudes towards using ICTs as a possible solution to increasing their involvement in government decision-making.

- Chapter five presents a case study that shows how ICTs can be used to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making. Particular attention is given to the planning, preparation, and decisions made in the implementation of this innovative solution. The action component of this thesis means that the case study is based on the findings presented in chapters three and four. The sociotechnical model is used to analyse the tensions and opportunities when developing an ICT solution for rural women.

- Chapter six presents the lessons learnt from the case study described in chapter five. This follows the action research cycle of understanding and reflection in order to rework future directions and experimentation. The barriers and enablers experienced by rural women using ICTs for government decision-making are examined.

- Chapter seven summarises the main findings of the thesis from chapter three to six (inclusive), in relation to each of the three research questions.

- The final chapter, eight, closes this thesis by proposing a new paradigm to increase rural women's involvement. This paradigm is based on rural women's diversity, the movement of rural women throughout the government system, and the contradictions that exist within the government system. Directions for future research are also discussed.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Capturing the essence of rural women's experience of government decision-making, and identifying ways to increase rural women's involvement in governmental processes, requires an approach to data collection that goes beyond statistics. Qualitative and feminist action research methodologies were used in this research first, to identify rural women's current needs and issues when participating in government decision-making activities, and second, to critique a trial that explored how ICTs could be used to increase rural women's input into government decision-making.

This chapter will describe and justify the choice of research methodologies and methods for this study of rural women's experience of the government decision-making system, with a particular focus on the feasibility of using the Internet as a new way to increase rural women's involvement. The chapter will commence with an analysis of the researcher's assumptions, and a discussion of the qualitative and feminist action research methodologies adopted. The structure of the study, the data collection methods, data analysis techniques, and a description of the participants in this research will follow. An examination of ethical considerations and the limitations of the research will conclude the chapter.

2.1 The Researcher's Assumptions

As Burns (1995) outlines, it is critical that the researcher is explicit in his or her assumptions regarding the research area when conducting qualitative research in the process of establishing rigour. Furthermore, feminist writers (Duffy & Hedin, 1988; Reinharz, 1992) have challenged the apparent objectivity of social research and have demanded instead that subjectivity is acknowledged, and that researchers position themselves in terms of the outcomes of their research so as to clarify the processes that lead to particular conclusions. Given that this research adopts both a

qualitative and a feminist approach, this section will outline the assumptions that I brought to the research in my role as researcher, while investigating new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making.

The issue of rural women's involvement in government decision-making arose from my experience as an elected representative in local government, as a public servant in state government, and as a woman who has lived in rural WA. It was important to me to fully involve rural women's perspectives, and understand their experience of the system, before generating possible solutions. This approach was informed by my experience from inside the government system, as a government decision-maker and policy writer. My assumption was that the most effective change process is the one in which key stakeholders or players are involved in formulating solutions to their own problems. Consequently it was my belief that only the rural women in WA could help the government system generate effective solutions that would work to involve rural women in government decision-making. This approach was consistent with my aspiration to facilitate rural women's (and my) empowerment. Rural women should be involved in government decisions that affect them.

My world-view is that social variables are necessarily complex, interwoven and difficult to measure. These variables exist in an open system, wherein players or persons affected (in this case rural women) are at the centre of that broader system. It seems to me that the best access to an understanding of a complex interplay of variables is when the phenomenon or events are analysed from the player's - rural women's - perspective. I assumed that there was more chance of obtaining effective solutions by working with the rural women, rather than working in ignorance of their views, since they are the ones in the predicament.

This research assumes that both reality and knowledge are socially constructed. Given this, I needed to examine the diversity and commonalties of people's experience to be able to understand the phenomenon under study. Accepting that there are many experiences of reality or alternatively, multiple realities, it is unrealistic to prescribe one solution that will suit all rural women. My assumption is that focussing on formulating a framework through which policy makers and rural women can understand and address the lack of rural women's participation in government decision-making, rather than identifying one solution, is

the most useful approach for meeting the needs of current, and future, generations of rural women. Using a framework that provides an understanding of all the elements, and their dynamics, provides a solid foundation for developing future solutions to the problem of involving rural women in government decision-making and helps ensure that such solutions are context – time and people – appropriate.

In summary, the following assumptions informed the examination of literature and the development of research questions. It is important to:

- explore the research questions by addressing the variables, or core elements of a system, in terms of their interactions;
- contextualise the information generated;
- capture rural women's diverse perspectives and experiences;
- generate in-depth information to ensure rural women's experiences are prioritised, and inform future action; and
- maximise opportunities for social action to flow from the research.

2.2 The Methodological Approach

The term "methodology" is 'a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed' as opposed to method which refers to 'a technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence' (Harding, 1987, p. 3). The criteria in choosing methodologies for this study was that they should provide rural women with the opportunity to respond broadly and creatively to data collection methods, rather than these women being confined to a prescribed set of constructs, questions, or paradigms. This means that the methodologies should highlight the rural women's role in generating, and choosing, solutions to the communications problems that affect them, allowing the diversity among rural women to be reflected in the solutions developed. Integrity was achieved by rural women's involvement in actions and decisions that affected them; this approach being consistent with the human rights argument of the thesis.

2.2.1 Qualitative methodology

Qualitative research has no theory, or paradigm, that is distinctly its own, making it difficult for researchers to agree on any essential definition of the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Despite the array of methods, techniques and theories used, Glesne and Peshkin (1992) conclude that the cornerstone of qualitative methodology is where researchers seek 'to make sense of personal stories' (p. 1). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) further add to Glesne and Penshkin's (1992) definition by suggesting that qualitative methodology aims to 'study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them' (p. 2). Denzin and Lincoln's definition is adopted here as it accurately describes how qualitative methodology allows rural women's experiences of the government decision-making system to be the focus of the research.

The qualitative methodology approach was also selected because it could help explore the research questions in the context of an open system, capturing the connections between the parts of the system. Weinstein and Weinstein (1991) describe qualitative methodology as having the capacity to 'connect the parts to the whole, stressing the meaningful relationships that operate in situations and social worlds studied' (p. 164). To date there is a lack of research that connects the parts, the single variables that affect rural women's involvement in government decision-making, to a broader, holistic framework. Although rigorous research has examined individual factors such as the "boys' club" culture (Alston, 1998a; Alston, 1998b; Dimopoulos & Sheridan, 2000; Drage, 2001; Elix & Lambert, 1998; Fisher & Hutchinson, 1998; Irwin, 2001), it is timely to investigate the inter-connections of these individual factors to the broader system, by focusing on rural women's experience.

Oversimplifying the complexities of the real world experiences of rural women through the use of positivist quantitative methodologies can run the risk of missing major factors that are not easily quantifiable. Further, given the exploratory nature of investigating ways in which rural women could participate in government decision-making, it was essential to adopt a methodology that captured a breadth of experiential data. Patton (1990) argues that qualitative methodology is suited to such a purpose:

> the whole phenomenon under study is understood as a complex system that is more than the sum of its parts, focussing on complex interdependencies not reduced to a few discrete variable and linear cause-effect relationships (p. 40).

At this stage of the inquiry, gathering data on multiple aspects of the setting – rural women, ICTs, and the government system – helps to assemble a comprehensive and complete picture of the social dynamics of the situation, and the impacts of any possible solutions.

2.2.2 Feminist action research methodology

Feminist research, and action research, has similar goals. They aim to create change to improve the situation under study (Patton, 1990; Reinharz, 1992; Wadsworth, 1998). Feminist action research's broad approach is to achieve human rights for women (Duffy & Hedin, 1988; Reinharz, 1992) by first, understanding the situations as experienced by women and second, using this understanding to instigate action (Dick, 2002). The overall argument is that an understanding of the reasons why few rural women are involved in WA government decision-making is needed so that action can be appropriately based on their experiences. The study does not set out to do a critical gender analysis. By adopting a feminist action research methodology the intent of this thesis is a practical versus a theoretical focus on the problem of rural women's under-representation in government decision-making.

Figure 2.1 outlines the cyclic process of the feminist action research methodology adopted in this study. The research commenced by capturing rural women's experiences of the government decision-making system, and an investigation of their ideas of ways to increase their involvement in the government system. This understanding then led to the preparation of an interactive study, which explored the potential of rural women using ICTs to participate in a government decision-making process. This case study was implemented and rural women's experiences were documented. The final cycle was one of critical reflection and a review of rural women's experiences. Possible solutions to the problem of rural women's under-representation were examined, with a focus on ICTs. Whilst the number of cycles was limited by available resources, the entire feminist action research cycle provided new data to inform future research and action.

The feminist action research premise is that rural women's experiences inform the action research cycle. This approach aims to create an empowering process in which rural women in WA develop their own solutions to improve their situation, and increase their involvement in the government decision-making system. Wadsworth's (1998) description of the transformative nature of action research follows,

> a creative 'moment' of transformation, ... an imaginative leap from a world of 'as it is' to a glimpse of a world 'as it could be'. ... *Possibility* theory rather than *predictive* theory. That is, human actors are both wilful and capable of thwarting research prediction, and wilful and capable of selecting and implementing theories or probabilities they want to see manifested! ... Action research, like the discovery phase of any science, knows it is coming from somewhere and going to somewhere, even though it does not know in advance where *precisely* it is going to end up, or what the new state will look like (Wadsworth, 1998, para (¶) 24).

This process of rural women developing their own solutions to their own problems has not been prevalent in government practice (see Elix & Lambert, 1998; Guise, 2001; SCARM, 1998). The processes of understanding rural women's situations, and developing solutions, and ultimately action, are usually separate. Policy officers or writers develop the solutions, rather than the rural women generating their own solutions, and providing feedback on resulting actions.

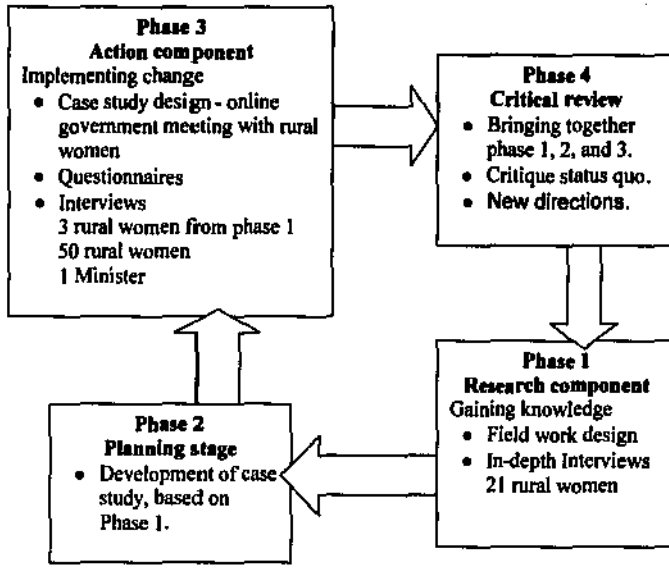

Figure 2.1 The feminist action research cycle for this study.

The emphasis on participants empowerment in feminist methodologies may be seen as one objective of this study, which is to capture the multiple realities of rural women's engagement with skills and knowledge of political processes, and new experiences of ICTs. Empowerment operates at three levels (Labonte, 1997): the intrapersonal, interpersonal and community level. The open nature of the sociotechnical framework of this study, and the feminist qualitative methodology, ensures that the relative importance of each of these three levels can be explained from the perspective of rural women. This approach also ensures that there is no essential "rural woman's" response. It avoids essentialism by giving voice to a variety and diversity of rural women's perceptions.

2.2.3 Section summary

The use of qualitative and feminist action research methodologies ensured that rich data had been collected from the rural women participants. As Coles (1989, p. 7) explains, these methodologies emphasise the participants' stories. He writes,

'the people who come to see us bring us their stories. ... We have to remember that what we hear is *their story*' (cited in Glense & Peshkin 1992, p. 1). Researchers using qualitative methodologies are telling the people's stories to society, and feminist action research ensures these stories can create action to help realise the full potential of these people's human rights. The description of the broad structure of the study follows.

2.3 Structure of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making. Specifically, one of the ways in which this can be achieved is by giving voice to rural women's opinions about access to government decision-making using new technologies. To date, no government initiatives have generated solutions to this problem of the under-representation of rural women, and the possible value of ICTs, by asking the rural women themselves (see Dimopoulos & Sheridan, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998; SCARM, 1998). The study is organised in two phases. The first phase, phenomenological field work, captures rural women's experience of what factors – barriers and motivators - influence them for or against becoming involved in government decision-making. The second phase, a case study, draws on the findings of the first phase to explore the extent to which online technologies can facilitate rural women's involvement in government decision-making.

2.3.1 Phase one: Phenomenological field work

The first phase of the study investigated two research questions:

- Why are so few rural women involved in government decision-making in WA?
- What are new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making in WA?

Phenomenological field work was used to investigate these questions as this study aimed to prioritise rural women's voices and experiences as part of an investigation as to why so few rural women participate in government decision-making. Woods and Catanzaro (1988) suggests that phenomenology 'attempts to

understand human experience through analysis of participants' description' (p. 134). Patton (1990) defines field work as 'having direct and personal contact with people under study in their own environments' (p. 46). Together, phenomenology and field work provide an approach that fits well with the ethos of qualitative and feminist action research. These combine to create rich data by gathering rural women's stories. The stories are then analysed and integrated within a holistic framework with the particular objective of explaining the barriers rural women experience when participating in political processes.

2.3.2 Phase two: Case study

The second phase of the study investigated the third (and final) research question of the study:

- If rural women are interested in using ICTs to participate in government decision-making, then what are their issues with using them?

To investigate this question a case study was designed to implement an ICT strategy for increasing rural women's participation, upon which rural women could provide feedback. A case study is an in-depth investigation that has clear boundaries of time, place, and people. (Burns, 1995; Woods & Catanzaro, 1988.) Patton (1990) further adds that a case study investigates 'unusual successes or failures to generate useful information' (p. 99). The ICT solution ultimately trialed was an unusual case, as it was the first, organised online meeting between the Deputy Premier (who was also a government Minister) and rural women in WA. The 60-minute, online government meeting consequently framed the action component of the research cycle. This intervention provided rural women with a real experience of using ICTs in an online government decision-making forum, where rural women participants could reflect on and critique issues raised by themselves and others in the first phase of the study. (Three of the 21 original interviewees participated in the online forum.)

In summary, this research consisted of two phases, which are developmental stages of a single inquiry into new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making. Phase one interviewed 21 rural women to identify any motivating factors and barriers relating to their involvement in government decision-making. Phase two drew upon these findings, and upon the women's ideas, by developing and implementing a case study trial of one new way to involve rural

women in government decision-making. The online forum with a government Minister (who was also the Deputy Premier) used ICTs as part of a strategy to include women's input in examining the ICT solution. Together, the two parts of the study comprise an action research program which aims:

> to bring about change in some community or organisation or program, and ... to increase understanding on the part of the researcher or the client, or both (and often some wider community) (Dick, 1993, p.4).

2.4 Data Collection

Becker (1986) explains that it is appropriate for a study such as this one to use multiple methods, as researchers are

> purely instruments who think they know something about society worth telling others, and they use a variety of forms and means to communicate their ideas and findings (p. 122 cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.4).

Notwithstanding the fact that a range of approaches is desirable, in-depth interviews were used to collect data in both phase one and phase two. In the online meeting case study, additional data collection methods were used: a questionnaire, and the transcript of the online forum. A description of each of these methods follows.

2.4.1 In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews were used in both phases of the study. In phase one, 21 rural women were individually interviewed. In the second phase, three (of the 21) original rural women were interviewed about their experience of the online forum, and the Deputy Premier was also interviewed using an in-depth interview approach.

The unstructured, in-depth method of interviewing is a 'controlled conversation which is geared to the interviewer's research interest' (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995, p. 62) that aims to tap into a richness of detail, and contextualise the person's experience (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). This method does not restrict the informant in expressing his or her ideas, thoughts or feelings. This open-endedness ensures that relevant and important issues and experiences are kept in focus throughout the research process (Minichiello *et. al.*, 1995).

2.4.1.1 Phase one: Interviewing rural women

Phase one involved the researcher travelling to six rural communities in WA, to interview 21 women. The interviews started with an opening ice-breaker question such as,

> *Can you tell me why you decided to be interviewed?*

These ice breakers helped achieve one research aim, which was to retrieve the informants' 'world by understanding their perspective in language that is natural to them' (Minichiello *et. al.*, 1995, p. 68). Following the ice breaker, the first key question was asked,

> *What are some ways that rural women can be involved in government decision-making, such as government committees and boards?*

The researcher encouraged the informant to think broadly and creatively. Prompts were given throughout the interview to:

- gain insight into the women's needs, concerns and ideas;
- explore whether ICT could be used as one strategy for addressing barriers to participation; and
- focus on the key areas under study: government, ICTs, and leadership (if the informant had not addressed them in the interview).

The duration of individual interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes, with an average of 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted in the location of the participant's choice, which was generally at the rural woman's home. Although this had cost implications, it impacted positively upon the usefulness and reliability of the information gathered, and enabled interviewees to feel more relaxed and empowered during the interview process.

Each informant was guided through the letter of introduction and consent form before the interview started. The letter of introduction and consent form (see Appendix) refers the participant to the purpose of the research, the benefits of the research, interview requirements, voluntary participation, openness to ask questions

or to stop the tape recording, the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviews, and future uses of the information collected.

2.4.1.2 Phase two: Interviewing rural women

Of the original 21 rural women interviewed in phase one, only 14 women were able to be contacted by email or telephone to invite them to participate in the online forum. Of these women, three indicated that they were able to participate in the forum. The 11 women who were unable to participate indicated they had other commitments at the time of the forum.

Three weeks before the forum each of these three women was contacted by phone, and asked if they would answer online questions "before" and "after" the forum. The women agreed, and were emailed an open-ended question, of their expectations of the online forum, to discover the women's attitude to the online forum, prior to participation. None of the women responded to the email, so the researcher telephoned each of them to follow-up. All three women indicated they found it difficult to analyse and express their expectations of the online meeting. Each agreed that it was easier to be interviewed over the telephone. They consented to participating in a one-to-one telephone interview "before" and "after" the online forum.

The interviews with each of the women took approximately 40 minutes. The "before" interviews were held approximately two days before the online forum, and the "after" interviews were held approximately two to four days afterwards. The opening question of the "before" interviews was,

What are your expectations of the online forum?

Prompts were given throughout the interview to explore:

- expected hurdles and problems relating to the online meeting;
- expected benefits for women;
- expected outcomes from the online meeting; and
- how the online forum impacts upon, and fits into, their daily schedule.

These prompts were consistent throughout the "before" and "after" interviews, and were foreshadowed in phase one. The reason for this similarity was to apply techniques to establish research rigour by addressing the same issue from more than one data source and more than one perspective (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

The opening question for the "after" interviews was

What did you think of the online forum?

The researcher encouraged wide-ranging responses. Prompts were again used to investigate the issues presented by the women. Information was solicited regarding:

- improvements and strengths of the online meeting;
- What they learnt from the online meeting;
- Issues relevant to the previous 21, in-depth interviews, such as access, domestic schedules;
- their experience compared with their expectation prior to the meeting re: hurdles, benefits, outcomes and impacts on their schedules; and
- future uses of the online meeting.

If there were discrepancies between the women's responses in the "before" and "after" interviews, these differences were explored. Furthermore, the researcher paraphrased responses to clarify the meaning of what the women said, and to check her understandings. The researcher completed the interviews by asking the women if they had any final comments regarding the online meeting.

The interviews provided an opportunity for respondents to give in-depth information on issues that the women believed were relevant to them. Two of the three women interviewed also completed the online forum questionnaire. The involvement of these women in both data collection methods was deemed appropriate but not essential given the complementary interview / questionnaire / transcript methods across the two phases of the study. That is, the questionnaire

elicited brief responses to a set of questions based on the issues identified during phase one.

2.4.1.3 Phase two: Interviewing the Deputy Premier

The Deputy Premier operated as an invited guest speaker/listener for the online meeting and agreed to a 30-minute interview straight after the online meeting. The interview was conducted in a private room in the same government building that had hosted the Deputy Premier for the online forum. The Deputy Premier's advisor was in the room whilst the interview was conducted and she had been directly involved in the organisation of the online forum. The Deputy Premier addressed all questions with no input from his advisor, except one. On this sole occasion, the advisor gave her opinion on a particular issue. The interview started with an opening question

What did you think of the online forum?

The Deputy Premier responded to the issues addressed in the forum, focusing on its strengths and possible improvements for the future use of online meetings in government decision-making. For the purpose of establishing rigour, the Deputy Premier was asked similar questions to those directed to rural women (see Appendix for the transcript and questionnaire).

The researcher invited the Deputy Premier to be as frank as he wanted, given that the purpose of the interview was to learn from the first online government meeting. At the beginning of the interview the Deputy Premier was told that the information would also be used for the researcher's doctoral thesis. Six months after the interview, the Deputy Premier was telephoned by the researcher to confirm further his approval to include details of the interview, and his identifying information in his role as a Deputy Premier in the research. The Deputy Premier insisted that he did not want to bothered with letters but he was happy for the researcher to include all details of his interview, his transcript, and his involvement in the transcript in the doctoral research.

2.4.2 Questionnaire

The research questionnaire was available online, and in hard copy print form, for all forum participants to complete (see Appendix for a copy of the questionnaire).

The questionnaire consisted of 12 open- and closed-ended questions relating to the participants' reasons for being involved, their experiences, any ideas they might have of how ICTs could be useful to rural women in terms of their interactions with the government in the future, and the participant's perception of the forum's outcomes. Specific questions were also asked regarding the technology, improvements required to realise the communication potential of an interactive forum, and the benefits of the online meeting.

A further eight questions were included in the questionnaire. These questions referred to participant's geographical location, age, place of birth, areas of interest they would like to discuss, current participation in government meetings, previous experience with online meetings, and the type of technology used for the online meeting. These questions were used to describe demographic characteristics of the participants involved in the forum, and to help determine whether the online forum was a useful medium to increase rural women's participation in government decision-making.

The online RRR Women's Network was a partner in the forum and two promotional questions were asked to discover if women knew about free subscription to this service, and asked for their email address or phone number. If respondent participants included contact details, they could enter a draw for the prize of a night's accommodation in Perth. A question asking for any additional comments about the online meeting completed the questionnaire.

Rural women were requested to complete the feedback questionnaire after their participation in the online forum. The questionnaire took approximately ten minutes to complete. To encourage rural women to complete the questionnaire, two strategies were used. Firstly, the RRR Women's Network donated a prize of accommodation at a hotel in Perth, and secondly, the regional Telecentres were requested to send in at least three questionnaires each as evidence that they had helped rural women access the online meeting. Funding had been allocated to Telecentres to recompense their active involvement in the online forum.

Participating women could complete and submit the forum questionnaire online via the Internet, or it could be printed off, completed and faxed in, or mailed by post. If the questionnaire was submitted electronically, both the RRR Women's

Network coordinator, and the researcher received it. If the questionnaire was mailed, it was received by the RRR Women's Network coordinator and then photocopied for this research.

If the respondent was submitting her questionnaire online, eight questions had to be responded to before the questionnaire could be sent electronically. If the questionnaire was printed, instructions requested women to respond to all questions, particularly the eight questions marked with an asterisk. This was to ensure that pertinent information was collected which addressed the research question for phase two:

- If rural women are interested in using ICTs to participate in government decision-making, then what are their issues with using them?

All respondents were informed that the information provided as part of the survey would be kept confidential; no identifying information would be used, and the information would help improve future online forums. Respondents were only required to write their email address or phone number on the questionnaire if they wanted to be included in a draw for the prize of hotel accommodation. Respondents were not required to write their name on the questionnaire.

2.4.3 The online meeting transcript

The transcript of the online forum was obtained from iChat software. This transcript is the exact word-for-word recording of the online meeting. Please see Appendix for the transcript.

2.5 Data Analysis

This section provides a description of how the data was analysed to address the three research questions of phases one and two. An inductive approach was used to analyse the data from the interviews, and the questionnaires. Content analysis was used to analyse the interviews and the open-ended questions in the questionnaires. The "yes" and "no" quantifiable questions in the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics.

In phase one, content analysis provided a tool for understanding the issues raised by respondents regarding the lack of rural women's involvement in

government decision-making, and for exploring their suggestions for new ways to increase participation. In phase two, content analysis and descriptive statistics further investigated issues relating to participation, and addressed the efficacy of using ICTs as one possible way of increasing rural women's involvement in government decision-making.

2.5.1 Content analysis

Content analysis was used to analyse the data collected from the interviews and the qualitative data generated from participants' elaborations in response to open-ended questions in the questionnaire. Content analysis examines and organises

> ideas and theories about the social world [to] reflect not only the surface level of reality but, more important, the deeper structures and forces that may lie unseen beneath the surface (Nueman, 1994, p. 424).

Content analysis was used to examine data within and between the four groups of informants – the 21 rural women in phase one, the three rural women interviewed in phase two, the 50 rural women who responded to questionnaires in phase two, and the Minister interviewed in phase two.

The content analysis process was conducted according to the following steps (Ahern, 1996):

1. researcher transcribes the interviews, or open ended-responses in the questionnaire;
2. researcher reads the responses several times;
3. reflective self-analysis so the researcher is aware of her feelings and biases;
4. researcher extracts significant statements and phrases as they relate to rural women's issues, and to ideas for creating new ways of involving rural women in government decision-making;
5. the clustering of significant statements into categories that reflect upon related issues and meanings. A list of these categories was developed throughout the sequential data analysis process; based upon the ideas and concepts offered by the participants. These categories were validated via feedback from the rural women and then in discussion with my supervisor;

6. a "topic" name was given to describe categories of conceptually related statements;

7. these topics were then grouped in conceptually similar categories. Categories were given a new name, a "theme". Reference to the transcripts, using representative statements or quotes from several informants, validated the theme name. These themes and representative statements provided concrete direction and suggestions for ways to implement new government decision-making processes to increase rural women's involvement. To ensure these new ideas for government decision-making were credible and valid, participants checked the analysis so that they could verify the essence of what was written. None of the rural women nor the other researchers requested any changes or revisions to the findings.

The responses to open-ended questions in the questionnaire in phase two were analysed according to the results obtained in phase one from the in-depth interviews with 21 rural women. This means qualitative responses were grouped according to:

- identifying barriers in the online forum (questions, 3, 7, 8 and 9);
- the benefits and value of the online forum (questions 1, 2, 4, and 10); and
- future uses of online meetings (questions 5 and 12).

Question five in the questionnaire, *"What are the issues that you are most passionate about in your community?"* gave insight into rural women's diverse interests, and ideas for agendas of future government meetings. A copy of the questionnaire is attached in the Appendix.

2.5.2 Descriptive statistics

In phase two, the questions in the questionnaire included an exploration of rural women's experience with using ICTs. The quantitative data obtain from the questionnaire was in the form of nominal statistical data (such as "yes" and "no" responses). The nominal data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, central tendency and variation measure.

The personal background questions (1, 2, 3, 4, 7, and 8) in the Details section of the questionnaire gave insight into the diversity of the rural women participating in the online forum who gave feedback. Of particular interest was question seven in the Details section, and question 11 in the first part of the questionnaire, as these indicated which rural women had been involved in government decision-making through being part of the online forum. Question seven asked, *"Are you currently involved in government meetings or decision-making groups?"* and question eleven asked, *"Have you been part of a meeting with the Minister before?"* If rural women indicated they had not met with the Minister/Deputy Premier and were not involved in government meetings, then this indicated that using ICTs had increased their access and involvement in government decision-making forums.

Two other "yes" and "no" questions (seven and four in the first part of the questionnaire) gave insight into the barriers and benefits rural women experienced by being involved in online government meetings. Question seven asked participants, *"Did you have any technical difficulties in participating in the forum?"* and question four asked participants *"Do you see this online forum and the online RRR network as an empowering tool for women who live in country WA?"*

2.6 Methodological Rigour

This research adopts Minichiello *et. al.*'s, (1995) approach to rigour in qualitative research. This approach is in line with assumptions of subjectivity and multiple realities, rather than assuming an absolute truth. Consequently ensuring rural women's experiences were accurately collected constitutes rigour in this thesis.

The concepts of validity and reliability were applied to this study to achieve methodological rigour. Validity (otherwise known as credibility in some qualitative research), is where the 'researcher tries to stay close to the empirical world in order to ensure a close fit between the data and what people actually say and do' (Minichiello *et. al.*, 1995, p. 176). Validity is demonstrated by calling things the right name and in the "correctness" of understanding and analysis of the rural women's perceptions, view, attitude, and behaviours. Minichiello *et. al*, (1995) defines reliability as 'checking the strength of the data' (p. 178) by the researcher

documenting his or her procedure, so details of how and why the researcher made certain decisions in the research process are transparent.

Techniques to establish rigour throughout the research process included triangulation, data saturation, and memo writing. These techniques are utilised during the data collection, and data analysis stages of the research. They provide the researcher with tools to understand the women's viewpoint, enabling the interpretation of their experience within a social context (Nueman, 1994). Each of these techniques will be discussed in relation to how they contribute towards collecting high quality data.

The triangulation technique enhanced the quality and validity of qualitative data, as it examines the consistency of findings generated by different methods, across different times and informants (Patton, 1990). When describing rural women's experiences, the data is regarded as valid if similar results are produced from different research methods in terms of participants' responses. Burns (1995) states that triangulation is the best way to ensure reliability and validity in qualitative research. In the research reported here, data was triangulated across different:

- methods of interviews, a questionnaire, the transcript of the online forum and verbatim records of the in-depth interviews;
- time frames, being between phase one and two; and
- informants, which included rural women and the Deputy Premier.

In particular, the following different assessment methods were used to triangulate the data:

- asking similar questions to different groups of online forum participants. These included the Deputy Premier, the three women interviewed before and after the forum, and the 50 women responding to the online questionnaire;
- comparing the three rural women's responses before and after the online forum;

- following up data collected with the three rural women participating in both phase one and two of this research (Kimchi, Polivka & Stevenson, 1991; Mathison, 1988).

- comparing the transcript of the online forum with the participants' perceptions of the online forum;

- using a combination of different data sources from questionnaires, interviews, and transcripts (Patton, 1990);

- providing the 21 rural women interviewed in phase one with an opportunity to provide changes for (or new information regarding) the findings of phase one; and

- access to associate researchers (the researcher's supervisor and associate supervisor) to discuss issues that arose during the data analysis.

All the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by the researcher to help promote rigour in the data collection. Recapitulation and silent probes were used to enhance the informants' responses when they did not seem clear, complete or relevant (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). Crosschecking during subsequent interviews was used to develop themes arising from previous interviews with different rural women. This helped ensure the validity of emerging topics and themes, which in turn helped validate examples generated from the research process. Representation of the data as a whole was achieved by using different quotes from all informants. This strategy of giving a voice to respondents, and including a contribution from every respondent, further validates the findings (Patton, 1990).

To ensure saturation of the data collected and, in turn, to prevent premature foreclosure, the researcher continued to interview informants until no new data was being volunteered in terms of topics or themes (Ahern, 1996). When interviewing the 21 rural women, saturation was reached with the eleventh interview. Once saturation is reached, researchers can have some confidence that common and pertinent issues regarding rural women's involvement in government decision-making have been captured. Saturation was not pursued in phase two, during the follow-up interviews with the three rural women, as the second phase was developed

to further explore the issues generated by phase one. It was deemed that the interviews with the three women in phase two, along with the Deputy Premier, could be used to triangulate topics, themes, and issues, and for confirming and disconfirming data. The interviews in phase two were primarily used to explore, analyse, test and follow through issues arising in phase one of the research.

As Patton (1990) outlines, qualitative researchers 'must make their own peace with how they are going to describe what they do' (p. 474). Consequently, the focus also involves examining the trustworthiness of the researcher. Reliability of the data analysis process was promoted through the researcher's use of memos (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The memos focused on general thoughts occurring to the researcher, and the decision trail. Memos provide a description, and explanation, of the researcher's thinking and decision-making throughout the research (Sandelowski, 1986). Reliability is also demonstrated by the researcher's transparency of assumptions and openness regarding connection with funding agencies.

To ensure validity of the results, participants and other researchers were involved in the data analysis stage (Dick, 1999). The roles of "the researcher" and "the informant" in the interview process were conceptualised as "egalitarian", particularly given the feminist underpinnings of this research. In this paradigm, the informant's ideas, thoughts and feelings are sought and highly valued. Further, this approach underlines the value of concentrating on the individual interview and thus avoiding (to some extent) the interplay of power structures which might have been involved with a focus group or a multi party interview. The exercise of minimal control in the interview provides a supportive environment in which the informant trusts and gains rapport with the researcher during the research process (Minichiello *et. al.*, 1995).

Time spent interviewing and corresponding with the 21 rural women facilitated the building of sound relationships, which contributed to the collection of trustworthy data (Glense & Peshkin, 1992). This is particularly so given that three of the 21 original women also participated in the online forum, and were interviewed three times over a period of two years, in both phase one and phase two.

In summary, according to Nueman (1994), the rigour of this research has been demonstrated by the data accurately representing the social world of the rural

women participating, and their views; and techniques adopted acknowledge the subjectivity and context of the informants' statements. The subjectivity and context of the informants' statements and actions have been taken into consideration throughout the data collection and data analysis processes, and through the writing-up phase of this thesis.

2.7 Participants

This section will describe the participants in phases one and two of this research. The four groups of informants in phase one and two are outlined in Table 2.1. The participants in phase one were 21 rural women from a range of country locations in WA. The participants in phase two, the online meeting case study were:

- fifty rural women who completed a feedback questionnaire after they participated in the online meeting;
- three rural women who were interviewed before and after they participated in the online meeting; and
- a Deputy Premier who was the guest speaker/keen listener of the online meeting.

Table 2.1 Summary details of the informants involved in phase one and two of the study.

Phase	Informants	Number	Age or age range
One	Rural women	21	N= 5, 30 –39 years
			N= 8, 40 – 49 years
			N= 6, 50 – 59 years
			N= 2, 60 – 69 years
Two	Rural women	3	N= 2, 40 – 49 years
			N= 1, 50 – 59 years
Two	Rural women	50	Mean = 38 years
			s.d = 11 years
Two	Deputy Premier	1	60 years

2.7.1 Participants in phase one

Twenty-one rural women in WA were participants in the first phase of this research. The interviewees were recruited from as far north as Kununurra and as far south as Bremer Bay, a distance of approximately 2,500 kilometres. As illustrated in Figure 2.2, the rural women interviewed were drawn from the larger rural regions of WA: the South West, Great Southern, Goldfields- Esperance, Mid-West, Gascoyne, and Kimberley regions. Government agencies and decision-making bodies use these regions in their administration of the state.

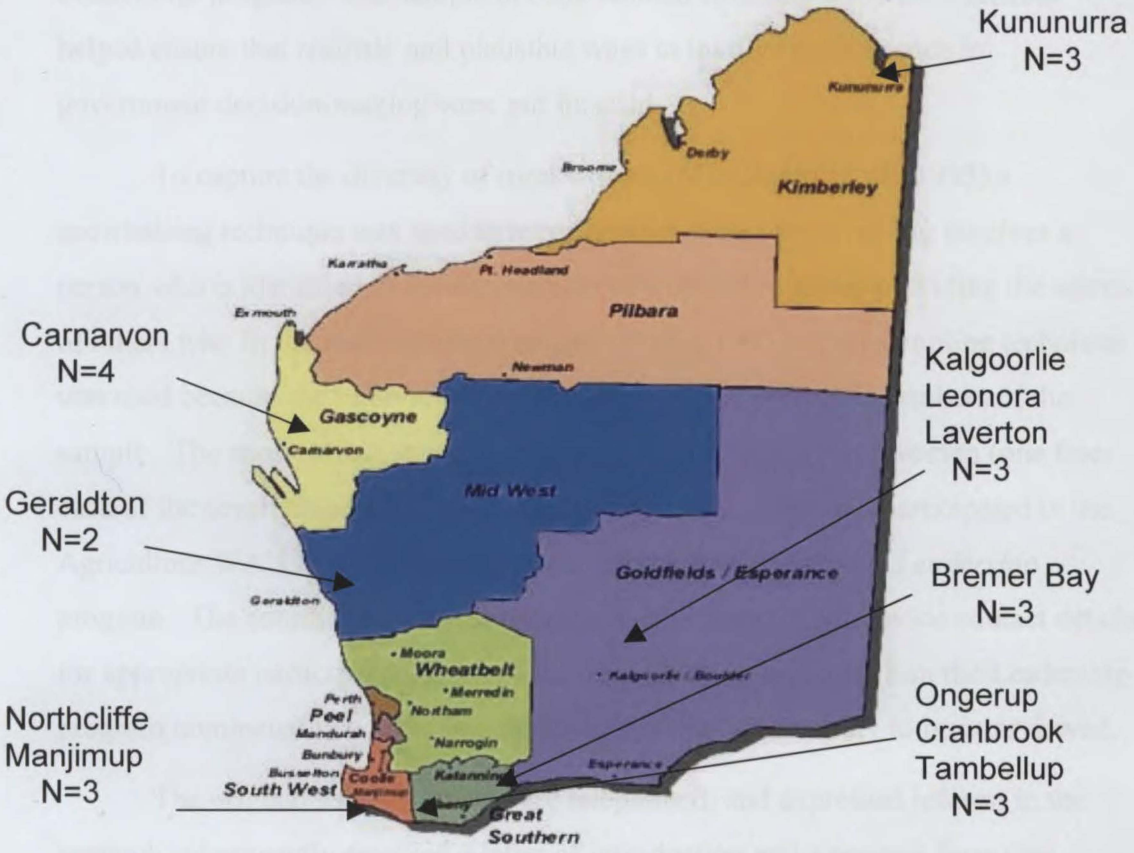

Figure 2.2 **Locations in WA where the 21 rural women interviewed were drawn.**

The criteria used to select rural women as participants in this research were decided on the basis of their familiarity with aspects of government, community leadership, and technology. Consequently each of the 21 women interviewed met the following criteria, she:

- had contact with government processes such as agencies and services;
- had experience with using, and was aware of, ICTs such as the Internet; and
- was considered by others to be a leader, or potential leader, or highly involved in the community.

Leadership roles were judged by word of mouth, by positions held in the community and by participation in the *Future Leaders: WA Rural Women's*

Leadership program. The sample of rural women fulfilling these three criteria helped ensure that realistic and plausible ways to involve rural women in government decision-making were put forward.

To capture the diversity of rural women (Minichello *et. al.*, 1995) a snowballing technique was used to recruit participants. Snowballing involves a person who is identified as a valid member of a specified group providing the names of others who fit the research requirements (Burns, 1995). This sampling technique was used because the interviewer did not know all the potential members of the sample. The snowballing strategy entailed accessing seven rural women (one from each of the seven broad regional areas, see Figure 2.2), who had participated in the Agriculture WA's Leadership program, titled the *Rural Women's Leadership* program. The coordinators of this program were contacted to provide contact details for appropriate participants. Each of the seven women selected from the Leadership program nominated two other female leaders in their community to be interviewed.

The original seven women were telephoned, and expressed interest in the research subsequently received a letter of introduction and a consent form (see Appendix). After a week the researcher telephoned these women to see if they would be willing to be interviewed, and to arrange a mutually convenient appointment. Each of the seven women was then asked to nominate two other women to be interviewed, who also met the above three criteria. These secondarily nominated women were also forwarded a letter of introduction and a consent form. One week later the researcher contacted these women to see if they would be willing to be interviewed and to arrange a mutually convenient appointment.

Interviewing three women from the same community provided an in-depth focus on that community's life, and upon issues that impacted on rural women's lives in the community and within country WA. These perspectives are important when considering new ways of decision-making for women. Furthermore, asking rural women leaders to generate new ways of involving themselves in government decision-making fits the feminist epistemology, and the sociotechnical systemic view of social action and social change. Change fostered by the dynamic of the sociotechnical model is intended to embrace the whole system and promotes solutions generated by people at the "grass roots". This contrasts with an individualistic focus on changing the attitudes of circumstances of individual

women, or creating change strategies with little input from the people who are intended to benefit from the change.

Table 2.2 Demographics of the 21 rural women leader's interviewed.

Age Range (Years)	Frequency	Dependent children at home	Working commitments
30 – 39	5	60% yes	100% yes
		40% no	0% no
40 – 49	8	38% yes	100% yes
		62% no	0% no
50 - 59	6	0% yes	100% yes
		100% no	0% no
60 - 69	2	0% yes	50% yes
		100% no	50% no
	N = 21	N = 21	N = 21

The diversity of the 21 rural women participating in phase one is demonstrated in Tables 2.2 and 2.3. The rural women leaders in this research ranged from 30 to 65 years of age, with the majority of the women clustering around the 40 to 45 year age spans. Table 2.2 illustrates the situational diversity among the different age groups of rural women. The two trends that demonstrate this diversity among rural women participants are:

- the younger rural women tend to have the added responsibility of dependent children at home; and
- almost all the rural women have business or work commitments, including all the women with dependent children.

Rural women's degree of isolation, committee involvement and use of ICTs further demonstrates the diversity among rural women (see Table 2.3). The majority

(57 percent) of rural women were living in relatively isolated conditions. In this context "isolated" means "without 24-hour power (electricity), without Internet capable telephone lines, and living 60 minutes or more from a General Post Office (GPO)". "Partially isolated" means that the women met two of the above criteria. "Not isolated" meant that women had "24-hour power, Internet access and a GPO within an hour's drive". Proficiency with ICTs was defined and ranked according to the following criteria:

- astute ICT users were those women who used the Internet as a communications tool (such as with chat programs), and as an information tool, as well as using email facilities;
- proficient ICT users were those women who used the Internet only as an information tool, and had used email facilities;
- basic ICT users were those women who only used email, but had not used the Internet; and
- aware ICT (non-)users were those women who whilst being aware of the Internet, had never used the Internet or email, and only used telecommunications such as telephones and faxes.

Table 2.3 Selected attributes of the 21 rural women leader's interviewed.

Age Range (Years)	Perceived Degrees Of Isolation	Government – Community Committee Involvement	Use of ICTs
30 - 39	20% no	0% lots (state, local)	0% astute
(n = 5)	40% partially	0% some (state, local)	60% proficient
	40% yes	0% lots local	40% basic use
		40% some local	0% aware
40 - 49	62% no	13% lots (state, local)	50% astute
(n = 8)	25% partially	37% some (state, local)	37% proficient
	13% yes	13% lots local	13% basic use
		37% some local	0% aware
50 - 59	50% none	33% lots (state, local)	17% astute
(n = 6)	0% partially	17% some (state, local)	33% proficient
	50% yes	0% lots local	33% basic use
		50% some local	17% aware
60 - 69	0% none	100% lots (state, local)	0% astute
(n = 2)	100% partially	0% some (state, local)	0% proficient
	0% yes	0% lots local	50% basic use
		0% some local	50% aware
N = 21	N = 21	N = 21	N = 21

As with much of this general population, age impacts on rural women's ICT use. Older women (60 - 69 years) tend to have a basic understanding and rudimentary use of the technology, while women in the 40-year age group use ICTs the most, with no technical support. The youngest age group of women (30 – 39) and the second oldest age group of women (50 – 59) are the next most proficient users of ICTs. These two age groups include some women who lean towards the

"basic users" end of the continuum, and have some women who are "proficient users" of ICTs.

A definite age relationship also exists with the number and extent of women's involvement in committees:

- middle age groups of rural women, (40 – 49, and 50 - 59 years) are predominantly involved in committees;
- within the middle age groups of women (40 – 49, and 50 - 59 years) there is a spread of women who are extensively involved in state and local committees, and also other women who are minimally involved in committees.
- younger women (30 - 39 years) are barely involved in committees, with 60 percent of these women wanting or willing to be involved, but not being involved; and
- although there were only two older (60 - 69 years) women in the interview phase, both these women are extensively involved in committees at a state and local level. Compared to other age groups of women, this is a unique situation, and skews the information gathered (in that age range) towards women who are already leaders.

It could be speculated that this age-committee relationship indicates that rural women traditionally commence their committee involvement during their middle age years (40 – 49). It would appear that most of these women exit from this responsibility as they enter their sixties, leaving relatively few older women at the "most involved" level of state and government committees. This research further indicates an untapped potential contribution by the younger women who wish to be involved in government – community committees, but who have yet to be involved. The data indicate a trend in that more middle aged women are involved in committees, there is an exit of older women from committees leaving only a few dedicated ones, and a keen group of young women who desire to be involved, but are not. Although confidence in this trend is limited by the small sample and the cross sectional and unrepresentative nature of this study, it is consistent with material

gathered in this research from the older rural women's interviews. Consequently the data is not generalisable to other populations of rural women.

In summary, analysis of contributions from the 21 rural women who were interviewed indicates that the following trends exist:

- there were few women in the older (60 – 69) group of women. These women were extensively involved in government decision-making, in both state and local committees and boards. These women saw themselves as partially isolated, they had less work and personal commitments than women in younger age groups, and both had a basic use of ICTs;

- the younger (30 – 39) group of women had high demands from competing responsibilities (children and work), and some of these women saw themselves as isolated. Some of these women had a basic use of ICTs, whilst others had a proficient use of ICTs. These women were the least involved in committees, yet had a strong desire to be involved; and

- the middle age group (40 – 49, and 50 – 59) were involved in a lot of committees, being either at state or local level. Only some of these women saw themselves as isolated. Women in both of the middle age groups had responsibilities for children. The 40 – 49 age group of women were also the most proficient users of ICTs, whilst the 50 – 59 year old women included some members who had a basic awareness of ICTs and others who were proficient users of ICTs.

These trends are all relevant to increasing rural women's involvement in government decision-making using ICTs

2.7.2 Participants in phase two

Sixty-seven rural women in WA participated in the online forum. Of these 67 rural women, 50 responded to requests to complete the feedback questionnaires. These 50 rural women came from seven of the ten regional areas in WA. These seven regions were the Kimberley, Mid-West, Goldfields-Esperance, Peel, South West, Great Southern, and the Wheatbelt. Figure 2.3 illustrates that rural women

were geographically apart, some 2,500 kilometres, yet they gathered together in the online meeting.

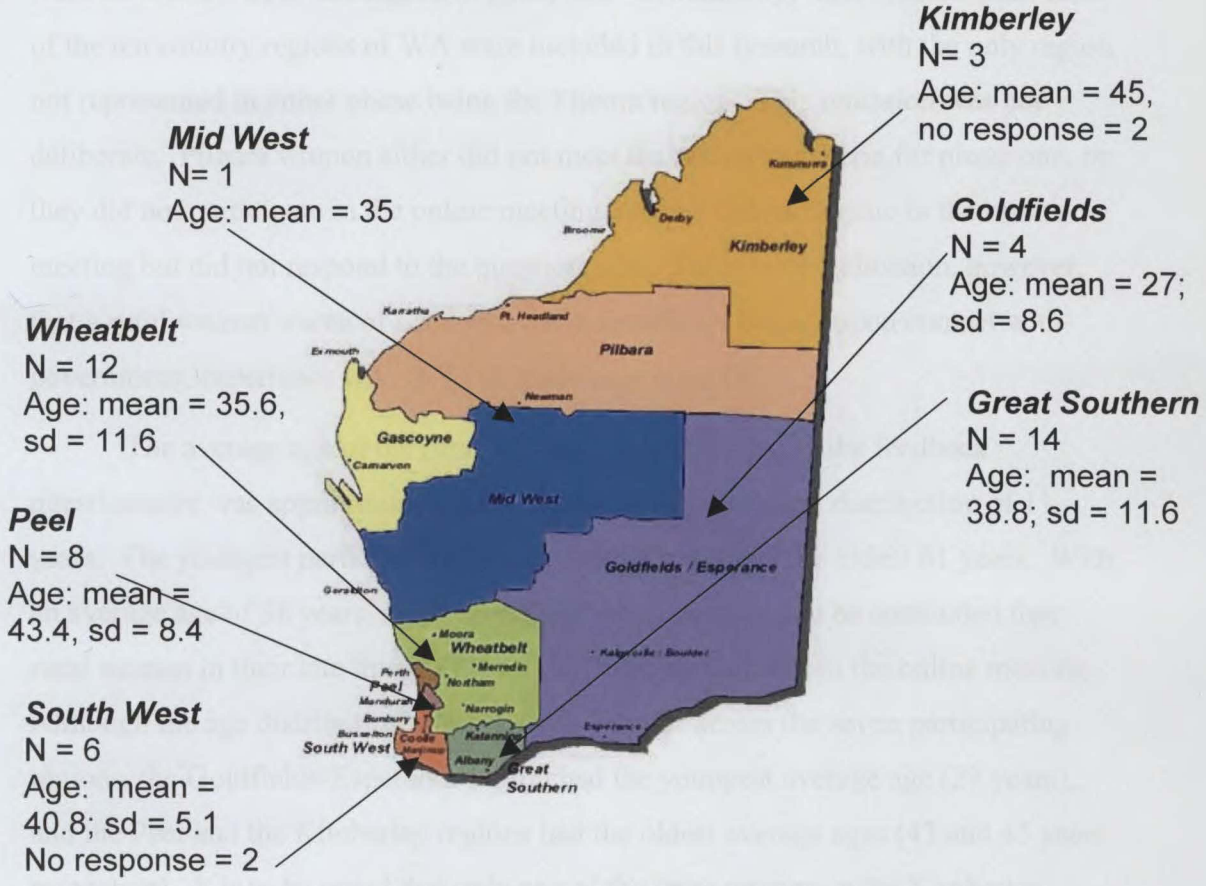

Figure 2.3 **Rural women who participated in online meeting and who responded to the questionnaire**[4]

The two regions of WA, which were not represented by rural women, were the Gascoyne and the Pilbara. It may have been that no rural women from these regions participated in the online meeting, or that rural women from these regions participated in the online meeting, but did not complete the feedback questionnaire. The technology did not record statistical information such as the geographical location of participants.

[4] Two informants did not provide details of their region.

Women from the Gascoyne area were represented in phase one of this research but no rural women were involved from the Pilbara region in either phase. Similarly, in phase two, women were included from the Wheatbelt region yet there were no women from this region in phase one. In summary, rural women from nine of the ten country regions of WA were included in this research, with the only region not represented in either phase being the Pilbara region. This omission was not deliberate. Pilbara women either did not meet the selection criteria for phase one, or they did not participate in the online meeting, or they did participate in the online meeting but did not respond to the questionnaire. There is no indication, however, that a rural woman's area of residence has a significant impact upon contact with government, experience with ICTs or leadership potential.

The average age of the rural women who responded to the feedback questionnaire was approximately 38 years old, with a standard distribution of 11 years. The youngest participant recorded was 16 years and the oldest 61 years. With an average age of 38 years, and a modal age of 35 years, it can be concluded that rural women in their late thirties were significant participants in the online meeting. Although the age distribution was relatively similar across the seven participating regions, the Goldfields-Esperance region had the youngest average age (27 years), and the Peel and the Kimberley regions had the oldest average ages (43 and 45 years respective). It is to be noted that only one of the three women in the Kimberley region provided her age.

While the predominant "given age" of the women in phase two is from 35 to 45, this indicates a younger group of respondents than in phase one. In the first phase, women who were most involved in committee meetings were aged 40 to 69. It appears that the online meeting involved a younger age group of rural women in a government – community decision-making forum.

Nine of the 50 rural women were born overseas, mainly in English speaking countries: United States of America, United Kingdom, Ireland, England and New Zealand, and there was also a participant who had been born in Germany. This predominance of women from English speaking countries among those not born in Australia may indicate a potential problem in involving rural women from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) in online government decision-making.

Whilst one Indigenous rural woman participated in phase one, no Indigenous rural women indicated their participation phase two.

Three of the initial 21 rural women who were interviewed in phase one also took part in phase two. These three women were selected on the basis that they were:

- able to be contacted 12 months after their initial interview;
- able to participate in the online forum;
- able to participate in two interviews, one before and one after the online forum; and
- they consented to participating in study two.

Of the initial 21 rural women who were interviewed, eight rural women were unable to be contacted by telephone or email prior to the online forum. Ten of the women were unable to participate at the time of the online forum due to work engagements and personal commitments, and three decided to participate in the online forum. This indicates that ICTs cannot solve all the problems raised by competing work and family responsibilities.

The three women who participated in both phase one and phase two were aged between 40 and 55 years. One of the women had two young children at home. Another of the women had three children at school, and the third woman had no children living at home. All three women had work responsibilities with their farm business, with one of these ladies also having a home business. Two of the women were local Councillors, while the other woman (although active in the community), was not formally involved in government meetings.

The Deputy Premier involved in the online forum had been involved for several decades in the state government in WA. The Deputy Premier was invited to participate in the online government forum since he was:

- responsible for the portfolios that directly related to the intent of the online meeting, which was to help increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making using ICTs;

- directly responsible for developing the infrastructure for democratic representation in rural and regional WA; and

- the Deputy Premier in charge of the government agency which was responsible for initiating the online meeting (and which had been my workplace previously).

Whilst the Deputy Premier was aware of ICTs, he had no experience of using the Internet, and was not able to type.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

This study does not deal with *prima facie* sensitive information and does not involve any potentially harmful consequences. Since the researcher is the only person who has direct contact and knowledge of the people who were involved in the two phases, the main ethical considerations that arose from the study's methodology are ones of maintaining privacy, confidentiality, informed consent and anonymity for the informants of the study. Ethical priorities in the research include ensuring informants' self-determination and autonomy throughout the research process.

The Edith Cowan University's Ethics Committee cleared the research upon the researcher's guarantees of the following criteria:

- all participants are fully informed of research details and role of researcher;

- all participants consent to their involvement in the research; and

- the information collected from participants' interviews and questionnaires is confidential, and any comments quoted are used anonymously. Where anonymity cannot be maintained, identifying information was to be deleted, with pseudo-identity information used to indicate the genuine background of the participant.

This section outlines the actions taken to meet these criteria.

All interested rural women were fully informed of the purpose of the research, how the research would be used and what the demands were of informants,

so that the women could truly make their own choice as to whether they would like to participate in the research. The process of gaining consent in phase one required the researcher to clarify the informant's involvement, and to clarify the purpose of the research. The informant explicitly agreed to the conditions of the research by formally signing a consent form (see Appendix). All informants in phase one were given a copy of the signed consent form so that they could individually reflect on the agreement. It was clarified that even though the informant had signed the consent form, she could withdraw from the study at any time.

In phase two, the three rural women participating in the "before" and "after" interviewing consented to be interviewed via email correspondence and by telephone conversation. The researcher informed these three women that the same conditions as they had agreed to in phase one applied while they were being interviewed in phase two. These conditions were reviewed before the pre-forum interview. The 50 women who completed the online questionnaire did so voluntarily, although incentives were offered for completed questionnaires both to individual women and to the Telecentres involved in providing rural Internet access. These 50 women were given details at the beginning of the questionnaire as to how the information would be used and assured that no personally identifying information would be included in the writing up of the research. Women's names were not requested in the questionnaire.

The strategies of gaining consent from individual participants in phase one, and of using snowballing methods to identify the next tier of participants, might raise an ethical issue. The "referring" interviewee was known to the "new" interviewee and might have felt social pressure to be involved. Nonetheless, this method was chosen since there was no more appropriate method of accessing a diverse sample of rural women leaders given the time and resource constraints upon the researcher.

Ethical snowballing procedures respect the privacy of the participants through the forwarding of a letter to inform them of the researcher's intentions, and the research project, prior to verbal contact (National Health and Medical Research Council, 1995). This procedure was deemed appropriate given the likely benefits of the research. It was anticipated that the invitation to the rural women to be involved in the research was beneficial, even if the woman decided not to be interviewed, as the research topic validates that individual as a leader and acknowledges that rural

women leaders currently experience barriers that limit their involvement in government decision-making. Given that the researcher had not previously met the informants, the social distance between researcher and interviewees helped alleviate any potential conflict of roles (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), and worked to ensure that privacy and anonymity goals were met. It also removed any implicit obligation that might have been part of a pre-established relationship, or a relationship based on power or service provision.

In the first phase of the research, the informant chose the private location where the interview took place. This private location, which was usually the woman's home, helped maintain the participant's privacy, anonymity and comfort throughout the interview. In the second phase, interviews were conducted by telephone, at the informant's chosen time and place. It was an ultimate aim of the researcher to acknowledge the importance of maintaining individual privacy and respecting confidentiality in the research practices adopted.

The researcher is the only person who has access to the audiotapes arising from the research. These tapes are stored in a locked cupboard to which only the researcher has a key. The audiotapes and the transcripts will be destroyed five years after the completion of the thesis. Pseudonyms have been used, and identifying information has been deleted in quotes from women's transcripts. Although the Deputy Premier has been given a pseudonym, there is only one Minister in WA, fitting his characteristics. As these details could identify him, this issue has been addressed by contacting the Deputy Premier on three separate occasions to explicitly request permission for the researcher to use information from the transcript, and the interview, and (most importantly) to check that the Deputy Premier is comfortable with the fact that he could be identified from the research. The Deputy Premier explicitly gave the researcher permission to use all the data, and even to use his name in the research, as he believed the research had beneficial outcomes. However the researcher decided on the basis of the University's ethics policy not to use the Deputy Premier's name in this thesis.

2.9 Limitations

Each of the following research limitations will be discussed: the multiple roles attached to the researcher – (government officer and consultant); funding by government agencies; time and financial constraints; the online meeting software used; and the sample selection restrictions.

The researcher's multifaceted roles and experience impacted on this research in both an advantageous and a limiting manner. At different stages of the research the researcher was a fulltime state government officer, a part time government officer, a consultant, a part time researcher who received monies to write an official government report, a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) student, and a local government city councillor. In phase one, the researcher engage in contract work with the Department of Commerce and Trade and Agriculture WA to investigate why rural women were not involved in government decision-making in WA. The Department of Commerce and Trade were interested in whether rural women were open to using ICTs to increase their involvement in government decision-making. In phase two, the researcher was a full time employee with the Department of Commerce and Trade. In this position the researcher was given an opportunity to implement a community project that demonstrated the use of ICTs. Consequently phase two was implemented in the researcher's role as full time employee at the Department of Commerce and Trade. Whilst the researcher was not directly involved in the WA RRR Women's Network before phase two, a collegial relationship was formed at this stage as the Coordinator for the Network also worked at the Department of Commerce and Trade.

The researcher communicated honestly that she was a researcher first, who was partly funded by government. The connection with the government also provided advantages such as greater resources available to interview rural women from isolated areas in WA, and provided greater leverage inside the government to instigate new initiatives to improve rural women's involvement in government decision-making.

Two government agencies funded the research through financial and in-kind support. The limitations following from this association between the researcher and the government, and the researcher's reliance upon government funding, include a

concern that the participants may have felt free expression curtailed since (on occasions) the researcher may have been perceived as an employed government officer rather than as an entirely independent researcher. It was necessary that the needs of the two government agencies were met, as well as the requirement of academic rigour.

In practical terms, there was also a limitation of collecting "too much" data. The government agencies required 21 rural women to be interviewed in-depth. This scale of research may have involved more interviewing than was necessary given saturation had been reached after 11 interviews. Although this additional interview commitment did not jeopardise the academic rigour of the research (as more is not necessarily worse), it did mean that there was a large amount of data to analyse. Nonetheless, an advantage of analysing the "excess" data for the PhD thesis was that rural women from diverse areas in rural WA were included in the research. It also meant that more individual "voices" could be heard, even if no new themes had arisen in the final ten interviews. The other benefit of including "too much" data was that government agencies were more likely to perceive and acknowledge the findings of this research, and give it greater credence. This is an important consideration in action research.

Partnership funding with government agencies meant that when the researcher introduced herself to the rural women to solicit their involvement, she presented herself as someone who was a researcher who was partly funded by government agencies rather than an independent researcher. Even though an egalitarian approach was established, and ethical issues regarding confidentiality were canvassed, the association of the research with government might have influenced some women's comments. This may have occurred, particularly, in relation to their critiquing of the government decision-making system, and the possible benefits and outcomes achievable from this research. However, upon analysing the women's interviews it is clear that there is definitely an openness and frankness regarding many of the rural women's critiques of the government decision-making system.

Within the time and financial constraints of this project, the research is limited because the 21 rural women in the first phase were only able to be followed up by telephone and email. Although this posed a few limitations, including not

being able to access a large number of the women to invite their participation in phase two, three of these women did participate in the second phase. The time constraints were also an issue for including the Deputy Premier in the second phase. The Deputy Premier had a range of responsibilities which meant that his time was in high demand. Since the researcher was a government officer and researcher initiating a new project, a maximum of one hour and 45 minutes was allocated by the Deputy Premier's office for his involvement in the online forum case study. The protocol of the Deputy Premier's office is normally to provide a maximum of one-hour appointments. Consequently all the Deputy Premier's activities relating to the research – training, the forum itself, and the debriefing interview - were constrained by this one hour and 45 minutes timeframe. Although this impacted on the research, it ensured that the case study in phase two was subject to the real time demands of government meetings. It operated as a genuine trial of the time implications of involving a government Deputy Premier or Minister in such online forums.

The online meeting was held during business hours (two to three pm). Although this may have posed problems for rural women who were working, some women stated they adjusted their schedules to fit in with the meeting schedule, particularly given it was just one hour. Women who had school children indicated that the online meeting time was useful as their children were in school. For one woman, who had to leave the online meeting ten minutes early, the flexibility of an online meeting allowed her to fit the meeting into her schedule rather than requiring that her schedule fit the meeting time frame. The time restrictions of rural women who work in formal settings are an issue, however. This can be addressed by offering an online forum during the lunch-hour or after work, or by offering an asynchronous online forum (via bulletin boards).

Financial and time constraints impacted upon the choice of the software package used for the online meeting. There was no budget allocated to this item as it was decided that working with the RRR Women's Online Network would be the most advantageous strategy, given its large network in rural WA. Also, since the online meeting was initiated as a demonstration project to determine any potential efficacy as a tool for helping rural women participate in government decision-making forums, it was decided to use the online chat infrastructure, iChat, which was already available on the RRR women's website. Given the lack of research and

development funding to specifically build a software program, and the limitation of time, the online government meeting was restricted to discussing agenda items rather than voting on agenda items. This was relevant in the context that this was a "trial" online meeting, and a first collective meeting that was open to all WA rural women discussing issues with the Deputy Premier. Although a few minor amendments and additions to the online environment were made, the iChat software presented some restrictions for the online meeting, which are discussed in chapter six.

The software and the nature of an online meeting, also resulted in limitations with respect to the characteristics of rural women who could be involved. Women had to be literate, able to write and read English, and had to be comfortable using a computer. The iChat software does not have a translation program linked to it. The WA Telecentre Network, however, actively provides Information Technology (IT) support, training, and access to all rural women including those who are not familiar with computers or online chat programs. This WA Telecentre Network involvement meant that women without much IT experience were supported in their participation in the forum. However there was no accommodating facility for women who could not read or write in English.

A somewhat paradoxical limitation experienced in the active involvement of the WA Telecentre Network, may have been that the Network's participation over-inflated the number of rural women taking part in the online meeting. Telecentres were given a small payment for supporting rural women involved in the online forum, who otherwise might not been involved, since they had no computer access, or limited knowledge or skills, to access the online meeting room. Although it was a measure of success to have up to 70 rural women speaking online with the Deputy Premier, problems were created with such a large number of participants using the relatively limited iChat software. The effects of this congestion are discussed within the thesis in chapter six, but it is important to acknowledge that phase two of this research is limited to rural women's experience of a government online meeting which has many participants, and which uses basic online meeting software, and which occurs in a synchronous timeframe, where all participants have to be logged on at the same time.

Even though basic chat software was used, the online forum offered a discrete experience of an IT facilitated meeting, upon which participants could

reflect. From their experience in this phase two case study, facilitators and participants could address specific issues, ideas and needs arising from using ICTs to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making processes. Most importantly, the experience can be used to inform future action and research in the area, where some of the limitations identified in the case study online meeting could be addressed in the trialling of different forms of inclusive, ICT-facilitated, government decision-making meetings. Appreciating that in action research, mistakes and problems are as important as successes because they are part of the plan when reviewing and learning from the cycle of research and action.

The definition of government decision-making was taken in its broadest terms to refer to the initial cycle of examining common issues and needs, as it acknowledges this is the first stage of reaching a resolution between different parties (Tyson, 1989). Whilst the application of this definition to the online forum does not represent the actual decision-making component, the case study does provide a first hand analysis of rural women's experience of using ICTs in the context of government decision-making. Consequently, in light of the innovation of this research, this limitation provides future direction for research to investigate the entire stages of government decision-making online.

Phase one of this research is limited to an investigation of the perspectives of rural women leaders. The sample selection criteria, and the online meeting restrictions, limits the population involved to most likely representing Anglo Australian, middle to upper, socio economic status, rural women. (One Aboriginal rural woman leader was among the 21 rural women interviewed, however.) This sample selection for phase one was warranted, given that rural women leaders will be the women most likely to be involved in initiatives using ICTs in government decision-making processes. It is anticipated, that, in the immediate future, government decision-making processes will evolve to include rural women, and will expand over time to be more inclusive of diverse groups of rural women.

Although the sociotechnical framework of this research privileges three aspects of the government decision-making process – women, technology and government – the data collected focuses on rural women, and their perceptions of the other two aspects; government and technology. This focus is primary since (to date) the system and its processes have lacked rural women's involvement, and thus their

perspectives. Without the time and financial constraints involved, all three aspects of the system could have usefully been investigated. Nonetheless it was decided to focus on the rural women's perspective. The government's perspective was partially investigated by interviewing the Deputy Premier, who participated in the online forum, and by involving the Ministerial apparatus in the setting-up of the meeting. The dual roles as both researcher and government officer also provided the research with an "inside government" view. The technology aspect was also partially investigated through the real time, real life case study of the online forum.

The historical context of this research is a critical factor given the global transition to expanding the use of new online technologies in a range of democratic (and anti-democratic) uses. Although this project is at the leading edge of research into online technology use in WA government decision-making, the issues that present in this research are unique to a time and place where there are comparatively few rural people who use online technologies, and particularly few people who use online technologies for meetings. Also, given that the research is in the context of a Western, democratic government it is limited to reflecting the culture and ideologies that exist within the country, as expressed by the actions and priorities of the people who inhabit it.

2.10 Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to accurately describe WA rural women's experience of government decision-making, so as to develop new ways to increase their involvement. The methods, data collection, and data analysis techniques met the requirements of feminist action research, and of qualitative research, as they embraced the subjective nature of rural women's experience. The application of phenomenological field work (phase one), and implementation of a case study (phase two), followed the feminist action research cycle, whereby rural women's experiences of the government decision-making system were used to develop an online government meeting. This provided an opportunity to examine rural women's experiences of using ICTs in a government decision-making setting. To complete the feminist action research cycle, the findings of phase one and two were examined in the context of exploring new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making.

Rigorous techniques such as triangulation, data saturation, and memo writing helped ensure that the data collected from in-depth interviews and the online forum questionnaires accurately described rural women's and the Deputy Premier's experience. Whilst ethical issues were not overtly sensitive; privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, and anonymity were addressed. The limitations of multiple roles attached to the researcher (funding by government agencies, time and financial constraints, the online meeting software used, Telecentre incentives, and the sample selection restrictions) have been noted.

CHAPTER 3

Phase One: Rural Women's Voices

This chapter addresses the first research question: Why are so few rural women involved in government decision-making in WA? To address this question, analysis of interviews with 21 rural women will be presented. The findings will outline the driving and impeding factors that affect a rural woman's decision to become involved in government decision-making processes. At the end of the chapter, a holistic framework, entitled the Government decision-making framework, brings together these factors. The development of this framework provides a solid foundation for understanding rural women's experience and for planning action to increase their involvement in government decision-making.

3.1 Factors Affecting Rural Women's Involvement

Table 3.1 outlines the driving and impeding factors that influence rural women's involvement in government decision-making. The two driving factors motivating rural women to become involved are their passionate reasons for creating change, and their empowerment. The three impeding factors contributing to rural women's under-representation in government decision-making are their lack of confidence, the extensive resources required to be involved, and the formalistic and gendered organisational processes. A discussion of each of these factors follows.

Table 3.1 The main factors influencing rural women's involvement in government decision-making processes.

IMPEDIMENTS	DRIVERS
Lack of confidence	Passion for change
Limited resources available	Empowerment
Formalistic and gendered organisational processes.	

3.2 Factors Driving Rural Women's Involvement

There is a lack of research discussing the factors motivating rural women to become involved in government decision-making. Labonte (1997) and Covey's (1999) research describe the factors that motivate rural women to be involved. Labonte (1997) examines an individual's participation, and empowerment, in the broader socio-political context of health promotion. Covey's (1999) work examines an individual's development in leadership style from dependent to independent to interdependent. Each will be used in the discussion of the results from this study.

This study revealed that the two driving factors that motivated rural women to become involved in government decision-making processes were their desire for change and their empowerment (or their capacity to take action in the public arena). These factors are inextricably linked, but in the first instance will be discussed separately.

3.2.1 Rural women have a passion to create change

Rural women's passion to create change focuses on four areas. The first is claiming their role as a change agent. The second is having an optimistic attitude towards change. The third is focusing on one's own actions rather than waiting for others to fix a problem, and the fourth is realising the power of being involved in government decision-making processes.

Those rural women who became involved in government decision-making did so because they were passionate in wanting to create change. These women

wanted a better standard of living for themselves and others. Pam and Vera, respectively, emphasised the theme of wanting to make a difference to people's lives, and improving agricultural industries; '*If you are going to get benefits out of it and it's going to help others then it's definitely worthwhile*' [Pam, 30 – 39, Gascoyne]. Vera shares,

> I feel that there is so much to be done. I would really like to become involved in the fruit growers' organisation and broader horticulture organisations, [and] decision-making groups for people that are looking at the vision for horticulture. I am a big-picture person [Vera, 40 – 49, South West].

Rural women's sense of a responsibility to better their own and other's lives is similar to the attitude described by Covey (1999) in his analysis of independent and interdependent leadership qualities. The focus is on "I can", or "We can", rather than the relatively powerless position of "You can".

This study found that rural women wanted to be involved in, and make a difference to, a range of different areas. There appeared to be no area that these women excluded from "rural women's interests". At the same time, there were no rural women-specific issues. Furthermore, rural women were adamant that governments (and the researcher) appreciate and respect the diversity among rural women. Betty, like many other rural women interviewed, would not recommend specific issues as being the principal concern of rural women, arguing, instead, the importance of the individual choices of different women in terms of what they consider important. Betty explains,

> I can't answer that because everyone is different. It [women's interests] is a huge area, everything from shipbuilding to driving motorcars to flying aeroplanes to telecommunications. Women have just as many interests as guys. I don't know [Betty, 50 – 59, Mid West].

A list of the different areas of interest among the 21 rural women interviewed demonstrates the diversity of areas in which rural women are passionate about creating change. Rural women's key interests include: education; health; community economic development; tourism; agriculture and pastoral issues; children and the family; conservation and the environment; Aboriginal issues; land issues; arts; marketing; and communications and technology. This long list of issues illustrates

that even among 21 rural women, they have many different needs and interests. This research, like Lennie's (2001), cautions against stereotyping rural women as a uniform group.

Victoria's experience as a decision-maker underlines how very difficult it is to represent the diversity of rural women. In particular, it is an impossible situation for one rural woman on a committee to represent 48 percent of the rural population of women (Regional Development Council of WA, 2001). Victoria recommends that to truly make a difference, rural women need to take on decision-making roles and responsibility for follow-up action (rather than relying on others to make changes). She affirms the position that rural women really need to represent themselves if their issues are to be diligently deliberated:

> Instead of representing the people they represent themselves. ... When I started I was the only woman there and someone wisely said to me, "You are representing 50 percent of the population, the women." While that's very nice, I'll stand up and say "What about the women this", "What about that", and try to bring that to the forefront all the time. If people had access to more [at a] local level, then they would be able to represent themselves instead of waiting for me to speak [for] to them [Victoria, 40 – 49, Great Southern].

Sally elaborates upon the importance of "doing it yourself" rather than relying on others to create change. She feels relying on others is disruptive to one's time, energy and action. Sally suggests that rural women should invest their energies in their own specific actions, targeted to creating whatever situation it is that they want. This understanding of self-responsibility is consistent with Covey's (1999) distinction between dependent and independent leadership, and has similarities with taking-on an adult role (emerging from a child's role) in the public arena.

> Now friends have said to me, 'Oh, we just petition the Council for something like that, and, if we didn't get it, well we would just petition more.' Whereas here we just do it, and I think, in a lot of ways, we just ignore a lot of what is happening outside, unless it becomes a real issue. You know the old saying, 'We'll be right, Jack'? We will just keep plodding along. What they do in Perth or Parliament House really is of little consequence to us until it becomes a consequence to us, and then I think we do something. ... I think the farmer is his own worst enemy, he has just sat back quietly gone about his own business and a lot of the bullshit we are fighting now has evolved from that. Because we have pretty much sat back, and we've let our groups become so political I think they have forgotten

what they were put there for in the first place [Sally, 40 – 49, South West].

Whilst the optimistic attitude of rural women like Sally appears necessary when creating change, a pessimistic or apathetic attitude is also found amongst rural women. Jennifer illustrates how she is caught in the middle of wanting to make a difference, knowing that one's opinion and actions are important, and at the same time feeling pessimistic and apathic, and questioning her involvement.

> I think one of the things with rural people is we do it ourselves. What the heck, we are two people in the middle of this huge country, 'What difference are we going to make?' So you are inclined to say, 'Oh well', just shrug it off. What really needs to be put across to rural people is that they are important, and their decisions are important, and they should be involved even though they are isolated. So, really, it is an education thing to educate people in these areas. Look it is important that you have an input because otherwise things aren't going to change without your input. Because, as I say, it is too easy; all the time we say 'Oh well'. I mean - when we are on postal votes our vote never gets there in time and we say, 'Oh what difference is our two votes? Why do we bother?' - and it's not good [Jennifer, 50 – 59, Kimberley].

Whilst Jennifer is aware of the importance of adopting a proactive - independent and interdependent - style of leadership, she also argues that the government organisation genuinely has to want her input. Jennifer's oscillating optimistic-pessimistic attitude - that women's involvement in government decision-making is not worthwhile - illustrates a connection between the personal motivation of wanting to make a difference, and one's perception of the broader government system as hard to influence. This resonates with Labonte's (1997) discussions of the connection between participation and power relationships in health promotion. Labonte's views are reflected in Jennifer's experience because he concludes that people are more likely to participate if there is a genuine interest shown in working together as partners in 'naming' (and defining) the problem, and developing solutions (Labonte 1997, p.31). In Jennifer's opinion the government does not demonstrate genuine interest.

Like Jennifer, Rosa also demonstrates a struggle to be optimistic. Rosa questions her own and other women's involvement in less influential positions (such

as participating in consultation processes) as there rarely seem to be any definite outcomes, other than that of government officers fulfilling their role.

> They will have a day for women to come along and share their ideas and I wonder what happens to that? Did they write a lot of notes and someone writes a report and that was the end of it? It never saw the light of day. ... Seagulls are bureaucrats that swoop in, make a lot of noise, crap over every body, fly out and leave us to clean the mess. ... People get very suspicious of the fact-finding tours or the community consultation. After a while you feel like you've been consulted to death. But you can never see any benefit for it, so you have to feel that for a start, they really do want to know what you think, and they are really going to do something with it, and that you will see some benefit. ... We've been there, we've done that, and they didn't do anything last time. We told them what they needed to do but they didn't do it, so why should I bother again? [Rosa, 50 – 59, South West]

Similarly, Vera comments on how consultation differs greatly from decision-making, particularly regarding the participant's power relationship with relevant government officials, the interaction involved, and the overall effects.

> There are committees, which are advisory only, and committees which are decision-making, and they are very different. With advisory ones you can clearly provide written input, you can consult with community, and you can write reports, and send them in. With decision-making, I really believe it has to be a dialogue between a group of people [Vera, 40 – 49, South West].

Rural women emphasise that there is a definite power and participation difference between consultation and decision-making forums. Labonte (1997) also makes the distinction between the relatively less powerful and non-participatory nature of consultation forums versus the more self-determining role of a decision-maker.

Rural women's desire to create change and make a difference is entwined with their perception of whether the actions they take are worth it, and whether the government will be involved. Sally challenges pessimistic attitudes by telling herself, "I will do it". Sally decides that she will be responsible for initiating change, by herself, and with other like-minded people. She is not waiting for anyone else to make changes that she wants. It appears, at one level, that some rural women are stifled in their passion to create change by pessimistically focusing on the

government, feeling reliant (or dependent) on what the government thinks or feels. This is in contrast to the more optimistic attitude where rural women focus on what they want changed regardless of the government or outside influences. Whilst Sally's "just do it" attitude is proactive, it does not solve the problem in all cases, nor does it necessarily address the process of decision-making. There is a point where rural women's involvement in government decision-making needs to directly influence macro issues such as health policy, and globalisation. Consequently, despite their proactiveness, the under-representation of rural women's in the government's macro decision-making processes is an area of concern that needs to be addressed.

Michelle and Victoria, concisely encompass the essence of the optimistic-pessimistic continuum. They both appreciate that it is better that they and other rural women are involved in government decision-making than not. This is because, with or without their involvement, government decisions will affect them, for better or worse. Hence they are better-off being involved and having an input into the government decision-making process. Michelle shares:

> That's very, very difficult because most women, I think, would be unaware that they could avail themselves or be involved in state and federal decisions, knowing that those decisions handed down actually affect them at a home level. I think a lot of people are unaware that decisions made in Canberra are made by ordinary men and women, human beings; they are mere mortals just like everybody else. They are not "gods" sitting up on a pedestal. They themselves can influence those decisions. They have got to understand that they can ring up and contact their Senators, or their representative for federal politics. A lot of them are unaware. They might think, 'why haven't we got this? Why haven't we got a mobile telephone so that when I break down and I've got a car full of kids, I will just phone somebody up and they know where I am and somebody will come and help me.' If they realise by lobbying and by making it known that the need is there, then something will be done about it sooner - rather than leaving it to their local council representation. This is where you are getting down to the "grass roots" of women's decisions, very much, but they are unaware, so, when you are running workshops or whatever in communication, this is the basics that you teach them. A lot of women don't understand it is easy as that. Contacting people, letting them know ... That's what you do if you want something changed, you have got the ability to help change it yourself. Too many people rely on somebody else to do it for him or her. But everybody has an opinion and this is what they don't know how to do.

> To get their opinion across they need that confidence [Michelle, 40 – 49, Kalgoorlie-Esperance].

Michelle (above) outlines a situation where some rural women not only relegate to someone else the action to achieve fulfilment of their desires and needs, but also assume that government decisions do not affect them. When rural women have a desire to create change, it is a prerequisite that they take on the responsibility to instigate that change themselves and do not assume others will "look after" their needs. Victoria argues that people have to:

> Learn to understand that if something is going to happen, or if you want something to happen, it is up to you to put your hand up and take part in it. Too many people think, well it is "them": the government, the shire, whoever. My thing that people hear me saying over and over again is that, 'People in Perth don't lay awake at night worrying about us.' ... Everyone needs to understand that they have a role to play [Victoria, 40 – 49, Great Southern].

In summary, the rural women interviewed experienced a tension between perceiving government decision-making as a useful spur to create change and being pessimistic about the benefits one can achieve by being involved. A rural woman's ability to claim her role as a change agent, and maintain an optimistic attitude, are key ingredients in women choosing to be involved in government decision-making. Whilst some rural women were pessimistic of the outcome, many rural women argued for taking the responsibility to pursue change that one wants. It is better for them to work with and in the government system than outside it. Experiencing the government decision-making system as currently imperfect does not distract rural women, who are passionate about creating change to improve their own or others' lives. They appreciate that working with and in the government system is more advantageous than ignoring it, given that they can voice their needs. Whilst rural women can create change on a local level without the government's involvement, it appears that women's influence upon macro level issues requires their involvement in government decision-making. If a rural woman can voice her needs in state government, decision-making forums, then there is a greater likelihood that she is more able to influence macro level issues. The capacity of rural women to focus on what they want, despite other distractions, is a key motivator in them becoming involved in government decision-making.

3.2.2 Empowerment: Having the confidence to create change

> The week before I went away I called a public meeting in [name of town] to get the Telecentre started. So I became the chairman [sic] of the Telecentre. It looked like we weren't going to get funding for it because the Telecentre people in Perth thought we didn't have anywhere to go. The only thing we could do was co-locate with the library. The library was so tiny we thought we would never make it. So they were a bit reluctant. And we decided we were going to do it anyway and so we got permission from the shire and started. We became agents for Westlink. We just did it. We did our business plan and got incorporated. We did a whole host of things, finally we went back to Commerce and Trade and said 'Look we have done this, this, and this'. By the time we had got to the bottom of the foolscap page of what we had done, I said 'We would really like you to support us'. They said, 'Yep, we will'. So they did. We then applied for a federal grant because we weren't really confident of getting the state money. We were fortunate enough to get that money from Department of Primary Industries and Energy, which was 30,000 dollars. So we ended up with both [Victoria, 40 – 49, South West].

This is the story of an empowered woman, Victoria. Victoria and like-minded people had a dream, a vision of what they wanted. Despite some obstacles they took action, forming partnerships. Every step of the way they believed in what they wanted to achieve. Without Victoria's (and other community people's) input, the needs of these women and the rural community would not have been heard, and the new Telecentre service would not have eventuated. It was Victoria and her team's focus on their goal, their directed action, and partnerships with government, which ensured their actions were successful.

Wallerstein and Berstein's (1988, cited in Stein, 1997) definition of empowerment is consistent with rural women's experience of empowerment when they are actively involved in their community and taking control of their personal lives and development. These two researchers define empowerment as:

> a social action process that promotes participation of people, organisation, and communities in gaining control over their lives in their community and the larger society. With this perspective, empowerment is not characterised as achieving power to dominate others, but rather power to act with others to effect *change* (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988 cited in Stein, 1997, p. 7).

Labonte's work on empowerment also supports Wallerstein and Berstein's definition that empowerment is about the unity of individuals working together to create change. This "partnership approach" of confident, visionary people, who have transformed their dissatisfaction or powerlessness and are taking action, is the key to defining empowerment. Labonte (1997) writes that sometimes the 'conditions of powerlessness were transformed through the actions of others around us' (p. 27). This research concludes that a rural woman's passion to create change by bringing together other people to take action represents empowerment, and is a vehicle for transformation. To become empowered, a rural woman integrates the personal and public roles and responsibilities in her life. As writers describe it (Covey, 1999; Stein, 1997), empowerment is a quality where one moves from developing the private sphere of life into the public sphere, working with others to create change. The continual process of empowerment involves the woman acknowledging the issues that concern her, believing in herself and taking action with others to make a difference.

Rural women acknowledged that being or becoming empowered is a personal, self-giving process. However, as Labonte (1997) argues, 'In order to share power one must first experience it' (p. 28). Thus to give power to another is an oxymoron, as empowerment is a self-giving and self-taking process (Stein, 1997). It is only by a person taking action and claiming their power, that empowerment is facilitated within that individual. Rural women's experience outlines how empowerment comprises two stages: the private mastery stage of self-confidence, and self-worth; and the public mastery stage of instigating action with others. Private and public aspects of empowerment will each be described.

Empowered women focus on themselves, and empowerment is linked to their confidence. This translates into an ability of these women to focus on their own needs, and to value their uniqueness. Consequently, rural women's attention to their development; improving their skills and knowledge, and seeking mentors and support, further develops their confidence and power. Crystal, a rural woman who believes she has a lot to offer, focuses on how much she has learnt through participating in government decision-making processes, and how much more she wants to learn:

> I really enjoy it. I really enjoy the intellectual stimulation. I also feel that really there is a lot of women that have a heck of a lot to offer and I really feel that there is a lot more for me to learn, but I have a lot more to offer: building that bridge between some of the government agencies and people on the land [Crystal, 30 – 39, South West].

Similarly, Maria's tranquillity in terms of entering new positions and learning from those experiences is indicative of her self worth and suggests a well-developed sense of self-mastery. Maria (although aware of her deficiency in knowledge) illustrates this as she continues in her new decision-making role, applying skills previously learnt, and learning new skills in chairing meetings for the local water board.

> Well the first meeting I went to they elected me Chairman, which was pretty hairy because I actually didn't know a lot about water. ... I basically just ran the meeting. I didn't get into any of the arguments that were going on. I just kept everything on an even keel and I just ran the meeting, you know. I'd run meetings before, in other areas, in sporting sorts of clubs, I knew I could run a meeting [Maria, 40 – 49, Kimberley].

In these words Maria, shows how she continued in her new decision-making role by drawing on similar experiences and skills. She now feels her knowledge of water and rivers in the community has increased, as she progresses with her new role.

Both Crystal and Maria are aware that confidence is not a binary, on-off characteristic. Instead, it requires of them a continual process of acknowledging strengths, identifying areas for improvement, taking action to engage in new experiences, and, overall, having a humble, "willing to learn", yet strong, opinion of self. As Rosa noted, although confidence is continually developing, a certain threshold of confidence is needed when taking the first steps in being involved in public activities, such as government decision-making:

> I am still talking about trying to get women involved in local government by pointing out things to them that they are already doing and saying [the things that are required]. 'Well you've got a brain and God didn't give you a brain unless he intended you to use it.' Just because they think, "I don't know anything about that", and, okay, I readily admit that when I got on council I didn't know which end of the grader was the front but ... to know whether or not the road

> needs grading - women drive on the roads and they will tell you if a road is dangerous without being able to tell you how the grader actually [works] [Rosa, 50 – 59, South West].

Labonte (1997) echoes Rosa's sentiment that a positive approach and commitment to building skills is needed to develop confidence and to self empower. He writes,

> If we fail to look for people's gifts – in ourselves, our colleagues, those with whom we work – we simply reinforce or extend the idea that people are powerless to make a difference (Labonte, 1997, p. 33).

Empowered rural women value their own uniqueness as decision-makers, and value the unique contributions they can make. In particular, rural women value the way they make decisions, how they relate to people, and their skills. Dora values her own experience as a decision-maker, even though this expertise is not normally acknowledged as a criterion when applying for committee membership:

> I don't think it is necessarily an education level. I mean I left school at 15 and so did my husband, but what I've learnt since, equals a 1000 times more than what I could have learnt if I had have stayed at school an extra three years. The only thing is, it limits you when you go for certain things such as committees. It tends to put you into a category that you are not as bright because you didn't go to school. Maybe the criteria they are using are really quite inappropriate [Dora, 30 – 39, Kimberley].

By being open to new experiences, such as government decision-making, and by taking up public positions, rural women indicate that they received new insight into finance, an increase in their personal networks, and a better understanding of how the government works. Maja describes her new understanding of government funding mechanisms,

> It was a very worthwhile experience, loved every minute of it. I resigned because I felt I had done enough after six years but it is something that I really feel; that most people should spend at least one term on local government so they see where the funding comes from, the problems that local governments have in making decisions with forward thinking and planning and raising loans and that type of thing [Maja, 50 – 59, Kalgoorlie-Esperance].

Crystal also noted how her involvement in government decision-making increased her networks and her awareness of government processes, *'I have learnt a lot about networking. ... I have learnt an incredible amount about the way government's work'* [Crystal, 30 – 39, South West]. These women's new experiences and awareness are valuable as they have stronger, more extensive, networks and a greater understanding of how the government system works when instigating change.

Unique, decision-making qualities valued by rural women in this research include their ability to simultaneously take a broad, holistic and detailed perspective; to include logical reasons and feelings; to be lateral thinkers when formulating solutions; and not to tolerate "game-plays" or politics. Rural women also brought their capacity to relate to other people into their participation in government decision-making as they: took a nurturing role; focussed on "win-win" co-operative situations instead of being competitive; were open to change; were willing to share information; and took on grass-roots work rather than being a figure head. Skills that rural women valued about themselves included their ability to look at a situation from someone else's perspective (including people from different cultures); and having good communication skills, particularly listening skills. Women's and rural women's unique, holistic approach and their diverse way of relating to issues are qualities are also noted in government decision-making literature (Alston, 1998a; Alston, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998; SCARM, 1998; Wilkinson & Alston, 1999).

Rather than debating the extent to which the above decision-making qualities are unique to rural women, the point made here is that empowered rural women value what they believe to be **their** unique and different qualities. It is from this personal, self-worth-appreciating and confident position that rural women are most likely to move into the public arena of social action and / or government decision-making. This private-public movement of gaining sufficient self-confidence to instigate action signifies personal empowerment. A woman's confidence in herself sustains her work in situations that are challenging. Michelle articulated the importance of a woman having self-confidence when tensions arise between males and females in government decision-making.

> There have been females on council but they haven't had the strength to carry it through. You have one female against nine males and of

> course she is the odd one out. ... They [men on the council] have a bravado you might say, which is false bravado with some issues, but it is enough to intimidate. If that woman doesn't understand that it is just pure intimidation then she could quite easily back down. She must be very sure of her argument and she must also be able to stand her ground. It's almost a form of school yard bullying but it [resistance] is definitely possible. You will find a lot of women haven't the strength of a voice or speech to compete with a man. If a man wants to make himself heard, more often than not it's far easier for him to make himself heard than for a woman to make herself heard. So she has to be very, very sure of what she is on about [Michelle, 40 – 49, Kalgoorlie-Esperance].

Covey (1999) argues the importance of personal development in leadership. The importance of valuing one's own abilities and credentials is so significant that some women opposed the appointing of "token" women to committees, for the sake of having rural women represented. Like many of the rural women interviewed, Crystal and Betty argued the importance of not adopting a quota system approach to including women on committees. Crystal says, *'It is really important that females aren't just put on the board as a token type situation. It is really important that they are genuinely valued for their contribution* [Crystal, 30 – 39, South West]. In a similar vein, Betty noted, *'Don't just select women because they happen to be women. There are a lot of very intelligent women out there, and no-one knows anything about them'* [Betty, 50 – 59, Mid West].

Labonte's (1997) "hardware and software" approaches to participation, positions a quota system as a "formal hardware structure" to increasing rural women's involvement. In contrast with the hardware quota approach, genuinely valuing rural women's contribution is a software approach to increasing their involvement as it is 'primarily concerned with the nature of the relationship between people in the decision-making moment' (Labonte, 1997, p. 48). However, Covey (1999) and Labonte, both emphasise the need to integrate software approaches with hardware approaches, as 'good hardware without any software is merely potential, but not actual, "empowerment" (Labonte's 1997, p. 49). The integration of hardware and software approaches is key to rural women's empowerment within the government system.

Following on from the need to build rural women's self-confidence and their perceptions of self-worth, the rural women interviewed for this study argue that

empowered women are also proactive. Proactive women are characteristically "doers"; they persevere with action despite resistance or barriers; they become involved in activities; challenge current practices (while proposing alternatives); and they take risks by being involved in new experiences. Rosa and Sally, respectively, illustrate their perseverance in proposing alternative actions to those championed by the status quo. Rosa reflects, *'So I lost the argument but I won it later. But then it cost us more money'* [Rosa, 50 – 59, South West] and Sally shares *'I should keep chipping'* [Sally, 40 – 49, South West].

Rural women's confidence and proactiveness communicate their experiences of empowerment. Victoria and Sally, provide as evidence of the importance of these qualities. Victoria proudly says,

> And so you start talking about leadership and what it really means. Now they are saying "Yeah you know she is right". And that was a real highlight for me, to have them turn around in their thinking. But it has taken my persistence for two years to keep on, not to give up [Victoria, 40 – 49, Great Southern].

Sally also shares her rewarding experience of persevering with building a community playground,

> Many city people will come down and say "It is a great playground, who designed it?" Well the mums did, we sat down, worked out what we wanted for the kids. The Shire said there was no money in the budget, so we filled out grant applications. We baked cakes, did the usual things, catered dinners, and we've got 30,000 dollars of play ground equipment for the kids [Sally, 40 – 49, South West].

Victoria and Sally's stories illustrate that a woman's confidence and proactiveness are necessary if she is to persevere with taking action despite obstacles. As reflected in the women's movement and the history of suffrage (Haines, 1992; Robinson & Richardson, 1997), these empowerment qualities have the capacity to transform the macro systemic barriers – for example, by challenging the policies of the government system.

Labonte's (1997) community development approach of 'encouraging people to teach one another' (p. 56), is an empowering strategy for increasing participation. Rural women also identified with the benefits of learning from, and being supported by, others. Rural women suggested the keys to empowerment often included

seeking a mentor and support. Crystal and Vicky, outline the importance of having mentors and a support system in relation to their new decision-making roles:

> I have been really fortunate in the people that I have worked with have been very supportive of me. Two years, on I now feel really quite confident, but for the first six months I was a gibbering mess and in fact, for me, it was awful because it clouds your vision and your brain; because you are so nervous. [Crystal, 30 – 39, South West].

Vicky comments,

> Because a lot of high words are being used and they don't know what those words mean, sometimes I don't know what the damn words mean, so you need to have that person there to understand. ... Yeah but if you haven't got that person to support you, then somebody else might pipe up and say "Yeah, well I agree with what so-and-so said over there". Otherwise someone else says, "No that's irrelevant". Well it might be irrelevant for them but not to me *[Vicky, 60 – 69, Kalgoorlie-Esperance].*

Providing mentors and a support network enables new members entering the system to develop the courage to take control of their own life and progress public-community issues. This mentoring process helps rural women, new to decision-making, to feel comfortable in their role. In turn, this creates flexibility in the decision-making system, so that rural women, who have been part of the system for a long time, can move on into new, decision-making roles, knowing that there are more women with whom they can share the decision-making responsibilities. It is this collegial process that benefits the whole community, as more people develop personally and share their responsibilities allowing themselves and others to be actively involved in developing their communities and public amenities.

Empowerment is a critical pre-requisite for rural women's involvement in government decision-making processes. Two key stepping stones for rural women's empowerment are their continuing personal development, which is predominantly linked to their confidence; and their continuing public commitment to creating change. A rural woman's ability to go out into the public arena comes with her strength of knowing and valuing herself: valuing her uniqueness; valuing her needs; identifying the areas and issues in which to create change; and constantly seeking

ways to improve and support organisational and decision-making gifts in herself as well as others.

3.2.3 Summary: Factors driving rural women's involvement

In summary, the driving forces for rural women's involvement in government decision-making are rural women's passion to create change in their area of interest, and their empowerment. As Covey (1999) suggests, it is in the mastery of the self, through confidence and action-oriented behaviour, that a rural woman can move forward to create change in the public and private arenas of her life, and consequently fulfil her role as a change agent. Rural women's desire for change and their empowerment are strongly linked. These findings are consistent with the foundations of the women's movement, which focused on empowering "grass roots" women to become aware of their strengths and to be proactive in changing their environment (Haines, 1992; Robinson & Richardson, 1997). These motivating factors are a strong foundation upon which rural women can build to challenge broader systemic factors such as the government culture. Labonte (1997) concludes that it is through valuing our own and other's gifts that motivated people unite to claim their power and make a difference.

3.3 Factors Impeding Rural Women's Involvement

The following individual factors impeding many rural women from involvement in government decision-making have been well-documented (Alston 1998a; Alston, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998; SCARM, 1998; Wilkinson & Alston, 1999). The rural women interviewed identified three impediments affecting involvement in government decision-making. These were:

- a lack of confidence;
- limited resources such as time, money, and support; and
- the formalistic and gendered organisational processes.

Whilst these three factors are interlinked, rural women's experiences of each of these factors will be discussed separately.

3.3.1 Lack of confidence

For some of the rural women interviewed, their lack of confidence is a major obstacle to taking part in government decision-making. This is evident in women feeling they have little or nothing to offer; not taking risks or planning actions; and feeling pessimistic about the overall outcome of their involvement. Justine reflects on how a lack of confidence contributes to rural women not taking on the public role of participating in government decision-making.

> At my age I am reasonably confident. ... There are some younger ones who I think would have the potential. I think we've had some girls marry into the community who have come from really quite responsible locations and professions. We need to get them involved too, because you don't like that expertise to just cut-off. ... The same people do crop-up on committees and perhaps I would have to put myself in that category too. Although you try very hard not to, I can think of one or two others who are in the same position. Give those sort of people who just might not think that they have the skills, but if they looked closely they probably have. Just give them that confidence to go ahead. It is an issue to try and draw people out and make them realise their own things they have to offer, their own potential [Justine, 40 – 49, South West].

Justine acknowledges the connection between rural women's lack of confidence and their lack of participation in public roles. This impediment appears to be the flipside of the drivers previously discussed.

Elna outlines how a lack of confidence deters women from becoming involved in a government decision-making role, particularly if those women wish to raise contentious issues.

> Yes that's right. It is important to have that support. When I got on the council I caused a big stir because I didn't really care what the men thought. I wanted to say what I wanted to do and I had a lot of conflict. If a woman can do that then you're okay, but a lot of the women don't have that confidence. They are worried about what the men are going to think or say [Elna, 50 – 59, Gascoyne].

Alston (2000) links rural women's lack of confidence to the oppressive "boys' club" culture of government. Alston (2000) states,

> The barriers and constraints they [rural women] face as a result of the macro-level gender order and the micro-level gender regime relations make putting themselves forward for leadership seem impossible (p.182).

Rural women can compound their lack of confidence by having high, and often unrealistic, expectations of the requirements of the government decision-making role. These high expectations are experienced particularly by women who do not prioritise their own opinions; do not appreciate the learning nature of the decision-making role; and have an idealistic perception of the role. Pam, a novice in the government decision-making process, illustrates her naivety by adopting a perfectionist approach, and by assuming that the decision-maker makes the "right" decisions and knows a lot about the topic. She fails to acknowledge the learning component in decision-making roles and appears to be unaware of the important political implications of having a range of people involved in making government decisions. Pam outlines her view of a government decision-maker as;

> Someone who knows a lot about the topic to be able to make the right decision, whether it be male or female. Well you've obviously made the right decision if the job gets done right or the outcome is the right outcome I suppose [Pam, 30 – 39, Gascoyne].

Maria's reflection affirms the learning nature of the decision-making role in committees, and the difficulties inherent in the government decision-making culture. She started out on a committee not knowing much about elements of the work, and made sure that she did her preparation so that she was "not made a fool of". Maria adopted the policy of only speaking on areas she felt confident about:

> Providing you know what you're talking about it's not an issue. It's only a problem if you don't know what you're talking about and you go in cold and you're just asking to be made a fool [of], which happens. Then that person will never do it again and, realistically, you probably lose good people whether they are male or female by that happening. ... Well I think, if you get onto any sort of a committee, you must make sure that you have all the background for whatever it is, for whatever committee you are on, and that you fully understand whatever it is that the goals are. That you are fully briefed, either before meetings ... so that you know what's going on. I guess that's purely communication [Maria, 40 – 49, Kimberley].

In comparison to Maria's experience of learning in the role, Linda, who has been involved in government decision-making for years, demonstrates an unrealistic expectation regarding rural women who may be considering entering a decision-making role for the first time. This is because Linda makes the assumption that all new members need to have full knowledge before they enter the system. Linda states,

> There is no way, personally, I would apply for a position like that unless I'd had some sort of experience because I believe you would probably be wasting everybody's time. I really feel you need to have a bit of knowledge about what you're going to do .... going onto boards, yes, you need to know the rules and regulations, how to run a meeting and how meetings are conducted. It would be up to, if the individual is thinking of serving on a committee, for their benefit, to find out how these things happen and learn about it because you'd be going in green: wouldn't have an idea at all [Linda, 60 – 69, Kalgoorlie-Esperance].

Both Maria's and Linda's comments express the intense pressure on committee members to know meeting procedures and agendas, so that they are not ridiculed. For some rural women these expectations can be daunting, and may deflate a woman's confidence, making her feel incapable of taking on a government decision-making role.

The issue here is that when a woman takes on a decision-making role there is new information and content that she needs to learn. The issue for a rural woman is how and when she should access this new information: before she applies for the role, or by learning on the job. Rural women's confidence hinges upon demystifying idealised perceptions that they need to be well informed on government meeting procedures and content before they enter the system. As Alston (2000) argues, rural women government decision-makers have high expectations placed upon them from current members, and the media, when they become members of the government system.

More rural women might feel comfortable taking on these responsibilities if they can explore and construct their own meanings for "government decision-maker", and appreciate the opportunity to learn the nature of the government decision-making role. This observation is in-line with previous research that recommends recognising 'the value of women' since this is likely to differ from 'the

traditional ideal of male leadership' (Alston, 2000, p. 183), and they can value and have confidence in how they want to be involved in this role.

Given previous research (Alston, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998; Haslam McKenzie, 1997) that demonstrates rural women are major contributors to their industries and their rural communities, it is intriguing that rural women see lack of confidence as a major obstacle to rural women's involvement in government decision-making. Alston (2000) concludes that women's confidence should be understood in the broader context of the government system. She writes, *'many women do not have confidence because it is not given to them! ... Under similar conditions, few men would feel comfortable about leadership roles'* (p. 182). The interrelationships between women's levels of confidence, and the other broader impeding factors, will be explored at the end of the chapter.

In summary, this research highlights the importance of facilitating the development of rural women's confidence and their empowerment. This is because rural women refer to a lack of confidence as an impediment, and perceive having such confidence as a driver to rural women's involvement in government decision-making. Whilst appreciating the broader, impeding factors that interrelate with a woman's confidence, confidence is an anchor that grounds many rural, women leaders in their public decision-making role. A rural woman's confidence enables her to stand solid in her public office, working with others, and at the same time challenging the status quo.

3.3.2 Limited resources available: Time, money, and support

Resources of time, money, and support are required if rural women are to participate in government decision-making. These public demands are in direct competition with private demands on the same resources from the rural women's current business, careers, family and personal responsibilities. Linda, a long time councillor and shire president, who does not have a lot of competing commitments, outlines the importance of balancing work, career, parental and partner roles with decision-making commitments:

> Unless you know you can spare that time, that you're committed and that you can manage your work, your job, your home and your family and your man ... there is no point in becoming a councillor. If you're not going to come to the meetings, and you're not going to

have any input, and there is sometimes conflict as some guys get upset if their wives are away leaving things and vice-a-versa. I mean, it happens with the wives too, you know, the guys spend a lot of time on council meetings. ... Each time they come to a meeting it is a long way to travel so it's okay for ladies to live in town but if they live out of town it's the travel, then they probably have good child support as well as support from their husband and also a knowledge of what you are going to be involved in and how much time it takes, how much commitment you need [Linda, 60 – 69, Gascoyne].

Pam, who currently does not have a formal government decision-making position, outlines the practical impossibility of becoming involved in these commitments whilst she has a young child:

> I think a lot comes down to having children because it is more of an effort to try and go to a meeting with a child, or a couple of children, because there is all these meetings that I would love to go to but if they offered child minding facilities it would be great. They probably would get a lot more women involved, but it is just too hard to try and take children. ... I suppose there is no reason why the husband can't stay home and look after the child while the lady goes to the meeting, but I mean it just never works out that way [Pam, 30 – 39, Gascoyne].

Alston's (2000) research also finds 'that the most cited factor assisting women's leadership aspirations is the support received from others' (p. 119). The research reported here finds rural women identify two issues that exacerbate the situations in which they need support. The first is that rural people require more resources when they take-on a government decision-making role, and second, even though they need more support, there is less infrastructure support available to rural women than to women in metropolitan areas, as there are minimal community services available in rural, remote and regional areas in WA.

Rural women note that, compared to women in the city, additional time, money, energy and support are required for them to be involved in government decision-making forums since there are greater distances to travel to attend meetings, and the channels of communication to keep in touch with committee members, with people they represent, and in sourcing information are much more costly. Dora indicates how costly and time-consuming the decision-making role can be:

> I really enjoyed it. Occasionally I found it hard to keep-up with. It is costly because of our isolation. You would end-up phoning people

> during the six months. We have a meeting every six months. With issues that came up in between, you would be on the phone. ... Every time we'd lose a chair person or a secretary it is a hell of a job replacing them. It's not that there is ten people going for it and we all vote on it. It is get down on your knees and beg somebody that is going to do the darn job. Because we are all flat-out and we are all working harder. The women are often trying to do not only their own house, but teach the kids as well, and they are flat-out as it is. They don't particularly want it and they certainly don't need another, dirty great hunk of paperwork dumped on them [Dora, 30 – 39, Kimberley].

Jennifer shares how she had to quit her government decision-making role as it was too much with all her other commitments. However, she intends to get back to participating in due course because she found her involvement personally valuable:

> I'm off them [committees] all now. I just found the workload too much ... with the Aboriginal community moving away and I would sort of do the books for them, plus the tourist side, plus we had these safaris plus the cattle side of it - just an overload. I suppose I just felt that I needed a couple of year's break. And, I feel, I just didn't have the time to do the job properly. And, on the other hand, I sort of miss it, because when you are on the committee you are involved aren't you? Once you get off you tend to lose track of things. But, hopefully, that won't happen, in the next year or two. I hope to get back on it [Jennifer, 50 – 59, Kimberley].

Rural women's involvement in their local community, businesses, family and farming tend to mean that demands on them are already at a high level without the extra burden of government decision-making roles. With the pressure of commercial businesses, seasonal routines, and difficult economic times in rural WA, many women comment that expanding their commitments further to encompass participation in government decision-making would lead to even higher personal and family pressures. Three rural women, Betty, Carmel and Jennifer (who all live at least ten hours driving-time from the capital city, Perth) indicate how the decision-making role adversely affects their resources of time and money. Commitments demanded by their farming and their businesses also affect their ability to contribute to government decision-making. As Betty comments, *'It is too expensive, we can't afford it, it is too far, you lose a day or two or three, and then you've got to catch up'* [Betty, 50 – 59, Mid West].

Carmel reflects,

> Why would you volunteer your time and 300 dollars to join a committee when you're not going to get paid for it? Like, you are better off having someone who lives in Bunbury do it, or Geraldton, because they are closer. That is a big thing. John[5] is part of the Pastoral Committee but every time he goes to Perth it comes out of our pocket. That, in itself, is hard. I mean for us to drive to Perth it is about nine to ten hours [Carmel, 20 - 26, Mid West].

Jennifer indicates how she would have to reduce her family and business commitments in order for her to be involved in government decision-making during the busy tourism season:

> Well, I suppose whatever it is, I think that you need at least four meetings a year. I think with two it's not really enough, you don't get that continuity. So, if we had four, at least two of those would fall in the busy time so it would be hard to get away [Jennifer, 50 – 59, Kimberley].

Rural women argue that taking on a government decision-making role becomes unmanageable given the absence of local services, lack of close-by family support, and a lack of support networks in their community. This was particularly true for some rural women who have no electricity, only generator power, and have no child-care facilities or help with children available, whilst they are travelling to and from meetings in the city. The general perception was that participation in state, government decision-making processes inappropriately drew on women's personal and family resources. Such participation involves juggling excessive demands. Margo outlines the inappropriate impact this has on her family and her life, as well as upon other women she has listened to:

> The local council asked me to be on council last elections and I just said "No". "Oh child-care is provided", they said. But child-care might be provided for meetings but it is not provided for the other eight committees that you go on. So in this area, to drive 100 kilometres to go to a meeting, then find child-care, that is an hour out of your kid's day anyway. Then say a four hour meeting and another hour to travel back, it's not fair. So you have to think of your family and social consequences as well [Margo, 30 – 39, Great Southern].

[5] Not his real name.

It appears the government system incorrectly assumed Margo has support to attend the additional activities required by the government decision-making role.

Toni, a local community worker, shares Margo's view on the importance of organising child-care facilities so that rural women can participate in local activities;

> The first thing women would say is "What am I going to do with my kids?" They need to have an answer. It isn't always necessary. For the last course I think we had two kids we were looking after, so there were six or seven of them who didn't need that facility. But it has always got to be there because it's the first thing that they are concerned about and they want to know who is looking after them. ... sometimes it may not be needed, they will make other arrangements if they can. But if it's there they'll use it and it does encourage them to come in more [Toni, 50 – 59, Great Southern].

Rural women interviewed for this research emphasised that the government decision-making role needs to fit into their life and not the other way around; particularly given the delicate balancing act which so many rural women perform. Previous research (Alston, 1998c; Haslam McKenzie, 1997) has also documented that rural women have little or no spare time as they are already committed to other family, work, and community responsibilities. Lyn indicates how women with busy schedules just cannot fit the decision-making role into their lives:

> I could go on, and on, and on. These are women whose talents aren't being tapped; they are wonderful mothers, wonderful partners for their farmer husbands. They have got so much to offer. These are women who have got a lot to offer, yet women who haven't really got the time [Lyn, 40 – 49, South West].

Linda (retired, and a widow) confirms the large time demands of her decision-making role:

> I work very hard for the shire. I go into the office every morning, do my paperwork. If people know I'm there they can ring me, they can approach me. I go and have lunch at the senior citizens', over the road there, about once a month so I keep in touch with them. While school is in, I rotate myself every Friday morning or nearly every Friday morning. If I'm not at a meeting I rotate myself around the school assembly and keep in touch with the schools and kids and the principals and teachers and I serve approximately 24 committees in town. And, of course, you're always, you're like an ambassador for this town. You know I love [this town] and I just want the best for

> [this town] so that's what I try to achieve. I give it my all. ... I've made it a full-time job [Linda, 60 – 69, Gascoyne].

Linda's dedication to her decision-making role would be impossible for many rural women who have family or work commitments. Whilst the relatively older women interviewed did not experience resource impediments, these women acknowledged that lack of resources was a problem for many rural women who have demanding roles, particularly women who live considerable distances from the capital city (Perth) and have child-rearing responsibilities. Women, who live in places far from the city, indicated that they have already been using teleconferencing facilities to address the problems raised by time and travel costs for state and city meetings.

In summary, this research has identified similar issues to those found by numerous previous studies (Alston, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998; Haslam McKenzie, 1997; SCARM, 1998): rural women in Australia are already overworked with their multiple roles and responsibilities, leaving few spare resources and little support for them to become involved in a government decision-making role. It is important both to decrease the demands of the government decision-making role, and provide more resources to ease the pressure of rural women's commitments.

This study highlights two groups of rural women who require specific attention as they have few resources available for government decision-making positions:

- the younger (30 to 49 year old), rural women who bear most of the child-rearing responsibilities and who, in this study, are the least involved in state government decision-making; and
- women who live in isolated rural areas and far away from the capital city, Perth.

Unless these rural women's issues are addressed, their participation in government decision-making will remain low. Involvement will be mainly restricted to older women, who have more access to resources and fewer claims upon those resources. Such an imbalance in the representation of rural women is likely to lead to a situation where the same few rural women are extensively involved in many

decision-making committees, ultimately resulting in them becoming over-burdened. This situation also leads to a lack of diversity of rural women in government decision-making.

3.3.3 The formalistic and gendered organisational processes

> Opportunities are there now that weren't there before. But I think in an area like ours, we still have the attitude that a woman can be intimidated. And, if that is the case, then it is not true democracy at all [Michelle, 40 – 49, Kalgoorlie-Esperance].

Rural women tend to perceive the culture of government decision-making as formalistic and gendered. They suggested that there were many women who did not want to be involved in government decision-making because of this culture. In particular, rural women found the culture to be intimidating, separate from them, based on white, male values, and inflexible. Numerous researchers have documented the "boys' club", government culture as an obstacle for rural women's involvement in decision-making (Alston, 2000; Alston, 2003; Dimopoulos & Sheridan, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998; Fisher & Hutchinson, 1998; SCARM, 1998; Wilkinson & Alston, 1999). Alston (2000) concludes

> By far the most difficult obstacle for women is the male culture of agriculture and the bias against women suggesting it is a far greater obstacle than is currently understood by many Board Chairs and others in power (p. 119).

Alston (2000) makes the point that it is the gender order within the government system that creates gendered processes that disenfranchise women. Alston (2000) refers to Connell's (1987) definition of gender order as 'the macro-level historically structured power relations between women and men' (p.37). The women in this research reiterate the presence of these gendered, government process. With so few women being part of the system, or feeling aligned with the government system, many respondents referred to it as a "man's place", or a "boys' club". This is how Lyn sees the nature of political lobbying:

> I've often thought that I would be interested in becoming involved in major decision-making, but quite frankly the bull shit puts me off. The game playing. Women don't like to play games. Women don't particularly like to lobby and get a group of people. They would prefer to place their case and have it judged on its merits, where men

> seem to have this [lobbying mentality]. I suppose women derogatorily refer to it as the "old boys' club", where you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. Even if I don't agree with what you are proposing, "I'll scratch your back because you've scratched mine". I think women really just can't be bothered, I think they just find it so petty [Lyn, 40 – 49, Kalgoorlie-Esperance].

Vera and Sally, respectively, also refer to the macro government decision-making system and processes being gendered, noting that some women can also "fall into the trap" of playing the same "boys' club" games. As Vera and Sally indicate, some women choose to play the same male-dominated game, which is just as off-putting as a male engaging in political lobbying behaviour. Vera comments,

> The pattern is not, it's not just men that have that pattern, there are women, too, because they buy into the way things are done and sometimes you feel that you can't make any progress unless you do adopt [these patterns], but you can choose not to [Vera, 40 – 49, South West].

Sally's concern is that there is no difference in government decision-making processes if women choose to play the same gendered game as men,

> Everybody said, 'Oh, the Shire will be great now you've got five women.' Well for the most part [it] might as well [have been men], you know, there is not a lot of difference sometimes in rural men and rural women [Sally, 40 – 49, South West].

This research proposes that it is necessary for research and policy to not only address ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making, but also to address ways that government decisions are made. This would lead to a new government system that is not based on the gendered processes that researchers have documented as the "boys' club" game (Alston, 2003).

The male dominance of the culture is further confirmed by rural women's experience of their voices being seriously considered only if they are supported or validated by a male in the system: *'Yes, if a woman said something publicly and if the man backed her up, then it would be taken more seriously'* [Elna, 50 – 59, Gascoyne]. This is also the perception of another woman: *'I've been to speak at some organisations and I have felt that they have dismissed what I have said until they have had verification from a man'* [Crystal, 30 – 39, South West].

Tanya and Vicky, respectively, comment that even though there are relatively more women entering the government decision-making process, these women are still seen as a novelty, which has many alienating effects for female members in the system. Tanya explains,

> I don't know, maybe I've been seeing more women on committees. .... It is really hard to say. I just think that men don't trust women. I don't generally feel hard done by as a woman, but I have seen it. It happens in the army as well. I mean it's a "boys' club" and politics tends to be a big "boys' club". They give jobs to their friends and colleagues. Whereas women aren't "seen" to be as steady as [men], or able to do the job, I suppose. ... It takes women to step outside of that traditional female role ... it still does seem quite masculine to get into that sort of area [Tanya, 30 – 39, Gascoyne].

Vicky shares her experience as an Aboriginal woman,

> If I was invited to a local government meeting, or any Aboriginal women [were], and they didn't know anybody they would still feel scared, thinking, "Hell, who are all these hob nobs? They are going to be talking about all these things. I wouldn't have a bloody clue what they are talking about." It is very frightening, if you have to go to a meeting like that, and you don't know anybody, you don't know what they are going to talk about and does it relate to you or your community [Vicky, 60 – 69, Kalgoorlie – Esperance].

Alston (2000) concludes 'with indigenous women, racism dominated and permeated all discussions. ... The gender order is effectively enforced for aboriginal women as with non-aboriginal women' (p.207-8). Given the specific focus of the study is to examine gender, and there was only one Aboriginal informant in the study, it is acknowledged that not analysising race is a limitation. Alston's finding that the gender order is experienced regardless of race was also found in the study. Both Tanya and Vicky share similar experiences of feeling alienated by the majority of "typical", government decision-makers. Tanya and Vicky's feelings are no surprise given previous research findings (Alston, 2000; Wilkinson & Alston, 1999). Older, white males predominate on GBCs, and many male decision-makers stereotype rural women as lacking confidence and assume that this is why they are not involved in government decision-making. The rural women in this study provide insights into the significance of this context for them. They describe the power of male committee members who support each other in a voting bloc. This is

significant when the majority vote prevails in decision-making, as in Australia. The policy-making challenge is to find ways in which rural woman, who are in the minority, can be engaged to change the status quo and to move from the predominant "boys' club" culture. How can women feel empowered to contribute to the process even before the climate change is seen? The results reported here highlights the vicious cycle where the culture hinders rural women from entering government decision-making, resulting in few rural women in the system, which then leads to a minority influence where rural women find it hard to change gendered processes to allow more rural women to feel empowered to participate.

Some women found government decision-making processes alienating since these were very different to the ones with which they were familiar. Vicky, for example, commented on how the processes differed from Aboriginal ways of meeting:

> Aboriginal people themselves, when they get up and go to a meeting in their own community, they will get up and talk whenever they want to talk. You try and calm them down a bit but they just want to make sure they get their point across. Now the person on the other side have to let them have their say to make sure they are comfortable in what they say, to try and get their point across to the meeting. A lot of meetings I've been to, Aboriginal people have gotten up and if they can't grasp what you are trying to say and they want to know, you've got to make sure that you explain it in simple terms to them; the procedures or what you are talking about at the meeting. You are going to have to let them get their point across and make sure you understand what they are trying to say, and say, "Okay, is this what you mean?" and if they say, "Yeah" or "No", or whatever, just make sure it comes straight across to you before you move on. Then that person will feel comfortable. "Okay that person knows what I am talking about", and then they will sit down. ... And another thing too, that person is still shy and still [has to] have an adviser there because if they can't really understand what's really going on they can just turn to their adviser and say "Hey what did they mean?" I can then understand what he's talking about and, preferably, if the traditional people are going to meetings, they need to have their interpreter with them. You know like an adviser, an interpreter, to talk in their own language, to make sure that they can get their point across to the meetings [Vicky, 60 – 69, Kalgoorlie – Esperance].

Vera, an Anglo-Australian, rural woman, also experiences the formal processes of government decision-making as alien:

> The reflective listening process I don't think happens in highly structured committees. What happens is somebody comes in to either support it or oppose it. Rather than saying, "I think what I hear you saying is this: [pause]. Is that right?" ... So, it's to do with people's communication skills and, often, in those committees there is no time for that. It is boom, boom, boom. I say this, you say this and somebody makes a decision. That is a very simplistic way of putting it, but do you see what I mean? It is not only the process of communication, but it is how people understand and listen to each other. I was struck when I came down here how, when you had a committee, there was an expectation you would have a chairperson, treasurer, etcetera, and you would have motions. You know the old fashioned [idea], have this motion and everybody agrees. I couldn't believe that they still did this anywhere, because anything I had been involved in had become group dynamics, group discussion, everybody sort of eventually reaches the point of, "Oh yeah, we all agree on that, let's go with that." Here, I was back in the process of people [who] were still putting up motions and doing it that way. I think a lot of that still happens. I mean, it still clearly happens in local government. I think it takes an awful lot longer to do it by [the] discussion process but you get a good result and everyone is committed to it [Vera, 40 – 49, South West].

The findings of this study endorse other, Australian, research (Alston, 2000) which indicates that rural women find the way decisions are made in government to be alien, not focused on achieving the best solution to the problem, and coloured by the predominant "boys' club" camaraderie. Many of the rural women in the present study preferred individuals to make decisions based on background information, facts, and issues, rather than adopting and responding to political lobbying: "boys' club" processes.

Rural women found the government decision-making culture to be separate, or different from, the values and ways they would normally discuss issues and make decisions. In general, as Sally, Vera, and Toni indicate, their experience of the culture is intimidating. They perceive the decision-making system to be characterised by obscure language, formalistic processes, the predominance of masculine symbols, and an often antagonist atmosphere, with many formalities:

> I felt that I could achieve more outside the grounds of protocol and the rules and regulations and people [who] basically, are not receptive to new ideas. We were really going forward and we've just taken a giant leap back, in my eyes. And it is really frustrating [Sally, 40 – 49, South West].

Vera's view is,

> Boards can be quite intimidating for lots of reasons, and one of them is just the words they use for reports. I mean, you've probably read lots of government reports, you know what they're like, you read them and think, "Why don't they speak English"? [Vera, 40 – 49, South West].

Toni outlines the lack of faith and trust rural women have in the government decision-making system:

> Sometimes, at a meeting, you are not willing to hop out of that comfort zone to cause trouble or voice a really strong opinion about something. Young people, in particular, tend to have that lack of confidence. ... I guess they [rural women] are more involved in politics now than they were in my younger days. They are more interested in politics, but there is a lot of disillusionment with most politicians, with politics and government decisions [Toni, 50 – 59, Great Southern].

In addition, rural women perceived the system to be inflexible to change, as it tended to be closed to innovative ideas or diversity of views. Rural women's sense of being alienated from the system was further exacerbated by little access to sympathetic mentors with whom they could identify, and little support once they had entered the decision-making system. Some rural women were cautious of entering the culture of government decision-making processes, since they perceived other women as hardened by the experience, and they disliked the idea that this might happen to them. Tanya explains:

> I think women are of a caring nature, I suppose, and less out to be less ruthless, and so it goes against the perception of what women should be. So it takes women to step outside of that traditional female role and so, broken down, it still does seem quite masculine to get into that sort of area. Yeah, I mean, we've got quite a few WA female politicians but you see them getting harder and harder as they spend more time in politics. They get really hardened and squared off on the edges [Tanya, 30 – 39, Gascoyne].

Some of the rural women who are, active in their community, had direct experience and knowledge of the government decision-making system. They emphasised that many rural women, not involved in government, relied on the media, stereotypes, networks, and friends for information on the government

decision-making process. According to rural women in the study who had first hand experience, these sources of second-hand information often portrayed the system as unduly formalistic, intimidating and alienating.

Bronfenbrenner's systemic framework (1979) supports Tanya's and other rural women's experiences that describe how the macro culture has a strong influence on rural women's interpersonal and personal factors, such as the leadership they adopt, their level of confidence and the expectations of how they are to behave or not behave. It appears when rural women deviate from the culture's expectations and other people's perceptions of how women and rural women are to be in government, tensions arise for all parties. This research argues either the macro cultural system is more inclusive or tension continues to be experienced by those involved in the government system.

In comparison to the other two impediments (lack of confidence and limited resources), changing the system's culture requires a more holistic, whole-of-government effort. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) conclude that both time, and the commitment of people in the system, is necessary for cultural change to occur. Culture is the 'total range of activities and ideas of a group of people with shared traditions' (Hanks, 1991, p. 364); with members' ideas, beliefs, values and knowledge all contributing to these activities. This kind of culture is perpetuated through members transmitting and reinforcing existing values, activities and ideas (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). Given that few rural women, and few women in general, are members of the government decision-making system (Alston, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998; SCARM, 1998), rural women contribute only minimally to the creation of the government decision-making culture, its processes and values. Consequently, they feel less aligned and sympathetic towards it.

In summary, the rural women interviewed in this research found the formalistic and gendered organisational processes hinders rural women's involvement. The culture in which these processes take place are perceived as based on white, male values that are often intimidating, inflexible, and separate from rural women's ways of making decisions. As Lyn demonstrates, she feels that people responsible for the government decision-making process are not interested in her contribution:

> The first thing I find most disturbing is the fact that the women aren't taken seriously by politicians. The average politician will say, "No, that's not true, I listen to the women that speak to me." But they just don't want to speak to me. Need I say more [Lyn, 40 – 49, South West].

As Labonte (1997) argues both soft and hard change strategies that address structures and relationships, respectively, are needed when increasing people's participation. Senior government executives need to instigate a variety of initiatives if more rural women are to be involved as decision-makers. Once more women are participating in these roles they can actively work to change the culture of the system. However, given that a change in the senior executive's commitment requires a whole-of-government approach and in the current climate may be less likely to be implemented, action that addresses the other two impediments— confidence and resources — may seem less threatening to current members of the system, and may thus be more likely to be implemented. When more rural women have entered the system, they themselves have the power to change protocols to suit their needs and reflect their preferred ways of working. For example, Maja explains how she did this by bringing her children to meetings:

> When I went into council, I never hesitated to take the children with me, whether it be a road works tour, an industry tour, they knew I was going to take my children with me and there was never any problem. I was the only woman on council. Councillors had been there a long, long time and they enjoyed having the children along [Maja, 50 – 59, Kalgoorlie-Esperance].

More rural, women government decision-makers are needed for the culture to be re-aligned to suit both corporate objectives, and rural women's values. As Alston (2000) writes

> until the gender order is addressed, support structures for women established, and women-friendly discourses facilitated, women will resist placing themselves in a hostile environment (p. 182).

3.3.4 Summary: Factors impeding rural women's involvement

The factors driving rural women's involvement in government decision-making are rural women's passion for change, and their sense of empowerment. The factors impeding rural women's involvement in government decision-making are a

lack of confidence, limited resources, and the formalistic and gendered organisational processes. Whilst extensive research has documented the impeding factors, a lack of research has documented the driving factors that motivate rural women's involvement in government decision-making.

This study found empowerment and confidence are foundational to any rural woman's decision to enter the public world of government. This is reflected by the circumstances where rural women, who lack confidence, were less inclined to take, or saw themselves as less capable of taking, responsibility for acting in a public role. Whilst empowered and confident rural women may decide to enter the government decision-making process, these women then have to grapple with the question of the additional resources required to fulfil their role. This particularly affects rural women who already have extensive commitments (such as rural women with children, women who live in isolated areas of WA, business women, and women who are already overburdened with committee responsibilities). Reducing the amount of resources needed to participate in government decision-making, and providing support for those who choose to become involved, are keys to fitting the decision-making role into rural women's lives, rather than the other way around. For rural women who are confident, and who have available resources, the formalistic and gendered organisational processes is the final impediment. Many of the rural women interviewed in this research wished that the government culture would be more inclusive and flexible.

Rural women's experiences illustrate how driving and impeding factors dynamically impact on individual rural women. As Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model proposes, this was particularly so for the government culture impacting on rural women's confidence and personal commitments. For example, a rural woman who has children at home, and has working commitments, may have fewer available resources to enable her to participate in government decision-making, compared to a rural woman who has no children at home. One motivation for the research reported here is to embrace all the issues that impact on rural women's involvement in government decision-making. Hopefully, this focus will enable new ways to be developed to ensure the inclusion of a representative cross-section of rural women in the government decision-making process. Following on from this possibility is a

description of a new holistic model that can frame government decision-making processes.

3.4 The Government Decision-making Framework

A holistic framework and model bringing together all the factors discussed so far has not yet been developed and adopted. Whilst previous research has extensively documented the barriers that affect rural women's involvement in government decision-making, and while the government culture affects other barriers rural women experience (Alston, 2000; Dimopoulos & Sheridan, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998; Fisher & Hutchinson, 1998; SCARM, 1998; Wilkinson & Alston, 1999), possible solutions require more active consideration than they have received to date. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological nested framework, a Government decision-making framework has been developed using the findings of the current study. Figure 3.1 illustrates the Government decision-making framework, incorporating impeding and driving factors that affect rural women's involvement in government decision-making. This framework provides an overview of how the impeding/driving factors originate from three levels of the government decision-making system. Factors originate from the personal, interpersonal, and cultural levels of the system. The personal level focuses on the rural women's private issues, the interpersonal level is where rural women negotiate with immediate family, work or community members, and the cultural level refers to the broader organisational and gender issues that impact on women in the government decision-making system.

Table 3.2 adds further detail concerning rural women's experience at each level, and factors that influence their participation in the government decision-making process. The combination of Figure 3.1: the Government decision-making framework and Table 3.2 demonstrates that all rural women first require the presence of personal level factors as a foundation for them to enter the government system. This is because three of the five influencing factors originate from the personal level, with this level being the only one that has both driving and impeding factors.

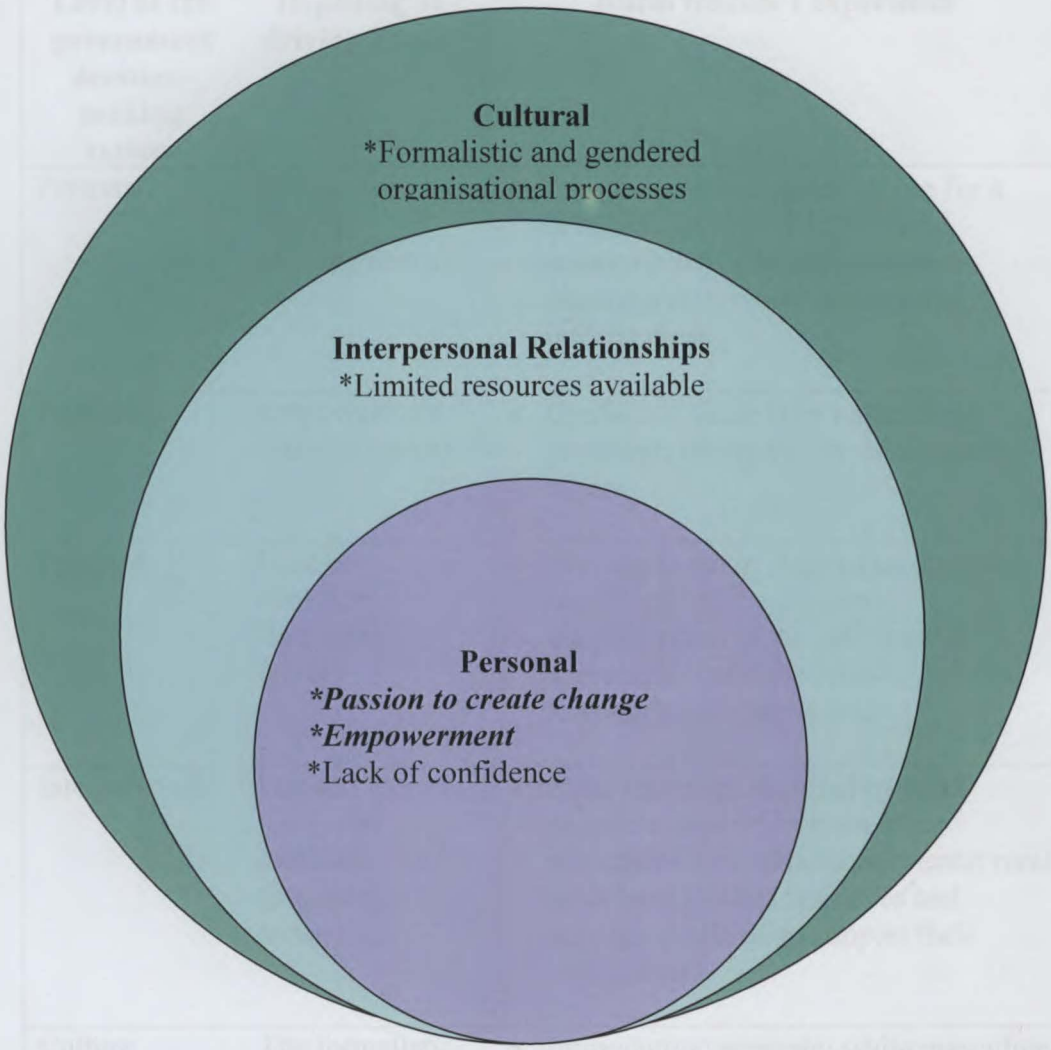

Figure 3.1 **The Government decision-making framework brings together factors that impact on rural women's involvement in government decision-making.**

Table 3.2 Rural women's experiences of government decision-making

Level of the government decision-making system	Impeding or driving Factor	Rural women's experience
Personal	Passion for change (driving factor)	• Care for self and others; desire for a better standard of living; shared responsibility; finding solutions; making a difference; and diverse interest areas.
Personal	Empowerment (driving factor)	• Confident; value their uniqueness; proactive, taking action; and mentor others.
Personal	Lack of confidence (impeding factor)	• Nothing to offer; risky to be involved; pessimistic of the outcome; misperception of the role; lack of appreciation of their opinion and the learning nature of the role.
Interpersonal	Limited resources available (impeding factor)	• Extra resources required by rural people; competition from other responsibilities and commitments; rural areas have limited resources and services available to support their involvement.
Culture	The formalistic and gendered organisational processes (impeding factor)	• Intimidating; separate; white masculine values; lack of support to enter; little direct experience; culture is hardening on the person; system is rigid in its ways.

The three levels and the driving/impeding factors in the two elements of the Government decision-making framework (Figure 3.1 and Table 3.2) are interdependent and dynamic. A change at one level will also create a change throughout the rest of the system. The "systems approach" is a new way to target and assess the development of solutions, as it is possible to ascertain how changes in one aspect of the system can be viewed as affecting changes in other levels of the system. For example, if the cultural level of the Government decision-making framework were to become less formalistic and more flexible, with rural women able to access decision-making forums from their own local community, this may reduce

the resources rural women require to participate. Reducing the resources required for participation means rural women would experience less pressure when they began to participate; and, – therefore, - have greater opportunities to be involved. This is likely to increase rural women's confidence about becoming involved, and being able to make a contribution. Consequently, a change in the flexibility of government culture directly changes the cultural level of the government system, however, the Government decision-making framework illustrates how other nested factors, - interpersonal and personal, – may also be positively affected.

Rosa offers a specific example of a dynamic interplay of factors when there is interaction between the male-dominated culture and rural women's confidence levels. Rosa's perception is that, most of the time, her self-confidence transcends gender-cultural differences:

> When I first got on local government I was the only woman [for] the first eight years. A lot of other women said "How do you put up with all those old men?" I said "Most of the time it is not relevant", and I used to forget, most of the time, that I was the only woman, because most of the time it really wasn't an issue. You were there as the elected person, who was involved in the decision-making, and most of the time the fact that I was a women, [and] all the others were men, really wasn't a problem. Just occasionally it was fairly obvious [sic] that the rest of them were different, but we do have different ways of looking at things. I don't know that women always realise that they have got something to offer and they have got a brain and can be involved in decision-making [Rosa, 50 - 59, South West].

The holistic approach of the Government decision-making framework can be effective when developing and implementing change strategies, as it provides details of the individual factors, as well as an overall "big picture" landscape. This approach is essential when planning responses and strategies to increase the diversity and representation of rural women in the government decision-making system, given that some rural women may have issues at the personal level, others at the interpersonal, others at the cultural level and still others may have issues in a combination of these levels. As Lennie's (2001) research suggests, embracing rural women's diversity is essential if rural women's voices are seriously to influence policy agendas. The power of the Government decision-making framework lies in its bringing together relevant factors that can affect sub-groups of rural women. It is

also useful for identifying new ways to increase these women's involvement in government decision-making.

Rural women in this research note that many of their WA contemporaries are well-qualified, but do not get involved because of the perceived barriers. Successive government's have failed to address the broad, holistic factors (Fisher & Hutchinson, 1998) that inhibit the participation of rural women. This means that sub-groups of rural women, - such as women who have child rearing commitments, feel excluded due to their circumstances. In turn, the system fails genuinely to embrace rural women's diversity. As women in this research have observed, there are rural women, who have a strong and confident personal foundation, who are not yet involved in government decision-making processes. Using the systems approach, the framework makes visible the personal, interpersonal and cultural areas to be addressed if the government is to encourage more rural women to participate in decision-making, without these women suffering the hardships currently experienced. Initiatives such as facilitating rural women's confidence and empowerment, providing additional support and resources (or minimising the resources required from participants), and providing more flexibility and openness in decision-making are all strategies that are likely to facilitate more rural women becoming involved in government decision-making.

3.5 Conclusion

The Government decision-making framework addresses the research question, "Why are so few rural women involved in government decision-making in WA?" The barriers – rural women's lack of confidence, limited resources, and the formalistic and gendered organisational processes – are well-documented factors impeding rural women's involvement. The driving factors – rural women's driving passion to make a difference and their empowerment – are newly-identified findings in this field of research. Whilst this research supports Covey's (1999) and Labonte's (1997) findings that personal qualities such as confidence and empowerment are foundational to rural women's decisions to take on a government decision-making role, it is clear that some rural women experience other barriers such as resource limitations and an oppressive and alienating culture of decision-making.

This research is unique in bringing together these factors in a holistic systems approach through the development of an integrated framework for government decision-making. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological nested systems, the five factors documented above (in Figure 3.1 and Table 3.2) originate from one of three levels in the system: personal, interpersonal or cultural. The advantage of bringing together all the different factors is that, for the first time, a model makes transparent to the government and other stakeholders the broad range of change initiatives needed to truly increase rural women's involvement.

Since the Government decision-making framework illustrates the interplay between different factors at different levels, it makes visible the consequences of implementing and not implementing particular change strategies. For example, if change strategies only address the personal level barriers by offering leadership training, then rural women who are confident, yet experience barriers at the interpersonal level and cultural level, will still find it difficult to be involved in government decision-making. Consequently, the framework embraces the diversity of factors that influence rural women's involvement in government decision-making, as it includes factors experienced by different rural women leaders who are involved, - and some who are not yet involved, but would like to be. The following chapter explores how this framework can be used as a basis to investigate new ways of increasing rural women's involvement in government decision-making processes.

CHAPTER 4

New Ways To Increase Rural Women's Involvement In Government Decision-Making

This chapter will develop the thesis by identifying ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making. The research question to be addressed by this chapter is, 'What are new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making in WA?' Analysis of interviews with 21 rural women will be presented to address this question. The findings include five change strategies to increase rural women's involvement. A holistic framework entitled the Change strategies framework brings together these five change strategies and relates them to the government decision-making process. The development of this new framework ensures that change strategies are grounded in rural women's experience, and that they address factors that influence rural women's involvement in government decision-making. Five principles will be presented at the end of the chapter to guide implementation of the Change strategies framework.

4.1 Five Change Strategies to Increase Rural Women's Involvement

The rural women in this study identified five specific interventions that could help increase their involvement in government decision-making. The five change strategies are:

1. create personal development opportunities for rural women;
2. support rural women's responsibilities so that they can participate fully;
3. adopt values that encourage and recognise diversity in the government decision-making system;
4. create diverse government decision-making forums; and
5. increase rural women's access to ICTs.

A discussion of each of these five change strategies follows.

4.1.1 Personal development opportunities

> Getting people involved in something, anything, unless they've got a real want to do it, is almost impossible. If they want to be [involved] but they can't, then the government might be able to help. [Dora, 30-39, Kimberley].

In these words, Dora (above) highlights the importance of rural women's personal development when considering ways to increase their involvement in government decision-making. She argues that, unless rural women have a motivation, or a reason for being involved, there is little others can do to increase their participation.

Rural women described personal development as gaining relevant knowledge and skills; developing their own leadership qualities; gaining confidence; expressing themselves; and acting on issues about which they are passionate. In particular, the women made the point that if rural women increased knowledge and skills relevant to government decision-making roles, this would increase their confidence in their abilities to take on such roles. Rural women perceived the following skills and knowledge as valuable: negotiating skills, influencing skills, debating skills, knowledge of standing orders, and how women might appropriately express their concerns, and present possible solutions, in decision-making forums. In Linda's views rural women need:

> A general knowledge of how meetings are run. You can buy books on it anyway, 'Take the Chair' is one for instance that's a good little book. It's not absolutely necessary. It just depends on how involved it's going to be, what level you know. If it's for instance, say, [a] meeting of Country Women's Association [CWA] for instance, it just depends on the people. Some people really get on well together and are very compatible and yet there are other committees and groups of people who fight and squabble all the time so that's when you'd need a firm hand, so it just depends. I mean you can coach people along, once you've been to a few meetings you can sort of learn how the meetings are conducted. It wouldn't be absolutely necessary for you to have knowledge of how state meetings are conducted. It just depends on what level - what sort of a meeting it's going to be. Those types of issues need to be addressed; as in fairly unstructured informal meetings as against really structured meetings that have got to abide. ... A lot of these board meetings must be done properly

too. You've got to make apologies first, and then read the minutes of the previous meeting, and take a vote on that and, you know, you move on down the agenda, and, you know, you have to do it properly. In local government, you must have a mover and seconder and everybody must vote. There is no abstaining from voting - it just depends on if the group has got a constitution, their own constitution, and those types of things [Linda, 60 – 69, Gascoyne].

Much of the relevant research (Alston, 2000; Dimopoulos, & Sheridan, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998), emphasises the importance of training rural women, and this was something put forward by the women themselves. Crystal explains how women in general have good communication skills compared to their male counterparts:

> Females have always been better communicators. Our world is changing. It's about communication now. Where in previous generations, it was about you doing what I say, it's now about negotiation and communication. Females have, over the generations, built up those negotiation and communication skills, and are more adept with that. It doesn't say that men can't be, they just haven't practised it [Crystal, 30-39, South West].

Maria argues that many rural women are already highly qualified. She suggests that all these highly qualified women need to do is transfer their current decision-making skills to the government environment.

> You tend to look at the problem slightly different. I don't know why that is, it's just a woman's thing, so I don't argue with it. I just let it happen. A lot of people don't think they can do it, make decisions. Well if you've got a family you make decisions the whole day, "What's for breakfast?" Get the kids to school, "What's for dinner?", "What's for lunch?", "What am I doing today?" All sorts of things, and you don't usually do one thing at a time. I have a friend on the other side of the valley. She said to me one day, she does a bit of tourist stuff, you know, makes jam and pickles and that sort of stuff and local produce, and she said, "If this fell apart I don't know what I'd do, I can't do anything." "You're an accomplished dress maker, you're an accomplished cook, what's wrong with you? You just have to be positive about what it is you can do, what are your skills". When women start looking at what their skills are, management and decision-making should be number one, because realistically you do that all day and every day. If you're home with the kids 12 years or 15 years it's pretty hard to get out there and front someone that's been in the work place getting all this stimulus, outside stimulus. I guess that's a fair bit of it, you have all this constant outside stimulus. It's making you think positively, whereas when you're home with the kids you tend to be involved with a lot of other issues. So, yeah, to

me it's a confidence thing. It's not that they lack the skills [Maria, 40-49, Kimberley].

These are somewhat different positions: in one, rural women are deficient in skills and need more training; and the other, in which rural women (in general) have the skills and abilities e.g., communication skills that then is applied to the government decision-making role. It appears that few Australian governments have addressed these different positions (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2002; Elix & Lambert, 1998; Guise, 2001). Like the SCARM report (1998), and other previous work (Alston, 2000; Williams, 2003), this study suggests that leadership programs should not necessarily assume rural women have no skills or knowledge, but rather build on women's current qualities and skills, so that they develop confidence in their skills, and can become aware of how to apply them in a government decision-making role.

In addition, it is essential that personal development change strategies be linked to changing the government decision-making culture to be more inclusive, and to value diversity. Increasing diversity also relates to training programs valuing rural women's unique leadership styles and skills. Women's knowledge and expertise are likely to differ from the majority of government decision-makers, since these are predominately males (Alston, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998; SCARM, 1998; Wilkinson & Alston, 1999; Williams, 2003). This research suggests that training programs could take a different approach. Rather than assuming rural women do not have any skills or the "right" skills for government decision-making, training programs should look to identify the skills possessed by these women in order to affirm and develop them.

The desirability of prior "moulding" is often found in the selection criteria for government decision-making roles. Rural women contributing to this research report that communication, networking skills, and life-based decision-making experience are not as valued by selectors as is previous government committee experience. With fewer rural women involved in GBCs, many more rural women are likely to rely on life experience, whilst many more males are likely to rely on previous committee experience when applying to take on additional government decision-making responsibilities

Rural women interviewed also identified some new approaches to the offering of personal development opportunities and training. These included knowledge and skills training with other rural women, having the real life experience of being in the government decision-making role, and having local access to personal development opportunities. Jennifer shares her experience of how being in a course with other women increases her confidence to learn.

> It would be really good if it was possible to have like a training course for a group of rural women because we are all a bit the same. Like, we don't feel confident and it would be easier to go in with a group of us to do something like that [Jennifer, 50-59, Kimberley].

Apart from registering a desire for relevant training courses, rural women commented that personal development would be a result of women becoming familiar with, and experiencing, government decision-making forums. Rural women argue that having a real opportunity to practice their new skills and apply their new knowledge would increase their confidence. Many women noted the importance of having flexible and informal government forums, where they could gain real life experience, and feel comfortable with their involvement. Vicky suggests:

> What would be good would be having these workshops, but having mock meetings and things like that, letting people know how the procedure is. If they don't know how the procedure is to run meetings and things like that, then of course the [sense of] intimidation will be there [Vicky, 60-69, Kalgoorlie-Esperance].

Vicky's sense of intimidation refers to decision-making members' feeling pressured to abide by government processes rather than wrongly assuming that women are actually intimidated by others if they do not know meetings procedures.

Linda, a Shire President, also affirms the benefit of learning from real life experience. She has been involved in government decision-making for many years, and notes how important her experience has been in becoming familiar with the broader rules of the government system.

> There is no way, personally, I would apply for a position like that unless I'd had some sort of experience because I believe you would probably be wasting everybody's time. I really feel you need to have a bit of knowledge about what you're going to do. ... Going onto

> boards, yes, you need to know the rules and regulations, how to run a meeting, and how meetings are conducted [Linda, 60-69, Gascoyne].

Rural women are valuing and requesting an experiential, real life component within the learning experience to facilitate rural women's participation in government decision-making. Indeed, Victoria discovered that once she learnt how the system works, she was able to tap into it and could progress her own community projects.

> You start, have a look around, and then see what you want to do. Then, almost always, there is a government program to tap into. It is just learning that process, of where the money is, what it's for. And so that is really, for me, the key [Victoria, 40-49, Great Southern].

As well as skills training, the rural women in this study sought leadership programs as a worthwhile, personal development initiative. Victoria sees leadership quality as crucial:

> I said to them the other day that, as far as I was concerned, that leadership was THE most important issue. I said where-ever I go, whether it is Landcare, or whether agriculture, or communications, or this and that, other people look for champions, people look for good models. They look for leaders so that they can show other people what is working. "What does that tell you about leadership?" It is absolutely critical [Victoria, 40-49, Great Southern].

Victoria, is not alone in this view. Other women, had participated in a specific leadership initiative for WA rural women, the *Future Leaders: Rural Women in Leadership* program. Victoria comments that the leadership program gave women the opportunity to take an active public role in pursuing an area of interest. Victoria makes particular note of her experience in investigating telehealth:

> When I was on the Future Leaders [program], our case study was on telehealth. I am just amazed and interested in telehealth because to me it is not just about health, it is more linked to the telecommunications that it provides. ... Well, first of all, they have got to understand [that it is important] to be empowered. ... And that was what I was trying to achieve with the local leadership thing. Was to say ... "come on board, see what things are about, learn to express what you think is important, learn to understand that if something is going to happen, or if you want something to happen, it is up to you to put your hand up and take part in it" [Victoria, 40-49, Great Southern].

These women strongly recommended that this (or a similar) leadership program be made accessible to rural women. Victoria also suggested changing the focus of rural women's leadership courses from a solely state-based perspective, to include local rural communities, arguing that this would accelerate rural women's involvement in decision-making. Comments from other interviewees also suggest that rural women with child-care responsibilities need personal development programs to be offered in the local context if they are to participate. Dora describes the complexities of life for rural women who have children, and who would like to attend day-long activities:

> I don't see how you would do it. I mean, it is all very well saying, "Okay the government will pay $100 a day to the woman while she is away, therefore allowing her to employ somebody to look after the kids," but it is not like being in town and popping down the road and hiring one of the other housewives that has got nothing to do for three days while you are missing. I mean, how are you going to bring somebody out here for three days? Not that I would need somebody, but as an example. It's not just a matter of, "There is a day-care centre down the road that you can hire to put your kids into" [Dora, 30-39, Kimberley].

Victoria, on her own initiative, organised an opportunity for rural women to attend a leadership program in the local community. She discusses the success of this leadership role, which also provided other rural women with an example to follow,

> Well it was persistence but also the fact that I was doing it. I just didn't talk about it. I got out and did the local leadership course after I actually thought it up. So it wasn't just that I fronted up to meetings and [was] talking about something that was really important. ... I actually designed, and funded, and ran two local leadership courses. That was the first time they have ever been run in Australia [Victoria, 40-49, Great Southern].

The Government decision-making framework developed in this thesis supports the proposition that rural women, who lack confidence, are more likely to access personal development opportunities if they are available in their local community. This is because fewer resources and less risk is involved in attending a program close to their home. The implication of extending these leadership courses

to be accessible from local rural areas means more rural women feel empowered to pursue a public leadership role.

Whilst the majority of change strategies focus on personal development programs, the main leadership program for WA rural women, *Rural Women in Leadership*, was predominately based in the capital city, Perth, and only a few rural women could be selected to participate. Of concern to rural women in WA is the fact that *Rural Women in Leadership*, and other specific rural Leadership programs, were discontinued when the state's Labor government came into power (Haslam McKenzie, 2003). This study draws attention to the continued need for leadership programs for rural women, as well as proposing that leadership programs be made accessible to rural women within their local community. Such programs might increase the likelihood that rural women will not only develop or further facilitate their leadership and confidence, but also consider participating in government decision-making roles. This will particularly be the case if the personal development training includes a self-directed component through which women can develop their skills and qualities in the context of their own lives.

In summary, this study gives rise to a new approach to leadership programs that are made accessible to all rural women by offering them in the local community. To fully empower women such programs should be advertised as building on their existing skills and leadership. This would create opportunities for a transfer of skills from private settings to public real life situations.

4.1.2 Support rural women's responsibilities

The second change strategy focuses on supporting rural women's responsibilities so that they can fit a government decision-making role into their lives. A prime focus of this change strategy is to minimise the personal and family pressures which would result from taking on a new role. Many rural women emphasised their perception that the problem of taking on a decision-making role was that it would require too much time, and too many resources, with too little in the way of support.

With the first personal development strategy expected to result in many more empowered rural women willing to take on a government decision-making role, these women would then be faced with interpersonal and cultural barriers to

participation. This, second, change strategy focuses on how the government can change gendered organisational processes to be more inclusive so that rural women can be involved without feeling burdened by their new role. A discussion of ways to support rural women's participation in government decision-making follows.

The rural women in this study suggested a number of organisational change strategies to facilitate their participation in government decision-making. These include: implementing new decision-making formats and increasing access to networks and mentors. New organisational formats that could minimise the resource demands on rural women include: providing more opportunities at a local level for rural women to participate in decision-making roles; rotating meetings to different rural locations; creating easier and cheaper ways for women to communicate and source information; providing flexible and informal forums for rural women to access and form opinions on policy issues; and restructuring the government decision-making role so that it would demand less commitment; for example, shorter committee tenures (one year), with a possible one year extension.

Pam describes how a long, three-year, government decision-making commitment is difficult for her when there are future uncertainties in her personal and business life.

> I mean if we had another child or depending, like, if we get really busy with the tourists, which we are trying to build up at the moment. I mean all those sorts of things. I suppose it's a time thing again. I mean if we have another baby, for instance, then time is obviously an issue. I would prefer less of a commitment. I just wouldn't quit half way through. You can't quit something if you're committed to something. If I knew what I was going to be doing in the next three years time then yes, I could say "I could help out or be involved in that for three years". But who knows what will happen? [Pam, 30-39, Gascoyne].

Increasing access to community networks and mentors would support rural women so that they could better balance existing demands and uncertainties with their new role. Betty, for example, refers to the importance of having a mentor or a support person to help her access and develop knowledge:

> If you have to suddenly take on the chairmanship, [it's difficult] unless you have a peer person that you can talk to, to find out what the ground rules are, without having to read through this big book, which is half rubbish [Betty, 50-59, Mid-West].

Rural women make the point that a government decision-making role becomes more manageable if strategies exist to minimise the amount of extra resources required, and facilitate the building of support networks. "More manageable" in this context means that the decision-making role fits into a rural woman's life, and not the other way around. Change is more likely to occur in ways that includes rural women's participation, if the system transforms itself so that fewer resources are required, and through encouraging rural women (and men) already in the system to be mentors for newly-recruited rural women. Although the rural women in this study did not directly refer to the provision of financial and in-kind resources as a way to increase their involvement, they did consistently refer to how many resources would be required for them to perform in the new role. Maja describes the resource issues that concern her.

> The hardest thing is to get on an aeroplane, 600 dollars. Then you've got accommodation on top of it so you are looking at 1000 dollars every time you attend a meeting. A lot of the meetings are in the voluntary form, like my museum committee work and a lot of my other committee work. So I find it very hard saying, "I am going to work for a month to pay for this trip". That's putting it bluntly. There are a lot of things I would like to become involved in but because of the distance, the travel, and that, it forbids it [Maja, 50-59, Kalgoorlie-Esperance].

Whilst rural women may not have suggested that they receive additional financial assistance, it seems warranted that some monetary exchange or support is provided given Maja's description of how a one-hour meeting for one rural women can involve exorbitant expenses extending into the hundreds of dollars. However, it is unlikely that the state government has sufficient monies, in the short–term, to fund rural women's expenses to enable them to participate in face-to-face, decision-making meetings, especially given the 18 months or so required to prepare government budgets. Therefore, strategies such as minimising the demand for resources may work better. The provision of in-kind support is more likely to make an immediate difference.

The strategies of minimising the resources required and providing in-kind support are also likely to transform the gendered, organisational processes that exclude many rural women. Previous research and programs have not fully addressed ways to support rural women so that a new decision-making role fits their lifestyle and commitments. Whilst mentor and network systems have been suggested as ways to support rural women (Elix & Lambert, 1998; SCARM, 1998), no such programs are available in WA. In any case, these programs risk being about fitting women into existing organisational structures. No mainstream, Australian government has yet discussed changing the government's decision-making formats to reduce the resources required by participants. The research reported here presents a new perspective by suggesting ways in which the government decision-making role can be made less intrusive in rural women's lives. These new ways include shorter committee tenures; local access to meetings; easier and cheaper ways of communicating such as teleconferencing; and informal and flexible decision-making forums so that rural women can more easily integrate the government decision-making role into their schedule.

In summary, whilst extensive financial support for each rural woman attending decision-making forums is an unlikely strategy in the short term, it seems practical for senior executives in the government system to introduce new decision-making formats to encourage rural women with different lifestyles to become participating members, without feeling burdened by the decision-making role. Support networks and mentors are recommended as strategies to increase the participation of new and different rural women. It is also important to instigate systemic changes for new organisational practices that will facilitate women's participation once they have been empowered to get involved.

4.1.3 Create values that encourage and recognise diversity

The third strategy focuses on transforming the government decision-making culture. The aim of this strategy is to formally encourage diversity among members of government decision-making bodies. The government decision-making culture has often been described as oppressive; a "boys' club" where mainly older, white, Anglo-Australian men are prevalent (Alston, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998; Haslam McKenzie, 1999). This section will present new ways, identified by rural women,

that could transform the government decision-making culture to encourage diversity among its members.

Although the rural women interviewed noted that changing the culture would be difficult and complex, many of them suggested that the culture would change in any case, once people from diverse backgrounds became involved. Rosa and Carmel, respectively, refer to the need to include different people in government decision-making:

> I have tried to get women involved and we've now got three women on our council. So I've gone from being one [alone] to now three of us. I think our council is better for it. We've also got a wide range of ages. Our youngest councillor is a 32-year old, single mother with two children. Our older [sic] councillor is 60 odd, and we've got a mix of farmers and business people. I think if you looked at a cross-section of people ten years ago, just before I got on the council, our council was middle-aged, male farmers. If it focuses on any group in the community, it gets unbalanced. You need to involve a cross-section of male and female, younger people and older people and people from different backgrounds [Rosa, 50-59, South West].

Carmel accords with Rosa's position, noting that diversity is essential to government decision-making:

> It's a traditional industry that men have always been the ones on the committees, and the women have always been the ones at home. ... I would love to go on the shire but it is going to be very hard work to [do so], getting them to respect you for who you are, and not because you are married to whoever, or because you've got this surname, or because you live on this property. ... So, yeah ... just have a cross section of people and ages. Because, I mean, I am 26 and I sort of feel that they wouldn't let me on because I am too young. You sort of have to be forties to be heard. The [re]composition of the committee would give it a bit of spice, and perhaps don't stick with the traditional people who are always on everything [Carmel, 20 - 29, Mid West].

The rural women identified two specific actions they thought had the potential to transform the "boys' club" culture of government decision-making. The first requires senior executives to take action to implement holistic solutions to the problem of the under-representation of rural women. The second refers to changing the way women enter and participate in the government decision-making system. Rural women recommended that senior executives instigate systemic, organisational

changes so more rural women could enter the government decision-making system by including community experience in the selection criteria. They also suggested the introduction of diverse forums and shorter committee tenures, as well as the provision of mentoring programs.

Dora provides an example how the membership of GBCs would change if the government system valued the experience and motivation of candidates, rather than privileging traditional, formal qualifications for government decision-making positions:

> So many of the bush people have minimal education. Past experience is what counts. What the person has done and if you are looking, if you've got 20 people applying for five positions, the only thing you can go on is their past experience. As in whether they had a go at something and did a good job at it, or whether they got on there and simply warmed a seat at ten meetings. I've been to meetings with people that have simply sat there like a stunned mullet and not opened their mouth for the whole meeting. All I can see that they did was warm a seat, they might as well not have been at the meeting [Dora, 50-59, Kimberley].

Including rural women's life experience in the selection criteria indicates that government culture is changing by being more inclusive. It also affects rural women's confidence in that this is likely to increase as women feel their skills and experience are valued by the government system. Once again, the interdependence of the three levels of the Government decision-making framework can be seen.

Rural women recognised the importance of a more integrated, whole-of-government approach to changing the existing decision-making culture, rather than creating a new, separate government department to source the input of rural women. What they want is practical, government intervention with real outcomes for rural women. However, Maja's fear was that new strategies might simply create a new government bureaucracy:

> We really feel that there is a need here for something. And even if it is just making the Internet more available to the outback people, and those types of things, without making a great big department that's going to investigate all those social issues [Maja, 50-59, Kalgoorlie-Esperance].

Maria agrees on the need to avoid the introduction of a separate government bureaucracy,

> There should be some provision made for child-care and it is an issue ... I don't believe that the government should set up a program that specifically targets getting more women involved in government decision-making [Maria, 40-49, Kimberley].

Another interviewee, Vera, acknowledges the time involved in creating cultural change. She comments, 'It is also a long-term challenge process, maybe the more you get women involved, the more you are [able] to bring about those changes, because they will do that' [Vera, 40-49, South West]. Vera's expectation is that, with more, new and different rural women entering the government decision-making process, cultural change will evolve. As women have greater and more direct opportunities to change the system from the inside, so more women will find participation attractive.

This dynamic of reforming a "boys' club" culture through encouraging the participation of women is reflected in the extensive feminist and critical literature that has documented the barrier to women's participation. The 2000 *Missed Opportunities* report (Dimopoulos & Sheridan, 2000) documents the continuing barrier of an oppressive, gendered culture, which had also been documented two years previously in the 1998 *Missed Opportunities* report (Elix & Lambert, 1998). The conundrum is how to involve more, new and different rural women to change the government culture from the inside, when it is the government culture which is one of the barriers to the participation of more, new and different rural women. The rural women in this study called for more attention to be given to implementing a mainstream whole-of-government approach to the problem of unlocking this gridlock.

In summary, changing the government decision-making culture to be more inclusive is fundamental to the effective implementation of strategies that aim to increase rural women's participation in government decision-making. Rural women emphasised the need to take a whole-of-government approach in changing the culture, rather than focussing on a new or separate government department to increase the involvement of rural women. Actions recommended by rural women as likely to contribute to this transformation include changing the requirements for

entry into the system, and creating new ways in which rural women can participate. Some of these actions include more diverse forums, shorter committee tenure, and minimising the resources required.

4.1.4 Create diverse government decision-making forums

The rural women in this study indicated that introducing diverse forums might minimise the resources required for them to participate. The outcome would be a real diverse system, and enhanced opportunities of personal development. Creating diverse decision-making forums means creating alternatives. One-size committee structures and proceedings do not fit all people. For example, Pam suggested a "no commitment" trial and a range of options for involvement: *'I would need to know, I would want to know more about it before I say "yes". So to see if I could handle it. I would like to try it for a term or whatever'* [Pam, 30-39, Gascoyne].

Sally recommends variety to meet the needs of rural women:

> People in [rural] areas don't fit into boxes. Across this state there is a really diverse range of people, and situations, and even circumstances. When they try to blanket a policy over the whole state, sometimes it's just unworkable. Like, what works for Bunbury does not necessarily work for Katanning or Albany. I think that's a really hard message to get across. Like, each one of us, although we are different, we need each of us to remain to make up the fabric of the state, and I think our independence should be encouraged, if you like. I think a lot of the programs that are out now are probably doing that. There is a bigger push to empower people and sell solutions. Like working from the grass-roots up, but I think they've also got to match that with the resources to make sure that happens [Sally, 40-49, South West].

The alternatives suggested by the women included online meetings, surveys, weekend workshops, day-long meetings, meetings in the local, rural community, and rotating the location of meetings. Lyn outlines how using telecommunications can change the way rural women participate in government decision-making as it offers new and flexible ways for women to become involved.

> The system needs to accommodate for them [rural women]. The other thing is you could do things like have Westlink [satellite] link-ups and maybe they could phone in. What are they, 1800 numbers, for [the] cost of a local call? Even if you paid them for the local call,

> What has happened in the past is they have had link-ups at the Telecentre. That is good, but for me to get to the Telecentre from home would be a 20 minute trip. That is 40 minutes gone. If I could do that at home, like I am just thinking, if I'm a mother with children and, even if I got the next door neighbour to look after the kids for half an hour, that would be very beneficial [Lyn, 40-49, South West].

Previous research has found that there is a clear power difference between consultation and decision-making processes (Labonte, 1997). It is not sufficient to use inclusive means to consult but restrict decision-making to committees with cumbersome, costly and alienating procedures. None of the suggestions would be difficult or costly to implement. The key point is that very simple changes have the potential to harness the expertise and perspectives of rural women, who do not want to commit themselves to a standard, three-year tenure on a government committee or board that meets in the city.

In summary, this research advocates the creation of diverse government decision-making forums to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making. All levels of the Government decision-making framework are likely to be affected by this simple step. To date, no Australian government, or research project into decision-making participation, has addressed the change strategy of creating diverse decision-making forums. The main benefits of such a change would be the minimisation of resources required for rural women to be involved. It would also promote open and inclusive values throughout the government system.

4.1.5 Increase access to ICTs

The fifth and final change strategy indicated by the results of the present study is to increase rural women's access to ICTs. Whilst previous researchers (Grace & Lennie, 2002; Lennie, 2002b; The Rural Women and ICT's Research Team, 1999) have investigated the benefits that Australian rural women experience when using ICTs, no research, to date, has investigated how rural women could use ICTs to increase their involvement in government decision-making.

The rural women in this study argued that sourcing information and communicating with others are two activities critical to decision-making, and that these activities currently require significant resources. Vera outlines how change is

encouraged by communication and how communication is one of the most important uses of ICTs:

> Well one of them *issues* is networking. The whole issue is that people have to be communicating about their ideas and purposes that they might have. And it is the exchange of information and ideas that is actually going to help the process of change, and that is probably one of the most important uses of the technology *[Vera, 40-49, South West]*.

ICTs used by rural women include the Internet, email, fax, videoconferencing, teleconferencing, and the telephone. Women, who live in remote areas of WA, currently depend on many of these technologies for their communication and information needs. For example, two of the women interviewed live on stations in the Kimberley region and rely on ICTs to connect with the outside world as they are unable to drive out of their property for six months of the year due to the wet season. This section describes how the rural women perceive the possible benefits of ICTs in terms of helping them fit the additional responsibilities of a government decision-making role into their schedule.

Rural women noted that ICTs could offer specific benefits if they wished to contribute to government decision-making but could not, practically, attend meetings in the city. Dora describes how attending a one-hour meeting in Perth requires one week in air travel and approximately 1200 dollars.

> You are either up for the big cost of the charter as you [the researcher] did today, or you've got to time it with the mail plane. So, if we leave here on a Thursday's mail plane, you could get the five thirty pm jet and you could be in Perth that night, as long as the meeting was tied in with those days. Because, if I left here Thursday morning, I am in Perth Thursday night, it would be happening on a Friday and then you've got your weekend in Perth. So, unless, yeah, you would have to maybe sort of do it on the mail plane on a Monday and then have the meeting on a Tuesday but then you know who is going to tie in a meeting to fit in with a mail plane? ... It's ridiculously expensive, though. Unless you give them at least 21 days notice, you are talking about 1200 dollars return. I mean, it's ludicrous you can go to bloody overseas for that [Dora, 30-39, Kimberley].

Some rural women stated that ICTs could help them carry out a decision-making role by:

- Increasing their ability to communicate easily and cheaply with others.

> With local call access, I dial in for 25c, I can e-mail, well as many people as I want, where ever I want, at it is still that one 25c [Sally, 40 – 49 years, South West region][6]

- enhancing opportunities to source information;

> she can go on the internet and discover things that she wants to know okay the kid had got something wrong there and without looking like an idiot and going up to the doctor she can find out what is really wrong there or the learning process she can do something that she wants to do whether it just be a craft, it doesn't matter [Maja, 50 – 59 years, Kalgoorlie-Esperance region]

- facilitating representation and advocacy at all levels;

> I'm the chairman of a diversification committee and we use it for our meetings for that and now and again for a particular topic to discuss and if the President wants to talk to several people he will call us up and say we are going to have a short executive meeting on the phone at 7am in the morning and that means you can sit there in your pyjamas. – [Betty, 50 – 59 years; Mid West region]

- removing travel problems associated with the tyranny of distance; and

> to be able to link up parents with their children, because it is a very small community, many kids have to go away for schooling or training or university and maybe they don't come back or they don't come back immediately so if you had something like a video conferencing link or even at the moment you can use your computer – [Toni, 50 – 59 years, Great Southern region]

- accommodating their daily work and family commitments.

> Particularly with out mail service we get out mail twice a week most of the times but if the mail man doesn't feel like coming, if it rains you don't get mail, but at least with e-mail it's there and you can get it backwards and forwards quickly, and for us we've only got those thermal faxes that fade, e-mail

[6][RW(Number = pseudonym), age range in years, region where woman lives].

you can print it out on the computer and it's there. [Carmel, 30 – 39 years, Mid West region]

The diffusion of ICTs constitutes a genuine opportunity, and practical possibility to engage rural women in government decision-making, with minimal disruption to their lives. Currently, there are no state government decision-making initiatives regularly using ICTs, and there are few senior executives using ICTs for government decision-making purposes (Chen, 2002).

Specific ways in which ICTs could be used in women's government decision-making roles include:

- participating in interactive online meetings;
- sourcing information passively and actively via email, web pages, and online meetings;
- communicating with government officials and other relevant organisations. (Rural women identified government "officials" as politicians, Ministers, senior executives, and government officers. Women wanted to communicate with these officials via email, the Internet, feedback, electronic surveys, and viewing web pages);
- communicating with people, organisations and communities they represent;
- accessing agendas and minutes; and
- participating in personal development and training online.

Rural women valued the use of ICTs since these gave women direct access to government decision-making processes, and enabled them to develop easier ways to maintain relationships with people from within their local community.

While generally recommending that policy makers review government processes to allow rural women to use ICTs for government decision-making, the interviewees focussed on the following possible strategies:

- create, and promote new initiatives using ICTs;

- encourage senior executives and government officers to use ICTs as a new way to communicate and share information with rural women;
- use ICTs to access existing, online rural communities or online discussion groups as a way to communicate with rural women;
- select the ICTs that best meet the objectives of the meeting, and that also suit the telecommunications infrastructure of rural communities.
- provide rural women, policy officers, and senior executives with training and support to use ICTs for government decision-making; and
- review standing orders of meetings so that voting becomes legal in teleconferences and in online situations.

Unless the senior executives within the system instigate and champion these changes it is unlikely that rural women will be able to access and benefit from new, government decision-making opportunities that utilise ICTs.

Rural women accept that technology is not a panacea to the problems inhibiting rural women's participation. Justine argues, for example, that ICTs are only effective tools if necessary personal qualities have been mastered:

> I think the technology is there as a tool. It is not there of itself. It is a means to an end. It is a case of "Well, what are we doing that the technology can help us do better?" So one of those things is obviously exchanging information. People need to believe in themselves, and be self-empowered before the use of technology can be truly optimised [Justine, 40-49, South West].

The Government decision-making framework offered in this thesis validates Justine's holistic perspective, whereby the different barriers experienced by rural women are overcome through the use of appropriate strategies.

In summary, ICTs constitute a useful way to increase their involvement in government decision-making processes since these mean that women can have direct, local access to communicating with others, and for the sourcing of information. The benefit of locally-based access is key to the minimisation of resources required for them to be involved. Rural women were aware that senior

executives in the system need to review current, government decision-making processes. These findings give rise to the third research question of this thesis, 'If rural women are interested in using ICTs to participate in government decision-making, then what are their issues with using them?' Chapters five and six address this question.

4.1.6 Summary

In summary, this section has addressed the five change strategies that rural women have indicated would facilitate their involvement in government decision-making processes. These are:

- personal development programs and training delivered through local communities;
- minimisation of the resources required for them to participate in government decision-making, and the provision of support networks and mentors;
- a whole-of-government approach that initiates new ways in which rural women can enter and participate in government decision-making processes;
- creating diverse forums including the creation of meeting structures accessible from participants' local communities; and
- increasing women's access to information and communication channels through the use of ICTs.

Whilst each of the five strategies has been discussed separately, there are linkages between them. The significance of these findings is that there has, so far, been no overall holistic framework to bring together a variety of change strategies that aim to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making. The revised holistic, multilevel, systems approach can be represented diagrammatically to illustrate how these change strategies relate to each other, and refer to the initial – motivating and barriers – factors identified in the Government decision-making framework that was outlined in Chapter three.

4.2 Change Strategies Framework

This thesis proposes that a systems perspective will prove useful when addressing the research question, 'What are new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making in WA?' In this approach, strategies target all levels and factors within the Government decision-making framework. This holistic, systems approach embraces the diversity of rural women's experience given that some women experience barriers at the personal level, whilst others experience barriers at the interpersonal or cultural level.

Figure 4.1, entitled, Change strategies framework, shows how the five change strategies relate to the three levels of the Government decision-making framework. The Government decision-making framework suggested in chapter three provides the framework that allows appropriate change strategies to be based on rural women's different needs. The integration of change strategies within the Government decision-making framework also represents the building blocks of action research, since the change strategies are dependent on rural women's experiences.

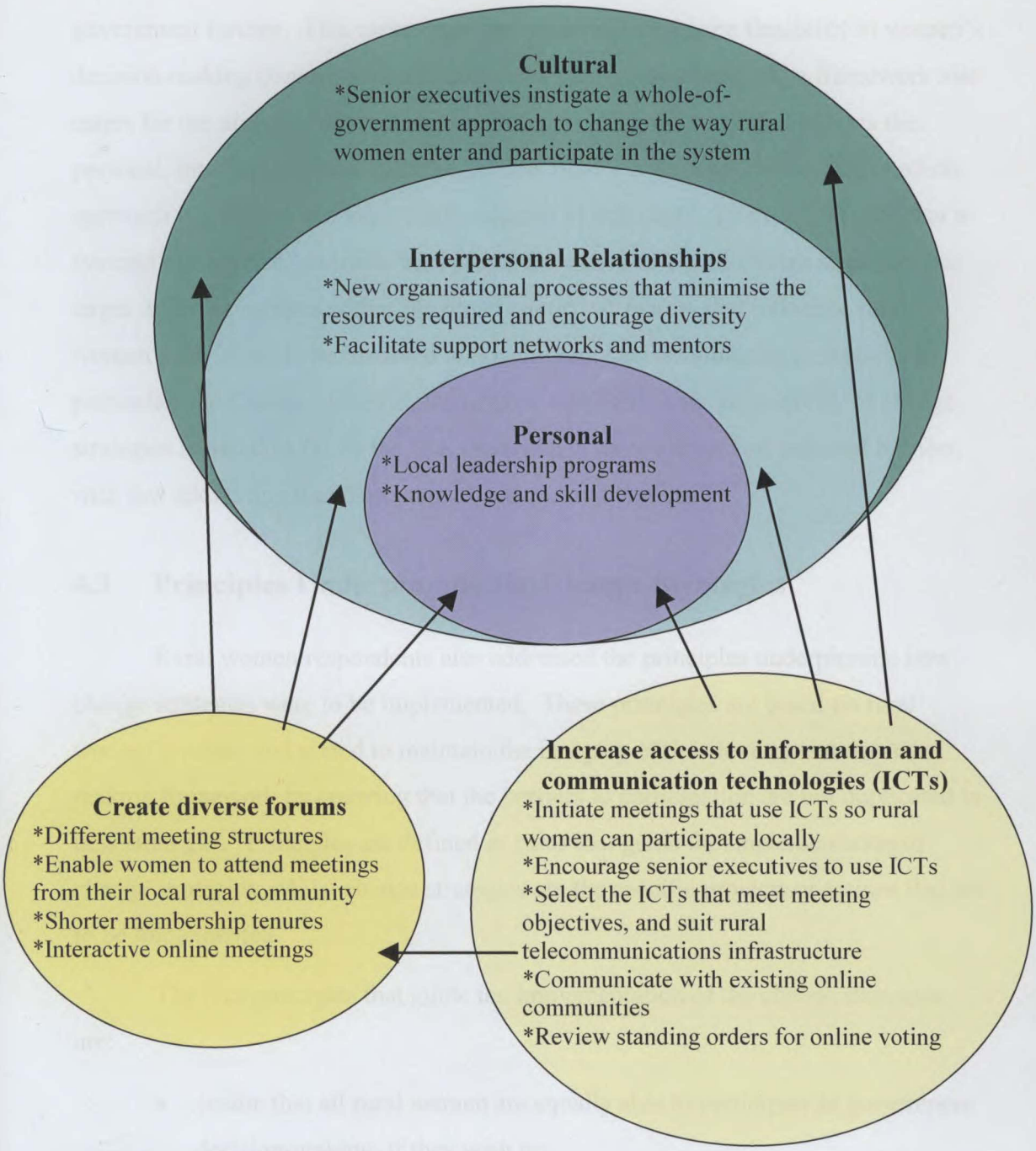

Figure 4.1 **Change strategies framework.**

This framework illustrates that each change strategy has the potential to affect all three levels of the government decision-making system – personal, interpersonal and cultural. For example, if rural women were to use ICTs in government decision-making, this would reduce the additional resources required for them to source information and/or to communicate with others. Consequently it would also increase the women's opportunities for participating in diverse

government forums. This means that the use of ICTs enhance flexibility in women's decision-making commitment and facilitates their involvement. The framework also caters for the diversity of rural women as the five change strategies address the, personal, interpersonal and cultural, barriers rural women experience. This holistic approach is a unique and significant outcome of this study. It is the first time that a systems perspective has made transparent the extent to which change strategies can target different barriers within the broad context of factors that influence rural women's decisions to be involved in government decision-making processes. In particular, the Change strategies framework highlights how the majority of change strategies adopted so far by the WA government have focused on personal barriers, with few addressing the interpersonal and cultural barriers.

4.3 Principles Underpinning the Change Strategies

Rural women respondents also addressed the principles underpinning how change strategies were to be implemented. These principles are based on rural women's values and aimed to maintain the integrity of the Government decision-making framework by ensuring that the barriers to participation are not duplicated in new strategies. Principles are defined as rules that guide the implementation of change strategies; whilst change strategies are the specific projects or actions that are to be implemented.

The five principles that guide the implementation of the change strategies are:

- ensure that all rural women are equally able to participate in government decision-making, if they wish to;
- use local community and women's networks to access rural women;
- ensure that decision-making processes address women's needs, but do not exclude men, or engage in tokenism;
- include all community groups when implementing change strategies, not just government-related ones; and

- simultaneously implement a wide array of initiatives that reflect the complex nature of the government decision-making system, and the drivers and inhibitors that determine participation within it.

The first principle ensures that all rural women feel included and that the diversity of rural women's experiences and circumstances is reflected in the change strategies. This diversity includes women's interest areas, different age groups, their responsibilities and commitments, and their geographical location. Recognition of the diversity of rural women will ensure that additional barriers are not imposed on rural women who do not fit a notional type; for example, rural women who have children and/or those women who have work commitments.

The second principle is that local community and women's networks be contacted for input when implementing change strategies. This will maximise the number of rural women who become aware of new initiatives, and includes recognition of local rural women's competencies and their existing networks. Rural women suggested that women's state, national, and rural networks also be contacted. Some of these networks include Women in Agriculture; RRR Women's Network; CWA; Women's Policy Development Office; local governments; Telecentres; and the leadership program within Agriculture WA.

The third principle is to implement change strategies that target rural women's needs rather than creating strategies exclusive to women. This means that men may also participate in initiatives. Many of the rural women emphasised that a separatist women's approach was not welcomed. In particular, there was a strong objection to the idea of adopting quota systems or token positions to increase rural women's involvement. Rural women felt this separatist approach discredited the value of women's contribution.

The fourth principle is to include both government and non-government organisations when seeking women willing to implement change strategies. Rural women indicate that women who move into government decision-making roles have usually been part of a non-government decision-making group previously. Skills and confidence-building opportunities that include all decision-making groups, not just government, are likely to benefit more rural women. Some of these groups

include agricultural political groups, associations, boards, CWA, WA Municipal Association, local community committees, and local government shires.

The last principle refers simultaneously to implementing change strategies that are grounded in rural women's different experiences and to reflecting the complex and multi-dimensional nature of the government decision-making system. This simply means that all the strategies within the Change strategies framework are implemented to ensure that the diversity of rural women's circumstances is catered for.

These five principles provide a grounded approach that ensures change strategies involve as many rural women and rural decision-making groups as possible. This commitment to widespread involvement is coupled with the proviso that, although the decision-making actions target rural women's needs, they do not necessarily exclude men. The use of local community and women's networks (and the simultaneous implementation of a wide variety of change strategies) will ensure that many different rural women have access to new initiatives, and have the opportunity to build confidence and experience empowerment.

4.4 Conclusion

In response to the research question, 'What are new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making in WA?' the Change strategies framework provides a holistic systems approach to increasing rural women's involvement. The five change strategies integrated within the Government decision-making framework target all the multilevel barriers to rural women's participation previously documented in the Government decision-making framework. The change strategies include:

- create personal development opportunities for rural women;
- support rural women's responsibilities so that they can participate fully;
- adopt values that encourage and recognise diversity in the government decision-making system;
- create diverse government decision-making forums; and

- increase rural women's access to ICTs.

These five new ways to increase rural women's involvement target the personal, resource and cultural levels of the government decision-making system.

The inclusion of principles guiding the implementation and integration of these strategies within the Change strategies framework ensures that future actions will not perpetuate or recreate the barriers many rural women currently experience.

Rural women have a positive attitude towards using ICTs to increase their involvement in government decision-making processes and argue that ICTs have the potential to help them enter and participate in the government decision-making system. Most importantly ICTs could empower them to integrate the government decision-making role within their current commitments. Given rural women's positive attitude to the use of ICTs as a tool for facilitating participation in the government decision-making system, this study now turns to explore how rural women can use ICTs and the issues that arise when the ICTs are trialled as part of a case study concerned with rural women's engagement with the political process.

CHAPTER 5

Phase Two: The Organisation And Outcomes Of The Online Government Meeting

This chapter addresses the implementation and outcome issues of the online meeting case study. First, the concept of an online government meeting, and second, the organisation of the online government meeting based on the sociotechnical framework, and phase one of this research are described. Third, the outcomes of the online government meeting are examined. Chapter six will examine rural women's experiences of the online government meeting.

Phase one of this thesis found that rural women were keen to use ICTs in government decision-making. As a consequence, this chapter presents phase two, a case study of rural women's use of ICTs to participate in a political process. This case study is unique, as it is a record of the first time that an online government meeting has been organised between a senior WA politician and his constituents. It is even more significant because the constituents were rural women. As such, this chapter aims to demonstrate how the frameworks and findings of phase one of this thesis can be used to implement new ways to increase rural women's participation in government decision-making.

The characteristics of the online meeting concept will be addressed first. A description of the approach used and corresponding actions taken to facilitate online communication follows, with an analysis of the online meeting outcomes presented at the end of the chapter. Whilst the methodology section of this thesis has introduced the case study and the participants, this chapter includes specific information linking phase one, and two, of this research, by examining the online government meeting using a sociotechnical perspective (Bijker, 1995). Data used for this chapter are questionnaires with rural women, an in-depth interview with the Deputy Premier, and the online transcript.

5.1 The Online Government Meeting Concept

Heron (1999) argues that the essential function of a meeting is for people to come together and speak and listen to each other with the intention of moving a matter forward so that, as much as possible, all the participants' needs are met. Using Heron's description of a meeting's purpose, an online meeting is defined in this thesis as people coming together through different uses of ICTs, so they can discuss a topic (or topics) of common interest. Figure 5.1 illustrates how using different ICTs can facilitate people coming together in the context of the aims and objectives for a meeting. The main point of the online meeting concept (see Figure 5.1) is that ICTs such as chat software and videoconferencing are not the focus of the coming together, but a tool that people use to help them communicate. It is also noted that an online meeting is different to online chat, as meeting aims are established in advance and reinforced in the course of the meeting, rather than a conversational open-ended approach taken.

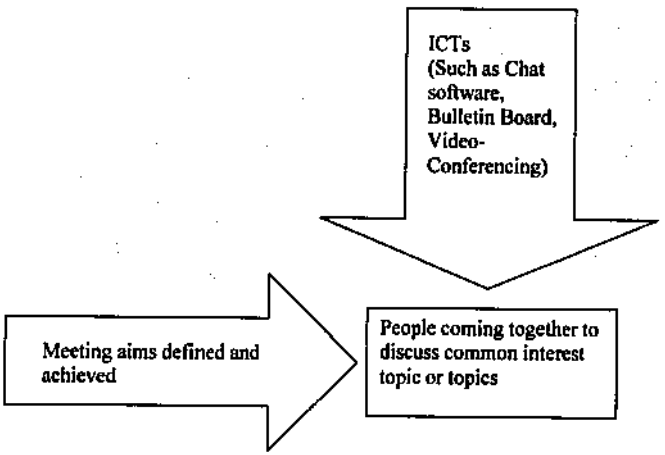

Figure 5.1 **The online government meeting concept**

The online government meeting concept in Figure 5.1 (Maiolo, 2001) was used to develop the online government meeting case study shown in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2 illustrates how rural women in WA and the Deputy Premier communicated through the use of iChat software, which includes a bulletin board and chat facilities. The aims of the meeting explored in the case study were firstly, for rural women to experience and evaluate the usefulness of using ICTs for the women's participation in government decision-making; and secondly, to provide many rural women with an opportunity to discuss current rural issues with each other and with the Deputy Premier.

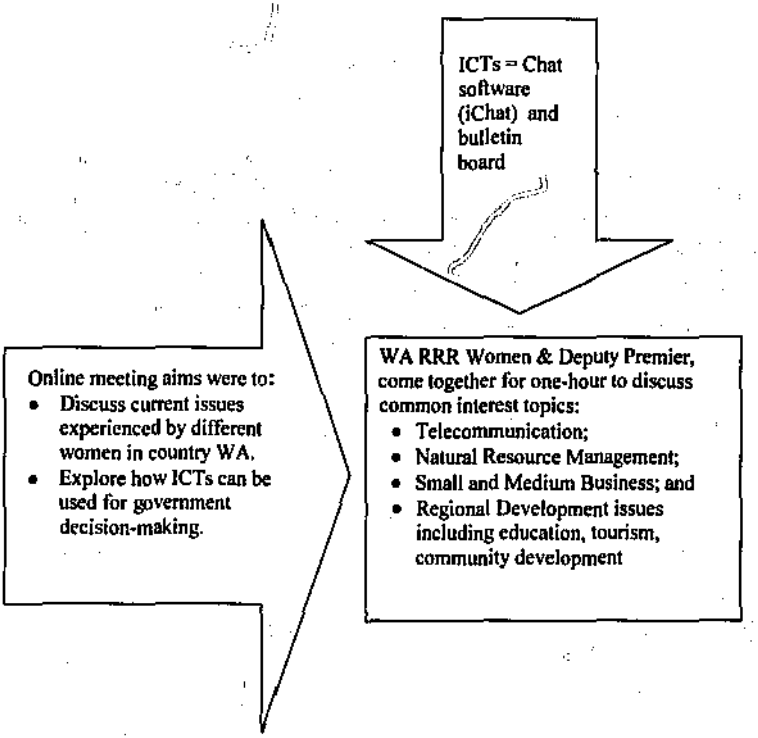

Figure 5.2 **The online government meeting case study**

The online government meeting was held for one hour on Thursday 31 August 2000. Sixty-seven rural participants and the then Deputy Premier discussed issues which had been nominated by rural women as being of importance to them. These issues included telecommunications, natural resource management, support

for small and medium businesses, and regional development issues. The RRR Women's Network, the Deputy Premier's office, the WA Office of Information and Communications, and the WA Telecentre Network (within the Department of Commerce and Trade), were all partners in implementing the online meeting.

The purpose of creating new ways and opportunities for rural women to become involved in government decision-making – such as an online government meeting – is that more and different rural women can participate in government decision-making processes. This study has already shown that rural women's under-representation is due to the fact that many rural women are too busy with their current commitments, and too stretched by the demands made upon them, to have available resources to attend government meetings in the city. Additionally, some women are uncomfortable with the typically formal and gendered nature of traditional government decision-making. Some rural women also lack the confidence to participate in usual government decision-making processes, even though these women may be decision-makers in their local communities and in business environments. It is for these various reasons that the online government meeting case study was developed.

The aim of the case study is to explore another way to involve rural women in government decision-making. The potential of the online meeting format is that it has the capacity to remove a range of barriers to participation, and gives more (and different) rural women the opportunity to participate in government decision-making processes. In particular, the online meeting format reduces the obstacles to participation in government decision-making that were identified by rural women in phase one of this research.

The online meeting process has the potential to provide a quarter of a million women living in rural, regional and remote areas, a new way to unite and discuss issues with the government as a collective group that represents the diversity of WA's rural women. Rural women require fewer resources when they participate in government decision-making processes using online technologies than when they participate in face-to-face forums. Furthermore, as the online meeting adopted a semi-formal meeting style, rural women could choose the extent in which they engaged. Consequently, the purpose of implementing and analysing this case study is to assess whether the online meeting succeeded in creating opportunities for new,

different and more rural women to become involved in government decision-making in WA.

The organisation of the online government meeting took approximately nine weeks from government approval to implementation. The process of implementation involved face-to-face meetings, email and phone correspondence, formal government correspondence; and two online meeting practice sessions (without the Deputy Premier). The two online meeting practice sessions were conducted with a variety of stakeholders. These included: one web developer, two Department of Commerce and Trade IT officers, connections with approximately five remote and regional Telecentres, four government officers, and two officers from the Deputy Premier's office. These practice sessions allowed the organisers, the web developers and the Department's IT officer the opportunity to refine the technological infrastructure of the online meeting, helping to ensure that the needs of participants would be met. Given the innovative nature of the online meeting concept, and its dual potential of removing existing barriers and empowering new participants, a comparison of the online meeting process with traditional government decision-making processes follows.

5.1.2 Government meeting processes

Whilst both an online meeting and a face-to-face meeting can achieve the aim of bringing together WA rural women and the Deputy Premier with the aim of discussing issues of joint concern, there are a number of important differences. To illustrate the differences between online and face-to-face processes involved in government meetings between rural women and the Deputy Premier, two questions are addressed. These are:

- Which WA rural women will be invited to the meeting? and
- What will be discussed at the meeting?

Face-to-face meetings are relatively small. Normally only eight to 12 women would be invited to attend a one-hour face-to-face meeting. The government would not typically pay for travel expenses to a one-off meeting, rather these costs would be seen as the individual's responsibility. Further, the face-to-face meetings normally reflect the government officer's reason for initiating the meeting. The

Deputy Premier would normally be consulted about the agenda and his office would vet and finalise the agenda items. The officer coordinating the meeting writes a formal government document, known as a Ministerial duties, that includes all necessary information required for a Minister to participate in any organised event. Consequently, the preparation for a face-to face meeting involving the Deputy Premier might involve preparing a memorandum and speech notes as part of the Ministerial. The memorandum would include background information on the women who would be attending the meeting; the reason why the meeting had been called; summary information such as the names, and affiliated organisations of the people participating; and the time, place, and agenda items for the meeting. The speech notes would include responses to which the Deputy Premier could refer throughout the meeting. The government officer, who writes the speech notes, is also responsible for coordinating information for all relevant government agencies. The government officer writing the Ministerial would also be required to coordinate responses from the Deputy Premier's policy advisors and any other government officers who had specialist information associated with agenda items.

This face-to-face meeting process differs from the online government meeting case study presented in this research. For example, the names of participating rural women would not be known until the actual meeting because a general invitation is offered and it is the women themselves who decide to participate. Further, the women could join and leave an online meeting as they choose. The names given by rural women as their 'handle' to participate in the online chat arena could be any name or nickname they wished to use. Whilst it was recommended to participants that they include their full name and their geographical location, some rural women chose to use an anonymous or unattributable name, a choice not available to women in a formally-structured face-to-face meeting.

Partnerships were central to the implementation of the online government meeting. The online meeting case study was set up in partnership with the WA Telecentre Network. This ensured that rural women had local ICT support and access. It also seemed to demystify the technology and help participants acquire skills and confidence. In itself, this approach differed from traditional government processes, as the online government meeting concept involved partnering with local

rural community organisations, the Telecentres, to facilitate the participation of rural women.

The online meeting in this research implemented processes where rural women were not expected or required previous relationships with the government or any particular organisations, nor required large amounts of resources. Unlike the situation with a face-to-face forum, an individual rural woman with no formal group affiliations, was able to participate in the online meeting. Similarly, minimal resources were required for rural women to choose to be involved in an online government meeting. Necessary resources included availability of the Internet at home or access to a local community Telecentre. Telecentres could support online meeting participants technically and through skill-sharing, and the provision of online access.

Setting the agenda for an online meeting differed from traditional face-to-face government meetings. Whilst many different approaches can be applied to the preparation for an online meeting, this case study used a participative approach. Over a five-week period, WA rural women were able to post items they would like to discuss with the Deputy Premier. Where these issues were posted on a bulletin board, the process is a transparent one and women could comment interactively on issues that other rural women thought were important. This participative process involved engaging in a semi-formal discussion. Whereas time constraints meant that only 15 minutes could be allocated to discussing each of the four items on the agenda, considerable freedom was given as to who asked questions, who made comments in response, and what specific aspects of issues were to be discussed. Given this semi-formal meeting process, speech notes were not included in the Ministerial created for the Deputy Premier, as the project officer recommended that this procedure would be inappropriate for an online meeting.

Two risks associated with the implementation of the online meeting in comparison with traditional face-to-face government meetings were:

- given the anonymous nature of the online meeting, and the contentious business of politics, the participation of the Deputy Premier could be at risk as he could be exposed to attack in an online forum. This situation

could be exacerbated if the meeting space was open to the wider public, and where media or opposition parties could be co-participants; and

- given the spontaneous nature of an online meeting, there was a risk that the discussion could be chaotic with a number of simultaneous conversations between different people; rather than a semi-structured meeting addressing all the agenda items previously raised by rural women.

In summary, the online government meeting case study reveals the potential for ICTs to transform the involvement of rural women in WA government decision-making and gives rise to a new paradigm: a new way in which rural women can become involved in government processes. This potential builds upon the capacity of ICTs to reduce the barriers to participation previously identified by rural women and discussed in phase one of this research. Greater participation offers the promise that new, diverse and different rural women may become involved in government processes. Despite the potential suggested by the online meeting case study, however, there are some risks associated with such an innovation and these will be discussed further in the following section.

5.2 Implementation of the Online Government Meeting

The sociotechnical framework (Bijker, 1995) and the feminist action research methodology adopted in this thesis ensure that rural women's different needs drive the development of the ICT solution. This section examines how the sociotechnical framework helps to ensure that the implementation of the ICT solution addresses rural women's needs. The sociotechnical framework indicates that there needs to be a delicate balance between the users' needs, the organisers' needs, and the chosen technology, if an effective solution is to be implemented (Bijker, 1995). Figure 5.3 demonstrates that three social and technical areas crucial to an evaluation of the online meeting case study are: the users' needs have to be identified and met; the organisers' aims have to be achieved; and the ICTs used have to meet the requirements of both the users and the organisers.

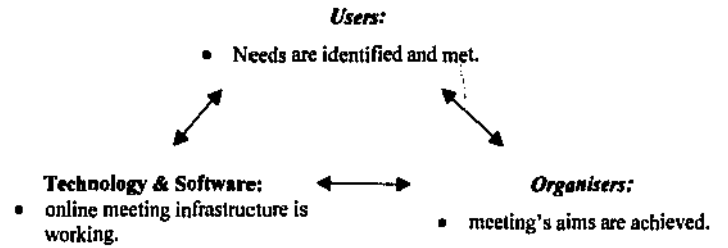

Figure 5.3 **Three areas of needs to be met when organising an online meeting.**

Whilst each of the three social and technical areas are inter-related, and part of a larger system, they will be discussed separately to examine how they each address rural women's needs, and to explore if, together, they provide a solution to the identified problems of marginalisation of rural women. First, the users' needs are examined, followed by the organisers' aims for the online government meeting, and then the effectiveness of the technology component of the ICT innovation is investigated.

5.2.1 Users' needs

The two sets of key users targeted by the online, government meeting process were WA rural women, and the Deputy Premier. Given the feminist action research methodology and the purpose of this research, rural women's needs are examined in-depth in this section. To ensure that rural women's needs were addressed, two actions were central. The first was to identify these needs. The second was to instigate processes using the sociotechnical system framework to ensure that their needs were met.

The Government decision-making framework and the Change strategies framework in phase one of this thesis identified rural women's needs. These findings indicate that when rural women decide to be involved in government decision-making their needs originate from three levels; personal, interpersonal and cultural. The online meeting sought to address rural women's personal needs by developing confidence and by creating an empowering context in which these

women had an opportunity to discuss issues about which they were passionate. Furthermore, the online meeting gave rural women a choice as to how they participated in the meeting: whether they wanted to be an observer, speaker, supporter or a combination of these roles; and also whether they wanted to include their personal issues in the meeting agenda for discussion by the group.

Key resources of time, money, and energy were not excessively required of those rural women who wished to participate in the online meeting. This need – to minimise the drain on an individual's personal resources – was addressed by organising the online meeting to fit within rural women's current commitments, rather than the government's. The minimum requirements needed were one-hour for the meeting (which was in school hours), and Internet access (which was available free from a nearby community Telecentre or from their home). Rural women also wanted to be involved in government decision-making processes that used a supportive culture, where they felt comfortable in participating rather than feeling alienated or restricted. Consequently, the online meeting protocols reflected a participative, semi-formal approach, where interaction and the discussion of a wide range issues were encouraged, within the necessary time constraints. The prior identification and incorporation of rural women's needs in the development of the experimental, ICT solution meant that a significant component of the sociotechnical framework had already been implemented in the organisational process of the online meeting.

The user's, rural women's, needs were further addressed by the principles that were identified in phase one, as being necessary when implementing change strategies. The first principle was that the online government meeting should be open to all WA rural women was addressed by the case study targeting the barriers that rural women experienced. Whilst targeting many rural women, the case study however did not include all WA rural women, as non-English speaking background was not accommodated. The second principle to liaise with local community, and women's, networks to invite rural women to participate was implemented through the WA Telecentre Network. The third principle referred to not excluding men or engaging in tokenism was met as at least two online participants were male. Thus while the online meeting was hosted by the RRR Women's Online Network, which targets rural women's needs, it did not exclude the participation of men. This

context of inclusivity – and the focus on networks and invitations – provided a safe environment in which rural women could discuss issues with representatives of the government. By inviting local Telecentres to be advocates, not just government groups meant the fourth principle was implemented. The fifth and last principle was that the online government meeting should be part of a wide range of initiatives addressing all the factors experienced by rural women when they tried to participate in the Government decision-making framework. This ideal could not be directly met because the online meeting was a one-off event. Nonetheless, the long term goal was to provide new knowledge through the documentation of the case study so that concrete data would be available for future implementation of inclusive strategies through the use of ICTs in government decision-making processes.

Whilst the first step in implementing the ICT solution had been to identify the rural women's needs, two processes ensured that their needs were addressed. The first was to develop partnerships with major stakeholders and the second was to have an advocate or advocates within the government system to ensure that rural women's needs were met through the development of appropriate policies and strategies. Each of these processes will be discussed.

Partnerships with key stakeholders were central to ensuring that rural women's needs were met during the experimental, online government meeting. The RRR Women's Network, the Deputy Premier's office, and the WA Telecentre Network were the key stakeholders. The RRR Women's Network became the lynch pin of the ICT solution. The Network is a primary link in communicating with WA rural women. It provides women's needs in policy contexts. For this project it provided the online meeting software and a 'place to meet' in cyberspace. As the RRR Women's Network was seen as the representative body for rural women, it also became the main political group to gain others' support. The involvement of the Deputy Premier's office ensured that the Deputy Premier's needs were addressed, while the active participation of the WA Telecentre Network provided the necessary local and infrastructure support for rural women. The role of the WA Office of Information and Communication (where the researcher had previously been employed full-time) was to support the early research which developed the findings of phase one of this thesis. They coordinated and resourced the project, bringing people and other supportive agencies together. This partnership structure took the

form of one person from each of the organisations meeting face-to-face (or using ICTs) to communicate and develop the idea of the online meeting project. By adopting this partnership approach, specialist advice was included in the development stages and high level commitment was made to the project.

The WA Telecentre Network is a joint government and community initiative where local community centres offer cost-effective support, training, and ICT access. The WA Telecentre Network's involvement was necessary for many rural WA women to access and participate in the online meeting. This is because the local community Telecentre provides rural women with confidence through skill-development and social support as well as technical assistance. The WA Telecentres (of which there were approximately 100), provided rural women with free computer and Internet access. Based in the local community, Telecentres provided a physical place where rural women could meet, where they were able to be mentored and shown how to use the online meeting software, and where they were encouraged to participate. The Office of Information and Communications provided funding to support the participation of the WA Telecentre Network as individual Telecentres received $100 dollars if they helped a minimum of three rural women to take part in the forum. The Telecentres were vital to the success of the online government meeting as they became the main venue for rural women's involvement, with 35 out of 50 respondents hearing about the online meeting via their local Telecentre. Having a familiar person in the local community as the Telecentre facilitator, and mixing with other rural women in the physical locale for online interactivity, provided social support mechanisms for rural women who were new to the government decision-making experience, or who may have been new to using the technology. Rural women who accessed the Internet from their home, and not from their local Telecentre, were also given technical support via a local access call phone number.

In addition to the agency partnerships that were central to implementing the ICT strategy, it was paramount that rural women had an advocate or advocates within the government system. The RRR Women's Network coordinator and the researcher acted as advocates for the rural women and ensured decisions regarding the ICT solution addressed rural women's different needs. The women had argued that the online meeting should adopt a participative approach and a semi-formal

meeting style, which meant that the meeting be open to all WA rural women, that they be able to have direct input into creating an agenda, and that they could also choose their level of participation. Further they wanted the choice to be anonymous, or to use a pseudonym. The semi-formal meeting style demystified the formal procedures of government decision-making. As the participative and semi-formal meeting differed from traditional methods of face-to-face meetings, the organisers were involved in instigating a range of changes, to which the partnering agencies – particularly the Deputy Premier's office – had to agree, which they did.

For the (then) Deputy Premier, participating in the online meeting also had a range of risks. The active involvement of the Deputy Premier's office was vital in supporting this new, but possibly risky, initiative. The online meeting moderator was given the ability to exclude an online participant if they severely contravened the meeting guidelines, in order to protect the Deputy Premier from being harassed and to minimise possible disruption to the meeting. As the Deputy Premier had not used an online chat facility beforehand, and because he was a relatively inexperienced typist, he was assigned a scribe to type in his responses. The appointment of a scribe to support the Deputy Premier's interaction helped keep the meeting progressing at a reasonable speed. With the Deputy Premier's prior commitments involving back-to-back meetings, and it being his first time participating in a chat room, comprehensive instructions were given to him ten minutes before the meeting, and the physical room was made comfortable for the online forum with catering and a wide screen data projector.

In summary, rural women's different needs were identified by drawing on the phase one findings of this thesis. Whilst the Deputy Premier's needs were identified through the direct involvement of his office, both the rural women's and the Deputy Premier's needs were addressed through a partnership between agencies in the planning and implementation stages of the project. The organisers - being advocates of rural women's needs, and willing to transform traditional government processes – helped introduced new meeting procedures that met women's needs as well as meeting the needs of partner agencies. Further details of how the organisers addressed the meeting aims follow.

5.2.2 The organiser – facilitator's, and administrator's, responsibilities

The online meeting aims were to bring WA rural women and the Deputy Premier together in a shared forum to discuss issues of concern, and to trial a new approach to government decision-making using ICTs. The organisers - the RRR Women's Network coordinator and the researcher – took the following actions to ensure that the aims of the meeting were fulfilled. They:

- selected appropriate group processes to facilitate an inclusive, participative meeting;
- advocated rural women's, and the Deputy Premier's, needs;
- refined the technology architecture and facilities; and
- developed partnerships with the WA Telecentre Network.

Each of these will now be discussed in turn. Whilst both of the organisers facilitated and administered the one-hour online government meeting, one was mainly the facilitator who managed the discussion and agenda of the meeting, and the other responsible for administrating the online chat software.

5.2.2.1 Inclusive, participative approach

Selecting the appropriate meeting processes ensured that the participants' interactions achieved the meeting aims, and that the online meeting was as accessible as possible to all WA rural women. The meeting processes were selected on the basis that they were inclusive. This focus explains the organisers' decision to enable the rural women to create their own agenda with the Deputy Premier; to have a discussion involving many topics rather than one topic; to partner with the WA Telecentre Network so as to provide local community support; to have a local access number for rural women to contact for technical help; to have a semi-formal meeting style; and to provide an opportunity for rural women to offer feedback on their experience. The organisers agreed that a discussion of several issues should be the focus. Whilst no formal voting procedures were introduced, there were no guidelines preventing participants from putting forward recommendations to the meeting. It is likely that future (or subsequent) meetings would include voting in their structure.

Transparency was a fundamental feature of the organisation of the meeting. At the beginning of the process, five weeks before the online meeting, anyone could contribute to the agenda by posting items on the bulletin board, by commenting on other people's items, as posted on the bulletin board, or by contacting the coordinators by phone, email or fax to post items on the agenda. Two faxes, twelve bulletin board postings, and three emails were received as items for discussion. These items were collated by the researcher into similar topics of interest, of which four agenda items were formed (see appendix iv). The next transparent process was having all relevant information – such as the meeting guidelines, and agenda - available for rural women to read, either in hard copy format in the RRR Women's magazine, or on the RRR Women's Network website. Furthermore, given the breadth of agenda items to cover in a limited timeframe, the organisers adopted a semi-formal meeting style so that different issues were addressed equally by the participants. The following transcript from the online meeting outlines the semi-formal style whereby the meeting was opened, and through which the guidelines for discussion were reviewed. (NB The phrase 'The Minister' refers to the Deputy Premier.)

facilitator1 WELCOME RRR WOMEN & THE MINISTER [name] to our first Online [Meeting]!

sarah-jerramungup tc bit cold, but had some rain overnight

facilitator1 [Name of other facilitator] and I will be your facilitators today.

flo Yeah we had a bit too still not enough

facilitator1 We will start today's forum

facilitator1 Please HOLD RESPONSES and we will give an introduction for today's meeting.

facilitator1 THANK YOU to all the women who posted their topics of interest on the bulletin board. The Minister [Name] has read them all.

facilitator1 Your posted topics have help frame the AGENDA for today's forum. These include: * telecommunications, * natural resource management, * small and medium business, and * regional development issues.

deanne Hi everyone hope the rain doesn't keep them all away

facilitator1 Your posted topics have help frame the AGENDA for today's forum. These include: * telecommunications, * natural resource management, * small and medium business, and * regional development issue

facilitator1 OUR DISCUSSION WILL PROGRESS TOPIC BY TOPIC

facilitator1 Before we start a few GUIDELINES for our online forum.

facilitator1 I will post these now:

facilitator1 * Please keep all responses as BRIEF and SUCCINCT as possible.**

facilitator1 * Please be GUIDED by the FACILITATOR'S PROMPTS. Eg. Please wait, Minister [name] is responding to a question**

facilitator1 * ONE question at a time. Welcome to add comments to other people's questions**

hopetoun Hopetoun Telecentre

facilitator1 Have a GREAT meeting! Let's begin with our first topic!

As the transcript illustrates, the organiser who took the facilitating role introduced prompts such as "Please HOLD RESPONSES and we will give an introduction to today's meeting", as part of the semi-formal meeting style, so that participants could come together and focus on central aspects of the exchange.

The following excerpts indicate how agenda items were listed, and further demonstrate the semi-formal meeting style:

facilitator1 Our first topic is TELECOMMUNICATIONS. Issues raised in this topic area include: * sale of Telstra, * mobile and Internet coverage for all, * rural women's IT needs, and, * location of CDMA towers in country towns

Minister G'day everybody, if there is anybody out there talk to me about telecommunications

facilitator1 We will wait for the first question or comment - anybody?

facilitator1 Our second topic is NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT (NRM). Issues raised in this topic include: * government assistance to spraying- locusts, * disseminating NRM information to land managers, * 1% levy on all tax payers for conservation works, * water catchment

facilitator1 Our third topic is SMALL AND MEDIUM BUSINESS. Issues raised in this topic include: * start up packages for young farmers, * large traveling charges - living out of town

Minister Free for all, anything else ?

Whilst previously notified agenda items had already been written up as part of the preparation prior to the online meeting, the Deputy Premier encouraged active participation by the rural women through writing casual, friendly comments such as "G'day everybody, if there is anybody out there talk to me about telecommunications". This semi-formal approach was also demonstrated when the Deputy Premier opened up the agenda as a "free for all", instead of listing the last agenda item, 'rural issues'. Given that the last agenda item was changed by the Deputy Premier to a 'free for all', it further supports the inclusive, open, approach to the meeting.

The two organisers had specific roles. Whereas the RRR Women's Network coordinator was responsible for the administration of the online meeting room (which meant that she personally welcomed people as they entered the room), she

also had the ability to exit (exclude) participants if they severely contravened the meeting guidelines. The other organiser, the researcher, was the facilitator of the meeting and responsible for chairing, and the management of the group process, so that agenda items were adequately addressed. Both facilitators (one and two) worked together to ensure that the online meeting achieved its aims. An example of this is outlined below, where the facilitators reminded participants to be succinct and short in their questions and responses, so that all participants' issues were addressed rather than having the meeting dominated by a few people: "facilitator1 please try to keep your questions / responses brief" and "facilitator2 Please hold questions - one at a time thanks."

To encourage this inclusive participative approach, the facilitators asked participants at the end of the meeting to complete the feedback questionnaires available online, or complete the hard copies given to Telecentres, so that the government and the organisers could learn from rural women's experience of the meeting. This reflection process also helped with the sociotechnical approach, where the users of the technology had an opportunity to further refine the ICT solution to meet their needs.

5.2.2.2 The Deputy Premier's needs

The facilitators paid special attention to liaising with the Deputy Premier's office so as to develop the trust and confidence of his staff in the new online meeting process. Rapport and trust were key ingredients in the partnership with the Deputy Premier's office. Initially the staff were not totally at ease with the idea, but they came to trust the facilitators' opinion that the traditional government speech notes were unnecessary. Through close work between the facilitators and the Deputy Premier's office, rural women's need for a participative semi-formal approach to the online government meeting, were easier to meet.

To ensure that the online meeting progressed smoothly, the facilitator arranged that the Deputy Premier, his advisor, the transcriber, technical support, and the facilitators themselves could access the online chat facility from the same room, where there were eight computers, and a data projector screen. The hope was that this arrangement would guarantee, as much as possible, that the technology was working, and would enable the Deputy Premier to read comments appearing live on the large screen data projector. Face-to-face communication between the Deputy

Premier and the facilitators was also beneficial, as the facilitators would quickly identify which of the online participants' questions the Deputy Premier was responding to, and this would be written into the transcript of the online chat room, so that all participants were aware of the topic under discussion. This was challenging because the online agenda moved very quickly, with as many as five participants posting questions simultaneously.

The Deputy Premier appeared to have a positive experience, as he closed the online meeting with the following comment:

> **facilitator1 The [Minister] will be leaving in a few minutes are there final comments you would like to make?**
>
> **Minister Thanks for participating today. It was a very interesting experience!**
>
> **facilitator1 For the remaining questions we will put responses on the bulletin board in a few weeks time**

The final statement presented a number of issues for the facilitators because there was confusion between the government agencies about who had taken on this responsibility. Further, there were concerns about the resources that would need to secure answers to the questions that were not part of the Deputy Premier's portfolios. While a lack of response to some of the questions raised by online participants did not satisfy the organisers' ideals, it did raise the issue of how current government processes deal with unresolved matters generated by an online meeting.

5.2.2.3 The technology architecture

Whilst the organisers had few resources to intervene in the functioning of the iChat software, they were responsible for ensuring that the technology was capable of achieving the meeting aims, and that it was able to meet the users' needs. To these ends the organisers made adjustments to the iChat program. The chat screen was enlarged, and clear instructions were available on the website through which participants accessed the online meeting. More complex customisation of the package – such as cutting and pasting text, and keeping a history of the chat as people logged on – were not possible. Consequently, the organisers had to implement other methods to ensure that the meeting aims were met. For example,

the organisers used Word in conjunction with the iChat software, so that they could quickly paste in prompts when opening up the meeting, and paste in agenda items so that time was not wasted typing in large amounts of text. The technique of cutting and pasting of pre-prepared, information ensured that the momentum of the meeting was maintained, and that as much communication as possible occurred in the one-hour time frame.

The organisers also checked that the online meeting architecture mirrored the participative approach so that inclusive decisions were made. For example, it was important that all responses in the chat room were visible to all participants; rural women could be anonymous in the chat room; there should be a bulletin board created upon which the organisers could post agenda items; and that links were made across relevant pages. The organisers found that decisions made by staff regarding the technological architecture reflected a particular philosophical approach – whether that be the creation of an open participative meeting, or creating a meeting that is closed and hierarchical in nature. Furthermore, the organisers were aware that there may be many rural women who would be anxious about using ICTs, so it became important to promote an inclusive meeting process for the preliminary pre-meeting work. Off line access was made available, for example, so that rural women could fax or phone in agenda items. In addition, Telecentres offered their support to help rural women use the online technology, and the RRR Women's Network magazine provided information before the meeting about how rural women could participate, as well as providing a story after the meeting for rural women, who could not participate. The transcript of the exchanges with the Deputy Premier was also posted on the RRR Women's website, two days after the online meeting. The transcript was slightly edited for ease of readability, and was perceived as a public record of the meeting. All participants were aware of the planned public transcript at the point where they entered the forum.

5.2.2.4 The role of Telecentres

The use of Telecentres meant that local rural communities were involved in the development of the online consultative processes. The partnership with the community Telecentres also increased the likelihood of personal contact, as a local person or organisation had a greater chance of encouraging rural women to participate in an online government meeting. This is a significant step because the

partnering agency — WA Telecentre Network – became an advocate of the project, and helped to build a strong relationship between the state government, and rural women.

In summary, the organisers ensured that the meeting aims were met by selecting group processes that encouraged rural women's participation. The inclusion of new meeting processes was facilitated through the organisers proactively monitoring the technology architecture so that it mirrored, as much as possible, the participative approach. The organisers' advocacy of an inclusive role for rural women and their championing of direct access by the women to the Deputy Premier, together with the partnerships formed among relevant government agencies, were essential parts of the transformation of traditional government decision-making processes.

5.2.3 The technologists' responsibilities

The technological dimension of the sociotechnical framework refers to the online meeting infrastructure functioning in a manner that ensures that the participant's needs were met, and that the meeting aims were achieved. This component was the direct responsibility of the government's technology specialists, and the web developers, who created and hosted the RRR Women's Network website. Extensive meetings took place between the organisers and the web developers to ensure that technology-related issues and problems were resolved, and that the architecture met the organisers' specifications for an inclusive, participative meeting. Prior to the actual online meeting the two, online practice meetings involved a number of WA Telecentres, Ministerial officers, the RRR Women's Network coordinator, the WA Telecentre coordinator, the Office of Information and Communications officers, and the organisers. The organisers decided to use the RRR Women's website to familiarise rural women with the online facilities, and to conserve resources, as the budget allocated for the online meeting was minimal. As a woman-focused place, the RRR Women's website seemed a safe place in which rural women could communicate openly with the Deputy Premier.

One of the first aspects of making sure that the technology worked was to ensure that the iChat software was compatible with outside computers such as the government's computer network. This was a significant issue since the

government's firewalls protecting the telecommunications network were incompatible with the iChat program, creating a duplication of text on the screen. The organisers also needed to check if iChat software was compatible with and accessible to a large range of different computer capabilities. This was important because rural WA has some areas where the telecommunications infrastructure is basic and download rates slow. Consequently, the organisers ensured that there were minimal graphics, and that only a short download time was required to access the online meeting. Participants could access the online chat using the web interface as plain text.

The second aspect was to ensure that the group dynamics of the online meeting flowed quickly and smoothly. The organisers requested that the chat room screen not use an automatic continuous roll whilst people were typing. This could not be accommodated. Given that 70 participants were typing in a one-hour time constraint, frustration was experienced by some of the participants, since the text they were responding to was automatically scrolling up the screen and out of sight. An alternative strategy might have been for participants to manually refresh the screen, but this was not technically feasible. Instead, the facilitator asked participants to hold responses if too many people seemed to be communicating at once and the size of the chat room screen was increased, which enabled more text to be included. This reduced scrolling, and the text was easier to read. Furthermore, the organisers liaised with the web developers to make sure that the links within the RRR Women's website were functioning properly, so that rural women could easily be directed to the online meeting area.

The organisers were concerned about the extent to which the iChat software would be able to accommodate all the rural women participating in the online meeting. The web developer assured the organisers this was not an issue since there was no limit to the number of participants specified in the proprietary software. However, it did turn out to be a problem, and many rural women respondents were automatically cut from the meeting area, or could not enter the online meeting, or they found that their computer screen was frozen or immobilised.

The third and final aspect of the technological dimension to the sociotechnical framework was ensuring that rural women had technical support and ICT access to allow participation. Two strategies were implemented to help rural

women, who were novice ICT users, to participate. In addition to the help provided by the local community Telecentres, a local-call-cost help-line was provided for rural women accessing the online forum from home. Step-by-step instructions were provided on the website and in the promotional material to address the varying ICT skill levels of rural women.

5.2.4 Summary

In summary, the technology component of the ICT solution was critical to the success of the online meeting. While the organisers endeavoured to change a number of features, such as increasing the size of the chat screen and the compatibility of iChat with the RRR Women's Network, there were some features that could not be accommodated such as participants' manual refreshing of the chat screen. Furthermore, the case study meant that technologists became aware of a new iChat software limitation particularly that the system is unable to accommodate a large number of participants online at one time. The technological support provided to rural women by the local community Telecentres was vital to the success of the project because it added a personal touch to this new method of communication between women from rural communities and the Deputy Premier.

The development phase of the online government meeting using the sociotechnical approach prioritised rural women's different needs. These needs were established through the findings from phase one of this thesis which, in action research terms, was the platform upon which the online government meeting was implemented. This approach was unique because never before had a WA government decision-making forum with rural women been implemented online. Similarly, developing a government forum based in accordance with the needs of rural women was highly innovative.

This new way for the government to meet and hear rural women involved the organisers changing current government processes. This transformation of government meeting processes into the online environment evolved from face-to-face government meeting processes through the active partnership of key stakeholders, and through the organisers taking an advocacy role so that trust and rapport developed with all parties as their needs were met, and as the aims were realised.

5.3 Outcomes of the Online Meeting

The previous sections have examined how the implementation of the online government meeting was a vital part of ensuring rural women's needs were met when developing an ICT solution to the problem of rural women's marginalisation. This section examines rural women's issues with using ICTs from an outcomes perspective, using data from the online meeting's participants' questionnaires. One of the aims of the online meeting was to explore new ways in which rural women could participate in government decision-making. Whilst this section quantitatively examines the once-off online government meeting, Chapter 8 critically examines the broader sociopolitical issues with the implementation of future online government meetings that are aimed to increase rural women's involvement in decision-making.

Tyson (1989) defines decision-making as a '*process* whereby proposals are put forward and debated, and then progressively evaluated until a preferred one is selected' (p.110). The online government meeting case study is essentially the first part of the decision-making process as the one-off event enables rural women and the Deputy Premier to put forward and discuss issues. Time constraints and the iChat software not enabling voting online limited participants to formally decide and select preferred positions. Nevertheless, this case study presents the first steps of decision-making as agenda items were put forward and discussed. Consequently, the case study explored new opportunities for rural women to be involved in government decision-making.

To address this outcome, the analysis focuses on whether new opportunities were created for rural women to participate in government decision-making. 'A new opportunity' is operationalised as being, first, the number of rural women who participated in the government meeting, who previously had not participated in such a meeting, and second, the diversity and difference within the heterogeneous group of rural women involved in the online forum, as indicated by the women's age groups and areas of interest. A discussion of each of these outcomes follows.

5.3.1 The number of rural women experiencing a new opportunity

To identify the extent to which the online forum created new opportunities for rural women to participate in government decision-making through the use of ICTs, the overall number of rural women will be examined according to:

- the number of rural women respondents who had never participated in a government meeting before, compared to the rural women who had; and
- the number of rural women respondents who had not directly communicated with the Deputy Premier before, compared to those who had.

To begin with, the total number of the online meeting respondents is presented. The definition of 'a participant' in the online meeting is 'a person who attempted to participate in the online meeting area, and who completed the online meeting questionnaire'. This definition encapsulates the overall number of people who had made the decision to access the new online method of participation, even though some (n=10) could not do so due to technological reasons.

Compared to a face-to-face meeting, a relatively large number of rural women were present at the one-hour online government meeting. The iChat software registered 70 people present in the online meeting at peak time. Of these 70 people, two people were the organisers, one was the Deputy Premier, and 67 were online meeting participants. Given the anonymity of participants taking part in the online chat, the only method to identify these 67 participants was from their responses to the questionnaire. As outlined in Table 5.1, of the 50 people who completed the online meeting questionnaire, 47 were female, one was male, and two did not specify their gender. Of these 50 respondents, 40 were able to access the online meeting, while ten participants were not able to gain access to the online meeting for technological infrastructure reasons.

Table 5.1 Online meeting participants who either responded to the questionnaire or who were able to gain online access.

Participant & respondent, male, access the online meeting	1
Participants & respondents, women, access the online meeting	37
Participants & respondents, no gender identified, access the online meeting	2
Participants & respondents, women, not able to access the online meeting	10
Participants who did not provide feedback via the questionnaire, a minimum estimate	17
Total number of online meeting participants, a minimum estimate	67

Whilst 67 participants is a relatively large number for a one-hour meeting, compared with what is generally organised for a face-to-face meeting with the Deputy Premier, this figure is a conservative indication of the total number of participants involved in the online meeting. This is because the Figure of 67 represents the peak number of participants at one time and not the cumulative number of different participants involved throughout the one-hour timeframe. The iChat software did not record the cumulative figure of different participants in the online meeting. Consequently, on the available statistics recorded, it can be concluded that, at a minimum, there were 67 online meeting participants, of whom one was a rural male, 47 were rural women, two did not specify their gender, and 17 were anonymous.

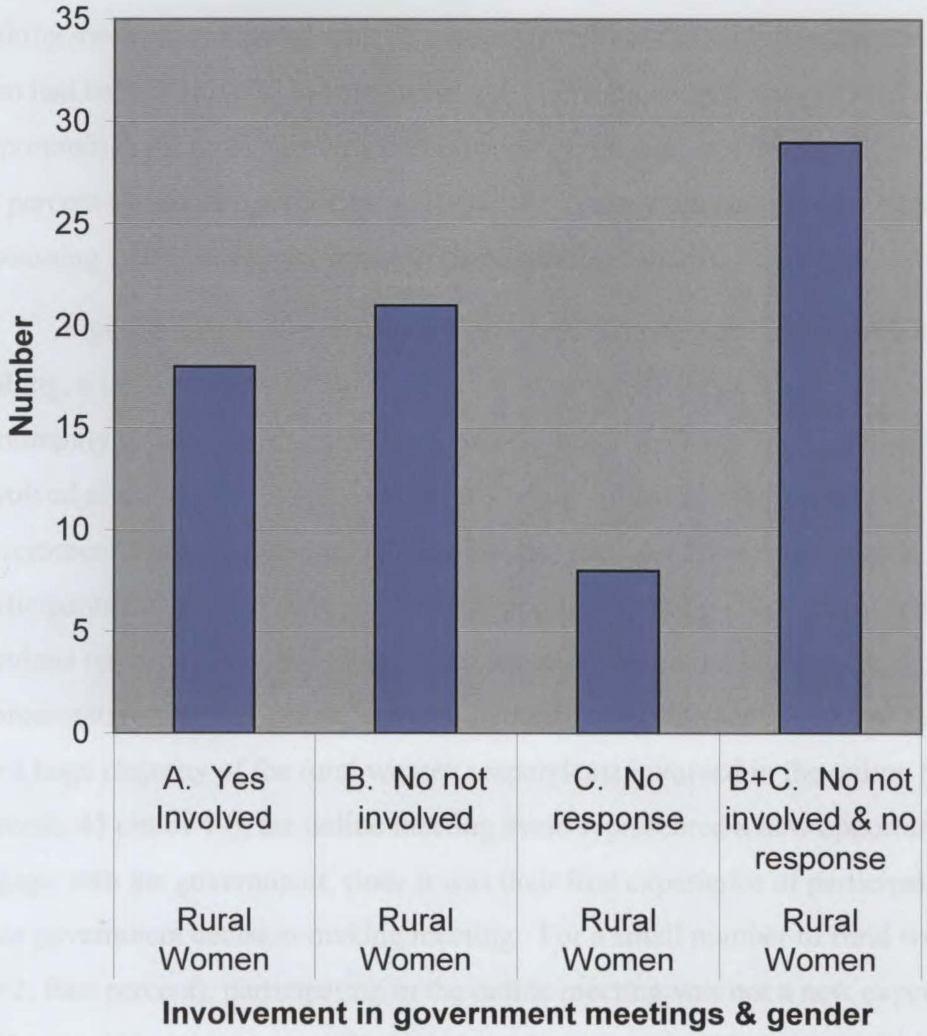

Figure 5.4 Comparing the number of rural women (n=47) who participated in the online government meeting, who had not previously been involved in government meetings to those who had.

To explore the new opportunity for participation, as experienced by rural women, (n=47) the data about rural women participants who had never participated in a government meeting before was compared with the data of those who had. Figure 5.4 indicates that of the 47 rural women respondents, 45 percent (n=21) of rural women, who participated in the online government meeting, had previously not been involved in decision-making meetings. A further 17 percent (n=8) of rural women did not respond when asked to write down names of the committees they were or had been involved in. As such, it can be optimistically argued that of the 47 rural women participating in the online meeting, and returning the questionnaire, a

large 62 percent (n=29) had not previously been involved in a government decision-making meeting, compared with 38 percent (n=18) of the rural women participants who had been involved. In conclusion, the online meeting format created new opportunities for rural women's participation given that, as a conservative estimate, 45 percent (or, more optimistically, 62 percent) of women had the new experience of discussing issues in a government decision-making context.

Figure 5.5 demonstrates that, of the rural women involved in decision-making, a large majority (16 of the 18 rural women; 89 percent) are involved at a community or local government level, whilst only two of the 18 (11 percent) were involved at a state level; with no rural women involved at a federal level of government decision-making. Whilst this distribution of few rural women participants involved in state government decision-making is consistent with previous research (SCARM, 2000), the case study makes no claim to being a representative sample of rural women. In conclusion, this case study has found that for a huge majority of the rural women respondents involved in the online forum (96 percent; 45 out of 47), the online meeting event represented a new opportunity to engage with the government, since it was their first experience of participating in a state government decision-making meeting. For a small number of rural women (n=2; four percent), participating in the online meeting was not a new experience with regard to making a contribution in a state government decision-making forum since they are involved in decision-making meetings such as the Isolated Children's Parent Association and the state Advisory Rural Plan.

The then-Deputy Premier of WA was an influential decision-maker in the state government, particularly with regards to representing the interests of rural people. Consequently, to explore the new opportunities that rural women experienced further, an analysis was made of the number of rural women respondents who had not previously met the Deputy Premier, compared to those who had. From rural women's responses to the question, 'Have you participated in a meeting before with the Deputy Premier?' 76 percent (n=38) of the participants had not done so, until the online meeting (see Figure 5.4). Of the 38 respondents, who had not met the Deputy Premier before, 36 were rural women and two did not specify their gender. Only a few respondents, (22 percent, n=11), of whom one was a rural male, had previously been involved in a meeting with the Deputy Premier

before the online meeting. One respondent did not indicate whether she had previously met the Deputy Premier. These results show that the online meeting case study provided a new opportunity for many rural women to interact with an influential decision-maker in the state government.

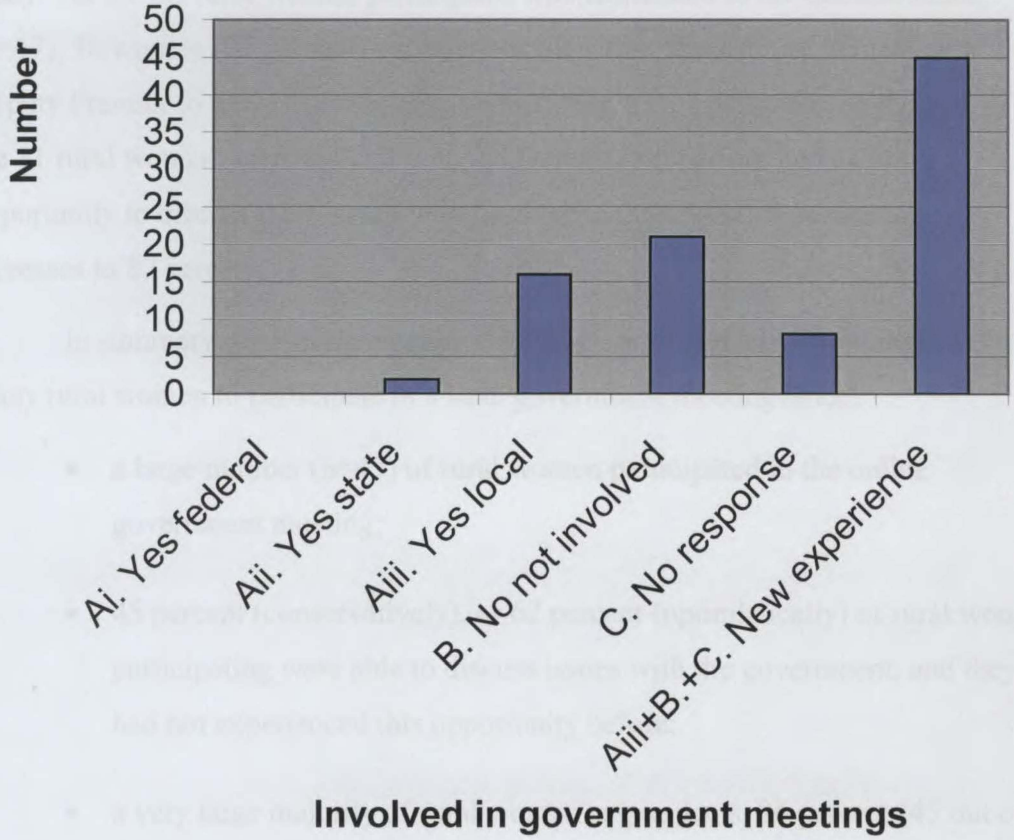

Figure 5.5 **Data from online rural women respondents who participated in the online government meeting (n=47): A comparison of rural women's involvement in government meetings, focusing on the new experience rural women received.**

A further analysis of the 22 percent (n=11) of participants who indicated that they had previously participated in a meeting with the Deputy Premier, demonstrated that approximately half (n= five) had been involved in a situation where they could discuss issues about which they were passionate. These five participants comprised one rural man and four rural women. Another five of the eleven participants indicated that they had met the Deputy Premier in passing when he visited their

community. One remaining rural woman did not describe her previous meeting/s with the Deputy Premier.

These findings further support the contention that new opportunities were experienced by a majority of rural women participating in the online meeting case study. As for the rural women participants who responded to the questionnaire (n=47), 36 women (77 percent) experienced their first opportunity to meet with the Deputy Premier to discuss issues about which they were passionate. If the five of the 11 rural women, who had met with the Deputy Premier but had had no opportunity to discuss their issues with him, are included in this percentage, it increases to 87 percent.

In summary, the online meeting case study provided a new opportunity for many rural women to participate in a state government meeting since:

- a large number (n=47) of rural women participated in the online government meeting;
- 45 percent (conservatively), or 62 percent (optimistically) of rural women participating were able to discuss issues with the government, and they had not experienced this opportunity before;
- a very large majority of rural women respondents, 96 percent (45 out of 47), participated in a state government decision-making forum for the first time;
- a large majority of participants, 76 percent (n=38), had never participated in a meeting with the Deputy Premier until the online meeting. Of the 38 respondents who had not previously met the Deputy Premier, 36 were rural women; and
- a very large majority of rural women, 87 percent, had their first experience of discussing important issues with Deputy Premier during the online forum.

All of the above findings indicate that the online meeting case study provided many rural women with a new opportunity or opportunities to participate in a state government meeting. This online meeting created new opportunities for rural

women to be part of the democratic system and to give voice to the issues about which they felt passionate. Importantly, they could do this without leaving their local community. This thesis argues that when policy makers adopt a new way to increase rural women's participation in government decision-making processes, it is also necessary to examine the difference and diversity of the rural women who become involved. The following section provides a preliminary examination of the heterogeneous nature of the group of rural women involved in the online meeting case study.

5.3.2 The diversity of rural women who participated

The age range and different interest areas of the online participants were examined to help determine the diversity of rural women participating in the online meeting. The rural women (n=47) respondents participating in the online meeting case study were of a relatively younger age range than the typical demographics of women involved in government decision-making processes documented in previous research (Wilkinson & Alston, 1999), but also represented many different age groups. The average age of the rural women participating in the online meeting was 38 years old, with a standard deviation of 11 years. The youngest rural woman participating was 16 years old and this indicates the age variation among the respondents since the oldest woman responding was 61 years of age. The most common (modal) age for rural women participants was 35 years old, indicating that the online participants involved a group of rural women predominantly younger than the average age of 38.

An analysis of rural women's diversity is also shown by the breadth of issues in which they were interested. The questionnaire responses indicated that these included:

- rural economic community development;
- rural facilities and services;
- education;
- women's issues;
- health;

- environmental land care;
- youth;
- telecommunications; and
- fuel.

Some of these issues, such as local facilities and economic community development, reflect broad, holistic issues, whilst other matters - such as fuel, environmental land care, and telecommunications - reflect issues with a specific rural spin. The agenda-setting processes for the online meeting (encouraging rural women to create their own agenda) may have contributed to attracting the participation of rural women who had varied interests (see Table 5.2, below).

Table 5.2 indicates the number of rural women wanting to discuss particular interest areas and also includes a variety of points that rural women wanted to raise within each specific area. The most common issue category was rural economic and community development, and the least common category was women's specific issues. Examination of the priorities reveals, 30 rural women wanting to discuss rural economic community development, 17 rural women wanting to discuss education, and 16 wanting to discuss rural facilities and services.

Whilst only a few of the rural women wanted to discuss issues such as fuel, women's specific issues, environmental land care, and health, it can be appreciated that these issues are of significant concern to rural communities and can affect broader holistic issues such as rural economic community development. These findings counter the stereotypical view suggesting that rural women only want to discuss women's specific issues, and rather support Haslam McKenzie's (1997) research. That research argues that rural women have a diverse range of interest areas and wish to be involved in a broad rural agenda.

Table 5.2 Rural women respondents' issues they would like to discuss with the government

Rural women respondents (N=47) identify their interest areas	Number & Percent
Rural Economic Community Development Community pride Community development – keeping town alive, businesses and tourism Community advancement; community spirit, working together Community survival and revival Socioeconomic problems relating to small towns Opportunities and reducing employment. Increasing awareness Keeping the town alive and populated. Not losing anymore services Creating pride in our community, and survival, increasing our population Communities and their survival. Rural Australia survival Survival – cost of living Community and economic development Small business being a viable option Cultural tourism; preservation and enhancement of history Development of the foreshore to provide jobs and tourist dollars Employment Lack of community optimism for the future. Keeping the town not only alive but growing Farm diversification and sustainability of rural communities. Making sure we are in charge of our own destiny. Having a strong community with vision and passion Community empowerment Current events World commodity prices on farm produce and the net return to the farmer The number of government bureaucrats that do nothing but talk and direct. Save money paying their salaries and give the tax-payer the incentive to use private enterprise to provide services.	30 64%
Education Schools closing Education facilities Lack of access – education and government agencies Outlets for children – entertainment Increasing education, keep small schools functioning	17 36%
Rural Facilities and Services Equity in services. Quality of health and education Facilities in small towns Community facilities Sport Not losing services Access to services. Equity in service delivery – education, roads, doctors, and hospitals The lack of facilities that city people take for granted that we in the country have to fight for funding to have access to. Get on a more even level with our cousins in the City (for example telephone, fuel prices, food prices) Emergency workers Transport and public transport Lack of access – education and government agencies Interest rates and the banks' perception that farmers must pay higher interest because their lending risk is high	16 34%

Table 5.2 (contd) Rural women respondents' issues they would like to discuss with the government.

Rural women respondents (N=47) identify their interest areas	Number & Percent
Telecommunications Providing rural people with the same technology (and speeds) as the city Information access Limited access to mobile services New and existing Telecentre IT CDMA towers Telstra sell off Telecentre in general, and the wonderful things that have been achieved through them How to attract people to the Telecentre	10 21%
Youth Youth unemployment Getting young people into farming Lack of youth activities and facilities Young people in the community Young people both at school and with the problem of drugs and alcohol Youth. Supporting youth in entrepreneurial activities, education, and quality of life	6 13%
Fuel Astronomical fuel prices My sister is trying to better her chances in life by doing a course. We live out of town and it costs her a fortune in petrol. There is no public transport and she has no other choices. Get rid of government excise Government excise	6 13%
Health Health, doctors and hospitals Quality of health	4 8.5%
Environmental Land Care Environmental issues Farm sustainability Agriculture Land care Sand mining – water table	4 8.5%
Women's Specific Issues Women's low self esteem – women's issues Domestic violence – child abuse Employment and support services for women in our town Opportunities for young women	3 6%
Miscellaneous Spatial data analysis	1 2%
No response to issues question	6 13%

In summary, the online meeting attracted a diverse group of rural women respondents. They were of different ages, with many of them being relatively young, in their thirties, and many having different areas of interest that they wished to discuss. These findings support other research (Haslam McKenzie, 1997; Lennie, 2001) indicating that there is no one stereotype of rural women, or rural women's issues. Even so, diversity among rural women is a rare feature in many government meetings, and it was a significant positive that the online meeting case study was able to involve new, rural women, many of whom have a background that differs from the homogenous characteristics of rural females participating in government decision-making (Alston, 2000).

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter addressed the implementation and outcome issues of the online meeting case study. The application of the sociotechnical framework to this problem resulted in a comprehensive approach that included and prioritised rural women's needs from both an organiser's and a technologist's perspective. The analysis of the online meeting demonstrated that rural women were attracted to participating in the state government online decision-making meeting.

The outcomes of the online meeting case study supported the suggestion that the online meeting presented new opportunities through which rural women could participate in a government decision-making meetings. For example:

- many rural women decided to be involved in the online meeting;
- a large majority of rural women participated in the online meeting, had previously been not involved in a state government meeting;
- a large majority of rural women had their first opportunity of discussing issues with the Deputy Premier; and
- significant diversity was represented by the rural women participating in the online government meeting.

The case study demonstrated that an online meeting is one innovative way in which to increase the involvement of rural women in government decision-making

processes. The following chapter examines rural women's experiences of the online meeting case study, so as to develop an in-depth analysis from the users' perspective, and to provide a deeper understanding of the efficacy and future of using online meetings as a way to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making processes.

CHAPTER 6

The Online Government Meeting Experience

'Thanks for the opportunity - should be more of it!' [Toni, 50 – 59, Great Southern]

This chapter examines rural women's experiences of the online government meeting case study. The analysis addresses the final research question: 'If rural women are interested in using ICTs to participate in government decision-making, then what are their issues with using them?'. A systemic approach is taken to assessing rural women's experiences of using ICTs. First, the benefits and obstacles of using ICTs are explored from the perspective of the rural women respondents. Subsequently, rural women's suggestions for future uses of ICTs in online government meetings are documented. This analysis of rural women's experience is an essential component of feminist action research because their experiences inform the action research cycle and capture the multiple realities of their different experiences. This analytical process is, therefore, fundamental to establishing the validity of any sociotechnical solution as the results in this chapter give rural women a voice in assessing the efficacy of using ICTs for government decision-making.

Information will be drawn from participants' questionnaires and from repeat interviews with three of the rural women originally interviewed. It also reflects the feedback of the Deputy Premier. Where appropriate, these three sources of information will be triangulated to demonstrate the reliability of data collected and to determine the multifaceted dimensions of the online experience. This analysis of data provides a litmus test for the online meeting as a sociotechnological solution to the problem of women's absence from many government decision-making processes by its main users, the rural women.

6.1 The Benefits of the Online Meeting

Overall, the benefits rural women experienced with respect to the online meeting case study were that it:

- had an interesting, current and relevant agenda;
- was an innovative way to be involved in government decision-making;
- improved access to government decision-making;
- enhanced access to the views of a diversity of other rural women in WA; and
- reduced barriers affecting participation in government decision-making.

These five benefits and their implications are discussed separately.

6.1.1 The online meeting agenda

Rural women found the online meeting agenda to be interesting, and to have current and relevant topics. Their interest in, and the personal relevance of, the topics in the agenda are illustrated by rural women's responses to the post-meeting evaluation questionnaire. For example, they commented that, *'The issues and topics affect me personally'* [Rural Woman Questionnaire (RWQ), 23, 36, Great Southern]; and that they were *'Interested in issues that affect rural women and families'* [RWQ 15, 43, Peel], and that '*Good and relevant topics were discussed'* [RWQ16, 29, Peel]. One woman's response indicated that she was particularly satisfied with the breadth of agenda topics:, *'Well organised and structured, good agenda - covered a wide range of topics'* [RWQ 50, 35, Mid West]. The topics ranged from telecommunications to small business to natural resource management and included the catch-all category of "other rural issues".

The active involvement taken by rural women in planning the government agenda means that the agenda was more likely to address their specific needs. A rural woman explained:

> This [posting items on the bulletin board] gives the organisers some idea about what people would like to discuss and then the agenda can be developed to include these issues [RWQ 50, 35, Mid West].

It is not surprising that rural women were attracted to the agenda as the participative approach meant that those women who wished to be involved in the

online government meeting could participate in shaping the agenda in their own time and from their own local community.

As the bulletin board was central to creating the agenda, it is important to discuss rural women's perspective of the bulletin board, which was well received: *'The bulletin board is an excellent idea. Arguments can be leisurely debated. A whole breadth of opinions are given'* [RWQ 47, 42, Great Southern]; and *'Reading comments from all over WA [was valuable]; and people were braver because they could be anonymous'* [RWQ 39, No DOB, Wheatbelt]. In particular, rural women stated that the bulletin board facility helped them focus their thoughts as they reflected on other's issues before the meeting itself:

> We didn't post any questions prior but it was good to be able to see beforehand what was being asked which prompted questions for similar situations to our own [RWQ 31, 42, Great Southern].

This meant that the women had the opportunity to clarify their own issues as they prepared their responses for the bulletin board: *'We had a quick chance to prepare our thoughts beforehand rather than waste valuable online time'* [RWQ 39, No DOB, Wheatbelt].

One rural woman was unaware of the bulletin board facility, even though a guide to participation had been included in all promotional material and networked to Telecentres. This woman stated: *'Did we have a bulletin board? Have I missed something?'* [RWQ 3, 47, Great Southern]. The implication is that some rural women may initially need offline strategies to increase their awareness of a bulletin board facility.

Rural women's attraction to the bulletin board discussion of the online meeting agenda developed their relationships with other rural women in WA, despite the vast distances between them and their isolation from one another. They were surprised at the empathy and connection created by the realisation that many of their issues were similar to those of other women. One woman wrote: *'Made me aware of common issues in areas of great diversity'* [RWQ 43, 61 Great Southern]. In brief, the bulletin board debate informed the development of the online meeting agenda and created the spin-off benefit of a community of interest that enabled the women to share information, and to network, and develop empathy with each other.

However, participation had to be balanced against the number of issues addressed and the depth of discussion of those issues. Rural women wanted more than simply to contribute to the agenda. They wanted an opportunity to discuss the topics thoroughly within the limited time frame. This was not entirely possible. As Margo [30 – 39, Great Southern], one of the rural women interviewed before the online meeting, commented: *'The agenda is certainly comprehensive. Will you get through it all?'* Although many of the rural women appreciated the range and diversity of the topics for the meeting, there were those who preferred a specific focus on one or two topics, and a commitment to regular forums: *'Yes* [it is an empowering tool for women]. *In a smaller forum - for one to two topics only - more often'* [RWQ 23, 36, Great Southern]; and

> Yes possibly [an empowering tool for women]. Maybe an open monthly forum would be a good way of doing [this]. Where the one issue was posted for the month, and women were free to comment for the month [RWQ 49, 26, Great Southern].

Consequently, rural women's attraction to the breadth of issues to be discussed in the online meeting also brought out their need to discuss their issues in-depth with the government and its agents and representatives. This could only be possible if the online meeting case study were to be extended with more time allocated, or with more regular government meetings.

In summary, one of the reasons rural women were attracted to participating in the online meeting was the interesting, current and relevant topics included in the agenda. Rural women valued the bulletin board facility which meant they were actively involved in shaping the agenda, and could prepare their thoughts by viewing other's responses and posting their own issues. WA rural women's inter-relationships strengthened as they shared valuable information and realised they had common concerns. Whilst rural women valued the breadth of interests covered by the agenda topics, they also expressed a need to discuss topics in-depth, which would mean online meetings needed to be more regular and / or longer.

6.1.2 The online meeting was an innovative way to be involved in government decision-making

There was overwhelming support for participation in a government meeting using ICTs. Justine, a rural woman who had been interviewed in the first phase, and

who responded to the questionnaire, stated: *'Great Concept ! Well Done'* [40 – 49, South West] and another participant commented '[I] *see the potential in developing this kind of forum'* [RWQ 49, 26, Great Southern].

The women were motivated by curiosity about the potential benefits of online technology. One woman said she was: *'Interested in seeing how it* [the online government meeting] *would work'* [RWQ 49, 26, Great Southern]. Table 6.1 shows how these rural women initially identified curiosity as a reason to be involved but also sought clarification of the opportunities arising from online meetings.

Table 6.1 Women's reference to curiosity about the technology and the identification of tangible new opportunities gained from the online government meeting.

Rural Woman	Curiosity as a reason why women were initially attracted to the online meeting.	Real new opportunities gained from the online meeting
RWQ 33, 39, South West	*'As a first for this area I felt it was important to see how helpful this could be for rural women'.*	*'Yes it is useful as a tool for rural women. As there is limited access to offices and major key staff in country areas. Makes them [Ministers] more accessible to the wider community'.*
RWQ 34, No DOB, South West	*'Curiosity'.*	*'Regular contact with the public. Lots of information'.*
RWQ 37, 39, Wheatbelt	*'I think that this is an excellent way to talk and it was an opportunity that was too good to miss. It was a first! And I wanted to see how it would work'.*	*'Being able to converse with a large number of people at once, and getting their views. Having an immediate response from* [the Deputy Premier]. *Getting a group into the Telecentres at the same time meant we could discuss answers amongst ourselves & better write questions. Yes. We are able to converse with the politicians as well as amongst ourselves. It was nice to know that [the Deputy Premier] was listening but also that what was pertinent to here was happening elsewhere. Get the other politicians involved. Education - have the Minister & the Director General of Education & other areas. Deal with specific topics - suicide, youth in regional areas'.*

Rural women identified a range of tangible opportunities received from the innovative online method.

- It enabled rural women to communicate. For example, a rural woman living in the Kimberly region, in a town far from Perth, commented on the new opportunity that the technology offered her by stating: *'The online environment is a means of communicating [about] current issues'* [RWQ 9, 45, Kimberley];

- it exposed rural women to a live demonstration of an online government meeting. For example, women referred to: *'Exposure to chatroom. Format. Would participate again'* [RWQ 7, 34, Wheatbelt], *'People now know that chats do work. Education of Guests i.e., Politicians that Rural Women are concerned!!!'* [RWQ 24, 54, Wheatbelt]; and

- it included a diversity of rural women. Rural women commented: *'Good to see the range and number of women making use of this application for communication'* [RWQ 41, 27, Great Southern]; and *'The outcomes achieved were the attendance and interest from local ladies who had no experience with computers'* [RWQ 32, 35, Peel].

Rural women's curiosity about the innovative method of meeting may have inspired them to participate in the first instance but that curiosity was sustained by the new opportunities offered by an online meeting format.

Participants' openness to using a new method to communicate with each other was observed throughout the analysis. It was the first online, government meeting in WA, so participants' and stakeholders' attitudes to using an innovative communication method were central to their participation. The Deputy Premier and the rural women were all willing to take a risk, to have a go, and trial a new way to conduct a government meeting. This positive "let's try it" attitude is supported by data from interviews with three rural women before the online meeting. All of the women initially commented that they had no expectations about the online meeting. For example, Sally reflects, *'I have been thinking about what to say .... I don't really have any expectations'* [40 – 49, South West].

Despite apparently open attitudes to using the technology, two of the three women had negative views about chatlines, and one mentioned she was "not a Chatline person". Justine, was cautious:

> For me it will be a first. I am very cautious. I don't get into chat rooms *[laugh]*. Time is an issue. I just think that I am not that sort of person. But I would say that if there is sort of something positive out of it. ... that comes from the contributions and the input that we have been given. Then I would think that it would be a very good move *[40 – 49, South West]*.

Sally mentions that even though she participated in the online meeting case study, she has usually not used chat rooms as a means of communicating:

> Yeah that *[time]* is the hard thing I find. And I have to confess I don't go on many chat lines as such. As a matter of fact, I think I have been on one. And it took all my time to keep up with the conversation *[laugh]*. You know when a lot of people are jumping in. And you think, where is the answer to that *[laugh]* [40 – 49, South West].

Rural women's open attitudes to the online meeting were shared by the Deputy Premier's response when he was asked why he decided to be involved in the online meeting. He said:

> Ahh [it was] just a request. I try to comply with some of the things the Department wants to do. If it's got some merit, I have got advisors who tell me whether it has or hasn't got merit. And the advice was, 'if it works it will be really, really good, if it doesn't it will be a complete shemozzle'. And it works, it works.

In summary, whilst rural women were generally curious about the innovative approach of using ICTs for government decision-making, many were of the opinion that the online meeting could deliver experiential, educational and access opportunities. Rural women and the Deputy Premier were also open to being involved in an innovative and potentially risky project. Given that the online meeting was the first of its kind in the WA government to explore new methods of meeting using ICTs, it involved significant input with little prior evidence as to the value of participation.

6.1.3 Greater access to government decision-making processes

Greater access to government was a significant motivator for rural women's participation in the online meeting, and was referred to frequently by them. "Greater access for rural women" meant creating more, direct and easier opportunities for rural women to communicate with the Deputy Premier and, in turn, the government. A discussion regarding how this direct access affects the relationship between the Deputy Premier and rural women, with a focus upon the benefits of direct communication channels for rural women, follows.

Across all the methods of data collection used in this research, rural women expressed their desire and (in some cases) their need to have direct access to the Deputy Premier. From the rural women's responses, "direct access" means having direct contact with the Deputy Premier, so that there is no middle person or bureaucratic process involved, there is no time delay in the communication and access is regular. Three rural women respondents, clarified the benefits of them having direct access to the Deputy Premier: *'The fact you were able to raise issues with the Minister and get a reply from him and not his helpers'* [RWQ 28, no DOB, Wheatbelt]; *'The fact that you could obtain a result to your query straight away'* [RWQ 36, 40, Wheatbelt]; and *'Seeing questions / responses first hand'* [RWQ 11, 44, Peel]. Rural women's positive reaction to their experience of direct access to the government decision-making process demonstrates that the online meeting may have by-passed the traditional, protective barriers surrounding the Deputy Premier, which may be perceived as keeping him at a distance from his constituents.

The benefit of direct access was also reflected in rural women being aware of what the Deputy Premier's concerns were and understanding his viewpoint. In asking the Deputy Premier questions, and digesting his responses, women found his expertise and the information received were both of value. Fiona appreciated the process of participatory access to the Deputy Premier; *'You get to talk to them and get answers from the horse's mouth* [RWQ 18, 25, Esperance - Goldfields]. An online participant noted that direct communication was particularly important *'As there is limited access to offices and major key staff in country areas'* [RWQ 33, 39 South West]. They valued the information they received from the online meeting as one said *'Any information we can receive in the country easily is a bonus'* [RWQ 2, 35, Wheatbelt].

Sally, interviewed before the online meeting, held the opinion that rural women generally viewed government decision-makers as inaccessible. She predicted that the online meeting process would help break down this perceived or real barrier: *'I think this sort of activity will allow people who may not normally mix with the Minister to have opportunity for some direct feedback'* [Sally, 40 – 49, South West]. Sally also indicated that the experience of direct access to the Deputy Premier might increase rural women's awareness that they can and do have access to him. The benefits of this perception of government accessibility include:

> Awareness raising I guess, on his part as well as on the women. And it can be a big boost if people can think that they do have access to him, even if it is only for an hour or whatever. "Do you know what I mean?" .... Yeah. There are people out there that don't actually even know they can do that or think they have the ability to do that. You know you could be at something and can say "I think we should take that to the Minister". They say, "why would we do that? How would we do that?" He is just a bloke. There is still that. [Sally, 40 – 49, South West].

One rural woman acknowledged that the time constraints of the Deputy Premier could be an issue: *'Good that* [the Deputy Premier] *gave up very valuable time'* [RWQ 30, 49, Great Southern]. The experience of the online meeting challenged such perceptions. Thus the online meeting served to demystify the process of gaining direct access to the Deputy Premier. Accessibility was improved because meeting online overcame the tyranny: *'It allows women to get together over great distances without travelling very far. Also it includes farms and more isolated areas'* [RWQ 8, no DOB, Kimberley].

In brief, there were two significant elements constituting perceptions of direct access to the Deputy Premier. First, a real practical opportunity to communicate directly with the Deputy Premier; and second, a sense of the receptiveness of the Deputy Premier. The questionnaires results overwhelmingly endorse the importance of direct communication with the government was beneficial:

- 'any meeting and discussions with Ministers is beneficial to anyone' [RWQ 2, 35, Wheatbelt];
- 'any chance to discuss issues with government has to be good' [RWQ 1, 51, Wheatbelt];
- 'something that has been required for a long time'. [RWQ 27, 20, Wheatbelt].
- 'absolutely, a personal meeting is the best way to go' [RWQ 38, 34, Wheatbelt];
- 'yes, any contact is valuable.' [RWQ 39, No DOB, Wheatbelt]].

- 'a good opportunity for the smaller communities to have contact with [the Deputy Premier] ... and get answers to their questions' [RWQ 50, 35, MidWest];
- 'opportunity to access information immediately' [RWQ 16, 29, Peel]; and
- 'good to be able to talk to the Minister direct' [RWQ 24, 54, Wheatbelt].

Rural women's responses to the online meeting illustrate how they valued the "top down" method of communication, where they could receive information directly from the Deputy Premier.

The "bottom – up" method of communication, whereby the Deputy Premier was able to gain information from rural women, was another major reason why these women valued having direct access to government decision-making via the online meeting. Reflecting upon this experience, rural women anticipated that they would receive better representation of their views in government via the online meeting process. Two respondents explained that: *'The Minister represents the people and this gives them an unequalled opportunity to get direct feedback without any pressure on participants'* [RWQ 40, 48, Peel] and *'They* [the politicians] *are there to represent our views. If they do not listen to their electors why bother entering politics at all?'* [RWQ 47, 42, Great Southern].

Meeting online enabled the Deputy Premier to hear the views of a range of rural women. Traditionally, a "grass roots" consultative process would involve the extensive use of resources in time and travelling. Rural women acknowledged that the online meeting case study provided an excellent opportunity for the Deputy Premier to engage in this "grass roots" approach in a short, one-hour time, frame. One rural woman respondent stated that the online meeting: *'Gives* [the Deputy Premier] *a fast one-hour opportunity to discuss* [with] *rural women all around the state in a fast and cheap forum'* [RWQ 16, 29, Peel], while another commented upon the online meeting's capacity to draw upon and include a diversity of rural women's perspectives: *'The ability to get a good range of women from all different parts of WA talking in the one place'* [RWQ 8, no DOB, Kimberley].

A deeper examination of how this "grass roots" approach benefits rural women's empowerment may be revealed through reference to the work of Covey

(1999) and Stein (1997) who note that empowerment requires a movement from an experience of personal mastery to the public mastery of working with others to create change. In this case the online meeting gave rural women the opportunity to communicate directly with the Deputy Premier. This was central to their empowerment. The online participants made particular reference to the importance of politicians needing to listen to people, as "this is their job". One rural woman noted: *'Politicians always need to listen to people. This* [online meeting] *gives the opportunity and they* [rural women] *know they are being heard'* [RWQ 3, 47, Great Southern]. For rural women to feel that what they have to say is being heard by the government becomes an important step in developing their experience of empowerment as these women move from sharing their perspectives in a private sphere of life into a playing a public and participatory role (Covey, 1999).

The anonymity and flexibility experienced by participants in the online meeting lowered the threshold of hesitation and reduce the fear of participating in a government forum. One respondent speculated that online communication may require less self confidence than alternatives: *'Women may feel more confident in voicing their opinions and hopes in this way instead of fronting for meetings or writing letters'* [RWQ 31, 42, Great Southern]. Another rural woman suggested that an increase in some rural women's participation in a non-threatening and anonymous environment might also create a snowball effect whereby other rural women, currently not involved, might become involved. This might mean that rural women who do not already possess the necessary prerequisites to participate in an online forum might potentially seek out resources or learn new skills to enable them to use this way of communicating with the government:

> It gives people the chance to voice a concern or opinion in a non-threatening and anonymous environment which will in turn encourage more women to get on and have their say - something many may not do otherwise [RWQ 48, 31, Great Southern].

Women's vast opportunities for empowerment is facilitated by rural women participants being able to choose their level of participation in the online government meeting.

> People were able to air their views and get answers to their questions or just sit back and watch the session and see how these chats work and perhaps next time get more involved [RWQ 50, 35, MidWest].

Rural women affirmed their confidence, and developed mastery over their life, as a result of the government giving them an opportunity to be heard. Three respondents explained: *'I am important and I have opinions to express BUT don't often get the chance to express them'* [RWQ 9, 45, Kimberley]; *' We are a minority group and we need to be heard'* [RWQ 28, No age, Wheatbelt] and, *'The people have the opportunity to have their say and know that they are being heard'* [RWQ 37, 39, Wheatbelt].

Two rural women commented how the online forum overcame a sense of their isolation and lack of direct access to the Deputy Premier, facilitating a new perspective of empowerment and "having a voice" in government: *'Women who do live in the country and isolated areas do feel isolated and appreciate the opportunity to be heard'* [RWQ 32, 35, Peel] and *'There are many issues people want addressed or made comment upon, this type of forum is perfect to bring up such concerns and an* [sic] *solution shown'* [RWQ 44, 20, Wheatbelt].

For rural women, who may be geographically isolated, or excluded from traditional government decision-making processes in other ways, the online meeting offers a unique empowerment experience. A respondent from a town five hours drive from Perth, commented: *'It's the only opportunity I have to present ideas'* [RWQ 43, 61, Great Southern]. In this context, isolation from government representation refers to the distance from Perth as well as from direct opportunities to communicate with the Deputy Premier. Another rural woman respondent explained how her isolation was overcome with the online meeting:

> This is probably the only chance most of us get to ask a polly [politician] a question directly and get an answer or response immediately ... living in isolated areas as we do it is great to come into the Telecentres and access modern technology and express our views and ask questions [RWQ 50, 35, MidWest].

In summary, given that the online meeting offered rural women better access to a government decision-making process, it enabled the formation of a closer relationship amongst rural women and the Deputy Premier. At the same time that

rural women were offered the opportunity to get to know the Deputy Premier better as a person, and gain information from him. The Deputy Premier was also able to understand rural women's perspectives better, along with responding to their issues, and needs. Thus, the "grass roots" process is a fundamental building-block of empowerment, as rural women can step forward from their roles in private arenas to finding a voice in a public arena.

6.1.4 Access to other rural women in WA

Another significant benefit of the online meeting was the value perceived by rural women in communicating with other rural women. As one woman said:

> We are able to converse with the politicians as well as amongst ourselves. It was nice to know that [the Deputy Premier] was listening but also that what was pertinent to here [the woman's geographical community], was happening elsewhere [RWQ 37, 39, Wheatbelt].

They indicated that it was rare for them to come together to discuss state-wide issues. In particular, it was rare for such a diverse group of WA rural women to have an opportunity to discuss issues of importance to each other. One rural woman observed that:

> Physical isolation means that a body of opinion never really forms. It would be interesting to discover that all country women, for example, view the Telstra issue in a certain way [RWQ 47, 42, Great Southern].

This comment emphasises the importance of WA rural women developing a collective voice on specific issues.

The involvement of the WA Telecentre Network enabled rural women to come together to discuss state-wide issues in the context of their local communities. Rural women voiced their appreciation of this opportunity to facilitate their offline social networks: *'Getting a group into the Telecentre at the same time meant we could discuss answers amongst ourselves and better write questions'* [RWQ 37, 39, Wheatbelt]. Another respondent commented upon the value of *'Using Telecentres so people are in groups of their own'* [RWQ 3, 37 Great Southern]. Consequently, the online meeting became a potential tool that rural women felt could be used to try to develop a coherent WA rural women's voice, at a local and state level.

The benefits of rural women being able to generate a collective voice include not only the development of political power and influence, but also the self-development of individual rural women through their interaction with other rural women, in a direct and cost effective way. The questionnaire responses indicated that they felt supported through receiving information and identifying that other rural women and communities shared the same concerns. They welcomed support in voicing their issues:

- 'so I could have a say and see what other women had [to] say about the issues raised' [RWQ 17, 31 Esperance – Goldfields];
- 'to find out if other rural towns are having the same sort of problems we have' [RWQ 13, 42, Peel];
- 'wanted to see what problems other rural centres are facing' [RWQ 36, 40, Wheatbelt];
- 'I was interested in what rural WA had to say on these topics' [RWQ 39, No DOB, Wheatbelt];
- 'to promote community activity in involvement with other communities' [RWQ 10, no DOB, Kimberley]
- 'good opportunity to … see what other rural women ask for support with' [RWQ 31, 42, Great Southern]; and
- I believe that the women participating gained valuable information from other women, the discussions were insightful and I'm sure informative for the minister (yes rural women have more to discuss than scone recipes!) [RWQ 46, 24, Great Southern].

These comments indicate that the vastness of WA and the sparseness of its population is not only an obstacle for rural women's participation in government decision-making, but is also an obstacle for rural women presenting a collective voice as part of government decision-making processes.

There are two aspects to being involved in government decision-making. The first is involving many different rural women. The second involves providing

an opportunity for rural women to deliberate issues to achieve some consensus: *'The most positive part was the involvement by so many participants. The outcomes need to be more directed to follow an argument through and to find consensus of opinions* [RWQ 47, 42, Great Southern]. This respondent felt that whilst the online government meeting had involved many different rural women, it had not really achieved the second element of achieving consensus on specific issues.

A broader political gain from being part of a rural women's group was another benefit. Enhanced involvement in government decision-making requires an individual focus as well as a collective one. As one of the rural women stated: *'Women need to unite and provide a united voice'* [RWQ 46, 24, Great Southern]. Working together is a catalyst for moving women from operating in a private capacity to participating in a public forum. Justine, for example, outlined how feeling alone in isolated circumstances can prevent people from exploring ways forward:

> I have a couple of issues that I have just been involved in recently. I have found that particular individuals are getting the feeling that they're the only ones that think like that. Probably because of being divided rather than having the opportunity to come together [40 – 49, South West].

Two other respondents commented upon the importance to rural women of being supported by other rural women in a collaborative forum: *'It gives a collective voice and encourages women to have a say'* [RWQ 48, 31, Great Southern] and

> It does give them access to people that they would otherwise find hard to contact. It also gives a form of support, showing that other people have the same or very similar issues that concern them' [RWQ 45, No DOB, No response for region].

Both of these women specifically acknowledge that the coming together of women can facilitate an individual woman's confidence to speak in public. Confidence that one's individual issues matter to the broader group and the wider community is increased through rural women uniting in an online forum.

The confidence and self development experienced by rural women through speaking out in an online forum was commented upon by two respondents: *'We do not get* [the] *opportunity to meet with 'hierarchy' as much as wanted. Confidence*

building both in expressing views and in technology' [RWQ 21, 47, Great Southern], and *'We were all on equal footing, not judged visually. I could be sitting here in my gardening clothes!'* [RWQ 39, No DOB, Wheatbelt]. The online meeting process facilitates a sense of informality and, anonymity. This informal and equalising experience could prove to be an important and powerful strategy for empowerment.

The online meeting has a capacity to bring rural women together in a way that allows individual women to choose the place that their participation has in their lives and the role that they occupy in the meeting. This place and role may vary between supporter, viewer, activist, speaker, thinker, and networker across the different issues that are discussed. Rural women can voice their issues, perceive support for issues important to them, network with others, and be involved in a meeting in whatever role(s) they chose. For example, Margo and Justine, two of the rural women interviewed in the first phase of the research, indicated that they were happy with observing the discussion online, understanding that if they wanted to speak they could. This flexibility of speaking / listening / observing roles within the online meeting case study gave participants the opportunity to identify the issues rural women were pursuing, supporting or not supporting before becoming explicitly involved.

Apart from talking with the Deputy Premier, the online forum constituted a collective opportunity for rural women to network and test support for their actions and ideas among their peers. Where rural women may not feel confident about initiating action, or talking in a meeting, the online forum offers an important opportunity to determine and voice their individual support for other women's actions. Justine, reflected upon the importance of her support role: *'You know you might not initiate a topic, but have a comment if that [*topic*] is presented to you ... "Ohh right, yes. I think this, or I think or feel that"* [40 – 49, South West].

It is very important for rural women's empowerment to have a clear role (or roles) to play and a sense of personal boundaries and capacities as these relate to taking individual action. This power is further strengthened when women have confidence in the ability of others to take action, and an understanding of different perspectives and perceptions. The sense that "we are different yet the same" can be very important in striving to make a political difference that affects a group of

people. Justine commented that one person cannot do everything to address all the relevant issues. Boundaries and a sense of perspective are important:

> I think sometimes because you have so many issues that you are involved in, you have to be you and just think, "I can't. I have to be, I have to put that one aside. I can't". Don't You? You just can't be for everything. And have confidence that there are others who probably can. Having met many different people in the areas that I move in - that you don't reinvent the wheel. And there are only so many ways of saying things and that usually you find that somebody else has exactly the same thought that you do, and expresses it equally as well [Justine, 40 – 49, South West].

When rural women come together they can discover and create a personal role within the group, and find others who can support them in their actions to create change. The online government meeting provided an innovative way for rural women in WA to engage in this united and individual process.

In summary, the online meeting case study created an opportunity for rural women to choose from a range of possible decision-making roles: activist, supporter and/or non-supporter, and reflective observer. They were able to determine support from other rural women and gauge their position in the wider collective. The online meeting provided a chance to develop a power base as a united group of rural women who were empowered to present issues to the government.

6.1.5 Pre-existing barriers lessened with the online meeting

The research underpinning the online meeting case study investigated the barriers and drivers that influence rural women in WA to be involved (or not) in government decision-making. The purpose of the case study was to examine the extent to which using ICTs might remove barriers to participation.

It was evident from their responses to the questionnaire that they perceived that barriers were lessened. Fewer of their individual resources were required to take part, and the culture of the meeting was less formal, resulting in a greater sense of empowerment, and more opportunities to contribute.

Not having to physically attend a meeting was valued by many of the women. A respondent from Kununurra, and another woman from Jerramungup, separately explained their perceptions that online meetings: *'Break down barriers of*

distance' [RWQ 9, 45, Kimberley] and *'People don't have to physically attend a meeting - they can just log in from the home office, for whatever time they can spare'* [RWQ 23, 36 Great Southern].

Using the Internet reduced the time commitment involved in attending government meetings: *'It gives us* [the same] *access to a meeting that many in Perth may take for granted'* [RWQ 41, 27, Great Southern] and *'It is a useful tool for women as they don't have to leave the comfort of their own home'* [RWQ 20, 16, Esperance - Goldfields]. The outcome was less conflict for participants between the resources required to attend the rural women's meeting, and their existing commitments and responsibilities, particularly child-care:

> Great way of communicating without driving to Perth. Many women are unable to do that sort of thing because of small children and school children responsibilities [RWQ 3, 47, Great Southern].

Rural women perceived the barriers to their participation in policy-making as including distance, time involved and existing responsibilities and commitments. All of these difficulties appear to have been lessened in the online meeting experience.

In summary, when rural women offered feedback upon their experience of the online meeting they indicated that physical barriers such as time and distance appeared to have been lessened to an acceptable level for many of them, allowing participation. Competing commitments and responsibilities are often perceived as barriers to rural women's involvement in government decision-making forums, but these seemed to be less of an issue for the online case study. The flexibility and informality of the online meeting contributed not only to reducing the impact of the physical barriers, but also to lessening some of the personal and cultural barriers that prevent women from getting involved. These dynamics helped create an open, inclusive environment within which a diverse range of rural women felt empowered to communicate issues of importance to them.

6.1.6 Summary

The benefits of online meetings are inter-related. Rural women regularly referred to more than one of them at a time, sometimes outlining how one benefit led onto another. The positive experience of the online meeting case study, evident in

much of the feedback, indicates that rural women want to be involved in government decision-making and wish their individual and collective voices to be heard by government. The research reported here demonstrates that if a new way of government decision-making can lessen the number and severity of barriers to rural women's participation and increase their opportunities for empowerment, then rural women are likely to participate.

6.2 Barriers Experienced in Relation to the Online Government Meeting

The sociotechnical framework supports a reflective learning process, using rural women's expressions of their perceived needs and concerns to refine any technological solution to the identified communication problem (Bijker, 1995). The barriers experienced in relation to the online government meeting by some of the rural women included technical difficulties and experimental processes associated with the conduct of an online meeting.

The most common complaint identified was regarding the technology, as rural women experienced an array of technical difficulties. Geographic locations gave rise to access–problems. Further, the pressure on the technology of so many people collectively accessing one chat room led to many localised and network problems that inhibited opportunities for rural women to participate fully in the discussion.

Rural women generally accessed the chat room from Telecentres and from their own homes and offices across WA. This diversity of access points was a significant strength because it overcame the tyranny of distance. However it also created difficulties. A significant number of rural women could not access the online chat room. Women's problems in accessing the chat room ranged from *'Too long to get on line'* [RWQ 43, 61, Great Southern] to *'The chat session kept crashing. It died on me about three times'* [RWQ 48, 31, Great Southern]. Naturally, responses were only available from those women who were ultimately able to participate, or who could contribute to the online discussion or questionnaire completion that followed the forum. It is not known how many women experienced a frustrating, technological bar to participation.

Some women attributed their difficulties to computer failure, '*My computer froze. Need a new computer*' [RWQ 6, 48, South West], whilst others thought it might have been because so many people were taking part at the same time: '*Yes difficult to log on because so many were trying at the one time?*' [RWQ 47, 42, Great Southern]. In reality, there could be any number and combination of reasons why rural women were experiencing technical difficulties while trying to participate in the online government decision-making process.

The multi-layer networks of the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) used by the rural women; the ISP of the online chat facility; the propriety software company; the network firewalls from where the guest speaker or Deputy Premier is communicating; the many telecommunications companies responsible for the lines of all participants; and the range of different computer hardware used by participants are all implicated in online communication problems. The multi-layer networks, in particular, resulted in a loss of control over many aspects of using online technologies.

A perception of lack of control, however, is relatively dependent upon the support available to rural women participants from face-to-face and offline sources. Providing a 1800 local call support number for rural women to access if they experienced problems, and working through the WA Telecentre Network, were two strategies used to address the situation of rural women who faced technical problems. In particular, some technological novices felt supported even when their problems persisted. As one rural woman explained, *'I could not find how to log on to the chat room. I rang the 1800 No and I think it was* [one of the Coordinators], *was very helpful but I could still not get on'* [RWQ 40, 48, Peel].

Among the lessons learnt from the online meeting is that the technology (and, in particular, the software itself) can create barriers to participating in a government meeting, although it promises better direct access in the longer term. The frustration of rural women who had decided to be involved, who had organised their schedule around the one-hour online meeting, and who were then not able to get access online was evident from the response of one of the rural women respondents from the Wheatbelt region:

> It took 50 minutes of the hour discussion to finally log on - and then it only worked for five minutes. It lagged severely and was frustrating with the time spent waiting for the program to download and such. Especially when looking forward to what discussions would take place and the comments made and in all I only caught three minutes worth [RWQ 44, 20, Wheatbelt].

One rural woman's comments indicated that, even for rural women used to chat rooms, the chat program was not very user friendly:

> Definitely hold the chat session in a different program, one that is quicker and more user friendly. As a previous chat addict I found that whatever program that Yahoo chat uses is quite efficient - maybe we could chat in a similar program if not in Yahoo itself????? Anything but the program we used (or attempted to) today [RWQ 44, 20, Wheatbelt].

Another rural woman who completed the questionnaire agreed that the software used was a barrier to participating: 'Only that a better chat program would be used as I had a considerable amount of problems in participating or even the [sic] viewing the chat session' [RWQ 26, 20, Wheatbelt].

More detailed instructions were needed on using the chat room, according to feedback from novice chat room participants: *'Some extremely basic instructions for beginners like me'* [RWQ 40, 48, Peel] and *'Basic instructions for partaking and getting out of chat room for beginners. Possibly a bit longer'* [RWQ 31, 42, Great Southern]. Although organisers had provided what they perceived to be detailed instructions in all promotion and support material, some women were unable to find the chat room site on the Internet. Problems identified included: *'Finding which room had all the people'* [41, 27, Great Southern] and *'Going back and forth from one room to another'* [RWQ 42, 50, Great Southern].

Some rural women complained that even when they were in the chat room, they experienced difficulties. These difficulties included:

- being involuntarily booted out of the chat room: 'We are fairly new at the chat game and had problems with being told that we had left the room when we hadn't' [RWQ 45, no DOB, no response for region]; 'Got booted out several times, unsure why. Once was when I made comment about fuel prices and the proposed conservation levy. My comment

never made it to the chat and I got booted out' [RWQ 50, 35, MidWest]; and 'Every time a message was sent we were booted off' [RWQ 32, 35, Peel];

- very slow downloading of text: 'It is very slow. Trying to handle too much information too quickly' [RWQ 8, No DOB, Kimberley]; 'Very slow - wouldn't work. Downloading problems – speed' [27, 20, Wheatbelt]; 'The speed was a bit slow (FIX THIS TELSTRA!!!)' [RWQ 46, 24, Great Southern]; 'It was very slow and congested' [RWQ 25, 33, Wheatbelt]; and 'Downloading was slow and [we] could not see what typed' [RWQ 28, No DOB, Wheatbelt]; and

- difficulty following the discussion: 'Just trying to find the questions that were being asked at a particular time' [RWQ 2, 35, Wheatbelt], and 'Lagging of questions and answers was confusing' [RWQ 9, 45, Kimberley].

On the other hand, there were some rural women who did not indicate that they experienced any technical problems. Trouble-free communication was associated with a combination of effective technical networks, appropriate chat room software, and previous experience with chat rooms.

Some rural women were dissatisfied with the way the interactions took place within the context of the online meeting environment. The number of participants commenting on a broad range of topics, in combination with the technical problems experienced by some rural women, influenced the way participants (including the Deputy Premier) communicated with each other.

Some rural women were not satisfied with the way in which their questions were answered: 'Some of the answers were not very concrete, but I guess it's hard with such a big agenda' [RWQ 42, 50, Great Southern], and 'Sometimes question was avoided. Too much banter between callers' [RWQ 5, 36, South West]. This dissatisfaction was not universal:

> [The Deputy Premier] listened. He did not avoid answering questions as politicians often do. We know that the lines of communication with [the Deputy Premier] are still open [RWQ 3, 47, Great Southern].

When asked what improvements were needed to make the online meeting process better, a number of women responded that there were too many participants wanting to have their say, on too many topics, in a limited time frame, utilising user-unfriendly technology. They suggested the following improvements:

- that there be more time and a slower pace: 'Spend a bit longer on each of the topics - it was a bit hurried at the beginning. Change in agenda item needs to be more pointed' [RWQ 37, 39, Wheatbelt];

- limit the number of people in the chat room: 'Limit the forum to a zone ... too many people logged into the chat room. Impossible to follow the argument and discuss the issues. Perhaps you could have several chat rooms - each one discussing a separate issue?' [RWQ 47, 42, Great Southern];

- focused agenda and more chat rooms: 'A limited agenda - there was too much to cover in the time available and with so many online it was difficult to ask questions and have them answered' [RWQ 38, 34, Wheatbelt];

- formalise the process of questions: 'Some structure!! Submission of questions before hand. Also when joining in later you couldn't view what people had been discussing' [RWQ 49, 26, Great Southern] and 'More time allocated. Possibly questions registered prior to online time hence being able to answer more specific questions' [RWQ 33, 39, South West];

- specific chats for geographical areas: 'More topics of general interest. One district at a time and topics of interest for them' [RWQ 12, 55, Peel]; and

- controlled and slowed down communication: 'Side chat was annoying. Better control needed. Questions to [the Deputy Premier] and answers only. Difficult to follow when a big group asking Questions and Answers of each other. Couldn't scroll back for long enough to refer to Questions'

[RWQ 4, 40, South West] and 'Ask participants to mail only relevant comments. Too much waffle' [RWQ 21, 47, Great Southern].

In brief, rural women wanted more communication on topics in a more leisurely and focused manner. These suggestions indicate that online meetings created opportunities as well as problems.

The 67 online participants, each wanting to speak with the Deputy Premier within an one-hour time frame: together with the diverse agenda items and the lack of control over participants speaking to each other; and the technical and software difficulties, these factors resulted in a limit to the effectiveness of the group discussion. The plan-do-review action research cycle that informed the development of this case study indicates that some refining of the process is needed.

Some of the improvements rural women suggested were in conflict with the intentions of the online meeting. For example, the suggestion that facilitators limit the number of participants by focusing on rural women from only a certain region in WA denies a primary intention of providing all rural women with the opportunity to meet with the Deputy Premier and communicate with other rural women from WA. This latter opportunity is a significant benefit when it comes to providing rural women in WA with the chance to develop a collective voice. Further, having an online meeting with rural women who are already in relatively close geographical proximity to one another does not maximize the cost-effectiveness arising from online methods of communicating.

Rural women suggested strategies for improving the online meeting such as: limit the number of participants; formalise the meeting process; limit the number of agenda items; and, segregate geographical areas for meetings. However, it is important to appreciate the context of the meeting and its original purpose of initiating a new meeting style for government decision-making processes. Some caution is, therefore, required when incorporating these suggestions so that any changes made do not perpetuate or recreate pre-existing barriers such as formality, exclusiveness, and isolation.

The technology will need further development and redesign. For example, the basic need to be able to read the meeting transcript and follow the questions and answers during or after the chat session is a software issue that can be addressed.

This is likely to have a systemic effect. The online meeting pace might slow down and adjust to the pace of rural women, unused to chat protocols. This would reduce frustration as their own personal chat screen would not automatically scroll up as new comments are added before they have a chance to finish the sentence they are reading. Further, the organisation of regular meetings, each with a specific focus, will reduce pressure on participants to cover all items.

6.3 Summary

In summary, whilst some women did comment on their frustration with using the technology, they still acknowledged the real opportunities of online meetings. Their feedback was that the technology could be improved, or better instructions given, rather than that they did not want to be using the technology at all.

6.4 Future Use of Online Meetings

To examine the efficacy of using online meetings for citizen-government communication, rural women were asked two questions regarding the ways in which they and their governments (state and federal) could use such meetings. The results indicate significant possibilities for using online forums in the future. One rural woman stated: *'Too many ideas - I'll write a letter'* [RWQ 39, no DOB, Wheatbelt]. Overall, they indicated a readiness to embrace innovative methods such as the use of online meetings.

The evidence clearly indicated that rural women are hungry for opportunities to gather information and to discuss issues arising within the government system. They want to further their democratic representation. They therefore valued the intent of the communal online meeting. Further, the experience gave rural women an opportunity to contribute to the future development of online meetings, which is an essential step in the development process of a sociotechnical solution (Bijker, 1995) to communication problems. Some even wanted future online meeting similar to the one they had experienced without changes: *'Do exactly what the* [Deputy Premier] *did. Ministers have session that relate to their portfolio eg,* [Minister's name] *education,* [Minister's name] *agriculture'* [RWQ 3, 47, Great Southern] and

'For more meetings like '[Deputy Premier's name] *Online'. Can't think of any specific guests at the minute'* [RWQ 50, 35, MidWest].

Democratic representation primarily meant having lines of communication open between the government of WA and rural women, and amongst rural women themselves. The meaning of "Open communication channels" included: speaking with Ministers; guest speakers with specialised expertise; and, the opportunity to communicate with other diverse rural women. Two rural women gave suggestions typical of those regarding democratic representation: *'Other Politicians. Education - Acting Director General of Education could be good. Have broader topics eg, suicide, grief, health'* [RWQ 3, 47, Great Southern] and *'Guest speakers - relevant women issues; education'* [RWQ 1, 51, Wheatbelt].

Table 6.2 displays data supporting the view that rural women want to use ICTs for empowerment opportunities through which they can move from the private to a public arena. This indicates that the online meeting creates opportunities for the government to listen and for rural women to be heard. The table also indicates that these women want the experience of being part of a collective group of diverse women. They want to support each other, share information, network, and develop a collective force of WA rural women. In turn, this influences their personal development because they can gain clarity about their own issues by talking with other women. In short, they see the political and personal power that can be derived from using ICTs.

Table 6.2 Rural women respondents' suggestions regarding how to use ICTs to improve their involvement with government.

Qualities in future online meeting solutions that would improve rural women's democratic representation	Rural women's responses
Rural women's voices be heard by the government	*'I think rural women make many of the financial decisions in running the farm. They need to be heard and given credibility. They are not the unseen and unheard generation of bygone times. Many women living in the country are the back bone of the establishment. Women are so versatile... mother, nurse, banker, caterer, cleaner, educator, courier and the list goes on'* [RWQ 47, 42, Great Southern] *'How about the Government asking the women the questions. And listen to the answers'* [RWQ 45, no DOB, no response for region], *'More politicians to hear what rural women have to say'* [RWQ 46, 24, Great Southern] *'Excellent for people in the country to get their feelings across to the Government as I feel sometimes, we in the country are forgotten'* [RWQ 28, no DOB, Wheatbelt];
Rural women develop closer relationships with government	*'By taking note of our comments and, if appropriate, act on them. We live in these isolated communities so we often know better what is required than the city politician might'* [RWQ 50, 35, MidWest]
Receive information	*'Valuable input can be obtained direct from those at the coal-face'* [RWQ 40, 48, Peel] *'[Get / give] information'* [RWQ 29, no DOB, Great Southern]; *'By listening to the wealth of knowledge and experience and promoting action groups'* [RWQ 43, 61, Great Southern];
Gain clarity and greater authenticity	*'Keeping in touch and getting ideas and problem solving'* [RWQ 12, 55, Peel]
Develop a collective force	*'Picking a specific subject eg - education; Child-care etc. Discussing with other rural centres - by networking many centre - areas into one voice with one goal'* [RWQ 36, 40, Wheatbelt]
Network	*'Generally, keep the lines of communication open, as well as create a sense of networking'* [RWQ 41, 27, Great Southern] *'Networking - having a say and being heard'* [RWQ 11, 44, Peel].
Provide support, keep in touch and share ideas	*'I think women want to "chat" to other women about certain topics, but can't and won't travel. That way would be a great chance to meet online with others in the same situation - same problems etc. Topics: Schooling, boarding fees, structure, choices; Health; Local Govt; family in General - how to survive in bad times'* [RWQ 23, 36, Great Southern];

6.4.1 Summary

In summary, rural women were optimistic about the possibilities of using ICTs. Their main focus was to use ICTs to improve their representation in government decision-making through increasing direct access to government and increasing communication with other rural women. Both of these activities offer a rural woman a range of opportunities to facilitate her empowerment by increasing her confidence in participating in a public government decision-making forum.

6.5 Other Issues Arising From the Online Meeting Case Study

Whilst rural women were supportive of the online government meeting concept, they do expect that once online meetings are implemented the government should seriously follow through with relevant action. Rural women stated:

- 'as long as Ministers take comments and concerns seriously and act to achieve resolutions to real issues' [RWQ 21, 47, Great Southern];
- 'only if issues raised are addressed. Its all very well to discuss pbs / difficulties but follow up action is what its all about' [RWQ 15, 43, Peel];
- 'it [online discussions] can make the politician aware of where to improve things - but only useful providing there is feedback and ACTION!!!!!!' [RWQ 43, 61, Great Southern];
- 'we got the chance to have our say. I'll wait and see if any action happens before I'll comment' [RWQ 39, no DOB, Wheatbelt]; and
- 'unclear if any outcomes achieved. Participants were wary of identifying any lasting contribution.' [RWQ 10, no DOB, Kimberley].

6.6 Conclusion

Rural women's positive experiences of the online government meeting focused on their individual and collective voices being heard and acknowledged by government. Rural women identified that the online government meeting offered them new opportunities to discuss relevant issues and topics; and thus have better

direct access to the Deputy Premier. Whilst rural women experienced technical difficulties resulting in limited effective group discussion, their feedback was that the technology could be improved, or better instructions given, rather than that they did not want to be using the technology at all. Rural women were optimistic about the possibilities of using ICTs, commenting on the real opportunities to be obtained from online meetings. Their main focus was to use ICTs to improve their representation in government decision-making through increasing direct access to government and increasing communication with other rural women.

CHAPTER 7

Summary of Findings

This chapter summarises the findings of this research in preparation for the analysis in Chapter 8. The findings will be presented in relation to the three research questions of the thesis.

Previous research has found that there is a widespread problem with the under-representation of rural women, and of women in general, in relation to government decision-making. Women are under-represented among government decision-makers in all countries of the world, and at all levels of government decision-making (UNDAW, 2001; UN Statistical Division, 2000). This research aimed to investigate ways in which to increase rural women's involvement in WA GBCs by firstly gaining an understanding of rural women's experiences of the state government decision-making system, and secondly offering an alternative communication protocol. This was an innovative project because no study of this type had ever been undertaken in WA - at least to date – and the study utilised an inclusive approach with feminist action research and qualitative research methodologies. The three research questions adopted to investigate this issue were:

- Why are so few rural women involved in government decision-making in WA?
- What are new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making in WA?
- If rural women are interested in using ICTs to participate in government decision-making, then what are their issues with using them?

The feminist action research commenced with phenomenological fieldwork (phase one), followed by the implementation of a case study (phase two), so that rural women's experiences of the government decision-making system were used to

develop two frameworks which informed the principles behind the development of an online government meeting. This case study provided an opportunity to examine rural women's experiences of using ICTs in a government decision-making setting. To complete the feminist action research cycle, the findings of phase one and two were examined in the context of exploring a range of recommended strategies for increasing rural women's involvement in government decision-making.

The Government decision-making framework was developed from the contributions of rural women respondents addressing the findings of the first research question, 'Why are so few rural women involved in government decision-making in WA?' The Government decision-making framework brought together the different barriers and motivating reasons given by respondents as to why 21 rural women chose (in the main) to participate or not participate in government decision-making. The barriers impacting upon rural women's decisions not to be involved included their lack of confidence that they could make a difference; their limited resources; and the formalistic and gendered organisational processes. The driving factors motivating involvement – rural women's passion to make a difference and their sense of empowerment – are newly-identified findings in the field of WA policy perspectives relating to rural women's representation. The Government decision-making framework presents a new approach to addressing the interdependency amongst different factors contributing to so few rural women becoming involved in government decision-making.

The significance of this research is that it draws together these factors in a holistic systems approach through the development of an integrated framework for government decision-making. The advantage of bringing together the different factors is that, for the first time, a model has made transparent to the government and other stakeholders the broad range of change initiatives needed to truly increase rural women's involvement.

In response to the second research question, 'What are new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making in WA?' the development of a Change strategies framework provided a holistic systems approach to increasing rural women's involvement. The five change strategies were integrated within the expanded Government decision-making framework to target the

multilevel factors that affect rural women's participation. The change strategies identified were:

- create personal development opportunities for rural women;
- support rural women's responsibilities so that they can participate fully in decision-making processes;
- adopt values that encourage and recognise diversity in the government decision-making system;
- create diverse government decision-making forums; and
- increase rural women's access to ICTs.

These five strategies target the personal, resource and cultural levels of the government decision-making system.

Rural women suggested that a range of principles should be included within the Change strategies framework to direct future government actions so they were less likely to perpetuate or recreate the barriers many rural women had experienced. These five principles were:

- ensure that all rural women are equally able to participate in government decision-making, if they wish to;
- use local community and women's networks to access rural women;
- ensure that decision-making processes address women's needs, but do not exclude men, or engage in tokenism;
- include all community groups when implementing change strategies, not just government-related ones; and
- simultaneously implement a wide array of initiatives that reflect the complex nature of the government decision-making system, and the drivers and inhibitors that determine participation within it.

The Change strategies framework incorporating the above principles, in combination with the Government decision-making framework, provides a platform for understanding rural women's under-representation, and gives direction to new ways to increase their involvement.

A case study based on the above frameworks and findings was implemented to trial a new way to increase rural women's involvement in discussing issues, the first stages of government decision-making. Given rural women's positive attitude to using ICTs as a tool for facilitating participation in the government decision-making system, the research was extended to explore a third research question: 'If rural women are interested in using ICTs to participate in government decision-making, then what are their issues with using them?' The results of this research indicate that Bijker's (1995) sociotechnical framework enabled a comprehensive approach to include and prioritise rural women's needs from both organisational and technological perspectives.

The outcomes of the case study indicated that the online meeting presented new opportunities for rural women to participate in a government decision-making meeting as:

- many rural women decided to be involved in the online meeting;
- a large majority of rural women who participated in the online meeting had not previously been involved in a state government meeting;
- a large majority of rural women had their first opportunity to discuss issues with the Deputy Premier through the online meeting; and
- the rural women who participated in the online government meeting came from a diverse range of backgrounds and represented a range of perspectives.

An experiential analysis of the online meeting followed to determine if the promising outcomes were a reflection of rural women's short term curiosity about using ICTs in such an innovative manner, or reflective of a more systemic desire to contribute to government decision-making forums where barriers to participation can be addressed. Consequently, the investigation of rural women's experiences of the

online meeting case study provided a deeper understanding of the efficacy and future potential of using online meetings as a strategy for increasing rural women's involvement in government decision-making.

The analysis of rural women's experience of using ICTs during the online government meeting case study highlighted the importance of addressing rural women's individual needs - such as their limited resources of time, support, money and, most importantly, their desire for a collective approach to bringing rural women together so that they can identify common issues that confront them. These findings indicate that the principles underpinning the successful inclusion of rural women in decision-making are largely the same for conventional and online meetings. However, whilst new barriers emerged that were associated with using the technology, rural women are keen to continue using ICTs to participate in government decision-making.

What is unique to the online setting as explored in the case study is that it drew together many different women from around the state. In so doing it embraced their diversity whilst allowing them to participate in their own locality. The rural women valued coming together as a group because they experienced support from other rural women in WA, even though they may live literally thousands of kilometres away from each other. Consequently the case study successfully underlined the fact that many new and different rural women were attracted to the online government meeting once the previous barriers - such as the requirement for extensive resources and the formalistic and gendered organisational processes - were lessened.

In summary, this research aimed to investigate ways in which to increase rural women's involvement in WA GBCs by addressing three research questions (see Table 7.1). By gaining an understanding of rural women's experiences of the state government decision-making system, this research found that the aim to increase rural women's involvement required a holistic approach addressing personal, interpersonal and cultural factors. The Change strategy framework embraces this position by presenting and integrating five findings-based change strategies that target the multilevel barriers and motivating factors impacting on rural women's participation in government decision-making.

Table 7.1 Summary of research questions and findings

Research Question	Research Findings
Phase One	
1. Why are so few rural women involved in government decision-making in WA?	Government decision-making framework: Barriers and Motivating factors across three levels of the system – personal, interpersonal and cultural.
2. What are new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making in WA?	Change strategies framework with its underpinning principles of implementation.
Phase Two	
3. If rural women are interested in using ICTs to participate in government decision-making, then what are their issues with using them?	How the sociotechnical solution can transcend barriers identified in the Government decision-making framework such as rural women's individual needs, and their limited resources of time, support, and money. Whilst new barriers emerged associated with technology use, rural women are keen to continuing using ICTs to participate in government decision-making. The importance of bringing rural women together so they can identify common issues that confront them.

Through the implementation of one of the change strategies – the use of ICTs - this research found that new and different rural women participated in a government decision-making forum. Despite barriers associated with the technology, these rural women were keen to continue using ICTs as they found previous barriers such as drain upon time, support and money were reduced. The case study presented a new perspective upon new ways to increase rural women's involvement. Women also reported valuing their coming together as a diverse group to discuss the issues they had raised.

Finally, reflecting upon phases one and two, it is through a focus upon rural women's different needs that change strategies required for all three levels of the government system are made transparent. The research reported here has provided a new approach to - and a number of tools for - addressing the issue of how to increase

rural women's involvement in government decision-making processes, especially in the WA context.

The final chapter, which follows, present an analysis of the different paradigms that can address the problem of increasing rural women's representation in government decision-making.

CHAPTER 8

Critical Reflection: A new paradigm emerges

This final chapter presents the last critical reflection cycle of the action research methodology used in this research. The findings of phase one (the research component) and phase two (the action component) are synthesized in this phase to present a new paradigm. This new paradigm highlights the need to prioritise rural women's different need in government decision-making system, in order to increase rural women's participation in the government system, and their visibility.

This chapter commences with a discussion of how necessary it is to use an approach to inclusivity that makes rural women visible. A critique follows which argues that a new paradigm is needed when investigating the research question, 'What new ways are needed to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making?', if rural women's experiences are to be visible when understanding and improving the current situation. Particular attention is given to comparing different paradigms – the government decision-making paradigm and the current status quo government paradigm – when looking at ways to increase rural women's participation. The online government meeting case study in phase two is examined to demonstrate how a paradigm shift can occur from the current government paradigm to a new paradigm that values rural women's different needs. Directions for future research are presented at the end of this chapter.

8.1 Approaching the Problem From Rural Women's Perspectives

The feminist, qualitative methodologies, and the in-depth interview method, prioritised different WA rural women's voices in this investigation. This approach avoided an essentialist approach, as rural women leaders from different geographical regions in WA could identify 'What and who is the problem?' when addressing why so few were involved in government decision-making in WA. Labonte (1997) states that this participative approach is empowering for rural women since they can

name and define the problem from their perspective. Consequently, apart from the relevance of the findings, the methodologies used gave rural women an opportunity to take power and voice their issues to the government. Rural women's voices were once again valued through this process as the case study was based on women's different needs which were identified in phase one, and informed the development of the new paradigm aimed to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making. A discussion of new and current paradigms to investigate ways to increase rural women's involvement follows.

8.2 A New Paradigm to Increase Rural Women's Involvement

Both Covey (1999) and Morgan (1997) highlight the importance of making explicit the paradigms that one uses to understand phenomena. This is because every paradigm has certain boundaries, and assumptions - highlighting certain concepts and putting other concepts in the background. Covey (1999) defines a paradigm as:

> a model, theory, perception, assumption, or frame of reference. ... it's the way we "see" the world – not in terms of our visual sense of sight, but in terms of perceiving, understanding, interpreting (p. 23).

The study based on rural women's different experiences proposes a new paradigm of perceiving, understanding, interpreting and addressing rural women's under-representation in government decision-making. One of the differences between this new paradigm and the current paradigm operating in the WA government decision-making system is that the rural woman's paradigm prioritises heterogeneity rather than homogeneity amongst its government decision-making members. An analysis of the current paradigm will be given prior to the presentation of the study's new paradigm of addressing rural women's under-representation.

8.2.1 Current status quo paradigm: a government system that values homogeneity

The current paradigm that operates in the WA government decision-making system renders rural women invisible through its discontinuation of specific programs for rural women, and a lack of commitment specifically to increase rural

women's involvement in the system (Haslam McKenzie, 2003). Evidence has been offered in this research as to how the government system values homogeneity amongst its members to the point which different rural women, who often do not fit the current government decision-making mould, are discouraged from participating. Particular reference is made to the predominance of leadership training amongst skill-development strategies for rural women, and a lack of support for rural women provided by the current government decision-making system.

8.2.1.1 The predominance of leadership training assumes all rural women do not have decision-making skills

To make explicit the assumptions of the current paradigm the research presents a critique of how the government has targeted leadership programs as the solution to increasing rural women's representation. Australian governments have predominantly focused on rural women's leadership training as a means to increasing these women's involvement in government decision-making. Many government programs - as shown by Elix and Lambert (1998), Muir (2003), Williams (2003) - aim to increase rural women's involvement by focusing on educating and training rural women. Inherent in these programs is the assumption that many rural women do not take on decision-making roles as a result of feeling deficient in personal confidence, or perceiving themselves as lacking in skills and knowledge. Based on the Government decision-making framework, this research questions **which** rural women need this training and also asks why these training programs predominate when different ways of increasing rural women's involvement are considered. This research raises the question of what support is available for rural women who do not experience personal, psychological or behavioural barriers, but who experience meso and macro barriers such as resource constraints or the oppression of government culture.

The paradox of the government's predominant focus on training rural women is that it is already the case that more rural women have tertiary qualifications than rural men (Haslam McKenzie, 2003), and many rural women are already decision-makers in their community and businesses (Elix & Lambert, 1998; Haslam McKenzie, 2003; Williams, 2003). It would appear in this context that many rural women are well-qualified and already experienced in making decisions and in taking a leadership role. Consequently, this research raises the question of why so many

government programs focus on educating rural women when many rural women already appear to have the necessary qualifications to be competent decision-makers.

Solely focusing on the training of rural women as a strategy to increase their involvement may mask the need to train government officials - senior executives, politicians, and chairpersons - to value diversity among members of government decision-making forums and within the system. This is because, unlike the picture presented in the Government decision-making framework, the government culture and the attitudes of the senior decision-makers in the system are not seen as part of the problem of rural women's under-representation. There are no programs to date that train government officials in rural women's needs, diversity, or in ways to change organisational processes and practices to move from a homogenous "boys' club" culture to a more diverse culture. Although many writers document the barrier of the "boys' club" (Alston, 2000; Alston, 2003; Elix & Lambert; 1998; Williams, 2003), few strategies have been implemented that have made a significant difference to addressing this barrier, and to increasing rural women's involvement. The benefit of using a holistic systems paradigm - such as the Government decision-making framework - is that the specific barriers and the different needs of rural women are addressed, and made transparent in the planning and evaluation phases.

The point here is not to stop the training of rural women but rather to address the training in light of other barriers rural women experience. Targeted training for specific rural women and implementing programs addressing – the macro and meso - barriers experienced by other rural women, challenges the assumption that the reason why so few rural women are involved in government decision-making is because they lack leadership skills. The research reported here also critiques the type of training provided to rural women. Given that confident women can be intimidated by the macro "boys' club" culture (Alston, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998), training rural women to believe and sustain their own confidence (and the confidence of other women) is arguably more important than training rural women in a particular executive style of leadership that may perpetuate that culture. Haslam McKenzie (2003) supports this premise in her evaluation of the unique WA leadership programs that facilitate transformational leadership qualities.

The research reported here supports writers who argue that educating rural women to let go of their unique and different leadership style, in return for adopting

a more masculine leadership style, is dangerous (Haslam McKenzie, 2003; Williams, 2003). This is because such an approach further contributes to the myth that many rural women lack leadership qualities and also most importantly, fails to promote the valuing of diversity among rural women, and within the government decision-making system. Elix and Lambert's (1998) findings - that twice as many male decision-makers (75 percent) have completed formal management course training compared to women, and rural women have completed more leadership training, whilst no male government decision-makers have done so - implies that the government culture favours a masculine executive leadership style rather than transformational leadership qualities. Consequently, it is both timely and necessary that government's review the reasons for training rural women in leadership, and the types of leadership training provided, and explore ways to promote diversity within the context of the government decision-making system.

The danger of governments focusing solely on the aspect of rural women's personal needs is first, supporting the flawed assumption that all rural women's needs are met by this one change strategy; and second, if there is no increase in the number of rural women participating in government decision-making after the implementation of a particular leadership program, then it could falsely be concluded that rural women do not want to be involved in government decision-making. Findings reported here make the point that focusing on the micro level needs of rural women - rather than addressing the collective diverse needs of rural women – can lead to false judgements where rural women are the cause of their predicament, as they do not fit the homogenous mould of a typical government decision-maker. With leadership training positioned as the predominant tool for rural women's empowerment, the government system assumes that if rural women are not involved in government decision-making it is because they either do not want to be, or because they do not have the necessary leadership qualities.

8.2.1.2 Lack of support maintains homogeneity amongst decision-makers

This section presents an analysis of the gender-based processes which expect that participants in government decision-making processes have outside support. This illustrates how the status quo is based on the current government decision-making system valuing homogeneity amongst government decision-makers in regards to the level of support they receive. The study, and others (Haslam

McKenzie, 1997), has found that rural women rarely have outside support and are often "the outside support" for others. These gendered practices are likely to be offshoots of century-old values of the forebears of the current government system: exclusively older, white males who had outside support. The research reported here raises the question of why the government system has not evolved to support rural women's participation, instead of assuming that all potential members have access to outside support. These outdated attitudes and gendered practices mean that the government system self-selects members who have outside support, or that members personally suffer by juggling their private and public commitments.

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework, if the macro level of the system ignores and does not support its members, the responsibility for support will inevitably fall back on the individual, their family, friends and community. The rural women in this research who have children commented that they just couldn't be involved unless support was offered, and they were not prepared to put extra pressure on their partners and their households since they were already under pressure. Previous research (Alston, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998) has also reported that there are many rural women who live on farms who also have outside part time work to support the farm business. The conclusion to be drawn is that the government system can address the issue that to encourage a heterogenous group of government decision-makers, it needs to address people who do not have outside support, for example with child-care responsibilities. By the government addressing that its members have different private and public responsibilities, the system acknowledges heterogeneity amongst its members. Consequently to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making requires a rejection of outdated organisational practices that assume people have readily available outside support, for example, rural women who live in isolated communities where there may literally be no people available close by to provide support, including child-care services. If different rural women's needs such as those presented in the study are not considered some women will selectively, be discriminated through a government decision-making culture that values homogeneity amongst its member.

This discussion illuminates Sinclair's (1998) position that dissonance exists between rural women's and senior executives' perceptions of why few rural women become involved in government decision-making. Many senior executives in the

government system believe few rural women are involved in GBCs because rural women are not interested (Wilkinson & Alston, 1999). This research, however, has found that many rural women either chose not to get involved, or decided not to continue on in the government decision-making system, because the system did not value and support their different needs, responsibilities and perspectives. Senior executives hardly ever address macro cultural reasons for excluding rural women (Wilkinson & Alston, 1999). With different paradigms and interpretations of the problems of perception between rural women and senior executives, different commitments to action follow. This lack of awareness of the need to support rural women in government decision-making roles may explain part of the reason why there have been poor results in increasing rural women's involvement in government decision-making despite numerous government reports (Dimopoulos & Sheridan, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998; SCARM, 1998; SCARM; 2000; SCARM, 2001) and research (Alston, 1998b; Alston & Wilkinson, 1998).

In line with Covey (1999), this research argues that new ways are needed for rural women and government senior executives to work together, and recommends that a common paradigm be used to understand the problem and to develop solutions. The prevalent paradigm influencing government action and budgets is a senior executive decision-making one, and this favours homogeneity and constructs rural women's absence as the "problem". Is this why many rural women experience the government culture as alien? Or why the system provides leadership programs for rural women, so these women can fix their "problem"?

8.2.2 Paradigm Shift: Government system that prioritises heterogeneity

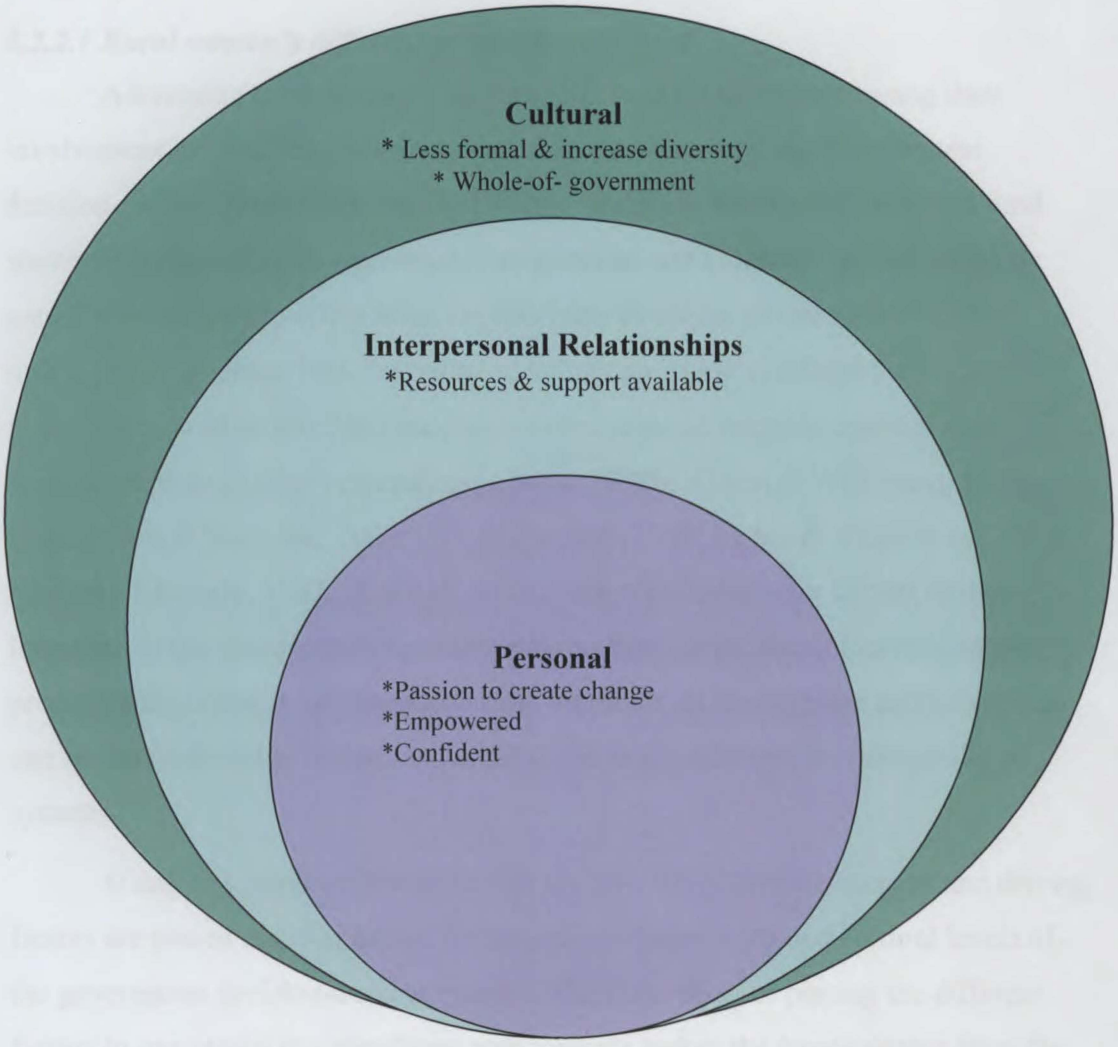

Figure 8.1 **Government decision-making framework values heterogeneity amongst its members**

The new paradigm titled the Government decision-making framework values heterogeneity amongst its members (Figure 8.1), is based on rural women's different experiences. These rural women live in them having different geographical communities across the sparse landscape of WA, which translates into different personal, interpersonal and cultural needs to be met before they can participate in a government decision-making role. This holistic, systems framework represents rural women's range of personal, interpersonal and cultural reasons for them deciding to be, or not be involved in government decision-making. The appreciation of the

social context of rural women's decisions regarding involvement, and their diversity as rural women, are key components of this paradigm.

8.2.2.1 Rural women's different needs are addressed

Addressing rural women's different needs is the key to increasing their involvement in government decision-making. In phase one, the Government decision-making framework and the Change strategies framework identified rural women's different needs – personal, interpersonal and cultural – so that solutions could be developed to allow them to participate in a state government decision-making role. In phase two, the online meeting case study validated the findings of phase one as well as provided insights into the value of bringing together rural women. Although other researchers (Alston, 1998b; Alston & Wilkinson, 1998; Dimopoulos & Sheridan, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998; Fisher & Hutchinson, 1998; Haslam McKenzie, 1997; SCARM, 1998) have reported similar factors to those identified in the Government decision-making framework, the uniqueness of the present study is that it has integrated rural women's different issues and needs into one holistic systems paradigm and applied this to government decision-making systems.

Using this framework readers can see how the different obstacles and driving factors are placed together across the personal, interpersonal and cultural levels of the government decision-making system. The innovation of placing the different factors in one model is a significant step towards makes the issues arising from the under-representation of rural women visible within the government decision-making system. This is a paramount consideration when the government system has rendered rural women invisible and not addressed the systemic factors that have contributed to their invisibility.

The interdependencies between factors such as the interaction between the government's culture and rural women's confidence are transparent in this paradigm, and women's personal qualities are shown in the context of meso and macro factors. This paradigm explains why some rural women in this research found it difficult to continue in their decision-making role, or even to consider this role, as they experienced the government culture as formalistic and gendered. It is essential that any new paradigm aiming to increase rural women's participation makes the impact of the government culture on rural women transparent, so change strategies can

specifically address how the culture can be more supportive of rural women's different lifestyles, responsibilities, issues, perspectives, and presence.

The power of the new paradigm lies partly in the fact that it makes the rural women's different needs explicit. As a result, the paradigm can be used as an evaluative and or planning tool. For example, rural women who have children at home may find using ICTs beneficial as these can increase their access to government decision-making forums; whilst rural women from a non-English speaking background may not. The lack of action targeting different rural women's needs is a possible reason why Alston (1998a) reports that the same few rural women are involved in government processes.

The lack of attention paid to recognising rural women's different needs is illustrated in the *Missed Opportunities* report. The *Missed Opportunities* report recommends monitoring gender diversity, but then suggests no specific strategies that might encourage rural women's diversity in government decision-making forums. An explicit link, made visible through adopting the proposed new paradigm, is needed to link the intention to increase rural women's diversity and any consequent actions.

If the government is not addressing a barrier experienced by a group of rural women, then many of these women do not participate in government processes, resulting in a more homogenous group of rural women in government decision-making. If the government system changes its focus to one of increasing heterogeneity amongst its members, the findings reported here suggest the homogeneity inherent in the government's "boys' club" culture (Alston & Wilkinson, 1998) is likely to lessen. The implications of this new approach is that specific actions can be implemented to address the different needs of different rural women, at different levels of the government system, rather than a blanket approach that aims to increase rural women's participation in general.

8.2.3 The new paradigm versus the current paradigm

This is an analysis of how the new paradigm's perspective on rural women's under-representation in government decision-making gives rise to new concepts in addressing the human rights situation. In summary the new paradigm presented in this research:

- prioritises heterogeneity amongst its members, and in government system policies and processes;
- adopt a holistic systems focus that addresses personal, interpersonal and cultural factors when understanding the "problem";
- acknowledges there are many different factors within the system that affect rural women differently;
- appreciates that different change strategies are needed to address rural women's collective and different needs;
- ensures rural women become visible in understanding and addressing their problems; and
- assumes rural women want to be involved in government decision-making.

The current paradigm operating in government decision-making contexts, however:

- takes a reductionist viewpoint of rural women's under-representation, targeting rural women as the "problem" rather than the government decision-making system;
- favours homogeneity amongst government decision-making members, and assumes gender-based government practices;
- renders rural women invisible, assuming all rural women – (and even urban women) have the same issues, perspectives and needs; and
- assumes that if rural women are not involved it is because they do not want to be, or they do not meet the "standards" to be involved.

Emanating from the new paradigm are new concepts that can empower rural women and femocrats to see new ways in which to increase rural women's involvement. To demonstrate the empowering process of adopting a new paradigm, two concepts are discussed:

- changing the indicator of success to one of increasing the number of new and different rural women involved in the government decision-making system; and

- addressing the collective movement of different rural women as they enter and stay in the government decision-making process

8.2.3.1 Changing the indicator of success from a "total" number, to the number of "new and different" rural women involved

This thesis, like previous research (Haslam McKenzie, 1997), has found that rural women want to be involved in government decisions. Consequently, finding new ways in which different rural women can become involved - who are currently not involved, but could be if the system created opportunities for them to do so - would mean more new and different rural women could enter the government system. Why isn't the number of new and different rural women entering, and staying on in, the government decision-making system being measured as an indicator of success for government programs?

Past government reports such as SCARM (2000), and the *Missed Opportunities* report (Elix & Lambert, 1998) only use the sole performance indicator of the total number of rural women involved. The implications of the current Australian approach (Elix & Lambert, 1998; SCARM, 2000), which uses the total number of rural women involved as its main indicator of success, and sets numerical targets to be achieved in rural women's representation in government decision-making is that this:

- masks whether an apparent increase in rural women's participation is due to the same rural women taking-up more decision-making positions;

- hides the need for new and different rural women to be involved;

- fails to highlight the need for different strategies to involve new and different rural women; and

- directs attention away from changing the culture and the broad macro barriers that rural women experience, as the government system can solely focus on personal development strategies without addressing

specific strategies that are needed at the cultural level to increase the number of new and different rural women becoming involved.

Little change will result if the government decision-making system continues to solely focusing on the total number of rural women involved, rather than specifically targeting an increase in new and different rural women entering and staying in the system. Whilst the former focus does not emphasise the importance of diversity, but diversity should also not be framed in separating rural women into different age groups or other sociological categories – rather, diversity is targeted by the government system focussing on rural women's collective and different needs.

A significant increase in rural women participating in government decision-making occurs if new and different rural women enter and stay on in the government decision-making system. Increasing diversity in the decision-making system is a challenging situation for the government "boys' club" culture, as such traditional gendered processes are obstacles to achieving heterogeneity amongst government decision-makers. Senior decision-makers responsible for increasing diversity in the system through diversifying members and the system's processes, are required to think outside their dominant paradigm, and make changes to the status quo so as to include people who differ from their colleagues in decision-making. As Tyson (1989) claims, 'diversity is the most disadvantageous in groups that require members to think or behave in similar or narrowly-defined ways or to act out of a uniform value system' (p. 128 –9). Consequently, there is a need for a new paradigm; for members to think outside of the box. Could the government decision-making paradigm facilitate government decision-makers to think outside the box?

Adopting the new indicator of increasing the number of new and different rural women participating in decision-making, a new focus emerges whereby new and specific change strategies are required, targeted at naturally increasing the total number of rural women in government decision-making. In contrast, previous strategies such as using the same token women on committees no longer reflect success, as these women repeat-responsibility women do not show up when measuring the number of new and different rural women involved.

8.2.3.2 The movement of rural women as they enter and stay on in the government system

The new government decision-making paradigm provides a systemic view of the government system. Figure 8.2 illustrates fundamental steps to increase rural women's participation through encouraging different rural women to enter, and most importantly for them to stay on in the government decision-making system. Insights obtained from this research propose that it is necessary to first, bring together rural women's different needs in a holistic framework and second, to acknowledge the movement of rural women from a position where rural women are potentially not involved (triangle one) to a position where rural women enter into a first-time government decision-making position (triangle two).

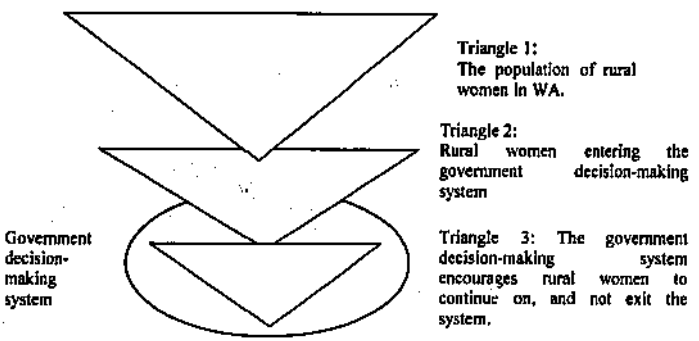

Figure 8.2 **Rural women as they move from their local community to entering and staying members of the government decision-making system**

The new paradigm's systemic focus on the problem of rural women's under-representation means that the movement of different rural women entering and staying on in the government system (triangle three) becomes transparent. In simple terms more rural women entering and staying on, rather than exiting the government decision-making system is an additional target. A reductionist approach that solely focuses on individual rural women loses sight of the necessity to encourage many different rural women to enter the system, and the importance of this system valuing these women.

Furthermore this new perspective examines the length of time rural women stay on in their government decision-making role (see triangle 3 in Figure 8.1), and highlights the difference between rural women entering and staying on in the system. Although the length of time rural women stay on in government decision-making has not been directly researched, much literature (Alston, 1998b; Alston & Wilkinson, 1998; Dimopoulos & Sheridan, 2000; Elix & Lambert, 1998; Fisher & Hutchinson, 1998; Haslam McKenzie, 1997; SCARM, 1998) has documented that the government culture acts as a barrier to rural women's continuing participation in the system.

8.3 Case Study: How Effective Was the New Paradigm?

The online government meeting case study provided an opportunity to address the question of "Why many new and different rural women were involved in an online government decision-making meeting when previously the government system has so few rural women decision-makers?" The case study shows how a paradigm shift from old to new enabled more empowerment opportunities for rural women to be involved Covey's (1999) explanation of a paradigm shift follows:

> The term *paradigm shift* was introduced by Thomas Kuhn in his highly influential landmark book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn shows how almost every significant breakthrough in the field of scientific endeavor is first a break with tradition, with old ways of thinking, with old paradigms. ... The traditional concept of government for centuries had been a monarchy, the divine rights of kings. Then a different paradigm was developed -- a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. And a constitutional democracy was born, unleashing tremendous human energy and ingenuity, and creating a standard of living, of freedom and liberty, of influence and hope unequaled in the history of the world (p. 29, 30).

The case study was organised and implemented using the new government decision-making paradigm. The implications of this were that old ways of involving rural women in government decision-making were changed through mechanisms such as:

- an open invitation to all rural women in WA to participate, rather than inviting a select group of rural women to a meeting;

- adopting informal, and direct ways of communicating with the Deputy Premier, rather than using bureaucratic processes to protect and manage his correspondence;

- the Deputy Premier communicating spontaneously and directly with participants, rather than speech notes being prepared for him; and

- the agenda developed using a participative process driven by rural women rather than by government.

The assumptions, principles and actions taken to organise and implement a government meeting were transformed through the researcher using the government decision-making paradigm.

This ICT solution was based on meeting rural women's different needs. Rural women's personal needs were addressed by minimising the risk for rural women for participating in a real-life government meeting. No rural woman participant was required to have had prior meeting experience. She could choose the role she took in the government meeting - observer, speaker, supporter, and or activist. She could also be anonymous in the meeting through using a nickname to enter the meeting. Rural women's interpersonal needs were addressed through organising the online meeting to fit into their schedule and by providing them with support. Rural women were not required to expend enormous resources to participate, as the government meeting was organised so that women could participate from their home computer, or from their local Telecentre. Telecentres provided local support to access the online meeting, and local call phone lines were available to help with technological issues. Rural women's cultural needs were addressed through creating a government meeting that was informal, provided flexibility for the women participating, and that provided women with direct access to a government decision-maker. This synopsis of ways in which the online meeting addressed WA rural women's different needs illustrates that the first essential is an understanding of what these women's different and collective needs are and then action is subsequently required to transform the old ways of government meeting and decision- making.

A discussion of the action component of transforming traditional government paradigms of meeting follows. The researcher, who was also a government officer who instigated and implemented the online government meeting, was known to be an advocate of rural women's empowerment and participation in government. This dynamic, on reflection, was essential for a paradigm shift to occur within government. The researcher formed partnerships across government agencies – Deputy Premier's office, RRR Women's Network, WA Telecentre Network, Agriculture WA, and the Office of Information and Communications – to work together on this project. The development of partnerships and relationships was an essential step towards transforming old government paradigms. The organiser – researcher addressed the needs of each of the agencies and officer involved, and at the same time stayed focused on the aim of finding new ways in which to increase rural women's involvement in government. This process of building relationships is consistent with Labonte's (1997) research, which argues that soft approaches to change are needed, such as partnerships alongside hard approaches, such as policy changes to transform organisations. This research demonstrates that the soft approaches are required within the government system. On reflection, the suffragette movement was seen as creating structural changes to allow women to enter government decision-making - and now an emphasis is needed on soft changes in government to fully realize rural women's and women's participation as government decision-makers.

In building the relationships between different agencies, actions were needed to minimise risk that emerged through the paradigm shift. There was a requirement to build trust, rapport, and to listen to stakeholder's needs. For example, as the online method of meetings was new to government, the Deputy Premier's office, needed to experience an online meeting before the "go live" situation. Two pilot online meetings were organised in which the Deputy Premier's advisors participated and gave feedback. This relationship – and confidence - building process is vital to transforming traditional government processes.

In the government officer role, the researcher was responsible for ensuring that governments, communities and people - particularly in WA - were aware of, and able to use, ICTs. Whilst ICT use was highlighted in the literature and in correspondence with the government, ICT familiarisation was not the government

officer – researcher's prime focus in the implementation process. This was because the new government decision-making paradigm was the driver relating to how to implement ICTs. This new paradigm supported, and was an essential addition to, Bijker's sociotechnical framework by ensuring that the collective and different needs of rural women were met through the design of the ICT solution.

Whilst rural women suggested that there were improvements they needed regarding the online meeting technology, all rural women participants wanted more online government meetings. Furthermore, the case study demonstrated that government's traditional processes can be transformed, with new and different rural women becoming involved in government decision-making. The question arises as to "Who will implement and drive the implementation of more online government meetings?" Based on Chen's (2002) findings - that few government politicians use ICTs to communicate with their constituents, let alone for decision-making - it is proposed that action needs to come from a change agent (person, people and or organisations) who can develop partnerships with government agencies and government decision-makers. The findings from this research suggests that the change agent should use the government decision-making paradigm to ensure their ICT solution transforms traditional government processes to meet rural women's collective and different needs. If used outside WA, this paradigm should be validated (and if necessary changed) to accommodate the varying needs of rural women in their local context. Consequently, this research does not propose that the implementation of new ways for rural women to be involved in government processes have to be driven solely from the top, but rather that the change agent develops partnerships within government and with decision-makers in government. This may seem challenging in light of the research finding that the government culture is not supportive of encouraging diversity. Nonetheless, this research outlines how a new way can be implemented through using the medium of ICTs, based on a different paradigm and encouraging heterogeneity.

8.4 Future Research Directions

Directions for future research include investigating a range of mechanisms for changing the current paradigm to understand, investigate and address the

problem of rural women's under-representation in government decision-making. Three specific directions for future research consist of:

- further development of the government decision-making paradigm to apply it to other states and countries;
- addressing the movement of a critical mass of diverse rural women into the government decision-making system; and
- further investigation using ICTs to increase rural women's participation in government decision-meeting.

New questions to be addressed by future research include:

- What is the most effective way of moving from the "boys' club" culture to a more inclusive one?
- Is the government system empowering? If so, what opportunities does it create to empower rural women?
- Are people in the government system, helping others? If so, whom?
- Are the people inside the government system empowered? And what definition of empowerment are the government decision-making members using?
- What are other ways in which WA's rural women can use ICTs to increase their diversity as a collective group, and to increase their involvement in government?

8.4.1 Further development of the government decision-making paradigm

This research has offered government officials and academic researchers a new holistic paradigm founded on WA rural women's diverse experiences. How are WA rural women's experiences of the government decision-making system, similar and or different from other states of Australia and international countries? As this research used qualitative and feminist action research methodologies, the development of the government decision-making paradigm is specifically related to

rural women in WA. Developing the paradigm to include the different experiences of rural women in other states and countries, would enable the government decision-making paradigm to become a more powerful model incorporating shows the collective, different issues and needs of rural women around the world. This has the potential to strengthen the UN's progress towards fulfilling its mandate to rectify the human rights situation in facilitating women's participation in decision-making processes.

Given that this research did not intend to capture the experience of all rural women, but to be a first stage in documenting the different experiences of active rural women leaders in WA who decide to be involved in GBCs, future research can explore the barriers faced by rural women when they wish to be active in their local community, rather than at a state level. This is a necessary research aim; as more rural women who are local community decision-makers move on to take up a state government decision-making role, other rural women will be required to take up vacant local community positions.

8.4.2 Addressing the movement of rural women as a critical mass

The second area for future research is to identify the movement of rural women into the government decision-making system. The study proposes one way of addressing if different rural women's needs have been met is by measuring the number of new rural women entering the government decision-making system, and by documenting the length of time rural women stay on in the system. This additional indicator of success – measuring the number of new rural women participating in the government decision-making system – gives a measure of how the government decision-making system is encouraging heterogeneity amongst its members. Consequently, a different understanding of the "problem" entails a different definition of what constitutes a successful program to increase rural women's involvement. The scenario changes with the application of a new paradigm that makes rural women visible and record's their voices and experiences.

The implications of using the new government decision-making paradigm in research, and government programs, means the adoption of new indicators measuring the number of new and different rural women who enter and stay on in government decision-making, and the length of time these women continue in their

roles. These new indicators suggest that future research should especially address rural women's personal, interpersonal and cultural needs, such as determining **which** rural women required leadership and empowerment training, and which women do not. Particular attention should be paid to the type of leadership and empowerment training that is most useful to rural women. Also given the lack of evaluation of the government programs in context of the holistic Government decision-making framework, this research recommends that the evaluation of training outcomes use the new paradigm's indicators of success.

Whilst this research touched briefly on the importance of bringing different rural women together to deliberate state-wide or common area-wide issues (triangle one in Figure 8.2), future research is needed to examine this strategy in detail. This is because, like previous women's movements, the catalyst to change the status quo significantly arises when a collective force of diverse women come together (Haines, 1992). More research is needed in this area so that WA rural women - who through sheer isolation and sparse living conditions can rarely come together to form a collective – may find an avenue to express rural women's viewpoints and voices that can systematically influence government, and support rural women decision-makers in the system. Consequently, this research extends Lennie's (2001) research on the recognition of rural women's diversity and incorporates it within the context of government decision-making. In line with the leading researchers of rural women in Australia (Alston, 2003; Haslam McKenzie, 2003), this research has documented the importance of clarifying what is meant by the concept of diversity, so as to avoid an implied homogeneity among rural women decision-makers, and to counter government practices that subscribe to favouring a homogeneity among decision-makers – mainly being, older to middle aged males, who have outside support. To further clarify the concept of diversity, it is recommended that future research bring together Lennie's (2001) research and this research by examining ways to mobilise new and different rural women to become active in their local community, a likely precursor to their taking on a government decision-making role.

8.4.3 Further investigation of how to use ICTs to increase rural women's participation in government decision-making

Whilst this research presented a case study of how governments can introduce online meetings, future research is needed to examine how the government

system itself can implement new ways to include a diversity of citizen's input into mainstream government processes, rather than solely implementing specialised once off projects.

Rural women's positive responses to the online meeting suggest that research could usefully explore other ways in which ICTs can be used to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making with particular attention paid to how the ICT solution should be implemented. This research recommends that both a feminist sociotechnical approach, and also the new paradigm be used, in research that develops ICT solutions for rural women. Future research can address other ways in which to overcome the barriers rural women identified as part of this research. For example the online meeting does not solve all problems since there are rural women who cannot access online government meetings. Adaptations to procedure also have to be made given that online group processes are less linear based than face-to-face discussion. Technical issues and chat software must also be addressed to maximise ways in which rural women can use and access online government meetings. Particular attention should be paid to the use of local community Telecentres in helping rural women participate in ICT-based solutions to under-representation. Finally, given the wide-ranging benefits different rural women experienced from participating in the online government meeting, future action research is recommended to explore how mainstream government processes can incorporate regular online meetings between rural women and Ministers and senior executives. This exploration could identify the issues and roles Ministers, executives, femocrats and rural women would play in initiating such recurring online government meetings. In addition, ICT solutions implemented to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making should also be assessed by the new diversity indicators and by rural women themselves.

8.5 Conclusion

This research raises the question, "If rural women were equally represented in government today, how would the government decision-making system be different?" This research indicates that rural women respondents prioritise the use of a new paradigm that values diversity amongst government decision-makers, and a system that shows by its decision-making processes that it values different decision-

maker's needs, viewpoints, issues and ways of coming to a decision. Consequently, if rural women were equally represented in the government decision-making system, the system would value and work with different points of view, rather than seem to criticise difference which has been the previous impression given by the "boys' club" politics and gendered processes.

This research concludes that a new paradigm is needed to understand, interpret and act upon the problem of rural women's under-representation. This paradigm proposes that rural women want to be involved, they just need new ways in which to be involved, based on rural women's different needs. Diversity amongst people, among decision-makers and in turn within the organisation's processes, practices and culture is central to increasing rural women's representation in government. Without a new paradigm focusing on diversity, the current government decision-making system operates on a status quo paradigm that values homogeneity, rendering rural women invisible.

The case study conducted as part of this research demonstrates that the dynamic is needed from the inside of the government system to make a positive impact for rural women. Appropriate strategies include partnerships, the sociopolitical will of organisers, a focus on rural women's needs, and not an exclusive attention paid to the number of rural women participating, but more emphasis upon attracting a diversity of rural women representatives. ICTs have demonstrated a capacity to facilitate diverse rural women entering the government decision-making system and the potential to transform traditional government processes. This is not to conclude that ICTs are the only solution, but more to assert that ICTs offer one possible solution that can include the contribution of different rural women, who have not previously been involved in traditional government decision-making roles. ICTs can also exclude other rural women – especially through language use and technology access - thus it is necessary to implement a variety of new ways to target different rural women. The Government decision-making framework and the Change strategies framework are both useful as they together offer a range of new ways to target different groups of women.

In conclusion, it is by acknowledging the broader context of bringing together rural women's diverse lives and offering connections between these and the government decision-making system, that a comprehensive understanding can be

provided so that new ways can be implemented to involve new and different rural women in decision-making processes.

After it all, fours years of research, is there hope for equal representation for rural women? What is the verdict? The verdict is that unless many different rural women are made visible in naming and defining their own "problem", the future is a pessimistic one. The Government decision-making framework / paradigm offered through this research enables rural women's voices to be heard through the synthesis of different rural women's needs and issues. These can then be encompassed in one new model for transforming the government decision-making system. Furthermore, this innovative paradigm makes transparent all the social and political factors that affect rural women's personal needs when deciding to become (or not to become) involved in a government decision-making role. It is through these empowering processes and paradigms that an individual can experience empowerment more easily, and with less distress. It is through the vision of first understanding, and then making visible, new ways to address the situation that hope emerges and we can all move to a more harmonious place.

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APPENDIX

(I) Letter of Introduction

Edith Cowan University

Faculty of Communications, Health & Science

Dear

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research project aiming to provide government agencies with new ways for rural women to be involved in their decision making processes through using information and communication technologies. This research project is a component of my Masters Degree at Edith Cowan University.

My name is Teresa Maiolo. I have lived in rural Western Australia for seventeen years and have worked in state government, at Universities, in the mining industry, and have established my own business. I am currently a City Councillor for the City of Rockingham. Over the years I have experienced and observed decision making processes of government and have a keen interest to include 'grass roots' community people more in government decisions. My own experience and reading has clearly shown that women, and in particular rural women, are missing from government decisions making.

Further details regarding the research project are provided in the accompanying information sheet. I will contact you in a week to see if you are willing to be interviewed and to arrange a mutually convenient appointment.

Yours sincerely

Teresa Maiolo
B.A. (Hons)

(ii) Information Sheet

This research proposes to address the continuing problem of rural women's low level of involvement in state government decision making. The aim of this project is to find out from rural women leaders, what are new ways to increase rural women's involvement in government decision-making using ICTs.

You were invited to participate in this project as a result of Agriculture Western Australia's referral, or as a result from your rural community's referral. These referees believed your valuable insight would contribute to the research, and rural women. I am interested in rural women who have had contact with government processes such as services and agencies, and have experience with using information and communication technologies such as the fax, world wide web, and email.

If you decide to be involved in this project, it will require 40 to 50 minutes of your time. Women will be individually interviewed in the location of their choice. Interviews will use a conversational style with a focus on your ideas, thoughts and feelings.

Participation is voluntary and all data will be kept confidential. Interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. This data will be safely locked away, and only available to myself, my supervisor Dr. Lelia Green, and an independent researcher. Collated information from the interviews will be reported on in the final report. When providing examples in the written report, pseudo names will be used and identifiable information will be deleted. This will further provide confidentiality. This project has been approved by Edith Cowan University's ethics committee.

I will be contacting you in one week to see if you are willing to be interviewed, and if so, we will arrange a mutually convenient appointment. If you would like to contact me, my phone number is [redacted] or [redacted]. My supervisor's, Dr. Lelia Green, contact details are 9370 6204 or l. It is my intention that at the end of this project, the rural women leaders' generation of new ways to involve that rural women in government decision making using information and communication technologies, will be considered by relevant government agencies such as Agriculture Western

Australia, Office of Information and Communications in the Department of Commerce and Trade, and Women's Policy Development Office. This process will ultimately address the continuing problem of rural women's low level of involvement in state government decision making.

(iii) Rural Women in Government Decision-Making – Participant's Consent Form

Please read the following statements and tick (✓) them if you agree, before signing and proceeding any further.

I _____ confirm that:

- I have read the information sheet that forms part of this document. ( )
- I was given adequate opportunities to ask questions. ( )
- The questions I asked were answered to my satisfaction. ( )
- I understand the content of the information sheet I was given. ( )
- I understand the implications (outcomes and benefits) of this study. ( )
- I understand that I am under no obligation and no pressure was put on me to participate in this study. ( )
- I understand that I may refuse to answer questions, or may stop at any time I no longer want to participate. ( )
- I confirm that I voluntarily choose to participate. ( )
- I agree that the research data for this study may be published provided that I am not identifiable. ( )

Signature of the participant _____ Date _____

Signature of witness _____ Date _____

(iv) Online meeting transcript

Note: No spelling corrections have been made this transcript.

Hendy Online transcript
facilitator1 WELCOME RRR WOMEN & THE MINISTER, HENDY COWAN to our first Hendy Online!
elke-jerramungup tc bit cold, but had some rain overnight
facilitator1 Margaret Puls and I will be your facilitators today.
jessie Yeah we had a bit too still not enough!
facilitator1 We will start todays forum
facilitator1 Please HOLD RESPONSES and we will give an introduction for today's meeting.
facilitator1 THANK YOU to all the women that posted their topics of interest on the bulletin board. The Minister, Hendy Cowan has read them all.
facilitator1 Your posted topics have help framed the AGENDA for today's forum. These include: * telecommunications, * natural resource management, * small and medium business, and * regional development issues
dianne Hi everyone hope the rain doesn't keep them all away
facilitator1 Your posted topics have help framed the AGENDA for today's forum. These include: * telecommunications, * natural resource management, * small and medium business, and * regional development issues
facilitator1 OUR DISCUSSION WILL PROGRESS TOPIC BY TOPIC
facilitator1 Before we start a few GUIDELINES for our online forum.
facilitator1 I will post these now:
facilitator1 *** Please keep all responses as BRIEF and SUCCINCT as possible.
facilitator1 *** Please be GUIDED by the FACILITATOR'S PROMPTS. Eg. Please wait, Hendy is
facilitator1 *** ONE question at a time. Welcome to add comments to other people's questions
 hopetoun Hopetoun Telecentre
facilitator1 Have a GREAT meeting! Let's begin with our first topic!
facilitator1 Our first topic is TELECOMMUNICATIONS. Issues raised in this topic area include: * sale of Telstra, * mobile and internet coverage for all, * rural women's information technology need's, and, * location of CDMA tower in country towns
hendy G'day everbody, if there is anybody out there talk to me about telecommunications
facilitator1 we will wait for the first question or comment - anybody?
waroona1 Hello, Hendy, What plans do Telstra have to increase mobile coverage in remote rural areas?

suzanna Why are we selling Telstra when it is making a record profit? What good will it be for rural WA?
felicity What plans are in place to expand the mobile telecommunications network?
elke-jerramungup tc We have recently been presented with a CDMA tower right in town -120 m from the school
jane Hendy, What will happen if the Local Shires can't raise the $60 000 need to assist with funding for the CDMA towers?
facilitator1 please wait whilst Hendy is responding
hendy It should not be sold until the Federal Government guarantees equity in the delivery of services to the bush
facilitator2 Please hold responses for the moment. We will invite more questions later.
bremer bay telecentr When all the money from the Telstra sale is spent, what happens to the funding programs that have been set up in relation to Telecentres. Where will our extra funds come from?
facilitator1 Hendy is addressing the Telstra question first
 hendy In regard to your comment Felicity, I have spoken to Telstra, and they have produced a plan to provide CDMA right across the south west land division. All it needs is twelve and a half million dollars. How much can you lend me ?
vickib at what interest rate hendy
facilitator1 Hendy is addresing the Local shire question
hendy In regard to Jane's question, I thought the Shires had to agree to provide the money to go onto the self help scheme. The 12.5 million I spoke about is for those Shires that were not even made an offer.
hendy Hi Elke, I don't have any legislative power to deal with this issue. It may be a small comfort but the health department keeps assuring everybody there is no risk.
hendy Are there any more questions regarding telecommunications
jenny pitman ICPA (Aust) seeks assurance from Govt that the current excellent standard services & programs will not be diminished after the Principle Universal Service Provider (PUSP) takes over responsibility for provision of Voice.
gilly Hi Hendy....what state funding is there available for training rural women in I.T?
hendy Jenny, hows your tennis ? Can I take that question on notice because I don't have an answer for you.
jenny pitman yes hockey not too good either
elke-jerramungup tc These towers seem to be an insidious threat- we can't see anything but it can do something to our body over the years. There is enough material on the Internet telling us about possible health risk. We just want some general guidance from the government on placment on these towers.

bbt jen Hi Hendy - we have several exchanges surrounding boyup brook without local call access - where's the best funding opportunity to correct this. Glad you've got a scribe!

gilly what question the one about Jenny's tennis or training funding?

waroona 3 my tennis is okay too thanks but how about our question from Waroona 1

hendy Gilly if you lived in a small town I'd refer you to the Telecentre. However, I'm sure there are course that must be provided by Tafe or the University of Western Australia's new Albany campus.

facilitator2 Thank you, we will move on to the next topic now.

facilitator1 Our second topic is NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT (NRM). Issues raised in this topic include: * government assistance to spraying- locusts, * disseminating NRM information to land managers, * 1% levy on all tax payers for conservation works, * water catchment

hendy We've now moved to NRM. What would you like to raise ?

waroona 3 are you going to help with the spraying of these locusts?

jane What programmes is the government looking at implementing that supports and helps those farmers who wish to develop sutainable farming practices?

facilitator2 Thank you please hold questions for the moment.

jenny Jenny, Denmark T Centre.Regarding fuel country prices. Cannot Metro prices be raised to help fund the country pricing structure?Finish

hendy I thought there were no egg beds in Waroona. I can assure you there are some in Narembeen, thats where I'll be, seriously it will need to be a combined effort between government and land owners.

facilitator1 hendy is now address teh sustainable question

vickib Care for the enviroment is everyones responsibility, but is anyone brave enough to enforce a levy on all

hendy Sustainable agriculture is a an outcome of successful natural resource management. We already contribute some $40 million to land care to combat salinity. AgWA also provides lots of information and advice for farmers to maintain their sustainability. Do you have anything specific ?

facilitator1 Hendy is addressing the fuel prices issue

hendy Hi Jenny. You could, but it is not an option that I would take. I would prefer to implement a fuel freight equalisation scheme.

rachael Why are country prices so high when fuel is brought into Albany harbour and delivered from there? How is this different to what happens at Fremantle harbour?

facilitator2 Hendy is replying to the levy question, one moment please

hendy Hello Vicki - Before you even start thinking about enforcement can you demonstrate that the majority of taxpayers/ratepayers support a levy. I know I do.

waroona6 Ditto Rachel

jane I have a client wanting to get into horticulture/permaculture etc, and just thought there may be a fund that we could tap them into.
kununurratelecentre Yes the price of fuel has gone up too much!
elke-jerramungup tc hendy, what chance is there of setting up a start up package for young people to get into farming
terri I get a laugh out of the prices advertised for the metro area. I bet we would have a serious revolt if they were paying the prices that we are
facilitator1 Hendy is responding to rachel's fuel question
jessie I agree Terri, they think they have it tough!
felicity Why can't we have a controlled pricing structure, similar to that which operates in NZ. Wherever you go, the price is the same.
hendy Rachael, usually there are a number of reasons. There is no control mechanism governing the wholesale price. There is no control over freight costs and retailers are entitled to write up their own margins.
jenny Jenny Denmark, Good question Rachael. Denmark is the highest fuel around even towards Perth, Even Albany is cheaper, !!! WHY?? end
rachael I agree with what felicity has just said about imposing pricing structures - comptetition doesn't seem to be working!
facilitator2 Hendy is answering Jane's question, pls wait - thanks
waroona4 Why won't the Gov. Reduse the excise on fuel???
hendy Jane, I am not aware of any specific fund for horticulture or permiculture, however there are funds available for those people with innovative projects. I suggest you contact your local BEC co-ordinator or RDC project officer.
hendy Elke, good idea, I will speak to Monty House about that.
facilitator2 Hendy is answering a question, one moment please
facilitator1 Hedny is addressing Warrona
hendy Waroona4 - I have asked John Howard this question and he hasn't given me an answer as yet.
jane With this 1% levy on all tax payers for consercation works, who or what will manage this. Is this a rumor or fact?
hendy It's getting too hot in the kitchen, next topic please...
facilitator1 Our third topic is SMALL AND MEDIUM BUSINESS. Issues raised in this topic include: * start up packages for young farmers, * large travelling charges - living out of town
facilitator2 The next topic is
waroona 3 wheres your apron??
rachael John Howard must be feeling 'very relaxed and comfortable' about getting back into office in country WA!!!!
hendy Jane - it is rumour, if it was applied it would need to be managed by the community not government.

dolphin Rural students still horrendously disadvantagedin termsos travel course offered- many svery able students opt out of year 11/12 education becuse of costs associated with upper seconday, never mind tertiary studies.
hendy Rachael, I'm not
facilitator2 Thanks Dolphin, Hendy is answering your question.
priscilla can I get some help obtaining digital map information free of charge, so that it can be made available to farmers and catchment managments / landcare groups free of charge.
facilitator2 One moment Priscilla, Hendy is answering a question:
hendy Dolphin, education costs are very significant once you have to move out of your district to obtain the education you want for your children. It is an issue that will have to be addressed to bring support levels up to a reasonable standard.
waroona6 When is the Federal Govt. going to address issues of ongoing funding for community based organisations that provide services that govt. departments will not outreach to isolated areas.
kelpie how can any one justify in real cost terms the closure of senior high schools then?>
facilitator1 Hendy is addressing Priscilla's question
hendy Hi Priscilla, nothing is free. However the costs should be reasonable if you have a view that costs of obtaining maps are too high I will take that issue up for you.
jane Waroona, instead of relying on governments servicing us, why don't we lobby for governments to change taxation legislation, review decision making process and turn community development into a commodity!!!!!
facilitator2 Hendy is answering Waroona6's question, one moment please - ta
hendy Waroona 6 - good question, I don't have that answer for you but I know much of my time is spent requesting support from the Federal Government in the delivery of services in regional WA.
priscilla many thanks - I'll get in touch with your office to further discuss matter
facilitator1 thanks Priscilla
facilitator1 the next question hnedy is addressing is the closure of high schools
hendy Hi Kelpie, to my knowledge there has not been closure of any high school in regional Western Australia. Can you tell me if there has been one closed in the country ?
hendy Free for all, anything else ?
jenny pitman In comparison to other states/territory WA has been left behind in the provision of remote family care services. There are excellent extensive services in QLD & SA. The other states have accessed Federal Funding, when will WA move forward to provide these type of services?
kambalda_4 Hendy .. when you were in Kambalda in March you mentioned funding for co-location .. can you tell me what it is called?
facilitator1 okay Hendy will address Jenny's question

kelpie Hendy - i'm aware that yrs 11/12 will be closing down in Harvey - for example - it could have a huge impact on the town's future population spread...etc etc..,
waroona1 Since de-regulation of the dairy industry on June 30, are there any educational funds available for farmers who wish to stay in the industry or depart?
hendy Jenny, I am not able to make a comparison between WA and other States, but I will check funding of family care services and come back to you.
facilitator2 HOLD questions for the moment - thanks
facilitator1 Hendy is addressing Kambalda's question
maja Hendy I'd like to ask aout funding for youth workers in rural WA? we are constantly being told that the involvement of young people in communities is vital for their that is the community's survival and that if young people have positive experiences growing up in their communtieles they're more likely to return yet current state govt OYA only funds activities not persons in place?
jenny pitman I'll send you some written information Hendy.
hendy Kambalda 4 - If you look up the Commerce and Trade website www.commerce.wa.gov.au you will find information on collocation or contact the GEDC.
facilitator1 Hendy is responding to the Harvey school question
kambalda_4 Thanks I'll take another look .. the GEDC haven't been very helpful .. unfortunately ..
hendy Kelpie, yes you are right, I understand agreement was reached that years 11 and 12 would travel daily to Australind.
jerry Hi all
jackie g'day homefronters....
kununurratelecentre same as with maja
waroona 3 also isn't Pinjarra High doing the same - kids will travel to Mandurah
facilitator1 please hold responses Hendy is responding to the diary question
waroona1 That means from Bunbury to Mandurah there will be no high school.
hendy Waroona 1, the dairy industry received a $27 million package from the State Government. You need to talk to AgWA to find out if that includes funding for education.
rachael With Tourism being such a major industry now for the South West and in fact entire state, is there the possiblity of the Government putting pressure on the Albany City to forward plans to develop the foreshore. The funding is sitting there, yet everyone seems too gutless to make a decision. How can we push this on??
waroona4 for students in waroona the closest high schools will be either bunbury or mandurah, which either one is almost an hours drive away
hendy Hi Maja, can I please take this question on notice.
corrigin_telecentre We are tired of losing our good teachers who are being forced out by others who have permancy. Why should permanent teachers be able to apply to a new school and force these temporary teachers out?
facilitator1 Hendy is address rachel's question

terri With regards to the school bus issue, kids here in Bremer catch their bus at 7.30 am to travel to Jerramungup this starts at year 8
roz The TAFE training courses are too rigid and often don't meet real needs of community. When is TAFE system going to be revised to make it more flexible and relevant to community needs for training and employment? When can communities have input into design of courses?
hendy Rachael, the foreshore development is a very contentious issue. It must be solved by the community of Albany, not by government. When you show that a majority of residents in Albany support the development it will proceed.
julia I agree with corrigin telecentre we have the same problem here in the North West
vickib rachel be careful what you wish for, I don't want govt giving my town orders
facilitator1 Hendy is now addressing Corrigin qu
hendy Corrigin, I was not aware they could. Let me get some more information on that and I will talk to you at another time.
bktc we also would like to see tafe system revised
peggy There's quite a lot of help available for people on farms through the Farm Biz program, but you must be grosing over $50,000 pa. What help is available for those of us who have had to go off farm for work and want to get back to full time farming?
rachael Yes very good point Vickib!
hendy Terri. 7:30 ? I used to have to catch the bus at 7 !! It's a tough call for little kids.
corrigin_telecentre They can and are doing it. It has happened here for the last 4 years. I lok forward to hearing from you regarding this matter further.
kambalda_4 Hendy is there assistance available for towns in need of doctors? We had two doctors, one left and now we have one very over worked female doctor in a town full of miners .. how do we get help to get another doctor?
facilitator2 Please hold questions thanks
patsy Is any funding available for mobile phone towers?
hopetoun I have heard that the Edn dept is thinking about changing the way teachers become eligible for positions... may become skills based on different criteria used instead of JUST time put into a certain school in a, say, hard to staff school.
hendy Roz, I'm meeting the Director of the Tafe College in Northam next Friday and I will ask him about this issue.
rachael Roz - good point on the TAFE system. They spend a fortune advertising that their courses are as good as any other institution and from what I have seen - alot of them are a joke.
vickim I am one of those temporary teachers who was moved out by a permanemtn teacher in a country area
jackie Rachel, this type of technology is v. gd 4 getting ppl doing consultation....

facilitator1 Hendy is addressing kambadal qu
pansy Hi I finally made it online. Don't know the problem but Pansy is actually suewa
bktc My concern is about the cdma tower locations, as ours will be situated in the centre of town Bruce Rock
gilly what happened...the system just crashed?!#@#$%% anyone out there?
hendy Kambalda 4, the answer is yes. You need to talk to the AMA or to the West Australian Centre for Remote and Rural Medicine. Both of those bodies provide support to local government bodies looking to place a doctor in their Shire.
elke-jerramungup tc The issue of students travelling long distances to school is very emotional as I have learn first hand having been involved in the closure of our primaru school with students now travelling one and a half hours. children do adapt and they do benefit from larger schools with better facilities, more teaching staff and a wider social scene. The children, even the small ones do adapt and they do cope. Not much consolation when your school is about to be closed but that's progress.
maja Re TAFE and relevant training opportunities - Northcliffe has been identified as great opportunity for eco tourism - adventure tecurism etc Right now there is no course in leisure sciences in WA? For someone interested in this they now need to go to EliderVictoria or Tasmania for non Degree based training despite the fact that ORCA has ratified a new 'Hands -on' Outdoor Course that no training providers in WA have taken up because regarded as too expensive to run? Govt needs to subsidize ?
facilitator1 please hold responses
kelpiesorry - got kicked out.... i'd love to bring up the 11/12 high school closing issue
facilitator1 please try to keep your questions / responses brief
facilitator2 Please hold questions - one at a time thanks
kambalda_4 Thanks for the opportunity Hendy .. must go pick up kids from school ..
kelpie hehehh
facilitator2 Bye Kambalda 4 - thanks for taking part!
bktc We would like to see perhaps a mobile female doctors service for the wheatbelt area
williams tc What pressure can we put on universities to offer more off-campus courses so young people can study by correspondence??
kambalda_4 Your welcome! .. Goneroonies!!
corrigin_telecentre To many acting Principals in schools, often nothing wrong with their skills, but no continuity and disruption for staff and students. Can something be done?
hendy Bruce Rock, I'm not an expert but there are towers dotted all through the metropolitan area of Perth. To date they have not had any impact to my knowledge on the health of Perth residents. If you can convince Telstra to relocate the tower to the water tank hill west of Bruce Rock it might be a good idea.

jackie Gton is looking at a 'Foundation' Course which will enable kids to stay home for another yr and then pick their uni and course
bvb tempory people only make tempory decissions
mschile Hendy, given there profit announcement they may be open to the Bruce Rock relocation!
facilitator1 Hendy is addressing bktc questions
corrigin_telecentre Why can Telecentres (there are 78 of us) not be used to offer courses from all Universities by correspondence? It is time the universities came out to the country (north to south) and kids do not want to leave the country.
jane Hendy, did you get any of my responses about taxation legislation and community development?
bktc thanks for the advice Hendy
hendy bktc, I will take this issue up with the AMA and WACRRM. There are already specialist visits to selected towns, maybe it can be done through that mechanism.
priscilla quite a few Aust universities are offering on-line courses; I think it will become very popular over the next few years. Infact, we could study on-line with many of the prestigious o/seas unis.
facilitator1 Hendy is addressing williams Tc
hendy Williams, you should be able to do this through Internet services, using your local Telecentre.
debbie Many rural towns have a handful of dedicated people volunteering their time on a number of committees. These people often suffer burn-out. Do you have any ideas/solutions to address this issue?
facilitator1 Addressing Corrigin tc
hendy Corrigin - I would have thought the universities would have jumped at the chance, why can't you ?
bvb pricilla many o/seas stuvents are studying online with Aust institions
waroona1 Our volunteers are the same. Where can we get funding for people on an ongoing basis, not just specific projects?
facilitator1 hendy is addresing Jane's qu
elke-jerramungup tc More off-campus modules is a big one. I have enrolled in a librarian course but can only do 6 modules by correspondence. This will only give me a third of my diploma. To do the rest I will have to attend a university. I am a farmers wife and a mother of 4. I can not leave home to attend university. HELP!!!
corrigin_telecentre I did try but TSU are supposed to be following something up (and have been for last 4 months) so I was asked to hold back so it could be put in place at all Telecentres. I was not told for how long?
hendy Jane, tax rebates or 150% tax deductability is a great way to recompense people living in the bush for the lack of readily available services.

kelpie elke- i just read your reply re schools closing... and want to suggest some implications - like services...and demographic mix and a whole lot more!
bktc Bruce Rock telecentre has an agreement with ECU Kalgoorlie and Curtin for off campus modules if you want info please contact Marie
corrigin_telecentre St Albans, Victoria has an excellent On Line campus
facilitator1 please hold responses
waroona4 why aren't TAFEs offering more courses by correspondance and on-line for people in rural areas who want higher education?
kelpie murdoch has online units too...
williams tc In most courses, some modules of the course are available by correspondence but to complete the degree you need to go ton-campus - these courses r often promoted as being part of the correspondence courses - it's not GOOD ENOUGH!!
facilitator2 Please hold questions, Hendy is answering Debbie's question
jane In response to Debbies question - I have the perfect solution!!! Lobbie governments to look at turning community development into commodity!!! We need to change tax legislation to instigate community foundations. That is what I ask this government to start looking at...maybe they already are!
jean_harrison1 corrigin more info please on 'online campus'
mschlle Only a few minutes to go. Congratulations Hendy for being 'brave' to do this. Could we encourage your Nat Party collegues to do similar?
hendy Debbie, a perenial problem for all small towns in the bush. One task we have set ourselves in government is to provide support mechanisms for those people who do show the leadership within their communities. Thats why we have the STEP programme and others.
jenny pitman Sounds like we need to get WA unis into gear re studying externally on line.
hendy Michelle, you want to see my scars !!!!
corrigin_telecentre Jean, would you like to email me direct on corrigin@wn.com.au so we do not tie up the last little bit of time.
facilitator1 Addressing Mschlle comment / question
wandtc what is the STEP program?
kelpie online campus means you interact like we're doing now - for tutorials etc
priscilla I thinks many are investigating - if not they will become dinosaurs
jane We also need to start looking at our decision making processes. Our present government have done so much in developing great programmes to help with small town revitalisation. However, these are only bandaide solutions. How do I know this because we are stil wanting more from our government...
kylee Uni's could utilise telecentre's in some 78 locations much more than what is happening

hendy wandtc - small town economic programme, contact Commerce and Trade www.commerce.wa.gov.au.
facilitator1 hendy will be leaving in a few minutes are there final comments you would like to make?
terri thanks for the opportunity - should be more of it!
kununurratelecentre Thank You Hendy
debbie Hendy - how did you find the process today?
kelpie I think these initiatives are better than band aids.....the fibre is improved in the towns...surely?
corrigin_telecentre Excellent idea Hendy. We would like to encourage you to visit a chat room again.
priscilla thanks hendy - like you I've never been to a chat room before but soon got the hang of it.
williams tc We who have done so much for so long with so little are now qualified to do everything with nothing.....
hendy Thanks for participating today. It was a very interesting experience !
beverley telecentre Thanks have enjoyed the opportunity
peggy I agree about the 150% tax break for farmers addressing the salinity problems. It makes far more sence that a 1% flat levy which will just alienate the city people once again.
elke-jerramungup tc I would like to be kept up to date on the start up package. -
bbt jen thanks hendy
waroona2 Can you please comment on my unanswered question re: funding for volunteers on an ongoing basis, not just specific projects?
jackie http://europa.eu.int/en/record/other/radiotel.htm - try this site for health risk assoc with mob ph ....
jane YES!! What about funding for feasibility studies and infrastructure projects in the Wide Wide West of WA, for TOURISM? in stead of convention centres in perth!!! AREN'T WE MEANT TO SHARE THE WA EXPERIENCE!!!
julia Thanks Hendy, there should be more chats available like this.
pansy Hendy any news on the quidelines for the relocation grants yet?
kelpie ta... keep doing this sort of thing to keep a finger on the pulse...
mschlle He he Hendy - still this has been great that you have done this. It is a first and maybe a sign of the way of the future
jackie Can't we subsidise issues in the bush by putting a tax on every carton of milk and loaf of bread - do you recn ppl wld notice 1c on ea?
merredin.telecentre I just have to say its a shame this program is so slow in loading, its taken 50 minutes for me to actually be here, unfortunatly I have missed the majority of the discussion. Is there any way of getting a copy of the chat????
jackie merredin - it shld be archieved or posted..

facilitator1 for the remianing questions we will put responses on the bulletin board in a few weeks time
kelpie hey do you all relaise you can link up anytime... if we make a set time we could all do this???
leeman2 Thanx Hendy
facilitator2 Sorry about that Merredin. I will be posting a copy to the website - a complete transcript of today's discussion.
pansy Same here took me 40 minutes to get online as well
exmouth Telstra charges for ISDN microlink to provide internet services are much higher in remote/regional areas and is justified by them because of the distance. We do pay for living in remote & regional areas!
beverley telecentre Same here it took too long to access
jackie show ppl stuff like this and let them loose on telstra & othr carriers
maja Thanks Hendy - Northcliffe
facilitator2 Can those who had troubles linking in fill in the feedback form, so we have a record of your problems?
leeman2 Thanks Hendy from Leeman
gill linespeeds !!!!! line speeds!!!!
beverley telecentre This is a great way to communicate
kelpie hey, who's facilitating this?
priscilla Thanks Hendy - like you I'd never been to a chat room before but soon got the hang of it
waroona1 Thanks Hendy... how about lunch? Come and visit..
jenny pitman Time getting on line , indicates what it is like for children in remote areas trying to access IT
jane is Hendy going to respond to my statements and questions?
williams tc CONGRATS AND A BIG WELL DONE!! to the RRR Network & Hendy for this chat - let's do it more often
kylee telstra isdn charges are absurd - its about time we got on telstra's case about services to regional areas - Im yet to find anyone happy with Telstra's bs
beverley telecentre Beverly is going to general chat
kelpie yep... why don't we ask optus to help the push?>
facilitator2 Hi all - the next speakers for RRR chat is Dr Dale Spender (yes, the Dale Spender) on Friday 17 November at 12.30pm.
gill a suggestion...next time 1pm-2pm and one topic in depth!
hendy Jane, I'm terribly sorry I missed your question, I'll ensure an answer is posted on the bulletin board.
facilitator2 Dale Spender will be chatting live courtesy of the Women's Policy Office.
libby well today has been interesting I've crashed two computers and used 3 names

bbt lynda Thanks Hendy from Boyup Brook
gill yup.....'tis me Jackie....:-)
waroona1 Hendy, with lunch - will you answer my questions re: volunteer funding?
gill yup..except for the 3 crashes:-)!!!
facilitator2 Hi folks - Hendy has left the room now, has an interview to do about this online forum process. Many thanks for all your help.
deb hi jen & lynda!!
gill na!
leeman2 who's Dale Spender?
wpo Women's Policy Office has enjoyed this opportunity to observe the chat line process and hopes you will all visit again on the 17 November to discuss Women and the new Technologies.
waroona1 Thanks... I was thrown off after 1 hour. Is this supposed to happen.. I logged on at 1.45pm?
deb depends on your service provider arrangements...
gill ta!
jackie Dale Spender - brill feminist and grt spkr - now IT and women guru among other things
waroona1 Not off explorer... just out of the homefront
libby bye
jean_harrison1 LEAVES
deb byee
bvb is mschelle still in the room
hus just joined, a little late
bvb I tried to send private message and stuffed another computer for a while anyway
liz thanks evryone some good issues here better go and get the kids! cheers
<!--
Hon. Minister Hendy Cowan MLA is a guest speaker on the RRR Women's Homefront Chatroom from 2 to 3pm, Thursday 31 August 2000.
To get ready for the Hendy Online! Chat on take a look at the information provided below.
<a HREF=/~wcrrr/cgi-bin/page.cgi?account=wcrrrnew&page=9>Topics and issues raised</A>
<a HREF=/~wcrrr/cgi-bin/page.cgi?account=wcrrrnew&page=11>Agenda</A>
<a HREF=/~wcrrr/cgi-bin/page.cgi?account=wcrrrnew&page=10>Guidelines for participating</A>
<a HREF=/cgi-bin/autoform/hendyonline>Give Feedback to Hendy Online and win a luxury weekender!</A> -->

(v) Online Forum Questionnaire

We would love to receive feedback from you regarding the first

ONLINE FORUM.

One lucky person who completes this feedback form by the closing date will win a voucher for a luxury weekend for two at the Sebel Hotel in Perth. The closing date to send your feedback form to be in the entry for this prize is 28 September 2000.
Please note all information will be kept confidential, and only summary information will be used. Your comments will help improve the online forums.

Also the questions with * are necessary to respond to before sending us feedback.

* 1. Why did you decide to be involved in the Online forum?

2. What were the strengths of the Online forum?

3. What improvements do you suggest for future Online forums?

* 4. Do you see this Online forum and the Online RRR network as an empowering, useful tool for women who live in country WA?
Yes / No ? Please explain why

* 5. How do you see that Governments can use Online forums to involve rural women in government – community decision-making?

6. How did you find out about the Online forum?

* 7. Did you have any technical difficulties participating in the forum?
Yes / no. Please explain what the difficulties were, if yes.

8. Do you find the bulletin board is a useful tool to complement an online forum? Please comment.

9. Is an hour a suitable length of time for the Online forum? Please comment.

* 10. What outcomes do you feel were achieved by the Online forum? And were you satisfied with the outcomes of the Online forum? Please comment.

* 11. Have you been part of meeting with [Minister's name] before?
Yes / No. If yes please outline type of meeting.

12. What are ways that the RRR women's network could use the Online Forum meeting? (please refer to topics, guests, and outcome to be achieved)

YOUR DETAILS

1. What is your residential town? Eg. Donnybroook

* 2. What is your residential region? Please underline one.

Great Southern
Peel
Kimberley
Pilbara
Esperance – Goldfields
Gascoyne
Wheatbelt
Mid- West
South West

3. Age in years?

4. Place of birth?

5. What are the issues that you are most passionate about in your community?

* 6. Are you currently involved in government (local, state or national) meetings or decision-making groups? (If so please state and outline years of involvement).

* 7. Have you been part of an Online meeting / forum before?

Yes / No . If yes, please outline which ones.

8. Please underline (or BOLD) the type of computer and software were you using for the Hendy Online Forum.

Internet Browser: Internet Explorer or Netscape
Operating system: Windows 95 or Windows 98 or Windows 2000
Hardware – IBM 286, 386, Pentium, other .....
Macintosh

9. Have you subscribed to the online RRR network?

Yes / no. If no and you would like to please include your email address here

10. Please write any additional comments about the Online forum.

I1. If you would like to be included in the draw for a luxury weekend at the Sebel Hotel in Perth, please write your contact details and send your feedback by 28 September 2000.

Phone number: Email address:

If you have any questions or further information, please contact Margaret Puls or Teresa Maiolo at the Department of Commerce and Trade, 1800 628 767 or at the below email address:

mapu@commerce.wa.gov.au or tema@commerce.wa.gov.au

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