

# At a Crossroads in the Work to End the Violence

## *A Rural Perspective*

by Marilyn Struthers

*Les lacunes d'une stratégie qui compte sur les services sociaux pour contrer la violence deviennent remarquablement apparentes dans les communautés rurales. Dans un temps de contraintes fiscales, les services ruraux font face à un choix*

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*difficile entre stratégies de changement individuel et récupération d'un mandat de changements sociaux. La perspective des femmes victimes de violence est malheureusement absente de ce débat.*

It is a peaceful, pastoral, geese-in-the-swamp kind of morning on the rural concession where I live. The sun has come up over my neighbour's new grain; there are peas in the garden. We are many miles away from the urban bustle that generates the research and policy that directs tax dollars into programs, and determines how the battle against violence against women in their homes will be waged.

There is an urban myth of the rural community, as cozy, close-knit, and helpful, a real community with friendly homes and safer streets. Yet the recent Violence Against Women Survey has confirmed what those of us working with women here already knew, that the incidence of violence inside those cozy rural homes is no less than in urban communities (Statistics Canada). For the women living in my community, and using the two shelters in Grey and Bruce Counties, the ability to gain help is conditioned in specific ways by the impediments of rural life.

One hundred and forty-nine thousand people live peppered across 3,500 square kilometers in these two counties. Our geography creates obvious practical problems for women who are victims of violence. Transportation to hospital, counselling, or shelter can almost never be done by public transit. A woman without a car, or money for gas, virtually requires the permission of her partner, or the active intervention of a neighbour, to seek help.

The response time from a regional OPP station to a rural concession road is generally far too long for effective emergency intervention. A legal restraining order be-

comes a license to abuse, as men know police cannot respond quickly enough to provide protection. A recent consultation for the Ontario Women's Directorate with women and service providers across these rural counties overwhelmingly said that police response to wife abuse is still inconsistent, that training efforts across the 19 detachments and departments that police Grey and Bruce are not yet adequate, and that the outcome of our courts more often feels like re-victimization, than justice (Struthers).

Even confidentiality of service becomes a kind of myth in a rural community. With the best of protocol and intent, the circumstances of women's lives still can quickly reveal their stories. Some women travel three hours to the London Battered Women's Advocacy Clinic to be assured of the anonymity of an urban setting. Women of profile can seldom afford the luxury of using formal service. To seek help for a "private" problem is often to also make the more difficult decision to go "public," because someone you know sees you walk in, or because you know the receptionist, or the therapist, or someone in the waiting room.

There are other less obvious effects of our rural geography on service for abused women. Low population density dictates generic mental health service that seldom permits the development of specialized knowledge. Feminist services, often the only organized lobby group, find they must mute their voice to exist within the tension between a critical politics and conservative community values. Because a woman usually must travel to another community for shelter, she often exchanges her natural networks of support for professional help. The cost of this exchange is especially high for First Nation and Mennonite women, and when they do seek a shelter, workers report they do not stay long.

Shelters in this community also seldom see farm women, nor, according to a farm women's study on stress, do other helping professionals (Ireland). Farm women who are victims of violence face the triple challenge of leaving their homes, their businesses, and their children's future equity. Leaving, even for a brief time to seek refuge, can jeopardize the farming operation, because her labour is essential. If she does leave, untangling the legal knot of entitlement in an inter-generational business often leaves a farm woman with little of either her cash or her sweat equity.


A woman I interviewed recently expects to recoup only \$4,000 of the \$65,000 equity she brought to a farming partnership on her husband's father's farm. During the four year relationship that ended in an assault charge, she also subsidized the farm through both her on and off-farm labour. There is nothing left to do now, she says, but to

invest her divorce settlement in a computer, and begin to tell her story.

Changes in the farm economy and the related haphazard land development have created a crisis of community in the countryside. The breakdown of the old farm networks, coupled with an influx of "urban settlers," has destroyed community helping systems and created isolated single families who share no common meeting place with their neighbours. The distance between homes on a rural concession creates a wall of isolation, and as isolation is a mechanism of control used by abusive men (Pressman; Graham *et al.*), it is likely that some men keep their

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Rural shelter workers speculate that the impact of the economic decline can be seen in patterns of shelter use in an area where low incomes are the standard, even in good times. Fewer older women come now, perhaps fearful of their ability to break into a shrinking employment market. Some women, free of their abusive husbands, are now abused by unemployed sons who return to live at home.

If service delivery falters over the geographic impediments of a rural community, the fault-lines in a strategy that relies on a social service approach to stop the violence become strikingly visible. From a systems perspective, because our populations are small, our services contained and fairly well co-ordinated, and neither service providers nor their clients move often, we can see more clearly the effect of the last 15 years of anti-violence work. This is the gift of the rural community; we can really see what it is we are doing in the movement to stop the violence.

Two ten bed shelters, a male batterers' group program, and a coalition of helping agencies who pool their efforts towards the prevention of "family violence" have been developed in these two counties since 1980. As in many Ontario communities, a small army of dedicated professionals work with individual women and men, and with each other, creating a web of therapeutic service to stem the tide of wounded and wounding people. Yet from the rural perspective, it is clear that reasonable levels of service have had little impact on either the incidence or prevalence of violence.

In the Violence Against Women Survey, 15 per cent of currently married women said in a telephone survey that their partners were violent (Statistics Canada). This figure is slightly lower than a Decima Research study that used an anonymous questionnaire to ask men about their violence, a difference that could be due to some women

answering questions in the presence of their partners. In the Decima study, 18 per cent of married or cohabiting men reported having committed at least one violent act in the past year (Lupri). Extrapolating this figure to married and common-law families in Grey and Bruce suggests nearly 7,000 men are physically abusive each year. Fifty-two men began, and 21 men completed the male batterers' program in our community in the last year (Men's Program: Ending Woman Abuse, 1993-4 statistics).

Nearly 7,000 women live with these men. Even if both shelters operate at capacity, we can shelter only about 200 women a year, and many of these women need to come more than once. The contrast between the need and the ability to serve is magnified when we include women who are separated or divorced and report much higher rates of violence (Statistics Canada), or women who are psychologically abused. Eight thousand children live with abusive men in our community. We know that these children are at high risk of internalizing the patterns of abuse and repeating them (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson; Statistics Canada), yet there are no preventive programs for children who witness violence.

From the micro-perspective of the rural community, it becomes strikingly obvious that we need to reconsider the framework that suggests individual healing is a solution to a systemic social problem of the unprecedented magnitude of violence against women. From here, we can see that it cannot be done, and we must ask why it is that shelters and batterers' programs continue to be funded to a greater extent than programs of prevention, and why institutionalized healing for women is more easily gained than programs to change men, or structural changes in the justice system, the taxation system, and the workplace that would make women economically able to live free of violent men.

The Ontario government now funds some 90 shelters (National Clearing House on Family Violence; Ontario Government Release), many more than the other provinces in Canada. This provincial government has bought into the movement to stop the violence in a big way. Yet, in a shift that parallels the increasing availability of funding, shelters have become much less a place where women gather to learn to name and challenge the parameters of the violence against all women, and more a place where some women come to receive counselling for personal change from other women with special training for the task. This shift in emphasis, which has been documented by Linda Macleod, Michelle Beaudry, and Gillian Walker, signals a shift in the movement from social change to social service, from working on making change on the social conditions that permit the violence, to making changes, at the personal level, in women.


As we succeeded in getting wife abuse onto the public agenda in Ontario, the province has responded by investing heavily in the most expensive form of therapeutic intervention, 24 hour care, where we can afford to "treat" the fewest number of women for the dollars spent. While

we know that abused women come from all walks of life, all ages, and all socio-economic strata, shelters are used most by those who are poorest, least educated, and have small children (Macleod 1987), the very women whose life circumstances suggest they will be least able to use what is learned collectively to go on and do the work of social change.

The rural experience of work against the violence against women sets the fallacy that is undermining the work in many places into high relief. We cannot heal all of the women that men have injured, one by one. No matter how satisfying the work, how skilled we get, how successful at

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fund-raising to purchase the service of more and more counsellors, we cannot offer enough women healing in a therapeutic frame, because there are too many. There will always be line-ups of women at shelter doors, because we cannot make the doors big enough. The public education and community development work of social change, housed in service settings like shelters, is set in hopeless competition with the demands of the front-line, and cannot go forward. It is time we stepped back from the work long enough to see what it is we are doing.

The recession has set a new cast on notions of helping service. Funding for individual care in health and social services is being reduced as governments bend to new economic pressures of restraint, and shift to strategies of wellness promotion and prevention. Small rural services, by definition more expensive to operate than their urban counterparts because their clients are spread over a wide geography (a budgeting issue seldom acknowledged by funders), are the canaries in the coal mine. Daily, we face the mismatch between restrained service and demand on the front-line. Every new public education effort increases the pressure.

The rural community is forced, by its economy of scale, to be the first to notice the cross roads in the work. Do we continue to invest so heavily in strategies of individual change in the form of service to some women, or shift the emphasis to systemic strategies of prevention and social change that will, over a much longer time frame, benefit all women? The choice is not clear, nor will the debate be easy, with so much invested both publicly and professionally in the work of personal change, but the question must now begin to be asked.

Gillian Walker has characterized three stages in the movement to stop the violence as: making the issue visible, getting something done about it, and persuading the

ruling apparatus to respond “properly”—the stage when shelters joined the ranks of “legitimate” social services. Walker suggests we are now entering a fourth stage, dissatisfaction with and strategic re-examination of the outcomes of the enterprise. To re-examine the work to stop the violence requires that we look first at the mix of who is thinking together. Theory building in wife abuse has become a very urban, professional, and therapeutic domain with a host of experts formally trained in psychology and social work. It is essential we notice whose voices have become absent from the discussion in recent years.

Women who experience the violence are now lodged at the bottom of professionalized women’s service organizations in the structural role of “client.” Even collective or other modified organizational structures, where women seek egalitarian relationships between workers, can overlook the hierarchical relationship between staff and “client” (Srinivasan & Davis). Hierarchical relationships silence those underneath, in this case, the women who are closest to the experience. The result of “legitimacy” within the social service community has been to make the perspective of experience increasingly inaccessible in a movement which was built on collectivizing and making public the experiences of abused women. It is not easy to imagine strategies of social change coming from a therapeutic perspective.

That the perspective of women with experience of the violence is different from that of professional service providers became strikingly clear in our rural community in two recent research projects. In the Ontario Women’s Directorate consultation (Struthers), we asked women and service providers about the direction of future policy in the province. We posed the dilemma of competition for resources between public education and prevention, and the therapeutic work of shelters and rape crisis centres. Women who had experienced violence most often suggested that provincial priorities should begin to swing to the longer term efforts of prevention and social change, followed by administrative providers. Front-line workers were insistent that the priority remain on the front-line.

In 1992, frustrated by our service community’s inability to imagine prevention strategies despite considerable interest, I also interviewed former clients of one of the women’s shelters and the batterers’ program about what they thought the community should do to help stop the violence. These women and men were readily able to draw on personal experience and prescribe for the community. What emerged was the beginnings of a comprehensive community agenda and a framework for prevention. They proposed a web of initiatives that cut across service sectors in the community, co-ordinating and linking sectors in a way that included treatment, education, justice, and social change. The vision drawn from this perspective is broader, more systemic, and more structurally changing than the professional social service notion of “prevention programs,” generally seen as service extended before the need for service is defined.

As we have worked with these suggestions in the service community, it has become clearer how the structures of therapeutic service set blinkers on both the process of imagining what can be done, and the building of mechanisms of organization that prioritize the long-term work of social change. The task now, in our rural community, is to determine how to overcome the subtle, and not so subtle, nuances of power that silence women who speak from the perspective of experience in our organizations. We need to learn how to build women's experience back into the legitimate and professional organizations that have become the site of most of the work of the movement. We need their vision to truly do the work, not just of treating the wounded, but of stopping the war.

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The invisibility of women's work becomes a complex legal tangle when a woman's family work is also business, on the farm. Legal recognition of farm wives' labour has come slowly and often bitterly, as individual women have battled for a fair share of farm assets in the divorce courts. Cases such as that of Irene Murdock and Rosa Becker mark the slow progress of Canadian justice in recognizing farm women's contribution to the family farm.

Irene Murdock was an active partner in the farm she ran for twenty years with her husband, sometimes managing the farm single-handedly during his extended absences. The Supreme Court of Canada refused her petition for half share in her farm in 1975, on the grounds that her contribution was only "the work done by any ranch wife" (Boivin). By 1980, the Supreme Court awarded Rosa Becker half of the value of the farm she had operated with her common-law husband. Six years later Becker took her life as an act of protest against the Canadian justice system. She died in poverty, her assets still tangled in the legal labyrinth.

There have been changes in provincial family law and amendments to federal tax law in the last twenty years, providing farm women with financial status increasingly separate from husband and family (Boivin). Farm women's organizations have lobbied publicly, and educated privately to help women navigate the copy legal waters of property entitlement. Sadly, the recent economic crisis in the farming industry has brought a rapid decline in the value of farm assets, eroding equity that may have taken a life-time to build. Women who gain legal entitlement now may still find themselves empty-handed, because after the debts are paid, there is little or nothing left to divide (Meanwell and Glover).

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