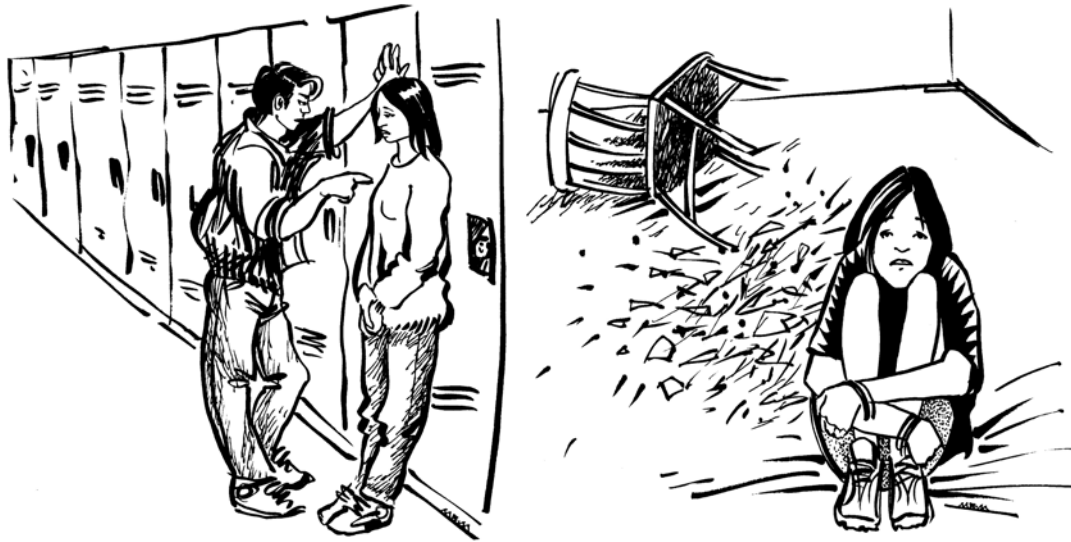


Violence Against Women and Girls



A Rural Response



**A Preliminary Report on Participatory Action Research with Girls
and Young Women in Guysborough and Antigonish Counties**

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS: A RURAL RESPONSE

*A Preliminary Report on Participatory Action Research with Girls and Young Women in
Guysborough and Antigonish Counties*

A Project of: The Antigonish Women's Resource Centre

In Collaboration with: The Pictou County Women's Centre and Every Woman's Centre

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February, 2009

Introduction

Violence Against Women and Girls: A Rural Response is a collaborative project of the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre, the Pictou County Women's Centre, and Every Women's Centre in Sydney. The project aims to explore the challenges facing girls and women in rural communities, and will work with them to develop and implement community education strategies, services, and supports that meet their needs. Each of the three collaborating centres is examining a different aspect of violence as it is experienced by women and girls in rural areas. We are interested in how women experience and respond to violence across different times in their lives, and particularly want to capture the voices and experiences of marginalized and racialized women who often go unheard.

On Cape Breton Island, Every Woman's Centre (EWC) works with a population of senior women that are vulnerable to a number of forms of violence and abuse - financial, physical and emotional. Through this project they are focusing on identifying and addressing these forms of violence by working with senior women and agencies that provide supports for senior women to identify gaps in services and identify better practice programs.

The Pictou County Women's Centre (PCWC) is working with aboriginal and African Nova Scotian women to identify community-based, culturally appropriate approaches for improving services to and reducing the vulnerability of women and girls to sexual violence.

The Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) is examining violence against adolescent girls and young women. Through this project the AWRC is working with adolescent girls in six diverse, rural communities to identify from their perspective the forms of violence to which they feel vulnerable and their specific service and program needs. As well, the project is working with community agencies, community leaders and mentors to identify ways in which communities can reduce the vulnerability of girls to violence.

This report is a summary of some of the initial findings coming from the AWRC discussions with girls and with service providers. We have asked girls and people working with girls to share their stories, insights and ideas for how the lives of girls living in rural communities can be improved.

We believe in the importance of seeking out the voices of girls and young women from rural communities, and of valuing their experiences and their expertise in discussing their own lives. This project has and will be guided by the experiences and by the needs of girls – as they define them. The girls who have participated in the project have been incredibly generous about sharing their stories, their time, and their enthusiasm. They are insightful and articulate, and they have shown a tremendous capacity to make positive change happen in their communities. The stories and the experiences they have shared have sometimes been bleak, but I have gained tremendous hope from knowing them, and I thank them for their contribution to this project.

Methodology

Although the topic of violence against women has received more attention in recent years, the voices of adolescent girls and young women remain largely absent from these studies. The experiences of rural women and girls are also largely overlooked. This makes rural girls and young women doubly invisible, and underlines the importance of seeking out their voices and valuing their experiences. Moreover, much of the research that has been done on youth in Nova Scotia and in Antigonish is quite dated. It provides an alarming picture of the challenges that young women in this area were facing fifteen years ago. Our work with young women suggests that they continue to struggle with gender-based violence, however, more systematic study of the kinds of violence they face and how this affects their lives is needed to develop appropriate responses.

This is a participatory action research project which aims to fill this void in our knowledge of what is happening with young rural women in Canada. Yet there is also a need to translate this knowledge into action and make lasting changes in rural communities. Participatory action research (PAR) is based on breaking down the divisions between “researcher” and “researched” – it is a collaborative and cooperative process that recognizes that researchers are not separate, neutral academics but rather are part of a community of people gathering information and building knowledge about an issue in order to try to bring about positive social change. The aim is to produce knowledge that is directly useful to a group of people, and can form the basis for action.

But what is useful? What actions should be taken? These are questions that should only be answered through dialogue between all participants in the research process. The AWRC has been providing direct services to girls and women for twenty-five years, and this project was developed because of a need that we saw in our capacity as service providers and as women living in this community. We have sought to involve community members, other service providers, and girls through an advisory committee and by taking their guidance throughout the project development. This report reflects a snapshot of what we have heard, and is open for revision. It also provides the basis upon which we, as a community, can decide what we want to do to address some of these issues.

The findings included in this report come from focus groups and interviews conducted with girls in four communities – Canso, Sherbrooke, Guysborough, and Antigonish. We are continuing to meet with groups of girls, and plan to include the perspectives of girls from other communities over time. Due to the nature of the discussions, we sought out young women over the age of 16 to be involved, although some younger girls did participate in information meetings about the project. Meetings have also been held with staff from local service provision organizations, and the project has been discussed informally with various community leaders, parents, school administration and staff, public health nurses, and university students.

The Rural Context

The rural context has dictated both how this project has been organized and the responses from the girls involved. One of the biggest challenges has been organizing and accessing girls in rural areas, where they are geographically spread out and there are fewer organized activities. To address this challenge, we have worked through the schools and through existing youth organizations.

Many of the girls involved in the project live in very rural and isolated areas, although some live in a village or town. While there are many commonalities across different levels of rurality, transportation and access to existing services become more difficult as the geographic distance from the closest centre (in this case Antigonish) increases. As was emphasized in the Senate Committee's report on rural poverty, "rural is not an absolute but a continuum".ⁱ

Rural areas are facing population decline and the steady erosion of services, which only worsens the situation. It is important to recognize that the reduction of services in rural communities does not affect all community members equally. Instead the most marginalized bear the greatest cost in terms of reduced service accessibility.ⁱⁱ This means that girls and young women - who often already face social, economic, and geographic barriers when attempting to access services – are disproportionately feeling the burden of service reduction in rural communities.

Rural areas are distinct geographically, because of their isolation, but also socially and culturally. People in rural communities tend to know each other and to be close-knit. When asked what they liked about living in their community, the girls involved in the project identified this as a benefit:

I like how everybody knows everyone.

You can talk to someone you know.

Everyone knows everyone else.

You know everyone and the people are usually friendly.

However, the close-knit nature of rural communities can also be a draw-back. When asked what they disliked about living in a small town/rural community, the girls responded:

How everything gets around so fast and rumours start.

How all the people in such a small town know you or someone in your family and once someone finds out your business it doesn't take long for it to spread around.

The thing I dislike about a small town is that so many people can spread rumors around and everybody knows about it right away and everyone believes it.

Having everyone know me or my family. Not having many supports.

While there is a strong sense of community cohesion, there are also the difficulties of small-town politics, gossip, family reputation, and a limited number of people to socialize with.

People in rural areas also tend to be more likely to hold traditional values. There is less diversity, and fewer opportunities to connect with other people who may fall outside the local norm. This makes it particularly difficult for girls who are perceived as “different”.

You can't really be all that different around here... like if you were from a completely different race or culture... you can't be different – there's no variety. Even your sexuality. People get made fun of for being gay - or lesbian- because they're so different from everyone else. Around here everyone is the same. You have to be.

It is important to recognize how the context in which one lives, both physically and socially, may also affect choices and vulnerability. We need to explore the ways that rural and urban girls and women may differ, as well as how other factors (including ethnicity, religion, class, ability, and sexual orientation) affect the experience of being rural.

Defining Violence



It is very difficult to define “violence”, and it is difficult to have a discussion about violence without people assuming that it is physical violence that is being discussed. We were concerned with how girls experienced violence, and how they defined it. Instead of providing a definition at the outset, we instead asked girls about the sensory experience of violence in their community – what does it look, sound, and feel like? This inevitably led to a discussion of the different types of violence. In all cases, verbal and emotional violence was identified along with physical violence. Various forms of self-harm, including cutting, were also discussed:

A lot of people do it – I will admit that I've done it in the past. Some people do it because of depression or you've been hurt a lot or you're having problems with your families and you just have nothing else to do – and the only thing that works is just pain.

It is clear that such forms of self-inflicted violence are often related to other forms of violence and loss of control that a person has (or is) experiencing in her life.

Another form of violence which can not be seen but became clear in listening to the girls' stories is structural violence. Structural violence is the harm that some people experience because of their status in society. Those who cannot access the things they need to ensure their health and safety because of their gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or any number of other factors

are experiencing structural violence. In this case age, gender, economic status and geography may prevent girls from being able to access the basic services that they need to be healthy and safe.

Causes of Violence

The causes of violence are complex and may be specific to the types of violence that a particular community is experiencing. However, in each of the communities that we worked with, there were certain themes that generally emerged when we talked about why there was violence in the community. One of these themes was the lack of organized activities for young people in rural communities other than playing sports. The resulting “boredom” was identified as one of the biggest causes of alcohol and drug use in rural communities.

I think that people who've gotten bored as a result have gotten into drugs. That's a huge problem around here. A lot of people around here either smoke or drink. Or both. And it's just because there's nothing else to do.

Tobacco and marijuana use is very widespread, particularly in the more isolated communities.

Everyone smokes in this school... There's nothing to do so let's go hang out and have a few smokes. ... It's not even peer pressure stuff that gets you into it... there's just nothing to do.

Drinking and drug use is identified as a major cause of violence, especially of physical fights (usually between guys) that tend to break out at parties.

People are way more apt to get violent when they're drinking.

The lack of diversity in rural communities was given as one of the major reasons for social violence. In the smaller communities in particular, it was emphasized that anyone who is “different” or “new” gets picked on.

It's so cliquey... even if we were to get new kids, we'd just talk about them or kind of reject them.

This extends to the difficulties of identifying as anything other than heterosexual, and the very real backlash for young people who either decide to come “out”, or who are “outed” by others.

Imagine the people who aren't out and they hear that stuff – and that only pushes them further into the closet and they don't want to say anything, they don't feel comfortable. I don't want anyone else to go through what I went through, because it was hell. If I wasn't strong – like I am – I don't know where I'd be right now.

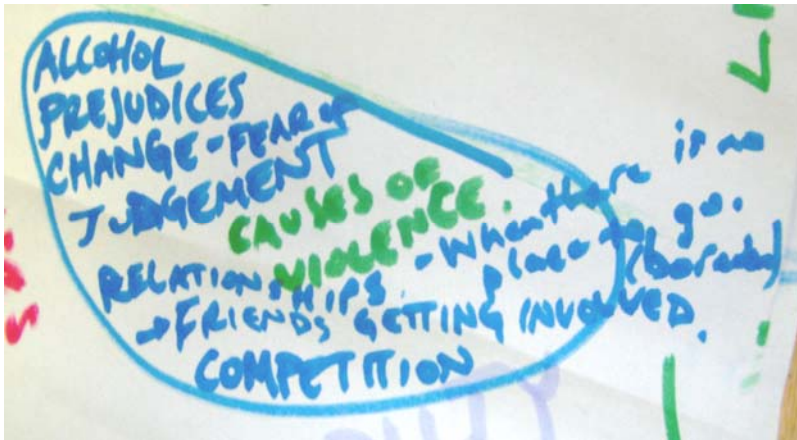
Where there was more ethnic diversity (a significant number of African Nova Scotian students), this was identified as a huge “divide”.

The way that we talk about some of them and the way they talk about us, we're not doing each other any favours and we're not helping anyone try to eliminate the racism that is actually in our school, and I think that's another problem with our school and with trying to get different things started.

There is a big divide – it's like fifty feet wide and deep... step over and you fall.

That's the way we grew up... we grew up with the stigma, 'oh, you're racist if you do this – if you say this kind of thing'... parents and teachers have made us the way that we are – like we're segregated and different and blocked – them on one side and us on the other – it's because of the way that our teachers have shown us... they're making us do stuff on that subject [of racism] that we don't really want to do because we've done it so many times... they're making it that way. They're making us be the way we are.

They tell us to treat everyone the same way, or equally, but they don't treat all of us equally.



Violence was also attributed to learned behaviours and to a cycle of violence within families. Girls also identified the media, competition, prejudices, and the lack of places to go as causes of violence.

Vulnerability to Violence

One of the factors that impacts the vulnerability of girls to violence is where they are hanging out. In general, young people in rural communities do not have physical spaces to gather.

The cops keep kicking people out of place after place. There's no place you can stand anymore without getting a charge.

This means that they tend to hang out and party in marginal and isolated places.

... there's a lot of camps... That's what it is – people have nothing to do so they're like, 'let's go back to the camp'... while they're drunk.

They go out to camps – in the woods – and then they come back later to a dance... all smiles and stories.

Because of the physical isolation of these places, girls tend to be at a higher risk of experiencing violence. This is particularly true when the young people who are spending time at these places are using alcohol and drugs, which were also identified as a major factor in increasing the vulnerability of girls to violence.

In grade eight, we switched classes, and I fell in with the wrong crowd... I started doing drugs and stuff...and there was an eighteen year old and he took advantage of me, but my friend didn't let him, and then she called the cops on him.

Who girls are with in these situations also impacts their vulnerability. Due to the small population and close-knit nature of rural communities, there tends to be a wide age range in social groups. Often it seems to be younger girls hanging out with older friends. While this is seen as natural in many cases (hanging out with older siblings or cousins), in some cases it is seen as a deliberate strategy for older boys to develop relationships with younger girls.

I find that a lot of guys graduate, and then they'll go to college and they'll be like, 'why am I going to college when I could stay in Antigonish and work and get all this younger skin?'... I find it really disturbing.

Many of the older girls see it as problematic for the younger girls.

Now you have girls that are 13 and 14 that are starting to have sex and everything, and it's really weird. They're trying to act older than they are... it's so appealing to them to seem older – to attract older guys... it's just so scary...

It's kind of sad because you see these little girls – and these guys, these older guys that can't get girls our age – and they go for younger, and it's just like a clasp that they have on them.

The older girls (in grades 11 and 12) expressed concern for the younger girls (grades 8 and 9), saying that they are engaging in risky behaviours, they seem ill-informed (especially about healthy sexuality), and that they are growing up too fast.

Grade 8 girls talking about how they're going to go have sex on the weekend, and how they're gonna get drunk and hopefully get with this guy that they like – I'm just like, 'you have so much to live for... why are you just gonna throw it all away because of one mistake ... what if he gets you pregnant...?'

Experiences of Violence

In every community we held focus groups in there was a normalization and, in many cases, a resignation to violence. Girls had a relatively sophisticated understanding of violence, pointing out that “*some violence can't be seen*” and that violence can happen to “*the last person you'd*

expect". However, they also felt that there was little to be done to prevent violence in their schools and communities, and seemed to believe that what was necessary was to find ways to cope with the status quo.

Rumours, gossiping, and social exclusion were identified as commonplace (both in school and in the community).

Everyone knows everyone, so you automatically know everyone else's business – and that can get really irritating and causes fights and stuff... [people gossip about] anything and everything... Anything that seems big here gets gossiped about....

Girls tend to police each others' behaviour, and react when the behaviour of some girls surpasses group norms.

People called us "dirties"... it was just because we did stuff that was kind of bad.

Social exclusion was identified as a way of "punishing" people who had done something considered to be wrong.

If one person does something wrong – does something that's not accepted – the whole group, not just one or two people in the group, you'll get everybody, and they'll completely turn their backs for two days, and then everything will be fine again – it'll blow over. And then sometimes it lasts for month and months and months.

It's about trying to teach people a lesson.

Trust amongst friends and peers (particularly other girls) is a significant issue, with many girls saying that they did not fully trust their friends.

I've been hurt a lot in the past from trusting people so I usually don't try to risk it... girls are so mean.

With girls it's more verbal – they're more out to get you. With guys it's like, 'I'm going to push you into a locker – then we're friends again!' With girls it's like, 'I'm going to ruin your reputation and I'm going to break you down!' That's what girls are like.

They're so hateful in grade 8. Every week they'll just gang up on a new girl and just rip their lives apart.

Some girls identified relationship violence as an issue which does not receive enough attention, particularly with more and more attention being devoted to bullying.

Our school focuses way too much on bullying instead of relationships...people don't really know the signs of an abusive relationship...

I got a new boyfriend – I'm still with him – and he wants to take me out in public, and he says, 'oh, this is my girlfriend,' and he wants to hold my hand and hug me and stuff... and I never realized how bad a relationship I was in when I was in it. He [my ex-boyfriend] would go to hockey and he wouldn't want me to go with him because he'd want other people to think that he was with another girl – but he wanted to be with me. I don't know... it was just... messed up.

Girls who had experienced relationship violence saw warning signs in relationships that younger girls were engaged in, and wanted to share with them their experiences to save them going through it.

I am just starting to realize now that that was two years wasted, because I didn't do anything, and he didn't let me do anything, and he was ashamed of me, and took advantage of me. I feel like I'll never get those years back. And so I feel like I have to make up for them now. But they don't realize that. I'd like for them not to be in that situation.

They clearly identified the long-term impacts of their past abusive relationships.

I didn't even realize until the first of this year how big an impact it had on me from then until now... say you start a new relationship... if my boyfriend was standing behind me and he went to grab my hip or something – I would automatically turn around like I was going to hit him. I just get so jolty... like I don't want to be touched.

Older girls identified the vulnerability of younger girls (grade 8 and 9) to getting involved in abusive relationships (particularly with older guys) because of their lack of self-confidence or knowledge of what a healthy relationship could be like.

There's lot of guys taking advantage of younger girls. I find that a lot – like twenty-year-olds or something, they just take advantage of them. Especially if they're drunk or high, or on some kind of drugs. They just take advantage of a person.

You just feel like you're used and just being pushed around, and you know that he's ashamed of you...but it's your first relationship and you don't know if that's how it's supposed to be.

Effects of Violence

The girls were asked to write down how violence looks, sounds, and feels to them. They were also asked who they think violence hurts.

The fact that service providers may be a well known community member (a friend's parent, a friend of the family) means that even if the girl does trust that confidentiality will be maintained, she may still feel uncomfortable confiding her questions or problems.

If I did something I wasn't proud of, I wouldn't want someone I know to think less of me.

Youth Health Centres

Youth Health Centres were identified as very important and effective in connecting students to services.

Are there services outside the health centre? It's so sad... but I don't know.

Consistency and full-time staffing was identified as important for the youth health centres.

If we have something like a health centre, it has to be open all the time... 'cause if not, then no one's going to take it seriously... If you're going to have something for young people, like a service, then it should be open all the time for everyone to go and use it when they need it... because that day that you need it, it could be closed.

I find that the younger kids are using the health centre more than the older kids... it's mostly because when we were younger it was never really introduced to us. The grade 9s grew up with the health centre being in the school.

Outreach

The lack of outreach services in rural communities was also identified as a major obstacle. Transportation is a problem, and having to drive to Antigonish to access services is not always possible, and is usually not desirable.

There a few people from here that go to mental health, but us travelling in there once a week can get pretty annoying and we just don't want to go anymore.

The principal had to get someone to come out from New Glasgow to come into the school, and my parents had to pay for him to be there- it was really expensive.

I don't want to go see my doctor because I don't want to drive an hour..

I don't think it's fair that we have to go to Mental Health in Antigonish. I think someone – like a psychiatrist – could at least come out here once a week.

The lack of outreach services, particularly specialized services, also causes situations in which girls get referred from one service provider to the next.

The people who come to our school just refer us to other people. ... I just want to talk to someone, I don't want to keep moving through all these people.

They expressed frustration over the lack of consistency and inability to get the support they wanted.

Sexual Health Information

The girls involved in the project have identified a major gap in terms of sexual health information available to younger girls. They are asking for more and better information regarding sexuality and sexual health, particularly for younger grades. They feel that this is an important part of any discussion of “healthy relationships”.

I think that “healthy relationships” should be like – ‘make sure you’re protected, if you’re gonna have sex, go on birth control... use a condom’... what goes on if you get a sexual disease, or whatever.

They argue that younger girls are engaging in similar sexual behaviours to older girls (in grades 11 and 12), but they aren’t equipped to deal with it.

I’ve heard grade 8s say, ‘oh, it’s my first time, nothing can happen.’ They don’t know the facts.

Youth Activity Centre

When asked what resources the youth wanted to have in their community, a “place to go” was the most common answer.

[We need] a place to go where you can just hang out with your friends... Just a place where you can go, and just be yourself.

Programming for Girls

Another need identified by the girls is girl-specific programs and places. They emphasized the importance of a confidential space where girls can discuss issues that come up without having to worry about that information becoming public knowledge.

[We need] a place for only girls after school or weekends to discuss the problems in their life, instead of being depressed.

[We need] a place to go to and have someone to talk to about problems that young women face - confidentially.

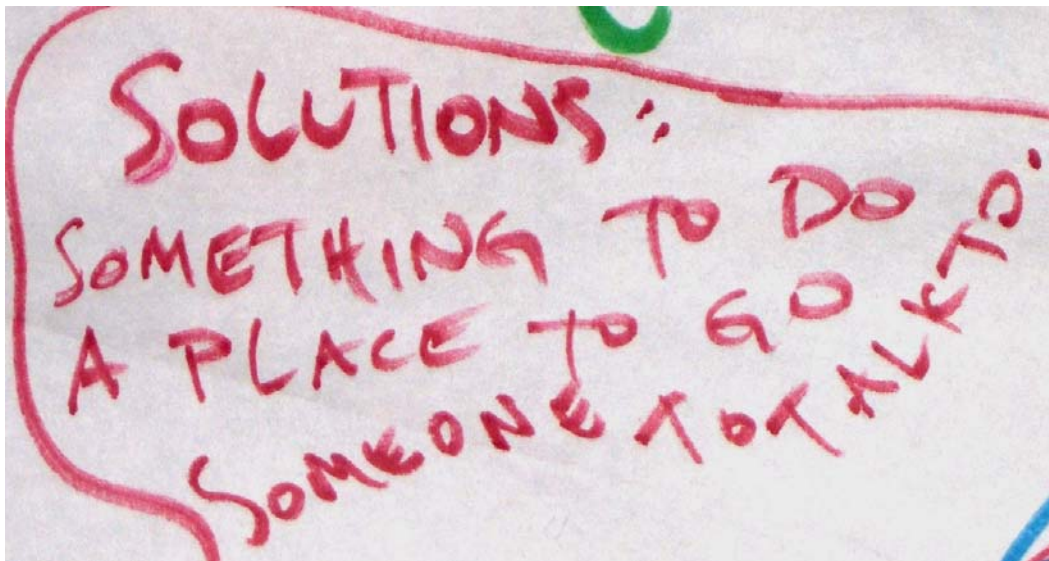
Support from the Community

The reluctance of adults to support these ideas was identified as the major barrier they would have to overcome.

The thing is you need the adults and the older generation to support it. And here, they don't really support that kind of thing... us as youth, we're trying so hard, and they're making us prove so much.

I guess we just learn not to expect much. We don't get our hopes up.

Moving Towards Action



The solutions outlined by the girls involved in the project are simple - they want something to do, a place to go, and someone to talk to. They need supportive adults in the community to help them achieve these things. Youth know what will work and what won't. We need to ask more and listen better. However, we also need to remember that youth need support from other members of the community – their time and expertise is valuable and they may face barriers that adults do not. They need to be meaningfully involved, but not expected to do it all themselves.

Girls and young women in rural communities need:

- Inclusive gender-specific and co-ed programs that include young people in both design and delivery.
- Accessible youth-friendly spaces in the community. Ideally, this would be a youth centre or other designated room or building where youth are free to take part in organized and unorganized activities.
- To feel safe (no drugs, discrimination, or violence) without being under surveillance
- Appropriate services and supports available *in community* which can be accessed confidentially and with a high level of consistency in service delivery.

ⁱ Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry. (2008). *Beyond Freefall: Halting Rural Poverty*. Ottawa, ON: Senate of Canada.

ⁱⁱ Lauzon, A.C. and L.O. Hagglund. (1998). *From the Ground Up: Healthcare Restructuring and the Health of Rural Communities*. *SRC Research Program*, OMAFRA.