



Hidden in the Fields: The Growing Crisis of Intimate Partner Violence in Canada's Rural Communities

Byline: Erin Kelly for the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

Farm communities are idyllic settings with sprawling fields, clean air, neighbours who never hesitate to lend a hand, and a sense of security.

But below that idyllic scene lies a dark reality in farming communities; a reality where many live in fear of their partner's actions and behaviour.

Lauren Van Ewyk is the co-founder and CEO of the National Farmer Mental Health Alliance, a registered social worker, and an agricultural mental health advocate. She says the traits that make farming communities so appealing are also often contributing factors to intimate partner violence.

"Certainly, there are a number of situations that make us more prone to intimate partner violence. For instance, in our rural communities, how many of us lock our doors?" says Van Ewyk, who also raises sheep with her husband in southwestern Ontario.

"You know, it's possible to have what looks like a great farm life, but there's a lot of movement that can go on apart from that farm life being seen."

Of course, intimate partner violence — the term used for abusive behaviour by a partner in a romantic relationship, with [eight out of 10 victims](#) being women and girls — does not just affect rural communities and is an unfortunate reality across all of Canada. The World Health Organization has even called intimate partner violence a "[major public health problem](#)," and [Statistics Canada data](#) shows that reported incidents have been on the rise in recent years.

However, in Canada, rural communities have a notably higher rate of intimate partner violence compared to urban locations. According to a [2022 report by the Canadian Centre for Justice and Community Safety Statistics](#) submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women, the rate of reported intimate partner violence against women was found to be 461 per 100,000 population in urban locations across Canada. That compares to the drastically higher rate of 985 per 100,000 population in Canadian rural communities.

Those numbers alone are hard to ignore, but considering that many incidents of intimate partner violence go unreported, it points to an alarming situation affecting farm communities across the country.



"I think part of it is because we have normalized it, in a sense. Part of it is based on our traditionalism in agriculture, which is to be celebrated, and there is nothing wrong with some of our traditionalism; it's part of who we are," explains Van Ewyk.

"But we have normalized some of the actions that go on. [Farmers] are typically more of peacemakers than we need to be when it comes to issues such as intimate partner violence."

That traditionalism in agriculture, says Van Ewyk, is also a reason why the roles of women on farms are often overlooked and undervalued, despite the Canadian Census of Agriculture indicating that [30.4 per cent of Canadian farm operators are female](#), which can impact a woman's mental health and the family farm dynamic.

"Particularly when it comes to things like divorce or separation, we have situations where women's sweat labour on farms is not accounted for," says Van Ewyk. "You almost have to have a forensic accountant go through to really appreciate how women have contributed to the success of farms."

While many enjoy the wide-open spaces that come with living on a farm, that isolation, which became a particular focus of concern for the agricultural industry during COVID, is a contributing factor to the high rates of intimate partner violence in rural communities. And though many know of the physical isolation associated with farming, emotional isolation is a concerning coercive tactic commonly used by abusive partners.

"The very fact that in some cases we have tremendously large farms, especially in our Prairie provinces. That physical isolation makes it harder to reach out for supports or to access services," says Van Ewyk.

"Emotional isolation is when women are emotionally cut-off from their friends and family. When we see evidence of narcissism on the farm, which is a form of control, we see that control exhibited over women where they don't have their own financial means or they have allowances. With isolation comes a lack of privacy, which can make it really scary to reach out and get support."

Van Ewyk adds that it can often be harder for women in rural communities to leave abusive relationships, not just because of the isolation aspect, but also because many women do not want to abandon the unique lifestyle that comes with farming.

"There's the isolation, the lack of privacy, there are legal issues, but by and large, one of the biggest things that we're asking them to do is to give up the things they love in order to be safe. I was just watching my neighbour who's out there blow-drying her calf. If we say to rural women, you've got to get safe, but you've got to give up all of your natural support networks, that's really intimidating," Van Ewyk explains, stressing that not every abusive relationship is alike and not every situation will necessitate a woman leaving the farm.



Though victims of intimate partner violence, regardless of their lifestyle or geographic location, can face barriers to accessing help, there are particularly unique challenges for women in rural communities. One of the most notable barriers for farm women is finding available supports with an agricultural perspective.

"This is one of the reasons we're so passionate about agriculture-informed therapy at the National Farmer Mental Health Alliance, because if a rural woman goes in for counselling or accesses services, unless you understand some of the culture and warning signs, you will miss it," explains Van Ewyk.

Van Ewyk says there is also a need for more people to be aware of the prevalence of intimate partner violence in rural communities.

"We need to open the communication; we need more guardians, more advocates, more people who are willing to say 'Hey, I noticed this.' Most often, people suspect it and they don't say anything until after the fact," says Van Ewyk. "We have stayed too long in the place where we learn about it and we don't act on it, and we have to do more to actually act on it."

But there is some good news according to Van Ewyk, which is that the agricultural industry has seen a notable shift in recent years regarding a willingness to learn and listen about more challenging matters such as mental health, suicide, and intimate partner violence. And that increased readiness to learn and listen could save a life.

"There is an opportunity for us to say 'Okay, there are some pieces that are missing.' And perhaps if we provide some of those education and support systems then there's an opportunity to change some of the outcomes that we've seen," Van Ewyk says.

"The reality is that we need to speak for women who can't speak for themselves."

More information about the National Farmer Mental Health Alliance is available at www.nfmha.ca. If you need support, you can contact them at 1-877-639-8828 (toll-free) or info@nfmha.ca.

About Canadian Agricultural Safety Week

Every year, the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association raises awareness about the importance of farm safety with the Canadian Agricultural Safety Week (CASW) campaign, which occurs during the third week of March. In 2026, CASW takes place March 15-21 and is sponsored by Syngenta Canada, CN, Canadian Canola Growers Association, and Parrish & Heimbecker. More information is available at agsafetyweek.ca.

About the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association



The Canadian Agricultural Safety Association (CASA) is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the health and safety of farmers, their families and agricultural workers. CASA is funded in part by the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership. For more information, visit www.casa-acsa.ca.

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Image:

[Lauren Van Ewyk](#)

Cutline: Lauren Van Ewyk is the co-founder and CEO of the National Farmer Mental Health Alliance. She says there are a number of factors that make farm women more prone to intimate partner violence. (Photo courtesy of Lauren Van Ewyk)