

Lucille Harper :*“I can’t speak enough to what I see as the determination creativity and resilience of women in the face of the most untenable circumstances. We need more people to listen; we need people to value what women bring to community; we need women to value community-building and community maintaining that women do, and the support that. And we don’t do that.”*

Hello, and welcome back to the Changing Public Engagement from the Ground Up podcast. My name is Jennifer O’Keefe, and I am working with the Changing Public Engagement team based out of Halifax, Nova Scotia. This project is a local sector of a national multi-university research collaboration, working with the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women under a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council partnership development grant. The project is aiming to test inclusive models of public engagement that will mobilize communities using first-hand and experiential knowledge on gender justice.

This is the second episode of a podcast series that is focusing on the experiences of rural women in Nova Scotia. Today, you’ll be hearing a chat I had with the Executive Director of the Antigonish Women’s Resource Centre, Lucille Harper.

First, a disclaimer. We acknowledge that speaking with a few women does not and cannot speak to the diverse experiences of all intersections of identities of women and gender-oppressed people living in rural and remote areas. We know that there are many different voices, across a broad spectrum, all worth hearing. And, that speaking with a few people, will not capture all issues. That is, of course, where you come in. This podcast is, ideally, about beginning a conversation about rural women’s experiences, and we want to hear from you.

So please share, comment, and deliberate about the content you're about to hear on our page, and we'd love to engage with you.

If you listened to our past episode, you'll know that in July I travelled with my colleague Jewelle to the town on Lunenburg to sit down with Liz and Rhonda at Second Story Women's Centre. The conversation enlightening and the environment was super welcoming, and so I definitely recommend that you check it out if you haven't.

So, my interview with Lucille Harper was actually scheduled for the day after my talk with Liz and Rhonda, so you'll know that this week involved quite a bit of driving. The drive to Antigonish is about two hours there, and two hours back. And this time I was completely by myself, as Jewelle wasn't able to make the trip that day. So, I packed up and made the trip. When I got to Antigonish, I was really excited to see the women's centre as I had never been here myself, and I knew it was the birthing place of a lot of great programs that were well-loved by the community.

Jennifer : *"So, I'm just gonna put it a little closer to you there".*

Whenever I go to a new place, I'm always a little bit worried that I'm in the right spot, or I went through the wrong door, but when I entered the women's centre, I was greeted with a warm welcome from the staff and I knew I was in the right spot.

Jennifer: *"Well, thank you again Lucille for meeting with me again today."*

Lucille and I met together in her office, and I was so excited I could hardly wait to sit down and just start asking questions as quickly as possible.

Jennifer: *“So, to start it off I guess, if you could just tell us a little bit about yourself—who you are, what your role is here?”*

Lucille: *“Okay, my name is Lucille Harper, and I’m the Executive Director of the Antigonish Women’s Resource Centre and Sexual Assault Services Association. We have been a women’s centre since 1983, so this is actually our 35<sup>th</sup> year, and I’ve been here for 30 years.”*

So, I’ll admit something: I’m only 23, and it kind of blew my mind a bit that Lucille had been working at the centre longer than I have been alive. So, I needed to ask her about its history.

Lucille: *“Well, when the organization started, and it was sorta interesting in the way that the organization started, because we had a prof come to the community, Angela Miles, and she had been teaching at York University, and was coming here, she was like the token feminist on campus at the time.”*

So, for anyone who may not know the campus that Lucille is referring to, is St. Francis Xavier University, or St. FX for short.

Lucille: *“—hire a feminist, because it was the 1980’s, so we need to hire a feminist. So they brought Angela in, and she had been teaching classes with adult women, and so what she wanted to do was to teach a class here. So it was a non-credit course that she did called “Women Today”, and it attracted such a*

*diversity of women from the community who came together. It was through that class, and looking (and it was a year-long class) so it was looking at any number of issues. It was fantastic really. And out of that there was a core group of women who wanted to do something. So, they created what was initially the Antigonish Women's Association, but realized quite quickly that it would be good to have a centre where women could come, get information, get support around issues, but also do organizing and advocacy. So we really started with the dual mandate of service delivery as well as social advocacy, social change, social justice work. And I was on that, had taken that class, and was involved in getting the organization up and going as an early member, and then took on the role of, this role, back in 1988, 87- 88, and at that time we were a very, very small organization funded by Status of Women Canada—no wait, it was the Secretary of State, women's program federal funding—and that's how we started. From there, we grew as we better understood and began to meet the different needs of the community. And as a rural organization, there's not a lot of organizations in the community, so when we would see gaps in services or needs that should be addressed, then we would do that. So now we really are, in some ways, a multi-services organization in that we do provide those direct services and supports for women and adolescent girls. We are also a sexual assault centre, so we have a sexual assault nurse examiner program, and we were recently able to secure funding for a specialized sexual violence trauma therapy program. Those are some of the direct services that we provide, along with outreach into Guysborough County. We have a one day a week health centre for women: Lindsay's Health Centre for Women, and we have also, within the last few years, been able to establish an immigrant support service, so we have what's called the Antigonish-Guysborough immigrant support program, where we support immigrants and their families. So those kinds of services we're able to house*

*under one roof, which makes it very accessible to women in the broader community. Along with that we do a number of programs, we do in-school programs, healthy relationships for youth with all ten high schools in our regional extending from (if you know the geography here) Sherbrooke, Canso, all the way up really to Margaree. So it's quite a broad area, and then we're doing projects as well. So right now we're working with all the universities in Nova Scotia to develop what we're at this point calling, "Made in Nova Scotia, pro-social, bystander intervention program"... and our other project is called "Advancing Women's Equality", where we're working with our Paq'tnkek Mi'kmaq community, the university, and the Straight Region Centre for Education around looking at policies around sexualized violence and its impact.*

Jennifer: *"That's awesome! There's so much going on. I love that!"*

Lucille: *"Yeah! There's lots going on, I love it."*

Jennifer: *"That's great. It's an interesting history, too."*

Jennifer: I had talked with Liz the day before about how the core funding from the government didn't cover all the costs for Second Story, and so I was curious if it was the same situation for the Antigonish Centre.

Lucille: *"Yeah, it's all of the above. The funding for our direct services comes largely through the province, so both through the Nova Scotia Health Authority, as well as through the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women. Some of our program funding is through foundations, so through the Law Foundation in Nova Scotia, our healthy relationships for youth program was*

*funded through the Canadian Women's Foundation. Right now, we're searching for funding for it, and our projects are federally funded."*

Jennifer: *"Okay, that's great, thank you."*

Lucille: *"And we have to raise money every year, so we are donation dependent as well."*

Jennifer: Next, I began to probe Lucille's brain about what she thought were the unique challenges that rural women in Nova Scotia faced.

Jennifer: (laughs) *"I know it's a broad question."*

Lucille *"It is a really broad question! And it depends in part on who women are, and the community in which they're living, and the level of income at which they're living, their age, ability—so all of those factors impact that. The more rural we are in our area, so our area generally we think of our area primarily as Antigonish and Guysborough County. So Guysborough county is probably the most rural of all the other counties in Nova Scotia, in that it has a very large geography, very small population. There's all kinds of issues there. So certainly the demographics are changing, so the population is definitely now an older population. It's a population where a lot of people are living with various disabilities. The income level tends to be lower. Certainly the schools are seeing fewer, and fewer, and fewer students in the school. I think school in Canso right now—I'm not sure how many schools are in the high school— but my understanding is that it's well under 100 students. And that makes it very challenging in those communities. So part of what we've seen in the communities*

*is the dismantling of infrastructure. The grocery stores, banks or financial institutions leave, post offices leave, government services close down or government services consolidate into larger towns, and so in the more rural you are, the less access you have not only to services but the less access you have to grocery stores and gas station and all those things that you need and that are a lot easier to access when they're closer at hand. That also means that in the smaller stores, our food is more expensive, So I think food in Guysborough, one of the last nutrition study shows, it's some of the highest costs in the province is in Guysborough. And, in some cases, you have to travel in some cases 65 km to get to a gas station. You're travelling even further to get to a grocery store. So what that means is that, even being able to access some of those life essentials are more expensive and more difficult to do. We don't have a public transportation system that, in any way, enables people to be able to work, to be able to live in some of the more rural areas, and access work in some of the larger towns. So that means people have to have a car, and that has a whole level of expense associated with it. If you have children, you need to be able to access childcare—well, the last childcare centre in Canso closed down a few years ago, so that means that your childcare is precarious. If you are trying to access a childcare centre and you need to have your children in this community at this time to access childcare and you're working in this community, and then you need to get there, and then you need to get back. So all of those challenges are just greater. We're also seeing that more members of the family, often the men in the family are working out west. So, when they're gone it means that the women in the household are not only having to maintain the household, but they're having to do all those other pieces of work as well, which means that—women have always been the community builders, maintainers, holding community together through what is often called volunteer work—I don't like to*

*call it volunteer work, I just like to call it life— and they're less able to do that if they are the only person at home with the children. So, some of the life force of community is just harder to maintain in the small rural communities, so we see all of that. We see poverty, inability to move out of poverty because you can't access educational programs easily, because you don't have childcare, because you don't etc. etc. It becomes very complicated. More services are moving to web-based services, which means you have to have a computer. And you have to have a phone. And, even if you do have a phone, then you might not have the cell service in your area—so, that has a whole other implications for women around what they're able to access, and what they're not able to access. We defunded cap sites in this province a number of years ago. So, cap sites were key in some of the smaller rural communities, where people could then go and have a bit of support and accessing a computer. So, all of those things have changed very much what is happening in some of the smaller rural communities, making it more challenging for people who live there. Certainly people who—I think the, if I've got this right, there's a high percentage of the housing stock in Guysborough County in particular, that is pre-1948. They've got older housing stock, it's more expensive to heat, etc. etc. So it all adds up to a complex picture of what some of the challenges are. And I use Guysborough as an example, because Antigonish is not as dramatic that way, but we are still rural community faced with some of those same challenges and some of those same issues. And in the Antigonish town itself, the poverty is around 20%. So it's not insignificant even here where, for all intents and purposes, people drive to the community and they see this lovely little community that looks quite charming and comfortable and prosperous, and yet the poverty here is quite deep as well. So, those kinds of barriers we see in place for women, and trying to manage that in and negotiate their lives through those barriers is not easy. And the supports aren't there.”*

Jennifer: After Lucille had provided me with such a wealth of information about Guysborough, County, I was definitely in awe. So, I asked what were the ways she had found successes in helping rural women to organize, or advocate, resist, and to initiate conversations about public policy.

Jennifer: *“Like, do you think there are certain ways that, especially working with working women, that we can kinda encourage and do reach out to initiate those kinds of conversations and start those movements, does that make sense what I’m asking?”*

Lucille: *“I think it makes sense! I think I understand.”*

Jennifer: *“Like, have you seen successes in certain ways? Or, are there ways you wish there was more of a certain thing? I guess that’s kinda my question.”*

Lucille: *“So the barriers there are the barriers that make it difficult, as you say, in some ways to organize. It’s an interesting question that you ask. My sense of rural women is that rural women are creative, resilient, able, intelligent, they’re really good problem solvers, they maximize resources—so, given the opportunity to come together, they’re very good—they’re just very good problem solvers. Just holding together families and communities over many generations, and right now, as we say, there’s even more challenges to doing that. So, I think there’s been lots of successes, but I think as well some of the barriers that are there I can’t underestimate them. So, in looking at some of the adult education programs that have been in place in some of the smaller rural communities have been very innovative in how they can bring people into those programs. Seeing women come together and create sort of some childcare circles within their communities*

*is another example of how women have come together in the smaller rural communities. Certainly, you look at some of the more isolated communities like Paq'tnkek and the women there have been absolutely instrumental in making significant change in that community. Around some really tough issues—so we have worked with Paq'tnkek over the years. They've taken a real lead in this province in looking at, addressing, and preventing sexual violence in indigenous communities, in their community, and developing a community-centred, community-driven way of doing that. So you see some of those examples—the same with what is often called the indigenous African Nova Scotia Community, called indigenous because they've been here for so many years, and faced huge barriers and levels of discrimination, exclusion, oppression over the years. The women in that community are amazing, and they are central to maintaining wellbeing of families in the community, and —when a need arises— of wrapping around, and reaching out and trying to connect with other resources that it can be supportive. So I don't know if that's a real answer to your question, but I think women have been the lifeblood of communities—they really have been. And it's that resilience that is, to me, so apparent. I think what's changing now are the demographics, and what that's going to look like in another 20 years, we'll see— unless, unless the province steps in and says “okay, we want to support our rural communities, and we need to do that in innovative ways.” And then I think it's possible to reinvigorate the smaller rural communities. But I don't think it's possible when we keep dismantling infrastructure, when we keep pulling out, when we use that urban-centric thinking. One of those most frustrating thing in rural Nova Scotia is the urban-centric thinking and the urban-centric decision-making that harms communities. It's not neutral, it's not beneficial, it's actually harmful. And that has led to some of that dismantling of infrastructure. So, for example, the courthouse closed a couple of years ago in Guysborough—that*

*means now that you have to travel either to Port Hawkesbury, or to Antigonish or sometimes even to New Glasgow—those are really not easy distances to try to cross*

*I can't speak enough to what I see as the determination, creativity, and resiliency of women in the face of the most untenable circumstances. We need people to listen, we need people to value what women bring to community. We need people to value that community building and community maintaining that women do, and to support that and we don't do that.*

*You know, and when you think about women, and you think about the home, and you think about sort of the kitchen, when you think about rural communities, when something happens in the community, women cook. If there's a wedding, women cook, If there's a birth, women cook. If there's a death, women cook. If there's a celebration, women cook. And it's like that and then it's that sharing and that feeding of community which is, in some ways, both absolutely real because people show up with pots of food, and it's also symbolic in that sense of that's what it is—it's feeding community. So, if you're not supporting the women, then who's feeding the women? If you're not supporting the women, then it's so much harder for women to give that."*

Jennifer: And that concluded my conversation that I had with Lucille Harper at the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre, in Antigonish Nova Scotia. Thank you again to Lucille for having me, I was astonished by everything you had to say, it was super informative. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

This podcast is brought to you by the Changing Public Engagement from the Ground Up Research Project, a Halifax-based sector of the Engendering Public

Engagement, Democratizing Public Space project led by Professor Barbara Cameron at York University. The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women is its community partner. The project is funded by a SSHRC Community Partnership Development Grant.

Thank you also for the support from Mount Saint Vincent University, Saint Mary's University, and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Thank you so much to Michael Fong, who wrote and recorded the original music in this episode. To learn more about this project at a national level, please visit the Policy 4 Women Project Overview at CRIAW's website: [www.criaw-icref.ca](http://www.criaw-icref.ca). To learn more about this project at the local level, you may contact myself directly by email at [jenniferdjokeefe@gmail.com](mailto:jenniferdjokeefe@gmail.com).

Thank you so much to Michael Fong who wrote and recorded the original music for this episode, and thank you of course, to Jewelle Carroll for taking notes.

Feedback and comments are always welcome and highly encouraged. Please let us know on your page, and we'd love to engage with you.

Stay tuned for our next episode, where I have a conversation with a young woman who lives in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia.