

**RESPONDING TO WIFE ABUSE
IN FARM AND RURAL COMMUNITIES**
Searching for Solutions that Work

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Rural Women Told Us...

“Rural life is great. You know your neighbours and who to trust. You have privacy, no traffic...you get help from others and its cheaper to live. The kids are happy.”

“My husband said if I left he would kill the dog or let the calves die and it would be my fault. When he threatened to kill me, I thought, who would know – the farm is so isolated.”

A Snapshot of Rural New Brunswick

In order to understand wife abuse in a rural context, it is important to recognize the nature of that context. New Brunswick is a largely rural province with 51% of its 738,133 inhabitants living in areas defined as rural. According to the 1996 Census rural means living in small towns, villages and other places with populations of less than 1,000 (Statistics Canada 1996). Only Prince Edward Island and the Northwest Territories have a higher percentage of their population living in rural areas. By comparison, 22% of Quebecois and 17% of Ontarians live in rural areas. Even provinces with considerable activity in the areas of farming, fishing and agriculture have a greater proportion of urban dwellers. For example, the rural population of Manitoba is 28%, Saskatchewan 37%, British Columbia 18% and Newfoundland 43%.

Although family violence is often characterized as a problem that takes place in the privacy of the home, clearly families do not live in a vacuum. Family violence must be seen in relation to a broader framework of social, political and economic factors that impact on all aspects of rural life. Moreover, the shifting constellation of such factors directly relates to how policy makers, crisis workers or various service providers recognize and respond to family violence issues in a rural context.

The farm and rural women we interviewed for our study shared many general concerns relating to life in a rural area. These included, to mention a few, fears associated with an uncertain future relating to the decline of the family farm, the lack of alternative rural employment especially full-time jobs, increasing poverty, the lack of access to education, day-care and health services, as well as inadequate transportation, housing and social services. As a result, the underlying fabric of rural life was seen to provide rather tenuous support to residents generally, while creating significant obstacles for victims of abuse. Moreover, many of the systemic issues identified by the rural women we interviewed are barely reflected in economic development plans. Most rural development initiatives tend to prioritize industrial development and infrastructure improvements such as the provision of safe drinking water and sewage systems. While no one would argue that ensuring safe drinking water is not of paramount importance, ensuring safe families has not received the same attention.

Many of the barriers confronting rural residents, such as those identified above, are systemic in nature. Some are imbedded in institutional frameworks and societal attitudes that have fostered a number of related systemic problems such as gender inequality, sex-role stereotyping, racism and so on. Others relate generally to larger economic situations such as trade barriers. As a result, many of these issues must be addressed at a provincial, national and even global level. As such, we recognize that it will take more than the enhancement of individual crisis interventions to change the lives of rural women living with abuse. Nevertheless, the strategies and solutions put forward in this paper must be seen as part of the solution.

Before presenting our findings, we shall provide a brief overview of rural New Brunswick. According to Census data (Statistics Canada 1996, tables 15 and 16), eleven

of the fifteen counties in New Brunswick may be characterized as predominantly rural in nature. Only four counties have greater numbers of urban dwellers than rural dwellers and these counties surround the three largest cities, namely Moncton, Saint John and Fredericton. With more than half the inhabitants residing outside of urban centres, it is not surprising that many people in the rural areas of New Brunswick are involved in jobs in agricultural, fishing, fish processing, logging, mining and forestry, and tourism.

The 1996 Census of Agriculture reported 3,206 farms in New Brunswick with the largest average farm size of all the Atlantic Provinces. The New Brunswick Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Aquaculture indicates that 1,200 of the farms produce beef and most of these are “small family operations or complimentary enterprises on large diversified farms” (2000, p. 21). The Northwestern Region and the Western Region of the province are involved predominantly in the potato, poultry and hog industries while the Central Region is fairly diversified with dairy, beef, fruit and vegetable farming and harvesting of wild blueberries. The Southern Region also supports diversified operations with about 600 farms producing vegetables, berries, poultry, dairy and beef. The agriculture and agri-food industry is a major contributor to the provincial economy.

Many would describe the forest as the backbone of New Brunswick with over 600 million hectares of productive forestland. The New Brunswick Department of Natural Resources and Energies reports on their website that 16,000 individuals obtain their wages and salaries directly from work in the forests. In addition, the value of jobs related to the forest and pulp production is valued at more than \$1.5 million. The fisheries are an important activity in certain areas of the province, along with major fish processing plants.

Men and women living in rural communities, whether coastal or inland, tend to rely heavily on employment associated with natural resource based industries. These primary industries (agriculture, fisheries, forestry), along with the secondary industries of manufacturing and construction, comprise the goods producing sector and account for about 25% of all jobs in the province and a significant percentage of the seasonal jobs (LeBreton, L'Italien, and Grignon 1998). In fact, 20% of all workers in New Brunswick are seasonally employed and most of them are men. A significant portion of these lives in the rural areas of the province (LeBreton 1999).

Both men and women take jobs as seasonal workers, although there are a higher proportion of men (63%) than women (37%). Statistics indicate that “a large proportion of seasonal jobs, 43%, were for 12 weeks or less in 1996” (LeBreton, L'Italien, and Grignon 1998, p. 8). Indeed, only a quarter of seasonal jobs lasted more than 26 weeks. The length of seasonal jobs, in combination with the generally lower hourly wages paid for seasonal work, has direct and serious consequences on the income levels of seasonal workers, many of whom live in rural areas. Many rural workers are unemployed for part of the year and there are few employment opportunities for women.

Labour market specialists point to a shift in New Brunswick over the past decade towards an economy based more on the tertiary sector and an emerging communications technology. In fact 73% of New Brunswickers are now employed in the tertiary sector in retail and wholesale, as well as health, social services and government. This shift has been accompanied by an increasing emphasis on the service sector and economic development in urban centres. However, rural areas have not benefitted to the same extent. Data show that the unemployment rates in New Brunswick tend to be below average in urban areas and higher than average in rural areas (LeBreton 1999). This is

reflected in the rural/urban migration and employment patterns for young people in the province.

Trends in urban/rural residency also show some differences with respect to gender. Although there are more women than men living in the province, Census data show that more men than women live in the rural areas. Of the total male population, significantly more (191,240) live in rural areas compared with the city (171,250). Women are concentrated slightly more in the urban centres. However, for both genders there is a similar pattern of migration to cities in the late teens and early twenties and back to rural areas during the childbearing and middle years, returning to urban centres later in life (Statistics Canada 1996). This pattern is significant since many studies indicate that wife abuse often commences or escalates during the childbearing years, the very time when families tend to migrate to rural areas.

Literacy is another concern in New Brunswick. In an exhaustive study of literacy skills in New Brunswick, it was discovered that 60% of New Brunswickers over the age of 16 years (approximately 300,000 people) do not meet the minimum desirable standard for literacy (Statistics Canada 1998). This compares to 45% of Canadians overall who do not meet minimum desirable literacy standards. Moreover, Census materials reveal that many New Brunswickers have dropped out of school, and a high proportion (42%) of the potential labour force (the employed, unemployed and people not in the labour force aged 15 to 65 years) do not have a degree, certificate or diploma (Statistics Canada 1996).

Inadequate literacy and numeracy skills can have devastating consequences on the ability of an individual to find employment, care for a family, shop, look after healthcare needs, or leave an abusive relationship. While not restricted to rural areas, the Report finds that low literacy is connected with a number of economic consequences that are

characteristic of many rural communities. For example, people with the lowest literacy level are seven times more likely to hold primary or industrial jobs, and work fewer hours per week and fewer weeks per year, than those with higher literacy skills. They are also five times more likely to be unemployed. Indeed, 75% of those at the lowest literacy level earn wages below NB's mean wage rate.

In light of this mix of factors relating to rural employment, incomes, education, and literacy, it is apparent that poverty is a reality for many rural families. Census data (Statistics Canada 1996) show the median income in New Brunswick was \$15,200. While urban dwellers received the greatest portion of their incomes (between 73% and 77%) from employment, those in the rural areas received a significant portion of their incomes from transfer payments (LeBreton 1999). Other differences relating to income disparities exist between the various regions of the province. The mostly rural counties of New Brunswick have median incomes well below average. This is consistent with the experience of the rural women we interviewed who spoke not only about their own suffering, but of the chronic stress experienced by families faced with unrelenting job losses and poverty.

Finally, a picture of New Brunswick would be incomplete without some attention to its linguistic makeup. New Brunswick is largely comprised of French and English speaking populations. Approximately 65% of the population (473,260 people) have English as a first language, while 33% have French as their mother tongue (239,730 people). The remainder of the population, 10,295, have some other language as their first language. This mixture of languages adds another dimension to the challenge of responding to family violence in rural areas.

Family Violence in a Rural Context

Over the past 20 years, issues of wife abuse and family violence have come to the foreground, both for researchers and policy makers. There now exists a voluminous body of research literature that provides different theoretical and empirical models for examining the nature and extent of family violence¹, and this information continues to grow. At both the federal and provincial levels, governments have established committees and policies that explicitly address issues of family violence prevention.

While researchers have documented that wife abuse cuts across all ethnic, socioeconomic and religious groups (DeKeserdy and Hinch 1991), scant attention has been paid to the situation and needs of abused women in rural communities (Canadian Farm Women's Network, 1995; Epprecht 2001; Jiwani 1998; Logan, Walker and Leukelfeld 2000; Van Hightower, Gorton and DeMoss 2000). The dearth of information about abused women in geographically isolated communities may be due, in part, to an urbocentric bias among social researchers and/or an assumption that few differences exist between the experiences and needs of abused women in rural and urban areas. There is also a tendency to idealize rural life and ignore the extent of social problems, including family violence, in rural communities (Martz and Sarauer 2000; Websdale 1998).

However, there is reason to believe that wife abuse is as prevalent in rural communities as in urban areas. Statistics Canada's *Violence Against Women Survey* (1993) found no significant differences between rural and urban areas in the incidences of

¹ In this paper, we are using the terms wife abuse and family violence interchangeably. While the term 'family violence' can imply that violence within the family is committed by both husbands and wives towards each other (see Straus et al. 1980), in much social science discourse the term family violence is understood as husbands abusing their wives.

wife assault. Saskatchewan researchers, Martz and Sarauer (2000), report that the women they interviewed believe that wife abuse is common in rural areas, although because of fear and isolation that rural women experience, there may be fewer reported cases. Earlier, McLeod (1980), in a groundbreaking report for the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, noted that wife abuse is not less of a problem in rural communities, but may be more hidden. Survey research in the United States also demonstrates that the prevalence of wife abuse in rural regions is similar to that of urban areas (Bachman and Saltzman 1995 cited in Websdale, 1998; Websdale and Johnson 1997).

There are, however, other compelling reasons to focus on family violence in rural communities. Rural communities, although not identical in their social structure and values, do share important cultural, social and physical characteristics that distinguish them from urban environments. Rural communities, for example, are more physically isolated; poverty rates and unemployment tend to be higher. Rural communities generally have fewer resources and services available. This means that access to health care, education, counselling, affordable housing and other social services may be minimal. Public transportation and licensed childcare is often inadequate or non-existent. Another dimension is the socio-cultural aspect. Researchers have found that traditional norms around marriage and the family are more prevalent in rural communities, as are patriarchal attitudes that devalue and objectify women (Gagne 1992; Jiwani 1998; Websdale 1998). Websdale uses the concept 'rural patriarchy' to refer to "a cluster of collective values, beliefs, and ideas that deem rural women to be subordinate to rural men" (1998, p. 93). Patriarchal attitudes are not absent from urban communities but rather co-exist with a wide array of other competing values. While rural communities

are not monolithic, researchers have found that they are generally more socially cohesive, have greater value consensus and have less tolerance of diversity.

We are not suggesting some sort of essentialist dimension to rural life, but rather argue that rural and farm communities² do share certain characteristics that make them different from urban environments. Taken together, these structural characteristics make it more difficult for abused women to “name” the abuse, report it, seek and get help or leave abusive relationships. Geographical remoteness means families are more isolated which may make it easier to hide abuse (Chalmers and Smith 1988). It also can mean that it takes police longer to respond to a call for assistance. Lack of public transportation is an impediment to women seeking help or wanting to leave the abusive home. Lack of affordable housing or employment prospects makes it more difficult for women to survive without the abusive partners’ wages. Patriarchal values and beliefs legitimate male social control over women; thus women who seek support in dealing with abuse may be perceived as violating community norms about appropriate gender roles. These obstacles can reinforce women’s fear and isolation and make them more vulnerable to abuse (Doherty and De Vink, 1995; Hornosty 1995).

That is to say, the forms of abuse - physical, emotional, sexual, economic - suffered by rural women may be similar to that experienced by abused women in urban areas; however, the community context in which the abuse occurs can be dramatically different. Our research findings, like that of other researchers (Jiwani 1998; Logan, Walker and Leukelfeld 2000; Martz and Sarauer 2000; Websdale 1998) suggest that understanding the social and cultural context in which abuse occurs is essential in order

²There is an important distinction to be made between farm and rural (non-farm) communities especially in the context of looking at wife abuse. While farm communities are, by definition, rural, there are unique aspects to farm life that need to be considered in examining the reality of abused farm women.

to both fully understand the subjective experiences of abused women as well as to design appropriate and effective programs for helping abused women. The abuse of women in their homes cannot be divorced from the broader social-cultural setting in which it occurs.

Methodology

The findings we present are based on interviews with over 50 abused farm and rural women and discussions in community focus groups in New Brunswick. The data gathered is in conjunction with research initiated in 1994 by the Family Violence on the Farm and in Rural Communities Research Team, one of the original five teams of the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research³. This multi-disciplinary team⁴, which included both academic and community researchers, had the following research objectives: a) to understand how rural women talked about their experiences of abuse; b) to understand how these women came to define such behaviour as no longer tolerable; c) to identify the social and cultural aspects of rural life which women felt make it especially difficult for them and other abused women to seek help or leave such relationships; and d) to identify remedies and resources for improving community responses and eliminating violence and abuse in rural regions⁵.

³The Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research is located in Fredericton, New Brunswick. It was one of five national Centres established in 1994 as part of the Federal government's Family Violence Initiative.

⁴The original team included an RCMP officer, a public health nurse, a farm woman, the executive-director of a public legal education service, a counselor and academics. Specific membership has fluctuated over the years. Original members included: Jennie Hornosty (Team Co-ordinator), Deborah Doherty, Pat Hayward, Kathy Long, Margaret McCallum, Floranne McLaughlin, Susan Nind, Sandra deVink.

⁵This research is still going on. In an earlier report (Family Violence on the Farm and in Rural Communities Research Team 1997), we explored some of the barriers victim's of wife abuse face in accessing support services, including transition houses, in a rural community. In the current phase we are looking at service providers' perceptions of and suggestions for addressing wife abuse in rural and farm areas.

One of our main goals was to understand how rural and farm women living with abuse made sense of their lives in the context of their rural environment. We wanted to capture women's experiences of and thoughts about abuse in their own words. We therefore used qualitative methodology, informed by feminist perspectives, and a commitment to action-orientated and collaborative strategies. Qualitative research methods are the most appropriate means of exploring people's views of their experiences and reality. Unlike quantitative studies that are concerned more with issues of frequency and distribution, qualitative research is rooted in the perspective of participants and their subjective meanings. Making sense of the data involves using inductive strategies that are sensitive to the social contexts in which behaviour occurs. In according authenticity to women's experiences in their everyday lives, our research is within a feminist tradition of giving voice to those who views have historically been marginalized.

Prior to beginning our main interviews, we had a number of open-ended discussions with several abused rural women who had left their abusive relationships⁶. These women assisted the research team by sharing their life stories and helping us better understand what types of questions we should be asking, how to ask them and what to be sensitive to. They made us aware of different socio-cultural barriers women faced when confronting abuse and the subtle ways in which language can hide the reality of abuse. They helped us develop a framework of issues to be explored in interviews and made suggestions for specific questions we should ask. Using a qualitative approach allowed us to modify our questions and issues as we gained different insights into the problem.

⁶Different team members had knowledge of abused women from rural communities and approached them, explaining the goals of our research team, and invited them to participate in the developmental phase of the research.

The participants, largely farm and rural women from central and northern New Brunswick, were recruited through advertisements in local newspapers, postings in public places, word of mouth and referral from service providers, and by direct and indirect contact by members of the research team. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews we conducted lasted between one and a half to five hours each. Given the linguistic composition of the province, we conducted interviews in both English and French. With the permission of the participants, most of the interviews were taped and later transcribed for analysis. In addition to the interviews, we held three community focus groups in Northumberland County; two were conducted in English and one in French.

The interviews began by explaining to the women that we were interested in their stories and their experiences. In the interviews, we asked background-type questions pertaining to their childhood experiences, the community in which they grew up, the length of time they had been in a violent relationship, the nature of abuse, the role of religion in their lives, the number of children etc. We asked them to tell us about their experiences of abuse in the family, how they defined wife abuse, and what factors they felt contributed to the perpetuation of and silencing of abuse. We probed for specific characteristics of rural and farm life they thought were most salient in keeping abuse hidden and made it difficult for women to seek help. We inquired about the specific factors that led to their decisions to leave abusive relationships. And, importantly, we asked for their suggestions about what would be most helpful to other farm and rural women in similar circumstances. We see this as a central component in our “action-oriented” research.

The transcribed interviews as well as the information gained from the focus groups were reviewed many times, looking for common themes, key phrases, concepts

and words⁷. Since we believe that knowing the social context in which abuse occurs is critical for an understanding of women's experiences, much of our analysis to date has focused on barriers women face in seeking help and leaving abusive relationships. By focusing on barriers, we are highlighting the ways in which geographical, economic, and socio-cultural factors amplify the controlling tactics abusive men use against their wives. While all abused women face tremendous difficulties in dealing with abusive relationships, women in rural communities encounter certain unique barriers and attitudinal obstacles that are less problematic in urban areas.

Some Findings and Suggestions for Addressing Wife Abuse in Rural and Farm Communities

In this section, we present some key findings in relation to possible actions, solutions and remedies for eradicating or addressing wife abuse in rural areas. We categorized these findings according to the following broad themes, most of which are well understood by policy makers and family violence researchers alike: the economic environment (employment, training, pensions, etc.), rural infrastructure (access to health, housing, justice and various social services and resources), socio-cultural factors, rural lifestyle, and geographic factors. In light of the commonalities of living in small communities with limited access to services, the experiences of rural and farm women were often very similar. Nevertheless, where appropriate we attempt to identify instances where the structure of farm life may pose unique challenges. As we indicate in our conclusion, our findings substantiate those who have conducted similar research in rural communities.

⁷ Co-authors Jennie Hornosty and Deborah Doherty are indebted to the work of the Family Violence on the Farm and in Rural Communities Research Team. However, much of the analysis and the material presented in this paper are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Economic Environment

Given the high rate of unemployment and the preponderance of seasonal

“I had no way to support myself and the children and no where to go. Most women here don’t have much education...there’s no jobs and welfare is barely enough to live on.”

Abused Woman

work in rural New Brunswick, it is not surprising that our study found that almost all of the rural women we interviewed tended to be financially dependant on their spouse. Financial dependency creates significant barriers for abused rural women. Many of the women we interviewed had never participated in the paid labour force; some were prohibited from doing so by their spouses. As a result, women often spoke of feeling desperate and trapped. As one women explained, “I had no way to support myself and the children and nowhere to go.”

The rural women we interviewed commented on the lack of access to jobs, job training and money. Women who work in short duration seasonal jobs, like fish processing, cannot afford to miss time and risk losing their positions. It is not uncommon for rural women experiencing abuse to decide against going to a transition house for safety if they are involved in seasonal work for fear of being fired. Similarly, farm women who are in the midst of calving or harvest time are more likely to overlook their own safety. Although such critical times are often associated with higher levels of stress and abuse, farm women are reluctant to jeopardize the farm’s economic viability. Financial dependency is compounded for farm women who often do not receive a wage for their work and are unable to save any money of their own. Additionally, farm women may have no employment insurance, no pension, and therefore no economic security if they do leave the farm.

Leaving an abusive relationship usually means turning to welfare. Since affordable housing is scarce in rural areas, leaving might involve moving to an urban area to live in low-income housing. This is anathema to many rural women. Since the opportunities to find a job are limited, many rural women chose to stay in an abusive relationship especially while their children are young. Although we have no data that would suggest a correlation between abuse and the tendency for more women than men to migrate to urban areas after the childbearing years, this may indeed be one factor to consider.

Suggested Solutions:

Generate Income Opportunities. Part of the solution to empowering rural women who wish to leave abusive relationships lies in generating opportunities for jobs, training and income for women in rural areas. Given the higher than average unemployment rates in rural areas, it is important that future employment strategies create income generating opportunities for rural women while recognizing the particular vulnerability of abused women

Establish homemakers' pensions. Farm women who have stayed in an abusive relationship for the sake of children suggest that access to a homemaker pension may provide an incentive to leave the abuse. Elderly rural women in our study who continued to stay in abusive relationships even after the children were grown did so largely because of the lack of income opportunities. Those who did leave generally saw a significant decline in their standard of living.

Educate Rural Employers and Promote Supportive Workplace Policies and Practices. Rural employers should be encouraged to bring in specialists or train their own staff to conduct family violence workplace awareness sessions for all employees and to develop policies and practices that recognize and support women who are being abused in their intimate relationships. Given the seasonal nature of rural employment, family violence awareness training, along with the promotion of supportive policies and practices, should be provided to fish processing plants, silviculture operations, agri-food producers and so on.

Rural Infrastructure (Access to Services and Resources)

Like other studies in British Columbia (Jiwani 1998) and Ontario (Epprecht 2001), we found that rural women have limited access to social services including health

“We used to have a health centre, but it closed. All the services are in [urban area] so you don’t bother getting help. That’s okay for me but I wish I could send my son for counseling.”

Abused Woman

care, mental health services, justice and law enforcement services, affordable housing,

places of shelter, and so on. Nor do they have access to readily available information to help them learn about their options or their rights. Given the scope of this problem, we could easily have focused the entire paper on reviewing needed services; however, we will limit our discussion to a few key services that are inadequately addressing the needs of rural women dealing with abusive relationships.

For example, most of the rural women we interviewed who had called the police spoke of long frightening response times. The fact that so many people in the country have scanners also means that it is likely that somebody will have informed neighbours, in-laws and others of the situation. Victims find this particularly humiliating. Moreover, in one geographic area of our study, we discovered that the women living the greatest distance from town had experienced the most severe injuries, yet most reported that in their dealings with the police they had not been directed to crisis services or helping agencies (Family Violence on the Farm and in Rural Communities Research Team 1997). On the other hand, the women who had been referred to a crisis service or taken to a transition house reported a high level of satisfaction with the police.

Women’s experiences dealing with criminal courts, as well as family law matters, particularly legal aid, also elicited considerable frustration. These matters cannot be resolved during a 30-day stay in a transition house and most criminal and family law

matters can only be handled from urban centres. Women found that dealing with the criminal justice system or the family law courts was overwhelming and frightening. Those who did, experienced many unexplained delays, unnecessary trips to town because of court adjournments and confusion. Most of the women had expected the criminal justice system to help set things right by ending the abuse. They did not want to see their spouse fined or jailed. As a result, many of the women we spoke with ended up feeling re-victimization in their dealings with the courts.

Several of the woman poignantly described the ways that abuse affected their mental and physical well-being, such as low self esteem, anger, depression, suicidal thoughts, fantasizing, substance abuse, and unfortunately, even abuse or neglect of their own children. Trauma during pregnancy seemed to be a common theme. Yet in rural areas there are few medical and mental health services available locally. Many of the women who sought treatment spoke of having their symptoms treated but not the underlying cause. Many women felt that their problems were medicated away by doctors or that they were inappropriately referred for marriage counselling after describing abusive situations. As well, women's drug and alcohol addictions were often seen as the problem rather than a response to abuse.

Although some women spoke of attempting to discuss the abuse with a doctor, one woman explained, "I never dreamed of telling my doctor, I could tell he didn't care." The lack of confidence in health care providers is clearly one aspect of the problem that needs to be addressed. However the overall inaccessibility of mental health and family health care in rural areas is disturbing given that victims of abuse are more likely to require health care services than non-victimized women (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, and Perrin 1997, p. 217).

Farm work may also impact on women's health. It can be physically demanding and rural women may be responsible for heavy chores around the farm as well as housework and looking after the needs of children. Many farm women spoke of fatigue and getting very little sleep, which was greatly exacerbated by abuse. As a result, they had little energy and time to socialize with friends and family, or to seek help. Moreover, the nature of farm work may leave abused women too tired to care about themselves and this can make them vulnerable to farm accidents.

Despite the mounting evidence (Schornstein 1997) that health care providers are particularly well positioned to play a key role in wife abuse intervention, access to health related services continues to dwindle in rural areas, whether it be pre- or post-natal visits, family clinics or emergency services. Yet with appropriate training, universal screening, increased sensitivity and enhanced measures to ensure privacy, many of the women we interviewed felt that health care providers could be particularly effective in helping abused rural women.

Lack of services also affects the youngest of victims. Many of the rural women we interviewed stayed in the abusive relationship to provide their children with the security of growing up in the country. However, most eventually came to recognize the harmful effects of the violence on their children, either directly or through witnessing it. Those who sought counselling or mental health services for their children soon found that very little help was available. Moreover, many of the women were terrified of seeking help in urban areas for fear that child protection workers would remove their children from their care.

Suggested Solutions:

Establish outreach services or centres and safe houses that meet the needs of rural women. Rural and farm women spoke of the need to have non-threatening,

local places where they could find information, assistance, advice and support. For example, since physical violence often escalates during pregnancy and at the birth of a child, women suggested that well trained public health nurses could travel to rural outreach centres for non-threatening activities such parenting classes and well-baby clinics. At the same time, they could promote the safety and security of abused women and their children. Pre-natal and post-natal home visits to new mothers in rural areas should be considered.

Co-ordinate services and improve communication among existing service providers, including the police. Rural women should not have to make several long trips to the city to apply for particular services, benefits, housing, legal aid, mental health or counselling services, or welfare. The coordination of services for abused women is an essential support for all women. However, coordination takes on an added degree of urgency for rural and farm women. When services cannot be made available locally, the women we interviewed suggested that the community must find ways to provide free transportation for women from rural areas who must travel to a distant transition home or city for help.

Educate and sensitize key service providers about family violence including health care providers, mental health workers, and police. It is often a struggle for rural women to find a service provider with whom they feel safe to disclose the abuse. When she does initiate contact, being rebuffed, referred to marriage counselling, or receiving no information about non-criminal remedies and assistance is unacceptable. There must be extensive and on-going family violence awareness training for the key service providers who work or come into contact with victims of abuse. This should include enhanced training for front-line police/RCMP officers, healthcare providers, and others. It should also include model policies, universal screening questions and guidelines for ensuring confidentiality.

Disseminate information about abuse and the legal rights of abused women. Accurate information about family violence, legal rights, options and available services must be readily available both to abused women and to all service providers. We should not expect rural women to find out about abuse only if they travel to the city and happen to find a pamphlet at a government office. Many rural women do not realize they have legal rights, or they may not know what those rights are. Often their husbands or boyfriends have misinformed them about their rights, especially with regard to the issues of child custody and support. It is important that a variety of sources, including police, healthcare providers and others, be able to share accurate information concerning her rights as a mother, a spouse and as a survivor of abuse. All agencies where a woman might turn should be able to explain the remedies and services that exist to help her.

Socio-cultural Factors

In focus groups conducted in rural communities and in the interviews with rural women

“For many years when he hurt me I never thought of it as abuse. It was only after he took a baseball bat to me and my son that I thought of it as abuse.”

Abused Woman

themselves, we discovered that family violence is usually thought to mean extreme physical violence. The hurt that women feel in their personal lives, ranging from emotional abuse to financial control, is seldom "named" even though it may be well known by neighbours and friends. In fact, the entire community may participate in blaming and using minimizing language and responses. This can act to normalize abusive behaviour and bolster norms about the private nature of family life. If hurtful and harmful behaviours are not labelled as abuse, women do not recognize themselves when they hear about "wife abuse or family violence". One woman told us, “My friends don’t talk about it [abuse]. They just brush it [an abusive experience] away – all women go through that...my friends don’t believe in it [abuse]”. Rural men and women who grow up witnessing or experiencing abuse in their own homes, come to feel that this is normal since others in the community seem to minimize or condone it.

Like abused women everywhere, rural women may experience years of controlling tactics, such as threats of suicide, remorse, promises and intimidation which keep them believing that they should stay. However, in a rural or farm context these threats and controlling tactics, whether implicit or explicit, take on a particular dimension. For example, they often relate to harming pets or farm animals or even the woman herself. This can be particularly menacing in a rural context since guns are readily available. Most farmers and many rural households own at least one gun for hunting or pest control. This fact, combined with the geographic isolation of farm and

rural women, intensifies women's fear of reprisal if they should choose to leave or to tell someone about the abuse.

In a farm context, emotional abuse often takes the form of blaming the

“My husband blames me for everything that goes wrong on the farm...even bad weather. He uses it as an excuse to put me down or even hit me. Everyone feels sorry for him. I can't talk about it to my friends...they just don't want to hear it.”

Abused Woman

woman for everything that goes wrong on the farm - from the machinery breaking, a failed crop, or the animals getting sick. Many women felt that the abuser used these unfortunate occurrences, such as droughts or failed crops, as a justification for other abuses. Others in the community would sympathize with the abuser as well. Another common form of emotional abuse entailed telling the woman that the farm would go bankrupt if she ever left, and that everyone would blame her. Since farm women are dedicated to the survival of their farms and the preservation of the animals, many stay to protect what they cherish.

The familiarity of people in small communities through family, marriage and friendship can lead to a feeling that “everyone knows everyone else's business”. However, rural communities tend to interweave a strong ethic of self-sufficiency with a belief that family issues are private matters. This makes it particularly difficult for abused women to ask for help even when they know that others are aware of the abuse. The belief that family matters should remain private also makes it difficult for others to intervene in cases of abuse. We learned that friends, family and neighbours who are aware of abuse in the rural woman's life, often do not want to hear about, nor do they wish to speak out about it.

Many of the women interviewed spoke about the lack of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality, living in a rural community. This is not to be confused with the strong

sense of independence and autonomy which country people value and which makes people reluctant to interfere in another's private family matters. Concerns about confidentiality and anonymity focussed more on access to social and medical services. Rural women may not trust service providers or their staff to keep their "secret".

Women in large urban centres may benefit from anonymity. However, abused women living in the country are afraid that as soon as they seek medical care or talk to the police, everybody would know about it and blame them. The rural women we interviewed spoke of fears that an appropriate level of confidentiality would not be maintained if they sought local services such as mental health counselling, medical treatment, marriage counselling and so on. This fear is complicated by the fact that rural service providers and professionals may be friends with the abuser or his family. This can also promote a reluctance to confide for fear the service provider will not take the complaint seriously. This familiarity in turn may deter professionals and others in the community from offering help. This greatly exacerbates the geographic isolation that farm and rural women tend to experience.

Suggested Solutions:

Encourage her to think about personal safety issues. If she is thinking about leaving the abusive relationship, encourage her to think about the ways in which she can provide for her safety and the safety of her children. She needs to know that an abusive man often looks for ways to continue to contact and harass the woman after she leaves. Suggest ways, both practical and legal, that she can address safety issues. In light of the prevalence of guns in farm and rural households, rural women need to be advised of how to take precautions. Does she know where the guns are stored and where he keeps the ammunition and the keys to the gun cabinets? She should be encouraged to plan an escape route that takes into account, the location of guns in the home.

Adopt better measures to assure privacy so women feel safe to disclose abuse. Service providers and professionals must address rural women's lack of trust and develop policies and practices to ensure privacy and confidentiality. They can do so in a variety of ways.

- Ask universal screening questions about abuse in private areas out of earshot

of others.

- Exclude the woman's partner from the conversation in a non-threatening way.
- Implement "I believe" policies with staff.
- Train staff on how to promote confidentiality in a rural context.

Change the prevailing ethos that 'private' matters are not of public concern.

The issue of abuse must be discussed openly and publicly. Rural communities must find opportunities to reflect on issues of family violence and show support for victims while holding perpetrators accountable.

Explain effects of witnessing family violence on children. There should be more public education about the adverse effects on children of witnessing abuse and living with family violence. Living in rural areas often means that there are few opportunities for children to access special services or to participate in extracurricular activities that might offer alternate ways to build self-esteem or provide support. Communities must work hard to offer inclusive, inexpensive programming, recreation and other services for children.

Increase public education about the nature of abuse and its impact. All women in abusive relationships need to be told about the various forms that violence and abuse may take and that none are acceptable. However, in naming the negative harmful behaviours, we must include examples that relate to rural and farm life. Women must hear that the abuse is not their fault. This message must be pervasive and reinforced in public awareness campaigns in which local communities are encouraged to take ownership. Family, friends, clergy, neighbours and others in the community should be encouraged to listen to the voices of abused women and let them know that they are believed, supported and understood.

Use a variety of appropriate formats for reaching rural and farm women.

Pamphlets distributed in rural areas must be distributed at appropriate times and places. For example, a blitz of information in a farming community should not happen at harvest time and information in certain rural communities might coincide with the exodus of men working in the woods. Family violence information must be put into places throughout rural areas where women will be able to access it safely. Plain language tips could be put into mail-outs with other materials or in circulars in local papers. It could come home in children's backpacks from the school or it could be put in private washrooms in community halls, malls and churches. Information about abuse should also be targeted at men and disseminated in locations frequented by them such as gyms, bars, pool halls, etc. In light of the low literacy levels in many communities, women suggested putting messages about abuse awareness on the radio and as commercials during soap operas.

Rural Lifestyles

Rural communities tend to promote a way of life that many rural people experience

“In the country, religious values are pretty strong. Growing up, everyone told me that it was a wife’s duty to take care of her husband and children and make the marriage work – no matter what.”

Abused Woman

collectively, as well as individually. Under normal circumstances, this is highly valued aspect of rural life. Farm and rural women spoke to us of the benefits of living in the country with helpful neighbours, low crime rates and a peaceful existence where close-knit communities tend to have strong shared attitudes and cultural norms. For many rural women, the church also plays a key role in their lives. However, these same shared norms and values, whether community or religious oriented, tend to reflect a patriarchal view that strongly reinforces traditional gender roles and expectations that women are subservient to men.

These norms are reinforced in the division of labour, traditions and attitudes relating to women as wives and homemakers. These expectations are also reinforced by religious beliefs that promote the duty of a wife to maintain harmony in the family and to preserve the family at all costs. Leaving an abusive situation can mean leaving one’s family and faith community as well. This is a far greater disruption to one’s life than to leave an abusive relationship in an urban area and the situation is exacerbated on the farm since there is often no separation between home and work. Farming is more than an economic livelihood; it is a total and unique way of life where survival is often dependent on the cooperation and effort of women. To leave may doom the farm to failure and this fact is not lost on abusers who frequently use it in their arsenal of emotional abuse and blaming tactics. Service providers who do not understand and address the unique context

of rural life, can impede disclosure and inhibit rural women from attending to their personal safety and security.

As one woman explained, “Using services, like the transition house, is difficult not only because it is far away, but they don’t really understand farm women. The staff are kind and sympathetic, but they don’t seem to know what it means to come from a rural home. You almost feel ashamed for placing so much value on it.” In other words, not only are the services inaccessible, the failure of service providers to recognize the unique context in which the abuse occurs creates additional barriers. As a result, we found that interaction between abused farm and rural women, and the service providers they meet sometimes results in heightened frustration and re-victimization. Farm women spoke to us of feeling revictimized by service providers or by urban women who made them feel guilty for not acting on their rights because of their loyalty or attachment to the farm or farm animals and pets.

Suggested Solutions:

Demonstrate sensitivity. Work places, social service offices, faith communities, hospitals, doctors' offices and others demonstrate that they understand the unique barriers faced by rural and farm women. We must create supportive and safe environments for rural women before we can expect them to promote disclosure.

Validate her rural experiences and the nature of her suffering. Women interviewed spoke of the importance of telling survivors that they are not to blame. It is essential that an abused woman hear the positive message that her suffering is real, and that she did not cause it. We must also validate the victim’s attachment to her rural or farming lifestyle, while at the same time validating her suffering. The two are not mutually exclusive. Just as the abuser uses rural situations to create a sense of blame, service providers should use examples from rural life to talk about abusive situations.

Address concerns about pets and farm animals. Not only must service providers learn not to minimize attachments to pets and farm animals, communities must find ways to help alleviate women’s concerns. This might involve setting up “safe houses” where women seeking shelter can leave their animals for care until they can make permanent arrangements. Other suggestions

were to involve the SPCA in rural outreach programs to shelter the pets of victims of abuse.

Work with local women and farm organizations. The women we interviewed emphasized the importance of listening to the voices of rural and farm women, including those who had experienced family violence. In order to be effective, programs that are being designed to help rural and farm women must have the input of rural and farm women, rural women's organizations and agencies and so on. Local women's groups and farm women's organizations must be involved in identifying ways to help abused women.

Geographic Isolation

Rural women experiencing abuse are not only emotionally

Although we had a car, my husband made me ask permission to use it and rarely said yes. I was isolated from my family and friends and we only got to town a few times a year.”

Abused Woman

isolated from family and friends, but physically isolated as well. A number of women told us how isolated and alone they felt. Some did not have phones. The nearest neighbour can be a couple of miles away. Often there is little opportunity to socialize with other women because of the distances between homes and lack of access to transportation. The geographic distance between farms means that abuse on farms is easier to hide. There are no neighbours nearby to see or hear what is going on. In a crisis, it may take the RCMP up to an hour to respond.

The absence of public transportation in rural communities makes it difficult if not impossible for abused women to get help. Many women had no means of transportation since their husband's would either be off with the car or would not give them access. Some women told us they “did not even have a driver's license and lived 15 kilometres from the nearest town.” The lack of transportation means, in the words of one woman, “You don't have the freedom to just go.”

The small population base spread out over a vast geographic area makes public transportation costly and impractical. However, some public means for women to access help must be put in place to assist abused women in geographically remote areas.

Suggested Solutions:

Address lack of transportation. Lack of adequate transportation is such a pervasive part of rural life that all service providers should consider how to assist abused rural women who must travel to access services. This might include setting up a program that provides free taxi service or volunteer rides.

Establish a toll-free crisis hot line that is widely advertised. Many of the women interviewed told us that they could not phone the nearest transition house for advice because it would show up on their telephone bill as a long distance call. This would create suspicion and perhaps put them in danger. A toll-free number that is widely advertised and known would bridge that gap. This would also assist rural women to seek information and advice while maintaining a sense of anonymity and privacy. It would help to overcome some of the obstacles created by inadequate transportation.

CONCLUSION

Although more focus is being given to woman abuse in rural and farm communities, research in the area remains limited. Similar to other studies (Biesenthal et al. 2000; Jiwani 1998; Logan, Walker and Leukelfeld 2000; Martz and Sarauer 2000), our research highlights the importance of looking at the social and culture context of abuse and understanding community values and norms. An important aspect of our research is that we gave primacy to the voices of abused rural and farm women. As researchers, we have gained new insight into the systemic barriers encountered by abused rural and farm women in attempting to disclose their situations or leave the abuse.

Meeting the needs of rural women means that we must look at their lives and options through their eyes. Their experiences and insights must be the starting point of developing new programmes and policies. As we were so frequently reminded, any strategies and solutions for addressing family violence in rural communities must be

rooted in the rural and farm cultures of abused women. By providing a vehicle for the voices of rural survivors of abuse, our research makes an important contribution to the understanding of these cultures.

Governments recognize that rural communities face special challenges. As part of the federal government's Canadian Rural Partnership Initiative, a national workshop was held to discuss issues of importance to Canadians living in rural communities (Rural Secretariat 1998). Ten key issues were identified including economic diversification, lack of access to financial resources, opportunities for rural youth, access to rural health care and access to rural education. Participants at the workshop indicated that there was a lack of awareness, understanding and sensitivity to rural issues on the part of governments and that frequently government policies and programmes were not adapted to rural realities (Rural Secretariat 1998, p.19).

Similarly, our research points to the need to recognize rural uniqueness in terms of providing programmes and services for abused women in rural and farm communities. The issues identified at the national rural workshop noted above are clearly important. Many of the recommendations made could potentially help abused women. However, we caution that a gender neutral approach which fails to consider how policies impact differently on woman and men can make interventions ineffective for abused women.

It is also important to recognize how rural families confront many of the challenges to sustaining healthy, vibrant communities. A shared sense of tradition and common values often helps them to deal with such challenges collectively, whether it be in demanding rural services, addressing rural poverty, or improving transportation. However, our findings indicate that many of these same shared characteristics and values can make it more difficult for women to report abuse, seek help or leave abusive

relationships. As noted earlier, the lack of anonymity and confidentiality in rural areas, along with the centrality of farm life for farm women, and the norms around privacy in family matters, also tend to mitigate against naming abuse and foster strong patriarchal values and sex-role stereotyping.

Like Epprecht (2001) and Jiwani (1998), we found that there is reluctance in many rural communities to admit that wife abuse is a serious problem. In addition, the individuals we interviewed suggested that there is a high degree of tolerance for abusive behaviours. In her study of Appalachian women, Gagne (1992) concluded that without a cultural acceptance of men's authority over women, violence would not be as effective a means of social control. As a result, we would stress the importance of promoting a strong countervailing ethos against abusive behaviours, both individually and at a societal level. This is a key component to addressing wife abuse in rural communities.

This does not mean that new services or public awareness programs cannot be built on the strengths of rural communities and lifestyles. Indeed, it is important to recognize women's contribution and commitment to the family and the farm. At the same time, we must encourage communities to speak out against abuse and to end the blame and stigma that is so often directed at rural women leaving abusive relationships. Values that dictate women's responsibility for "keeping the family together at all costs" must be counterbalanced by the value of encouraging women to protect themselves and their children from harm.

In this paper, we explored many findings related to the barriers experienced by abused farm and rural women. We discovered that a variety of social and cultural factors impact on abused women's access to services and resources, while economic conditions in rural areas limit options for becoming financially independent. As the women we

interviewed noted, the misunderstandings that arise among service providers in relation to farm and rural life, and the lack of access to programmes and services to help abused rural women, can lead to feelings of frustration and revictimization. This paper offers a number of suggested solutions that are based upon the experiences and needs of the women who participated in our study. Solutions ranged from initiating strategies to eliminate poverty and create employment opportunities for women in rural areas, to increasing sensitivity of service providers and employers, to establishing family violence toll-free numbers and places of safety for farm animals. These solutions are not exhaustive; rather, they are intended to act as springboard for addressing the unique and diverse needs of abused rural women, both at the individual level and systemically.

This is clearly a time of uncertainty and transformation in rural communities. During such periods of rapid change, rural communities tend to be particularly vulnerable. Globalization, out-migration of youth, a deteriorating infrastructure, a decline in resources and services, are some factors that create added stress for rural families. During such crises, it is likely that incidences of wife abuse will increase. However, it is also at such times that the opportunities exist for communities and government to respond in a more positive fashion to the needs of abused rural women. For as Korten (1994) noted, “Functioning, caring families and households are the foundation of functioning, caring communities, which in turn are the foundation of functioning, caring societies.” Federal and provincial government plans for economic diversification, as well as the delivery of health care, education, justice and other services, must be designed and evaluated with an eye to assessing their impact on abused rural and farm women. Unless family violence is addressed, rural communities will continue to be a very isolating and fearful place for many women.

Ending violence against women in rural and farm communities requires a societal solution. Communities must learn to name unacceptable behaviours and speak out against all forms of abuse. However, systemic changes are also essential to truly address the problem. Governments must play a key role by ensuring that initiatives to promote overall rural development include gender analysis, with particular attention being paid to the special needs of abused rural and farm women.

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