

Jennifer: Okay, so I noticed something recently. Whenever I heard talk in the news about rural communities in Canada, and particularly Atlantic Canada, it tended to sound like this:

Radio clip 1: *“Rural communities across the Maritimes are struggling to stay alive”*

Jennifer: And this

Radio clip: *“The issues are complex—they included an aging population, housing, and young people and families leaving.”*

Jennifer: And this:

Radio clip 2: *“ERs at seven hospitals are closed this week.”*

Radio clip 3: *“Mills and plants have closed down.”*

Radio clip 4: *“The town, citing challenges like rising costs and declining population.”*

Radio clip 5: *“People are searching everywhere for help.”*

Jennifer: Yeah, it paints a pretty bleak picture. And since I work and do research that primarily focuses on the experiences of women, I got curious about the headlines about women. And they sounded like this:

Radio clip 6: *“Tonight there is new information on a troubling trend facing women in remote areas of Canada. They’re twice as likely as their urban counterparts to be victims of domestic abuse.”*

Radio clip 7: *“The women who have to travel more than four hours to access maternity care have much higher infant mortality rates—so it’s about 3.1ths of a times higher.”*

Jennifer: And that was just two news stories. So, I wanted to do a bit more research. In 2012, Status of Women Canada released a profile dedicated exclusively to Canadian women living in rural, remote, and Northern communities. Some highlights include:

- Labour force participation rates for women in general are lower in rural areas than in urban ones.
- The gap between men and women’s labour force participation rates is larger in rural and remote areas.
- The income gap between men and women becomes greater in rural areas than in urban ones.
- In rural and remote areas, women are slightly more likely than men to obtain a certificate, diploma, or degree.
- Indigenous women and girls comprise a large part of the rural and remote population in Canada. Unemployment rates for Indigenous women are higher than urban women and non-Indigenous counterparts.

Okay, so as someone’s whose grown up in the Halifax area her entire life, I began to wonder: what was it like living and working in rural areas of Nova Scotia? And particularly for women. And, even further, what does public

engagement look like for women who live in rural areas? What are the unique barriers that might prevent women in rural areas from participating in public life? And not just ones that are orated by government documents or news stories, but from women themselves.

Hi, my name is Jennifer O'Keefe. And I am working with the Changing Public Engagement from the Ground Up research project based out of Halifax, Nova Scotia. We are a local sector of a national project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Canada through a community partnership development grant led by Barbara Cameron at York University, with the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women as a community partner.

The project is aiming to test the inclusive models of public engagement that will mobilize communities using first-hand and experiential knowledge on gender justice.

This is the first episode of a podcast series that is focussing on the experiences of rural women in Nova Scotia. I'll be interviewing some women from across the province to discuss the unique challenges that women face living and working in rural communities.

First off, a minor 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 large spectrum, and speaking with a few will not be able to capture all issues.

Of course, this is where you come in: this podcast is, ideally, about initiating a conversation about rural women's experiences, and we want to hear from you. So please, share, comment, and deliberate about the content you are about to hear online on our page, and we'd love to engage with you.

So, getting brainstorming about what kind of people I wanted to chat with about the challenges facing rural women in Nova Scotia, I thought about the community-based women's centres that are located across the province. They do a variety of advocacy work, educational work, and they provide safe spaces for women and gender-oppressed people to connect with their communities. In total, there are 9 centres in the province. And I reached out, and I got the opportunity to speak with 2 different centres.

So my first stop was the Second Story Women's Centre in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. My colleague Jule and I prepared for about an hour-long drive and headed towards the south shore of Nova Scotia. The town of Lunenburg is the United Nation's education, scientific, and cultural organization world heritage site, and it is also a national historical site of Canada. Second Story Women's Centre is located in what is called 'the old train station' in Lunenburg—meaning, quite literally, that it was renovated from the old train station in the town. So the building has a lot of history. It is quaint, cozy and welcoming. I managed to schedule an interview with the volunteer support and administrative coordinator, Elizabeth McCurdy.

Jennifer: *"So we're recording now"*.

Liz and I had been emailing back and forth for the better part of a month, and so it was great to finally meet her in person.

Jennifer: *“Okay.”*

Liz: *“Okay”*

Jennifer: *“Great. Okay, so (I was also a bit nervous). Yeah, just like, tell us about yourself, what you do here, all that stuff.”*

Liz: *“My name’s Liz McCurdy; I’m the Administrative and Volunteer Support Coordinator, so I do all the administrative things for staff. I also welcome people as they come in the door and I often am the first point of contact for people—whether they’re coming through the door or on the phone or email, so that’s my administrative part. I also help with fundraising and special events, things that happen in the organization. And then the volunteer program—I support volunteers in finding meaningful roles to play in the centre that kinda fit their interests and their experiences. And sometimes that’s just engaging the Centre—for example, we have a couple people who do the garden just outside, and the flowers, and it’s really important for them just to have the time together and do something special for the Centre and so there’s a variety of ways to volunteer. And, yeah—I’ve been involved with the Centre for a long time doing a lot of youth initiatives and youth programming things, which is often grant-based, but this is my current role here.”*

Jennifer: So, after hearing all those headlines, it might not surprise you to know that rural areas in Canada are significantly under-resourced with regards to

health information and services that those of us in urban areas can take for granted. It might surprise you, however, to know that research indicates that it is rural women's organizations in Canada that have been one of the few resources providing folks in rural communities with support around a variety of issues. Talk about resilience. While some rural women's organizations are privately funded, many are heavily dependent on provincial and federal funding. So, when Liz mentioned fundraising, I needed to ask.

*"So you just mentioned fundraising. I'm just curious—is the Centre, does it have any public funding, or is it all privately fundraised, or?"*

Liz: *"There's some core fundraising from the provincial government. And, which, there is a large portion—"*

Jennifer: (laughs) *"So, it doesn't fund all of it"*

Liz: *"No, it doesn't fund all of it."*

Jennifer: To clarify here, I'm laughing because this story feels all too familiar, and sometimes, if you don't laugh, you'll cry. Cutbacks in funding for community-based organizations and social services have been a hot trend since the 1980s, in both rural and urban areas. But, research indicates that for women's organizations in rural communities, these cuts have been devastating—shifting from core funding to project- or grant-based funding has undermined organizations' ability to maintain staff and infrastructures. Resources are diminishing and there's a strong reliance on fundraising in competition with other similarly cash-strapped organizations.

Liz: *“Core budget for the year is fundraised.”*

Jennifer: *“And volunteers are kinda the ones who are able to bring that in?”*

Liz: *“Volunteers support with that—we’re very supported by the community, which is awesome. Sometimes people want to do fundraising efforts for us, which is always nice and helpful. And staff are pretty involved with fundraising too.”*

Jennifer: It was evident to me that the Centre was really loved by the community. When I got there, there was already two women talking to Liz; the phone rang about twice; and there was another two to three people who came in while we were talking. Next, I asked Liz what she felt were the barriers women would face to participate fully in public life.

Liz: *“One of the biggest barriers is transportation—for people to be able to just get to basics, like getting to apartments they need to get to or even attending programming here, or counselling or, you know, wherever they need to go. Sometimes they may have a vehicle, but the vehicle may not work all the time or maybe they can’t afford the gas to put in the vehicle, so that’s definitely a barrier.”*

Jennifer: Access to reliable and affordable transportation is a huge policy issue, whether you’re from a rural or urban area. But, when you think about it, the issue is much more complicated in rural areas. Lack of public transportation, larger distances from point A to point B, higher rates of poverty—it all intersects and compounds in rural areas. Research on cutbacks in funding in public services in Nova Scotia has found that a lack of public transportation in rural areas can

discourage people from seeking voluntary medical treatment, as well as take a toll on your mental health. Women living in rural areas found it very difficult to get around without a car, which is costly, and it can contribute to intense feelings of isolation and frustration.

Liz: *“You know, work can be a barrier. Finding work that suitable—just finding work: finding work they can get to, finding work at all, is definitely a barrier for people in being successful and getting their basic needs.”*

Jennifer: The list of barriers and issues that rural women face goes on and on. A lack of well-paid employment opportunities. Higher rates of intimate partner violence. Deteriorating infrastructure. Food insecurity. Housing. Limited or no childcare. So, I wanted to know what kinds of services were being offered to mitigate these issues.

Jennifer: *“That’s a big question!”*

Liz: *“Yeah, but we’re trying to—so, the transportation piece we keep trying to find ways to create a program that might be a car share program or a program to support people in getting their car fixed so it can get up and running and can get on the road, and then possibly they start to pay back, you know, what was able to be put forward, but there’s a lot of ideas in that way, to be put that we’ve been dancing around and trying to figure out. But to do those you need grant funding, and often grant opportunities don’t provide enough to make it successful. And then there’s the capacity piece—I mean, we have a small team, and there isn’t a lot of—we just don’t have the capacity to necessarily give it it’s full—what it fully deserves to be successful, so for us it’s trying to find ways we can make it work*

*within our capacity, but something like that would be amazing for the community and there's lots of creative ways to make it happen and make it work for people, so that's one area. And then also kinda pre-employment support, and finding out what are the barriers for people to be getting employment—like whether it's skills or whether it's transportation; whether they have other needs that are getting in the way of them accessing work, and then helping them meet those needs so they are more able to be successful. We really want to be offering a lot to the women and other gender-oppressed people in our communities. For example, we have a counsellor who works here, so people come and see her. And then we recently had an outreach worker start, so she goes to different communities to do outreach counselling, and she also does some here, and already she's full with people. So they are very busy with their work. And then, you know, we do things with trying to create social change and system change, and staying clear on what our strategic plan is and our objectives. And, you know, our Executive Director is very busy with a lot of systems and organizational things that are important, and then as well as being part of the community and being visible in the community and providing supports where needed. Sometimes people just need to be together, or have a place to connect and not feel alone, so we use our volunteers a lot. We have a volunteer who comes in and she makes muffins every Monday morning and so people can just come in and hang out for Muffin Mondays—“*

Jennifer: (laughs)

Liz: *“Yeah, it's awesome! And just spend time together and be together and have conversation. And it's also a way to bring people into the Centre, and then they at least see the space.”*

Jennifer: It was definitely in this moment that I started to feel really inspired about the idea of community spaces where folks can come together.

Jennifer: *“I feel like—this is just my impression—but sometimes that when folks might feel like they are feeling in isolation or the problems they face aren’t systemic or that they might be more of an individual thing, and then they are kinda able to come to this space and it’s like, “Oh, like this is a shared experience”, and then maybe they can kinda come together and work together to figure what are the solutions, if that makes sense. Because I feel like sometimes—especially when it comes to, like, public policy—and that word, to some people, is frightening for people—they hear it and they think, “Oh, that has nothing to do with me,” but in reality situations around finding work very much has to do with public policy in that what is the work government is doing to help create jobs in certain areas or, you know, why isn’t there enough grant funding? Or why is this place funded, but it’s not fully funded? So folks don’t often think about it in those ways—they just kinda think, oh, that’s the reality or even, if they do think about it, they kinda think, “Oh, well, I wouldn’t know what to do.” But then, in spaces like these people can come together and kinda organize.”*

Liz: *“Your comment about the grant funding—sometimes a problem with grant funding is—like, a grant comes out and you have something like, this is what its’ geared towards, this is how long you have it for, and then it ends, and the next grant that comes out focuses on something else. So you have the time to set up a solid program that is of great value, and then it ends.”*

Jennifer: *“So, we wanted to know—out of curiosity, because you kinda mentioned that there were youth programs. What are the different kinds of youth programs that you do here? And what’s the response? All that stuff.”*

Liz: *“Currently we have an “Express Yourself” program—well, currently there’s a girls’ camp happening, and we have two staff hired for that. They talk about things like self-esteem, sexuality, body image. They have a conversation learning thing in the morning, and they have lots of fun activities they do other parts of the morning and through the afternoon. And each week is done in a different community in Lunenburg or Queen’s County. And then we also have another program that’s grant-funded, which is done—the first part of it, or parts of it, are done in school aren’t about similar and have conversations about similar topics. And then there’s an extension of it—so those girls can participate in a group venturing program: an adult mentor is paired with three to four girls, and a high school student is there as well as a high school mentor, and the goal of that program is to do different activities and hear from different people, and to help show them that there’s a lot of different opportunities and things you can do and be interested in—which, they already have their variety of interests, but girls are often shown through media and a variety of ways that there’s one or very few ways that are appropriate to be a women, which are so not valid. So it’s just kinda helping them celebrate who they are and their interests and that there are so many possibilities and options of things to be interested in. So that’s our mentoring program. One of the programs we used to run is the Healthy Relationships for Youth program, which was created in Antigonish.”*

Jennifer: For anyone who is unfamiliar with Nova Scotian geography, Antigonish is another rural area located pretty much at the opposite end of the province in comparison to Lunenburg County. It is more so on the way towards Cape Breton.

Liz: *“And so it was done in a few schools, and we had it going for a few years, and a really great response from students as well as staff. And then we didn’t have enough funding to continue the program—so, yeah, that was one that was hard. And then our outreach worker who will do youth counselling.”*

Jennifer: *“Awesome. It’s nice to hear about the different things that are going on.”*

In this moment, the Executive Director of Second Story Women’s Shelter, Rhonda Lemire, popped out of her office for a moment, and I was really excited. I had tried to schedule a meeting with her, but it just didn’t work out because of our schedules, and when she decided to pop by and chat, I couldn’t help but ask a few questions.

Liz: *“Alright, this is Rhonda, our Executive Director. This is Jennifer.”*

Jennifer: *“Hi, nice to meet you.”*

Rhonda: *“—we also applied for a project to develop supports and policies to encourage more women to be involved in mostly municipal politics.”*

Jennifer: *“Yeah, well it’s all politics.”*

Rhonda: *“Yeah, and one of our interests were to ensure the workplace, or the municipality, had supports in place for the women. We never got around to even applying for it—it was this huge thing, it didn’t fit with the Status of Women’s pillars at the time, so we might do it another time, but that was something we identified as a huge barrier, that the municipality wasn’t supportive of women with young children, or transportation, or other things that they may be experiencing.”... What’s also interesting in our area is that we’ve got women in leadership positions in all three levels of government. So our MP, two MLAs, and two (that I can think of) town mayors are all women. So that’s pretty exciting.”*

Jennifer: *“Yeah, that’s cool!”*

Rhonda: *“And I think that visibility is important for younger girls and younger women to see themselves in politics.”*

Jennifer: *“Definitely. That is an interesting difference, because there’s not other communities that have that many.”*

Liz: *“No, we’re lucky. Lucky to have it for sure.”*

Jennifer: *“It’s great.”*

Rhonda: *“Unfortunately, one of the mayors is the only female on the entire council, which is a problem sometimes.”*

Jennifer: And our time wrapped up pretty soon after that. Unfortunately, I did not get a chance to record my goodbyes and thank-yous, but I will reiterate them

here: a huge thank you to both Liz and Rhonda for chatting with me, it was greatly appreciated.

Ok, so what did we learn?

Women in rural areas are in distinct need for services and resources that pertain to health, socioeconomic conditions, their lifestyles, their families, sexual health, etc. And rural women's organizations, like Second Story Women's Centre, provides some of these resources and they are highly valued members of their community. And just from my time being there, I could tell it was a busy and lively place, and that it was well-loved.

And, of course, the downside. I heard a lot about how a lack of sufficient, core funding prevents Second Story from up-keeping certain programs. And this is an ongoing trend among rural women's organizations across the country. This made me feel frustrated and confused. And I needed to know if this experience was shared at other organizations in the province, so stay tuned for next episode, where I have a conversation with the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre Executive Director, Lucille Harper.

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.

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We acknowledge that this podcast was produced in Mi'kmaki, the traditional, unceded and unsundered territory of the Mi'kmaq people.

Be sure to check out our description box, which will have a link to the references utilized in this episode, as well as any additional materials you might be interested in.

And that is all. Feedback and comments highly encouraged, and please deliberate with us and we would love to engage with you.