

# Opinions



COMMENTARY

## A reality check on rural women

Article | Comments (10)

News Stock Business People

SEARCH

Print E-mail Comments (10)  
Share License Text Size

BELINDA LEACH

From Thursday's Globe and Mail

January 15, 2009 at 12:00 AM EST

The not-quite-reality CBC TV series *The Week the Women Went* removes all the women from a small rural town for just one week, then watches how the men cope. Last year, it was Hardisty, Alta. In the new season, which begins on Jan. 21, it's Tatamagouche, N.S. The program may be four parts soap opera, but taking women away from their families and communities reveals the often invisible work that rural women do.

The Senate produced a report on rural poverty last year that showed how living rurally affects transportation, employment, housing, education and health care. It pointed out that if rural areas don't prosper, neither do cities. But it paid no particular attention to women or to how gender affects rural issues, even though rural women make up a large proportion of Canada's working poor.

The role of rural women is not valued in Canada. Most rural women hold low-paid service-sector jobs and are more likely than their urban sisters to work seasonally and part-time - not because they want to but because of local economic conditions. Rural women are making less money each year than urban women and rural men.

The new season of *The Week the Women Went* features some men whose work takes them away from their families, underscoring the fact that men's work affects what women do. Ironically, rural women have greater managerial and professional qualifications overall than rural men, but ideas about what's suitable work for women and for men often work against them.

Rural areas also offer fewer managerial and professional jobs, while many of the public-sector jobs that used to provide women with security and good benefits - in teach-

ing, nursing and government - have been lost as small rural hospitals and schools close and offices are amalgamated in larger centres. Better-paid service-sector jobs - in financial services, for example - are in cities, not small towns.

Rural women are more likely to be self-employed than urban women, but only 20 per cent of them earn more than \$20,000 a year. Unemployment rates for rural women are consistently higher than for urban women. Those who have taken advantage of new rural job opportunities - in Prairie meat-packing operations, for example, and in Ontario auto parts and assembly plants - are justifiably worried that the loss of a job in the current economic slowdown could plunge them and their children into poverty.

Other events in women's lives - illness, abuse, accidents, separation - can lead to instant poverty. Women often rely on better-paid men to support them, especially when they have children. Organizing around children's needs can prove impossible. Child care is hard to find, expensive and usually informal. With rural public transit virtually non-existent, getting to work makes a car a necessity, a cost that consumes a huge part of a low-income mother's resources.

Women are just as likely to be abused in rural areas as they are in cities, but isolation often keeps violence, like so many features of rural women's lives, invisible. In its first season, *The Week the Women Went* didn't address issues of violence, poverty or illness. It is, after all, family entertainment. It was far more interested in pulling viewers into people's lives and relationships than in considering problem issues or the community impact of women's absence.

Still, *The Week the Women Went* is clearly premised on the idea of making visible the usually invisible work that women do. This season's version of the program is sure to open a few husbands' eyes. Some of us hold out hope that it will open other eyes as well, and that rural women's work in families and communities will start to get the recognition and support it deserves.

Belinda Leach is University Research Chair in Rural Gender Studies at the University of Guelph.