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Introduction

Special Issue on Domestic Violence in Rural America

Walter S. DeKeseredy,
Guest Editor

In an interview conducted for a study of separation/divorce sexual assault in rural southeast Ohio, Jackie (this is a pseudonym) told me, “It’s like we see, but we don’t. It’s like three monkeys: don’t see, don’t hear, don’t speak.” Jackie’s abusive experiences are not unique, but many people believe that what happened to her is a rare or isolated incident and that violence is mainly found in urban places. This is partially due to the fact that common images in fictional and nonfictional accounts of rural life portray a slower, more peaceful way of life, picturesque farms, Main Street businesses that give personal service to long-standing customers, little schoolhouses with dedicated teachers and studious pupils, and a sheriff who knows everyone by his or her first name. Further, newspapers and other media often characterize rural people as being nicer to each other than are urban residents. Of course, the media also often portray rural communities as “backward” or “hillbillies.”

What happened to Jackie is a social problem that is much more serious than the average person can imagine. The reality is that rural women around much of the world, including

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Violence Against Women in Rural Communities: What We Know and What We Don’t Know

Walter S. DeKeseredy

It was not until the publication of Gagne’s (1992) feminist ethnographic work in Appalachia that the international sociological and criminological communities started to develop rich social scientific knowledge about various types of violence against women in rural communities. Shortly after came Websdale’s (1998) path-breaking book, *Rural Woman Battering and the Justice System: An Ethnography*. As we progress toward the end of this decade, there is now a significantly larger academic literature on male violence against women in rural places, and there is conclusive evidence showing that rural women in both the Global North and Global South are more likely to be victimized by abusive male behaviors than are their urban and suburban counterparts (DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2018; DeKeseredy, Hall-Sanchez, Dragiewicz & Rennison, 2016). The main objective of this article is to describe, from a social scientific standpoint, what we know and don’t know about lethal and non-lethal violence against rural women in the United States.

What Do We Know? I begin my review of the current state of social scientific knowledge on male violence against women in rural America by briefly examining the research on intimate femicide, which is the killing

of females by male partners, with whom they have, have had, or want to have, a sexual and/or emotional relationship (Ellis & DeKeseredy, 1997). Little is known about intimate femicide in American rural communities, but of the six studies on this problem reviewed by DeKeseredy, et al. (2016), all but one revealed that the proportion of rural females murdered by intimate partners is higher than the percentages of women killed in urban and suburban places.

Gun ownership is a strong correlate of intimate femicide (DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz & Schwartz, 2017; Dobash & Dobash, 2015). This is a particular problem for rural women, because the rate of gun ownership in the United States is higher in rural than in suburban and urban places (Donnermyer & DeKeseredy, 2014). Websdale (1998) observes:

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

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country are more familiar with the sound of gunshots and often attribute the sound to legitimate uses such as hunting.

Supporting Websdale's statement about the "familiar sound of gunshots" is this quote from a Westover, West Virginia woman who, on December 1, 2014, did not realize that Jody Lee Hunt was killing his ex-girlfriend (one of four of his victims) who lived close to her:

Arlene Barnett ... 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, pp. 1-2).

Hall-Sanchez's (2014) recent exploratory rural Ohio study provides more support for Websdale's claim about the relationship between the rural hunting culture and violence against women. Based on in-depth interviews with 12 women, she found that hunting was an integral part of the rural patriarchal male peer support subculture that

promoted and justified separation/divorce assault and other forms of male-to-female violence in her participants' communities. She states:

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 often times 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 are separating from their abusive male partners (p. 502).

Certainly, separation and divorce, too, are key risk factors associated with intimate femicide in rural areas, as they are with non-lethal forms of intimate partner violence against rural women (DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz & Schwartz, 2017). Here, intimate partner violence (IPV) refers to physical, sexual, and psychological assaults committed by a current or former male partner (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; Edwards, 2015). Yet, there is not much empirical and theoretical work on psychological abuse and other non-physical harms, with much of the available research being qualitative in nature.

There has been a recent surge in U.S. survey research on non-lethal IPV experienced by rural women mainly because many researchers, practitioners, and policy makers doubted claims made by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2009), among others (McDonnell, Ott & Mitchell, 2010), that rural communities have higher rates of such violence against women compared to urban and suburban areas (Edwards, 2015). Based on analyses of National Crime Victimization Survey data (Rennison & DeKeseredy, 2017; Rennison, DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2012, 2013), we, as stated earlier, now know that rural American women are at higher risk than those living in the other two places. As well, the World Health Organization's (WHO) Multi-Country Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence Against Women found that the highest amount of overall intimate violence in the Global South occurs in rural locales (Garcia-Moreno, et al., 2005). The key difference between the Global North and the Global South is "the divide between the metropolitan states of Western Europe and North American on the one hand, and the countries of Latin America, Asia, and Oceania, on the other" (Carrington, Hogg & Sozzo, 2015, p. 2).

Most of the research on risk factors associated with rural IPV has thus

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far been done in the United States and Australia (see DeKeseredy, et al., 2016). The literature reviewed by DeKeseredy and Hall-Sanchez (2018), DeKeseredy, et al. (2016), Edwards (2015), and Wendt (2016) points to the following determinants:

- Violent rural men are protected by a “good ol’ boys” network consisting of criminal justice officials;
- Geographic and social isolation;
- A strong “rural patriarchy” (Websdale, 1998);
- Widespread acceptance of woman abuse and community norms prohibiting women from seeking social support;
- Fewer social support services for rural women as compared to urban and suburban women;
- High rates of male pornography consumption; and
- Inadequate (if any) public transportation.

In-depth reviews of the broader literature on violence against women show that the most cited authors in the field are based in psychology, psychiatry, nursing, and medicine (DeKeseredy, 2016; Jordan, 2009). These disciplines tend to focus more on individuals and do not address the ways in which broader social, cultural, political, and economic forces shape violence against women and societal reactions to its many shapes and forms. On the other hand, most of the research on non-lethal IPV against rural women is sociological, informed mainly by feminist ways of knowing, and relies primarily on qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews. It seems, then,

that many of the researchers who study the harms covered in this article believe “[w]e cannot lose sight of individuals, but the challenge we confront is to disentangle the complex relationships between individuals and society, including our own roles in this dialectic” (Renzetti, 1997, p. vii).

What Don’t We Know?

Violence against rural women no longer remains at the social scientific margins, but there is still “a lot of work to do” (Jensen, 2007). There is still much that those who study the gendered nature of rural life do not know about some highly injurious male patriarchal practices that exist on what British radical feminist Liz Kelly (1987, 1988) refers to as the “continuum of sexual violence,” ranging from nonphysical acts such as obscene phone calls to physical acts like rape or beating someone up. Although the idea of the continuum is often used to portray moving from the least serious to the most serious, to feminist scholars like Kelly (1988) and to many female survivors of male abuse, all these behaviors are serious and have a “basic common character” (p. 76). Since none is automatically considered more hurtful than another and since they all are types of “abuse, intimidation, coercion, intrusion, threat, and force” used to control and dominate women (Kelly, 1988, p. 76), they recommend that researchers not create a hierarchy of abuse or violence.

Violence against women, regardless of where they live, is multidimensional in nature and includes a broad range of brutal acts that do not cause physical harm but still hurt women

(and often their children) economically, psychologically, and spiritually. Some of these behaviors involve using technology. Until recently, most of the research on the “dark side” of the Internet and other new technologies either ignored or overlooked the fact that various electronic devices are now tools used by many men to exert control and power over their current or former female partners (DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz & Schwartz, 2017; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2016; Navarro, Clevenger & Marcum, 2016). Global communications technologies are not limited to urban areas, but we do not know the exact extent of the online victimization of women in rural areas in both the Global North and Global South (DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2018). Yet, given that research on image-based sexual abuse and other electronic means of victimization (*e.g.*, stalking) is in its infancy, we also do not have accurate estimates of these problems in many of the more densely populated areas in the Global North and Global South.

There is a major shortage of studies of male perpetrators. The research community is now at the point where it can confidently state that a substantial number of women experience various types of woman abuse. Therefore, it is time to use different methods to determine what drives rural men to be violent and this will enable researchers to test some of the theories developed by me and others, which have yet to be tested using quantitative techniques.

Also needed is research on the IPV experiences of rural immigrants and

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refugees, those who live in public housing, people with disabilities, the elderly, women in same-sex relationships, and other underserved populations. We know little about intimate violence against rural girls. While we know that rural women are at higher risk than suburban and urban women, it is unclear whether this is the case with rural females in middle and high schools.

Additionally, it is time to examine how intersections of class, race/ethnicity, and gender pattern intimate violence against rural women and girls. Thus far, studies of intersectionality have focused primarily on the experiences of urban women and girls of color (e.g., Garfield, 2005; Miller, 2008; Potter, 2015). 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 & Flores, 2013, p. 79). It should also be noted that at the time of writing this article, I was 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).

Members of the LGBTQ community experience equal or higher rates of intimate violence compared to heterosexuals (DeKeseredy, Hall-Sanchez, Nolan & Schwartz, 2017; Messinger, 2017). Are the victimization and perpetration experiences of LGBTQ people different or similar across geographic regions? This question has yet to be answered empirically and intimate violence against LGBTQ people living in rural places is “greatly understudied” (Messinger, 2017). Maybe this is because researchers assume that LGBTQ people are more comfortable in urban settings and thus it would be difficult, if not impossible, to generate a reasonable sample size. Recent research on the

lives of rural LGBTQ people may be limited, but what is available reveals that numerous LGBTQ people now live in rural areas and enjoy doing so (Baker, 2016). Hence, “[w]e need to think twice, then, before acceding to the notion that rural life necessarily involves isolation from broader national and international trends” (Johnson, Gilley & Gray, 2016, p. 3).

Conclusion

This article reviews the current state of social scientific knowledge about violence against women in rural communities. While more research on many issues negatively affecting rural women is necessary, the good news is that more people are joining together around the world to respond to this call, and new articles are being published every month in major international journals like *Violence Against Women*. Hopefully, my colleagues will take the next research steps suggested here and answer the question “What is to be done about violence against women in rural areas?” In the words of Australian feminist political economist Jacqui True (2012), “Researching violence against women – the point is to end it” (p. 183).

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