

# Women Living in Isolated Areas

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## ABSTRACT/RESUME

*Les emplois dans les régions isolées de l'Alberta sont à prédominance masculine et le rôle des femmes y est rigoureusement déterminé. A la ferme, la femme est la cuisinière, la ménagère, quelquefois elle travaille même aux champs; elle est généralement la comp-*

*table et la jardinière; elle est aussi responsable des fournitures et chargée des soins aux enfants. La femme n'est jamais considérée comme une partenaire.*

*L'industrie du pétrole brut affecte les femmes de façon différente. En raison du fait que les hommes doivent changer d'endroits constamment suivant les installations pétrolières, se pose le problème de l'instabilité familiale.*



Tamra Farrow,  
CYDNEY, photo-  
graph, 1975

*L'insécurité financière est aussi présente dans l'industrie forestière à cause du grand nombre de grèves et là également, se manifeste des problèmes causés par l'éloignement des hommes de leurs familles.*

*Bien que l'alcoolisme soit un problème grandissant chez les hommes plus que chez les femmes, le nombre de cas-problèmes chez les femmes augmente constamment. Les femmes sont en général des buveuses modérées jusqu'à ce qu'elles confrontent des difficultés soudaines ou une existence dépressive. Etant donné les attitudes sociales d'aujourd'hui, les femmes alcooliques recevront des soins professionnels seulement après avoir été victimes d'un accident mortel ou d'une grave maladie.*

*La question des femmes battues est également un problème existant dans ces régions isolées et aucune maison d'accueil n'est présentement accessible.*

*Les femmes ne possèdent aucune connaissance ou moyen d'améliorer leur existence et leur situation à cause de la pénurie de communication existante dans ces régions éloignées. Notre but devrait être d'établir un réseau de communication à travers les régions rurales, en utilisant les stations radiophoniques locales pour diffuser des programmes sur les questions touchant les femmes. Il nous faut organiser des sessions d'étude afin*

*d'aider les femmes à se revaloriser. Les femmes ont besoin de moyens afin d'améliorer leur niveau d'instruction. Nous avons besoin de l'aide du gouvernement et de l'appui financier également pour atteindre ces buts.*

My paper concerns women living in the rural areas of Canada. My interest in this topic comes from the experience of living in rural Alberta. A minority of women, like myself, come to rural living as a choice after experiencing various lifestyles. However, for the majority of rural women, who do not have such a choice, acceptance of and adjustment to the problems of living in an isolated rural area is often much more difficult. Isolation is as much a political and emotional issue as it is a geographical one. In the first part of this paper I will examine women's roles in the three major industries in rural Alberta--farming, heavy crude oil and natural gas, and the timber industry. In the second part I will look at three problems facing women in rural Alberta--alcoholism, wife battering and communication.

The rural industries are male dominated hence a woman's work roles are largely limited to secondary and support aspects of the work. On the farm she is the cook, housekeeper and mistress. She will often work as a labourer in the fields, thus contributing financially to the farm since, if she did not do this work, it would have to be

done by a hired hand. In addition to her responsibility for childrearing, she is often responsible for the stock, keeping the books and tending the garden. However, she is seldom an equal financial partner in the farm. For example, she is rarely included in decisions of buying and selling. This is true even if she makes an independent financial contribution to the farm. Her social life is almost always interwoven with her husband's interests. Thus, if he belongs to a service club she belongs to the women's auxiliary of the same club. Her only independent involvement is generally with the church.

In the crude oil and natural gas industry, women's lives are also affected by the nature of men's work, although these effects differ from those influencing the lives of farm women. Men must follow the rigs and thus create problems for family stability. The high rates of injury and alcoholism among the men also contribute to family instability. For the women there is little support and very few opportunities for involvement outside their families.

Similar problems exist for women whose men are involved in the timber industry. In addition to the problems of frequent moves and alcoholism, these women also have to deal with lack of good medical facilities, living in logging camps, frequent separation from the family

and financial insecurity generated by frequent strikes. As in the oil and natural gas industry, women fulfil support roles with very little opportunity to integrate other, more active, participation in the work world.

The problems facing women living in rural areas are many. Solutions require both the active efforts of the women who are affected and awareness and action on the part of government. In the second part of this paper, I wish to focus on three major problems facing women in rural areas, namely alcoholism, wife-battering and communications.

#### Alcoholism

Although men with alcohol problems continue to out-number women, the rate of women with alcohol problems is rapidly rising. It is difficult to know how many women have alcohol problems because they often drink at home and their problem is thus less visible to public agencies. Studies(1) have shown that women first abuse alcohol between the ages of 28 and 39. In almost all cases this abuse is accompanied by severe depression and frustration. Given the lifestyles, responsibilities and lack of mental stimulation available to women living in Alberta's north, it is not surprising that the rate of alcoholism is high among women.

Georgio Lolli(1963) (2) compared the

medical history of men and women alcoholics. He found that women alcoholics were most often teetotalers or moderate consumers of alcohol until they were overwhelmed by sudden difficulties or depression, at which time they began to abuse alcohol. Thus drinking became a sudden and individual problem. This picture differs from that of the male alcoholic whose problem develops much more slowly and in a social context. Although attitudes towards alcoholism are changing, most women come into contact with professional help after a major accident or illness.

Help for the female alcoholic in most rural areas of Alberta is either difficult to obtain or non-existent. In a rural community where everyone knows everyone else, a woman seeking help becomes known to everyone in the area. Children in school repeat the gossip they hear at home. Where individuals are inter-related and privacy difficult to obtain, a woman with an alcohol problem faces, in seeking help, both whatever difficulties are inherent in the situation and public exposure of her problem.

#### Wife-Battering

As professionals we are trying to understand the syndrome of battering. However difficult it is for us to understand the problem, it is much more difficult for the women involved who

know no other way of life. I have heard women cry and say such things as: "He only hits me when he is drinking, and he always feels sorry about it when he is sober," or "Ah, he really doesn't hurt me" (said by a woman with bruises on her arms and face), or the saddest remark "You know he is my husband." Wife-battering is one of the most disturbing problems facing women today. Shelters for battered women are beginning to appear in some of our larger towns, but in rural areas they are non-existent. The personal interdependence and lack of privacy in rural areas create problems with the placement of shelters. In urban areas the locations of shelters or transition houses are not generally known. This is important as it gives women the safety of knowing that their husbands cannot follow them there. In rural areas, the location could not be kept private. Even if such a shelter were moved from town to town, the new location would become quickly known through local channels of information and gossip.

Another problem facing battered women is the lack of support from other women. The common attitude is one of blaming the victim, e.g., "she nagged her husband too much." It is commonly accepted that whatever the situation, he probably had a good reason for beating her. There is also the acceptance of the battering as inevitable. The feeling that there is nothing one can do about battering is passed down from

mother to daughter. However, from my experience working with these women, I find that after they begin to feel good about themselves and to develop or regain self-confidence these attitudes quickly change. They then see battering as an abusive act, one that they do not deserve, one that they are not responsible for and one that they do not inevitably have to live with.

### Communication

The lack of communication in rural areas in Canada is a problem that interacts with all other problems facing rural women. Without improved communication, these women lack the support and information necessary to change their social and economic status and to make their lives more meaningful. A chain of communication can be established throughout rural areas across Canada. This is a necessary beginning in social change. Through a well-developed communication system women can learn that sisterhood is a powerful tool and not something to be afraid of. In order to establish this communication network, we need both to use established organizations and to create new ones. For example, mental health departments and home economics departments provide effective ways of reaching women. Local radio stations can be encouraged to have programs that deal with more relevant issues than baking and marriage announcements. Workshops, seminars, educational upgrading programs, and group discus-

sions geared to self-development should be a goal. I believe strongly that we can do this. It would mean more power for women and great advances in health, education, and employment. Government help is critical for financing these programs. It would be costly but we are worth it.

### REFERENCES

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