**‘You’re not one of those are you?’**

**Situated feminism, rurality and women’s learning in rural Manitoba, Canada**

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“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, rural woman, Research Participant.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Introduction**

Feminist intersectional analysis of women’s learning and education typically considers identities such as race, sex, gender, and class, yet rarely is rurality analyzed (Pini, Moletsane and Mills, 2014). Discussions of rural are often limited to descriptions of context or setting (Pini, Moletsane and Mills). Rural education research and practice critically highlights that the urban experience and context is the norm (Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane, 2008; Wagner, 2014). Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane lament “seldom is rurality conceptualized as dynamic, or as a set of preference that have value independent of urban influences” (pg. 97). Rurality is not palisaded within a static context, informed by forces of change; the glolocality (Antrobus, 2004) of rurality ensure its infusion with influences beyond its location, through media –including social media, technology, migration, globalisation, as well as political, economic and cultural forces.

Numerous factors may contribute to the limited feminist research on rural education, including: stereotypes of rural women and girls as “apolitical” (Pini, Molestane and Mills, p. 453); assumptions about the rural as ‘backward’, pre-modern, conservative and conformist (Brandth, 2002; Pini, Moletsane and Mills, 2014; Wagner, 2014); frequent hesitant or hostile attitudes toward feminism in rural areas (Brandth, 2002a; Pini, Moletsane and Mills, 2014; Teather, 1998); and that “traditionally feminism has been alien to farm women” (Brandth, 2002b, p. 108; Brandth and Haugen, 1997; Teather, 1998). Simultaneously, rural women often may reject or be hesitant towards the urban and/or more popular manifestations of feminism as many rural people, including women see feminism as an urban movement (Teather, 1998). Teather observed:

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. (1998, p. 212)

Hesitancy for feminism and feminist analysis and acknowledgement appears to go several ways – from the outside-in, from the inside-out, and with-in.

The factors, including assumptions, informing the lack of feminist research on rural women ignore the long tradition of activism for social and political change, including gender equality, by rural women (Fincher and Panelli, 2001; Pini, Moletsane and Mills; Taylor, 1997; Taylor, 1997; Teather, 1996; Welton, 1995). They also deny the situated feminisms in rural spaces (Carbert, 1995; Doeffer, 2014; Taylor, 1997) and dismiss the creative ways women, including rural women, have and continue to use the gendered nature of their roles as mothers and caregivers to advocate for security, well-being, equality and social justice (Dominelli, 2006; Krause, 1998; Naples, 1994, 1998). Rural women’s associations addressing women’s concerns, including equality, health, childcare, education, and social justice, have a long tradition in Canada (Ambrose and Kechnie, 1999; Cox, 1997; Neustaeter, forthcoming; Taylor, 1997; Welton, 1995). While many associations, organisations and initiatives in rural areas do not define or identify themselves as feminist, the values which inform their work reflect the goal of feminism: gender equality (Walby, 2011). Considering that rural feminisms may not look the part of their urban manifestations, it is important that they are not dismissed for not fitting a preconceived stereotype of ‘this is what feminism looks like’.

Drawing from literature, my experiences designing and facilitating women’s programs in rural Manitoba for an urban women’s organisation as well as my doctoral research on rural women’s learning in community-building, this article critically examines the intersection of rurality and feminism in women’s learning. What concerns, issues and challenges must adult educators, in particular feminist educators, take into consideration? What strategies have been successful? And, finally, how can adult educators support feminist thought and practice in rural areas?

To locate myself within this discussion I will share the awakening of my own feminist curiosity (Enloe, 2004) and journey. I returned to my rural roots in 2009 to pursue my doctorate in Peace and Conflict Studies while raising my child as a single mother with the support of my family. My intersectional identities, as rural, educated, mother, feminist, daughter/family member, advocate, community member and adult educator, prompted me to focus my research on rural women, learning and peacebuilding. In doing so, I began a fascinating and rewarding critical engagement with women’s everyday learning and peacebuilding experiences situated in dynamic rural contexts and cultures. Having grown up in the research area, I was aware of the patriarchal gender culture, and true, it made me anxious to disclose my own developing feminist values and analysis. After moving away at 18, life experiences, including living, travelling and doing research in foreign places as well as pursuing a graduate degree in Adult Education were formative experiences in my feminist curiosity and becoming. All of these experiences happened elsewhere, not in my current rural backyard, and my feminist friends and networks existed outside of my now rural-life. 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. It wasn’t until I co-facilitated a women’s community leadership program that I connected into 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 myself and feminist-inclined friends have discussed how careful we have to be about using the words feminist and feminism; self-identifying as a feminist; and, how we must be strategic in expressing feminist ideas and values. Jokingly, we suggested it would be easier if there was a secret hand-shake. During at the beginning of an encounter with leaders of a local women’s group to discuss the possibility of facilitating a workshop for their group I was asked “We don’t have to burn our bras do we? You are not one of those are you?” While shocked at the bluntness, sadly, I was not surprized. I simply replied that they could keep their bras. I’ve learned to listen with an open feminist curiosity and open to surprises (Enloe, 2000), to be critical and caring, and to ask questions in order to understand women’s situated knowledge and feminisms. In doing so, I’m beginning to see and hear the nuances of gender equality, feminisms.

To clarify, this article focuses on rural women living in areas which are strongly connected to agriculture, rather than rural areas associated with natural resources such as timber, hunting, fishing, mining and oil and gas industries. As well, this article focuses on rural experiences in ‘developed’ countries. This is not to say there is an absence of commonalities regarding women, feminism, and learning in all rural areas, rather, I wish to focus this article to a specific rural experience.

**Scanning the Fields**

The diverse definitions of rural are informed by spatial and thematic factors (Ramsey and Beesley, 2006). Rural is constantly created and recreated through media, culture, and discourse (Cloke and Little, 1997; Cloke, 2006; Woods, 2010). Rural has functional, experienced and perceived definitions (Ramsey, Annis and Everitt, 2002) influenced by ideologies, values, geography, demography, politics and nostalgia. Functional definitions, often used by governments or institutions for statistical purposes factor population, population density, relationship to an urban centre/core, percentage of people who commute to an urban core, and dominant economic activity (Bollman and Clemenson, 2008; Cloke, 2006; OECD, 2006; Pini, Moletsane and Mills, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2011). In Manitoba, the rural population makes up twenty-seven percent of the total population of which fourteen percent live on farms or four percent of the total provincial population (Statistics Canada, 2011). In rural areas, in developed countries, only a minority of the population is directly employed in agriculture, though people may be employed indirectly in industries or manufacturing that are dependent on agriculture, such as transport or grain or oil-seed processing (OECD, 2006; Rousseau, 1995).

Experienced and perceived conceptions of rural are varied, contradictory and common (Cloke, 2006; Bryant and Pini, 2011; Ramsey, Annis and Everitt, 2002; Wagner, 2014). Ramsey, Annis and Everitt’s (2002) 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” (pg. 196). Wagner (2014) points out that popular concepts of rural as racially homogenous, lacking educational opportunities, and poverty troubled contradict the romanticized rural idyll of “a sanctuary free from the crime and social ills perceived as rampant in urban areas” (p. 555). As well, rural is often juxtaposed against the modern urban metropole and set up as the ‘other’ against the normative urban (Nairn, Panelli, and McCormak, 2003; Wagner, 2014).

Rural areas are dynamic and transforming (Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane, 2008). The culture of each rural community is evolving, influenced by migration, economic, social and cultural factors including development and globalization (Balfour, Mitchell and Moletsane, 2008; Panelli, 2006). While rural areas are typically painted with one swooping stroke, they are actually diverse and unique (Cloke and Little, 1997; Woods, 2010). In my own research I’ve noted the diversity between and within rural communities and regions, in regards to age, religion, class, culture, ethnicity, and race. However, this diversity exists with and at times in conflict to the idyll of rural homogeneity informed by harmonious social relationships along with the strong, communal experience of gemeinschaft (Brandth, 2002; Brookfield, 1984; Naples, 1994). Gemeinschaft is described by Brookfield (1984) 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” (pg. 62). Critically examining gemeinschaft Brookfield (1984) emphasizes the significance of the socialization process which ensures the perpetuation and enforcement of this social system, “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).

The rural idyll and perception of homogeneity suppresses gender, race, class, and religious realities and conflicts (Brandth and Haugen, 1997; Cloke and Little, 1997; Little and Austin, 1996; Naples, 1994; Pini and Leach, 2011; Wagner, 2014). For example, Wagner points out that the homogenized rural ignores the rural Indigenous population, which can make up a significant percentage of the rural population in certain areas. In my work with rural immigrants and refugees, I`ve been introduced to a growing Muslim population which is networking across communities to collectively support their faith practice. Religious minority groups, particularly non-Christian are hidden within the Christian homogenized rural idyll, with a strong protestant majority and a Catholic minority.

The gendered nature of the conceptions of rural tend to validate the subordination of women and limit women’s abilities to make individual and collective choices, particularly if the choice challenges perceived gender roles (Brandth, 2002; Brandth and Haugen, 1997; Little and Panelli, 2003; Naples, 1994; Teather, 1996, 1998). Often women hang on to this rural idyll without critical consideration on its effects on their gender and community relationships, particularly as it pertains to their subordination (Naples, 1994). For example, farm women may dismiss their own emancipation out of fear for diminishing the “public status and private ego of their men folk” (Teather, 1996, pg. 5), or fear demanding their own needs “would undermine the struggle of their farms and their communities and that would be selfish” (Heather, Skillen, Young & Vladicka, 2005, pg. 90). Farm wives have been socialized to “take a back seat” (Haley, 19991. pg. 169).

The absence of a women’s movement in rural areas could also be considered a lack of women’s gendered critical awareness and action in response to their perceived ‘back seat’ position, however at the same time, rural women’s community activism has existed for over a hundred years in Canada, albeit manifested in forms and language outside of mainstream feminist discourse (Carbert, 1995; Demarais, 2005; Taylor, 1997; Welton, 1995). This ‘absence’ may be strategic on the part of rural women who recognize how the dominant perception of the women’s movement as focusing on women is a threat to the rural values of family and community, harmonious social relationships and gemeinshaft (Brandth, 2002b; Brandth and Haugen, 1997; Shortall, 1994). Pini, Moletsane and Mills (2014) encourage rural and feminist researchers to consider the messiness of what is rural and rurality, noting the inter-relationships between diverse conceptions. “The rural, like gender” Pini, et al. write “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).

Gender roles and ideologies which inform the power relations in farming and rural communities can create challenges for many farm and rural women (Brandth, 1994; Brandth and Haugen 1997; Heather, et al.; Little, 2002; Naples, 1994; Shortall, 1992; Teather, 1996, 1998). Gender and rural identity reflect a relational view of gender development where masculinities and femininities are created and recreated in relationship to each other and changing social and economic conditions and policies (Brandth and Haugen 2005; Campbell and Bell, 2000; Coldwell, 2010; Taylor, 1999). Rural systems, such as farms, depend significantly on cooperation between men and women (Brandth, 2002b). Farm and farm household work remains gendered, although it is slowly changing (Martz, 2004). While men’s work on the farm is primarily focused on the production of the farm, women’s work encompasses the farm and household and it is more common for women to engage in all farm work (Martz, 2004; Martz and Bruekner, 2003).

For women living in rural areas their experiences are varied. Rural women may live in small or large towns, small cities[[2]](#footnote-2), villages, First Nations Reservations and colonies[[3]](#footnote-3). Women may live on working farms, where the household income is all or in part supported by agriculture. Women may live on farmyards where the household income is not supported by agriculture. It is important to recognize that farm women, in this area, are the minority of rural women. 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.

As mothers, workers, caregivers, farmers and community volunteers, rural women balance their multiple roles in contexts which may or may not offer them significant economic, education, employment, and health and well-being support (Kelly and 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, employment and service work (Kelly and Idehen, 2005; Sutherns, McPhedron and Haworth-Brockman, 2004) including “geographic isolation, transportation, and limited child-care, networking, and mentoring opportunities (Davis, 2011, pg. 5).

Being a rural feminist is not a contradiction in terms, nor is it impossible. Feminism itself is a contentious and stigmatized term (Walby, 2011), particularly in rural areas (Brandth and Haugen, 1997; Whatmore, 1994). Popular ideas of feminism are regarded as destabilizing or a threat to many of the social relationships valued in rural society, including the nuclear family and relationships between men and women, as well feminism is perceived as hostile towards men (Brandth, 2002b). 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, pg. 90). Women who do consider themselves feminist or espouse feminist values incorporate their feminism into more contextually or culturally acceptable forums. Terms like feminist and feminism are used cautiously and strategically. These hushed ‘f-words’ are perceived as threats to the rural patriarchal hegemony (Brandth and Haugen, 1997). There are under-currents and realizations of feminism in rural areas, though they may manifest and be perceived differently than mainstream conceptions of the women’s movement or feminism (Little, 2006). Here, feminist language is usually transposed into the key of rural: softer, subtler tones, rephrased as equality and fairness, which are quieter, held longer and repeated. These discourses often take place through whisperings in the ear, taps on the shoulder and safe or strategic conversations. Anecdotally, I’ve observed women using stories, at times using humour to pose critical questions, to challenge gender roles and develop their own agency, in women’s public spaces such as church groups, play groups, as well as recreation and leisure groups. A common site of rural women’s agency, in particular for farm women are farm women’s networks (Little, 2006).

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)

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. Women find and create spaces and relationships in which the can share stories, ask questions and develop agency.

**Feminist pedagogy and practice in rural Manitoba**

The impetus for this article are my experiences co-designing and co-facilitating women’s programs for a feminist organisation from the city in the rural area in which I live and my doctoral research on rural women’s learning in community-building. The women’s programs, Changemakers and PathMakers, were informal learning programs offered through UNPAC, a not-for-profit association in Winnipeg, Manitoba, committed to the empowerment and equality of women in Manitoba (The Canadian CED Network, nd.). UNPAC, now defunct, operated with the belief that “women already possess the knowledge to make positive change in our communities” (The Canadian CED Network, pg. 1). Changemakers was a one year, part-time program aimed at assisting community women to “harness their knowledge and skills in order to create positive change in their communities” (pg. 1). This program was initially developed and offered in Winnipeg, an urban centre, and then offered in rural southern Manitoba. Pathmakers was a six-month, part-time program for women in rural areas to grow their leadership and mentoring knowledge and skills, and develop strategies to create change in their workplaces and communities (The Morden Times, 2013). PathMakers only ran in rural communities. I co-facilitated two of the three PathMaker programs. When I co-facilitated ChangeMakers and the first PathMakers, my facilitation partner commuted from Winnipeg. The second time I co-facilitated PathMakers my facilitation partner had just moved from Winnipeg to the rural area where the program was taking place, in a sense she was more local than myself. The analysis provided here represents my own critical analysis and reflection as a facilitator, not a program manager, and does not necessarily reflect considerations of others involved in the program.

Feminist pedagogy (Haynes and Flannery, 2000; Shrewsbury, 1993; Tisdell, 2000) informed the program design as well as the topics and issues addressed in the program. Tisdell (2000) describes feminist pedagogy as being

about women as learners, It is about women as knowers, teachers, actors in the world. 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. (pg. 155)

By using the women’s own stories to build upon their experiences and ask critical questions (Shrewsbury, 1993) we hoped to create a dynamic reflective space where the women could engage in collaborative meaning-making (Mezirow, 1991) by naming and renaming (Freire, 2000) their experiences to build their praxis. In PathMakers, using the women’s stories unearthed a deeper discussion within the groups about our gendered socialization and experiences, in particular as rural women trying to create community change. Dialogue is a significant learning tool and experience in which participants can “experience their thoughts as they are being created, dialogue sponsors the growth of self, voice and mind in the participants” (Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock, 1997, pg. 80). It is important to begin where the women are at, as well as explore and compare women’s realities and experiences with women (Dominelli, 1995). By engaging in critical dialogue about their experiences as rural women, and actively listening in order to understand each other, where we are coming from and what has informed our ideas, we were able to appreciate the various ways that rural women could theorize and practice gender equality in our homes, workplaces, churches and communities. This experience highlighted for the women that 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 creatively account for and challenge the gender culture. Here it was not about the label one gives to their ideas, values and beliefs yet the ideas, values and beliefs themselves that are important. Dialogue and connection were the means through which we could safely examine feminism in regards to rural women’s situated knowledge (Harding, 1991; Naples, 2003). At times the ideological diversity within the group demanded greater curiosity and reflection, active listening, in order to identify common interests, as such asking women to speak and listen from the perspective of a woman or a mother, rather than from a political or religious ideology.

Creating connection was a significant component to both programs, however seemed more immediate in PathMakers. In one PathMakers, we noticed that women were often late, coming at some point within the first half-hour. In response, we incorporated the Swedish tradition and practice of ‘fika’[[4]](#footnote-4) for the first thirty minutes as an opportunity for women to drift in, settle into the space, catch-up, get to know each other – essentially building relationships and networks. This tactic was so ‘successful’ that women often lamented missing ‘fika’ when they arrived late. Fika not only created a practical time buffer yet also a relaxed, informal space where we could build friendships and connections. Connection and building connections have been identified as significant for women’s self-identity (Desplanque, 1997; Gilligan, 1982) and a central space and experience of women’s learning and knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986; Hayes and Flannery, 2000; Hayes, 2001).

In order to create and maintain these women’s spaces for learning it was important to address barriers women learners face, for example transportation which is a recognized barrier to rural women’s participation and learning. Considering the absence of public transportation in rural areas, in order to participate in learning or education opportunities women must have access to a reliable vehicle, finances to afford the associated vehicle and driving expenses (insurance, licence, gas, and maintenance); further in rural areas distances can be greater between communities, requiring significant time and fuel (Davis, 2011; Graveline, Kitzpatrick and Mark, 1991; Kelly and Idehen, 2005; Sutherns, McPhedron, and Waworth-Brockman, 2004). To address this problem we attempted to run the programs at a central location for participants, however some participants had to commute up to forty-five minutes, one way, to the sessions. In response mileage was offered to all PathMakers who lived outside of the local community, however some of the participants initially declined the support. This sparked an interesting discussion between the facilitators: how does an organisation committed to acknowledging and advocating for the elimination of barriers for women address barriers, such as costs incurred to participate, when the participants are uncomfortable or unwilling to accept support? In rural areas driving to meetings, events and classes for personal reasons is simply an absorbed cost to the participants. A woman’s participation is thus determined by her access to a reliable vehicle and her ability to drive and pay for the fuel, or having a willing driver. The rarity of mileage reimbursement, particularly in regards to education or learning programs for personal development, can make the discussion an awkward encounter. A few participants reasoned that perhaps others needed it more than they did. Some women shared that they so greatly appreciated the opportunity to connect with allies and a diverse group of similarly minded women in a rural area that they couldn’t accept money for being there. It was suggested to mail-out the cheques or discreetly give the women the cheques without discussion. However, these approaches challenge respecting for learner autonomy and agency which would conflict with feminist pedagogy (Shrewsbury, 1993). The incident highlights a potential disjunction and challenge between feminist ideology and practice.

My initial analysis of women’s responses to mileage reimbursement focused on creating and maintaining harmonious social relationships and homogeneity; connecting their rationale to concepts discussed in rural ideologies and women’s learning – connecting and identity (Hayes and Flannery, 2000). Through further consideration, including a discussion with some of the women, I realized that the matter is more complex and fluid. Expanding and deepening my analysis I noticed how the issue dynamically and peculiarly manifests itself in this particular learning space differently for facilitators and participants. As the facilitator, I was focusing on group dynamics and program management at the intersection of gender and rurality. As learners and feminists pursuing social, economic, gender and political issues, these women focus incredible time and energy advocating for change at the local, regional and provincial levels for the marginalized and disadvantaged, and seeking a fair society. It seemed ironic, that as advocates these women were so intently focusing on others and addressing inequalities that when they were presented with support to address a barrier in their own lives they declined assistance. As mentioned, some women declined mileage cheques on the perception or basis that someone may need it more than they. This emphasis on need and determining of need, in particular financial need, raises significant questions for organisations aiming to address accessibility and equity informed by feminist ideology. Whose role is it to determine financial need, the learning institution or the learner?

The intent to maintain harmonious social relationships among the learners may prompt women to decline mileage reimbursement for fear of creating conflict or jealously within the group which could destabilize group cohesion. If this is the case, women may decline mileage or other types of support or avoid other potential or perceived conflictual topics in order to reduce or avoid possible intra-group conflict and ensure group stability. The assumption being that harmonious social relationships are conflict free, or give the impression that they are conflict free. Such an assumption exposes participants’ values, beliefs and approaches to conflict and conflict resolution; as well, the perceived roles of conflict in social relationships – constructive, destructive or transformative. If practicing feminist pedagogy and acknowledging women’s learning means creating a safe and supportive space where learners give and develop their individual and collective voice, as well as express diverse and perhaps at times conflicting points of view (Hayes and Flannery, 2000) isn’t the expectation that this learning space should be able to manage, resolve or transform conflict?

Social relationships and networks are mentally and emotionally significant for addressing the physical and psychological isolation many rural, in particular farm, women face (Cox, 1997; Taylor, 1987, 1997). Research on women’s friendships highlights “women need to identify with each other as a gendered group” (Gullstead, 1984 as noted in Desplanques, 1997, pg. 234). Desplanque (1997) explains that “women’s friendship groups and their dynamics can provide a catharsis from which a sense of identity emerges” (pg. 234). Women’s friendships, networks and social relations can be particularly significant for women whose ideologies and values are different than or challenge the cultural or community status quo, such as feminism (Oliker, 1989), as Friedman writes “numerous communities of women throughout history who defied the local conventions for their gender” (Friedman, 1989, pg. 287). For women involved in community activism, as many of the PathMaker women were, women’s networks, social relationships and friendships can be an important catalyst, motivation and support (Connolly, 2002; Dominelli, 2006; Krauss, 1993, 1998; Sacks, 1993; Vickers, 1998). Women’s friendships are also significant learning sites for women (Martinez Aleman, 1997; Oliker, 1989) which reflect the connecting-style of learning mentioned previously that many women engage well with. Reflecting upon the experience now, I consider that as facilitators we were intentionally creating and implementing something, a learning process and community that women create and practice informally nearly every day.

Continuing the analysis informed by key concepts in rural ideology, an examination of homogeneity within the group exposes the subjectivity of the construction of homogeneity which depends on what identity or identities one has chosen to place their focus. Incorporating an intersectional analysis points out that while the group may be homogeneous in regards to gender and rurality, other identities such as age, race, class, ethnicity, marital status, family status, ideology, religion, education, and politics point to the group’s heterogeneity. Rural identities and experiences of rurality also vary among town, village and farm women. Homogeneity can be considered at a micro-level among friendship groups to the macro-level of society. Tillman-Healy (2005) points out that we tend to develop friendships with people more similar to us than different, typically staying within gender, ethnicity, race, age, ideological, and class lines; thus our friendship groups tend to be more homogeneous. A critical analysis of homogeneity raises considerations on the social construction of inequalities and differences, as well as the location and dynamics of power (Naples, 1994, 2003). Feminist researchers, as Naples points out, “have been particularly sensitive to the cultural practices that reinforce gender, racial-ethnic, and class inequality” (p. 111). Gestures insinuating difference (even if the difference is in relation to a perceived identity within the group rather than the reality) such as offering or accepting financial assistance can distinguish an individual as different threatening their blending into group homogeneity. This point highlights the significance of cultural knowledge and power discourses which construct perceptions of homogeneity in rural areas and how these discourses affect those who fit into these perceptions, those who are marginalized by them and those who challenge these discourses of power (Naples, 1994).

Central, if not critical to the Changemakers and PathMakers experience, yet perhaps more so with the latter, was the creation of a space for critical dialogue and examination of practice on issues pertinent to the women shared with other women. Often challenging discourses of power informed by patriarchy, culture, colonization, and religion. It became a safe space where women could examine questions critically and share stories challenging gender regimes and roles, listen to differences and similarities and finally to support other women, and themselves while the dreamed of gender equality. Significantly, it was a refuge where women could reveal their situated femimisms, with their masks off. One participant compared the group to a modern adaptation of her mother’s and grandmother’s ‘nahverein’ –sewing circle. In doing so, I, and perhaps more women, began to recognize the various dynamic, creative gestures of rural women advocating for gender equality and transformation. At one PathMakers session one woman recounted the following story of when some members of her softball team made up of any woman in the community who could hold a bat and run, held a sit-in at the local grocery store. In many rural communities, the local grocery store also serves as a community coffee shop and gathering spot.

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 start and then watched the men as they came in.

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1. Tanya’s name has been changed to ensure confidentiality. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In Manitoba a population centre with a minim population of 7,500 can be designiated a city. REFERENCE. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hutterite Colonies dot the prairie landscape. Hutterites are a protestant religious denomination which lives in collective colonies, with limited connections to the greater population. REFERENCE. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While living in Stockholm, Sweden I learned about the Swedish social institution of ‘fika’ or is called elsewhere ‘coffee break’, though there are particular norms and expectations regarding a traditional fika which make it more similar to the British practice of tea time or high tea. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)