

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 rural living impacts women's experience of abuse and poses unique barriers to accessing help. Policymakers can play a crucial role in addressing these barriers by advocating for the expansion of resources and supports, the implementation of a widespread training program about IPV and intersectional experiences of IPV across all social services, the promotion of coordinated, trauma-informed and survivor-centred approaches to service provision, and other ways to improve the accessibility of IPV-related services to rural women in 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. 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 policy implications 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.

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

For study details,
access the final
report here

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 Policymakers

● Expand resources and services:

- Improve funding for the existing services in rural areas, including women's crisis shelters, resource centres, counselling and legal services (including legal aid).
- Establish more second-stage shelters, childcare and parenting centres (including visitation centres) in rural areas.

● Develop individual educational and financial support for victims/survivors of IPV:

- Many rural women face a risk of homelessness and experience a loss of employment or educational opportunities. Targeted educational and financial support can help survivors of IPV heal and rebuild their lives.

● Implement a widespread training program about IPV and intersectional experiences of IPV across all social services:

- Rural women who sought help from such services as the police, the courts, lawyers, income assistance and welfare sometimes experienced blaming, shaming, or ignorance about the dynamics of IPV. There is a need to train service providers in IPV, its dynamics, intervention, and prevention.

● Re-consider residential and immigration requirements for healthcare access and residential requirements post-separation in cases of IPV:

- Women fleeing abusive relationships should be able to access services and supports across jurisdictions.
- Immigrant/newcomer women who experienced sponsorship abuse or lost their legal status due to the experience of IPV need special arrangements to access healthcare and other services.
- Custody arrangements often kept rural women in an area where they previously resided with their ex-partner. There is a need to re-consider residential requirements for women and their children post-separation in cases of IPV.

● Develop employment policies that protect victims/survivors of IPV:

- To address reputation damage and discrimination due to IPV in small rural communities, there is a need to create a complaint mechanism and supports that guarantee special protections for survivors of IPV.

● Address the public transit gap and digital divide:

- Rural women face significant transportation-related barriers when seeking help for IPV. There is a need for a comprehensive and safe public transit system that connects rural communities to larger population centres.
- Survivors experienced difficulty accessing cell service and internet rurally when seeking help. There is a need to optimize cell service and internet connectivity in rural areas.

● Promote coordinated, trauma-informed and survivor-centred approaches to service provision:

- Victims/survivors of IPV need coordinated and long-term support. Such agencies as the RCMP and victim services need to develop a survivor-centred and trauma-informed approach to their work.
- Develop mechanisms to ensure safety for Indigenous women, immigrant women, and women experiencing co-occurring issues, such as substance use, disability, and other issues.

Implications for Policymakers

The current study indicates that there is a need not only to increase the number of IPV-related services in rural areas of the prairies, including in northern and remote areas but also to improve the quality of service provided. The increase in services should account for geographic isolation, normalization of abuse, a lack of privacy, and other rural considerations. This may require that policymakers seek solutions "outside the box." Furthermore, there is a need to increase education and awareness among rural service providers to address the knowledge gap about the nature and dynamics of IPV and coercive control. Victims/survivors of IPV need coordinated, long-term, trauma-informed, and culturally safe support that centres survivors and addresses diverse needs.