

Executive Summary

The current brief provides an overview of the research study that explored rural women's experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) and barriers that rural women face in the prairie provinces when seeking help. We found that women have positive and negative experiences with social services in rural areas. The social services sector needs to know what works and does not work for rural women and address the existing barriers to improve the quality and accessibility of IPV-related services across the prairies.

Introduction

Even though women living in rural areas face one of the highest levels of IPV in Canada and numerous barriers, there has been limited research that explores women's experiences of IPV and their help-seeking (Burczycka, 2019; DeKeseredy et al., 2016). To address this gap, *Responding to Women Who Experience Intimate Partner Violence in Rural Municipalities Across the Prairies* explores women's experiences of IPV and help-seeking in rural areas of the prairie provinces. In this brief, we highlight key findings and implications of these for service provision to improve service response in rural areas of the prairies.

For this study, the RESOLVE Network partnered with the Women's Resource Centre in Manitoba; the Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan (PATHS); Dr. Margaret Savage Crisis Centre, Safe Haven Women's Shelter Society, Family and Community Support Services, and Sagesse in Alberta. The research was led by Dr. Kendra Nixon (University of Manitoba), Dr. Karen Wood (University of Saskatchewan), Dr. Carolyn Brooks (University of Saskatchewan), Dr. Nicole Letourneau (University of Calgary), and Dr. Dawn McBride (University of Lethbridge) and funded by the Prairieaction Foundation.

Research Overview

Research Approach

The research study addressed the following questions:

1. What is rural women's experience as victims/survivors of IPV?
2. What are rural women's experiences of help-seeking?
3. What are the barriers, gaps, and challenges that rural woman experience when seeking help?
4. What intervention services are available to rural women who are victims of IPV?
5. What are recommendations for improving the service response to rural women who are victims/survivors of IPV?

To address these questions, RESOLVE researchers produced several sources of data. A **literature review** that examined previous research on rural women's experiences of IPV; an **environmental scan** of services available to support rural women across the prairies, a **GIS story map** analyzes the accessibility of IPV-related services to rural women and visualizes the barriers rural women face when seeking help; and **semi-structured interviews** and **focus group discussions** with survivors and service providers from rural areas in the prairies.

Results

The nature of intimate partner violence was impacted by the rural context

Rural women experienced several forms of violence within their intimate relationships, including coercive control and emotional, physical, financial, and sexual abuse. The nature of the abuse was impacted by rural living. For example, it was easier to control women's social circle and their movement, and it was harder for women to prevent and avoid coercive control and stalking.

The impact of intimate partner violence on rural women was compounded by the rural context

Rural women experienced numerous impacts of IPV, including mental and physical health challenges, a loss of employment, a loss of savings, a loss of housing, a loss of education opportunities, a loss of visa and legal status in Canada, and the inefficiency of protective orders. These impacts were compounded by the rural context. For example, reputation damage that was part of the IPV (during the relationship or post-separation) made it harder for women to find employment, develop new relationships and feel safe in their community.

For study details,
access the final
report here

Rural women lack adequate formal and informal support when help-seeking

Many rural women emphasized that help-seeking is costly mainly because of the distances they must travel to access resources. Women with a lack of informal support and women who experienced co-occurring issues, including substance use, found it difficult to access resources.

Rural women face unique barriers to help-seeking

Rural women face many unique barriers to help-seeking, such as distance and isolation, a lack of privacy, farm and animal care, limited services and limited connectivity, access to firearms, and other such barriers.

Rural women need more resources and improved access to resources

Rural women need an expansion of shelters, women's resource centres, transitional housing, post-separation support services, mental health resources for them and their children, legal and farm resources, childcare, education and employment-related support. There is a need for more outreach work educating the public and community leaders (such as pastors, Elders, and service providers working rurally) about IPV. Indigenous and immigrant women need culturally safe services and additional support structures.

Recommendations for Service Providers

● Increase education, outreach, and inter-agency collaboration:

- Promote learning about IPV and coercive control in all relevant agencies.
- More financial and institutional support is required for crisis shelters to engage in outreach work about IPV and its prevention.
- Agencies should strive to initiate, encourage, and support inter-agency collaboration across IPV-related services.

● Expand resources and services:

- Services, such as legal aid and immigration services, need to be more accessible to survivors of IPV.
- There is a need for an additional counselling support mechanism, including virtual counselling.
- Navigating the service system can be challenging. A survivor-led support system built into the justice system, for example, can help victims/survivors orient themselves to get the best assistance possible.
- There is a need to develop a comprehensive resource guide for women escaping violent relationships not only in English and French but also in other relevant languages.
- Rural women face animal considerations when leaving IPV, therefore, a guide that provides options for the temporary fostering of pets and animals can be useful.

● More cultural, racial, and gender diversity within service provision:

- Recognition of gendered, racial, and "local bias" across all agencies, especially within the court and police is needed.
- There is a need for more women, more racial and cultural diversity, and more outsiders to control the "local bias."
- There is also a need for more education about racism towards Indigenous and immigrant women within social services and ways to address this.

● Address stigmatization of mental health, disability, and substance use:

- Substance use, mental health problems, and disability impeded women from help-seeking due to stigmatization or fears of stigmatization.

Implications for Service Providers

Understanding how the rural context shapes rural women's help-seeking behaviours and experiences is essential to improving service provision. Our research findings indicate that positive experiences with service providers for rural women stemmed from the provision of information about relevant services and resources, support in accessing safety and continuous monitoring of women's safety, accompaniment to police, help in understanding and navigating the system of service provision, and other supports they received. Negative experiences, on the other hand, included a lack of IPV-related services rurally, a lack of understanding of the dynamics of IPV and its impact, not being believed, a lack of recognition and understanding of coercive control, stigma due to substance use and disability, and other service-related barriers. There is a need to address these gaps and barriers to improve IPV-related service accessibility to rural women in the prairies.