



Literature Review: Executive Summary

Rural Women Advocating for Rape Culture Change (Status of Women Canada)

For Women's Sexual Assault Support Centre of Renfrew County (WSAC)

May 2018

Completed by Nicole Pietsch

Introduction: About the *Rural Women Advocating for Rape Culture Change* Project

As survivor advocates, Women's Sexual Assault Centre of Renfrew County (WSAC) is aware of the ways in which sexual violence differentially impacts women and girls.

While all survivors of violence face barriers to getting the support and validation towards healing they need, rural survivors of sexual violence face an array of concerns that urban survivors do not. Sexual violence is easily hidden in vast communities where women are isolated from loved ones and one another. Sexual violence carries particular stigma, and rural women are seen as violating community norms by their peers or families if they disclose their experiences¹. Conservative norms are prevalent in rural areas, as are patriarchal attitudes that contribute to victim-blaming. Moreover, services meant to support survivors (i.e. police reporting, courts, counselling services), may be fewer and farther away from rural households in these geographic regions. Indeed, a local needs assessment conducted in Renfrew County in 2015 shows that respondents who self-identified as survivors of sexual violence agreed that their capacity to access traditional recovery strategies, such as counselling services and formal reporting², was limited³.

Gender-based, including sexualized violence, holds high stakes for rural women -- and functions to isolate and silence survivors in unique ways. Recent femicides in Renfrew in 2015 speak to some of these rural realities.

In response, the *Rural Women Advocating for Rape Culture Change* Project, WSAC will identify and address safety issues, the realities of isolation, and attitudes that impact upon rural survivors' ability to effectively engage with recovery supports. Despite many documented dire outcomes for survivors of sexual violence, research has also identified factors that influence the meaning of sexual violence and its consequences for survivors. WSAC's project aims to intentionally address barriers which impinge upon rural survivors' ability to engage support.

The Project produced this literature review as a deliverable which will guide its work. The review specifically aims to identify:

1. Safety issues for women survivors of violence, including safety concerns incurred by speaking out about violence, in a rural context;
2. Realities of isolation for women survivors of violence in a rural context; and
3. Attitudes and stigma specifically connected to rural realities and culture impacting women survivors of sexual violence.

Unlike other work on sexual violence and its implications on gender equality, this work will focus on this specificity of sexual and gender-based violence occurring in rural spaces, and its implications on rurally-situated women.

This literature review will be shared with the Project's Survivor Community Groups in Renfrew County.

¹ Serving Victims of Violence in Rural Communities, Victim/Witness Assistance Program. 2010, 2.

² Lalonde, J. 2015. Working Together for a Stronger Renfrew County: Needs Assessment Report: 2.

³ Ibid, 2-3.

Methodology: What Literature did we Review?

Literature was gathered by Project consultant-writer Nicole Pietsch, in consultation with *Rural Women Advocating for Rape Culture Change* Project staffs.

We conducted searches for relevant publications through:

- Organizations that offer frontline service provision to rural populations of survivors of gender-based violence in Canada, the United States and Australia; and have conducted evaluative or informational research on the needs of rural survivors, based on this service provision;
- Networks or collaboratives that offer frontline service provision to rural populations of survivors of gender-based violence in Canada, the United States and Australia; and have conducted evaluative or informational research on the needs of rural survivors, based on this service provision;
- Community research created by sexual assault centres in Ontario
- The Project team also undertook a search in multiple academic databases, using the key words: *rural + sexual violence survivor; rural + sexual assault/sexual assault services; rural + criminal justice; rural + gender-based violence; rural + violence against women; rural + social services.*

Findings from these sources are organized under the following sections:

- I. *Safety issues for women survivors of violence*, including safety concerns incurred by speaking out about violence/disclosing violence, in a rural context;
- II. *Realities of isolation* for women survivors of violence in a rural context; and
- III. *Attitudes and stigma specifically connected to rural realities* and culture impacting women survivors of sexual violence.

Findings

I. *Safety issues for women survivors of violence, including safety concerns incurred by speaking out about or disclosing violence, in a rural context*

It is well-known that safety issues remain a salient concern for women survivors of violence in Ontario overall. Literature addressing rural survivors of violence, however, specifically identify that rural-situated women experience *different or additional* safety issues, as well as *exacerbated/more severe* safety concerns, given their rural context:

“women living with violence and abuse -- in urban or rural areas -- often experience and internalise violence and its effects in similar ways. There are differences, however, in the external circumstances of women living in rural areas (and small towns) which can affect their ability to find safety”⁴.

In addition, the authors share, “historically, responses to the issue of woman abuse have been based primarily on the experiences of urban residents”⁵. Overall, much of the literature refers to the practical concerns present in rural contexts that have a direct impact on women’s safety. In this review, the practical concerns that we identified as occurring throughout much or all of the literature are as follows:

- Survivor confidentiality
- Material/practical contexts of rural geography
- The threat of lethal violence

We have been conscientious to consider sexual violence specifically in each section.

Survivor confidentiality

While confidentiality is important to all survivors of violence, the rural environment creates additional challenges that are particular to small communities, close-knit communities or lower-population regions.

In an Australian publication’s research process with rural survivors of violence and service providers, the authors state that the problem of maintaining confidentiality was “the primary barrier to disclosure by every service...surveyed”⁶. Authors describe rural communities as different than urban regions for sexual assault survivors for “having high levels of ‘acquaintance density’, meaning that most people have some level of familiarity with most other people in the community”, or are connected to each other in some formal or informal way⁷.

⁴ Biesenthal, Lorri and Lynne Dee Sproule, Mary Nelder, Susan Golton, Donna Mann, Denise Podovinnikoff, Inge Roosendaal, Shellie Warman and Donna Lunn, In cooperation with Community Abuse Programs of Rural Ontario. *The Ontario Rural Woman Abuse Study (ORWAS) FINAL REPORT*: Community Abuse Program of Rural Ontario. July 2000: 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Neame, A. and Melanie Heenan for Australian Government – Australian Institute of Family Studies. ACSSA Briefing No. 3 — June 2004. Responding to Sexual Assault in Rural Communities. Online: <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/responding-sexual-assault-rural-communities/export>

⁷ Ibid.

At the same time, sexual assaults in rural areas are socially-constructed as “mostly hidden crimes, hidden both intentionally and unintentionally by characteristics of a close-knit culture or an isolated lifestyle”⁸. In this, reporting sexual violence formally – or simply disclosing it to friends and family members informally – counters an implied cultural tenet. This, in turn, can create additional safety concerns for those who report sexual assault, and may be perceived as anomalous, contrary to or even antagonistic to a rural ethic of community.

Survivor concerns about confidentiality and privacy had a number of impacts on survivors and their safety: for example, *The Ontario Rural Woman Abuse Study (ORWAS) Final Report* identified that anxiety about confidentiality affected survivors’ “decision whether or not to confide in professionals”⁹. The *Serving Victims of Violence in Rural Communities: Challenges and Best Practices*, written in reflection of the experiences of Victim/Witness Assistance Program in Eastern Ontario agrees, stating that confidentiality is both “key to victim’s safety and their willingness to discuss safety concerns” with others¹⁰.

Accordingly, in Lalonde’s 2015 *Working Together for a Stronger Renfrew County: Needs Assessment Report*, 30% of sexual violence survivors surveyed identified that they did not access support because they were worried about confidentiality and privacy¹¹.

The threat of lethal violence

Rural homes – unlike urban homes -- are often homes that contain firearms and other weapons. One report we reviewed on women and domestic violence found that women in that rural Ontario community reported “the use of or threat with a weapon at *more than twice the national rate* as reported in the Stats Canada Family Violence Survey”¹².

In alignment with this, firearms have been shown to be a significant and consistent factor that increases the risk of lethality to women living with or leaving domestic violence situations¹³. The link between domestic violence lethality and firearms is consistent. Between 2003 and 2007, the Domestic Violence Death Review Committee found that “access to or possession of firearms” was present in 42% of domestic homicides (female partners killed by current or former partners); in later years, this pattern continues, with it was present in 47% of domestic homicides in 2007 and later¹⁴.

In multiple sources in this literature review, rural women identified fear for their physical safety and their lives, often specifically connecting this fear to the close proximity of legal weapons: the *Reaching Out – The Experiences of Abused Women in Grey Bruce* found that 51% of women surveyed in that rural locality reported they feared for their life, as compared with 34% in the Stats Canada survey¹⁵. In a study conducted in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, 66%

⁸ Lewis, S. PhD. 2003. *Unspoken Crimes: Sexual Assault in Rural America*. For National Sexual Violence Resource Center (A Project of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape): 3.

⁹ Biesenthal, Lorri and Lynne Dee Sproule, Mary Nelder, Susan Golton, Donna Mann, Denise Podovinnikoff, Inge Roosendaal, Shellie Warman and Donna Lunn, In cooperation with Community Abuse Programs of Rural Ontario. *The Ontario Rural Woman Abuse Study (ORWAS) FINAL REPORT: Community Abuse Program of Rural Ontario*. July 2000: 16.

¹⁰ Kasdorff, Deborah and Barbara Erb. “Serving Victims of Violence in Rural Communities: Challenges and Best Practices”. Victim/Witness Assistance Program, East Region, January 2010: 17.

¹¹ Lalonde, J. 2015. *Working Together for a Stronger Renfrew County: Needs Assessment Report*: 3.

¹² Kasdorff, Deborah and Barbara Erb. “Serving Victims of Violence in Rural Communities: Challenges and Best Practices”. Victim/Witness Assistance Program, East Region, January 2010:13

¹³ Domestic Violence Death Review Committee. Office of the Chief Coroner, Province of Ontario, 2007, p. 10

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Kasdorff, Deborah and Barbara Erb. “Serving Victims of Violence in Rural Communities: Challenges and Best Practices”. Victim/Witness Assistance Program, East Region, January 2010:13

of abused women who lived in households containing guns said that the guns made them more fearful for their safety and well-being. In this same group of women, 70% said that the guns had an effect on their decision to tell others about the abuse¹⁶.

DeKeseredy and Joseph's research on sexual violence occurring in the context of rural women who left abusive partners identifies a specific concern about firearms, and its use to intimidate partners: "45% [of offenders of post-separation sexual violence] owned weapons. Some perpetrators threatened to kill their partners when they discovered that they wanted to leave them", in addition to perpetrating post-separation sexual assault upon them¹⁷.

Domestic violence always carries with it the risk of lethal violence to the victim. Sexual violence, as it occurs in domestic violence situations, also carries this risk. Some North American research¹⁸ demonstrates that compared to survivors of non-partner sexual violence, survivors of partner-perpetrated sexual violence experience significant safety issues. These include:

- longer-lasting trauma and higher levels of physical injury
- higher incidences of multiple sexual assaults
- financial dependency on the perpetrator
- safety issues
- women who experience both sexual and physical violence by an intimate partner are also more likely to be deliberately exposed to sexually transmitted infection, more likely to be forced into pregnancy, and more likely to be killed.

Material/practical contexts of rural geography

All Canadian publications we reviewed identified rural geography and its related, unique contexts as creating additional safety concerns for women experiencing violence. Kasdorff and Erb's "Serving Victims of Violence in Rural Communities: Challenges and Best Practices", for example, posit: "Imagine a home where [in addition to experiencing sexual violence, domestic violence or both]:

- You don't have a phone
- You have to ask for permission to use the car
- You live 5 kilometres from your nearest neighbour
- You can't leave home for more than half a day because the farm animals have to be fed...
- Your family have stopped coming to see you because they don't like the way your partner treats you...

Abusers may take advantage of these factors to silence victims and prevent them from seeking safety from abuse¹⁹. Overall, all of the literature on rural issues impacting survivors of violence reference the particular safety challenges brought on by life in a vast geographical area that is sparsely populated.

¹⁶ Fraser, J. PhD Candidate, Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa. 2011. Rural Crime Prevention: A Literature Review for Crime Prevention Ottawa: 3.

¹⁷ DeKeseredy, Walter S. and Carolyn Joseph. Separation and/or Divorce Sexual Assault in Rural Ohio: Preliminary Results of an Exploratory Study. *Violence Against Women*, Volume 12 Number 3. March 2006: 307.

¹⁸ Logan, T.K., Walker, R., & Cole, J. (2015). Silenced suffering: the need for a better understanding of partner sexual violence. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 16(2), 111-135.

McOrmond-Plummer, L. (2009). *Intimate partner sexual violence: Sexual assault in the context of domestic violence*. Olympia, WA: Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs.

¹⁹ Kasdorff, Deborah and Barbara Erb. "Serving Victims of Violence in Rural Communities: Challenges and Best Practices". Victim/Witness Assistance Program, East Region, January 2010: 15.

II. ***Realities of isolation for women survivors of violence in a rural context***

While violence often creates the side-effect of isolation for any survivor, a rural environment can exacerbate isolation – or create additional barriers to survivors who are contemplating or actively attempting to break isolation. Conditions of rurality such as long distances, lack of transportation, limited services, and rigid, small town social structures further complicate the isolation experienced by rural women²⁰. The *Serving Victims of Violence in Rural Communities: Challenges and Best Practices* comments at length upon the isolation for victims of violence, noting a number of dire realities attributed to rural life:

- Being physically isolated is a reality for many families
- Going to a neighbor's home for coffee or to use the phone is not an option for many
- Living in isolation often means there is little if any informal (peer) support present and formal support provided through counselors or other professionals is frequently non-existent
- Victims of crime may not be aware of services and supports available to them²¹.

Accordingly, in Lalonde's 2015 *Working Together for a Stronger Renfrew County: Needs Assessment Report*, 33% of sexual violence survivors surveyed identified that they did not access support because they didn't know what services were available²².

Authors also discuss the practical effects of geographic isolation upon space and personal property in Ontario: "Rural crime is different than crime that occurs in cities. In many rural areas, residents live far distances away from their neighbours. Residents may also drive into the city to go to work...This means that houses and other property are left unattended"²³. Fraser also notes that, compared to urban spaces, there is little police presence because of the large areas these officers have to patrol. All of these factors together mean that "crimes can be committed in rural areas fairly easily without anyone seeing"²⁴ —realistic problems for women experiencing relationship violence or stalking, and for fostering higher-risk situations for sexualized violence.

All literature identify numerous challenges to service provision to survivors of sexual assault. One American report notes: "It is not unusual in some rural states for an advocate to drive several hours through the countryside at night to respond to a call. Alaska, with the nation's highest rate of rape, is a very rural state...It often takes several days to respond to a call. Some places are so remote that cell phones may not work, radio reception is spotty and public telephones are rare"²⁵.

In this, we can see the many ways in which rural realities inform isolation. This has an impact on both survivors; as well as service providers working to support survivors of these forms of violence.

²⁰ Biesenthal, Lorri and Lynne Dee Sproule, Mary Nelder, Susan Golton, Donna Mann, Denise Podovinnikoff, Inge Roosendaal, Shellie Warman and Donna Lunn, In cooperation with Community Abuse Programs of Rural Ontario. *The Ontario Rural Woman Abuse Study (ORWAS) FINAL REPORT*: Community Abuse Program of Rural Ontario. July 2000: 13.

²¹ Kasdorff, Deborah and Barbara Erb. "Serving Victims of Violence in Rural Communities: Challenges and Best Practices". Victim/Witness Assistance Program, East Region, January 2010: 9-10.

²² Lalonde, J. 2015. *Working Together for a Stronger Renfrew County: Needs Assessment Report*: 3.

²³ Fraser, J. PhD Candidate, Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa. 2011. *Rural Crime Prevention: A Literature Review for Crime Prevention Ottawa*: 2.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Lewis, S. PhD. 2003. *Unspoken Crimes: Sexual Assault in Rural America*. For National Sexual Violence Resource Center (A Project of the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape): 4.

III. Attitudes and stigma connected to rural realities and culture impacting women survivors of sexual violence

Deleterious attitudes concerning survivors of violence and stigma related to sexual violence have negative impacts on survivors. The Learning Network identifies sexual violence myths and stereotypes as the *greatest factors* in creating barriers to survivor disclosures and, subsequently, access to helping resources: "The prevalence of rape myths and stereotyped beliefs that blame victims/survivors may cause or contribute to feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt, and unworthiness"; this and "anticipating negative responses [from others] can isolate and silence victims/survivors"²⁶, thus limiting their support-seeking behaviors. In Lalonde's 2015 *Working Together for a Stronger Renfrew County: Needs Assessment Report*, one sexual violence survivor surveyed identified that she did not access support because she fear attitudes and stigma that could be used against her: "[I] did not want my actions as a young woman to be used against me, or to be...blamed for the violence which I experienced"²⁷.

Attitudes and stigma affect all survivors of violence, and have also been found to inform incidences of violence. DeKeseredy and Joseph's research on sexual violence experienced by women after separating from an abusive partner in rural Ohio cite "patriarchal dominance and control" as a major theme that stands out in almost every survivor interview they conducted: "80% of the women stated that the men who abused them feel that 'men should be in charge at home'"²⁸. Much other (non-rural situated) literature on sexual violence note the connection between patriarchal attitudes and belief in rape myths: for example, "researchers found that individuals who score high on measures of sex-based oppression (e.g., sexual prejudices, hostile sexism) and intergroup dominance (e.g., belief that social hierarchies should exist), were more likely to accept rape myths and to have a more negative attitude towards rape victims"²⁹. More, some (non-rural situated) literature on sexual and relationship abuse offenders also notes patriarchal attitudes in offender populations³⁰.

It is worthwhile to note that much of the literature in this review (rural) identify patriarchal attitudes as well: "Traditional norms are more prevalent in rural areas and so are patriarchal attitudes that devalue and objectify women. While patriarchal attitudes are not absent in urban centers, they co-exist with a wide array of other competing values"³¹. In this context, authors note, "rural women are seen as violating community norms by their peers if they seek help"³².

²⁶ Violence Against Women Learning Network, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children, Western University. May 2012. *Overcoming Barriers and Enhancing Supportive Responses: The Research on Sexual Violence Against Women, A Resource Document*: 20.

²⁷ Lalonde, J. 2015. *Working Together for a Stronger Renfrew County: Needs Assessment Report*: 3.

²⁸ DeKeseredy, Walter S. and Carolyn Joseph. Separation and/or Divorce Sexual Assault in Rural Ohio: Preliminary Results of an Exploratory Study. *Violence Against Women*, Volume 12 Number 3. March 2006: 308.

²⁹ Violence against Women Learning Network, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children, Western University. May 2012. *Overcoming Barriers and Enhancing Supportive Responses: The Research on Sexual Violence Against Women, A Resource Document*: 13.

³⁰ See: Domestic Violence Death Review Committee 2015 Annual Report: 33.

³¹ Kasdorff, Deborah and Barbara Erb. "Serving Victims of Violence in Rural Communities: Challenges and Best Practices". *Victim/Witness Assistance Program, East Region*, January 2010: 2.

³² *Ibid.*

An Australia report emphasises that "a rural area is not simply a physical space but a social place as well"³³. Social attitudes related to this rural space include:

- "greater social and political conservatism (Kelly 1989; Watkins and Watkins 1984)
- stronger enforcement of gender rules and traditional roles in the family (WESNET 2000; Dempsey 1992);
- a strong belief in the privacy of family matters (Macklin 1995); and
- a mythology of mateship among men and reinforced patterns of female subservience (Gibson et al. 1990)"³⁴.

Much of the literature identifies the role of conservative, victim-blaming or patriarchal attitudes in rural regions in reducing survivors' capacity to disclose their experiences. Neame and Heenan summarize this well: "Women's responses to sexual violence, the range of options that are available to them, and their own capacity to take action after an assault will all be affected by the sociocultural dynamics of the place in which they live"³⁵ – this includes the tenets or social code associated, implicitly, with a rural environment.

An Ontario-based crime prevention report identifies additional reasons why rural residents may be less likely to report crimes to the police: "they do not want their neighbours, friends, or family members to be arrested or because they are afraid of retaliation from known perpetrators [in their own community]"³⁶.

When we consider that sexual violence is statistically most likely to be perpetrated by an offender known to the victim, then these two concerns are likely very realistic for survivors of sexual violence as well.

The Learning Network's research aligns with this, sharing that, overall, survivors of sexual violence may not disclose to formal supports "for fear of retaliation or reprisal"; more, "victims/survivors of sexual assault within an intimate relationship are often afraid of retaliation from the perpetrator due to the ongoing access the perpetrator has to the victim, including fears related to stalking post separation"³⁷.

³³ Neame, A. and Melanie Heenan for Australian Government – Australian Institute of Family Studies. ACSSA Briefing No. 3 — June 2004. Responding to Sexual Assault in Rural Communities. Online: <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/responding-sexual-assault-rural-communities/export>: 5.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Neame, A. and Melanie Heenan for Australian Government – Australian Institute of Family Studies. ACSSA Briefing No. 3 — June 2004. Responding to Sexual Assault in Rural Communities. Online: <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/responding-sexual-assault-rural-communities/export>: 5.

³⁶ Fraser, J. PhD Candidate, Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa. 2011. Rural Crime Prevention: A Literature Review for Crime Prevention Ottawa: 4.

³⁷ Violence against Women Learning Network, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children, Western University. May 2012. *Overcoming Barriers and Enhancing Supportive Responses: The Research on Sexual Violence Against Women, A Resource Document*: 23.

What Now?: Recommendations on Utilizing this Data

WSAC's project aims to intentionally address barriers which impinge upon rural survivors' ability to engage support. This literature review will support the overall work of the *Rural Women Advocating for Rape Culture Change* Project, identifying rural-situated contexts and providing recommendations that will guide strategies, moving forward.

As we have seen, the literature review specifically identified:

1. Safety issues for women survivors of violence, including safety concerns incurred by disclosing violence, in a rural context;
2. Realities of isolation for women survivors of violence in a rural context; and
3. Attitudes and stigma specifically connected to rural realities and culture impacting women survivors of sexual violence.

Solutions the Project identifies will focus on identifying rural barriers to speaking out about violence, fostering strong mentoring and leadership by local rural women, and creating tools for creative acts of system and self- advocacy by survivors for survivors.

This literature review recommends the following high-level approaches, based on its findings:

- Solutions/advocacy/campaigns that communicate that survivors of sexual violence are not alone/realities of sexual violence prevalence
- Solutions/advocacy/campaigns that acknowledge rural realities impacting sexual violence survivors
- Solutions/advocacy/campaigns that communicate that survivors exist in rural spaces, and across vast geographies
- Solutions/advocacy/campaigns that bring survivors together in a safe, confidential setting
- Solutions/advocacy/campaigns that communicate that confidential support services are available
- Solutions/advocacy/campaigns that reach out to/speak to bystanders and allies (i.e. friends, family members, faith leaders, school-based professionals) in a rural context

This Executive Summary is excerpted from the complete *Literature Review: Rural Women Advocating for Rape Culture Change (Status of Women Canada) For Women's Sexual Assault Support Centre of Renfrew County (WSAC)*.

To read the full Review, including Works Cited, please contact Women's Sexual Assault Support Centre of Renfrew County (<http://www.wsac.ca>) or author Nicole Pietsch (nicole.e.pietsch@gmail.com).

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