

Rural women deserve more than simply recognition ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

October 15 marks International Day of Rural Women, which recognizes the contributions and critical role of rural women, including indigenous women, in "enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security, and eradicating rural poverty".

On this day, we should all recognize the fundamental role Canadian women play in the rural economies of our great country, as well as the hardships they face and their requirements to succeed and thrive.

Rural women contribute through helping in crop production and livestock care, providing food for their families, and undertaking off-farm activities to increase their families' livelihoods. Moreover, they care for children, the elderly and the sick.

But they also face challenges, including geographic and social isolation, a lack of accessible and confidential health care services, an insufficient number of shelters and services for those who have been victims of abuse, a deficiency of employment opportunities, and a lack of public transportation. Other challenges include lack of access to high-speed internet, which impacts economic development and essential services such as distance learning. Aboriginal women also suffer the continuing effects of colonization and residential schools.

Today in Canada, one in five women live in a rural area, but only two per cent live on farms. In stark contrast, almost half (47 per cent) of all Aboriginal women in Canada live in rural areas.

A key challenge for rural women is employment, as many rural and remote communities experience "boom or bust" cycles of employment; local economies are dependent upon primary production, resource development, and "unstable manufacturing industries".

As a result, unemployment rates are higher in rural areas, wages are lower, rural women are more likely than their urban counterparts to be self-employed, and rural women are more likely than urban women to work part-time and seasonally. The latter two factors mean rural women are also less likely to be eligible for Employment Insurance (EI) and EI-funded training.

Another issue rural women face is less education and limited access to training. Although 31 per cent of rural women have a post-secondary education, a person living in a rural area is 1.5 times more likely than the national average to have less than a Grade 9 education.

What other factors keep rural women out of the work force? Rural women face far greater travel costs than their urban counterparts. For example, only 27 per cent of rural women live and work in the same municipality in comparison to 59 per cent of urban women. Moreover, 91 per cent of rural women travel to work by car and one per cent take public transit. For urban women, the rates are 75 per cent and 16 per cent respectively. Lack of child care services in rural communities and the distances that must be travelled to access care further restrict rural women's employment.

We should therefore all ask whether enough is being done to provide women-specific services or program supports, such as child care, training, and transportation, to allow rural women to contribute to their family's income and to the Canadian economy. We should also ask what is being undertaken to protect rural women from poverty, such as community kitchens to provide affordable, healthy food, child care co-ops to provide affordable child care adapted to rural and remote situations, and playgroups so that mothers and young children can enjoy and learn from each other.

Does the government understand how rural living-such as geographic isolation and limited access to health services-impacts women's health? Today, more than 17 per cent of women in rural areas travel more than two hours to reach a hospital, while only one per cent of their urban counterparts have to travel such a long distance. Furthermore, one study showed that more than 80 per cent of pregnant rural women had to drive at least two hours to arrive at the delivery room.

Rural women also have "certain health issues working against them": for example, diabetes, hypertension and other conditions, higher rates of teen births, and "socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhoods". These factors add stress to expectant mothers. As a result, they might be considered higher-risk, and might be redirected to a larger hospital that is better equipped.

Does rural Canada have enough medical professionals, including doctors, lactation consultants, midwives, nurse practitioners, physiotherapists, public health nurses, and social workers? Can more be done with mobile services and portable technology to allow services to come to rural women?

Does the government sufficiently understand domestic violence in rural areas, and is it doing enough to stop it? Gender-based violence hampers productivity, reduces human capital and undermines economic growth-and of course, first and most importantly, violates human

rights.

Will the government implement a national strategy to end violence against women in Canada, and will it be adequately funded so women's safety is not compromised? And will the government back a call by aboriginal leaders and Canada's premiers to launch a national public inquiry into the case of 600 missing or murdered aboriginal women?

On this International Day of Rural Women, let us recognize the accomplishments of rural women in Canada, ensure that they fully participate in rural development, and have access to the health care, social security and training programs they need.

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