

LearningNetwork

Mobilizing knowledge to end gender-based violence

Issue 35 | May 2021

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN RURAL, REMOTE & NORTHERN COMMUNITIES

Gender-based violence (GBV) takes place in ways that are both unique and disproportionately high in rural, remote, and northern (RRN) communities, but the needs of survivors and local service providers often go unmet.

Survivors and service providers alike often face complex challenges when addressing GBV in RRN communities, in part because the issues shaping this violence may be left “invisible” in public policy, research, and in the communities themselves.¹

Bringing light to issues of GBV in RRN communities requires us to critically examine how the geographic and social contexts of such can create vulnerabilities for women, girls, and gender-oppressed people, as well as how these contexts might foster empowerment, resilience, and community-generated supports for survivors.²

Drawing insights about the challenges faced by GBV survivors in RRN communities can also provide a broader perspective for thinking about the geographical, cultural, and social structural dimensions of GBV more generally across the country. Readers from communities of all sizes might consider how the issues addressed here may relate to survivors’ experiences and needs in their own community.



This Issue examines the interconnections among geography, social context, and GBV in RRN communities.

The Issue will:

- Present current statistical trends on the prevalence of GBV in RRN communities.
- Examine pathways to GBV within RRN communities and how these intersect with other forms of oppression.
- Highlight opportunities for mobilizing the unique strengths of RRN communities to address barriers to support for GBV survivors.
- Advocate for policies and social-structural changes that support the ongoing work of GBV services—and the safety and resilience of survivors—in RRN communities.



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Defining “Rural, Remote, and Northern” Contexts for Gender-Based Violence

Rural, remote & northern (RRN) communities may be classified differently among researchers and self-identified community members. In this Issue, we use the following working definitions:³

Rural: A community or geographic location with low population density and a population less than 10,000.

Remote: A community or geographic location that is not accessible by road year-round.

Northern: A community or geographic location that is designated by the provincial government as being the northern part of the provinces. All the Canadian territories are considered northern.

Distinguishing between each type of community can help to illuminate distinct factors shaping GBV in each context. At the same time, there are social and geographic factors that can make a combined analysis of RRN communities useful for understanding the common experiences of GBV survivors and service providers across all three types of communities.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a term that recognizes that violence occurs within the context of women’s and girl’s subordinate status in society and serves to maintain this unequal balance of power.⁴

To learn more about this term, and other terms used in the GBV field, visit the [Learning Network Glossary](#).

WOMEN IN RRN COMMUNITIES IN CANADA FACE DISPROPORTIONATELY HIGH RATES OF GBV

Rates of police-reported intimate partner violence (IPV) experienced by rural⁵ women in Canada are:

▶ **3.5x**
higher than for rural men⁶

▶ **75%**
higher than those for urban women⁷

▶ **7x**
higher than for urban men⁸

Rates of police-reported violent crime are **56%** higher for rural women than the national rate.⁹

The threat of violent crime against women in RRN communities is heightened for young women and girls.¹⁰

The violent crime rate experienced by young women and girls in the north is:¹¹


▶ **4x**
higher than for Canada's overall population¹²

▶ **3x**
higher than for those in the south¹³

Violence experienced by young women and girls in the north is more likely to be severe.

Violent crime resulted in physical injury for:

 **45%** of women and girls in the north

 **32%** of women and girls in the south¹⁴

The rate of violent offences resulting in death is more than **3x** higher for young women and girls in the north than in the south¹⁵

Colonialism has led to Indigenous women and girls experiencing particularly high rates of violence. Between 2007 and 2017, Indigenous women in the north comprised:

 **34%** of all young female homicide victims in Canada¹⁶

 **76%** of all young female homicide victims in northern Canada¹⁷

These statistics point to the necessity of understanding violence in RRN communities and the critical role of community-based services for survivors.

THE UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF RRN COMMUNITIES CAN CREATE DISTINCT PATHWAYS FOR GBV

Factors such as geography, culture, and economy influence the forms of GBV that take place in RRN communities and the different impacts that GBV has on people's lives. In some ways, these factors can elevate the risk of GBV and create barriers that make it harder for survivors to access supports. In other ways, they provide the key to fostering strong, responsive services from within the community.¹⁸

Recognizing both the strengths and challenges within RRN communities is crucial to continuing to develop meaningful responses to GBV. Here, we highlight factors that make RRN communities strong and unique, but that can also compound the difficulties that survivors and GBV organizations experience in the context of GBV.

1. TRADITIONAL VALUES AND STRONG COMMUNITY BONDS

Tight-knit bonds held among members of RRN communities provide a strong sense of belonging, identity, and connection. The familiarity that people have with other members of their community also affords a network of support if somebody is in need. In circumstances involving violence, however, strong bonds in the community can have the effect of silencing survivors in various ways.¹⁹

Social norms within RRN communities themselves can complicate the ways that some members experience and navigate GBV.

Learn More:

Barriers to accessing legal support for survivors of family violence in RRN communities



In this webinar hosted by Luke's Place and Community Legal Education Ontario, Pam Cross provides an in-depth explanation of the major pathways and barriers experienced by family violence survivors when engaging with family courts.



Women experiencing IPV in RRN communities may be struggling with questions like:²⁰

How can I report this to the police/hospital when we have family members working there?

If I leave, that means leaving our animals as well... What if my partner harms them out of anger?

My partner is well known in our community—nobody will believe they are capable of this.

We have a gun in the house and I am afraid he will use it on me if he finds out that I'm planning to leave.

All of my money is in our family business—I'm not sure how I would even begin to start over.

The nearby shelter looks welcoming, but I'm not sure that it will have the resources to accommodate my disability.

CLOSE-KNIT COMMUNITIES

In communities where everybody knows one another, individuals experiencing GBV may face social barriers to escaping or reporting abuse. Community members may incorrectly assume that sexual violence or IPV is something that happens “in the big city.”²¹ There can be tremendous social pressure on survivors to avoid disrupting community cohesion. Barriers can also emerge directly from the personal relationships that exist within the community, such as:

Credibility deficit

Survivors may encounter difficulties being believed, especially in situations where the individual committing the abuse is well-known and respected in the community (such as a coach, pastor, police officer, or business owner).

Awareness paradox

Survivors may not realize that other members of the community are aware that violence is taking place but just don’t know whether they should get involved.²²

Lack of privacy

Survivors may be unable to access services such as shelters, family courts, hospitals, counselling, or the police without being recognized either by staff or passers-by.²³ In addition to harmful social stigma, this lack of confidentiality poses a risk of escalated violence at the hands of the abusive partner.

For LGBT youth, a lack of anonymity in RRN communities can also serve as an obstacle to coming out on one’s own terms.²⁴ While many participants did experience tolerance from their communities, there were also pressures to “conform.”²⁵

Conflicts of interest among legal or health services

Seeking support may entail disclosing details to an individual or organization with a close connection to the individual committing violence.²⁶

Leaving the community behind

The decision of whether or not to escape an abusive situation may be complicated by concerns about having to leave the community altogether.²⁷

“The abuser may not just be a police officer; he may be the *only* police officer.”

Pamela Cross,
Feminist Lawyer²⁸

“It’s so hard in a small town. There’s gossip and every family has so much pride, they want to keep their secrets to themselves, and not let anybody else in on what is happening.”

Survivor, Grey-Bruce²⁹

THE NORMALIZATION OF FIREARM OWNERSHIP

Firearm ownership is more prevalent in RRN communities than in urban communities.³⁰ Firearms are also more likely to be regarded as a tool in rural communities—such as for protecting livestock and hunting—making regulation a potentially more contentious issue.

Nevertheless, firearms are a common cause of femicide in Canada.

- Between 2010 and 2015, approximately 1 in 3 domestic homicides in RRN communities were committed using a firearm.³¹
- Between 2017 and 2020, the proportion of Ontario femicides committed using a firearm was substantially higher in small and rural population centres (29%) than in large and medium population centres (12%).³²
- In addition to lethal uses, perpetrators may use guns to threaten a partner or family member directly or indirectly as a form of coercive control.

2. GEOGRAPHY CAN PRESENT A BARRIER TO ACCESS SERVICES

Living in a less densely populated rural or remote community provides an element of freedom and independence in day-to-day life. At the same time, this situation can leave survivors isolated, both socially and geographically, making opportunities for other community members to detect the abuse and supportively respond less likely.



PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

The increasing diversity of RRN communities presents a multitude of possible intersectional experiences of GBV. Despite their best efforts, RRN support services may not have the resources to accommodate the complex circumstances of each client. Survivors may have to travel considerable distances to access services with staff/resources that can meet their language, cultural, religious, medical, or accessibility needs.³³

Long EMS response times may be used as an intimidation tactic by perpetrators to deter survivors from seeking police or medical intervention. Violence against women with disabilities may involve weaponizing geographic isolation by restricting access to medicine or destroying assistive devices, which would be difficult to get in RRN communities, to prevent a partner from escaping.³⁴

RRN community members looking to separate from an abusive marriage may also encounter barriers in family court proceedings in RRN areas. Hearing dates are often infrequent, family courts and lawyers' offices may be a long distance from home, and judges may be unfamiliar with the litigants' community.³⁵ In communities that have few lawyers, abusive partners have been known to meet with all local lawyers in order to "conflict out" the available representation for survivors.³⁶



TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES

Escaping abuse may expose survivors to further risks of harm such as hitchhiking or travelling in unsafe weather.³⁷

A national survey of shelters and transition houses (THs) in Canada found that only 45% of shelters/THs in small and rural communities had access to public transit in the community, compared with 96% of those in urban and suburban areas.³⁸

Taxis and rideshare services (e.g. Uber) may not be available in all communities, or they may take too long to arrive and can be expensive. In small communities, they may also pose a confidentiality risk—an abusive partner may know the driver personally and be able to find out the location a survivor went to.³⁹



COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Cell phone reception in some areas may be unreliable, making reliance on emergency services or digital apps unfeasible for some survivors. Since calls from remote areas are often long-distance, contacting a lawyer or other support professional may appear on a phone bill, which can create risks of interception by an abusive partner.⁴⁰

Online communication can also present challenges:

- High-speed internet is as much as **3** times more expensive in the north than in the south, creating a barrier to researching and corresponding with support services.⁴¹
- **40%** of rural households have access to high-speed internet service, compared to **97%** in urban areas.⁴²

3. IMPACTS OF ONGOING COLONIAL INJUSTICE FOR SURVIVORS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

Indigenous Peoples continue to protest the ongoing impacts of colonization on Indigenous lands, communities, families, and individuals. The harms caused by these injustices, as well as the ongoing community solidarity in fighting against them, all affect how GBV manifests in the lives of Indigenous women and girls.⁴³ Because a large proportion of Indigenous individuals reside in rural and northern areas in Canada—and because of the traditional, ancestral relationship that Indigenous Peoples have with the land more broadly—a direct analysis of the intersection of GBV and colonialism is essential.⁴⁴

Colonial policies that disproportionately institutionalize Indigenous children and youth, steal, or exploit Indigenous lands, and fail to bring justice to missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, have contributed to the intergenerational trauma and violence experienced in Indigenous communities.

Intergenerational and historical trauma responses are intertwined with the ongoing violence experienced by Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit individuals.⁴⁵

For many Indigenous youths, child welfare institutions have been a source of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Moreover, Indigenous youth involved in the child welfare system are often targeted for human trafficking.⁴⁶ Perpetrators may use promises of affection, or an escape from abuse or poverty, to lure young women away from small communities into the big city.

Additionally, colonial ideologies that promote homophobia in Northern communities (such as so-called “conversion therapies” imposed upon 2SLGBTQ individuals) can cause emotional and psychological harm, including suicide.⁴⁷ For Indigenous individuals who are 2SLGBTQ, these initiatives continue the residential school system’s legacy of sexual stigma and violence.⁴⁸

Indigenous women living in rural and northern Canadian communities experience higher rates of IPV than those living in urban communities, and these cases of violence tend to be more severe.⁴⁹

It is notable that community-based research has found that levels of violence against Indigenous women are often higher than rates reported in government research such as the General Social Survey or other self-report victimization surveys.⁵⁰ Distrust in police and governments can be a deterrent for Indigenous women and girls to disclose or report incidents of violence. The Native Women’s Association of Canada suggests that as many as six out of ten incidents of violent crime against Indigenous people go unreported to police.⁵¹

The psychological and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is compounded by the context of the intergenerational trauma of epidemics.⁵²

The health threats brought on by the pandemic—and, in particular, the elevated risk factors posed by travellers from southern Canada travelling to northern communities to avoid COVID-19—may rightly be seen as an extension of colonization.⁵³

Many RRN service providers do not feel fully prepared to address the needs of Indigenous IPV survivors in clinical settings.⁵⁴

A community-based participatory study involving 31 RRN service providers in First Nations communities underscores numerous barriers to supporting women who are experiencing IPV.⁵⁵ These include:

- Lack of understanding of jurisdictional complexity of First Nations and non-First Nations IPV services.
- Uncertainty about how to negotiate cultural safety around IPV.
- Lack of referral networks due to fragmented, scarce services for IPV.



4. ECONOMY, ECOLOGY, AND CONNECTION TO THE LAND

Individuals in RRN areas are likely to benefit from a more direct connection with the land than is often the case for city-dwellers. Whether through farming, hunting, recreation, or spirituality, this connection can be an important part of people's well-being and identity, as well as their economic livelihood. However, the integration of rural life and the natural environment creates pathways for distinct forms of GBV to occur. Here we highlight how broader economic and environmental factors may become a catalyst for GBV in RRN communities.

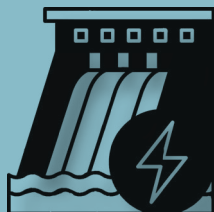
FAMILY FARMS



For farming families, threatening the well-being of livestock, pets, or crops is a potent coercive control tactic because of the economic and emotional harm this would inflict.⁵⁶ For instance, individuals who engage in abusive behaviours may threaten to kill or neglect livestock as a means of financial or emotional abuse.⁵⁷ The personal connection that an individual has with the land—a long family history on (or ancestral relation to) the land, a commitment to the family business, fear over sacrificing the children's inheritance—may serve as a further deterrent to escaping an abusive situation.⁵⁸

“They stayed because they, too, had invested the time and energy in the family business and gained a sense of identity from their hard work on the land.”

RESOURCE EXTRACTION



The influx of transient industry workers (e.g. hydroelectric development, oil and natural gas extraction) in RRN communities can pose an elevated risk of violence against women in the community. These risks are reflected in research findings, such as a 38% increase in police-reported sexual assaults in a northern BC municipality during the first year of an industrial project.⁶⁰ The prevalence of misogynistic and racist attitudes toward Indigenous women has led to the targeting of Indigenous women, girls, and nonbinary individuals in particular.⁶¹

MIGRANT AGRICULTURAL WORKERS



Migrant agricultural workers face a lack of reproductive justice and an elevated risk of sexual violence.⁶² Fear of punitive action by employers, such as deportation, or not being re-hired the following year, are deterrents to women speaking out about their experiences. These barriers are often reinforced by language barriers, social stigma, racism, and isolation.⁶³

“Factors uniquely impacting female [migrant] farmworkers include sexual harassment and pressure to enter into intimate relationships, chemical exposure affecting menstrual cycles and reproductive systems, and vulnerability to STIs.”

PANDEMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS



Natural disasters brought on by climate change, such as fires,⁶⁵ floods,⁶⁶ and droughts,⁶⁷ are a catalyst for domestic violence as well as factors that can indirectly increase other risk factors for violence, such as economic precarity, trauma, and homelessness.⁶⁸ In a similar way, lockdowns, unemployment, and increased alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic increase the isolation and risk of violence for people, including those in RRN communities.⁶⁹

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT:

OLDER WOMEN IN RRN COMMUNITIES FACE UNIQUE CHALLENGES WHEN SEEKING SUPPORT FOR GBV

The research of Weeks and her colleagues illuminates some of the underlying reasons why support services are often under-utilized by older and mid-life women in RRN communities—this, despite the fact that rural women of all ages experience higher rates of IPV than their urban counterparts.⁷⁰

Older and mid-life RRN women may require IPV support and information that is more directly tailored for considerations such as:⁷¹

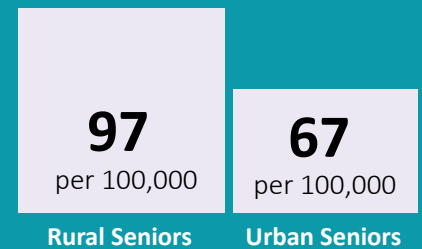
- The prevalence of self-blame and secrecy, which may have intensified over the course of the relationship.
- The significance of religious communities as either a barrier or facilitator to help-seeking.
- Limited employment opportunities and uncertain economic futures without their partner.
- Traditional beliefs about gender roles, the permanence of marriage, or not seeking help from a professional.

Older and mid-life RRN women described some of the IPV supports that were not available in their communities, but would be useful for survivors. These include:⁷²

- Information about access and eligibility concerning available support, resources/services.
- Resources identifying differences and similarities between healthy and abusive relationships so that women can assess their risks.
- Validation of their experience and recognition that it is acceptable to leave.
- Temporary shelter/drop-in centre where support/resources could be accessed.

Among seniors, rates of police-reported family violence are **45%** higher in rural areas than in urban areas.

Rates of police-reported family violence against women in Canada's provinces, 2018.⁷³



Learn More: Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario

Resource: Creating a Collaborative Approach to Seniors Issues in Rural Communities

Webinar: Mitigating the Effects of Social Isolation During and Post COVID-19

SUPPORTING RRN COMMUNITIES AND GBV SURVIVORS

In this Issue, we have sought to highlight ways that the particular conditions of RRN communities may create pathways to GBV and barriers to support, while recognizing the characteristics that make RRN communities distinctive and strong.

We continue this strengths-based approach in this section by underscoring some of the ways that community members, advocates, service providers, researchers, and policymakers can mobilize the unique qualities of RRN communities to better support survivors and increase access to safety and supports.

1. CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES AND CONSULT WITH DIVERSE RRN COMMUNITIES

While it is important to recognize how cultural and demographic factors within RRN communities may affect the ways that survivors access to support, it is essential to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes.⁷⁴ This is the case both for positive and negative stereotypes.

For instance, stereotypical depictions of women in rural communities as “stoic” and “self-reliant” can create pressures to accept or withstand abuse.⁷⁵ Women who internalize these gendered expectations may be more likely to minimize the severity of threats or violence they experience. When this stereotype is also held by service providers, it may similarly lead to a lack of sensitivity or vigilance in addressing the needs and safety of clients.⁷⁶ Stereotypes about the politics, values, and lifestyles of individuals in RRN communities can likewise obscure the actual needs and lived experiences of survivors.

Stereotypes lead us to assume that a “one-size-fits-all” approach can be applied to all communities, when in fact RRN communities are increasingly diverse—both in terms of the people within them and in comparison with other communities across the country.⁷⁷

Policymakers, researchers, and service providers can avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes about RRN communities by:

- Consulting directly with long-time front-line workers and survivors who can speak directly to the ways that service demand and service provision has changed over time within the community.
- Seeking input from individuals who belong to traditionally underrepresented and/or oppressed groups in RRN communities (e.g. Indigenous Peoples, people of colour, 2SLGBTQ people, recent immigrants, people with disabilities, and members of different religious groups).
- Creating “communities of practice” that bring together representatives of numerous communities and backgrounds to strategize about a particular focus area (e.g. emergency services for women in fly-in communities, support groups for 2SLGBTQ youth, legal services for women escaping family violence).

Learn More:

Bonnie Brayton of DAWN Canada discusses the intersections of disability and GBV for rural women at the [Silent Tears forum and exhibition.](#)



The DAWN Canada infographic series [More than a Footnote](#) highlights critical focus areas for supporting women with disabilities and Deaf women in rural communities.



2. FOSTER COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP OVER SOLUTIONS TO GBV⁷⁸

The complex, intersecting dimensions of GBV survivors' experiences create challenges for RRN services that may not have the resources to directly meet each person's needs. GBV support workers may have concerns about directing clients to services that may not fully understand trauma, violence, addictions, mental health, or other potentially stigmatizing issues.⁷⁹ Under these circumstances, organizing collaborative networks across sectors and communities has become an essential approach for GBV agencies in RRN communities.

Mantler and Wolfe advocate for a "no wrong door" approach to RRN service provision: a mandate to draw upon the strength of collaboration to connect RRN survivors with the trauma-informed service they need, in order to not have to turn them away.⁸⁰ The key ingredients of this approach include:

Relationship building

Forming partnerships and/or coordinating committees with other agencies that work with women (clergy, police, sexual assault centres, Indigenous communities organizations, child protection service managers)

Community mobilization

Fostering education and accountability around the most pressing issues within the community, as well as intersectional issues that may have unique impacts on community members.

Revising delivery models

Identifying ways that enable ease of use for RRN clients, such as designating a more centralized "hub" for accessing all services.

Ideas for how communities can collaborate to support the needs of survivors.⁸¹



- Create a safe volunteer driver program
- Use school buses for transportation
- Collaborate with retirement homes for use of their van
- Partner with food banks for community cooking
- Build kennels at shelters or make arrangements for the safe shelter of pets elsewhere
- Collaborate with businesses like salons, pharmacies, and dental offices to recognize warning signs of GBV and refer clients to local resources



Learn More:

The [Cut It Out](#) campaign provides the education, awareness and skills that permit salon professionals to safely refer clients to community resources.

3. FULFIL CALLS FOR JUSTICE FROM INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES


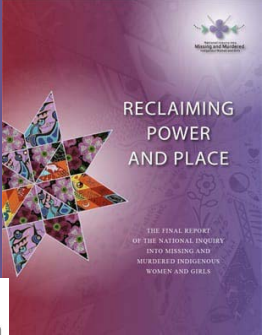
Calls for justice from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (NIMMIWG) address vitally important steps for ending the Canadian state's genocide against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people.⁸²

The NIMMIWG highlights four pathways to the genocide that must be addressed:⁸³

- historical, multigenerational, and intergenerational trauma;
- social and economic marginalization;
- maintaining the status quo and institutional lack of will; and
- ignoring the agency and expertise of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people.

To date, the federal government has yet to fulfil the calls for justice that would bring accountability for these harms.

Learn More:
Read the Calls for Justice from the **National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls** and the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada**.



4. FUND GBV AWARENESS EDUCATION AND SUPPORTS IN RRN COMMUNITIES TO ENSURE EFFECTIVE, ONGOING PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

The vital role that GBV support services play in RRN communities can be strengthened by policymakers in the form of sustained public funding. **This would ensure that:**

Agencies can direct resources toward programs best suited to their communities.

Increased awareness can be spread to communities and service providers alike about the diverse ways that GBV may be experienced, particularly at various intersections of social oppression and marginalization.

Supports are available for service providers experiencing trauma and burnout, especially as a result of the increased service demands brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Full support for survivors also rests on the awareness, accountability, and collaboration of the whole community in confronting the realities of GBV.

This Issue has sought to highlight the ways that the socio-cultural and economic context of RRN communities impacts the ways that GBV is manifested and experienced. This broad analysis indicates some of the critical sites where collective community engagement can foster substantial—and possibly life-saving—changes for women, children, and other gender-oppressed people in the north and in other rural and remote communities.

NEED HELP NOW?



Find resources on the Learning Network website

Learn more about shelters in your area: [ShelterSafe](#) provides links to shelters across Canada.



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Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children

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