

# Assessing the Needs of Rural, Anglophone Women in Québec

## The RONA Project

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*Cet article décrit les activités d'un centre de femmes et ses efforts pour offrir des services et de l'information aux femmes anglophones du Québec, installées en l'Estrie. À travers le programme RONA (Regional Outreach Needs Assessment) le centre a pu établir une permanence dans cette région et a permis aux agricultrices de s'appropriier du pouvoir et de développer des stratégies pour contrer l'isolement, la pauvreté et la violence.*

Approximately one in five Canadian women live in a rural area (DesMeules, Lagace, Pitblado, Bollman and Pong). Despite interest among policymakers and their attempts to revitalize rural economies and communities through effective policy, women's experiences remain an often-ignored research topic. The research that does explore women's realities reveals gender, place and culture affect rural women in interconnected and myriad ways (Centres of Excellence for Women's Health; Curto and Rothwell). Rural Canada is composed of diverse communities, locations and peoples with a variety of socio-economic characteristics. However, one constant is that rurality is a powerful determinant of women's lives. Compared to their urban counterparts rural women suffer from more health and mental problems, financial insecurity, violence in the home and lack of access to health and social services (Centres of Excellence for Women's Health). The ways women mobilize to improve their lives and those of their families are also shaped by their rural situations.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the attempts of a Québec Women's Centre, the Lennoxville and District Women's Centre (LDWC), to assess the needs of its rural constituency and provide services to women living in the remote parts of its regional mandate. The Regional Outreach Needs Assessment or RONA project developed a method for expanding the Centre's services to women who have traditionally been all but forgotten by the state. Through the RONA project, the Centre was able to ensure its permanent, grassroots involvement throughout

the region. The success of the project is an example of rural and small town sustainability and women's activism to resist the conditions of isolation, poverty, abuse, and lack of available health and social services in their own communities and language. More importantly, the Centre's outreach illuminates, what Dominique Masson argues is,

the direct and productive involvement of women's movement service groups in ... an institutionalized, state-funded partnership ... with the Québec Ministry of Health and Social Services. (50-51)

In today's "post-welfare state" and federal restructuring of health and social services, the Lennoxville and District Women's Centre was able to pursue its feminist agenda for political representation through ongoing negotiations with a provincial government searching for a "social consensus" between itself and grassroots, community organizations (Masson).

A content analysis of the LDWC archives was conducted for this study. Pertinent documents such as the Centre's by-laws, activity and event reports, newsletters as well as the grant proposal and evaluation of results for the RONA project were also analyzed. In addition to this, informal interviews were conducted with the Director of the LDWC as well as one of the Coordinators for the project.

### Theoretical Framework

I draw on the sociological literature in the areas of women's citizenship and relations with the welfare state to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of rural women's grassroots activism. Historically, women's movements have included participation in the "politics of citizenship" whereby women have either been excluded from the construction of the political or inserted with entitlement but as men's subordinates (Pateman; Orloff). They have

pursued the related objectives of securing full citizenship rights for women and proposing state intervention to enhance their individual independence. Realizing the potential of state provided resources for self-determination within and outside marriage, the Canadian women's movement demanded a welfare state conducive to their needs by employing claims to equal access to paid work and guaranteed resources for women as caregivers in the home and community (Gosselin).

For the past two decades Canadian women have witnessed the erosion of the political base for their mobiliza-

and referral service (LDWC Fonds). Along with shelters, health centres and rape crisis centres, the LDWC is part of a network of women's services designed to respond to women's political rights and social needs. Within a broader context, these women's groups occupy a legitimate place among a variety of voluntary, community-based organizations that are included as partners in the government ministries' delivery of health and social welfare programs in Québec.

The LDWC is located in a small community called Lennoxville in the Estrie region of central Québec. This

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tion and the diminishing of their individual and collective rights due to the dismantling of the welfare state (Brodie; McDaniel). State restructuring, fueled by globalization, new technologies in the labour market and a neo-liberal political agenda, has led to changes in the relations between women and the state. This entails declining social provisions and services for women and families, a shift to unstable and contingency work, public funding cuts to women's service groups, loss of government commitment to social equality and increasing demands placed on women to assume the unpaid burden of caregiving (Luxton). But as Dominique Masson argues,

practices and discourses of restructuring may be nationally less coherent ... more uneven among provinces and sectors [and] have different implications in terms of the perspectives they open, preserve or foreclose for the pursuit of feminist politics. (50)

Indeed her work shows how women's service groups "figured prominently" and "made a difference" in the restructuring of Québec's health and social services sector (51).

### **The Context**

The LDWC has existed since 1981 and is the only one in the Estrie region of Québec to serve English-speaking women. Its mission is to help women develop their full potential by encouraging them to participate in their communities through educational, political, and social activities. To accomplish this, the LDWC offers a meeting place and resource centre for women, formal and informal educational opportunities, a liaison between English-speaking women and state services, and an information

region, which covers 16,000 square kilometres, is situated southeast of Montreal and is home to a National Linguistic Minority Anglophone population. The Estrie is primarily rural but does include a large urban centre, Sherbrooke, and several smaller ones. Of the 17 Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) in the Estrie, the Centre is responsible for seven in the 05 administrative region. The LDWC has approximately 300 active members who live mainly in the Lennoxville/Sherbrooke area but according to its regional mandate, it serves over 11,000 Anglo-women.

The Estrie economy consists primarily of mining, farming and manufacturing in rubber/plastics, textiles, clothing and wood industries. The largest labour pools are in retail trade and the health, social services and education sectors. Anglophone women are less active in the labour market compared to English-speaking men and French women.<sup>1</sup> Factors that keep them out of the labour force are low levels of post-secondary schooling and lack of French language skills (Floch and Warnke 2004). When they do work, it is usually on a part time or seasonal basis and the reasons often cited for this are economic and business conditions and the burdens of unpaid care to the family (Curto and Rothwell). Only farm women in the area have higher labour force participation rates and tend to work longer hours than non-farm women (Dion and Welsh).

### **Reason for the RONA Project: Phase 1**

According to the Director of the LDWC, the Centre is well equipped to identify and respond to a wide variety of needs among a diverse population of English-speaking women. An experienced staff and board are dedicated to maintaining an extensive network of contacts among both English and French community groups serving the health and social service needs of the Estrie. The Centre also has

a large repertoire of services available to women including a medley of workshops and educational activities, compassionate listening, and informational and referral services, monthly newsletter, advocacy concerning women's issues, action and support groups and services to victims of sexual assault. However, only women able to travel to the Lennoxville area were making use of these services and personnel. Previous attempts to entice women from outlying communities through carpooling, mass mailings and local advertising of events failed. Moreover, its core funding from the *Régie régionale de la santé et des services*

issues such as heart and osteoporosis, nutrition, gardening, arts and crafts, exercise classes and computer training. An average of 15 women attended each activity. Information about mental health, where to access help with abuse in the home, and liaison services for dealing with the provincial government was also given out. Written evaluation forms were distributed at every workshop that generated information about the participants' satisfaction with the event and interest in the LDWC services. A record of attendance was also kept for each activity to serve as a contact list for promoting future activities.

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*sociaux de l'Estrie* (today called *Agence régionale de la santé et des services sociaux de l'Estrie*) did not provide an additional subsidy of some \$15,000 normally given to organizations with a regional mandate. This was because the LDWC was never able to show that English-speaking women in outlying areas needed its services. Both staff and board agreed that a community outreach strategy to better serve all women in its territory was needed. But without the financial resources and a team of staff and volunteers that was already overburdened, the task would not be easy. So in 2001 the Centre applied to, and received from, the Department of Canadian Heritage's Official Languages Support Program the sum of \$40,000 to ascertain the needs of Anglophone women in the 05 Estrie region and establish a two-year pilot project to deliver services. The RONA project was thus born and if successful could be used to convince the Centre's core funding agency to finance all future outreach activities.

Phase 1 of the RONA project began in May 2001 with the hiring of an Outreach Needs Assessment Coordinator and a research consultant. A questionnaire was designed to solicit information on residence, age, marital status, number of dependents, occupation, family income, access to transportation and English-language services, and interest level in workshops and services. Initial contacts were made by phone or in person to existing volunteer groups such as the Women's Institutes, Anglican, United and Baptist church groups, Imperial Order Daughters Of The Empire chapters and farm clubs. According to the project Coordinator, over 40 presentations about the project were made to different focus groups and participants were asked to fill out questionnaires. Based on the responses from the survey, a number of pilot workshops and services were offered in 9 rural communities spread throughout 3 CMAs. Twelve workshops were conducted on health

#### **The RONA Project: Phase 2**

The results of the one-year, first phase of the outreach project clearly demonstrated that services were needed in the remote areas of the LDWC's regional mandate and that the Centre could deliver them. With an established bank of contacts and resource people for a wide variety of workshops, the second phase of the project was designed to encourage younger women to involve themselves in the services offered. The hiring of a second Outreach Coordinator allowed the project to expand its activities to more participants. Throughout the second year, 22 informational and hands-on workshops were held. During this phase, the needed services focused on techniques to overcome the effects of physical isolation such as stress management workshops, demanded by farm women in particular, parenting skills, learning ways to reverse the cycle of poverty, French language instruction and help with ending abuse in the home. At the same time as the RONA outreach activities, the LDWC organized a community kitchen program. Intellectually handicapped women and poor, young mothers were enrolled in the program and received help with learning how to cook nutritious meals for their families and to shop and budget household finances. Also, a series of Art Therapy support groups for survivors of abuse called "Victims No More" were held.

In addition, two one-year projects aimed at helping girls between the ages of 17 and 25, many of them single moms, were organized. According to the Outreach Coordinator, "Tools for Life" targeted young women from a rural community known for its high levels of poverty, violence, illiteracy, and sexual abuse among the Anglophone population. With the assistance of the municipality and various community groups, the LDWC became a partner in giving over ten young women the opportunity to acquire

the tools and knowledge to develop their full potential. Courses in non-violent communication, leadership and organizational skills, child development and effective parenting, nutrition, career counseling, literacy, personal growth and community implication were conducted with the group of young women. The goal was to motivate the participants to want a better life for themselves and their children and to instill in them a sense of self-worth needed to break the cycle of despair that consumes so much of their lives. Today, some of the participants are off welfare and working, others have moved out of the region to find employment, and a third "Tools for Life" is ready to start in the near future.

## Results

The RONA project was a success in meeting both its short- and long-term objectives. In the short term, the coordinators were able to assess the diverse needs of rural women and provide services and information to address these needs. In the long term, permanent, grassroots contacts with rural women were established and, even though the project ended almost two years ago, the outreach activities continue. New services have been added as a result of the RONA project and the current goal is to reach women in all seven CMAs in the Centre's jurisdiction. Since 2004, Anglophone women can receive intervention and counseling services for sexual assault in their own language. Throughout the project, the LDWC staff and board learned several facts about women and rurality. First, in service delivery it is important for rural women to gain the trust and confidence of outsiders. They must be met in their own communities and services brought to them rather than vice versa. Second, women living in small and remote towns are not a homogeneous group. They have a diversity of needs ranging from formal and informal education, health care, stress and isolation relief, upgrading of labour skills, personal growth, and services to cope with illiteracy, abuse, and poverty. Unfortunately, illiteracy, abuse and poverty are compounded into generational and daily reminders of their experiences as women, Anglo and rural. Thus, the continued presence of the LDWC in small and remote regions of the Estrie is essential for the empowerment of women and their ability to ameliorate the conditions of their lives and participate more effectively in their communities.

## Concluding Remarks

The outreach work of the LDWC is an important example of rural women's activism. As a service provider and resource for information on women's lives, it is well positioned to understand and respond to a diversity of conditions and needs. The Centre is part of a grassroots network of women's service providers and acts in partnership with the Québec Ministry of Health and Social

Services to ensure that rural women's rights as citizens are not forgotten. Although tensions still exist between the need for long term core funding versus state financial support on a limited, contract basis, the LDWC continues to empower women in their communities through its outreach program. Today, Centraide funds this program from year to year through its Community Building Project. However, the current liberal, provincial government has agreed to increase the level of core funding for all women's service groups and make the money recurring which should provide more stability for the groups. The biggest struggle for the future is to ensure that the present government upholds the social consensus model of partnering with community groups in the provision of public services to its citizens.

In this localized context, the LDWC's activism shows that Québec women's groups did not lose their political representation due to state restructuring of health and social welfare services, but rather entered into a legitimate and sustaining partnership with the government. The LDWC, through the RONA project opened up an avenue for the participation of rural women in the building of more democratic and equitable communities. Policy makers would do well to incorporate this gendered model of rural and small town activism in their agendas for revitalization.

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<sup>1</sup>According to William Floch and Jan Warnke, 50.9 per cent of Anglo-women were out of the labour market in 2001.

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## JEANETTE LYNES

### My Mother's Feet

You think I press 'end', fit my smart phone back in its red casket  
and forget you miles away in that white bed with the bend in it.

Forget your feet. I don't. The thing eating at them  
never leaves my mind. How could your feet fall from remembrance?

The knobs of hardened flesh, knolled there, the battered heels, the corns.  
Terrible feet. The soles of farmers' wives don't make for animated chat

at the best of times – still, I'd tell anyone with ready ears  
of the two-dollar sneakers you wore (the only kind, pliable

thing in your life) – I wish I had a pair of your old running shoes now.  
Your old running. The only ears are here.

You think I don't recall your trudges through fouled straw, leaden pails  
pulling down your arms. You tallied you made the moon and back,

feeding feathered livestock. I once showed you my geography book –  
women in hot countries, wearing bright patterns, bearing yokes over bad terrain –

I said 'you are like this' – you blushed. Do you remember your boled toes  
(purpled now, with sores) worming into warm, fresh-turned garden soil?

Or dipping, next to mine, into cool creek frowzy with wild mint? Your feet  
could laugh, could cry. There should be a Nobel Prize for feet – though *any* prize

would pinken your face. You suppose I write my slender books and live my big  
doctored life and forget you. I remember. I press 'end', it only begins.

*Jeanette Lynes's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*