Remote Realities: Exploring Online Harm and Abuse in the Context of Rural Scottish Women

Exploratory Report, March 2024

Written By
Dr Stephen Dolan, University of Edinburgh
on behalf of South West Grid for Learning

Research supported by Kate Worthington and
Izzy Petherick, SWGfL

DELIVERING EQUALLY SAFE

SWGfL Safe, Secure, Online

Contents

1. Scope of work

This exploratory report set out to document the experiences of women in rural Scotland who have experienced online harm and abuse. After reviewing the established literature, this report sets out the approach taken in its interviews and surveys. The report goes on to detail the findings of its research, before concluding with next steps and further recommendations. This work is inherently limited in scale, with the aim of scoping out further avenues of research.

2. Literature review

This report seeks to explore an aspect of abuse and rurality that is currently in its research infancy. The unique challenges faced by women in rural areas experiencing domestic abuse has been highlighted in several national and international studies, including the NRCN's Captive and Controlled report from 2019 that laid bare the challenges rural women experience[1]. This report, and other Scottish resources including the 2019 Scottish Women's Aid report titled "Participating in Equally Safe in the Highlands and Islands: Consulting Women" and Robert Gordon University's "Supporting Victims of Domestic Violence in Rural and Island Communities During COVID-19" highlights that women in rural areas are faced with a myriad of challenges in seeking support, including limited access to resources and services, a culture of surveillance in local communities and financial challenges[2]. What the existing literature shows is that examples of online harm are not included within the criteria of domestic abuse or violence, and as such there is a need for further research in this area. One such study from Australia begins to connect online harm and abuse with rurality, and "identifies that technology-facilitated domestic abuse is often nebulous and immune to available legal and social support remedies."[3] Overall, while the literature on women's experiences of abuse in rural communities is growing, there has yet to be a proper study looking at the connection of online harm and abuse with rurality. This report, while only exploratory, highlights the need for this gap in research to be resolved and seeks to add to the wider discussions already underway across the globe.

---

[1] National Rural Crime Network, *Captive and Controlled: Domestic Abuse in Rural Areas* (https://www.northyorkshire-pfcc.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Domestic-Abuse-in-Rural-Areas-National-Rural-Crime-Network.pdf, 2019). See also Thelma Riddell, Marilyn Ford-Gilboe, and Bevery Leipert, 'Strategies Used by Rural Women to Stop, Avoid, or Escape From Intimate Partner Violence', *Health Care for Women International* 30, no. 1–2 (6 January 2009): 134–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/07399330802523774; Tk Logan et al., 'Barriers to Services for Rural and Urban Survivors of Rape', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 20, no. 5 (May 2005): 591–616, https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260504272899; Sarah Pedersen, Natascha Mueller-Hirth, and Leia Miller, 'Supporting Victims of Domestic Violence in Rural and Island Communities during COVID-19: The Impact of the Pandemic on Service Providers in North East Scotland and Orkney', *Island Studies Journal*, 2023, https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.423; Gail Bailey, *Rural Women's Experiences of Leaving Domestic Abuse (Domestic Abuse, Rural Alberta Women, Rural and Small Town Definition, Rural Women Fleeing Abuse, Abuse Stories and Themes)* (Ottawa: Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2014); Brenda J. Eastman et al., 'Exploring the Perceptions of Domestic Violence Service Providers in Rural Localities', *Violence Against Women* 13, no. 7 (July 2007): 700–716, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801207302047; Brenda J. Eastman and Shelia Grant Bunch, 'Providing Services to Survivors of Domestic Violence: A Comparison of Rural and Urban Service Provider Perceptions', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 22, no. 4 (April 2007): 465–73, https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260506296989; Melanie McCarry and Emma Williamson, *Violence Against Women in Rural and Urban Areas* (University of Bristol, 2019); Charlotte Barlow, Pam Davies, and Rob Ewin, "He Hits Me and That's Just How It Is Here": Responding to Domestic Abuse in Rural Communities', *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* 7, no. 3 (October 2023): 499–514, https://doi.org/10.1332/239868021X16535814891956.
[2] See Scottish Women's Aid, *Participating in Equally Safe in the Highlands and Islands: Consulting Women* (https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Participating-in-Equally-Safe-in-the-Highlands-and-Islands-Consulting-Women-Digital.pdf, 2019); *Captive and Controlled: Domestic Abuse in Rural Areas*; Pedersen, Mueller-Hirth, and Miller, 'Supporting Victims of Domestic Violence in Rural and Island Communities during COVID-19'.
[3] [3] Samantha Rose Williams, Rojan Afrouz, and Sevi Vassos, 'Exploring Rural and Regional Social Workers' Perceptions and Practices of Technology-Facilitated Domestic Abuse', *Australian Social Work* 76, no. 2 (3 April 2023): 231–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2021.1985547.

3. Methodology

A multimethodological approach was used to qualitatively analyse the research gathered from the experiences and testimony of those involved in supporting women who have been harmed or abused online, including contributions from Police Scotland, The University of the Highlands and Islands, and Grampian Rape Crisis. This report received contributions from service providers in several Scottish council areas, including the Highlands, Shetland, and Aberdeenshire. A digital survey was also commissioned to hear from service providers and professionals from across rural Scotland. Both the interviews and surveys feed directly into this report's results.[4]

4. Results

There was an almost unanimous consensus about the realities of experiences for rural women who face online abuse and harm. These realities are not dissimilar to the challenges that existing work on rurality and abuse has highlighted. Throughout the interviews and survey responses, it was clear that despite misconceptions, rural women's experiences of online harms and abuse are comparable with urban examples, and that despite some technological limitations due to the rural settings, on the whole women were just as likely to experience online harm and abuse as urban women, and in a similar manner. The types of online harm and abuse recorded in our interviews and surveys included intimate image abuse, harassment and bullying, threatening messages, stalking, and sharing of images throughout private online groups. There were several unique challenges facing rural Scottish women in seeking support or justice. This report breaks these challenges down into five categories: reporting restrictions, limited service reach, financial limitations, uneven training levels and disparities between expectations and reality. From our small sample size of experts, it is clear that women in rural Scotland face a myriad of challenges after experiencing online harm and abuse, and further work is urgently recommended to fully establish the nuances and particulars across all the different Scottish rural communities (e.g. challenges the Islands face may differ from the rural highlands) in order to better tailor future services, support and outreach.

a. Reporting restrictions
Throughout every interview and survey response, it was immediately clear that rural women face a community level barrier to seeking help and aid. Within the tight knit

---

[4] [4] This report considered online harm to be broadly in line with the World Economic Forums' definitions found at World Economic Forum, 'Toolkit for Digital Safety Design Interventions and Innovations: Typology of Online Harms', accessed 28 March 2024, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Typology_of_Online_Harms_2023.pdf.

communities in which everyone knows everyone else, there is a hesitation from victims to draw attention to themselves by either reporting to police, who could also be known to the victim/perpetrator, or inviting in specialised aid without the community drawing attention to the arrival of an 'unknown' person into the community. The close-knit nature of rural Scottish communities also amplifies the harm done by the sharing of intimate images throughout the community. It was highlighted that women who are victims of the sharing of intimate images experience feelings of shame at the thought that their images were not only spread throughout the community, but because of the nature of rural life, they would be easily recognised and judged. Prevailing attitudes in the communities were also noted as a barrier for women reporting instances of online harm and abuse.

b. Limited service reach

Our interviews and survey responses highlighted that when women experience online harm or abuse, the reach that support networks can offer is limited. In rural Scotland, the choices of service or aid providers is considerably more limited. In urban areas, women could remain relatively anonymous by choosing a service that is a short distance further than their homes, but these options are not available in rural communities. With often only one aid service within the community, women who experience online harm or abuse may have to travel greater distances, or risk community 'gossip' by reaching out for help. Local aid services are forced to provide unique solutions on a case-by-case basis, straining resources and further limiting availability. With the wide areas local services need to cover, providing comprehensive support is also at times more constrained.

c. Financial limitations

From the survey responses and interviews, it was clear that the unique challenge of rural life in Scotland puts an added burden on professional services and law enforcement. Interviewees would often compare the apparent vast resources and availability of services in urban Scotland to the rural services that have to negotiate unique constraints on their budgets. Providing unique care solutions to accommodate the complex nature of rural life discussed above, mean that budgets are often constricted by travel and accommodation costs, the costs of transporting experts or specialists and the limited budget to investigate online crimes. There is also a financial burden on victims who could spend several times as much on transport to and from services than urban victims. The limited reach of services puts a financial barrier between services and law enforcement reaching victims and on victims accessing services.

d. Uneven levels of training and awareness

The interviews and surveys highlighted an unevenness in the levels of training and familiarity professionals and law enforcement have with regards to online abuse and harms. While training on online harm and abuse is being provided to law enforcement, it is often the more senior officers that receive in-depth training, while more junior officers may only have exposure to online harm and abuse from on-the-job experience or informal training videos. The inconsistent levels of training and awareness is also present in reported GP interactions, where victims have reportedly been dismissed or belittled for discussing the mental health impacts of online abuse and harm.

e. Expectations and realities

One of the unique challenges when it comes to rural women facing online abuse and harm is the expectation that law enforcement have the tools and means to investigate instances of online crime and that justice will be served. The interviews and surveys have made it clear that the realities are much less encouraging. Law enforcement does not necessarily have the tools to be able to trace every form of online harm, nor do existing laws cover every instance of online harm or abuse. As such, victims have reported feeling let down by existing services, and these negative experiences are shared between victims preventing victims from coming forward and seeking help.

f. Summary

The interviews and survey responses have painted an almost unanimous picture of the experiences and challenges women in rural Scotland face regarding online harm and abuse where women face several barriers to accessing support and services. It is a misconception that women in rural Scotland do not experience online harm and abuse; instead experiences of online abuse and harm are comparable with urban experiences. However, several challenges were reported that were unique to rural communities, which include reporting restrictions, limited service reach, financial limitations, uneven training levels, and challenging expectations versus realities. These results correlate with the existing studies that highlight the particular challenges rurality places on women who are victims of abuse. While only an exploratory report, these results highlight areas for further research that should be conducted to better tailor services to help women in rural Scotland.

5. Discussion

To draw this short exploratory report to a close, it is clear that while women in rural Scotland face similar forms of online harm and abuse, their experiences of seeking support and the associated challenges reinforce the existing trends observed in the existing

research on domestic abuse in rural Scotland. After women experience online abuse or harm, they are faced with a complex picture of limited services, resources, and specially-trained officers, expectations that are not always realised, and the social and financial constraints that come with living in rural Scotland. In view of these challenges, and in light of the growing literature from across the globe, rural women could be considered a marginalised community within Scotland. In order to address the challenges and shortcomings in the experiences of women facing online harm in rural Scotland, further detailed and quantitative research is needed to provide nuanced data to help agencies and law enforcement address the particular barriers marginalising rural women and provide more effective care and support throughout the country.