

# WOMEN VETERAN FORUMS REPORT

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### PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The Women Veteran Forums were created to listen to women who have served, to understand what RSL Victoria is doing well, to identify gaps in programs and culture, and to co-design practical actions that can be implemented at pace.

The intent is to place lived experience at the centre of improvement and to provide an evidence-based roadmap for policy, programming, and Sub-Branch guidance.

The Forums used facilitated small group conversations and anonymous submissions from Victorian women veterans. Participants represented a range of ages, services, ranks, and life stages.

To complement the group sessions and to ensure accessibility and psychological safety, we also conducted individual interviews with some veterans. These interviews allowed participants to speak in depth about sensitive or complex matters that may have been difficult to raise in a group setting.

Forums were hosted across metropolitan and regional Victoria.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from the RSL Victoria Women Veteran Forums. The purpose of the Forums was to understand the experiences of women within the Victorian RSL community, to identify what is working well, and to define practical improvements that will increase safety, belonging, and relevance for women.

The Forums surfaced strong variation between Sub-Branches.

Some locations are welcoming and modern.

Others still carry evidence of historical, and outdated, social norms that exclude or diminish women.

Participants described a need for better recognition of service, stronger advocacy on issues that affect women, clear and up to date information about transition and entitlements, respectful and trauma informed practice at the local level, and governance that protects privacy and dignity.

The report recommends seven priority actions for RSL Victoria to consider.

- 1) Set inclusive standards for Sub-Branches together with a Zero Tolerance pledge for sexism, bullying, and harassment, backed by simple training and visible accountability.
- 2) Diversify programming and channels so that veterans and families can participate in ways that fit modern life.

- 3) Establish a clear advocacy agenda for women in service and create a Female Veteran Liaison group with lived experience to provide feedback on this report and the broader transformation of RSL Victoria.
- 4) Build a central online resource that provides plain language guidance on transition, entitlements, health and wellbeing, employment, legal and financial support, and family services.
- 5) Strengthen partnerships with ex-service organisations, including WVNA and community providers with warm referrals and shared outcomes.
- 6) Establish a women focused networking and leadership program that offers connection, mentoring, and support, with flexible delivery.
- 7) Improve the visibility and representation of women in governance, ceremonies, storytelling, and marketing so that female veterans can see themselves and be seen by the community.

The expected outcomes include stronger belonging and psychological safety for women, better access to entitlements and support, higher engagement among younger cohorts, improvements in Sub-Branch culture, and greater policy influence on issues that affect women in service.

## WHAT WE HEARD: KEY THEMES

### Theme One: Culture, Safety and Belonging

Culture at the local level is the strongest determinant of whether a woman chooses to engage with the RSL in Victoria or withdraw. Participants described a very mixed picture. Some spoke of kind people, good facilities, and supportive leaders. Others experienced patronising remarks, exclusion from leadership, or environments that did not appeal.

### Theme Two: Recognition, Identity and the Meaning of Veteran Status

A recurring theme was the devaluing of service for women. Many participants were told that their service did not count because they did not deploy. Others were directed toward auxiliaries rather than being recognised as veterans in their own right. Many spoke about the discomfort of being challenged when wearing medals in public.

### Theme Three: Transition, Entitlements and Navigation

Participants want RSL to step into a stronger navigation role. They want a single trusted place with plain language guidance on claims, entitlements, health pathways, employment, legal and financial issues, and family supports. They want warm handovers, not just links. They want current serving members to be better engaged and supported so that transition is smoother later.

### Theme Four: Governance, Power and Professionalism

Participants described governance weaknesses that undermine safety and trust for women. This included committee gatekeeping and lack of privacy and skills in welfare practices for women. Some felt intimidation to participate in election process that were male-dominated, and some left committees because they could not influence change or felt that governance practices did not meet reasonable standards.

The views of participants align closely with the reasons that current Governance Transformation Project is taking place. These comments are a reminder of how governance deficiencies affect women disproportionately.

### **Theme Five: Relevance for Younger Veterans and Families**

Younger veterans want modern, flexible, and family friendly options. They need meeting times outside business hours, online participation, short and purposeful sessions, and programs that are not always centered on alcohol. They also need clear pathways to get involved without navigating Sub-Branch politics or unwritten social rules.

### **Theme Six: What Good Looks Like**

The Forums also highlighted positive practice. Women described inclusive Sub-Branched with strong allies who call out inappropriate behaviour, visible representation of women, modern programs, and respectful, private welfare support. Many participants reported supportive experiences at State Branch. The contrast between these examples and negative experiences provides a clear roadmap for improvement.

## **FUTURE VISION: WHAT WOMEN VETERANS WANT THE RSL TO BECOME**

Women veterans described a strong desire for an RSL that reflects modern service, values their contribution, and offers a place of genuine belonging. While many shared difficult experiences from the past and present, they also offered clear and constructive direction for how the organisation can evolve. Their feedback provides a roadmap for a future RSL that is inclusive, contemporary, professional, and grounded in respect for all who served.

- **A Modern and Inclusive Organisation That Recognises All Service**
- **A Safe, Respectful, Trauma Informed Environment for Women**
- **A Strong Advocate and Peak Body for Modern Veterans**

Women want an RSL that leads on policy and boldly represents all who served. They want visible involvement at transition points and stronger advocacy with government and the ADF.

- Be a clear voice on women related issues and on matters that affect current serving personnel
- Ensure strong female representation and practical content at transition seminars
- Advocate for culturally competent support within the Department of Veterans Affairs
- Build stronger relationships with the Australian Defence Force so members know where to turn when they leave service
- Partner with women associations within each service and with specialist ESOs

- **A Well Governed and Professional Organisation**
- **Contemporary Programs and Services**
- **A Place of Connection and Community for Women**
- **A Renewed Focus on Purpose**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish an advocacy agenda for women in service and create a Female Veteran Liaison Group (FVLG). Define three to five priorities such as women health pathways, responses to sexual harassment and assault, equitable access to entitlements, support for families and carers, and transition reform. Publish position briefs and submit evidence-based inputs to DVA, ADF, and relevant committees. Use RSL channels to elevate stories and normalise help seeking.
2. Build a central resource for female veterans, and other veterans, that combines plain language content, step by step guides, checklists, timelines, an ESO directory, and warm referral options. Offer live chat hours and a call back form. Provide printable packs for Sub-Branches and use during outreach to current serving or at transition seminars etc. Establish content governance with named owners and a quarterly refresh cycle to keep information current.
3. Strengthen partnerships with ex-service organisations and community providers. Map the landscape, sign memoranda of understanding that include referral standards and data sharing with privacy safeguards, and pilot co-branded programs. Create a shared outcomes dashboard to avoid duplication and to learn together.
4. Establish a veteran women's networking and leadership program. Include peer circles and mentoring. Provide a directory of women veterans in leadership so others are less isolated.
5. Set inclusive standards for Sub-Branches and require a Zero Tolerance pledge to sexism, bullying, and harassment. Provide a short and very basic training for leaders and volunteers with an annual refresh. Create a support and escalation process for Sub-Branches that struggle with culture change, and recognise Sub-Branches that are doing well. Make inclusion a criterion within the Sub-Branch Performance Framework.
6. Modernise programming. Offer events and programs that are relevant to veteran needs. Provide hybrid access, family friendly options, and quiet rooms. Along with active and social programming, include content on things relevant to life after service like entitlements, webinars, mental health information, and information about skills transition. Also, offer fitness and wellbeing, creative arts, and family day type events at times that are accessible and promote offerings across the network.

7. Improve communication with veterans. Overhaul data management to allow for better engagement with existing members and start communicating with veterans who are outside the network through innovative digital campaigns and relationship building with other ESO interest groups. Use inclusive symbols in spaces and communications.
8. Improve visibility and representation of women. Set targets for women representation in leadership and ceremonial roles. Audit and renew imagery and narratives to reflect diverse contemporary service. Launch a See Her Serve digital series to highlight contributions and journeys. Provide governance pathways and leadership coaching for women who wish to serve in elected roles.
9. Create a more consistent brand, including an environmental brand. Improve aesthetics at Sub-Branches to freshen and modernise the spaces so veterans feel proud to belong. Produce guidelines and recommendations for the use of spaces. Reduce the presence of weapons in Sub-Branches and consider the prominence of alcohol service areas.

