

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: PREVENTION AND SERVICES**

**HEARINGS**  
BEFORE THE  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON SELECT EDUCATION**  
OF THE  
**COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR**  
**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**NINETY-SIXTH CONGRESS**  
**FIRST SESSION**

HEARINGS HELD IN WASHINGTON, D.C., ON JULY 10, 11, 1979

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## RURAL PERSPECTIVE ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Presented by Shirley J. Kuhle, GRI, CRS  
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Board Member, Nat'l Organization of Victim Assistance (NOVA)  
Co-Chairman NOVA Domestic Violence Committee

In all probability, domestic violence occurs with no greater or lesser frequency in rural as opposed to urban areas, but the problems faced by a battered woman in a rural area are greatly compounded by the facts of rural life.

It's very difficult for many people to understand why the family unit, which most of us think of as the very foundation of our society--especially in rural America--and the place we look to for love, warmth and intimacy, is, in reality, many times a battleground.

Though most people today have a growing awareness of the increase of violence and violent crimes, we think of it more in terms of big cities and street crimes--such as being raped or robbed or beaten by a stranger rather than the attacker being someone we love or know intimately--and yet women are twice as likely to be assaulted or murdered in their own homes than anywhere in the country! In other words, Wife Abuse is not just a big city problem--it is a national dilemma just as prevalent in rural areas, if not more so.

The most obvious problem is the serious lack of human services in rural areas. Where can a woman turn when the nearest doctor is 30, 50, or even 75 miles from her home? When there is only one mental health counselor serving her county, and three others as well? And some of those counties are larger in area than the state of New Jersey. In her desperation, a battered woman can go to great lengths to seek help if she knows it is available. Recently in Nebraska, a woman tried to reach a shelter that was 150 miles away--on foot. After walking nearly 75 miles with her small children on back roads, she reached a town that had a volunteer task force, and they arranged for her transportation the rest of the way to the shelter.

The sparse population and great distances between neighbors create an isolation that is psychological as well as physical. Transportation to agencies is difficult to arrange, especially if a woman does not have her own car. The lack of jobs and opportunities to upgrade her skills contribute toward making women financial prisoners of their abusive marriages.

In rural areas and small towns, anonymity is impossible. A doctor in a small farming community of 1400 people, in the past months, has had five really severe cases of Wife Abuse. For instance, he treated a young divorcee whose boyfriend hit her in a jealous rage and broke her jaw in two places. He also hospitalized a married woman whose husband claimed she fell in the bathtub--she had bruises and lacerations all over her body, two black eyes, and three broken ribs. Just to give you some idea of the lack of documentation of these incidents in the past, the doctor did check back through the hospital records and found that the man's first wife had been admitted to the hospital five times with the same type of injuries that she had supposedly received from falling downstairs, falling out of a car, and, believe it or not, falling in the bathtub twice. We realize now that a lot of battered women HAVE been hospitalized over the years without admitting what really happened.

These cases represent the ones who HAD to seek help because of the extent of their injuries (and yet the woman with the broken jaw sat at home for two days telling members of her family she had a toothache because she didn't want anyone to know what had happened to her. I think that attitude of concealment is much more common in smaller communities than it is anywhere else. For instance, in a city if a woman calls for help she can usually remain anonymous, whereas in a small town if she calls for help, she will very likely be the main topic of conversation the next day, and she knows it. In fact, the rural woman caught in a violent home situation suffers a VERY SPECIAL sort of isolation. There is the obvious geographic location of a farm woman who may live anywhere from 5 to

50 miles, or even farther, from her nearest neighbor or town--and therefore from help of any kind. This means that the batterer, who is generally over-possessive by nature and actually wants to segregate his victim from society and thus make her completely dependent upon him both emotionally and financially, has a perfect built-in situation to do so. These women who suffer this GEOGRAPHIC as well as SOCIETAL ISOLATION have the same feelings of depression and despair which all abused wives have in common, but they are likely to be more severe because she is really very much alone in her plight. We all quote expert Erin Prizzey when she says, "they all scream quietly so the neighbor won't hear; but with rural women it won't really matter whether or not they scream at all!"

Also, the law enforcement people who traditionally don't like to become involved in family disputes are especially reluctant in small communities when they know both parties personally. Those of us who have worked with Domestic Violence--urban or rural--have encountered many of the same problems in dealing with public officials, but several factors are present in smaller communities which must be considered. unique--and one is, as I have said, this personal familiarity situation which is unavoidable in small towns. Added to this is the fact that, unlike a city where the police force is generally quite large, the likelihood of the same officer being summoned to the same home is reduced. But in small towns where there are perhaps only three or four officers to be called, we find that they are very antagonistic toward chronic cases or when the wife had called before, even a few times. It wasn't uncommon for them to ignore her calls for help altogether by telling themselves and the community, "so and so is at it again." So, until the advent of local Task Force groups, this attitude most certainly placed the rural woman and her children in a completely indefensible position, with absolutely no place to turn for help.



When we began to establish a working relationship statewide with the local police and county sheriffs, we soon realized that a variety of very understandable procedures were being used to deal with family disputes and domestic violence. Here again, of course, this can be true in larger cities, but city policemen are required to take more intensive training in preparation for their work and refresher courses are usually given periodically by professionals, whereas in outstate Nebraska, all that is required to become an officer is several weeks at the State Police Academy, and there is no provision for in-service training, as such. So procedures policies are generally set at area meetings which can include ten counties or more. This means that when a poor policy is adopted, it can be very widespread. For instance, we found that in a number of counties they had devised what they decided was the best solution to family dispute calls, and that was simply to jail both husband and wife. This, we were told, not only served to separate the parties, but it discouraged future calls. We even had highway patrolmen tell us this was what they did, because they are included in these area meetings. It's hard to believe that anyone would ignore or even jail a woman who has been beaten, but that's what was happening. Women were also receiving very poor advice concerning their legal rights, because, to tell you the truth, law enforcement officers in rural areas may not know themselves what the statutes are or what options are available to a woman who has been assaulted.

Just briefly, I'd like to mention just a few other factors relative mainly to rural areas, and one is the lack of available social service resources. Until just recently, the closest mental health group for some areas was 80 miles away, and that's not uncommon. We now have an area mental health counselor who rotates her time in all of the towns in our four-county region, but she is already so overburdened with work that she can't accept any new cases. She is, however, training Task Force members who volunteer to be on call, because just like the law enforcement people, she needs all of the help she can get.

We have no legal aid resources, and this has presented a rather serious problem considering the fact that we many times encourage women to take rather serious legal steps to solve their dilemmas. Some local Task Force groups have dealt with this by working with attorneys to develop a revolving system by which each one will accept cases of this nature periodically, and other groups are pursuing the possibility of counties hiring a public defender by district. In other words, four or five counties would share the cost.

Financial resources that have been made available in larger cities in regard to Wife Abuse, such as United Way, Salvation Army, YWCA, etc., are simply non-existent in rural areas. So they have to depend upon people who do care, and luckily, many of these people who care do live in small towns as well as big cities.

But the determining factor which very often keeps a rural woman trapped in a violent home is the fact that, if she leaves, the job opportunities are very meager in her immediate area, and many times her lack of education and saleable job skills discourage her from moving to a city, or anywhere else, for that matter. She is then, actually a financial prisoner of her marriage, and actually believes she cannot live without a husband or father for her children, no matter how bad he is.

There are no long-term shelters available in Nebraska. The best we have been able to provide in rural Nebraska are emergency shelters in motels outside the immediate area, or in homes of local Task Force members far enough from the natural home situation that they can remain anonymous.

In addition to the factors of distance and population, rural can be defined as a mindset. It is typified by an essentially conservative outlook on sex roles, the family, and methods of problem solving. There is widespread acceptance of stereotypic roles, and many people, including women, believe it is acceptable for a man to beat his wife.

Finally, and this is perhaps purely speculative, but I have lived a great part of my life in rural areas and I have found that rural and farm women, probably because of polarization, are much more likely to accept their so-called stereotyped sex roles in which the male dominates the female, and the husband is the monolithic head of the household. Many still entertain the very antiquated notion that the wife IS the property of the husband, to do with as he wishes, and if he beats her she somehow ironically believes the inadequacy is in HERSELF.

SUMMARY: We need special training for law enforcement and mental health agencies, legal and medical personnel. Often they accept the myths and are unsympathetic, or when they want to help, are unprepared, both personally and within their agency, to deal with the complexities of a battered woman's dilemma. We need to establish transportation systems to make human services more available, because public transportation is inadequate at best in the cities of these states, and non-existent in the small towns and rural areas. We need to expand and coordinate the services that are available. Local volunteer groups have proven very effective in rural areas and need support. Cooperation among agencies and volunteer groups is essential and must be encouraged. We need networks of volunteer groups and agencies, and some services, such as shelters, may work best on a regional level in rural areas. This means cooperation and communication. All of these efforts must be aimed at the empowerment of women.

These projects need funding, of course, which is a major problem in rural areas. Sparse population and great distances increase costs, and the small population means there is less money available internally. Therefore, we need small grants for local groups, larger ones for state or regional programs. There must be special provisions, including no hard-match requirements, to insure that less populous areas will get adequate funds.

We need large-scale education programs directed at the general public to raise awareness of the problem of domestic violence, and to dispel the myths and stereotypes that surround it. We need to examine the causes of violence and teach people alternative ways of dealing with stress, tension, and anger. We need to change attitudes toward women, women's roles in society, the macho concept of masculinity, and violence of all types. We must make it clear that violent behavior is unacceptable. Children must receive special attention in these programs, for they are our hope for a non-violent future.

**END**