

## **Small, rural and isolated communities**

### **Round Table**

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### **Summary**

Violence against women in small, rural, or isolated communities can be exacerbated by geographic and social isolation, inadequate transportation, poor economic conditions, and lack of basic or accessible services. Other challenges include local government's apathy or lack of awareness; political culture/dynamics (especially that “safety” is generally defined in a way that excludes particular issues of women and other disadvantaged groups); and lack of community capacity (expertise and resources), institutional supports, frameworks, and sustainable funding.

Rural women have been found to stay in abusive relationships far longer than women in urban areas due to such factors. To date, there have been very few initiatives to address challenges unique to small, rural, or isolated Canadian communities.

In 1995, the Cowichan Valley Regional District formed a Committee on Violence Against Women and the Cowichan Women Against Violence Society partnered with the regional government. Together they have conducted women's safety audits and developed structures and processes to better coordinate service provision, community outreach and prevention efforts and guide local policy, planning, and decision-making.

Further plans for an integrated strategy for community safety in small, rural, and isolated communities include:

- Researching issues of women's and community safety in small, rural and isolated communities in order to have a solid knowledge base from which to develop a targeted and integrated strategy
- Lobbying for provincial policy and programming to meet women's needs in these areas
- Developing and formalizing a network of groups and projects from small, rural or isolated communities.

## Discussion

Although safety issues in urban areas are thematically similar, remote areas have unique problems and challenges that require solutions that are tailored to consider their different circumstances and accessible resources. Unique challenges include that abusive partners sometimes move their families to isolated areas so as to purposely remove them from support networks. This creates the reality of abused women having nowhere else to go to if they leave their abusive environment.

The fact that "everyone knows everyone" in smaller communities can worsen the stigma attached to domestic violence and can influence women's hesitance to report abuse even if victim services agencies do exist. Strong social stigma can cause violence against women to remain relatively hidden, particularly under smaller communities' surface appearance of being relatively calm, safe, and free of public fear experienced in urban centres. Traditional community leaders and government structures can be especially repressive in remote cultural communities and religion also has a strong potential to influence women to submit to or tolerate abuse.

A representative of the South Asian women's community in Toronto (Canada) emphasizes that smaller cultural communities can still be isolated from larger local safety initiatives in their own urban centres, particularly due to language and cultural barriers. When smaller community groups are largely excluded from other community support networks, they end up having to do a

majority of work on their own. This strains their already scarce resources and monopolizes their time that could otherwise be spent forging connections with other community groups.

"Collective kitchens" in Ottawa (Canada) provide a casual cooking and play space to bring women together to improve their awareness of community resources available to them and encourage their discussion of safety issues. These kitchens have sought to involve women that are still isolated or excluded from the city's safety resources. Accessibility issues remain a key challenge to the effectiveness of these kitchens due to the distance that some women have to travel to take advantage of community services.

A violence against women network has been formed in South Africa. Provincial network coordinators help broaden the support base and network by bringing together women's groups, community service providers, and key role players. The network seeks funding for transportation costs so that women don't have to use their scarce household money to access services and so coordinators and outreach workers can go into remote areas themselves rather than forcing isolated women to travel to them.

## **Conclusions**

- We must be creative in developing solutions to meet the unique needs and realities of small and remote communities.
- We must reach out to isolated and excluded women rather than merely providing services and expecting them to travel to them. Satellite offices opened in smaller communities could improve access to resources such as childcare, outreach, and transportation.
- Low literacy rates, language barriers, and women's lack of employment and income-generating skills are particularly relevant challenges for women in the South or even

Aboriginal communities in the North as they give women little other choice than to remain financially dependent on abusive partners.

- Women's groups must partner with municipalities to make decision-makers more sensitive to women's concerns and to encourage civic participation. Local governments need to be made aware of how they are already addressing women's issues to increase their willingness to do more.
- Partnering with and/or lobbying local government is extremely important, especially prior to elections, for fighting resource cutbacks and ensuring sustained funding from mandated funding mechanisms and structures.
- Efforts to develop small or remote communities' infrastructure to support women's local safety need to be integrated with all levels of government.

## **Recommendations**

- We must advance equality by empowering women with language and literacy education and training in employment and income-generating skills so that can become economically self-sufficient and independent of abusive spouses.
- Local governments must be convinced of the importance and value of funding women's safety activities. It must be explained to them how developing the infrastructure to integrate women's perceptions and recommendations into urban planning will be beneficial to the entire community, possibly in even more efficient and less expensive ways.
- Caucuses or groups should be formed in remote communities to lobby governments and pressure political candidates, especially around election time, to address women's safety concerns and ensure sustained funding.

- Religious community leaders must be educated on the social consequences of violence against women and involved in progressive, holistic partnerships that address women's and community safety through both physical environment modification as well as social development efforts.
- Efforts should be made to engage the private sector and to make them more aware of the effects and costs of crime and violence on their business and the cost-effectiveness of investing resources in prevention and violence reduction initiatives.
- Community-to-community (possibly North-South) partnerships should be developed such as "sister cities" where a larger city can provide global network support and help provide information to and exchange knowledge with its smaller, more remote "sister" community.