Domestic and family violence in regional, rural and remote communities

An overview of key issues

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KEY MESSAGES

- Women in regional, rural and remote areas are more likely than women in urban areas to experience domestic and family violence.

- Women living in regional, rural and remote areas who experience domestic and family violence face specific issues related to their geographical location and the cultural and social characteristics of living in small communities.

- There is a common view in rural communities that "family problems" such as domestic and family violence are not talked about, which serves to silence women's experience of domestic and family violence and deter them from disclosing violence and abuse.

- Fear of stigma, shame, community gossip, and a lack of perpetrator accountability deter women from seeking help.

- A lack of privacy due to the high likelihood that police, health professionals and domestic and family violence workers know both the victim and perpetrator can inhibit women's willingness to use local services.

- Women who do seek help find difficulty in accessing services due to geographical isolation, lack of transportation options and not having access to their own income.

Rates of domestic and family violence are higher in regional, rural and remote areas. Geographical and social structures in these communities, as well as unique social values and norms, result in specific experiences of domestic and family violence. These issues also affect responses to domestic and family violence in non-urban communities, and women's ability to seek help and access services. Poor understanding of domestic and family violence by health, social and legal services in regional, rural and remote communities has been identified as a significant issue for survivors of domestic and family violence (George & Harris, 2015; Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centre, 2015). This paper provides a brief overview for understanding the issues unique to domestic and family violence in regional, rural and remote communities.

Box 1: Definitions

Domestic and family violence

Various terminologies are used in policy, practice and research to describe violence experienced by women, and their children. The Australian Government's *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children* (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009) adopts the United Nations definition. The United Nations defines violence against women as: any act of gender-based violence that causes "physical or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty" (United Nations, 1993). This can include a host of specific forms of violence experienced by women and girls including sexual violence, intimate partner violence and domestic and family violence as well as practices that are harmful to women and girls such as female genital mutilation and forced marriage (United Nations, 1993; World Health Organization [WHO], 2010).

Intimate partner violence or domestic violence generally describes violence perpetrated by a current or previous partner and is the most common form of violence against women (Phillips & Vandenbroek, 2014; WHO, 2010). Family violence is a broader term encapsulating violence between family members as well as intimate partners (Phillips & Vandenbroek, 2014) and is the preferred term in Indigenous populations as it better captures the kinship and extended family relationships in Indigenous communities (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009). Intimate partner violence, domestic violence and family violence include behaviours that are coercive and controlling and include physical abuse, emotional/psychological abuse, sexual abuse, financial deprivation and social and cultural isolation (COAG, 2009). Domestic and family violence may also refer to violence experienced by men in the home; however, domestic and family violence is gendered in nature and the overwhelming majority of violence experienced in the home is perpetrated by men against women and children (ABS, 2013, Cox, 2015).

Regional, rural and remote

There are no standard definitions of regional, rural and remote communities used in Australia. The Australian Standard Geographical Standard (ASGC) (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2014) classifies areas according to their population size and relative distance to an urban centre and access to goods and services. The Commonwealth Government's *National Strategic Framework for Rural and Remote Health* (2012) classifies anything outside of major metropolitan cities as regional, rural or remote but acknowledges that remote, and very remote, areas have specific issues related to their geographical isolation and thus acknowledges the need to distinguish between remote and regional or rural localities.

Roufeil and Battye (2008) define regional, rural and remote as:

- *regional*: non-urban centres with populations over 25,000;
- *rural*: non-urban localities with populations under 25,000; and
- *remote*: communities with fewer than 5,000 people and with very limited access to services

About 29% of Australia's population live outside urban areas, and about 2% live in remote or very remote areas (ABS, 2013). In this paper, we use the terms regional, rural and remote to refer to all non-urban areas but we note the terminology used in each study that we refer to.

Prevalence

It is difficult to ascertain accurate rates of domestic and family violence in any context as many women do not report it (Phillips & Vandenbroek, 2014). Domestic and family violence is even less likely to be disclosed to formal services in rural and remote areas than in urban contexts (Hogg & Carrington, 2006; Ragusa, 2013). A number of studies suggest, however, that women living in regional, rural and remote areas are more likely to have experienced partner violence:

- The ABS' Personal Safety Survey (2013) showed that 21% of women living outside of capital cities had experienced violence from an intimate partner since the age of 15 (compared to 15% of women living in a capital city).

- The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (Mishra et al., 2014) found that women in rural, regional and remote areas were more likely to have experienced partner violence than women living in capital cities.
- An analysis of domestic violence cases reported to the New South Wales police in 2010 found that more incidents of domestic and family violence were reported in regional, rural and remote areas (Grech & Burgess, 2011).

Owen and Carrington (2014) pointed out that the higher rates of domestic and family violence in rural and remote areas were often attributed in the literature to the higher Indigenous population in these areas. However, in the NSW data cited above, the top 10 localities for domestic and family violence in NSW included some predominantly

white, agricultural areas (Owen & Carrington, 2014). Within Indigenous communities, domestic and family violence needs to be understood in the context of a history of colonisation, dispossession of land, forced child removal, racism and discrimination and the resulting intergenerational trauma that has arisen from this history (Millward, 2013; Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Taskforce, 2003; Cripps & Davis, 2012). This paper broadly examines the issues for non-urban communities, many of which are relevant to Indigenous communities; however, for an overview of domestic and family violence in Indigenous communities see Blagg, Bluett-Boyd and Williams, 2015; Cripps and Davis, 2012; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2006 or Millward, 2013.

Characteristics of domestic and family violence in regional, rural and remote areas

There are many commonalities in women's experiences of domestic and family violence, and the barriers to leaving violent situations, between women in non-urban communities and women from other geographic locations. These include fear of their partner's threats if they leave; economic concerns for themselves and their children; limited means to leave; and societal and/or familial pressure to stay in the relationship.

However, there are social and geographical issues that are specific to the experience of domestic and family violence for women living in non-urban communities (George & Harris, 2015; Owen & Carrington, 2014; Wendt, 2009a; Wendt, Bryant, Chung, & Elder, 2015). These issues are discussed below.

Social norms and structures in regional, rural and remote communities

The unique characteristics and social structures of life in non-urban communities and the social norms and values of rural communities are central to understanding the specific experience of domestic and family violence in these communities (George & Harris, 2015; Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centre, 2015; Owen & Carrington, 2014; Wendt, 2009a, 2009b; Wendt et al., 2015). These norms and values may act to silence and minimise the experience of domestic and family violence and deter women from disclosing domestic and

family violence and seeking support. They may also affect the adequacy and fairness of justice-based responses (George & Harris, 2015; Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centre, 2015). These values can also contribute to a lack of perpetrator accountability, community protection of perpetrators and the shaming of domestic and family violence victims (George & Harris, 2015: Owen & Carrington, 2014).

Rural masculinity

Traditional gender norms in rural communities may be more narrowly defined than in urban areas (George & Harris, 2015; Wendt et al., 2015). For example, masculinity in rural areas is often constructed in a way that privileges strength, courage and domination (Carrington & Scott, 2008). Traditional and patriarchal family structures in rural communities may act to normalise male control and abuse; violence may be justified as a part of men's dominant/patriarchal role in the family (George & Harris, 2015; Wendt, 2009b). A qualitative study in rural Victoria found that male violence had become normalised in some communities to the extent that women had experienced multiple forms of violence from men across their lifetime (George & Harris, 2015).

Carrington, McIntosh, Hogg, and Scott's (2013) and Carrington and Scott's (2008) research into Australian agricultural and mining communities suggested that violent expressions of "hyper-masculinity" in those communities may be a response to the destabilisation of traditional forms of rural manhood (Carrington & Scott, 2008). Their research found that in agricultural communities, domestic and family violence was one of a myriad of hidden forms of violence including suicide, bullying, homophobia and sexual assault, which the authors described as internalised male violence (Carrington et al., 2013). Wendt et al. (2015) argued that Carrington and colleagues' research into rural masculinity offered "insights into how geography and place construct masculinities and potentially impact on men's perpetration of violence against women and other men" (n.p.).

Self-reliance and privacy

Another social characteristic or norm of rural life that affects the experience of domestic and family violence, is the idea that individuals should be stoic and self-reliant, and that family problems should be kept private (Carrington et al., 2013; Owen & Carrington, 2014; Wendt, 2009b). Maintaining a sense of family harmony is also an important

rural value that may inhibit disclosure of violence (Owen & Carrington, 2014). Several studies have suggested that these norms deter women from seeking help and leaving abusive relationships and also minimise the issue of domestic and family violence (Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centre, 2015; Loxton, Hussain, & Schofield, 2003; Owen & Carrington, 2014; Wendt, 2009a, 2009b). Further, women who do disclose domestic and family violence and seek support services might experience shame and stigma, or become the subject of gossip and exclusion (Loxton et al., 2003; Owen & Carrington, 2014; Ragusa, 2013; Wendt, 2009a). Owen and Carrington (2014, p. 6) argued that this emphasis on maintaining family privacy and sustaining harmony acts as an "informal social control that pressures women into hiding instances of DV".

Conversely, *lack* of privacy is also a significant concern for women in non-urban areas. The "intimacy" of life in rural towns (Owen & Carrington, 2014, p. 5) means that people tend to know, and gossip about, the activities of their friends, neighbours and others in the community. This intimacy can deter victims of domestic and family violence from seeking help or services. The likelihood of police, health professionals and domestic and family violence workers knowing both offender and victim is high (George & Harris, 2015; Owen & Carrington, 2014). Recent research has highlighted how the intimacy of small towns also affects women's experiences of court (Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centre, 2015; George & Harris, 2015). The public visibility of courts in small towns, for example, results in women and their children feeling unsafe and exposed to their perpetrators.

Lack of perpetrator accountability

The silencing and invisibility of domestic and family violence in non-urban areas, as described above, results in perpetrators not being held accountable for their actions (Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centre, 2015; Wendt, 2009a). The community may act to protect perpetrators, particularly if they are of high standing or have visible roles in a community (George & Harris, 2015; Owen & Carrington, 2014). In a qualitative study of women's experiences in regional Victoria, women said that they felt their community was complicit in the continuation of domestic and family violence as perpetrator behaviour was rarely challenged and there was an overall indifference to domestic and family violence (Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centre, 2015). Inadequate or unsympathetic police and

justice (court) responses contributed to a lack of perpetrator accountability; for example, continual breaches of intervention orders not taken seriously by police and magistrates' indifference to the safety concerns of mothers (see also George & Harris, 2015; Ragusa, 2013).

Complex financial arrangements

Complex financial arrangements and financial dependency make it difficult for women to leave abusive relationships (Owen and Carrington, 2014; Wendt & Hornosty, 2010; Wendt et al., 2015). In farming communities, for instance, money is often tied up in assets or trust funds, such as the family farm, and controlled by husbands or fathers; women may not have access to their own income stream (Owen & Carrington, 2014; Wendt, 2009a). Further, farming and agricultural businesses rely on women and children's labour to operate: research shows that women may be reluctant to leave an abusive relationship for fear of bankrupting the family farm or leaving their children without economic security (Wendt & Hornosty, 2010). Perpetrators may also threaten to destroy the farm or harm the animals if women leave (George & Harris, 2015; Wendt & Hornosty, 2010).

Without financial independence, women are unable to obtain alternative accommodation or legal representation, or access transport, food and clothing for themselves and their children (George & Harris, 2015; Ragusa, 2013). When women do leave, financial abuse and control by perpetrators may intensify and women have limited opportunities for income support while awaiting court outcomes (Owen & Carrington, 2014; Ragusa, 2013). For example, there are limited employment opportunities in rural areas, and women may be ineligible for Centrelink benefits as means testing for benefits includes assets such as property (Owen and Carrington, 2014; Wendt et al., 2015). Further, women and children in non-urban locations face higher levels of poverty and disadvantage and are also more vulnerable to homelessness following domestic and family violence due to a lack of crisis accommodation and scarcity of rental properties (Trainor, 2015).

Geographical issues

There are issues relating specifically to geography and the practicalities of regional, rural and remote life that also affect the experience of domestic and family violence.

Isolation

Rural, regional or remote women experiencing domestic and family violence may be both geographically and socially isolated. Geographical isolation intensifies the experience of domestic and family violence and can be explicitly exploited by perpetrators as a form of control (Loxton et al., 2003; Owen and Carrington, 2014; Wendt, 2009a). Perpetrators may take advantage of victims' isolation and may remove phones, destroy transport or control access to transport, or use firearms as threats (Wendt, 2009a, 2009b). In remote locations and properties women have nowhere to go and no nearby neighbours or others to ask for help. George and Harris (2015, p. 46) quoted a survivor in their study who stated, "no one can hear you scream": a sentiment echoed by several women in their study.

Geographical isolation is also a barrier to accessing support or disclosing violence (George & Harris, 2015). Women are unable to reach services due to a lack of both private and public transport options, and the closest services and support may be several hundreds of kilometres away. Police and emergency service response times are also significantly longer, or may come too late (George & Harris, 2015; Loxton et al., 2003).

Geographical distance from rural or regional centres may also contribute to significant social isolation with limited or no access to friends, services, leisure activities and jobs (Wendt et al., 2015). This, along with the more patriarchal/ conservative attitudes to gender in rural communities, may position women as dependent on their male partner, contributing to their reluctance to leave (George & Harris, 2015).

Gun ownership

Higher rates of gun ownership in non-urban communities is identified as a serious concern of survivors of domestic and family violence (George & Harris, 2015; Loxton et al., 2003; Wendt et al., 2015). The prevalence of firearms in these communities increases "women's vulnerability to serious harm and death" (Wendt et al., 2015, n.p.). Victims of domestic and family violence describe living with constant fear and feelings of powerlessness knowing that their abuser has a gun. For example, survivors in George and Harris' study described how perpetrators used firearms to stop women leaving abusive relationships—by threatening self-harm or harm to women or their children.

Natural disasters

Women and children are at greater risk of domestic and family violence during or after natural disasters such as bushfires, floods and droughts (Parkinson & Zara, 2013; Setty, 2012; Wendt et al., 2015). Parkinson and Zara's (2013) research in Victoria following the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, for example, found an increase in the incidence and severity of domestic and family violence following the disaster. Increased rates of domestic and family violence reports following natural disasters are often attributed to the increase of external stressors related to the event/s such as financial instability/loss of income, loss of possessions and/or loss of the family home. These stressors are thought to escalate *existing* domestic and family violence, rather than contribute to new cases (Setty, 2012). However, it is important that high levels of stress are not viewed as an excuse for perpetrator behaviour (Parkinson & Zara, 2013; Setty, 2012). Setty's (2012, p. 4) review of the literature suggests that it is not stress per se that leads to domestic and family violence, rather it is perpetrators' "sense of losing control over all aspects of their life" that may lead them to exert further control over their families.

Diversity in regional, rural and remote communities

There is significant diversity within non-urban communities. The social, cultural and economic characteristics of such communities vary significantly within, and between, each other (Immigrant Women's Domestic Violence Service [IWDVS], 2006; Wendt et al., 2015). As a consequence, the issues outlined above impact unevenly on women from regional, rural and remote communities, and some women may face additional barriers to seeking help following, or when they are at risk of, domestic and family violence. For instance, as noted previously, the nature and context of domestic and family violence differs markedly between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in non-urban communities (Wendt & Hornosty, 2010). Culturally appropriate domestic and family violence services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women may be even more limited in non-urban communities than in urban settings due to fewer service providers.

Women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds living in non-urban communities may also face further barriers to accessing services due to a lack of cultural

awareness and sensitivity among service providers, language barriers, cultural isolation, xenophobic attitudes and fears about residency/visas (IWDVS, 2006; Wendt et al., 2015).

Similarly, women with disabilities are doubly disadvantaged and isolated in regional, rural and remote locations with limited access to transportation and specialist services (Wendt et al., 2015). These factors are important to keep in mind when considering in detail the issues facing women living in non-urban communities and their experiences of domestic and family violence. Responses to the issue must be relevant to specific communities and local contexts, and sensitive to the diversity within them.

Service provision in regional, rural and remote areas

The issues described above also affect responses to domestic and family violence and service provision in regional, rural and remote communities. There are challenges that affect both the provision of services and women's access to services. A key issue is that access to services in non-urban locations is severely compromised by their scarcity and the distance that women often have to travel to reach them. There are also heightened concerns for women relating to privacy and confidentiality due to living in a small community with a limited number of service providers (Tayton, Kaspiew, Moore, & Campo, 2014). Further issues include:

- a lack of specialised or culturally appropriate services (disability, CALD, Indigenous);
- a lack of affordable legal services (e.g., Legal Aid);
- the higher cost of service provision in non-urban areas;
- longer waits for services (e.g., court sitting times); and
- delayed response times (by police and emergency services) due to geographical remoteness a shortage of crisis/refuge accommodation (George & Harris, 2015; IWDVS, 2006; Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centre, 2015; Ragusa, 2013; Tayton et al., 2014; Trainor, 2015; Wendt et al., 2015; Wendt & Hornosty, 2010).

Other issues identified in the literature are related more generally to problems specific to delivering services in isolated/remote areas and include:

- significant workforce shortages

- single services being responsible for large and remote geographical areas
- safety concerns for individuals delivering programs both in relation to living in a small community and potentially visiting isolated locations such as farms to support clients (Roufeil & Battye, 2008; Trainor, 2015; Wendt, 2010; Wendt & Hornosty, 2010; Wendt et al., 2015).

Effective practice models

There is limited evidence regarding the effectiveness of different models of service provision for addressing and preventing domestic and family violence in non-urban communities (Tayton et al., 2014). However, there are some key points that should be considered (though as previously stated, regional, rural and remote communities are not homogenous and therefore services and responses to domestic and family violence need to be tailored to the specific contexts in which domestic and family violence occurs in non-urban communities (Wendt 2009a)).

The Australian Institute of Family Studies' review of domestic and family violence prevention and intervention initiatives for at-risk groups (Tayton et al., 2014) found that while there *are* services in non-urban locations, and many cater well to the needs of women in their catchment area, approaches that address the issues of isolation and a lack of services by creating networks between services and programs are essential. This has often occurred informally in the past. However, such arrangements are increasingly being formalised and recognised as a way of maximising women's access to domestic and family violence services across the response, prevention and early intervention spectrums in regions where there are limited services (Tayton et al., 2014; Wall & Stathopoulos, 2012; Wendt, 2010).

The "hub and spoke" service model (Wendt et al., 2015) can be effective for regional, rural and remote service provision. In this model, a central hub (can be a generalist or specialist service) located in a regional centre provides outreach to remote populations. Another important element identified in the literature is the need for services to be embedded within the local community, and to collaborate with the community as well as with other services (George & Harris, 2015; Roufeil & Battye, 2008; Wall & Stathopoulos, 2012).

(For a full overview of the strengths and limitations of different service models for regional, rural and remote communities, see Wendt et al., 2015.

George and Harris (2015) also provided several recommendations for better service provision in rural areas.)

Workforce and community education

Recent studies have shown that there is a poor understanding of the nature of domestic and family violence by general services—for example, health and legal services—and this has caused significant distress for women and/or placed them in danger (George & Harris, 2015; Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centre, 2015; Ragusa, 2013). Workforce education in regional, rural and remote areas for all services that may come into contact with victims/survivors of domestic and family violence is therefore essential. George and Harris (2015) noted the need particularly for further training in the police force in rural and remote areas.

There is also a significant need for primary prevention strategies that are universal and tackle sexism and ingrained/traditional attitudes toward gender, and that also specifically target higher risk groups such as Indigenous and CALD communities and women with disabilities (George & Harris, 2015; Tayton et al., 2014). Community education and awareness is essential, in order to make visible the problems of domestic and family violence in regional, rural and remote areas. Information about domestic and family violence should be widely available in communities "including in print and online media, the offices of healthcare professionals and educational institutions" (George & Harris, 2015, p. 10).

Conclusion

Rates of domestic and family violence in regional, rural and remote locations are higher than in urban areas. Geographical factors and social norms and attitudes that are specific to life in these communities significantly shape the experience of domestic and family violence and survivors' access to services and support.

Resources

National Rural Women's Coalition. Stopping violence against women before it happens: A practical toolkit for communities. <www.nrwc.com.au/Projects/StoppingViolenceAgainstWomenBeforeItHappens.aspx>

Relationships Australia. Rural and remote relationships. <www.relationships.org.au/relationship-advice/relationship-advice-topics/rural-and-remote-relationships>

CFCA. Effective rural and remote family relationships service delivery. <aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/effective-regional-rural-and-remote-family-and-relationship>

1800 RESPECT. Training and professional development to understand and better respond to sexual assault and domestic and family violence. <www.1800respect.org.au/workers/fact-sheets/training-and-further-professional-development/>

Our Watch. Myths about violence. <www.ourwatch.org.au/Understanding-Violence/Myths-about-violence>

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If you are experiencing family or domestic violence or sexual assault, or know someone who is, please call **1800RESPECT** (1800 737 732) or visit **www.1800respect.org.au**

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