

Study uncovers toll of economic abuse on rural women

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Blocked from pursuing their careers and left without any source of income. Isolated from friends, coworkers and community. Low credit scores or resumé gaps that dog them for years after the abuse.

A new study from Western researchers highlights the toll of economic abuse on rural [women](#)—and their resiliency in the face of it.

"Where someone is located changes the resources they have access to, which changes the way they're going to interact with people. It changes everything," said Tara Mantler, professor of health sciences who specializes in [women's health](#).

"When we think about resilience, it's not necessarily someone who has faced adversity and triumphed, so much as someone who is surviving. For women who are experiencing gender-based violence, that is resilience, surviving every day."

The scope of the problem is staggering.

The study cites sobering statistics: 44 percent of all women in Canada who have been in an intimate relationship report some form of violence during their lifetime. That's an estimated \$7.4 billion cost between direct services—shelters and police calls, for example—and indirect impacts, such as hospital visits.

"This isn't a small group. This impacts everyone. It's important we start having these conversations and thinking about ways we can change the system," Mantler said.

As part of their recent study, a team of Western researchers interviewed 12 shelter staff members and 14 women facing gender-based violence, between 18 and 59 years old. All the participants lived in [rural communities](#) across the province, some in southwestern Ontario and others as far as Thunder Bay.

"A lot of those really rural-specific issues were brought up by the women as well as service providers, who were grateful we were finally focusing

on their experiences, because they know how different they are from urban experiences," said Julia Yates, BHsc'21, MSc'23, a researcher on the study.

"Rural communities are smaller, so it is harder for women in those communities to get out of their relationships or get out of the stigma around their relationships, because there are fewer community members and people know each other's business more," she added.

The study uncovered factors hindering [rural women](#)'s resilience, with loss of income high on the list. Some women were able to continue working but had their pay cheques taken or managed by a partner. Others were unable to hold jobs, either as a result of abuse and control exercised by their partners, or due to rural barriers, like little to no public transit. Sometimes they were physically injured and couldn't make it to work.

"Not having a job while in a relationship then impacted them after leaving the relationship because they now had big gaps in their [work experience](#)," Yates said.

Finances can also drive someone back to an abusive partner, the researchers noted. For those who have bad credit or a lack of work history, the path to renting a home or landing a job can be exceptionally difficult.

Many realities of economic abuse were exacerbated by the isolation experienced by women living rurally.

"Sometimes we think of abuse as it happens, and then it's done. Those consequences—having a destroyed credit score or losing a job because they couldn't physically show up because they had significant physical abuse or their partner wouldn't allow them to leave—those have lasting

economic impacts and consequences that are often amplified in [small towns](#) where there are not as many employers, not as many options," Mantler said.

"These are cycles that are really hard for women to break."

The bottom line?

Economic self-sufficiency, where a woman isn't forced to depend on her partner for income, cash to meet [daily needs](#), or the ability to work, is a key factor for resilience, researchers found.

Mantler and Yates said the solutions are at the same time simple and exceedingly complex, from supporting local agencies to tackling systemic barriers.

Investing in the work of shelters is essential, they said, especially since staff are experts in the supports and realities of their own communities.

The researchers also hope everyone, from hiring managers to [policy makers](#), will think more deeply about the ramifications of gender-based violence.

"There are a lot people who do not know, and it is really uncomfortable to talk about gender-based violence," Mantler said. "We need to start having these conversations, because there are a lot of people who would be willing to do something, willing to mobilize, if they just knew."

More information: "When I Decided to Leave, I Had Nothing": The Resilience of Rural Women Experiencing Economic Abuse in the Context of Gender-Based Violence, *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, journals.brandonu.ca/jrcd/article/view/2225/605

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