Growing up as youngest of four children at Kununurra in the Ord Scheme, Kalyn Fletcher can trace her interest in agribusiness back to her earliest memories. Today, the 2016 RIRDC Rural Women’s Award for Western Australia and the 2016 Business Women’s Australia’s Women on the Rise award manages her family’s two businesses.

This puts the 36-year-old in the minority according to research behind the Diversity in decision-making in rural industries report, with women representing just 26 per cent of the decision-making roles in small businesses.

A carefree childhood in northern Western Australia was followed by boarding in Perth for secondary school, where her interest in chemistry saw career advisers encourage her into a double geology-chemistry degree.

“I found it really easy and I loved the subjects — but I hated living in Perth. When I realised that’s probably where I’d live as a geologist, I quit, went home and decided to focus on agriculture.”

Learn more agrifutures.com.au/national-rural-issues
“When I quit uni, Dad only said ‘no worries’. I worked in RB Dessert Seed Co, our seed business, and he gave me the worst jobs. I’ve worked out they were not even jobs — we’ve never done them since!”

Six months later, Kalyn began at the University of Queensland, Gatton Campus, studying applied science in horticulture and focusing on plant breeding, followed by a bachelor’s degree in agribusiness. A few years after returning to the Ord, Kalyn became the business manager of her family’s two businesses.

“In the distillery I organise the marketing and wholesale contracts, and in the seed business I look after all the sales, contracting and agronomy work. I’ve got a sorghum breeding program which is PBR’d [plant breeder rights], and a couple of new legumes too. So there’s lots of science around our businesses, which I find really enjoyable, so I’m still using that interest.”

Finding a work-life balance

The mother of three says her challenges are the same as any business person’s: time and work-life balance — identified as one of several barriers to diversity in decision-making roles in the Diversity in decision-making in rural industries report.

“My skills lend themselves to both businesses and I enjoy the diversity of both businesses, but it would be far easier if someone could invent a 40-hour day. We’ve had a fair bit of growth in the past couple of years.”

Kalyn finds satisfaction and enjoyment working in a family business.

“None of us were ever told we had to be involved in the business. So I think if you don’t have that pressure it really gives you this freedom to choose that path if it’s the right path for you.”

She notes it’s “quite unusual” for the youngest sibling to be driving the business. “It does have its own challenges to manage, but I love it.”

She also notes her management approach is very different to her father’s, but says their strong relationship is one of the things she enjoys about working with her family in business.

Listening key to managing

Kalyn says listening is one of her strengths, and partly attributes it to her business success.

“I love hearing insights from my staff. I love it when they approach me and say ‘Kalyn, this is not working, I reckon we should do that’. Or, ‘Kalyn, have you ever thought of … ?’. I think it allows for efficiencies and different thoughts. I’m never shy in asking people their advice and their opinions.”

Natural gender diversity in The Ord

Kalyn says The Ord is a unique agricultural area, where gender bias doesn’t exist.

“The Ord was only released in 1965, and it seems the people who came up here and had a crack were husband and wife teams. And the wives needed to succeed — the businesses couldn’t exist otherwise. I don’t think women and men approach decisions differently; different personalities see things differently.”

She says her father strongly believes in gender diversity — as does she. “As a daughter, I always could do whatever his son was doing. In the businesses, I’ve never set gender-based targets, and what’s funny is that our team is actually skewed more to females.”

Benefits in diversity

Kalyn believes different personalities in a decision-making team benefits a business; a view that is backed up by findings in the report, including wider experiences, a greater affinity with customers, improved quality of decision-making, better understanding of emerging markets, improved business continuity, beneficial influence on investors and improved governance and strategy.

“Organisations need diversity in leadership: there are so many advantages. Different people look at things differently, with different opinions and ask different questions. And it’s important, because otherwise, everyone would still think the world’s flat, wouldn’t they?!"