



Brief submitted to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women

“Domestic Violence in Rural Settings: A Human Rights Issue”

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Introduction

The Women's Resource Centre is an organization that works in Brandon, Manitoba and the surrounding Western Manitoba region to serve self-identifying women and their children who are experiencing situations of family violence and sexual assault. We approach all our work using a feminist, trauma-informed framework and we deliver services such as specialized family violence counselling, specialized sexual assault counselling and advocacy, community advocacy, specialized children's counselling, art therapy programs, wellness programming, and informal drop-in services. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has played a large role in highlighting and exacerbating pre-existing issues of domestic violence and sexual assault in our region. However, there have not been the accompanying increases in funding and resources that would be required to adequately serve all those who need it. Rural women are especially at-risk when experiencing situations of domestic violence as resources can be few and far between, or simply non-existent outside of major population centres. The lack of adequate provisions to address domestic violence and sexual assault in rural settings facilitates the perpetuation of these crimes and has resulted in a human rights issue for rural women.

A Human Rights Issue in Rural Settings

Domestic violence is an urgent public health and human rights issue. It deprives people of physical, psychological, emotional, and financial security. It has been found that domestic violence in rural settings occurs at a rate approximately three times higher than rates of domestic violence experienced in urban settings¹. One of the chief ways that domestic violence operates is through isolation. Women living in rural settings may already be isolated by geography, but through domestic violence they are isolated socially, and isolated from services that may be difficult or impossible to access². Domestic violence resources in rural communities are often sparse, or even non-existent³. This difficulty in access can be attributed to several factors, including the lack of available funding for domestic violence services, inadequate transportation, a lack of coordinated response networks, issues related to strong community connections that prevent confidentiality or anonymity in domestic violence reporting when it occurs in small rural communities, as well as the prevalence of toxic masculinity and patriarchal attitudes surrounding gender roles⁴. Furthermore, the issues of domestic violence and sexual assault are inextricably linked, with many women who experience domestic violence also experiencing sexual violence or assault. It is critical that these two forms of gender-based violence be addressed in tandem.

This issue is also one of racial inequality, as Indigenous women experience domestic violence at high rates and Indigenous women who live in rural communities also experience higher rates of

¹ Nicole Youngston, Michael Saxton, Peter G. Gaffe, Deborah Chiodo, Myrna Dawson, & Anna-Lee Straatman, "Challenges in Risk Assessment with Rural Domestic Violence Victims: Implications for Practice," *Journal of Family Violence* 36 (2011): 537.

² Ibid, 538.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid; Kristen Rigalka, Marion Maar, Roger Pilon, Lorilee McGregor, & Marianne Reade, "Improving the response of primary care providers to rural First Nations women who experience intimate partner violence: A qualitative study," *BMC Women's Health* 20, no. 209 (2020): 7; Pertice Moffat, Wendy Aujla, Crystal J. Giesbrecht, Elizabeth Grant, & Anna-Lee Straatman, "Intimate Partner Violence and COVID-19 in Rural, Remote, and Northern Canada: Relationship, Vulnerability and Risk," *Journal of Family Violence* (2020): 4; Sarah Wendt & Jennie Hornosty, "Understanding contexts of family violence in rural, farming communities: Implications for rural women's health," *Rural Society* 20 no. 1 (2010): 57.

domestic violence than their urban counterparts⁵. However, there are many Indigenous communities in rural Manitoba that do not have access to adequate services for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only revealed further the need for adequate domestic violence and sexual assault services in rural regions but has greatly exacerbated it. The isolation that many rural women feel when experiencing situations of domestic violence was further compounded by the isolation brought on by COVID-19 measures. While these public health measures were necessary to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, it resulted in a situation where factors like prolonged contact with the perpetrator, increased stress, and job loss caused instances of domestic violence to skyrocket. Centres like ours began to see a huge spike in requests for domestic violence and sexual assault services, leading us to have a lengthy waitlist that had never been seen in the 30+ year history of our centre. While requests for domestic violence and sexual assault services have increased dramatically during this time, the funding that would allow us to serve all the survivors asking for our help is limited. Further, this extremely high number of survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault indicates that current efforts aimed at the prevention of domestic violence and sexual assault are not as effective as they need to be.

Recommendations

Our recommendations for preventing domestic violence and sexual assault, as well as adequately providing services for survivors are as follows:

- Increasing funding for women's organizations specializing in providing holistic services to survivors of domestic and sexual violence.
- Partnering with provincial and local governments to create a national public education curriculum on domestic and sexual violence in secondary schools with the aim of preventing domestic and sexual violence from a young age.
- Passing Private Member's Bill C-233 (Keira's Law) to better equip judges and JJPs to handle domestic violence cases in a manner that is evidence-based, trauma-informed, and aware of the dynamics of gender-based violence.
- Ensuring that rural women are treated equitably when increasing funding for domestic and sexual violence services and prioritizing the funding of rural service collaboration models.
- Funding external service organizations that are well-versed in the work surrounding domestic and sexual violence to provide training for other service providers in the fields of health and justice, and members of the public.

Conclusion

It is critical that domestic violence and sexual assault occurring in rural settings is accorded the attention it deserves. This is a human rights issue that can be remedied. Increased funding and a focus on education for both the public and service providers is critically needed to prevent domestic violence and sexual assault from occurring in the first place, and to give survivors the services that are needed and that they deserve.

⁵ Rigalka et al., "Improving the response of primary care providers," 2.

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