

**ADDRESSING VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN IN A
RURAL CONTEXT**

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Introduction

Rural communities are frequently characterised as being conservative and harmonious, yet these images mask the diversity within communities and conceal the negative consequences if individuals are perceived to challenge the dominant rural ideology. Addressing the issue of violence against women within this context presents workers with multiple challenges.

The authors of this paper are employed as Regional Violence Prevention Specialists (RVPS) with the New South Wales (NSW) Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women and are both working in rural NSW. This paper explores the strategies and challenges in engaging rural communities in addressing violence against women. The authors have found 'mainstreaming' the issue of violence against women useful in developing broad community support and have looked to local networks in progressing various strategies. Despite the challenges of geography, distance, limited services and differing ideologies, successful partnerships have been developed through mutual respect and hard work. This paper has been developed from a rural practice perspective.

Defining "rural"

Implementing the NSW Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women in a rural context requires a definition of "rural". Several authors writing from a rural perspective (La Nauze, 1996; Lynn, 1990; Mitchell, 1994; Cheers, 1992; Martinez-Brawley, 1987) note that 'rural' is a contested term.

It is our experience 'rural' in NSW frequently refers to the area outside the cities of Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong. The six RVPS working west of

the Great Dividing Range consider there are similarities that distinguishes this 'western interior' from coastal NSW. For example the regions west of the Great dividing Range share common characteristics in geography, there are significant distances between towns and centres, it has fewer specialist services available to support women who experience violence, there are more generalist workers and a common ideological culture regarding violence. Despite sharing these similarities the diversity among rural communities must also be recognised.

Diversity in Rural Communities

Geographical boundaries defining regions are artificial. Towns are often parochial and individuals within towns rarely maintain a regional perspective. Towns within regions differ in their economic and business base, their social structure and political influences. Collingridge and Dunn (1993), cited by Homel et al. (1999), note that rural Australia is very diverse in social, cultural and economic terms and different rural areas have different needs.

Rural communities are not homogenous entities. In discussing the diversity of rural communities, Scott et al. (2000) highlight that "Recent commentators have pointed to a tendency in academic discourse... to treat rural communities as homogenous in nature ignoring the diversity in ethnicity, class and occupational status". They note that class, ethnicity and gender are "strong modes of social differentiation" (p 434).

The tendency to "homogenise" rural communities overlooks their diversity. Recognising a community's diversity is essential for any community development strategy – both in the strategy itself and in the processes required to develop the strategy.

Violence Against Women in Rural Communities

There are competing myths created about rural Australia. Rural society is often idyllically eulogised, where "peace and tranquility abound; life is unhurried and old fashioned values are still intact" (Baxter, 1992). For many rural people their lives are reflected in these images. They enjoy the inter-

connectedness of their community and the slower pace of living. Rural communities may also be perceived as “conservative, racist and slow to embrace change” (Mason 2001). The interaction between these myths may support and sustain each other.

Rawsthorne (2000) explores the exclusion of individuals who breach or challenge the dominant discourses for rural communities. This exclusion results in “othering” of those individuals and denies them a place in the broader community. Macklin (1997), cited in Rawsthorne (2000), argues that it is the notion of rurality and particularly the image of ‘one big happy safe family’ that prevents the naming of a range of social problems such as child abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, homophobia, racism and alcoholism (p 21).

Dominant, often conservative ideologies contribute to the folklore that underpins how violence against women is regarded. This was highlighted when women from a small community strongly rejected the idea of locating two billboards at either end of the highway leading in and out of the town saying, “*This town does not tolerate domestic violence*”. The local women responded by saying “we can’t say this, we’d be accusing our men of being violent”. Kate Baxter (1992) notes that it is this same folklore that produces comments about rape, e.g. “we don’t get many of those” or “it doesn’t happen here”.

A cursory glance at the reported rates of violence provides a contrast to the peaceful and harmonious image of rural communities. The NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research demonstrates higher rates per population of domestic violence (1998 & 1999), sexual assault and murder (1997-2000) occurring in rural areas than metropolitan areas.¹

Alston (1997) identified several factors compounding difficulties for rural women who experience violence. These include

- geographic isolation;

¹ During 1998 and 1999, the Far West, North West and Mid-North Coast statistical divisions demonstrated significantly higher recorded rates of Apprehended Domestic Violence Orders granted by Local Courts than Sydney statistical division. During the years 1995 – 2000, the Far West, North West and Murrumbidgee statistical divisions recorded significantly higher proportional rates of sexual assault than the Sydney statistical division. (Local Courts Statistics 1998 & 1999 AVOs Granted; NSW Recorded Crime Statistics, 1995-2000. NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research)

- the lack of public transport;
- the lack of crisis accommodation;
- the lack of financial support;
- the prevalence of guns;
- a perception that violence must be physical;
- uninformed workers;
- the normalisation of violence;
- fears of breaches of confidentiality if violence is disclosed;
- complicated financial arrangements in farming families; and,
- a reluctance to leave the farming lifestyle.

For rural women who are Indigenous, from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, have a disability, are lesbian or are older, these issues are exacerbated.

Raising violence against women as a social issue

One of the challenges for rural RVPs has been to raise the issue of violence against women as a topic for discussion in rural communities. Implicit in this challenge is recognising the dominant ideology regarding violence against women and the cultural mores that support its occurrence.

Aboriginal communities often explore issues of violence against women in the context of “family violence” (NSW Health, Aboriginal Family Health Strategy 1998). We also understand that culturally and linguistically diverse communities talk about “family harmony” rather than violence against women. In acknowledging the unique culture of rural and remote communities, we recognise that rural service providers are developing their own approaches to respond to issues of violence against women. These approaches are respectful of rural culture and community ownership.

Discussing violence against women with rural communities has largely been permitted by ‘mainstreaming’ the issue. Adamson, Brisken and McPhail (1988) use the term ‘mainstreaming’ to describe the process of engaging communities in relevant and concrete issues that arise from direct and personal experience (p 177). In engaging communities about violence against women, communities set the agenda and become engaged in the process of

change. "By addressing issues of immediate concern and offering concrete and practical solutions... contact is made with women in a way that would not otherwise be possible" (p 178).

It is our experience that increased community education has resulted in many rural communities recognising the impact that violence has on individuals' lives and the extent of violence within communities. In practice, mainstreaming issues of violence against women has engaged broader community groups in our respective regions. It must be noted that 'mainstreaming' refers to bringing out and expanding issues of violence against women in the community and *not* mainstreaming services.

The Violence Prevention Plan for the South West Slopes Area developed in 1998 involved a variety of workers from state and local government, women's services, community members and community organisations including Rotary and the Country Women's Association. These workers and agencies would not have normally been involved in the issues of violence against women. The Violence Prevention Plan included a series of prevention strategies with specific attention to the issue of violence against women. A highlight of this plan was the inaugural Reclaim the Night march in Tumut (population 6,000 people). This resulted in 150 women marching in the street during 1998. This success was attributed to defining violence in a way that was relevant and meaningful to the lives of individuals and the development of strategies that were appropriate for the local community.

Working with rural community groups

Due to the limited range of services, the generic nature of many workers' positions and because within rural communities local "connections, relationships, relatedness, networks and networking" are concepts that resonate well with aspects of rural community practice (La Nauze, 1996), working with rural community groups is very important. It is understood that networking is consistent with rural life (Lynn, 1990), it acknowledges the traditions of rural communities (Puckett & Frederico, 1992) and is a respectful way of working (Martinez Brawley, 1987).

Working with community members is also consistent with what the literature tells us about who women tell when they experience violence. Most women

who experience violence tell someone within their family or friendship networks. The Australian Bureau of Statistics *Women's Safety Australia* survey (1996) found that 58% of women who experienced a physical assault told a friend or neighbour and 53% spoke to a family member (p 28). By comparison, of the women who experienced a physical assault within the previous twelve months, 19% reported the last incident to the police (p 28).

As the NSW Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women uses a broad definition of violence and identifies key target groups of women, an opportunity has been created to 'bring to the table' a wider range of representatives to discuss violence against women related issues. Within rural areas this has seen the involvement of various groups who have not traditionally been involved in the violence against women dialogue – the Country Women's Association, rural counsellors, Rural Women's Network, Women On the Land, local councils etc. Utilising networks beyond 'violence against women' services recognises the strengths of these organisations and the integral place they have within the community's functioning.

Social work literature strongly encourages rural workers to engage community groups and informal networks in any community work. The community's reliance on informal community networks is important for personal and community support (La Nauze, 1996) and for coalition building (Cheers, 1992; Martinez-Brawley, 1987). Baxter (1992) considers informal networks are useful in disseminating information regarding sensitive issues such as sexual assault.

In implementing the *Violence Against Women – It's Against All the Rules* statewide campaign (a NSW community education campaign that utilises sporting 'heroes' to promote messages about violence against women not being tolerated in the community), both RVPS developed strategies utilising locally known sportsmen. Within the New England region, three local rugby Union Players featured in a series of anti-violence television commercials and the referee's within the two Rugby zones wore the anti-violence slogan on their jerseys. Within the Greater Murray region, the towns of Albury and Wagga Wagga embraced the campaign. In Wagga Wagga Australian Football League (AFL) or "Aussie Rules" players became local spokesmen for the campaign and featured in a poster that stated, "*Violence against women is not our game*". The Albury poster featured 14 sportsmen from a wide variety of sports promoting an anti-violence message.

Both strategies favoured a local approach where the identities were known. It aimed to make the campaign personally relevant by building on the networks of young men in the region. By being local there was also an opportunity for interaction between community members and the key sportsmen. In both regions, the process in developing the campaign strategy occurred through the use of local networks, connections and informal interactions.

Partnerships

The Strategy promotes both a statewide and a regional approach to the prevention of violence against women. Regional work is centred on forging partnerships with workers from government, non-government and community agencies and community members to identify regional concerns, develop local strategies and implement projects and programs in partnership.

Developing effective working partnerships is important. This takes time, and the energy required is often underestimated. Relationships can mean having cups of tea, or eating meat pies or 'professional loitering'. Relationships are critical to the development of partnerships, especially in rural environments where there is a high regard for personal relationships.

Partnerships have been facilitated by 'mainstreaming' the issue of violence against women. Opportunities have been created to engage a broad spectrum of community groups through the development of strategies that are relevant and/or determined by community members. We are mindful of rural communities' reliance on the informal community networks and indeed, the cultural context in which we discuss violence against women.

A major factor that contributes to the mainstreaming of issues of violence against women is the relationships that develop in the formation and implementation of partnership responses. As with all the significant relationships in our lives, a partnership response to community issues is hard work. Relationships are critical to the development of multi-agency responses and time must be set aside to nurture and maintain relationships at both an individual and group level.

The Safer Times 'Round Albury Wodonga – for Women (STRAWS) project was an excellent cross-border partnership between Albury City Council, Wodonga City Council, the NSW Police (Albury) and Victoria Police

(Wodonga), the Albury Wodonga Women's Centre and RVPS. This project addressed the issue of safety for women in licensed premises through an award and audit system. One of the strengths of this project has been the effectiveness of the partnerships. Working party members truly valued each other's diverse expertise, contribution and skill.

The challenges in working with rural communities

The cultural and environmental context of rural communities presents regional workers with some inherent challenges. These challenges include:

(i) Geography: There are practical difficulties in maintaining a regional perspective when towns are 300-400 kilometres away. This raises implications regarding the participation and engagement of people within communities that are a significant distance away from the RVPS location. Factors of geography, distance and time influence decisions about:

- ◇ The location and frequency of regional meetings
- ◇ Participation in project development and implementation
- ◇ Whether projects develop a local or regional perspective.

Distance requires RVPS to be creative with resources. A model offered by Francis and Henderson (1992) that reflects our approach in working with rural communities is the *focused, indirect approach*. This emphasises a strategic and targeted approach with communities. This results in intensive intervention for a period of time, maintaining an overall regional perspective and engaging in quality locally based solutions. In short this means working intensively in parts of the region, rather than sporadically across all the region.

(ii) Limited range of services and service providers: Within rural areas, a community-based service is frequently a euphemism for one or two part time workers. Workers are often expected to cover substantial distances, provide outreach to smaller villages, liaise with other part time workers, juggle competing agendas and perform a multitude of tasks. Communities west of the Great Dividing Range have limited mobility and are not usually transient. This results in the same people and the same faces attending meetings and undertaking projects. In this context

generating new ideas and new ways of thinking is difficult. Working in rural communities means there are ramifications in offending key individuals, there is difficulty in negotiating around the time constraints and, at times, it feels like an eternal search to find the place of violence against women amongst other competing agendas.

- (iii) Different ideologies: Within rural communities and amongst community groups (e.g. CWA, Zonta, local councils) and some government and non-government services, an understanding of violence against women that incorporates an analysis of gender and power is not often present. One of the challenges for both rural RVPSs has been working with communities in a way that is both meaningful for participants and is consistent with a gender analysis.

In developing strategies, communities make choices about what a particular event or resource will look like. In some instances, it has felt that a standpoint reflecting power and gender regarding violence has not been incorporated in the production of that event or resource. This is personally and professionally challenging and requires substantial wisdom in managing this. As individuals, we make decisions about what can and can't be compromised, what is and is not appropriate, will my input now create new opportunities in the future etc? As workers implementing a government program the decision to remain engaged is sometimes a complex one.

For many reasons, this tension is inevitable. A community development approach requires power to be 'handed over' to community groups (Ife, 1995) and the development and actioning of ideas is an energetic, dynamic and fluid process. In the melting pot of ideas and activity, it is predicted not all participants will have all objectives met. Within the rural melting pot, strategies to reduce violence against women may not address the structural or cultural inequalities, however, they are likely to achieve broad community support and be successful in raising public awareness.

It has been our experience that by supporting initial projects and debates, this leads to the development of mutual trust and respect and provides a platform to address the challenging structural and cultural issues within communities.

During 2001, the issue of violence for older women was explored in the “Stories Over the Back Fence” tour. This project engaged Women’s Health (New England Health), the Country Women’s Association, New England HACC (Home and Community Care) Development Inc, the RVPS and the Older Women’s Network Theatre Group. Through stories, skits and songs the theatre group explored issues of violence and a range of other issues for older women.

The issue of violence for older women had received little attention within the New England region. The Older Women’s Network Theatre group was chosen as a way of inviting “peer communication” with other older women. Over 400 women attended the sessions resulting in several personal disclosures of similar experiences of violence to the theatre group members.

Following the success of the tour and the partnerships between organisations, the RVPS is now working with New England HACC Development Inc in developing education forums for HACC workers addressing issues of abuse amongst older and disabled clients. One of the key issues addressed is how violence for older people is conceptualised differently between Aged Care service providers and women’s services. This opportunity became available because of the previous partnership where mutual respect and trust was well established.

Conclusion

This paper is a reflection of work in progress. It has described some of the issues and challenges in addressing violence against women and offered useful strategies in overcoming geographical, structural and cultural barriers. Working in rural NSW, we have developed, encouraged and seized opportunities to work with multiple and diverse partners.

Projects undertaken as part of the NSW Strategy to Reduce Violence Against Women have been offered as a way of demonstrating our understanding of ‘mainstreaming’ violence against women. We have also described some unique and creative partnerships with non-traditional partners, the possibilities offered in working with rural community groups and potential opportunities as the result of established partnerships.

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