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Intimate Violence Against Women in Rural Communities\*

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Intimate violence against women takes many shapes and forms and is endemic to most, if not all, societies. However, some groups of women are much more likely than others to be subjected to lethal and non-lethal acts of violence committed by their current or former male partners. Rural women constitute one high-risk faction, but have historically been given short shrift by the social scientific community. This is not surprising because, as made explicit throughout the *Handbook*, criminology is generally urban-biased. Still, the empirical and theoretical literature on intimate femicide, sexual assault, physical violence, and other brutal male behaviors experienced by rural women has rapidly grown since the latter part of the last decade, with most of it generated in the United States. The main objective of this chapter is to review this body of knowledge and to suggest new directions in research and theory.

#### THE VIOLENT REALITIES OF LIFE FOR RURAL WOMEN

Why do rural men, as well as other males, assault or kill the women they love? One of the most common answers to this question is that these men must be “sick” or mentally disturbed. How could a “normal” person punch, kick, stab, rape, or shoot someone he deeply loves and depends on? The media contributes to the widespread belief that men who assault or kill female intimates are “sick.” For example, the use of quotations such as, “We don’t know what happened” typically “makes the cause of death appear inexplicable or the result of a man’s suddenly having ‘snapped’” (Myers 1997: 110). The truth is, regardless of whether they live in rural, suburban, or urban communities, most abusive men are “less pathological than expected” (Gondolf 1999: 1), with only 10 percent of all incidents of intimate violence resulting from mental disorders (DeKeseredy 2011).

Another unsettling truth is that various types of violence against women are not rare incidents. Rather, they are numerous and there is now conclusive evidence that women living in rural U.S. communities are at higher risk of being victimized by non-lethal violence and sexual assaults than their urban and suburban counterparts (Rennison, DeKeseredy, and Dragiewicz 2012, 2013). While there is a growing literature on the plight of rural women outside the U.S., much of the research done so far was conducted in the U.S. Thus, most of the empirical, theoretical work reviewed in this chapter is limited to this country.

## FEMICIDE

Ten years ago Weisheit and Wells (2005) stated that there are many homicide studies, but there is a limited amount of research on murders in rural communities. The same can be said today. As well, relatively little is known about rural intimate femicide, which is defined here "as the killing of females by male partners with whom they have had, or want to have a sexual and/or emotional relationship" (Ellis and DeKeseredy 1997: 592). Of the few in-depth U.S. studies conducted so far on this problem, Sinauer et al.'s (1999) examination of data abstracted from the North Carolina State Medical Examiner System reveals that the proportion of rural females murdered by intimate partners is higher than the percentages of women killed in urban and suburban counties. Five other studies examined geographic variations and all but one revealed higher rural rates.<sup>1</sup> Of course, rural femicide is not limited to the U.S. and annually approximately five thousand women and girls lose their lives to honor killings around the world (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2013; Proudfoot, 2009), many which occur in rural, patriarchal towns and villages (Sev'er 2013). An honor killing is defined here as:

the "premeditated murder of a preadolescent, adolescent, or adult woman by one or more male members of the immediate or extended family. These killings are often undertaken

when a family council decides on the time and form of execution due to an allegation, suspicion, or proof of sexual impropriety of the victim (Sev'er and Yurdakul 2001: 964-965).

Not all honor killings involve husbands or ex-husbands killing their current or former wives. Even so, thousands do (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2013). Yet the data on this problem should be read with caution. Though many rural women are killed in Muslim-majority countries, such as Iran and Turkey, Islam does not condone such violence. Based on her extensive research in rural Turkey, Sev'er (2013: 21) reminds us:

Honor killings are a misnomer, an ugly facade that tries to cover up murders of women in patriarchal parts of the world. By attaching the word "honor" to brutal murders of women, people are erroneously led to believe that these are somewhat legitimized, and culturally or religiously sanctioned practices. They are not! There is no culture or religion that directly connects murder of women with honor, or honor with femicide.

Furthermore, many femicides committed by Muslim men living in North America, regardless of where they live, are not examples of uncivilized medieval peasants following their traditional values. Rather, these men are controlling patriarchs living out their modern misogynist values. As well, women in intimate relationships are murdered every day in North America, almost exclusively by non-Muslims (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2013).

Why are rural women at higher risk of being killed than their urban and suburban counterparts? There is no simple answer to this question and some sociological attempts to do so are briefly discussed further on in this chapter. Nonetheless, no section on rural femicide is complete without a brief discussion of the role of guns, especially in North America. Contrary to popular belief, in the U.S.A. and Canada, two countries which consistently have the highest

homicide rates among the most advanced industrial nations (Currie 2009, 2012; Dobash and Dobash 2015), rural areas have higher rates of gun ownership than urban and metropolitan places (Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy 2014). Many rural gun owners hunt wildlife and own rifles, but the rate of rural handgun ownership is also higher than that for cities. Some scholars estimate that the rural rate in the U.S.A. is at least eight percent greater (Weisheit, Falcone, and Wells, 2006), while the most recent Canadian statistics show that 37.3 percent of small town residents own a gun compared to 2.8 percent in communities with over one million people (Department of Justice Canada 2015). Additionally, in Canada, close to 50 percent of domestic homicides involving firearms occurred in rural communities, though rural homes account for less than 20 percent of Canada's population (Royal Canadian Mounted Police 2013; World Bank 2013).

Consider the results of a study that generated data from 8,529 men enrolled in Massachusetts certified batterer intervention programs between 1999 and 2003:

- Seven percent of the men reported owning guns during the past three years.
- Recent gun owners were 7.8 percent more likely than non-gun owners to have threatened their partners with guns.
- Batterers reported using guns to threaten their partners in four ways, including threatening to shoot them, cleaning, holding or loading a gun during an argument, threatening to shoot a pet the person cared about, and shooting a gun during an argument with a victim (Rothman et al. 2005: 62).

Directly related to the above data are some findings derived from DeKeseredy and Schwartz's (2009) interviews with 43 rural Ohio women who experienced separation/divorce abuse. More than half (58 percent) said that male offenders had guns, and some of them

threatened to use them.<sup>2</sup> Keep in mind, as well, that gun ownership is strongly related to intimate femicide, especially when intimate partners live apart (Campbell et al. 2003). This is what happened to one of DeKeseredy and Schwartz's (2009: 48) interviewees when her partner found out that she wanted to leave him:

And I mean the one night he'd come home and pull a double barrel and cock both barrels and said he was going to kill me. And it was like, wait a minute here, you know, it was two o'clock in the morning. I was sound asleep and I got up at four to go to work. But he'd always keep pressuring me, "If you leave me, I'll find you. I'll kill you. If you leave me, I'll find you, I'll kill you."

Websdale (1998: 10) contends that the abusive behaviors listed in the above summary of the Massachusetts study are probably more common in rural U.S. areas than in urban places. He further argues:

Rural culture, with its acceptance of firearms for hunting and self-protection, may include a code among certain men that accepts the casual use of firearms to intimidate wives and intimate partners. In urban areas it is more difficult for abusers to discharge their weapons and go undetected. People in the country are more familiar with the sound of gunshots and often attribute the sound to legitimate uses such as hunting.

Supporting Websdale's claim about the "familiar sound of gunshots" is this quote from a woman who did not realize that a man was killing a woman who lived close to her:

Arlene Barnett of Westover said she was drinking coffee at her home when she heard four gunshots shortly after 10 a.m. at a nearby trailer where one of the victims lived. "I didn't pay any attention to it because I thought, oh heck, it's deer season," Barnett said. "I

thought they were deer hunting. I just went about my business and didn't connect anything. Then I heard the sirens" (Associated Press 2014: 1-2).

Websdale is also correct about the relationship between the rural hunting culture and woman abuse, as documented by Hall-Sanchez's (2013, 2014) recent rural Ohio study. She presented the results of DeKeseredy and Schwartz's (2009) ten-year-old study to a purposive sample of 12 rural Ohio women and her face-to-face interviews with each of them are insightful and generated data that, to the best of our knowledge, were never published before. In fact, two of the most important themes uncovered by DeKeseredy and Schwartz – male peer support and patriarchal dominance and control – clearly stood out. The former concept is defined as the attachments to male peers and the resources that these men provide that encourage and legitimate woman abuse.

More importantly, for the purpose of this section of our chapter, Hall-Sanchez also found that hunting was an integral part of the rural male peer support subculture that promoted and justified male-to-female violence in her participants' communities. She notes:

Regardless of why these men participated in the hunting subculture, the excruciatingly imperative reality is that it allowed them access to a legal and justifiable weapon that could be (and oftentimes was) used to intimidate, threaten, control, and hurt their female partners. This fact alone has a profound impact on the lives of rural women experiencing violence in their intimate relationships, especially when they are expressing a desire to or actually separating from their abusive male partners (2014: 8).

Hall-Sanchez helped fill a major gap in rural patriarchal male peer support research. Ironically, given that rates of intimate femicide are higher in rural areas and that these places have higher rates of gun ownership than do urban and suburban locales (Donnermeyer and

DeKeseredy 2014; Edwards 2014; Wendt 2009), over the past 25 years, male peer support researchers such as DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2009, 2013), have paid little attention to hunting issues. It is fair to assume that Hall-Sanchez's research will influence them and other feminist rural criminologists to do so.

#### NON-LETHAL INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Defining male-to-female intimate partner violence (IPV) is subject to much debate (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2011), but the current heated controversies are not repeated in this chapter (see DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2013 for reviews). Rather, here, following the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2013) and Edwards (2014), IPV refers to physical, sexual, and psychological assaults committed by a current or former male partner. Keep in mind, however, that there is not much empirical and theoretical work on psychological abuse and other non-physical harms in rural places, with much of the available research being qualitative in nature (e.g., DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2009).

The United States is the world's center for crime survey research, which partially explains why U.S. researchers have produced most of the statistics on IPV, especially nationally representative sample survey data. The most common such data base used to discern geographic similarities and differences is the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Edwards (2014) notes in her in-depth review of the rural IPV literature that four studies which used the NCVS found that the IPV prevalence rates are similar or higher for urban women compared to their rural and suburban counterparts (Bachman 2000; Bachman and Saltzman 1995; Greenfeld et al. 1998; Rennison and Welchans 2000). Three other studies that used the same data set gleaned much different findings. For example, DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz, and Rennison (2012) found that multiracial rural women had IPV rates exceeding those of multiracial urban women. Moreover,



Rennison, DeKeseredy, and Dragiewicz (2013) found that a higher percentage of rural females are victims of intimate violence than are urban and suburban females. Also using the NCVS, Rennison, DeKeseredy, and Dragiewicz (2012) found that rural separated/divorced women report significantly higher rates of intimate rape/sexual assault than do urban and suburban separated/divorced women.

Using different representative sample survey data sets, two other studies were conducted with conflicting results. One found higher rural rates for Wave 1 of the National Survey of Families and Households, but not for Wave 2 (Lanier and Maume 2009). On the other hand, CDC researchers Breiding, Ziembrocki, and Lynberg (2009) examined geographic differences across 16 U.S. states and found that one in four rural women were victimized by IPV over their life span, which is similar to the rate for the U.S. general population.

Turning to other countries, except for Canada<sup>3</sup>, there is a conspicuous lack of representative sample survey data on rural IPV. Most of the statistics are derived from official or government data sets, which greatly underestimate the extent of the problem. Consider Australia. While this country is home to a vibrant violence against women research community, what Hogg and Carrington (2006: 147-148) stated nine years ago is still relevant:

There is still very little in the way of research on the subject, and next to nothing relating to violence on farm properties as distinct from that which may occur in rural townships. Violence within the white rural family has also remained relatively invisible in public policy as a matter of priority or concern.

This is not to say that there is no research on non-lethal violence against women in rural parts of Australia and other countries. On the contrary, there is a wealth of important information derived from multiple empirical "ways of knowing" (Jaffe et al. 2011), especially through the use

of qualitative methods. It is safe, though, to conclude that, collectively, using small-scale quantitative statistics and qualitative data, international research done to date outside North America demonstrates that rural women are at higher risk of experiencing IPV than those in more densely populated areas (DeKeseredy 2015). Why is this the case? The bulk of the answers to this question are provided by North America and Australian scholars. On top of pointing to the high rate of gun ownership, the role of patriarchal male peer support, and to the hunting culture, these scholars assert that there is a system of social practices that dominates and oppresses rural and urban females alike, but it operates differently in rural places. For example, the masculinization of the rural, the dominance of man and mankind over women and nature, is represented as natural, and unproblematic (Carrington, Donnermeyer, and DeKeseredy 2014). While some men in urban vicinities report adversarial relationships with police, violent men in rural communities are more likely to be protected by an "ol' boys network" (Websdale 1998). Referred to as "mateship" in Australia (Wendt 2009), many rural battered women know that the local police may be friends with their abuser, and officers may refuse to arrest on grounds of friendship (DeKeseredy and Joseph 2006; Rennison, DeKeseredy, and Dragiewicz 2013)

In rural parts of Ohio and other states, such as Kentucky, as well as in Australia and Canada, there is also widespread acceptance of woman abuse and community norms prohibiting victims from seeking social support (Brownridge 2009; DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2008; Krishnan, Hilbert, and Pace 2001; LaViolette and Barnett 2014; Lewis 2003; Wendt 2009). Moreover, while urban abused women encounter many barriers to service, rural women by comparison have fewer social support resources (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, and Perrin 2011; Lohmann and Lohmann 2005; Merwin, Snyder, and Katz 2006; Rasuga 2013; Rennison, DeKeseredy, and Dragiewicz, 2013), and those available cover very large geographic areas

(DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2009; Logan, Stevenson, Evans, and Leukefeld 2004; Logan, Evans, Stevenson, and Jordan 2005). Rural women face additional barriers, including geographic and social isolation and inadequate (if any) public transportation (DeKeseredy 2015; Lewis 2003; Logan, Cole, Shannon, and Walker 2006). Another factor exacerbating rural women's troubles is being uninsured. What's more, rural women are less likely to be insured than are urban and suburban residents (Mueller and MacKinney 2006; Patterson 2006), which restricts their access to physical and mental health care services (Basile and Black 2011).

The study of contemporary pornography and how it negatively affects rural gender relations may be in a state of infancy. Yet, a small, but rapidly growing, body of qualitative research on separation/divorce sexual assault strongly suggests that the linkage between male pornography consumption and violence against women is a major problem in rural communities, at least those based in southeast Ohio (DeKeseredy and Hall-Sanchez in press; DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2009; Hall-Sanchez 2014). More empirical work is needed to determine whether this relationship is consistent across rural places and whether it is stronger in these areas than in urban and suburban locales.

#### THEORIZING VIOLENCE AGAINST RURAL WOMEN

Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy's (2014) review of rural criminological theoretical offerings reveals that no other perspective has been adopted more by rural criminologists than social disorganization theory. However, rural violence against women scholars buck this trend. Not surprisingly, the bulk of the theoretical work they produce draws heavily from various strands of feminism and prioritizes the gendered nature of intimate violence. For instance, Wendt's (2009) theoretical approach focuses primarily on rural culture and women's experiences of male violence, while Websdale's (1998) contribution concentrates mainly on the rural

criminal justice system's response to woman battering. More recent developments include the crafting of integrated theories of separation/divorce sexual assault that emphasize both the influence of broader patriarchal forces and male peer support.<sup>4</sup> As well, DeKeseredy, Muzzatti, and Donnermeyer (2014) offer an integrated theory of the horrification and pornification of rural culture, one that merges cultural criminological and radical feminist modes of thought.

Australian critical criminology has a relatively long history of examining rural masculinity as a powerful agent of violence against women. Some of the more recent work is similar to that being done in North America on male peer support, with a strong emphasis on how male drinking practices shape and escalate violence (Carrington, McIntosh, and Scott 2010). In addition, the relationship between frontier masculinities, mining, and gendered violence is garnering considerable theoretical attention, particularly from scholars affiliated with Queensland University of Technology's School of Justice (Carrington et al., 2010, 2013).

In addition to putting gender at the forefront of their explanations for IPV, all of the theorists cited here emphasize the concept of patriarchy. Yet, as Carrington, Donnermeyer, and DeKeseredy (2014) observe in their commentary on the current state of rural critical criminology, patriarchy is not simply an abstract concept divorced from reality. Rather, the research that points to the importance of focusing on patriarchy reveals that it is a real-life expression of norms and actions which make many rural women the victims of violence at the very places where they live, work, and raise their families.

## NEW WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING

### INTIMATE VIOLENCE AGAINST RURAL WOMEN

Intimate violence against rural women no longer remains at the criminological margins, but many important questions remain unanswered. For example, there is a conspicuous shortage

of qualitative and quantitative studies of men. What motivates them to abuse their current or former intimate female partners? Certainly, we obtain much useful information by asking the people who know these men best – the women who share or have shared their lives, who can speak extensively on men’s behavior or correlates of men’s behavior. Nevertheless, such information does not obviate the need for direct research on men. As Diana Scully (1990: 4) observes, there are problems with depending completely on female partners to report on male abusers because “they do not share the reality of . . . violent men. Such insight is acquired through invading and critically examining the social constructions of men” who sexually assault, kill, beat, stalk, and abuse women in ways that few of us can possibly imagine.

Also absent from the extant IPV literature is research on rural immigrants and refugees, those who live in public housing, people with disabilities, the experiences of the elderly, women in same-sex relationships, and other “underserved populations” (Basile and Black 2011). Furthermore, we know little about intimate violence against rural girls. We do know that rural women are at higher risk than suburban and urban women, but it is unclear whether this is the case with rural females in middle and high school.

As stated before, more scholarly work on the relationship between pornography consumption and rural violence against women is warranted. Increasingly, new technologies are commonly being used to view degrading and hurtful images of women. Additionally, it is necessary to address other harms caused by technologies such as cellular telephones, global positioning systems, and video cameras. Many men use these and other seemingly harmless devices to stalk and control their current or former intimate female partners, but less than a handful of studies have examined this problem (DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz 2013). To the best of our knowledge, too, none of them were conducted in rural areas.

Rural violence against women must advance theoretically and one way to achieve this goal is to examine how intersections of class, race/ethnicity, and class pattern intimate violence against rural women and girls. Thus far, theorizing such intersectionality is limited to the experiences of urban African-American women and girls (e.g., Garfield 2005; Miller 2008; Potter 2008). Not only will intersectionality enable us to better understand trends in intimate violence victimization among rural females, as well as those living in urban and suburban communities, it will also help us “address how multiple forms of oppression influence the experiences of women” (Jones and Flores 2013: 79). It should also be noted that, at the time of writing this chapter, we were unable to find one North American book, journal article, or scholarly book chapter that specifically focused on intimate violence against rural women of color and rural Latinas. There is, though, a small literature on male-to-female violence in rural Indigenous communities and some experts on this topic apply an intersectionality framework (e.g., Brownridge 2009).

## CONCLUSION

That this chapter appears in the *Handbook* is an important statement on the current state of progressive criminological knowledge on intimate violence against rural women. Gagne’s (1992, 1996) offerings, arguably, marked the start of rigorous theoretical, empirical, and policy work on the topic. Shortly after her work came Websdale’s (1998) ethnographic Kentucky study. But, violence against rural women research quickly exploded on the scene in the latter part of the last decade with a spate of publications mainly produced in Canada, the U.S., and Australia (Sandberg 2013).

Where do we go from here? The above suggestions are not exhaustive and many readers will point to other gaps in the extant literature. One potential criticism of this chapter that will

undoubtedly be raised is the dearth of information on short- and long-term policy proposals. Actually, there are publications on this issue<sup>5</sup>, but space limitations precluded a thoughtful, in-depth review. All the same, it is essential to always remember that regardless of which new empirical or theoretical direction rural violence against women researchers and theorists take, for women who participated in the studies cited here, the creation of effective public and legal policies should be the top priority. Likewise, as Logan et al. (2004: 58) recommend, “creative solutions must be developed in order to serve women with victimization histories within the context of the specific communities where these women live.” Even so, policy development must always be highly sensitive to the ways in which broader social forces contribute to intimate violence against women. Achieving this goal is a challenge in this current political economic era, given many people’s reluctance to push for major social changes. Still, as Websdale (1998: 194) discovered in his rural Kentucky study, “any social policy initiatives must use the concept of rural patriarchy, in all its intricate manifestations, as an essential frame of reference.”

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Edwards (2014) for a review of these studies.

<sup>2</sup> Gun ownership is strongly related to intimate femicide, especially when intimate partners live apart (Campbell et al. 2003; DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2009; Hall-Sanchez 2014).

<sup>3</sup> See Brownridge (2009) for data derived from three national Canadian representative sample surveys. The prevalence rates for urban and rural women were similar across these surveys.

<sup>4</sup> See DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2013) for reviews of these integrated theories.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, DeKeseredy, Donnermeyer, and Schwartz (2009), DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2009) and Donnermeyer and DeKeseredy (2014).



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