

Barriers to disclosure and reporting

While the under-reporting of sexual assault remains endemic to most communities, the factors that weigh against a woman feeling confident or willing to disclose may differ according to where she is situated. For women living in rural communities, the most common barriers to disclosure and reporting concern the absence of specialist victim services, the problem of maintaining confidentiality, and the fear of having to manage a community response that is largely unsympathetic, if not overtly hostile, towards the victim/survivor.

What are some of the barriers to disclosure and reporting faced by women in rural communities? How are these barriers different from those faced by women in urban areas?

Isolation

Greater distances from support services, medical care and police services all impact on whether victims will feel able to disclose and seek counselling support, and whether they will consider reporting to police. While the majority of the services in regional centres surveyed by ACSSA were able to provide a 24-hour emergency response to victims of recent assaults, they also described the difficulties of providing adequate support in the face of limited forensic or medical care being readily available.⁸ Most services also offered follow-up counselling support to victims, including outreach services in certain regions, but spoke of their frustrations at being unable to access women who were particularly isolated through lack of transport or even access to telephones.

All of the services felt hampered by inadequate funding and resources, especially those where either sole-workers or undersized teams providing the only specialist service response to victims of sexual assault in their region:

“Rural people have to rely on social support or the local GP as there are fewer professional services to turn to. If those support people aren’t around they face more isolation. The risk of isolation is greater in rural areas than in metro areas.”

One worker also reminded us of how isolation is not simply a property of the physical environment, but also refers to people’s perceptions of being isolated:

“One of the big issues for us is that each of the ten population areas in our outreach scope are not that far away from other population areas but there are mountains between them that seem to cause a psychological barrier, a perception that they [clients] cannot possibly travel to a nearby location for counselling. Each centre sees that it is particularly isolated and demands services be brought to them.”

Hurriyet Babacan (1999: 239) has described how women from non-English-speaking backgrounds in rural communities also uniquely suffer the effects of isolation that flow from the “lack of culturally relevant support services, breakdown of family networks . . . a lack of child care, and transport difficulties”. In the absence of programs or research that can speak to the nature and extent of immigrant women’s experiences of violence (Victorian Law Reform Commission 2003), mainstream service delivery has been unable, and perhaps ill-equipped, to respond to the needs of different ethnic communities.

Visibility and lack of anonymity

The problem of maintaining anonymity and confidentiality was nominated as the primary barrier to disclosure by every service ACSSA surveyed. The literature describes rural communities as having high levels of “acquaintance density”, meaning that most people have some level of familiarity with most other people in the community. When O’Connor and Gray (1989) interviewed 5 per cent of the population of a small rural town, they found that aggregating these people with their relatives currently living in the district accounted for almost 59 per cent of the local population (cited in Hogg and Carrington 1998). High levels of acquaintance density have been said to lead to both strong informal social controls and increased levels of surveillance, particularly of women and girls (Hillier and Harrison 1999).

For sexual assault victims this translates into a near total lack of anonymity when attempting to access medical, counselling or legal services, and the corresponding fear of services being unable to guarantee confidentiality:

“The big step in coming forward is whom they’re going to know, whom they might run into. In metropolitan regions, women wouldn’t have to face this as much.”

“There are significant issues around confidentiality and privacy. All victims and their families experience some level of concern regarding these issues because of greater visibility in the community when accessing a service.”

“Survivors attending services are recognised by people walking along outside the service. Most things that happen in country towns are known about within hours. Privacy and confidentiality is a huge factor. Some workers in these services could be a relative of the perpetrator or indeed of the survivor, which would make it extremely hard for a survivor to attend the services to seek help. In the country areas the impact of shame is much higher.”

Perceptions of sexual assault

Many commentators suggest that greater conservatism and a deep commitment to maintaining traditional gender roles mean that perceptions of sexual assault, victims and perpetrators can be less progressive than in metropolitan areas (Mason 2001; Ermacora 1998). While many of the services surveyed emphasised the need to maintain a more balanced view in considering how rural communities culturally respond to sexual assault, workers were emphatic that community attitudes were still extremely problematic for both victims and workers, and it was their belief that this constituted a significant urban/rural difference:

“It can be a very patriarchal community here, where having those kinds of attitudes is seen as something to be proud of. People are less concerned with appearing to be remotely politically correct. When people find out where I work . . . they say things like ‘Is that where you go to get it?’ or ‘What do you do there then, because there can’t be much of that’. A GP said to me once that he’d worked here for 25 years, and prior to my coming [to the region] there just hadn’t been any sexual assault.”

“I believe that people within rural settings are unaware of the extent that sexual assaults actually occur. Whereas, I believe, people in metropolitan areas (namely women) are more cautious and aware about sexual assault

and the likelihood of it occurring. I believe in both centres, however, that people tend to view possible assailants as being 'strangers', which in actual fact only accounts for approximately 20 per cent of sexual assaults."

Community insistence that "there's no full-on rape here" (reported by rural police officers to Dietrich and Mason (1998: 9)), is a strong theme in the survey responses, and was also framed as a qualitative difference between rural and metropolitan areas, where the latter was seen to have a greater general awareness of sexual assault:

"A lot of the offences . . . are kept secret and not reported and a lot gets swept under the carpet. There is less impact on the community, as what they don't hear about isn't happening. The metropolitan areas are more proactive in this area as they have marches, seminars, forums and many other activities to be more vocal in informing the community."

An Indigenous worker also described how managing the denial of sexual assault remained a significant tension during the time the service was first being established:

"The 'non-believers' of sexual assault or the perpetrators say we don't need the service as it doesn't happen in the community."

Informal social controls

Ruback and Menard (2001: 134) suggest that "social climate may have the biggest impact on failure to report in rural areas". Many different types of social structures and belief systems can contribute to methods of social control that militate against the social disruption produced by disclosing or reporting sexual assault. Some factors that are frequently mentioned in the literature include a strong emphasis on rural women remaining self-reliant and an implicit injunction against divulging personal problems, or in compromising the sanctity of the family. Family problems accordingly should never become public knowledge.

Similarly, where a woman experiences ongoing sexual or physical violence in a relationship, she may feel significant pressure to try and save the marriage for the sake of the family. A woman from South Australia's Barossa Valley told Wendt and Cheers (2004) that: "The hard working rural background is that you try and try . . . and keep at it against all odds. I was battling against the odds and I wanted to stick it out".

A number of services also noted the rural emphasis on self-reliance in their clients:

"There's less help-seeking in rural culture – more acceptance that it is their lot in life."

Indigenous workers, and those providing services to communities with high Indigenous populations, emphasise the specific dynamics of social and/or cultural controls resulting from close community ties and extended kinship networks:

"The survivors face community shame. Their families are ashamed and don't believe the survivor. The community talks about the survivor – usually saying that they are nothing but a so-and-so and deserved it. Or there's an entrenched belief that it couldn't have happened as they are not injured or their clothes torn. Families break down as some families believe and others don't. The survivor is harassed and tormented by the perpetrator's extended family and friends . . . smaller communities know most people and snicker about it while the survivor is around. This in turn impacts on the survivor and

they stop going out socially, become a hermit – and some contemplate suicide.”

“Cultural issues also impact on the reporting of sexual assaults, as it is considered ‘shame’, not necessarily to *be* sexually assaulted, but to *report* sexual assaults, as this could have implications on the family, the victim or the perpetrator. Indigenous victims of assault, if reported, also face backlash from their communities/relatives, more especially if the perpetrator is also Indigenous.”

“There’s high pressure to recant story in Aboriginal communities, and a very high risk of suicide once they disclose, as they get such a hard time. Upon return to communities, they are very isolated. Children who disclose are sometimes removed from communities and placed in town, sometimes with non-Aboriginal families.”

Mainstream services also acknowledged how little use was made of their services by Indigenous communities. Few Indigenous women saw mainstream services as being able to provide counselling support that would be culturally appropriate, or that would share a consciousness of the particular historical difficulties that impacted on their willingness to report sexual assault to police. Where Indigenous workers were employed, services were moderately more successful in encouraging Indigenous victim/survivors to access support. One worker also noted how more Indigenous women had attended their service after a perpetrator had been convicted in the previous year.

Reporting to police

The barriers victim/survivors face in reporting sexual assault to police in a rural context mirror many of the same fears talked about by victims of physical and sexual violence, regardless of where they are situated (Nicholson 1998; Dietrich and Mason 1998; Knowles 1996; Coorey 1988). Alongside the common concerns about the legal system, the absence of social supports, and the debilitating sense of shame or self-blame often identified by those who have experienced sexual assault, however, are the very real practical problems that are specific to living in rural or isolated communities.

In smaller communities there may only be a part-time police presence, or possibly none at all. In the context of domestic violence, Lovell (1996) and Nicholson (1998) have described sole-worker police having to wait for back up from neighbouring towns before responding to call-outs to an outlying property. In this literature there is also a strong sense that police culture, perceptions of violence against women, and existing relationships between police officers and the perpetrator or the perpetrator’s family make reporting extremely difficult, or can compromise an appropriate police response. While Nicholson (1998) suggests that police attitudes may have improved insofar as sexual assault is concerned, with members being generally more sympathetic to victims of sexual assault than they were to calls to assist victims of domestic violence, where the perpetrator is a current or former partner, or where there is no physical injury to the victim, the police response is still identified by some rural services as problematic (Victorian Law Reform Commission 2003). Lievore (2003) writes of the “boys club mentality” in rural communities where the networks between police members, the offender’s families, and the offender himself often coincide, which makes victims wary of coming forward. Victims may also be

forced to contemplate giving their statement to a police member that they themselves know.

Nicholson's research (1998) also noted the extent to which police, particularly general duties members, were inadequately trained for responding to sexual assault. For example, some members lacked awareness of the services that were available for supporting victims in their region.

While most of the services surveyed by ACSSA acknowledged there were now formal protocols or arrangements in place to coordinate the police response with specialist sexual assault services providing counselling support, there were still problems with compliance:

“There are formal protocols but they are rarely followed. Some police officers are very good at following them, but they are few. Mandatory reporting is rarely followed through, and the follow-up to reports that are made is, in my opinion, negligent.”

“The issues of the police seem to be the same in that the uniform officers can undermine the experience of the victim and do not take them seriously . . . There is also little support from police if a survivor has reported and is being harassed by the perpetrator, his friends or family.”

“It is hard to get police officers, in particular the uniformed officers, to take reports seriously. There can be a prejudice toward the victim. There is also the issue of police officers knowing the alleged perpetrator socially.”

Other services spoke about the more systemic difficulties of victim/survivors accessing a legal system that remained largely unresponsive to changing the processes and procedures that continued to re-victimise them, especially when it came to their giving evidence in court. These were significantly compounded for Indigenous victim/survivors who not only might face a “backlash for reporting” in the first place by members of their community, but are also subject to the difficulties faced by “all Aboriginal people in accessing a legal system that arises from language, culture, history of contact with ‘white’ systems, etc”.

Projects that have been more successful in working together with Aboriginal women and communities in trying to address the safety of women experiencing family (and often sexual) violence have tended to start with an understanding of the historical alienation of Indigenous people to non-Indigenous processes and agents of law. The cross-border project in the Pitjantjatjara region in north western South Australia supports Aboriginal women “to negotiate a safer life”, by providing support for them to lay charges, to better liaise with police, and by providing court support (Partnerships Against Domestic Violence Projects, Case Study 4). However, the project's success has been assisted by police in three different regions (Western Australia, Northern Territory and South Australia) agreeing to cross-border protocols. The police members involved in the project have also been committed to meeting monthly to share information about how they have responded to domestic and family violence reports.

With respect to the sexual violence being managed by rural and regional court-houses more broadly, services surveyed by ACSSA identified the continuing problem of low conviction rates. Jury members were said often to have some knowledge of the parties involved, or to have already been influenced by the town's “grapevine” which invariably seemed to apportion blame to the victim and not the offender.

The make-up of juries was also identified as highly problematic:

“It is very hard to get a conviction, even when the evidence is overwhelming. At the risk of making an un-politically correct statement, we have few professional people to draw on for jury duty and those who are called are usually exempted. This means there is an imbalance in juries . . . who find it difficult to understand much of the process, let alone the evidence in the way it is presented, and rely on their feelings to guide them. Even if they believe sexual activity took place . . . they disregard the age of the victim and bring in a verdict of ‘not guilty’ to all charges. We have had in the last year two occasions when a Judge wanted to berate the jury for getting it wrong and made this fact very clear to the accused.”

Another worker positioned these problems within a context of a general rural conservatism:

“There is still the traditional conservatism associated with rural communities, despite the great influx of others . . . and there is a generally held view that this is reflected in our local juries.”

Issues faced by rural service providers

“We are under-staffed and under-funded to do the work we could be doing. We could be doing so much preventative work within the schools, such as helping adolescents understand how not to be a perpetrator. We could do more work with the police around how to handle a sexual assault situation and challenge some of the myths they carry around with them in their work.”

While the issues that impact on our understanding and treatment of sexual assault often crosses the rural/urban divide, when it comes to issues of service development and delivery, there are certain factors that clearly affect rural service providers in ways not experienced by their urban counterparts.^{ix} Jacinta Ermacora (1998: 38-42) succinctly locates the problems as falling into two main categories – rural services cost more to provide, and practice relationships are more complex and demanding.

How does the cost of providing rural services and issues surrounding delivery impact on workers in rural communities?

Cost of rural services

Put simply, running a rural sexual assault service is expensive, and entails costs that are not generally encountered in a metropolitan context. Geographical distance, for example, imposes additional expenses: travelling to provide outreach services is costly both in staff time and practical outlays like transport.

As one worker commented:

“The difficulties are based in the remote and isolated nature of the area. The number of hours available for face-to-face contact is reduced by the number of hours spent travelling to different locations.”

The isolation that rural services often experience has a financial impact also - sustaining networks by attending meetings, training workshops or conferences, is far more costly for rural services. The cost of developing and maintaining a high