

Women's Safety in Small, Rural, and Isolated Communities

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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 guide local policy, planning, and decision-making.

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

- Researching issues of women and community safety in small, rural and isolated communities in Canada and beyond in order to have a solid foundation of knowledge from which to develop an integrated strategy ;
- Addressing the need for provincial policy and programming ;
- Developing and formalizing a network of groups/projects with an emphasis on small, rural and isolated communities.

"The defining feature of a safe community is the ability of all citizens - regardless of gender, race, sexuality, age, income, language or ability – to participate fully and freely in all community environments. This requires that they feel and are safe, and that they have meaningful opportunities to participate in local decision-making processes."

The Women and Community Safety Project, Cowichan Valley Safer Futures

Introduction

Women's safety work has grown out of the need to understand, acknowledge and address the barriers to participation in community life faced by women that stem from violence and fear. Safety is a basic quality of life issue – victimization and fear have severe implications for

women's health and well-being, and that of the entire community. When women experience their social and physical environments as unsafe, they experience all sorts of barriers to free and full participation in employment, education, community activities, and local decision-making processes.

Canadian statistics illustrate the high proportion of women who experience first-hand the effects and the aftermath of violence.ⁱ And first-hand experience of victimization is only one dimension of the issue. For the majority of women in Canada, knowledge of the risk of violence translates into fear of victimization - over half of women say they restrict their lives in order to be safe on a daily basis.

In small, rural and/or isolated communities, violence against women can be particularly problematic, exacerbated by factors such as: geographical and social isolation; lack of, or inadequate, public transportation systems; poor economic and social conditions; lack of essential and/or accessible emergency services such as crisis centres, medical clinics, social and police services; and long distances to work, recreation, and community services.

In a study of rural women who were abused by their partners, researchers found that rural women stayed in abusive relationships 5 to 7 years longer than women living in urban areas because of lack of resources, and isolation from support systemsⁱⁱ. In a safety audit conducted in the Boundary, a vast rural area of the southern interior of the Canadian province of British Columbia, concerns about the response or service provided and lack of infrastructure and capacity to respond, were identified as the top two categories of concernⁱⁱⁱ.

Over the last two decades, we have seen some movement towards understanding and acknowledging women's experiences, in the way we think about community life, and in the way we envision the future of our communities. A great deal of work has been done in cities in Canada, by groups such as Women Plan Toronto, METRAC (Metro Action Committee on Public Violence Against Women and Children, Femmes et Ville (Montréal), and the Women's Action Centre Against Violence (Ottawa).

Indeed, women's community safety projects, and/or safer city initiatives have been tried in cities such as Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa-Carleton, Montreal, Québec City and St. John. Yet, there have been relatively few comprehensive initiatives to address women's safety in small, rural and/or isolated communities. Examples of rural initiatives include communities in the Cowichan Valley and the Boundary Region of the province of British Columbia, and in the Ottawa- Carlton region of the province of Ontario.

Rural initiatives in British Columbia

THE PROJECTS

In the communities of the Cowichan Valley, we have been working to promote safety of women and children in their community environments, at home, at places of work, and in public places through a coordinated, multi-disciplinary approach. In late 1995, the Cowichan Valley Regional District received a package of information containing national statistics on violence against women, and a handbook produced by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities called "How to Build a Safer Community for Women." The Chair of the Board at that time responded to that information by forming a Select Committee on Violence Against Women, and asking them to put forward recommendations on what the regional district should be doing as a local government, to contribute to the prevention of violence against women.

A group of women from the community came together and put forward a set of recommendations based on the guidelines in the handbook; they also recommended that the regional district conduct a women's safety audit to consult with women and hear from them about their concerns, and about solutions for making their communities safer.

What transpired from that dialogue was amazing. Our women's organization (Cowichan Women Against Violence Society) formed a partnership with the regional district government, and together, we have conducted numerous women's safety audits, and developed structures and processes to guide policy, planning and decision-making.

This work has used the *safer communities approach* to violence prevention which advocates the community as the focal point for identifying issues and defining solutions to

improve safety. To achieve solutions, the whole community must be involved; however, a major catalyst for support and mobilization is the leadership of local governments.

Over the last six years, we have gained some important information about the concerns and barriers that women experience in their daily lives, and how this affects their well-being and participation in their communities. We have also networked with other organizations around British Columbia and found that we share very similar circumstances, and face the same challenges in trying to address safety of women in small, rural and isolated communities.

During 2000 to 2002, Safer Futures worked with nine communities around British Columbia to provide training and development for women's safety. Based on the *training and development* project, our thoughts on effecting change in this area can be summed up as:

- 1) Issues of safety for women and other marginalized groups must be addressed at the local level (as well as, of course, at provincial and federal levels);
- 2) Municipal leadership is absolutely critical;
- 3) Local government must incorporate policies and procedures to address women's safety, into their everyday and long term activities;
- 4) There must also be adequate mechanisms to sustain the process; and
- 5) There needs to be a collaborative community process/structure.

THE EFFECTIVE APPROACHES

What we know about effective approaches can be summed up as:

- 1) The women's safety audit model provides an excellent process for initiating action;
- 2) Local government planning offers sustainability;
- 3) Local government leadership is key;
- 4) There has to be a meaningful partnership between women-serving organizations and local government;
- 5) A dedicated initiative, program, or committee is a must; and
- 6) A broad spectrum of the community needs to be involved in meaningful ways.

THE CHALLENGES

Some of the challenges include:

- 1) Resistance and/or apathy, and/or lack of awareness on the part of local government;
- 2) Political culture and dynamics of small, rural and/or isolated communities -- especially the fact that “safety” is generally defined in a way that excludes or ignores the particular issues of women and other disadvantaged groups.
- 3) Lack of community capacity (expertise and resources);
- 4) Lack of institutional supports and frameworks and;
- 5) Lack of funding (especially long-term funding)

Specific problems and challenges

So, while the issues around women's safety in small, rural and isolated communities are similar to urban areas, they bring with them, a unique set of challenges that need to be addressed in different ways.

THE INFRASTRUCTURES

Further, the frameworks (legal, jurisdictional, resources, etc.) within which small, rural and isolated communities operate are often very different from larger municipalities - for example, many small, rural, and isolated communities do not even have a planner on staff, never mind a social planner. “Women-as-a-group” isn't even on the radar, never mind “women's safety issues”. And as we have mentioned above, many of the issues faced by women in many of these communities are rooted in their geographic isolation – women often do not have access to basic services, never mind public transportation, for example. The capacity of the women's sector to do this work is also limited – for example, the only women's organization in town may be the Women's Centre - limited resources get in the way of this work being a priority.

Thus, we need to provide some of that much-needed infrastructure that would assist these communities to move forward. The progress that **is** being made, as a result of the project, needs to be given all the chance of succeeding that is possible.

AN INTEGRATED STRATEGY

Where we have seen most success in small, rural and/or isolated communities, there have been two key ingredients:

- 1) A dedicated community group and/or initiative: e.g. Cowichan Valley Safer Futures Program, or New Rural Partnerships Project in the Boundary region of British Columbia; and
- 2) A local government committee or initiative, e.g. Women's Advisory Committee, a women's and children's safety committee of council, etc.

We believe that we cannot continue to do social change by individual effort; that is, in those communities that do not have either or both of the above key ingredients, what is currently making a difference, and offering potential for change, is a dedicated and informed individual in a women-serving organization, or in local government (either staff or elected official), with some resources at their disposal to take this work forward. If they move on, or lose those resources, the work stops. We need to create some infrastructure that would ensure that this work continues, no matter who the individual involved is.

In other words, we need planners who are knowledgeable about women's safety issues, women's safety activists who are knowledgeable about local planning issues and, crime prevention practitioners who are knowledgeable about both. We need those bodies that small, rural and isolated municipalities listen to, and belong to, to be encouraging them to integrate women's safety into their work, and providing them the tools to do so. Underlying all of this, we need a solid foundation of research, and strength in numbers.

We believe that we need to begin to develop an integrated strategy for women and community safety in small, rural, and isolated communities. We are planning to do this through:

- 1) Conducting research on issues of women and community safety in small, rural and isolated communities in Canada and beyond, in order to have a solid foundation of knowledge from which to develop an integrated strategy on women and community safety in British Columbia.
- 2) Beginning to address the need for provincial policy and programming on women and community safety issues in small, rural and isolated communities.
- 3) Working to develop an educational framework on women and community safety in small, rural and isolated communities.
- 4) Developing and formalizing a network of individuals/groups/projects involved in women and community safety initiatives in all British Columbia communities, with an emphasis on small, rural and isolated communities.

Check us out at www.saferfutures.org!

ⁱ Nationally, one in two women, since the age of 16 has been physically or sexually assaulted by a man at least once, and one out of every three women in BC is assaulted by her husband or partner (Statistics Canada, 1993 *Violence Against Women Survey*)

ⁱⁱ McLaughlin and Church, *Cultivating Courage: Needs and Concerns of Rural Women Who are Abused by their Partners*, 1992.

ⁱⁱⁱ New Rural Partnership Project, 2000. *Creating Consensus for Safer Rural Communities. A guide for creating safer rural communities for women, children and other vulnerable groups.*