

Going the Distance:

Supporting Rural and Remote Survivors with Family Law Issues

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First published August 2016, updated March 2022

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Introduction

Between 20 and 30% of Canada's population lives in rural areas, yet public policy and community services all too often focus on the needs of those living in urban areas.

Location affects every aspect of people's lives: education, housing, employment, health care and more.

Women who have been or are currently being subjected to violence are affected significantly by where they live. While the presence of violence against women and the laws – both family and criminal – that are intended to respond to it are the same regardless of where people live, the way the violence plays out and the effectiveness of policy and service responses are profoundly shaped by where people live.

This resource is divided into two sections, 1) Understanding the Rural and Remote Experience and 2) Strategies for Supporting Rural and Remote Women. The first section is designed for workers and decision-makers who are unfamiliar with the challenges and experiences that come with rural and remote living. It may also affirm the experiences of workers and women living in small communities. The second section helps us all think of ways to support violence survivors in these areas.

If, as you read this resource, you think of challenges and barriers rural and remote women encounter and strategies for support that we do not cover, please share your insights with us at ProjectCo@LukesPlace.ca.

Understanding the Rural/Remote Experience

What is a rural/remote community?

Definitions of “rural” vary depending on the context. Both the *Oxford* and *Merriam Webster* dictionaries define rural in part as it compares to urban, while their definitions of “urban” do not place it in comparison to rural.¹ By doing so, these dictionary definitions create a norm out of urban and make rural the other to that norm.

This sets the stage for the invisibility of rural needs and issues in the development of much public policy and programs and services in Ontario.

Both the federal and provincial governments generally define “rural” as communities with populations of less than 10,000 people that are “outside urban centres,” thus including small towns in the definition.

Using this definition, which is not exactly precise, census data tells us that between 20 and 30 percent of Canadians live in rural areas, which is a considerable population to be so often ignored.

Social scientists commonly consider factors in addition to population:

- Distance from the area to an urban centre
- Culture
- Lifestyle
- Self identity
- History
- Employment sources (e.g. farming)

In other words, in addition to population density, the concept of rural is to some extent a social construction.

¹ Rural: “in, relating to, or characteristic of the countryside rather than the town” (Oxford) “of or relating to the country and the people who live there instead of the city” (Merriam Webster)

Urban: “in, relating to, or characteristic of a town or city” (Oxford) “of or relating to cities and the people who live in them” (Merriam Webster)

This resource works with an understanding (rather than a definition) of rural that includes the following concepts:

- Low population density
- Small towns and villages
- Countryside
- Lack of public transit

We also work from the understanding that remote communities – even those with higher population densities than would be considered rural in less remote parts of the province – face particular challenges of isolation and distance.

What are the realities of rural living?

Many urbanites, and likely some of those who live in rural settings too, have stereotyped and/or outdated notions about what rural living looks like. These are sometimes reinforced by popular cultural images of country life, television programs, movies and so on.

Sometimes, these stereotypes are romanticized: Country living is clean, healthy, friendly. Everyone looks out for their neighbour. Close-knit families work together to run farms and other small businesses. There is no crime. There is a square dance every Friday night. Everyone goes to church. Families are intact and loving.

Sometimes, the stereotypes are bigoted and offensive: people who live in the country are racist, uneducated, stupid.

Other times, they are just ill informed: people who live in the country conform to old fashioned values and beliefs. Gay and lesbian people do not live in the country. Trans people don't live in the country. There are no people of colour or immigrants in the country.

In fact, rural living has become extremely diverse in recent decades. Some of this is for economic reasons: it can be much cheaper to live in the country or a small town than in a large urban centre. Other people move to rural areas because they want to escape the high density living that is one of the realities of urban living. Others want their children to grow up where there is clean air and lots of space to play outside. Still others think small and rural communities are safer places to raise a family. Some want to grow their own food and enjoy a more slow-paced lifestyle. In other words: people live in rural parts of the province for many different reasons, whether they are born and raised there, or move there from an urban background.

Country and small town dwellers come in all races and skin colours, speak many languages, inhabit straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans bodies, have lived in Canada for generations and have just arrived as immigrants/refugees and struggle with ability/disability as do people who live in larger communities.

Despite the increasing diversity of rural communities, there are a number of ways in which rural living is very different from urban living. These factors can have a significant impact on how women who live rurally are subjected to abuse and the options that are available to them. We set out many of these factors in the following section. Women's voices and comments from women's advocates are interwoven to illustrate common experiences, which are excerpted from the *Ontario Rural Woman Abuse Study (2000)*.

Distances

I've been in the middle of nowhere, even in Ontario, and still walking three hours to get to the road . . . and then when I got to the main highway, it was another kilometre or two to walk to a payphone.

Whether it is a question of getting to a grocery store, a doctor's appointment, recreational activities, school, a religious institution or a friend's house, distance is an issue for everyone living in a rural community.

For those living in the countryside, walking to any of these destinations is seldom a practical option. Small towns offer some services and activities within walking distance for those who are able, but people requiring specialized services will have to travel some distance to find them.

Women living in or trying to leave relationships in which they are subjected to abuse are affected by distance. If they do not have their own vehicle, they will be very limited in their ability to, for example, meet with a lawyer or talk with a counsellor or therapist. Even if they have a car, their responsibilities at home may make it difficult for them to travel any distance. The abuser may monitor their use of the car (e.g. by checking the odometer, getting reports from neighbours).

Not surprisingly, police response times are affected by distance too. Increasing numbers of communities and rural areas are served by police detachments that are many, many miles away and that are not staffed 24 hours a day.

After calling the OPP on a Sunday afternoon from a rural community she was told it would take two hours for them to respond.

Lack of public transportation

If you're stuck on a farm, or even in small areas, you don't have a car and you don't have any way to get to these places to get the help that you need . . . you're stuck.

The lack of public transportation in rural communities compounds the challenges posed by the distances to many services, supports and activities.

While this creates significant and obvious practical challenges for women living with abuse, it also creates psychological challenges. Women feel isolated and trapped, as though there are no options available to them.

Women without their own car must rely on friends and taxis. Friends may not always be available when needed or may not be a safe option. What if they tell others or even the abuser about what the woman is doing?

Taxis are expensive and also interfere with a woman's privacy, since the cab driver will know her destination and might tell others. Time can be a factor, too.

What happens if you don't have a vehicle and you have to wait for a taxi? That's at least an hour. By that time it might be too late.

Lack of services

One of the biggest problems is [lack of] easy access to services. The program where there's someone who comes into the community once a week always has a tremendous waiting list. We really need services right in the community.

Small communities do not offer the range and diversity of services that are available in urban centres. There are few shelters, which do the best they can to offer services to women with a diversity of needs, but it is simply impossible for them to be fully accessible to women with different language and cultural needs, ability concerns and so on.

Of course, this lack of services is a challenge to any woman who needs them. For women with mental health or substance use issues, the lack of services can create an insurmountable barrier. If the woman is seen as "difficult," which often really means she requires more time and effort than other clients, some services may decline to take her on as a client or may not offer as much support as they offer to other clients. In the country, she is not likely to be able to find the specialized services she needs or alternative services when she is turned down by the one she first approaches.

Community counselling programs in rural communities are often unavailable or, where they exist, are available only occasionally. It is not uncommon for services to be offered in a hub in one community, requiring those who live in smaller communities or the countryside to travel to that centralized service.

There are few lawyers practicing full time in small towns and rural communities. In the most remote parts of the province, there are no local lawyers at all. Lawyers in rural communities tend to be generalists who practice a bit of many kinds of law. Their work may be focused on real estate and wills and estates, with a small amount of family and criminal law on the side. In addition, lawyers with specialized training in violence against women are few and far between, which can leave a woman with few options in terms of finding a lawyer who has the necessary skills and expertise for her case. Lawyers in rural parts of the province tend to be older and getting older. This may mean they are slowing down their practice as they move towards retirement, and the limited career opportunities coupled with the likelihood of lower incomes mean no new lawyers coming along to take over their work.

Women either travel great distances to meet with a lawyer or they wait to see one who comes to their community on set dates.

Child protection services may operate from an urban centre, with satellite offices or workers who drive out to small communities as needed.

Violence against women services often operate from a service that is based in an urban centre. Some programs allow workers to travel to rural areas to meet with women, but others do not have the resources for this, with the result that the woman must travel to the service.

Small communities, especially in remote parts of the province, do not have family courts. In parts of northern Ontario, women must travel up to four hours by bus to get to the closest family court.

Lack of privacy/anonymity

And there's no place to hide in [*name of community*].

Cities provide a certain amount of anonymity. While this can make cities seem cold at times, the privacy it affords a woman who does not want her abusive partner knowing what she is doing, where she is going or who she is seeing can be very helpful.

There is no such protection in small communities. If there is only one family law lawyer in town, neighbours will see the woman's car parked outside the office, and speculation begins. If a woman appears at church with bruising on her face or a cast on her arm, rumours swirl.

Everybody knows everybody's business. If they don't, they'll speculate, and that's how the rumours start.

Anything the woman does that is out of her usual pattern of activity will be noted and, in many cases, reported back to her partner or former partner.

A very dominant mother-in-law augmented much of the abuse one of the women experienced. She also alerted the abuser to the survivor's whereabouts when she was seen in the small community.

This can make it very difficult for a woman to take any steps to leave her partner or even to gather basic information to help her decide on the best course of action. Her fear level may

escalate as she worries about what other people may be saying behind her back or to the abuser.

Isolation

You just feel like you're totally lost in the middle of no where. . . that's probably why they move you there in the first place, because of the isolation factor, and they can get away with more, and they can control what you do and where you go, if you're stuck there.

Nosy neighbours can be a real irritation. However, being reasonably close to other people can enhance the safety of a woman with an abusive partner. For example, a woman in an urban centre can run to a neighbour's home or a public place if she needs to flee her partner in the midst of an assault. A woman who lives on a farm is less likely to be able to do so: the driveway into her house alone may be half a mile long and the distance on the main road to a neighbour far too long to travel on foot, especially if she has young children with her or the weather is inclement.

Isolation can also be psychological. A woman who cannot easily drop in on a friend or neighbour or even a store for some casual conversation can quickly feel as though she is alone in the world with nowhere to turn for support or help. This can reinforce the abuser's power over her.

Presence of firearms in the home

One day he told me I was going to be a hunting accident. We were up in the bush 40 miles away, with the two children and the gun and all those bullets.

While firearms are not the most commonly used weapon in domestic homicides, abusers with guns often threaten to use them. These threats carry an air of reality and have an impact on women's responses to other abusive behaviours of their partner.

There are more firearms in rural homes than in homes in urban areas. And, guns are used more often in rural domestic homicides than they are in urban domestic homicides.

People in rural communities have strong, positive attachments to firearms “which are associated with a long-standing tradition of hunting.”² The presence of firearms in rural homes “is normalized because people do not regard them as weapons.”³

Because the presence of firearms is normalized and because guns are often properly used on a regular basis, there is a high level of unsafe storage of firearms in rural homes, which makes them easier to pull out and use in a threatening manner.

In the research conducted by the Canadian Firearms Centre:

- 66% of women who said there were firearms in their home said this made them more fearful for their safety
- 70% said it had an impact on their decisions about whether to tell others about being abused or seek help
- 83% who knew the guns were loaded said they were fearful
- 45% said their partner had deliberately threatened to harm their pets or farm animals and of those, 41% said their partner did harm or kill the animal⁴

Bystanders, and even sometimes the police, fear retaliation with firearms if they try to help the victim.

The police were afraid to go in because they knew he was a hunter and they knew there were firearms in the house and they knew he had a temper.

Telecommunication challenges

I had no phone. I was in the middle of nowhere. Being stuck there in the wintertime with a small child, the isolation is overwhelming.

While cell phone use has become *de rigueur* in highly populated parts of the province, no such option is available yet for women in many parts of Ontario. There are areas of the province

² *Fire Arms, Family Violence and Animal Abuse in Rural Communities Research Report to Canadian Firearms Centre/Public Safety Canada, 2008*

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

where there is no cell phone reception at all and many others where reception is unstable and unreliable.

Some communities still offer landline telephone service only through party lines, which eliminates any privacy for a woman in terms of phone calls for help or information.

In isolated parts of the province, virtually every call is long distance, meaning, for example, a woman would not be able to call her lawyer without the charge showing on the monthly phone bill.

Some rural communities do not have high speed Internet access, which can limit women's ability to use the internet to gather information or communicate with friends and family.

Traditional values

I do think in a rural community you have much more of the old fashioned type attitude where a man is king of his castle and a woman is supposed to do what a woman is supposed to do.

As noted previously, rural communities have become increasingly diverse over the past few decades. Nonetheless, traditional values – including values about the sanctity of marriage, gender roles within the family, appropriate roles for women in the community and the workplace – linger on in the minds of many.

There may be reluctance on the part of the community to accept that a woman's partner is abusing her. This may stem from a value that says that this kind of thing does not happen here and can lead to a kind of community complacency: the community knows that something bad is going on but does nothing because it does not want to admit or acknowledge what is happening.

These values and attitudes can affect a woman's own attitude to the abuse she is being subjected to and her willingness to reach out for support or to consider leaving the relationship.

Status of the abuser

In a small town, if a person has a certain reputation and you say something the opposite it's like it's B.S. "That's not right. I've known him all my life." Well, you don't know him until you live with him.

The power of the abuser in the community is an issue for women regardless of where they live. Even in a large city, if the abuser is seen as a leader or if their job has status in the community, this will make it more difficult for the woman to seek help.

Women's fears about not being believed will be intensified in small and rural communities, simply because of the smaller population. For example, the abuser may be not just a police officer, but the only police officer in the community. Or, they may be a popular local politician or business owner or may be known for their volunteer contributions to the community.

One woman stated that other people's employment was dependent on her husband, therefore they wouldn't want to believe her. Another pointed out that her husband was highly placed in their church and she didn't want him to be embarrassed before them.

Animals

Animals are a significant presence in rural families, whether as pets or livestock. For a woman who has been isolated from family and friends, her pet may be her greatest support. Animals can be unwitting tools in the hands of an abuser who will threaten to kill pets as a means of emotionally controlling the woman or who will threaten to or will kill or neglect livestock as a means of both financial and emotional control.

What does violence against women look like in rural/remote communities?

Violence against women is a prevalent societal problem occurring in all socio-economic, cultural, racial and religious backgrounds. No women are immune from the possibility of being subjected to abuse in a relationship. However, there are some socialized characteristics that may increase an individual's vulnerability to being abused or make it more difficult for that person to leave an abusive partner. Where a woman lives is one such characteristic.

Her geographic location is one element of her culture that can have a profound impact on her experience of violence. Women living in rural communities are subjected to violence in different ways and face different barriers and challenges when they consider leaving an abusive partner because of factors that are specific to their geographic location.

An individual's reality as a rural woman also creates different opportunities for the abuser in terms of the tactics and forms of abuse they may employ.

In addition to the unique characteristics of rural living and their impact on women experiencing abuse, the following factors may arise:

- Women everywhere face challenges in **accessing shelters** but there are unique issues for women living rurally. In particular, the lack of shelters means more women remain in relationships where they are being abused because going to a shelter in a different community may not be an option for many:
 - She and her partner may farm together.
 - She may have children attending school in the community.
 - She may have employment that requires her to remain close at hand (for example, driving a school bus).
 - She may not want to move far away from family and friends.
- **Affordable housing** is in high demand everywhere, but even more so in rural communities, where there is less rental housing generally.
- A **scarcity of lawyers** makes it more difficult for a woman to retain one to represent her in family court. Her partner may have used the only lawyer in town at some time in the past, which would mean that lawyer could not represent her, or they might visit every lawyer in town specifically to make them inaccessible to her.

- The fear created by **firearms** in the house may make her more acquiescent to the abuse.
- Her role on the **family farm** may make it very difficult for her to even consider leaving, especially if the farm is in the abuser's family or if they have threatened to destroy the business or harm/kill farm animals.
- A woman may remain with her partner because **poor economic conditions** make seeking employment more challenging.
- Because of **distances**, she may not be able to call on her family for practical support, which can make her more vulnerable to her partner's abuse.

What are unique family law and court issues for women in rural/remote communities?

Of course, family law is the same for people everywhere in Ontario. The law pertaining to custody and access, for instance, is contained in *The Children's Law Reform Act*, which applies to everyone who lives in Ontario.

However, the usefulness of these provincial (and, in some cases, federal) laws is different depending on where people live, as is access to lawyers, the courts and enforcement mechanisms through the police.

For example:

- The requirement that all parties to family court proceedings attend a Mandatory Information Program session at the court house may be inconvenient to people everywhere in the province. For women who live a four hour drive from the closest courthouse, even if they have access to a vehicle, this is a prohibitive obligation.
- There are challenges in obtaining legal representation for women throughout the province. Women in rural communities have fewer lawyers to choose from, including fewer who accept legal aid certificates and fewer who have a background or training in violence against women. Even when a woman is able to hire a lawyer, getting to meetings with them can be a problem, because of distances, especially if she does not

have a car.

- In remote communities, family court only takes place once or twice a month, with everyone – judges, court staff, mediators and lawyers – flying in for the day. This makes it very difficult if not impossible for a woman to get meaningful legal representation. It also means long delays are inevitable, which can have serious implications for safety for the woman and her children.
- It is unlikely in a large urban centre that a family member, friend or neighbour will see a woman when she goes to family court. However, in a small community, there is little such privacy. Some rural and remote family courts are located in hockey arenas and shopping malls.
- Even though all professionals the family is dealing with are bound by confidentiality obligations, in small communities there is a greater likelihood of overlaps between different parts of a woman's life than would be the case in larger communities. For example, the police officer who responds to her 911 call may be a relative of her partner or her lawyer's spouse may be her child's teacher or her dentist or doctor.
- Restraining orders – not a guarantee of safety for anyone – are especially difficult to enforce in rural communities, where police response time may be longer and where people may move across jurisdictions as part of their daily routines.
- There are fewer sites for supervised parenting time and exchanges of children.
- Distances are greater, which can make transporting children for access more difficult, time consuming and expensive.
- If the children live and go to school some distance from their father, it may be difficult for them to participate in school and extra-curricular activities during their access visits.
- Telephone contact between children and their access parent may all be long distance, which can create economic barriers for some families.
- It is not uncommon for women leaving a relationship in which they have subjected to abuse to want to put some distance between themselves and the abuser. In urban centres, it is possible to do this with little or no impact on parenting arrangements. In rural communities, a woman may not be able to relocate without creating parenting arrangement difficulties

What barriers do women in rural/remote communities face when they leave an abusive partner?

The reasons women stay with an abuser are as diverse as the women who are abused and as those who abuse them. Often, women stay for a combination of reasons, the exact combination changing over time, depending on their personal circumstances, the situation of the family, and external factors.

These are some of the factors that contribute to a woman's decision about whether (and when) to leave her abusive partner:

Financial

- Can I afford to leave?
- Will my children have to accept a lower standard of living?
- Will I be able to find a job?
- Can I afford a car of my own?
- Will my partner pay support or will this be just another way for them to abuse me?

Love

- They are not abusive all of the time
- We have good times as well as bad
- I need someone special in my life

Fear of losing the children

- They have more power in the community
- They can afford a better lawyer than I can
- Their parents will help them get custody
- They will make people think I am not a good mother

Fear of leaving the children alone with the abuser

- If I stay with them, they won't ever be alone with the children so I don't have to worry about my partner abusing the children
- They have never spent time alone with the kids, and I don't think they really know how to take care of them

Fear of increased violence

- They have told me that if I leave they will find me and kill me
- They will be able to find me wherever I go

Lack of adequate or appropriate external supports

- I can't find a job
- I won't be able to find housing that I can afford
- There is no child care in my community

Denial

- It is not that bad
- They are a good provider
- They have never hurt me physically
- They are good with the kids
- I could not manage the farm on my own

Self-blame

- If I were a better wife/girlfriend/partner they would not abuse me
- I could work harder to make home life more relaxing for them

Shame

- I don't want my family to know I am being abused
- Everyone in the community will find out and my kids will be embarrassed

Isolation

- I have no-one to turn to
- All our friends are my partner's friends
- My family does not live near us
- If I leave them, I will be shut out of the community
- I don't have a driver's license

Wanting to help the abuser

- They say they can't live without me
- They say they will kill themselves if I leave
- I am the only one who understands them

Learned helplessness

- I am not smart enough to manage on my own
- I am not a very good mother
- I will not be able to find a job

Fear for the animals

- They will kill/neglect the animals
- I can't take the pets with me

While many of these factors arise for women regardless of where they live, some of them have a particular impact on women living in rural and small communities.

Even when a woman makes the decision to leave, the process is a slow one, sometimes called the evolution of separation. It can involve a number of trial departures, expeditions into the world to find out what it is like to be away from the abuser, what services and supports are available, how the children cope, and what he does to try to get her to come back.

Strategies for Supporting Rural/Remote Women who are Experiencing Violence

These strategies come from the experts: Family Court Support Workers and other women's advocates working in rural and remote parts of Ontario, and from a series of meetings held in Spring 2016 in an eastern Ontario rural community that had experienced a number of domestic violence related homicides.

Transportation

- Build collaborations with local taxi companies.
- Ask for donations of gas cards.
- Collaborate with retirement homes for use of their van.
- Discuss possible use of school buses by women who need transportation.
- Meet with the police to see if they can offer women subjected to abuse transportation to a safe place, even if the woman is not making a report to the police.
- Have discussions with the health care sector and organizations that support people who require transportation for medical treatment to discuss possible transportation collaborations.
- Engage local and county councils to assist in addressing this issue.

Economic

- Collaborate with area food banks to provide cooking classes, community kitchen sessions and to prepare food in bulk for women to take away.
- Develop furniture and clothing programs that are financially self-sustaining.
- Use social media to solicit support.

- Distribute gift cards instead of holiday gifts.

Privacy

- Contact Google to remove your shelter's location from Google Maps.
- Develop policies for women's use of cell phones (especially the GPS function and camera) and children's digitalized toys in the shelter.

Animals

- Work with the Safe Pet program to house women's animals while they are in the shelter: <https://safepet.ca/>
- Consider providing a kennel on the shelter property.

Family court

- Use the Luke's Place Family Court and Beyond resource package as an aid as you support women who have family court issues. Visit our website, <https://familycourtandbeyond.ca/>, or order copies of the Court Survival Workbook and Organizer.
- Tap into the Luke's Place Family Law Information Workshops for women, delivered by video conference, which cover a range of legal issues, from family court processes and presenting evidence of abuse to managing legal bullying. To register women, contact Intake@LukesPlace.ca.
- Collaborate with the family court for your organization to do presentations at the Mandatory Information Program sessions.
- Encourage lawyers to take the Luke's Place online training for lawyers: <https://lukesplace.ca/for-lawyers/accredited-training-for-lawyers/>
- Connect with judges. Ask a judge to speak at your shelter AGM or other community events.
- Establish Lunch and Learn sessions for lawyers and judges.

Access to services

- Use the Luke's Place Virtual Legal Clinic to connect women to family law lawyers training on the issues women face for free summary law legal information. Learn more on our website at <https://lukesplace.ca/for-women/lukes-place-virtual-legal-clinic/> or email Intake@LukesPlace.ca.
- Collaborate with family court duty counsel to provide regular services in your organization.
- Work with others in your community to develop a regional crisis response model to manage major violence against women emergencies that may arise. This model could include strategies for communication, information sharing and support for first responders.

Safety

- Work with other VAW services in your region to establish an information hub where women can access a wide range of information in a safe, anonymous space such as a school.
- Develop expertise in specialized rural safety plans for women.
- Encourage women who live in remote areas to get to a safe place once they have called the police. They should, where possible, have a cell phone or cordless phone with them so they can continue to speak with the 911 dispatcher while they wait for the police to arrive.
- Encourage women to know where their partner or former partner keeps his guns or other weapons (e.g. cross-bows).
- Develop partnerships and collaborations with organizations that could assist with informal but safe supervised parenting time or supervised exchanges.

For Indigenous women

- Work with Indigenous partners to offer sweats, run groups off-site, establish a medicine garden, organize a drumming circle, etc.

- Ensure your organization has a room for cultural practices.
- Incorporate symbols of Indigenous cultures and Indigenous languages into the shelter.
- Provide Indigenous worker at least one day at week.
- Provide staff with specific training about Indigenous culture.
- Use the Talk4Healing helpline: www.talk4healing.com

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Luke's Place
<http://lukesplace.ca/>

Family Court and Beyond
<https://familycourtandbeyond.ca/>

Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO)
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Family Law Education for Women (FLEW)
<http://www.onefamilylaw.ca/>

Neighbours, Friends and Families
<http://www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca/>