

The PRISM Evaluation Resource: Feminist Critical Reflection on Anti-Violence Programs in Rural Areas

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Abstract

This paper is based on the results of a three-year research collaboration between academics, government, and community organizations from across Atlantic Canada, out of which evolved a resource for critical feminist reflection on violence prevention policies and programs. Through the voices of activists and clients, we describe the components of the PRISM resource for program and policy makers, developed to better respond to violence against girls and women in rural communities.

Résumé

Cet article est basé sur les résultats d'une recherche de trois ans faite en collaboration entre les universitaires, le gouvernement et les organismes communautaires de la région de l'Atlantique du Canada, de laquelle a évolué une ressource pour la réflexion politique et les programmes de prévention de la violence. Par l'entremise d'activistes et de clientes nous décrivons les composantes de la ressource PRISM pour les élaborateurs de programmes et de politiques, développée pour mieux répondre à la violence faite aux filles et aux femmes

dans les communautés rurales.

In 2001, 20.3% Canadians lived in rural communities (Canada 2002). In the four provinces of Atlantic Canada, far more people still live in rural areas compared to the rest of the country: in New Brunswick, 51% of the population lives in rural areas; in Newfoundland and Labrador 58%; in Nova Scotia 50%; and in Prince Edward Island 62% (2002). Few studies have documented approaches to addressing violence and abuse in the lives of women living in rural communities (Hornosty & Doherty 2002; Jiwani 1998), and there are even fewer studies about violence in rural girls' lives (Cameron 2002). While there are similarities between the experiences of urban and rural women and girls, there are also differences that are grounded in geography and the socio-cultural character of rural communities (Mitura & Bollman 2004; Schissel 2000). These differences are augmented by the social, economic, and political circumstances within rural communities that affect women's and girls' experiences of violence and their access to the resources that are available to them.

Despite these differences, programs to help women and girls in violent relationships have been based on urban life. To provide effective anti-violence programs in rural communities, it is necessary to consider the unique characteristics of rural life, and the specific needs of the women and girls who live there. One of the most significant assumptions of anti-violence programs is that women and girls will have access to a social service network. One Atlantic-based anti-violence program worker explained that the lack of programs in rural communities is one of the primary challenges to developing anti-violence programs:

In a lot of rural communities girls' and women's only means of accessing help is by telephone. Most communities do not have a women's shelter. Where are you going to go if you are an abused woman or an abused teenager? If you are a teenager that gets kicked out of your house, there is nowhere for you to go unless you have a friend who is going to take you in. (NLIA)

Service providers in rural communities must consider the lack of social services available to women and girls when they design programs in their communities. Because accountability has become increasingly important, community-based programs are expected to evaluate the effectiveness of their services. Evaluation tools, however, do not consider the specific needs of women and girls living in rural, remote, and socially-isolated communities. In this paper, we describe the PRISM resource, an evaluation resource that was designed by frontline workers, government officials, and academics who work in Atlantic Canada. The resource is intended to help community-based organizations to determine the strengths and shortcomings of their programs and to identify best practices for addressing violence against women in rural communities.

Probing Rural Issues: A Collaborative Project

In 2000, the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research (FVRC/CRVF), at the University of New Brunswick, began a research project entitled: "Probing Rural Issues and Selecting Methods to Address Violence Against Women and Girls in Rural and Socially-Isolated Communities in Atlantic Canada" (hereafter referred to as the PRISM project). The goals of the project were: 1) to identify conditions that would enable rural women and girls to live violence-free lives; 2) to identify the gaps in our knowledge about violence against women in rural Atlantic Canada and; 3) to develop a resource for feminist reflection on policies and programs that respond to violence and abuse in the lives of rural women and girls. To achieve these goals the FVRC/CRVF, in collaboration with representatives from community groups and government, developed an evaluation resource based on an

intersectional feminist framework that seeks to understand how gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and age intersect in particular ways to shape women's and girls' experiences of violence as well as their access to anti-violence programs and services (Crenshaw 1994; CRIAW 2006). The resource was designed specifically for programs that address violence against women in rural areas.

In Phase I of the project, researchers from the FVRC/CRVF organized an advisory committee that included women who work in government, community groups, and universities to design the evaluation tool. The advisory committee adopted the metaphor of the prism to reflect on the way our experiences shape how we think about our practices and why we work in a particular way, including this research project. The PRISM resource is comprised of six lenses of analysis that enable community groups to conduct a critical self-evaluation based on feminist principles (Seigart & Brisolara 2002): 1) naming violence and abuse; 2) gender and diversity; 3) living in a rural, remote, and socially isolated communities; 4) personal and community safety; 5) intervention across the life span; and 6) feminist social action. The advisory committee developed questionnaires based on these six lenses of analysis. The evaluation includes three stages: first, the director of the program fills out a form that provides background information about the service; second, a researcher conducts an interview with a staff member; finally, a focus group with clients is held in order to incorporate women's and girls' definitions of violence and abuse and their ideas for change.

The next phase of the research project was to test the resource. The advisory committee chose two anti-violence programs from each of the four Atlantic Provinces. The programs were selected carefully in order to reflect the socio-economic and cultural diversity of the region, to include programs that address different forms of violence, and to assess programs that are designed for women and for girls. The programs that participated in the project were:

- ▶ Le Centre de ressource et de crises familiales Beauséjour (Dieppe, NB) is a community centre with the mandate to raise awareness about family

violence and to support victims of violence. It is a bilingual service and most of its clients are francophone.

- ▶ Kikahan Committee (Negoot Gook, Tobique First Nation, NB) is made up of volunteers who promote awareness of family violence in the community and provide services based on an Aboriginal holistic approach to healing violent families.
- ▶ Indigenous African Canadian Women and Violence Project (NS) is an educational program developed by the African United Baptist Association (AUBA) Women's Institute to raise awareness about the specific needs of black women who experience violence.
- ▶ Rural Youth Education Project (Antigonish, NS) is sponsored by the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre. It is a school-based program designed to decrease the incidence of violence toward youths and to prevent youths from becoming involved in violent activities.
- ▶ PEI Rape and Sexual Assault Crisis Centre (Charlottetown, PEI) is a feminist organization that provides counselling for victims of sexual violence and childhood sexual assault.
- ▶ West Prince Transition and Support Services (PEI) provide services for abused women after they leave the shelter. The services include second-stage housing and counselling.
- ▶ Building Healthy Futures Program (Corner Brook, NL) is run by the Corner Brook Status of Women Committee (CBSWC) and is a program that helps senior high school students to develop health policy for their school.
- ▶ Get SEHRious about Self-Esteem and Healthy Relationships (St. John's, NL) is run by Planned Parenthood of Newfoundland and Labrador and fosters self-esteem in young women so that they can develop healthy relationships.

In keeping with the FVRC/CRVF's commitment to participatory action research, local researchers were hired to

interview program workers and organize focus groups with clients. In May 2003, the FVRC/CRVF organized the Violence Against Girls and Women in Rural/Remote and Socially Isolated Communities in Atlantic Canada Conference to share the research results and to discuss ways to implement the program. The following sections discuss the barriers to seeking help in rural areas and the strategies that researchers identified as most effective to overcoming these barriers.

Violence and Abuse: Naming and Defining Violence and Abuse

Regardless of how far the work on violence against women and girls has come, it is still difficult to talk about it. Therefore, naming violence is important because it clarifies what violence means and challenges explanations that minimize violence and tend to blame the victim. This is particularly true in rural areas in Atlantic Canada, where violence against women is a lived reality, and still a private matter, not something to talk about in public. The PRISM resource adopted a broad definition of violence to include all forms of violence and abuse, but followed the feminist argument that violence against women is about power and control. The PRISM evaluation asks program operators to think about how their program connects personal experiences of violence to structural inequalities and constraints against opportunities. The questionnaire includes questions about sexism, poverty, racism, ableism, heterosexism, and ageism.

Many of the program operators who participated identified the shame associated with violence as the most important reason that women and girls are reluctant to seek their services. Thus, many are not advertised as anti-violence programs. Instead they promote self-esteem, healthy relationships, or general family counselling. Le Centre de ressources et de crises familiales Beauséjour offers a multi-faceted outreach service that includes support groups and individual counselling for families. Nevertheless, the centre was organized primarily to help women understand the dynamics of violence and realize that they are not to blame for abuse. One activist explained why it was important to change their language to accommodate the concerns of women in violent relationships:

Participants were concerned about use of the term "domestic violence," they do not think of themselves as victims of violence, but rather of abuse...After attending the support group, participants understood the reference to violence, but they thought that a program with a different name would encourage more women to ask for assistance, since women may often regard their own situations as involving abuse rather than violence. (N2A)

Even though many of the groups that participated in the program used similar tactics to make women and girls feel more comfortable when they seek help, they all agreed that naming violence was crucial to the success of the program because it validated the clients' experiences and reduced the stigmatization associated with violence. This ultimately empowered women and girls who use the programs because it helps them to understand that they do not have to tolerate violence.

Gender and Diversity: Situating the Lives of Women and Girls

Situating women's and girls' experiences of violence and abuse within the contexts of their lives means that we embrace, in a meaningful way, as many voices and perspectives in programs and services as possible. The PRISM resource is designed to help programs think about how their assumptions may prevent some people from accessing their services. It also asks operators of programs that target specific communities to explain why their service is more effective for their community than others.

The Indigenous African-Canadian Women and Violence Project recognized that anti-violence programs must also address the systemic racism that prevents some African-Canadian women and girls from accessing services. One activist explained: "Black women who are living in abusive relationships are reluctant to go to transition houses because they do not see themselves represented in the anti-violence, outreach, and educational material and because few shelters rarely keep in supply personal care products designed for Black hair and skin" (N3A).

The AUBA Women's Institute partners with other social action committees to address a wide range of social issues in African-Canadian communities. Coalitions help the organizers of the program to share resources and expertise, but the true strength of the program comes from its connections to the African-Canadian community. One activist explained that organizing services through the church is effective because it is the foundation of the community: "Attention to issues of religion and spirituality are important. Spirituality brings women together through their abuse despite contradictions in established religions. Churches can be meeting places where women support each other" (N3A).

The Kikahan Committee of Tobique First Nation has also designed programs in which it is recognized that Aboriginal women and girls may feel more comfortable only with other Aboriginal people, and further, that they need culturally-appropriate services. One activist explained:

Aboriginal women and girls feel safer and more secure talking with someone within the Aboriginal community, someone with whom they are familiar and who they know can understand and relate to their situations. Because they feel more comfortable with native run programs, services are first looked at for referral purposes in other First Nations. (N2B)

While programs designed specifically for socially isolated communities are needed in rural communities, it is also important to ensure that all programs address the needs of women and girls from marginalized communities. Many of the program workers stated that their projects helped to bridge rifts between different cultural groups only because they addressed diversity in the planning stage of the project.

Living in a Rural Community

Rural communities create specific barriers for women and girls, but it is also true that many women have chosen to live in smaller communities because they cherish the values associated with them. The PRISM resource seeks to identify these barriers, but also asks people to consider the benefits of country living so that women and girls are not obliged to

choose between their personal safety and staying in their home communities (Jiwani 1998; Weisheit, Wells, & Falcon 1994). There is no essential rural experience, but rural communities share common characteristics that influence a woman's or a girl's experience of violence and her ability to seek assistance (Hornosty & Doherty 2002; Jiwani 1998). Researchers identified the lack of privacy, isolation and the rhythms of rural employment patterns as key barriers to providing anti-violence programs in rural communities.

Women and girls have more physical privacy in rural communities, but less social privacy because of the close-knit nature of rural communities. Seeking help in small towns in rural areas is often difficult for young women because the only person who works for the program may be a relative. One of the young women who participated in our study stated, "My guidance counsellor [at school] is my cousin. So I am not going to go over to him and talk about my problems. He is related to me. So then it is like just because you don't hear about things, it doesn't mean that it isn't happening." (NL2) Program organizers also stated that women and girls in rural communities are often under surveillance by the community. For example, people recognize the cars that are outside of the services in their communities, and this makes many women and girls afraid to ask for help.

Seasonal work is common in Atlantic Canada and in rural areas many women live on farms. Service providers in rural areas have developed innovative programs that incorporate the specific needs of women and girls in their communities. The PEI Sexual Assault Centre's Therapy Program organizes support groups during the off-season in order to accommodate the work schedules of women who work in farming and fishing seasons.

Toward Personal and Community Safety

The PRISM resource is based on the premise that safety is a social responsibility and this lens of analysis asks program operators to consider how their violence prevention interventions coordinate community resources to support women and girls who are dealing with violence. The effectiveness of any anti-violence program depends on a high degree of support from police, victims' support services,

counselling programs, and the criminal justice system. But coordinating services in rural areas can be difficult because of the lack of resources, social services, and police officers who are available to respond to emergency calls. Moreover, there may not be adequate resources in rural areas to address the specialized needs of particular groups, as this project discovered for all girls and women, especially girls and women from Aboriginal, Francophone, and African Nova Scotian populations.

Public awareness of anti-violence programs is essential to their success, but getting the message out in rural areas poses unique challenges. The Get SEHRious! project delivers interactive workshops to teens that teaches young women and men the skills they need to create healthy relationships. The project is delivered in schools, community centres, and other places where young men and women go. To afford some privacy to teens, workshops may be advertised in one community and offered in another. Sometimes young men and women are taken on out-of-town retreats.

Intervention: Making a Difference in the Lives of Women and Girls

The intervention lens asks activists to determine what practices work, why they are effective, and how the program is tailored to rural communities. The lens identifies whose needs the programs does not meet, and also examines woman-centred programs that are meeting women and girls' needs in order to better understand what makes a program effective.

The Building Healthy Futures program teaches students to carry out needs assessments with their peers at school. Through focus groups that they conducted at school, students learned that many other students thought that physical education programs reinforced gender roles that encouraged young women to be submissive, and boys to be more authoritative. One activist explained why many students were uncomfortable in these classes:

Phys. Ed. is all about bodies...so it heightens any physical issues, be it real physical or perceived male/female differences and gender as a parameter

for male/female relationships. Girls admitted they get sucked into behaving like a so-called traditional feminine girl when they are in Phys. Ed. class. The boys get pulled into behaving super macho masculine. (NLI)

The student researchers recognized that this behaviour was also contributing to unhealthy intimate relationships. Using the findings of their own study, the students made policy recommendations to the school board. In collaboration with students, the Corner Brook Status of Women Committee (CBSWC) created a policy-based pamphlet entitled A Gender Handbook for Physical Education Teachers that outlines a variety of gender inequities in the physical education classroom and provides suggestions to help create more equitable learning experiences.

Feminist Social Action: Individual and Social Change

The PRISM resource asks program organizers how they make connections between individual experiences and the social, political, and economic conditions that shape experiences of violence. Changing attitudes about violence is a particularly important component to ending violence in Atlantic Canada because there is still a tendency to tolerate abusive behavior in farm communities (Hornosty & Doherty 2002). In New Brunswick, one in five people surveyed believe strongly that violence should be kept behind closed doors (New Brunswick 2002).

West Prince Transition and Support Services provides opportunities to talk about violence by organizing support groups for women where they can share stories and feel less isolated. At the personal level, participants gain information on family law, safe housing, the criminal justice system, and welfare options in order to change their own circumstances. Women are also encouraged to strategize so that they can take individual and collective action that will help abused women. One woman who participated in the program explained that building on the creative ideas generated in the support groups was an important aspect of the program:

It drastically changed my life; it gave me courage

and strength. I don't know where it came from, but I was timid and scared to move, scared to breathe. [The Outreach coordinator] makes you feel like you can do stuff. She makes you feel good about yourself. She compliments you and she says little things that you pick up on. I am back in school now and last year I did well, I can't wait to tell her. I have moved from victim to survivor to warrior. (P2B)

Activists and women who participated in the program reported that when abused women begin to make the connection between their personal experiences and how the world constructs their position they begin to question not only the meanings that shape their lives, but also to think of themselves as other than victims. Supporting women's and girls' empowerment entails both education about violence against women, changing social attitudes about gender and the family, and providing options for women and girls that allow them to identify the personal changes that they need to make (Profitt 2000).

Encouraging women and girls to become politically involved in feminist projects is a key challenge for groups with a social action component. Activists involved in the Rural Youth Healthy Relationships Project found that young women were resistant to feminism and both young women and men rejected the fact that in personal relationships, men are more likely than women to be abusive. The Antigonish Women's Resource Centre developed the program because many girls in their community thought that feminism is irrelevant and consequently believed they can do whatever they wanted to do because they lived in a safe world. Boys also wanted to hold on to this view because they did not want to acknowledge male privilege. As one of the organizers stated, "Without consideration of gender and diversity, a program would lapse into being 'neutral,' which doesn't reflect anyone's experience" (N3B). Students who found the program useful agreed with the organizers that a gender-based analysis of violence against girls and women is imperative.

Concluding Remarks

The PRISM project came about as a result of feminist reflection on the need to better understand how community context is critical in understanding violence against girls and young women and how knowledge regarding the perpetration of violence might be broadened to include the experiences of rural populations and the differences in policy and program response that are grounded in geography. The PRISM project illustrates that girls and women need women-centered programs and policies to help them cope with the violence in their lives. However, to be effective, these programs must be developed in accordance with the specific social, economic, and political context of area in which they live. Making a difference in the lives of rural girls and women means recognizing and responding to how various unequal social relations affect girls' and women's choices (e.g. poverty and the tendency to attribute violence against women to cultural differences) and consequently limit women's and girls' opportunities to live violence-free lives and relationships.

The PRISM resource is a tool that recognizes that while rural areas present specific and daunting challenges to women and girls, it would be misleading to argue that life in smaller communities is entirely negative. Many women do not want to leave rural communities because they value the sense of community and the way of life. A strong sense of community can also motivate service providers and community organizations to galvanize against violence, and to develop well-coordinated responses to abuse. The programs and services that participated in this project demonstrate how rural communities can and do develop creative solutions at the grassroots level that address the specific needs of girls and women living in rural areas. The six lenses of analysis developed in the project provide a valuable means of critical feminist reflection on the development and implementation of programs and services in rural communities.

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