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Situated Feminism, Rurality, and Women's Learning in Rural Manitoba, Canada

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SITUATED FEMINISM, RURALITY, AND WOMEN'S LEARNING IN RURAL MANITOBA, CANADA

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Abstract

Intersectional analysis of women's experiences and learning rarely consider rurality at the crossroads of social experiences and identities. Various factors, such as assumptions about rural areas as hesitant toward feminism and the homogeneity and gemeinschaft *ideologies of rurality, may contribute to the lack of analysis of rural identities. Rurality encompasses the imagined and experienced conditions of being rural. Starting with rural women's lived experiences, this examination of an ethnographic doctoral study explores the intersections of rurality and gender in women's learning in community involvement in southern Manitoba. Drawing from the data, attention is given to rural women's discussions of opportunities, rural lifestyles, patriarchy, and connecting pertaining to community involvement.*

Résumé

L'analyse intersectionnelle des expériences et de l'apprentissage des femmes prend rarement en compte la ruralité à la croisée des expériences et des identités sociales. Divers facteurs, tels que les hypothèses sur la position hésitante des régions rurales envers le féminisme ainsi que celles sur l'homogénéité et les gemeinschaftideologies de la ruralité, peuvent contribuer à l'absence d'analyses des identités rurales. La ruralité comprend les conditions imaginées et vécues d'être rural. À partir des expériences vécues des femmes rurales, cette analyse d'une étude doctorale ethnographique explore les intersections de la ruralité et du genre dans l'apprentissage des femmes dans la participation communautaire dans le sud du Manitoba. En nous appuyant sur les données, nous portons notre attention sur les discussions des femmes rurales au sujet des opportunités, des modes de vie ruraux, du patriarcat, et des relations qu'elles forment pour la participation communautaire.

Introduction

Feminist intersectional analysis of women's learning and education typically analyzes identities such as race, sex, gender, and class, yet rarely is rurality considered beyond descriptions of the context (Pini, Moletsane, & Mills, 2014; Wagner, 2014). Balfour, Mitchell, and Moletsane lamented that "seldom is rurality conceptualized as dynamic, or as a set of preferences that have value independent of urban influences" (p. 97). Rurality refers to "the condition of being rural" (Woods, 2011) and is informed by understandings of what is rural (including both imagined or perceived and real) and rural locations, as well as experiences in and with rural spaces. Rurality is not palisaded within a static context but informed by forces of change. The glocality (Antrobus, 2004) of rurality ensures its infusion with influences beyond its geographical location, such as media, technology, migration, and globalization as well as political, economic, and cultural forces. Ideas of rural conjured up in our minds are informed by our experiences with rural spaces, whether lived, observed, or imagined. Here, in the geographic rural, women negotiate their identities, including gender, class, age, race, ethnicity, religion, and rurality. An intersectional understanding of identity recognizes that isolating identities such as gender and rurality would mean that rural women's experiences risk falling through the cracks; researchers need to consider how rurality and gender interact to create the many dimensions of rural women's experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 2008).

The data examined in this article derive from an ethnographic study on rural women's learning in community building in rural Manitoba, which formed my doctoral research. The broader study focused on rural women's life stories regarding community building and their learning and knowledge connected to community involvement. This article will focus specifically on the intersection of rurality and gender as discussed by rural women to identify the challenges and opportunities for feminism in contemporary times. First, I clarify my subjective position by locating myself as a feminist educator and researcher in this endeavour. A literature review of gender and rurality will provide an overview of relevant concepts and issues, with particular attention on feminism and women's community action in rural contexts. A description of the research method and context follows. Finally, considering the intersection of gender and rurality, four key concepts are explored: opportunities, rural lifestyles, patriarchy, and connecting.

Locating the Writer

To locate myself within this discussion, I will share the journey of my own feminist curiosity (Enloe, 2004). Having grown up in the research area, I was aware of the patriarchal gender culture. After I moved away at 18, my life experiences, including living, travelling, and doing peace research in foreign places (including post-war zones) and pursuing a graduate degree in adult education, were formative in my feminist curiosity and becoming. All of these experiences happened elsewhere, and my feminist friends and networks existed outside of my rural life.

I returned to my rural roots in 2009 to pursue a doctorate in peace and conflict studies while raising a child with family support. Commuting nearly 250 kilometres for each class, I repeatedly crossed the geographical and cultural boundaries of rural–urban–rural. My intersectional identities as rural, educated, mother, feminist, daughter/family member, social justice and peace advocate, community member, and adult educator prompted me

to focus my research on rural women, learning, and everyday grassroots peacebuilding. In doing so, I began a fascinating critical engagement with women's everyday learning and peacebuilding experiences situated in dynamic rural contexts and cultures. I struggled to negotiate a peace between my feminism and the gender culture of my place of residence. Many times, I felt like a lone, isolated feminist island drifting among seas of wheat, sunflowers, and canola, wondering how to express my own evolving hybrid feminism informed by materialist feminism (Naples, 2003) and feminist peace (Brock-Utne, 1985, 1989; Confortini, 2006; Reardon, 1985; Ruddick, 1995). When I co-facilitated a women's community leadership program, I finally connected with a web of local feminists, which opened my eyes to the nuances of language, analysis, and practices of the situated feminisms flowing across these plains. On occasion, I and local feminist friends have discussed how careful we have to be about using the words "feminist" and "feminism" and self-identifying as a feminist, and how we must be strategic in expressing feminist ideas and values.

This article focuses on women living in a geographical rural area of Canada associated with a strong agricultural industry and economy as opposed to one associated with natural resources such as timber, hunting, fishing, mining, or oil and gas. Six of the 35 women who participated in this study were directly involved in agriculture. The others were not directly involved in farming, though they, their partners, or their family or friends may have worked in agriculture-related industries. This is not to say there are no commonalities among women in rural areas with agriculture or natural resource–based economies; however, recognizing how imagined and experienced spatial and cultural geographies influence identity and agency, I wish to focus this article to a specific rural experience. Therefore, in this article, the terms "rural woman" or "rural women" refer to a woman or women living in an agrarian rural space.

Related Literature: Scanning the Fields

Rural

Pointing out rural and urban areas is typically easier than explaining these concepts (Woods, 2011). "Rural," "urban," "country," and "city" are powerful words within Western societies encompassing experiences of human communities and ideas about modernization and the progress of humanity (Cloke, 2006a; Woods, 2011). The diverse, and at times contested, definitions of rural are informed by spatial and thematic factors (Ramsey & Beesley, 2006; Woods, 2011). Rural is constantly created and recreated through media, culture, and discourse (Cloke, 2006a; Cloke & Little, 1997; Woods, 2010, 2011). Rural has functional, experienced, and perceived—also referred to as imagined—definitions influenced by ideologies, values, geography, demography, politics, and nostalgia (Ramsey, Annis, & Everitt, 2002; Woods, 2011). Functional definitions that are often used by governments or institutions for statistical purposes factor in population, population density, relationship to an urban centre/core, percentage of people who commute to an urban core, and dominant economic activity (Bollman & Clemenson, 2008; Cloke, 2006a; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006; Pini, Moletsane, & Mills, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2011).

Experienced and perceived conceptions of rural are varied and contradictory (Bryant & Pini, 2011; Cloke, 2006a; Ramsey, Annis, & Everitt, 2002; Wagner, 2014). Ramsey,

Annis, and Everitt's research in southwest Manitoba identified the following experienced definitions of rural: lower population density, small town, open spaces, country, isolation, friendly people, "everybody knows your business," "slower pace of life," and "higher quality of life" (p. 196). Popular conceptions of rural as homogeneous in class or race, lacking in educational opportunities, and troubled with poverty conflict with conceptions of the rural idyll that present rural areas as sanctuaries without the social issues of urban areas (Pini & Mills, 2013; Pini, Moletsane, & Mills, 2014; Wagner, 2014; Woods, 2011). Perceptions of homogeneity in rural areas suppress gender (Bell, 2006; Bell & Valentine, 1995; Brandth & Haugen, 1997; Cloke & Little, 1997; Little & Austin, 1996), race (Cloke, 2006b; Wagner), class (Naples, 1994), and religious realities and conflicts (Pini & Leach, 2011). For example, Wagner pointed out that the construction of the homogenized rural ignores the indigenous population, which can make up a significant percentage of the rural population in certain areas.

Rural areas are dynamic and transforming (Balfour et al., 2008), influenced by economic, social, cultural, and political factors including migration, development, and globalization (Balfour et al.; Panelli, 2006; Woods, 2011). As well, rural areas and communities are diverse and unique (Cloke, 2006a, 2006b; Cloke & Little, 1997; Woods, 2010). This diversity exists within the complexities of the perceived rural homogeneity informed by harmonious social relationships along with the strong communal experience of *gemeinschaft* (Brandth, 2002a; Naples, 1994). Brookfield (1984) described *gemeinschaft* as "a geographical locale in which people live and work, in which they develop relationships based on common concerns, and in which expressions of mutual assistance reflect the dominant social mores" (p. 62), adding that "underpinning this sense of inter-relatedness is the cohesion afforded by all members of the group subscribing to shared norms, moral codes, beliefs and attitudes" (p. 62). Naples (1994) and others analyzed the construction and perception of homogeneity and harmonious social relationships and raised critical questions regarding identity, knowledge, and power within rural discourses (Sachs, 1983; Wagner, 2014) that must continue to be addressed.

Rural and rurality are defined by functional, imagined, and experienced factors laden with values, beliefs, and cultural images associated with human community, development, and modernization. The changing and dynamic nature of rural communities exists in conjunction with constructions of rural communities espousing social harmony and homogeneity that ignore significant concerns and issues regarding gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and class.

Rurality and Gender

Pini, Moletsane, and Mills (2014) encouraged rural and feminist researchers to consider the messiness of what is rural and rurality, noting the interrelationships between diverse conceptions. "The rural, like gender . . . is messy, fluid and complicated. Definitive and unequivocal universal assessments of inequalities which arise from the intersections between gender and rurality are thus impossible to make" (p. 456). The experiences of women living in rural areas are varied. Rural women may live in small or large towns, small cities, villages, and First Nations communities. Women may live on working farms, where the household income is fully, partially, or not at all supported by agriculture. The majority of women living in rural areas do not live on farms, though they may have connections

either directly, indirectly, or historically to agriculture and farming (Krug, 2000; Panelli, 2006).

Women may hang onto the rural idyll without critical consideration of its effects on their gender and community relationships, particularly as it relates to their subordination (Little & Austin, 1996; Naples, 1994). For example, farm women may dismiss their own emancipation out of fear of diminishing the "public status and private ego of their men folk" (Teather, 1996, p. 5) or that demanding their own needs "would undermine the struggle of their farms and their communities and that would be selfish" (Heather, Skillen, Young, & Vladicka, 2005, p. 90). The analysis of the gendered nature of rurality highlights its validation of the subordination of women and the limits on women's abilities to make individual and collective choices, particularly if the choices challenge perceived gender roles (Brandth, 2002a; Brandth & Haugen, 1997; Little & Panelli, 2003; Naples, 1994; Sachs, 1983; Teather, 1996, 1998).

Within the literature, much of the gender analysis focuses on the gendered nature of agriculture within the arenas of home, farm, rural organizations, media, and industry politics (Panelli, 2006). Both broader and more complex, gender analysis on rural communities examines what it's like to be a woman, women's positions in rural communities, and the cultural discourse of gender identity (Panelli). Gender and rural identity reflect a relational view of gender development in which masculinities and femininities are created and recreated in relationship to each other and changing social and economic conditions and policies (Brandth & Haugen 2005; Campbell & Bell, 2000; Coldwell, 2010; Taylor, 1997). Rose (1993, as cited in Panelli) argued that maintaining harmony within rural communities required everyone to know their place and that their places are constructed around "'natural' gender differences" (p. 77). The gender roles and ideologies that inform the power relations in rural communities can create challenges for rural women (Brandth, 1994; Brandth & Haugen 1997; Heather et al., 2005; Little, 2002; Naples, 1994; Panelli; Shortall, 1992; Teather, 1996, 1998; Whatmore, 1991). As mothers, workers, caregivers, farmers, and volunteers, rural women balance their multiple roles in contexts that may or may not offer them significant economic, education, employment, and health and well-being support (Kelly & Idehen, 2005). Local social gender attitudes and assumptions can hinder or create barriers for women, leaving them more isolated and vulnerable. Women in rural areas face various challenges in their education, in employment, and in accessing services (Kelly & Idehen; Sutherns, McPhedron, & Haworth-Brockman, 2004), including "geographic isolation, transportation, and limited child-care, networking, and mentoring opportunities" (Davis, 2011, p. 5).

A review of the literature highlights a need for more examination of the historical and present experiences of rural women living off the farm in agrarian rural areas. Furthermore, the majority of gender and rural research and literature comes out of Australia, New Zealand, and Europe, exposing a crucial need to develop this discussion in Canada.

Feminism in Rural Areas

Feminism itself is a contentious and stigmatized term (Walby, 2011), particularly in rural areas (Brandth & Haugen, 1997; Wagner, 2014; Whatmore, 1991). Rural women may reject or be hesitant toward more popular manifestations of feminism, as many rural people, including women, see feminism as an urban movement (Teather, 1998). Often in rural areas,

feminism is perceived as hostile toward men (Brandth, 2002b) and a threat to the rural patriarchal hegemony (Brandth & Haugen, 1997). Popular ideas or images of feminism, such as non-violent direct actions and protests, including Take Back the Night and Slut Walks, may be regarded as destabilizing or a threat to many of the social relationships typically valued in rural society, including the rural values of family and community, harmonious social relationships, and gemeinschaft (Brandth, 2002b; Brandth & Haugen, 1997; Shortall, 1994).

Despite the "back seat" mentality attributed to rural women (Haley, 1991), rural women's feminism persists, albeit manifested in localized forms and language (Carbert, 1995; Demarais, 2005; Miles, 1991; Welton, 1995). Being identified as a feminist in a rural area can be contentious or socially isolating, since "being known as a feminist in a rural community can over-ride other identities that are more acceptable, creating unwanted problems including rejection by community members whose goodwill is desired" (Heather et al., 2005, p. 90). Teather (1998) made similar observations:

> For rural women to espouse publically the feminist agenda would bring problems for them in the form of social rejection . . . yet many rural women feel either that feminism is irrelevant to them, or that their frank acknowledgement of a feminist agenda would damage their position in rural communities. (p. 212)

Little (2006) pointed out that women who do consider themselves feminist or espouse feminist values incorporate their feminism into contextually and culturally acceptable forums rather than mainstream conceptions of the women's movement or feminism. Advocacy for women's issues must be contextualized by women and their allies. The situated feminisms in rural areas reflect the local gender culture and highlight strategic ways in which women integrate their values and ideas of gender equality into their surroundings and create spaces to challenge gender roles within the rural patriarchal hegemony (Black & Brandt, 1999; Carbert, 1995; Doeffer, 2014; Miles, 1991; Taylor, 1997).

In Canada, women's community building and activism for social and political change to improve their communities (Ambrose & Kechnie, 1999; Cox, 1997; Fincher & Panelli, 2001; Neustaeter, in press; Taylor, 1997; Teather, 1996; Welton, 1995) predate European settlement (Anderson & Lawrence, 2006). Rural Canadian women often became involved to break the isolation of rural and frontier life by putting their time and energy into women's organizations focusing on community development and social and political change (Welton). While many of these early organizations no longer exist, others such as the Women's Institutes continue, and new organizations and initiatives are active in rural areas. While many associations, organizations, and initiatives in rural areas do not identify themselves as feminist, the values that inform their work reflect the goal of feminism: (gender) equality (Walby, 2011). Rural women, like many women community activists, continue to use the gendered nature of their roles as mothers and caregivers to fight for social change (Krauss, 1998; Morton, Terrazas, & Herriman, 2013; Naples, 1994, 1998; Neustaeter, in press; Welton).

Women's Learning and Connecting

Numerous factors may contribute to the limited feminist research on rural education, including stereotypes of rural women and girls as "apolitical" (Pini, Moletsane, & Mills,

2014, p. 453); assumptions about the rural as backward, pre-modern, conservative, and conformist (Brandth, 2002a; Pini, Moletsane, & Mills; Wagner, 2014; Woods, 2011); frequent hesitant or hostile attitudes toward feminism in rural areas (Brandth, 2002a; Pini, Moletsane, & Mills; Teather, 1998); and perceptions that "traditionally feminism has been alien to farm women" (Brandth, 2002b, p. 108; Brandth & Haugen, 1997; Teather, 1998).

This study on women's learning in community action draws from theories regarding women's learning (Gouthro, 2005; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Shrewsbury, 1993; Tisdell, 2000) and informal learning (Foley, 1993, 1999). By recognizing "women as knowers, teachers, actors in the world" (Tisdell, p. 155), an aspect of women's learning theories is to seek "to understand and value women's learning in its own right" (Hayes & Flannery, p. 9) while also identifying similarities and differences across social identities, such as race, class, and age (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), and the influences of systems and discourses of power, such as patriarchy, which continue to silence and marginalize women's learning and knowledge (English & Irving, 2007; Gouthro, 2000, 2009; Hart, 2002; Hayes & Flannery; hooks, 1994). Women's learning is often discredited despite its importance for women, families, and communities (Andruske, 2000; Foley, 1993; Gouthro, 2000; Gouthro & Plumb, 2003; Hart; Hayes & Flannery).

Everyday activities, routines, and challenges can be significant critical learning and political acts (Dominelli, 2006). Learning that takes place in contexts such as the homeplace and community through community involvement creates and recreates an unfolding, dialectical indigenous knowledge (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997; Brookfield, 1984; Foley, 1993, 1999; Gouthro, 2000, 2005, 2009; Gouthro & Plumb, 2003). Unfortunately, this learning and knowledge are often dismissed by society and the learners themselves (de Carteret, 2008; Foley, 1993, Gouthro & Plumb; Hayes & Flannery, 2000).

Connections and connecting with other women form a significant conceptual space and dynamic in women's learning, whether this be in formal, non-formal, or informal spaces (Belenky, Clinchy, et al., 1986; Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997; Hayes & Flannery, 2000), including networks and friendships (Aleman, 1997; Oliker, 1989). Women seek, find, and create spaces and relationships in which they can share stories, ask questions, and develop agency. These spaces and relationships are significant for women whose ideologies and values are different than or challenge the cultural or community status quo, such as feminism (Oliker).

For women involved in community activism, women's networks, social relationships, and friendships can be important catalysts, motivation, and support (Connolly, 2002; Dominelli, 2006; Krauss, 1993, 1998; Sacks, 1993; Vickers, 1988). Common sites, and perhaps sustenance, of rural women's agency are formal and informal networks—for example, farm women's networks and organizations. Research on women and farm women's organizations, wrote Little (2006), identifies that

> the emergence of these networks created a public space where women debated the nature of their farm work and its valuation, patriarchal gender relations on the farm, and the patriarchal nature of agricultural institutions. Yet debates remained conservative in terms of advocating a radical feminist position, reflecting the difficulties of such a position within a family farm business. (p. 21)

Through formal and informal networks, women find support and mentoring for their community involvement and advocacy.

Methodology

Informed by feminist ethnography (Naples, 2003; Naples & Sachs, 2000; Reinharz, 1992) and feminist pedagogy (Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Shrewsbury, 1993; Tisdell, 2000), this study seeks to make rural women's lives visible and their voices audible (Reinharz) using semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Describing feminist pedagogy, Tisdell (2000) wrote, "It is also about stories—about sharing stories, feeling stories, analyzing stories, theorizing stories, reframing them in some sort of educational space, and encouraging new action in light of our educational re-storying experience together" (p. 155). Beginning with the standpoint of the everyday world (Harding, 1991; Naples, 2003; Smith, 1987) of rural women, this inquiry explores rural women's situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) in regards to community involvement through their personal stories. Women, as active knowers and learners (Tisdell, 2000), possess and create a significant wealth of knowledge and experience in regards to how communities develop and thrive.

To participate in the study, women had to be over 18 years of age and involved in a volunteer capacity with local organizations or initiatives for a minimum of five years. In this study, the concept of community involvement included both formal and informal involvement and was informed by the concepts of community-based activism (Dominelli, 2006; Naples, 1998), activist mothering (Hart, 2002; Jetter, Orleck, & Taylor, 1997; Naples, 1992, 1998), neighbourhood activism (Susser, 1988), women's peacebuilding (Cockburn, 2007; Mazurana & McKay, 1999), everyday peacebuilding (MacGinty, 2014; Richmond & Mitchell, 2012), active citizenship (Gouthro, 2009), and volunteering (International Labour Organization, 2011; United Nations Volunteers, 2011). Potential participants were identified through snowballing and purposive sampling. Initial contacts were made with friends who recommended possible women. Considering that we are often friends with those who are more similar than different to us, typically staying within social identity groups (Tillmann-Healy, 2003), I also used purposive sampling. Through media analysis and field observations, I identified additional potential participants. The objective was to achieve as diverse and accurate a representation of rural women as possible. This meant ensuring racial, ethnic, class, and religious representation as well as involving women from large and small towns, villages, farms, and reservations. Field analysis determined local sectors of women's community involvement, including but not limited to education, municipal government, religious organizations, sports and recreation, arts, family, health, security, justice, and the environment. Efforts were taken to ensure the majority of volunteer sectors were represented. Thirty-five women between the ages of 30 and 85 participated in semi-structured, conversation-based interviews (Stern, 1998). Most interviews were conducted one on one in a location selected by the participant, usually her home. Four women organized a group interview in one of their homes. Conversations ranged from one to three hours.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Women who participated in one-on-one interviews were asked to review and edit their transcripts. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms are used and all potential identifiers removed. Using inductive analysis, I identified central and sub-themes highlighting the significance of the everyday in women's

community involvement in regard to identity, learning, and practice. These categories often blend into one another. For example, being a woman presents expectations, opportunities, and barriers, yet also influences learning and practice. Similarly, motherhood informs identity, motivation, and practice. Several mothers in the study incorporated community involvement into their parenting practice. Through role modelling and involving their children in their volunteering, mothers passed on their values and knowledge about community, citizenship, and social justice to their children. Mothers also extended their motherwork (Gouthro, 2002; Hart, 2002) beyond the home and into their communities through community involvement to support their children's development—for example, by coaching or managing sports teams and organizing family-oriented programs, festivals, and events. As well, women expressed an intersectional understanding of identity, noting that their multiple identities, including, for example, gender, family, and rurality, interact within the many spaces of their everyday lives. Georgia recognized how she is more than a mother and that is why she is involved and working, "because there is more to me than just being a mother and nurturing. I feel that women have good ideas and they need to share them and that they can make as much difference as anyone else."

The following section presents findings and analysis on rurality, gender, and community involvement.

Rurality, Gender, and Community Involvement in Rural Manitoba

Discussions of rurality, gender, and community involvement considered opportunities, rural lifestyles, patriarchy, and connecting.

Opportunities

Discussing opportunities, women identified that the lower population base in rural areas means more people per capita can be involved and there might not be as stringent qualifications for involvement as assumed to be the case in urban areas. Also, it is easier to be involved and make change in rural communities. Speaking about opportunities for rural people to be involved, Dot explained:

> You are a little fish in a little fish bowl and so you are not having to compete with the big fish to get involved. In big cities you can be, you can go, there are all kinds of courses, there are opportunities to go view and do things like that, theatre and concerts, all that kind of stuff, but if you are a musician, you, in a big city, you are not going to get into the orchestra, symphony orchestra unless you are really, really, top notch. In a rural area your skills will be appreciated if you share them because there are not that many better musicians so you can be involved in starting up an orchestra or choir or little musical group.

Comparing her urban and rural involvement, Fiona noted, "It's easier to get involved in the rural area just because there are less people," adding:

> I find here if you are going to be involved in something it is more on a personal level and you don't necessarily have to go through the door of your profession . . . here I can just be myself and I don't have to carry my profession with me when I walk through the door.

Both Dot and Fiona equated a larger population base with greater competition for volunteer positions that would require higher credentials. Lena, who has provided strategic planning for many rural boards, observed that many people were recruited to boards "for the fact that they are breathing a lot of times."

Shifting the discussion on opportunities, Lena suggested that in rural areas there is more opportunity to make change. "If you have an idea and you think it's good and if anybody else wants to come along with you, you know, if anybody else thinks it's a good idea, you can get it done." While Lena is speaking from her own experiences, this observation calls for considering our understandings and assumptions of making change in rural and non-rural settings as well as how these opportunities are gendered.

While there may be more opportunities to be involved, these opportunities must be considered in regard to the gender cultures prevalent in rural communities. How do women decide which opportunities they will pursue? How does gender factor in? Are all opportunities available to women, particularly leadership opportunities on municipal councils or on credit union, agricultural, health, and school boards? A quick anecdotal review of the research area indicates that the majority of town and municipal councillors are male. All mayors and municipal reeves are male. School boards present a different story, as over 60% of trustees are female. Three women who took part in this project were municipal councillors or committee members, and one was a former school board trustee. While nearly half of the women stated they did not see gender influencing their community involvement, the majority of the areas women named in their involvement are connected to what are traditionally considered female concerns, including children, family, hospitality, recreation, health, and education, suggesting gender is a strong determining factor when it comes to community involvement.

Dot noted that many provincial-level committees are desperately trying to find rural members to ensure truly provincial representation. Tanya, who sat on the board of a provincial women's committee, shared:

> The opportunity that I had to get involved with [a provincial women's organization] gave me an opportunity to feel I was doing something for rural women, although I might not have been part of the local groups. One of the first things I learned on this council of women: there weren't any rural women. There were very few rural members, and I was the only rural member on the board.

While the opportunity to sit on a provincial committee provides opportunities for women to influence broader issues and concerns, expand their networks, and often access information and training, these opportunities are typically accessed through personal and professional connections, which makes them exclusive. Also, many of these opportunities require driving to Winnipeg, increasing the time and expenses associated with these roles.

Rural Lifestyles

Rural life, including the socio-economic realities of the lower cost of living in some rural areas, allows mothers to stay at home or work part-time. Stacey noted, "Moms do tend to stay home more often than in an urban setting, I think, or at least only work part-time and maybe that's because it is cheaper to live out here and there isn't quite as much push to move ahead." Several women pointed out that as mothers they could legitimately stay at

home to be with their kids or work part-time, granting them the time and flexibility to be involved. Mia, a farm woman, noted that if she wasn't a stay-at-home mom, there was no way she could do it all. While some women acknowledged the career sacrifices this choice entailed, few critically questioned the socio-cultural values and system that make women the default stay-at-home parent, or the broader societal undervaluing of motherwork to the functioning of a strong, viable civic society and economy (Gouthro, 2009; Hart, 2002). While stay-at-home moms are not exclusive to rural areas, it is important to consider how rurality informs the gendered nature of family structures.

Although none of the full-time working moms discussed this specifically, anecdotal observations and conversations with local mothers who "choose to have it all"—career or full-time work, family, and community involvement—when alternatives are financially viable and culturally valued, indicated that they face significant pressures. Belinda saw herself as being a role model for her daughter, though was challenged with mommy guilt for working and volunteering:

> I think my daughter sees a great role model. I don't think she's feeling ripped off. I've asked her lots of times. "Do you think I'm ripping you off? Would you prefer if I wasn't working, like look at so and so's mom, look at so and so's mom, like what do you think of that?" She's quite happy with it the way it is.

Farm women, on the other hand, have always to some extent worked on the farm while raising children, being involved in their communities, and, for many, working off the farm. Considering how women spend their everyday, whether in the homeplace or workplace, raises critical questions about modernization and assumptions underlying greater ideas of human progress (Felski, 2000), particularly how understandings and assumptions about societal and human progress are gendered.

Patriarchy

Several women discussed the prevalence of patriarchy. Women expressed feeling unheard, dismissed, and alienated. Considering her community, Belinda, an advocate for women and families, described her frustrations:

> I think [men] would like us to just still shut up. Stop complaining. It's so nice we don't hit you anymore. That's what I would say. That's what it feels like sometimes. It's really just you know, "don't you have enough, you're equal, isn't that good?" This idea that it's all good now. But it isn't yet, it isn't yet.

Belinda's account highlights how the legislation on gender equality has yet to manifest itself into the mindsets and actions at the local level, not to mention economic, justice, political, and socio-cultural systems. At one time, Stacey considered running for mayor, yet decided against it, even though in the past her community has elected female councillors.

> The culture is patriarchal and so, um, it feels like my opportunities for leadership are somewhat limited. I considered running for mayor but chose not to for a number of reasons. One being lack of time, but partly that was self-preservation. And when a couple of males decided, I just felt like people were going to vote for the males anyways because males

> are seen as the competent leaders. So maybe that shows a bit of, cannot think of the word. Lack of confidence in myself, but it was more a lack of confidence in the community.

Stacey's comments highlight the significance of the local gender culture, perceived or experienced, in women seeking and attaining leadership positions in local volunteer-based organizations and institutions, particularly politics. Three of the women discussed being the first female to be municipal councillor or school board chair and the challenges and supports they had experienced breaking gender barriers.

In regard to feminism in a rural area, Tanya, a feminist farm woman, shared the following account of when she wore a feminist pin:

> I consider myself to be a feminist and I decided to be brave and wear a little pin that said "this is what a feminist looks like," and I was told at a service provided in one of the larger communities that I could be shot for that. And that was for me a very large shock.

Tanya's story validates what I believe is a private fear among many local rural feminists. Early on I was told by a local feminist that, in the study area, feminist discussions happen in private encounters. As highlighted in the rural and gender literature, gender, including feminism, is not safe to discuss in public, particularly if you are challenging gender roles. Those who publicly identify as feminist risk social isolation, rejection, and alienating themselves from potential allies (Heather, et al., 2005; Teather, 1998). The smaller population of rural areas means "that here everybody knows everybody," as Simone pointed out, and the lack of anonymity simply means that you are constantly carrying your reputation and connections with you. The result is that local feminists must situate their feminism within their context to strategically negotiate when and how to effectively make change toward gender equality or risk being isolated.

Connecting

Community involvement provides significant spaces for women to connect and network with other women and access support and mentoring. Many women identified community involvement as an important opportunity for socializing and connecting with other women. Gail suggested that in her community, in terms of volunteering, there are more female-based groups than male-based groups because women are more social. She added, "I think women find reasons to get together or develop reasons." For many women, community involvement also serves as their leisure social time (Connolly, 2002; Desplanque, 1997). Stacey surmised, "I think women have a desire to connect. Not all women, obviously. Generally, I think we are social beings and have a desire to connect with others." In regards to her own involvement, she noted she longed for community connection, in particular with other mothers, to help normalize her experiences, and she hoped others did as well. "[I] started it off kinda selfishly wanting that kind of community connection and thinking there were others who would want it too and it developed from there." Mia, a farm woman and business owner, said, "The main reason for me was to actually find women that I have something in common with; that I can learn something from, too; and do something with, and that is sometimes educating too." For women such as Tanya, whose ideas and values

may challenge local norms, connecting with local like-minded women helped develop her sense of self and agency.

> I've learned that there are other women like me and not necessarily living all that close to me but relatively close to me who share some of my views, my worldview. And that is a very comforting feeling. And then you also have more confidence in being yourself in your own community.

Connecting with other women, in particular like-minded women, can help normalize women's experiences, whether it be around motherhood, feminism, or illness, as shared by Gail and Kathy, who started a women's support group for breast cancer survivors. This connecting can also spark action. Tanya recounted a story of a sit-in (my term) held by women from her community baseball team in response to the gaze they received from the male coffee drinkers when they entered their local grocery store.

> In the beginning we had a community store, and if you go there in the morning for a quart of milk or something there, it would always be awkward to walk into the store because conversation would stop and you felt awkward. And this wasn't just my concern. This was when I was on the baseball team and a few of us decided that we were going to get to the store first and so we sat in the store and then watched the men as they came in . . . there was a little discomfort and it probably, we made our point. And hopefully the men had a little laugh over it. It wasn't discussed, we just did it.

Tanya pointed out that the women didn't discuss the event—although I assume there was some planning involved, like when to meet at the store—yet from her comment, I also assume the women didn't talk about it afterward, and my understanding is that there was no follow-up action. Tanya herself didn't refer to the team's action as a sit-in, most likely because this would be considered locally as taboo. Labelling this action a sit-in demonstrates how renaming an event or experience can dramatically alter how it is perceived and its political significance.

The informal learning and mentorship opportunities women gain through connecting with other women in community involvement are significant to their ongoing community involvement practice. This can be particularly significant to women in rural areas where there are limited opportunities to attend workshops or seminars. All women identified learning by doing and learning by watching/mentoring with role models and others as the most significant means of learning what needs to be done and how to do it when it comes to community involvement, from organizing events to advocating for resources. Mia provided an example:

> For example, the [community supper], I never organized something like that and I mean you see all of a sudden they all work together and they all have certain jobs. The same job for so many years. So, it's like they know exactly what to do and who is in charge for what. It was like learning from the others that have done it for many years basically and sitting there first and listening, and then, I mean I didn't jump in like crazy right away. I was pretty slow, and so you take on more responsibilities as you grow, you know.

The significance of connecting with other women validates the importance of considering women as connected knowers (Belenky, Clinchy, et al., 1986) and connection for women as knowers (Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Community involvement offers a venue for women to connect with women sharing common values and concerns; for example, not just any woman would volunteer to sit on a youth restorative justice committee or a women's shelter board. These experiences can help women validate their perceptions and knowledge of community beliefs, values, and practices. Not a single woman discussed how community involvement challenged her perceptions of her community. Considering that we tend to keep to our own social identity groups (Tillmann-Healy, 2003) and the perception of homogeneity within rural communities, where are the spaces to critically challenge and engage women's understandings of the local gender culture and how it influences their lives? If we support and encourage the connections as they exist, do we not risk perpetuating the existing understandings of gender culture and practices in rural communities? What about building connections across boundaries, particularly with minorities and marginalized groups such as immigrant and indigenous women? In stating this, I realize I risk assuming that, presently, women are not critically challenging their understandings of gender cultures. However, I'm left with consternation about women's spaces that challenge gender culture and assumptions, as well as how women's connections bridge social identity groups.

Final Words

The diverse, complicated, assumed, and ordinary nature of rurality can make it difficult to isolate its influences on activities perceived as everyday and normal, including how women are involved in their communities. Discussing their community involvement, rural women identified several ways rurality influenced their community involvement, including opportunities, rural lifestyles, patriarchy, and the need to connect with other women. Women's connections with other women in community involvement are significant to learning and sustaining their community involvement, particularly when their values and ideas challenge traditional and prevalent ideologies and values such as patriarchy. Feminism and a women's movement in this rural area both take on situated forms reflecting the context. Here feminist language and action are often transposed into softer, subtler tones and actions rephrased as equality and fairness, which are quieter, held longer, and repeated, often over decades. Tanya's "sit-in" story highlights how rural women can take action, though they may not use direct-action terms.

By engaging with rural women and actively listening in order to understand rural contexts and culture, we can appreciate the various ways that rural women could theorize and practise gender equality in their homes, workplaces, churches, and communities. There is more than one way to be a feminist, and often we have to adjust our feminist practices and language based on where we find ourselves, not to hide our feminist values, but rather to account for and challenge the gender culture. Recognizing this article as a contribution to a necessary broader discussion of rurality and women's learning, we must continue to ask critical questions about how rurality and gender intersect within our deeply held ideas and values of learning and education.

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