

TELLING THE UNTELLABLE:  
TRADITIONAL BELIEFS RELATED TO VIOLENCE  
AGAINST WOMEN IN A RURAL NEWFOUNDLAND  
COMMUNITY

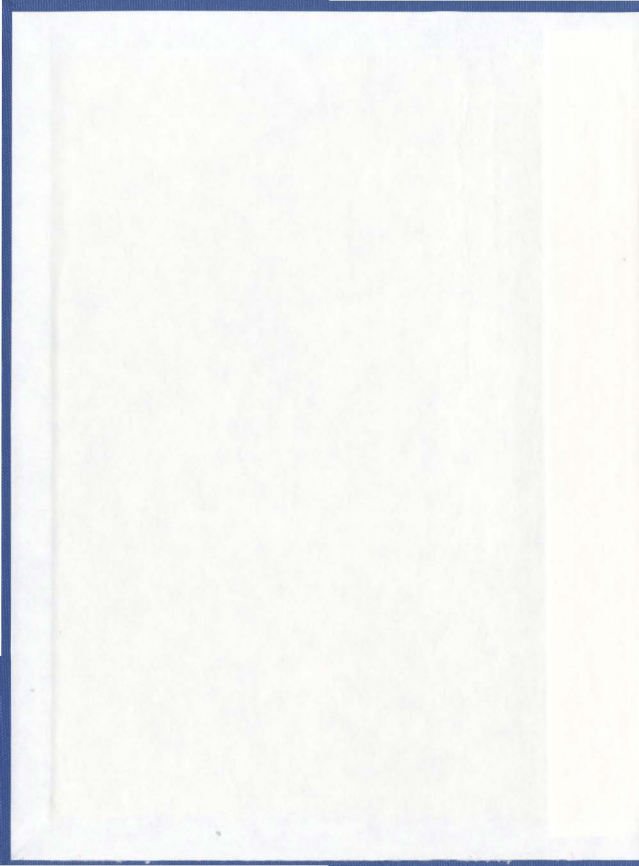
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NEACHEL KEEPING





TELLING THE UNTELLABLE:  
TRADITIONAL BELIEFS RELATED TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN A  
RURAL NEWFOUNDLAND COMMUNITY

by  
Neachel Keeping

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## **ABSTRACT**

Through an analysis of five women's personal experience narratives, this thesis examines traditional coping strategies used by victims of violence in the Newfoundland outpost of Town's Grove. I discovered the primary coping mechanism chosen by these women was silence. Consequently, I explore the belief systems of these women in order to express the importance of silence in their lives.

The first two chapters introduce five women growing up in rural Newfoundland and provide a definition of "rural." With a presentation of their life histories, I discuss how their lifestyles and personal experiences inform their attitudes and worldviews regarding violence against them.

In the next chapter I draw a comparison between these women's definitions and those taken from feminist literature. A discussion of the importance of naming in defining violence against women concludes the chapter.

Chapters four and five detail the coping strategies used by the women interviewed and review how they are often not successful strategies for change. Although resources such as the church and the law were available to women in Town's Grove, they preferred their own informal strategies such as minimization, role obstruction and silence. I conclude with a look at the long-term effects of violence on the women I interviewed. I also briefly discuss some postulated reasons why women may stay in abusive relationships.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The contents of this thesis could not have been possible without the courage and generosity of the five women interviewed. I hope that I successfully portrayed their life stories and experiences while still maintaining their anonymity. It is these strong women, who told their stories through tears and laughter, that I want to thank first and foremost.

My family and friends have been my rock to lean on throughout this project, especially my Mom, Jessie, for offering profound insights during our numerous discussions about outport life and John Vincent for his many years of encouragement and support.

MUNFLA's invaluable materials provided me the intuition to work on Newfoundland women's life stories. In addition, the staff at MUNFLA, namely Patricia Fulton, Barbara Reddy and Pauline Cox, cheerfully offered their optimism and reassurance during the final weeks when I drudged "across the hall" to edit the thesis. And Paul Gruchy, or "The CC," for his unique humour and "foolishness" that kept me laughing, even though the difficult times.

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A special thank you to my supervisor Diane Tye. Words cannot express how much I appreciate the advice, guidance, time and energy that was unselfishly given to me. The final weeks of editing were especially tiresome but, Diane's contagious laughter did not cease and this acted as my inspiration.

Also thanks to all those who shared an interest in my study and listened to me repeatedly talk about my work. Although this thesis studies the various silences enforced upon women, I am happy to say that this time the violence was not silenced.

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## CHAPTER ONE:

### INTRODUCTION

Much contemporary feminist literature and social action concerns itself with violence against women. For example, a recent Women's Studies text emphasizes the pervasiveness of violence in women's lives: "The lives of almost all women, regardless of class, caste and age, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability or disability have been distorted by violence and the expectation of violence. Whether women are the actual targets of violence, live in fear of violence, or live with the commitment to transcend the violence, violence permeates their life experience and sense of self" (Duffy 152). However, as Pahl writes, "... the tradition of accepting [violence against women] is longer than the tradition of deploring it" (11). While in the last twenty years the feminist movement has undoubtedly increased public awareness of sexual and physical assault and forced its discussion into political arenas, these gains are not felt equally by all women in all communities. In rural areas, where everyone knows everyone else, many keep violence against women a horrible secret. What folklorist Donna Wyckoff refers to as "untellability" maintains the silence. Isolation within rural communities and a lack of resources are other reasons that women there sustain this silence (MacLeod, *Battered...* 22). Isolation is further compounded by the fact that many rural women are not fully aware of the gains of the feminist movement.

The following work builds on earlier research I conducted as part of my graduate



course work and presented as two conference papers (See Keeping, "When the Silence is Broken..." and Keeping, "It Just Wasn't Talked About'...."). Drawing on the experiences and views of five women, this thesis explores the extent to which traditional beliefs still inform ideas about violence against women in one rural Newfoundland community of approximately two hundred people. I consider how traditional belief systems relate to violence against women, specifically what the women I interviewed believe violence is and how they think it is best dealt with. The thesis argues that contrary to popular belief, violence against women within rural communities takes place more often than many people are aware or at least are willing to admit. My study explores informal ways in which some residents of Town's Grove, where my research is based, cope with violence. It looks at how women deconstruct the problem of violence against women and create traditional strategies for dealing with it even though some of the interstitial knowledge that allows them to survive assault is in opposition to the goals of feminist organizations that strongly urge women to speak out.

### **Why I Chose the Topic**

Growing up in rural Newfoundland in the 1970s and 1980s, I often questioned community dynamics, especially those related to women and their perceived secondary status within community life. I rebelled against the way things "had" to be done and did not appreciate that my brother and other male peers could be absolved from just about anything with the phrase "boys will be boys." In the meantime, any female who stepped

outside the accepted role as the innocent, submissive and passive “girl” would often be negatively categorized and stereotyped as “lazy,” “wild,” “a slut” or worse. I disagreed with the fact that my brother could consume a meal and then relax and view television while I had to partake in the “womanly” duties of clean-up such as washing dishes, sweeping floors and so forth. I frequently challenged: “why doesn’t he do the dishes?” and I was always reminded that: “he’s a boy.” I longed to live in an urban setting where no one knew my business and people judged me by what I did as opposed to who I was. I regularly questioned the rural way of life and found myself comparing and contrasting rural and urban settings based on what I viewed on television.

From the time I recognized differences between the treatment of males and females, I developed an interest in women’s issues although significantly this was dismissed by my family as something I would “grow out of.” It was not until much later, during the last year of my undergraduate degree that I got involved with the St. John’s Rape Crisis Centre (RCC)<sup>1</sup> and things fell into place. I then appreciated that I was not the only one who felt frustrated and dissatisfied with the treatment of women in our society. And I realized that my feelings, ideas and beliefs could be named; I was a feminist. During the twelve weeks of the RCC’s instruction on how to offer help to survivors of violence, I also learned much about my belief systems and myself. Although I knew the equality of women is severely challenged in many areas of our society, I had never

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<sup>1</sup> Since my involvement with the organization, the name has changed to the Newfoundland and Labrador Sexual Assault Crisis and Prevention Centre.

considered the impact of this inequality on me. Most importantly, though, I found out that many women, particularly outside of St. John's, were unaware of the services that the RCC, and other women's organizations, provide. In an effort to heighten awareness, I conducted an occupational study of the St. John's RCC for a graduate course paper with the intention of expanding it for my thesis. Unfortunately, this effort resulted in one paper but not a thesis.

At the time I joined the RCC most research and programs focusing on violence against women had neglected rural communities. Limited funds as well as social factors combined to limit researchers' access to rural areas. For example, informal pressures felt by many rural residents to keep violence within the family and within the community prevented an in-depth study of violence against women in these settings. The RCC's installation of a toll-free phone number that women in need of help could contact without the knowledge of their abusive partner was seen as a colossal step forward for the RCC and, more importantly, a momentous step toward reaching rural abused women. Inspired by this effort to get information out to rural centres and conduct research on a topic that had previously been lacking, I chose to base my thesis on an examination of how rural women's beliefs affect their way of coping with violence against them.

Around the same time the RCC was making headway toward offering help to rural abused women, a local known troublemaker within the rural community of Town's Grove sexually assaulted a woman in her home on Christmas Eve. The perpetrator had a long history of assault within the community and this woman decided that she was going

end the violence. She pressed charges against her assailant. Upon hearing about this, I decided that this was the community I wanted to base my work on.

### **Methodology**

Due to the sensitivity of the issues discussed in this thesis, the data collected did not always come easily. Fortunately, prior to beginning my fieldwork, I had friends within Town's Grove. I contacted them for interviews regarding their experiences and beliefs pertinent to violence against women and their opinions related to the attempted rape. These women were unhappy with the violence occurring within their hometown and appeared eager to vent their frustrations to me. The women recommended two other women who I contacted and they also agreed to be interviewed. A fifth woman heard about the work I was doing and approached me to be a participant in my study. During my conversations, I found that not only were the women unaware of some formal services available such as those offered by the RCC, but for various reasons I will discuss later in the thesis, they rarely resorted to the limited formal channels within Town's Grove: the church and the law. Instead, they tended to rely on informal strategies to help cope with violence. Strikingly, the women's comments highlighted the silence that often still surrounds violence against women in rural settings. This resulting work then, is part of a growing study of violence against rural women that comes out of both my experiences and interests in rural community living and participation in the feminist movement.

When I originally decided to conduct this study on violence against women in a small outport, I gave careful consideration to the issues surrounding such a topic and the effects it would have on the women I interviewed once the thesis was made available to the public. I constantly kept three things in mind: sensitivity, confidentiality and anonymity. All of the women I talked with had either been assaulted or had experienced assault in some way within Town's Grove. And, not all of these assaults were common knowledge.

Assuring participants that I would do my best to provide anonymity and confidentiality, I conducted tape-recorded interviews with five women from their mid-twenties to mid-eighties. My interviews took place over an extended period of time and produced mixed results. The first interview with Faith, who is in her early fifties, took me out of the province and was by far the best interview I conducted. Faith witnessed many incidents of violence against women within Town's Grove and often offered aid to victims. The information was detailed and in-depth with Faith starting from her early childhood growing up in rural Newfoundland to current events taking place there. After two separate interviews over a number of weeks, I was thrilled with what I obtained. I later contacted this woman on a number of occasions for verification or more detailed information.

The success of the first interview raised my hopes. However, the second interview with Joan, who is in her early eighties, took much probing on my part. Joan, who is the oldest woman in my sample, was a victim of violence from her childhood

through her married life. Nonetheless, Joan does not feel that she has been assaulted. Her answers were short and abrupt and I often had to encourage her to expand or elaborate on them. It took two attempts over one week before I realized that I had all I could and would obtain. I contacted Joan for follow-up information on three other occasions.

The third interview with Lisa, who is in her mid sixties, was conducted on the telephone. I found this to be limiting mainly because I could not view her bodily and facial expressions and was often unsure as to how my questions were affecting her. Lisa had been raped at the age of thirteen and I was unsure as to how she felt about talking about her rape, considering she had only recently told select family members of the incident. I constantly drew on my training and experience working with the RCC to feel-out how she was responding to the questions. Although I was aware that she felt she had dealt with her rape, I did not want to force her to discuss something that she preferred not to. So, I frequently started my questions with "Please don't feel you have to answer..." or "If you're uncomfortable talking about this...." During my follow-up questions, when I asked her to elaborate, I did so reluctantly. Overall, though, the interview went really well and I have not had to contact her again for follow up information.

My fourth interview, with Kirsten, who is in her late twenties, again took encouragement on my part. Kirsten is aware of various violent episodes within Town's Grove and has helped her friend deal with her sexual assault. Her answers were again

brief and to the point, and she often responded yes or no to many questions. I had to encourage her to be more informative and to elaborate on her answers. The interview was short and I contacted her on many occasions for follow up information.

My final interview was with Sara, who is in her early forties. Sara started off the interview quite powerfully, offering direct and well thought-out answers. However, at one point, during the telling of her recent experience of an attempted rape, which had only taken place a few months prior to this interview, she became extremely upset. I again drew on my training and experience with the St. John's RCC. After allowing her time to regain control, I offered to terminate and/or reschedule the interview. Sara, however, felt it necessary to continue and we finished shortly after. I have not felt it necessary to contact her for follow-up details.

An aspect of the fieldwork that surprised me was the difficulty I had resolving some of the women's comments about the men I know. While I remain sympathetic to the women, the stories they related made me see some people in a new and uncomfortable way. The men who were referred to by the women I interviewed as "abusive" and "alcoholic" are certainly not the men I know today. There are many challenges to doing research on a silenced topic and this was one I was unprepared for.

### **How is this Folklore?**

I realized upon undertaking this topic that some folklorists might consider it the domain of women's studies and question its relevance for folklore. It is not a traditional

topic. It is not about folktales or folksongs that fit into a major genre of folklore.

However, as Greenhill and Tye note, "Because not all traditional and popular culture is old, folklore studies must constantly expand to accommodate new materials" (5). This thesis does build on a growing feminist folklore literature. Recently aspects of women's traditional culture have been looked at from a folkloristic perspective. For example, the work of Radner, Wyckoff, Crain, Bourke, Murray and others, identifies and explores the coded subtexts and hidden silences of women's narratives and experiences. Some studies have specifically considered aspects of violence against women. For example, in this thesis I draw on Gail Grant who explores social constraints on women; Majorie Bard who looks at community responses towards domestic violence and homelessness and Joan Radner who studies women's use of implicit feminist coding. I also look towards the works of folklorists who treat the more general topic of violence. Eleanor Wachs discusses crime victim narratives, William Westerman considers "official" and "folk" violence and Donna Wyckoff details violence's "untellability." This partial list of folklorists who have conducted similar works demonstrates both the recent interest in women's folklore within the discipline and a willingness to face the more unpleasant aspects of traditional culture. Within this feminist folklore framework, I also draw on literature exploring the dynamics of small community living. For example, Wendy Milne looks at the added obstacles of confronting abuse in rural settings and Neil Websdale questions the effectiveness of the "so-called justice system's response" (xv) to violence.



Having finished my research, I am convinced of both its relevance to a deeper understanding of rural Newfoundland women's lives and its value to folklore study. Despite an increased awareness of violence against women as a social issue, recent research suggests incidents of violence may actually be on the increase in rural parts of the province since the collapse of the fishery in the last decade (See Davis, "Gendered..."). Folklorists can contribute to a greater understanding of women's informal strategies for coping with assault. In its objective for social change, I have come to see this thesis as an example of applied folklore. Even though the study does not provide solutions to the problems related to violence within Town's Grove, it offers a view of the options these women exercised and suggests reasons why formal strategies of dealing with violence are not always solutions.

As applied folklore, this work draws on both folklore methodology and theory. At the heart of my study is a life history approach. Through an analysis of the five women's personal experience narratives, I examine the presence of violence in their backgrounds, from their childhood growing up in rural Newfoundland to the present. As Martin Lovelace suggests "The special nature of the text obtained through the life history interview demands a mode of analysis which is sensitive to rhetoric in general and which will enable the life history to be seen as the informant's argument on his own behalf" (215). Lovelace's argument that "The interest of folklorists in securing life histories of individuals may prove to be one way of gaining a better understanding of social

communication in general" (212) is perhaps particularly relevant for women who frequently have been silenced (See Grant).

The women's narratives have many intersections with community traditions of belief. For example, later in this thesis I look towards supernatural beliefs as a way of coding to hide or silence violence within Town's Grove. I refer to Peter Narvaéz's work that suggests fairies were sometimes used to mask deviant behaviours including violence. Fairies were often employed as an effective means of social control for both children and women. I also refer to Barbara Rieti's connection of traditional expressions and customs, such as those about witchcraft, to violence against women. Rieti talks about witch lore as an explanation for normalizing and accepting violence against women. Religious beliefs about the devil may also sometimes explain a women's non-conformity within the community. As I discuss later in the thesis, one of the women I interviewed reported how her abused grandmother was believed to be possessed by the devil. Finally, although I have not made any references to belief in the old hag in my study, Marjorie Bard has compared the experience of sexually abused women with being "hagged" (49-56).

The women I spoke with fit into Oring's understanding of folklore as "communal (a group or collective)" (17-18). As five women from the same community who have witnessed similar situations, they are members of a folk group. Their shared background of rural living and experiences of violence against women are common threads that bind

them together. In the telling of their personal experience narratives, these women refer to their shared culture, custom and ethnicity and they break their silence.

The women's strategies for dealing with violence also conform to Oring's other orientations. He identifies folklore as "the common (the everyday rather than the extraordinary)" (18). Unfortunately, this research and the work of others has found that violence against women in rural settings is a common occurrence; it is not "extraordinary." The women's coping mechanisms are what Oring terms "the informal (in relation to the formal and institutional)" (18). Although I make reference to formal coping strategies, my focus in this work is how women turn to traditional and informal means of dealing with violence. And the women are "the marginal (in relation to the centres of power and privilege)" (Oring 18). As I note later in the thesis, they sometimes feel disadvantaged by the larger community, the church and the Canadian criminal justice system and may find release in "the aesthetic (artistic expression)" and "the personal (communication face-to-face)" (Oring 18). The creative manner in which these women hide the violence and their responses to it is worthy of a study of its own. Some of the ways of dealing with violence and related beliefs have been passed down through generations and perhaps their families; what Oring describes as traditional or stable over time (18). And, finally connections with individual and community belief systems reflect Oring's orientation of "the ideological (expressions of belief and systems of knowledge)" (18).

## **Chapter Divisions**

In the next chapter, the thesis looks at life in rural Newfoundland. To gain insight into the issues and barriers that limit life there, I begin by defining “rural.” I then present the lives of five women from the rural Newfoundland community, which I refer to as Town’s Grove. Their life histories explore the hardships of struggling rural families.

In chapter three, I explore the varied definitions of violence against women. Here I examine the perceptions of the women interviewed against definitions of assault taken from published literature. Community attitudes and beliefs toward assault, as viewed by these women, are analyzed and compared to contemporary feminist writings. I also discuss the importance of naming violence and how it affects the women.

In chapter four, I describe the formal coping strategies available to the women I interviewed. I look at the forms of community support that women in Town’s Grove had and why these strategies were not often utilized. I focus the discussion on one woman’s particular experiences with the rural Newfoundland justice system after she reported a sexual assault.

In chapter five, I present some of the women’s informal coping strategies and explore why women may resort to silence. I survey the “untellability” and silence around violence and discuss how women use coded messages in displacing their traumatic experiences.

Finally, I conclude this thesis by reviewing why women stay in abusive relationships and name some of the long-term psychological effects of violence against women. Here, I will look at long-term repercussions of women's experiences of violence

The battle combatting violence against women has been a long, tedious one that is far from over. The history of violence against women and why it happens is still being written. In its collection and analysis of five women's views and experiences of violence, this study is my attempt to broaden awareness and strengthen efforts towards prevention of violence against women. It begins with an introduction to the rural life of Town's Grove.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **LIFE IN RURAL NEWFOUNDLAND**

This chapter presents what life was like in rural Newfoundland for the five women I interviewed. Here, the women speak of the violence they have experienced or witnessed. In their words are coded messages as to why some women resort to informal coping mechanisms when faced with violence and why some remain silent. These are the subjects of later chapters. Because the women's experiences and perceptions are shaped by their rurality, it is important first to define "rural" and then to introduce the community of Town's Grove.

#### **Rural**

There are many misconceptions about rural living. Urban residents may believe that country settings are safe, secure and peaceful and the media often perpetuates these stereotypes. However, many are unaware of the real dynamics that exist in outports, especially in the lives of women.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the recent research on rural women, see Whatmore, et. al. The authors describe the area prior to the 1990s as an isolated and "discrete field of interest," what they term as "fugitive literature" (1).

While rural settings are sometimes perceived to be similar, as Milne argues, there are no archetypal rural centres in Canada (3). In fact, she writes that "Rural communities can be as complex socially-politically as any urban centre, but the population is smaller, more dispersed, likely to be more economically depressed, or linguistically isolated " (3). While some of the experiences of the women I interviewed in Town's Grove apply to residents of other places, they cannot be generalized to everyone or to every rural outport.

Milne writes that rural may be defined as "all territory lying outside urban areas," with "a population under 2500" (3). Even within this definition, there is diversity. In Newfoundland, rural communities often depend on the fisheries but there are agriculturally based communities as well. Although Newfoundland is relatively homogenous, different descent groups dominate in different areas of the province. Thus, while literature outlining the characteristics of rural communities is helpful, it is important to keep in mind that authors like Redfield create ideal constructs.

Newfoundland outports like Town's Grove conform to what Redfield describes as a little community; it is distinctive, small, homogeneous and self-sufficient (4). Town's Grove has a distinct identity whose boundaries are obvious to outsiders and insiders alike. With a population of under two hundred people the outport can certainly be classified as small. The women's stories reflect aspects of that smallness. Everyone knows everyone else. This also leads to everyone knowing everyone else's business. Just as in the small town in the United States where bell hooks grew up, "you always see

someone you know. Interruptions, intrusions are part of daily life. Privacy is difficult to maintain" (hooks 74). Lack of privacy is one reason that gossip is a very common occurrence that often provides many interesting topics of conversation. There are no local radio stations, newspapers or any other form of printed documents. Thus, gossip acts as an important form of communication. In Town's Grove, the local convenience store is a place of transmission. Most women gather to discuss current "shocking" activities. Although the "news" that circulates is not always true, oral communication is the only way of getting it around the community.

As Redfield notes for the little community, in Town's Grove, "Activities and states of mind are much alike for all persons in corresponding sex and age positions; and the career of one generation repeats that of the preceding" (4). Redfield continues to say that homogeneous also means "slow changing" (4). Ideals and beliefs are passed on from one generation to another. For women, the passing on of silence, which I later discuss in detail within this thesis, is a prime example of this. Occupations have also traditionally been passed on within rural communities. In Town's Grove, the fishery has been the primary source of income for community members and fathers and sons often fish together.

Redfield states that the little community is self-sufficient and "provides for all or most of the activities and needs of the people in it" (4). In Town's Grove, members made their living off the sea. In early years, merchants acted as bankers and provided goods in return for fish. What was not provided or could not be bought at the local



general store was grown or made. Women had their own individual gardens, cows, sheep and hens and sewed clothing for family members. Men built their own boats, cut logs for housing and even concocted their own beverages and cigarettes.

The next section introduces the rural community of Town's Grove.

### **The Community of Town's Grove - A History**

Town's Grove was discovered in the 1600s by French fishermen who named and used this rough and wooded shore on one of the coasts of Newfoundland as a winter fishing site.<sup>1</sup> European fishermen also visited the harbour in the early 1600s. They were attracted to what promotional literature for a recent Come Home Year, describes as a "... secure harbor and a good place to salt and dry fish." However, it was the English who eventually settled Town's Grove. The *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador* notes that "The French were excluded from the ... fishery in the early 1700s and by the mid-1700s there were probably a handful of English settlers." Fishermen were brought from outside the province to a nearby community and were the first to make it a home. In the mid-1700s, stages were mapped out at Town's Grove. By the mid-1800s, with the boom of the herring fishery, more families moved to Town's Grove bringing its population to almost 300 residents. Families built sturdy and stationary housing and settled there year round. Others arrived from various islands looking for a new life in

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<sup>1</sup> References to this community are purposely general in order to protect anonymity.

this rough and sometimes brutal climate. Eventually, the community became an active booming fishing settlement.

With the growth in population, businesses automatically developed. Two merchants set up trading stations and by the late 1800s, there were "... prosperous bank fishing firms at [Town's Grove]" (*Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*). By the early 1900s, the population had risen to well over 500 people in the area.

One of the merchants had a prominent and strong Catholic religious background which helped to "... make the community a major trading centre for the Roman Catholic communities," (*Encyclopedia Newfoundland and Labrador*). To aid in the growing population, the Presentation Order set up a convent and school there in the late 1800s. Students attended from faraway communities to gain an education where fishing was still the mainstay. Not to be outdone, the Church of England also set up a church and school and the population eventually became evenly split between the two religions.

In the early 1900s, Town's Grove gained its very own resident doctor who, with the aid of his own yacht, serviced all surrounding areas. The community continued to attract more individuals until there were a little over 300 people living there. The physician remained the only doctor until a few years before his death.

Eventually though, the booming community of Town's Grove plummeted and started its quick decline. Financial distress suffered by local merchants, a tidal wave that caused disruption to some fishing grounds and a general decline of the bank fishery, all aided in the breakdown of the now struggling community. The introduction of draggers,

which ended the bank fishery, took men from Town's Grove to their places of operation. By the 1930s, a little under 300 people remained in this community and by the late 1950s there were only about 200 people living there. Today, in 2001, the population is not quite 200 members.

The development of the roads in the late 1960s and early 1970s brought many changes to rural communities. They became connected with other towns and modernization began. Many people resettled to now readily accessible towns where they could make an easier living without the sea and the problems that accompanied it. Even though the population continued to decline, many decided to stay in this rugged land and try to maintain a living the way of their fathers and forefathers.

Today, the majority of the residents living in Town's Grove are senior citizens. The few younger families that remain struggle to make a living from a sea that no longer can provide them the necessary subsistence to feed their families. The result is shorter and shorter fishing seasons, the need for more frequent employment insurance and migration outside the province. Admitting defeat and experiencing the shame of accepting aid from Social Services is the final and seemingly only available option to many who remain.

The few children who are native "Town's Grovers" and remain grow into adulthood and try their best to succeed at fishing. They then tend to migrate upon finishing high school, leaving to obtain a higher degree of education or to seek employment. This sometimes means moving to a nearby urban centre or simply leaving

the province altogether. The "Mainland" tends to be a big attraction for many Newfoundland youth. There they can generally secure employment without a higher level of education. And some then return to their hometown when they have acquired enough "stamps" enabling them access to Employment Insurance.

Those youth who stay, or prefer to stay, in Town's Grove do so because of their love for their way of life. It is a place they "belong"<sup>1</sup> where kinship ties are strong. The smallness of the community offers security, serenity and quietness. The standard of living is generally economically lower but many have the security of knowing that the local convenience store owner will provide them the option to "charge" items until they receive their salary or government cheques. There is trust and peace of mind that comes with knowing your neighbours.

For some young adults an obstacle to obtaining well paid meaningful employment is their choice to leave school to work the sea. So, with the shock and life-changing decision of government to enforce a moratorium, residents now feel they have no other choice but to accept Social Services if they are to remain in Town's Grove. Today, the prevalent income is government sponsored with social security or social assistance being the main sources. Make-work programs have been ongoing, providing employment insurance for a limited time. This, however, only provides temporary relief and when the work is complete and the employment insurance exhausted, the families begin the cycle again.

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<sup>1</sup>For a full length discussion of what it means to "belong" to a Newfoundland rural community, see Pocius.

## **Growing up in Rural Newfoundland**

“The basic structure of any life history or oral autobiography is built upon the reminiscences of the informant” (Fulton 21). Until recently, many women were not given the opportunity to verbally express their thoughts and ideas related to their home-life, work and activities. This thesis builds on a small but growing literature that explores the life of rural Newfoundland women (eg Davis, Murray). Traditionally, the work of women in outports has been strenuous and time consuming. As well as working side by side with their husbands with the fishery, women juggled household activities, childrearing and farming and some even had paid employment outside the home. Leisure time was extremely rare. In this following life history section, I allow five women who resided in Town’s Grove from the mid 1930s to the late 1990s to speak for themselves. They describe their lives as wives, mothers and employees.

## **Joan**

### **Childhood**

Born in the early 1900’s in a small rural community on the south coast of Newfoundland, Joan was one of seven children in a poor but hardworking family. During his late twenties, Joan’s father died and her mother was left raising her children alone. Prior to this, Joan claims that “We had the very best of times because we had plenty to eat and we had plenty to drink. We had plenty of sheep and one thing and the other. Poor Mom used to rear the gardens and Dad used to go away and come home

[every night] from fishing.” But, things changed when Joan reached the age of ten. During a time when government aid was not provided, a widowed woman could not possibly support herself and her children. So, shortly after the death of her husband, Joan’s mother remarried, moved to a new community and took on the added responsibility of three stepchildren. Both her mother and her stepfather gave preference to his children, leaving Joan and her siblings to fend for themselves. Her stepfather did not relish the added financial responsibility of providing for seven children and he verbalized this frequently. Although her father never physically abused her, her siblings or her mother, Joan’s stepfather often did. According to Joan, after her mother’s second marriage “We had hard times growing up.”

At the tender age of ten, Joan “... left school because Mom remarried and I had to support myself.” She acquired a job as a “live-in-domestic” which allowed her to leave her stepfather’s abuse behind. She lived with this family for several years and assumed the role of mother and housekeeper. According to Joan “I treated those children like they were my own. I didn’t want them to go through what I went through.” Unfortunately, Joan’s happiness was short lived when a few years later her employers decided to move to an urban centre. She was invited to join them but Joan declined. She later got a similar position but this time her employer was not as considerate. Joan was mistreated and was often criticized and ridiculed by her employer. Yet, “times were tough,” jobs were hard to obtain and Joan had no place else to go. And although Joan admits that her

employer verbally abused her, she was not beaten. For a second time, the pattern of violence was repeated. Joan endured but there was more to come.

### **Marriage**

At the age of thirteen, Joan met her future husband. He lived in a nearby community and would often "... walk fifteen minutes on the 'cow path' [connecting the communities] to see me." After several years of dating, they married and, as was the tradition, they moved in with Joan's in-laws. She was again starting over in a new community where she was seen as an outsider. According to Joan, she respected and loved her father-in-law like a father. Her mother-in-law, however, did her very best to make Joan's life miserable. According to Joan's daughter Faith "Pop was the gentlest man, never lifted a finger to anyone. But Nan was another story. She was the one who hit Dad and her other children." Joan's mother-in-law was a domineering and demanding woman. She would often verbally and sometimes physically abuse Joan. Faith commented that she would "make Mom work like a dog," keeping her so busy with chores that Joan often did not have time to tend to her own needs and responsibilities. "She was often deprived of things, like doing her own laundry" (Faith). Joan was frequently insulted, criticized, deprived, and pushed beyond her limits both physically and mentally. Her mother-in-law would prevent her from socializing with the rest of the women in the community thus Joan's role as outsider was reinforced. According to Joan, though, she was obedient to her mother-in-law so feels that "we got along." Shortly after

her marriage, at the age of seventeen Joan had her first child. She related to me that her extremely difficult and painful labor lasted a total of five days. The baby was breeched and it was not until the fifth day of her labour, when she was on the "verge of death" that a midwife finally arrived and delivered the baby girl. It took Joan weeks to recover from the birth. During this time, her mother-in-law cared for her while verbally reinforcing her theory that Jane could do nothing right, not even deliver a baby.

Eventually, Joan and her husband decided to build their own house. According to Joan, her husband worked day and night for months. During the day he would fish to obtain the necessary subsistence to provide for his family. During the night he would cut logs and drag them from the woods on his back. For an agreed amount of wood, the merchant provided the necessary materials to build a house. When the agreement was reached, Joan's husband was bedridden for almost a month from physical exhaustion. "Jack was in bed for months after he got all the logs out. His back was one big blister and he could barely walk. But we got our house" (Joan). The house had only the bare necessities. There was no electricity, running water and the bathroom consisted of a bucket that was known as the "slop pail." But according to Joan, "we had kerosene lamps, a wood stove, plenty of gardens. We had the best of everything."

Making a living in Town's Grove was extremely difficult. Joan's husband fished during the day and the fish would then be sold to the local merchant in return for dried goods and other necessities. Unfortunately, many men often were given little choice but to borrow fishing gear at the beginning of the season so started in debt to the local



merchant. This debt appeared to be never ending. Even when the fishermen did relatively well during the fishing season, the profit from the fish often only paid some of the debt and they generally had little choice but to borrow from the merchant again the following year. This meant that many families remained poor and everyone had to pitch in to help support the family. When he was not fishing, Joan's husband cut wood, that was also sold to the local merchant, and took on any job he could secure.

Joan also was involved with the fishery. She helped unload the fish and then split, salt and cure it. She also cared for the household, took care of the children and tended to the gardens. Joan and her children would go to the opposite side of the community, where the gardens and livestock were located, and spend the whole day there feeding sheep, hens, ducks and other animals, cutting grass, "rearing" the gardens and so forth. According to Faith, it took about an hour to walk there each day. They would work until dark and then head home for supper and bed. Joan again obtained work as a "domestic," caring for other people's children and doing various household chores for women in the community who were more financially stable. As the children got older, some pitched in and did the most of the household chores while Joan and the others did the farming.

Shortly after the arrival of her third child, Joan's husband got a job as lighthouse-keeper on a nearby secluded island. This job took him away from home for months at a time. According to Joan, he would only come home once a month for supplies. This continued for five years. Joan and the children were unable to move to "the Island."

During the winter the children were in school and during the summer Joan and her children had to tend to the gardens and livestock. During this time, Joan cared for her children and worked outside the home as a domestic.

By this time, there were a total of six children. One of Joan's children was born with a disability and life became even more difficult. The child attended school for a few years but eventually it became apparent that she had reached her mental capability and discontinued school. The child needed special care and eventually became completely dependent.

Joan's life illustrates the proverb "work hard, play hard." After a full day of demanding work, Joan's husband would socialize with other men in the community and often return home intoxicated. At this time, he would become violent. Faith recalls, "There were times my Mom got beat for no good reason. My Dad would go on a drinking spree, come home polluted, beat up on her, beat up on us kids for no good reason." Although Joan and her children were beaten for no particular reason by her husband while he was drunk, the children were often "disciplined" in the form of violence. According to Faith, her parents were taught by their parents that physical punishment was the best way to discipline children; they did not realize that it was abuse. They thought they were doing the right thing.

### **Recent Years**

As Joan and her husband grew older, the struggles of their youth caused many health problems for her husband. Eventually, he became semi-dependent on Joan for various needs. It is interesting to note that a complete role reversal took place. Joan became the dominant partner in the relationship while her husband became a quiet, gentle and somewhat submissive character. In their later years, the two shared much good humour. Joan's husband would often tease her and Joan would laughingly tell him to "go away." There was contentment in their relationship.

Joan's husband died a number of years ago and she continues to grieve him. She claims that caring for her disabled son who still lives with her is the reason she gets out of bed every morning. In her mid eighties, Joan has more energy and ambition than many half her age. She spends most of her time alone in her own home, where she does her own housework. She performs the daily rituals of laundry, cooking and caring for the general health of her son, who she feeds and bathes. She also administers his medications. Her only trips outside are to the local convenience store and mailbox. Even those outings are limited due to ice and snow in winter and her deteriorating hearing. A few years ago, Joan experienced serious health problems and no one thought she would pull through. Remarkably, she had an almost full recovery.

## **Lisa**

### **Childhood**

Born in the 1930s, Lisa is the eldest of Joan's six children. According to Lisa, Town's Grove, was a "beautiful and quiet place to grow up." Lisa's mother tended the gardens located on the opposite side of the community and cared for the children and household while her father fished. Lisa states that during her time in Town's Grove, the women worked just as hard, if not harder, than the men. When the men returned with their catch, the women worked side by side with them and helped cut and dry the fish. Women also had the added chores of cooking meals and caring for the children. Lisa's father fished most of the year, until the fall when he would trade his haul to the local merchant. Generally, this trade would barely cover the expenses for the items credited at the beginning of the fishing season. In the winter he cut wood and any other jobs he could locate. Lisa stresses that it was difficult for fisherpeople to earn a good living. The winters especially were financially difficult. Some people were forced to accept aid from Social Assistance and only those in dire need of it were allocated the privilege. Paper money never existed in the lives of many residents. Generally, they relied on credit where fish was traded for goods and services. Social Assistance consisted of a slip of paper with a list of items that one could obtain at the local convenience store. Lisa stated that most of the time her family lived "hand to mouth."

Lisa indicates that everyone had to do their share within the household to eat. But, there still were times when food was scarce and they only had bread and tea, if they

were fortunate enough to have that. Although Lisa had five siblings, she states that, because of the age differences, it was like having two families in the one. She did not get to know her younger siblings until much later when they had all grown and left the household. She mainly cared for her three younger siblings and took them to school with her so that her mother could do her chores. The two youngest children Lisa does not remember because they were born after she left Town's Grove. As well as caring for her siblings, Lisa also gardened, washed dishes, carried water, cut wood, did laundry, cooked and performed any other task that needed doing.

The days were often filled with work and, according to Lisa, there was very little opportunity for leisure. The only free time they had was during the weekend or sometimes during the summer. Lisa spent time with girlfriends, with whom she picked berries and talked. Mostly though, she was with her brother. Lisa recalls many occasions when she and her brother would wander off and sit in the woods. Many times they would fall asleep and spend the afternoon that way.

Lisa comments, "I would have liked to have had a family like my friends had." She describes her father as an alcoholic who was also violent outside the home: "He was like many other men in the community when they were drinking...[when he was drunk], he would become a complete maniac. He would throw and he would beat and he would just beat up everything. He'd beat up the furniture, he would beat up all the dishes. He would not leave anything and he would beat everything that stood in his way. He'd clean house." He would also beat his wife and children.

Today, Lisa wonders why she never gave the abuse much thought at the time and chalks it up to childhood innocence. Although as a child she longed for a stable family life, she recalls there were many other families just like hers where both mother and children were abused by their drunken fathers. According to Lisa, her father thought he was disciplining his children when he hit them. On the other hand, Lisa believes that they often received punishment without reason and strongly claims that "it wasn't discipline. You don't kick your children with your boot. And you don't pound your children around the head. And you don't grab your kids by the arm and tell them if they do anything wrong they're going to kill you. You don't do things like that to your children and that's what was done to us." Lisa describes living her childhood in fear of doing something wrong and angering her father. She believes that eventually she and her siblings were unable to tell right from wrong because they got beaten for both.

Lisa remembers "There were times when I was very happy." But, one evening her world turned upside down. Lisa and a young man in the community were good friends and they frequently spent time together. Then, he violated that friendship. Her friend had obtained some alcohol from Lisa's father and became intoxicated. Upon later meeting up with Lisa, he brutally raped her. Lisa was in her early teens.

Devastated by the assault, Lisa felt she had nowhere to turn. She dropped out of school in junior high and moved to a distant city with a friend where she got work as a domestic. When her girlfriend and mother decided to move out of the province, Lisa went with them. She located in a new city with a job as a waitress.

**Marriage**

Lisa met and married her husband. Less than a year later, they decided to move to Town's Grove. They lived with Lisa's parents for awhile and then moved in with her father's parents. Their first of five children was born and shortly after they built their own home. They later had their second child. Lisa's husband decided he loved living in the small community and, like other men there, he fished, lumbered and took advantage of any job to make money. Lisa worked as mother and caregiver, partaking in household activities, gardening and childrearing. Although it was not their original intention, Lisa and her husband lived in Town's Grove for six years before her husband decided he wanted to move back to his hometown.

Upon returning to the Mainland, Lisa's husband worked as a truck driver. According to Lisa, the standard of living there was very poor. "We just survived. There was no extra money." Lisa concludes, though, that "it was much, much better there." She states that life there was better because it was easier to get a job and the pay was higher better than at Town's Grove. She says "we did live much better." Within the following years, Lisa had three other children. While her husband worked she cared for the family.

**Recent Years**

A few years ago, Lisa's father died. Her husband died within the same year. She continues to live in the house she shared with her husband. Remarkably, forty years after

leaving the community of Town's Grove, Lisa feels that she has dealt with the issues of her past and looks back on Town's Grove with fond memories.

## **Faith**

### **Childhood**

In her fifties, Faith is the fifth of Joan's six children and Lisa's younger sister. Unlike Lisa, Faith was not fortunate enough to have the opportunity to leave Town's Grove until she was in her mid forties.

Although Faith was the second youngest child, her life was not easier than the rest of her siblings. At a very young age, when she was considered old enough to care for herself, she also looked after her younger brother and older disabled sibling: "Everyone had to pull their weight and I was no exception." Faith started school at the age of seven and attended during the winter. During the summer, she and her family spent most of their time on the opposite side of the community attending to the gardens and livestock. When she was not doing that, she cooked, cleaned, and cared for her siblings. According to Faith, things were hardest for her during the fishing season. At that point she took on extra responsibilities while her mother helped out with the fish.

Faith reflects, "Just because we're poor doesn't mean we have to be dirty." Joan's view of cleanliness was passed onto her children. There were times allocated each week for particular cleaning duties. Things had to be cleaned in a particular way and Faith remembers that "everything had to be spotless." Twice a week the exhausting task



of doing laundry was performed. According to Faith, there was no running water or electricity so water had to be boiled on the wood stove. By the time all bed sheets, window treatments, clothing, and any other article that needed cleaning was completed, most of a morning was utilized. Faith indicates that "It was exhausting. And especially in summer when it was so hot outside and you still had to have the wood stove stacked full of wood." Three meals a day were prepared. During the winter, these meals mainly consisted of bread and tea and anything that could be cooked from the bare basics. During the summer, when things were a bit more plentiful, Faith often prepared larger meals for her working parents and siblings: "Fish was a common meal. We had this three or four times a week sometimes. But we also had stuff like pea soup, beans and lots of vegetables in the summer. It was stuff that took a long time to cook." As well, Faith conducted general daily cleaning such as sweeping, scrubbing floors and dusting. Twice a year, spring and fall cleaning was undertaken. This consisted of a thorough cleaning of the house which included scrubbing walls and windows and any other thing that was not normally done during the rest of the year.

Faith comments "Waste not, want not. Back then you didn't have anything to waste." According to her, things were not wasted and never taken for granted. There were rarely times when things were plentiful. In the summer, families relied on raising gardens and animals. Some of the food and animals were sold to the local store for necessities such as flour and sugar. During the winter, many families received social assistance and barely had enough food to eat. Clothing were home-made and passed on

from child to child as each outgrew an item. The same articles of clothing were worn in both summer and winter and many children, Faith and her siblings included, did not even have boots or coats to wear in the winter.

At that point, Town's Grove was still extremely isolated. A coastal boat visited the community once a week and this was the only way in or out of the area. Except for a "cow path" that connected Town's Grove with two other communities, there was little outside contact. Walking was the main form of transportation. Most families had a dory as a necessity for work and a select few had a horse which was used for farming. The nearest hospital was a week's travel by boat.

Although there were few services within Town's Grove, religion was a strong force within the community. There were two predominant religions: Roman Catholic and Anglican. According to Faith, there were often disagreements between the two groups. When her mother was younger, the two religions were not allowed to interact. A person was not permitted to befriend someone outside their religion and marriage was forbidden. Faith claims that this changed gradually during her youth. She had many Catholic friends and they would often attend church services together. Each church sponsored many fund-raisers and members of the community generally supported them all.

Faith states that there was little time for leisure. When they had the opportunity to play, they made their own fun and found their own toys: "We would play with old cans and stuff that people threw out. We would play in the 'cove' and have snail boils where

we would boil snails in old cans found on the beach. Our dolls would be long rocks and we would dress them up in bits of rag that Mom wasn't using." Faith states that even during their leisure, the children were homemakers: "We had clotheslines and would take clothes pins and soap from home to wash the rags and put them on the line."

Traditionally, physical punishment was a common form of discipline. According to Faith, she and her siblings often "got butt kicked, slapped in the head with a belt or a pair of hip rubbers or whatever was handy at the time." Generally, punishment was inflicted for disobedience towards parents or community members, acting out within the home or community or to teach a lesson. Faith indicates that discipline was most often administered by her father who also physically assaulted her mother: "There was a lot of wife-battering back then too."

Alcohol was a common socializer used by men within Town's Grove and Faith's father was "no stranger to the bottle." Men generally "worked hard and played hard" and women were sometimes on the receiving end of this "play." In contrast to Lisa, who links her father's drinking to alcoholism, Faith credits his drinking to stress. A combination of stress and alcohol can be a lethal one and Faith's father would often take out frustration on his wife and children: "Back then, things were hard. There was no money and you had a family to support and you're wondering how you're going to keep that family. I guess they would go out and get drunk enough so they wouldn't have to think about anything. It was their way of relieving their frustrations. It seems that most men did that." Faith states that if her father was in a bad mood or was drunk then either

her mother or the children or both would receive a beating. She remembers that "his moods could change at any time so we always had to be careful around him and we tried to avoid him."

### **Marriage**

In her mid teens, Faith met her future husband. They married when she sixteen and moved to his hometown where they lived with his parents. In a new place where she did not know anyone, she was an outsider. Her husband worked as an offshore fisherman and spent most of his time at sea leaving Faith at home with his parents. She could not do anything to please her mother-in-law who would often criticize and belittle her. According to Faith, her mother-in-law would create problems between her and her husband, often fabricating lies about her. Faith's father-in-law was the only one who treated her with respect and it was because of him that Faith coped.

After two years of marriage, Faith had her first baby. Two years later she had another child. By this time, she could no longer deal with the stress of living with her in-laws and convinced her husband to relocate to Town's Grove. They moved in with Faith's parents while they saved money and eventually built a house next door. By this time modernization had come to many Newfoundland rural communities. With the construction of roads, Town's Grove was no longer completely isolated. Electricity, running water, bathrooms and other luxuries became a reality. Vehicles slowly became the main form of transportation and telephones lines were installed. A year later Faith

and her family moved into their new home, complete with the latest comforts. Shortly after they had their third and final child.

Things appeared to settle down in Faith's life. When the children got older, Faith acquired a job working in the fish plant at a nearby community. While she worked long days and many nights in the cold, damp building splitting fish, her mother cared for her children when they were not in school. Financially, things were running smoothly.

As her parents got older, Faith took on more responsible caring for them. She paid their bills, ran errands, took them to the doctor when necessary and helped her mother care for her disabled son. Because her husband was absent most of the time, Faith acted as both mother and father to her children. In addition to working full time outside the home, she had responsibility for both household finances and maintenance.

Faith recalls that "[Assault] was common here." During her married life in Town's Grove, she witnessed many episodes of violence. Although she herself was not an assaulted woman, many in the community were and according to Faith, it was not hard to identify them:

you see certain things, you know. And you can tell by certain tones of people's voices, how they talk to each other, their reactions when they were around each other. You knew there was something going on. I grew up in a household like that, I knew the signs. There was one woman my age. Her husband used to smack her around whenever he felt like it, get drunk and come home. One Christmas he destroyed everything they had. Usually liquor was involved.

She continued to tell about another man who also beat his wife when he got drunk and to relate a story of a man in the community who repeatedly broke into a young married

woman's house and raped her. Her husband was out to sea working and was unaware of the assaults.

According to Faith, community members often made excuses for the violence. She claims they would explain it by stating "Oh well, he's on one of his rampages again" or "it's her life, let her deal with it." If anyone challenged the perpetrator, it was done privately. For example, Faith remembers that when the young woman's husband found out that his wife had been raped, he threatened the rapist. His wife was never assaulted again.

Many years of living a demanding and stressful life took its toll on Faith. Eventually, she decided to leave. Her two oldest children had previously moved away and her youngest was in the last year of high school. She eventually moved to the Mainland and made a new life for herself. She has reconnected with her family and visits Town's Grove whenever possible. Currently she is working outside the home and, after many years of struggle, she is happy.

## **Sara**

### **Childhood**

Unlike Lisa and Faith, Sara did not grow up in Town's Grove. Born in the 1960s, she grew up in a nearby community in a family that was considered middle class. Her father was a fisherman, who later worked as a highway construction worker, and her mother stayed home to care for their six children. Sara is the second oldest. Like Town's Grove,

Sara's home community was isolated. Electricity and bathrooms did not exist until just before she reached her teens. According to Sara, everyone was expected to help out in the family. She helped her mother care for the younger children and participated in household chores such as bringing in wood and coal, scrubbing mats and floors. Sara also assisted her father with the fishing. Besides helping to organize the fish for drying on the flakes, "we all helped Dad pull nets before we went to school in the morning." Family members did not go without food, clothing or any of the necessities of life yet "they were not so plentiful as to be taken for granted either."

When she was younger, leisure time activities consisted of spending time in the "landwash" (beach shores) and making up games to play with her friends. As she got older, she simply "hung out" with friends. Sara claims that when they could, they drank alcohol and smoked cigarettes they pilfered from their parents. The teenagers did this with care though, because Sara's parents were strict disciplinarians. She and her siblings were often hit for disobedience. Sara states that it was not unusual for her mother or father to use some form of object to hit them when they did something wrong. Just the same, Sara states that she "didn't lose respect for my parents because of the hitting. Back then it was okay."

Although Sara's parents physically disciplined her, they did not tolerate their children receiving severe beatings from educators. The "strap" was often used in schools to reprimand children and Sara received her share of its wrath. Sara relates a story of receiving a severe beating at school where her hands were badly blistered. She had

accidentally torn off the cover of one of her text books and the teacher strapped her for it. According to Sara, her father visited the teacher and complained about the treatment. From then on, being forced to stand in a corner for extended periods of time with books on her head was Sara's punishment for disrupting the class.

A higher level of education was strongly encouraged in Sara's family. At the age of sixteen, Sara left her hometown to attend the nearest high school. She was the first of her siblings to do so. Because there was no bussing system, Sara had to leave home to board near the school. Sara claims that this was difficult for her because she was a shy child. During grade ten Sara decided she no longer wanted to remain in school.

### **Marriage**

Sara met her husband when he was visiting her hometown. They dated for awhile and, at the age of seventeen, Sara married. They then moved in with her husband's parents at Town's Grove. Eventually, Sara and her husband got their own home. A year after her marriage, Sara had her first child. Like Joan, Sara had a very difficult first labour where she received a caesarean section. Her second child arrived shortly after and again Sara had surgery. It was six years after her second child before Sara had her third and final baby.

Over the years Sara settled into married life as mother and wife. Her husband worked at various jobs, primarily fishing. In the meantime, Sara made many friends and when she and her husband were not out enjoying themselves at a local club, they



entertained at home. According to Sara, "I believe in having a good time. I think that's what keeps my marriage fresh and exciting over the years."

Sara considers herself extremely open-minded and unprejudiced. Growing up in a strict household encouraged her to be more lenient with her children and other youth in the community. She acted as confidante for her children and many of the young people within the community. Generally, her various babysitters and their friends would spend their free time at Sara's house. Sara states that they felt comfortable talking with her about any problems they had. And she answered their questions and offered advice as honestly as she could. She also treated her own children similarly. Sara claims:

I didn't know about sex when I got married. I didn't know much of anything. But I do feel it's important to know these things. I was honest with my children. I told them what they needed to know and let them make their own decisions based on what they know. Then any mistakes are theirs and they can't say they didn't know.

Sara remembers many incidents of assault that occurred within the community during the approximately twenty years she lived there. She recounts occurrences of domestic violence, child sexual abuse and rape. Sara claims that some of these incidents even went to court. However, more commonly each time a shocking story leaked out, community members only whispered about it but "didn't act publicly." Most often, the perpetrator was not adequately punished, if charges were placed against him at all. Sara feels this was a crime in itself. She did not realize how strongly she felt about these issues of abuse that were not reported until she herself was assaulted.

A few years ago, a community member of Town's Grove, who had a reputation for violence, attempted to rape Sara in her home. Sara decided she was going to end the cycle of violence that this person had initiated and she reported the assault to police. The events that followed that night devastated Sara. Her expectations of the law and community members were not met. As will be discussed in chapter four, the assault resulted in Sara moving from her home of about twenty years to start a new life in a new community.

A few years have passed since Sara was attacked but she claims that the events remain fresh in her mind. She continues to try to make a new life for herself in her new surroundings. She eventually lost contact with most of her friends from Town's Grove. In fact, Sara states that she no longer desires contact with community members. The community support that Sara expected but did not receive still wounds her: "I didn't think I had a bad friend [in Town's Grove] and then I found out that my friends are scarce. It's something I don't think I'll ever get over."

## **Kirsten**

### **Childhood**

Kirsten, an outspoken and active woman, is Faith's youngest daughter. She was born in the 1970s and lived in Town's Grove until a few years ago. Although the settlement was still isolated, Kirsten had an easy childhood compared to her mother and grandmother. The youngest of two siblings, she had few domestic responsibilities.

Neither did she lack any of the necessities of life. Her father was an offshore fisherman who spent much of his time at sea. Her mother, as well as being a housewife, mother and caregiver to her parents, periodically worked at a nearby fishplant. Kirsten admits, "I can't say that I never had what I needed. I even had plenty of spending money. Mom would give me money for school and then more to spend after school."

According to Kirsten, she had a good childhood. She claims that her parents never hit her in the form of discipline: "I remember a lot of shouting when I did something wrong but I have no memory of being hit. I remember having a lot of temper tantrums and rolling around the floor because I couldn't get my own way. Mom would just leave me alone until I got over it. I had many, many temper tantrums." Kirsten was intimidated by her father. He was working most of the time and Kirsten claims that she never got the opportunity to adjust to his presence before he left for work again. According to Kirsten, her father would work for extended periods of time: "All it took from Dad was a slight rise in his voice and we [siblings] would run to our rooms."

Early in her teens, Kirsten became friends with next door neighbour Sara and spent much of her time there during the evenings and weekends. She became attached to Sara's youngest child and would often care for him. She would bring the child to her parent's house where she would feed, care for and entertain him. It was at Sara's that Kirsten learned household and childrearing responsibilities that she had neglected to learn at home.

During the nights, Kirsten would see her friends. She claims that there was little to do for entertainment within Town's Grove. Over the years, there were a few "hangouts" which consisted of a juke box, pool table, video/electronic games and pin ball. A few of these were also take-outs. This is where Kirsten and her friends spent some of their time: "When we weren't at the 'hangout' we mostly just walked the roads. Most of the time we just hung out by the 'store,' chatted, laughed, ate a lunch and then went home." Sometimes teenagers from other rural settings, who had vehicles, would visit the community. This is how Kirsten met her future husband.

### **Marriage**

Kirsten was sixteen when she met her husband. He lived in a nearby community and would visit Town's Grove quite often with friends. Like many of his peers, Kirsten's husband quit high school at an early age to fish with family members. When he was not fishing, he spent most of his time in Town's Grove with Kirsten. When she was in her teens and still in high school, Kirsten's parents separated and her mother moved out of the province. Kirsten continued to live with her father in Town's Grove and her future husband would visit. They were dating for numerous years when she got pregnant. By this time, Kirsten had completed high school and moved to an urban centre to obtain a post secondary education. A few months after, however, she moved back to Town's Grove. Shortly after she had her first baby. Two years after, Kirsten married the father

of her child and he moved to Town's Grove where they lived with Kirsten's father.

Three years later they had their second and final child.

### **Recent Years**

At the beginning of her marriage, Kirsten cared for the children and her father while her husband fished. She became financially responsible for her own family as well as for her father. She also took over the care for her elderly grandparents, a role that once belonged to her mother. Kirsten often drove her grandparents places, ran errands and performed other duties for them including helping to look after her disabled uncle.

Kirsten recalls numerous violent incidents within Town's Grove, mostly of which occurred during the early part of her marriage. She relates suspected episodes of child sexual abuse perpetrated by various young men within a particular family. However, she does not recall any incidents of domestic violence. The sexual assault of her friend Sara, helped her realize how violent the community had become during past years. Shortly after the assault, Kirsten and her family moved to her husband's hometown so that her partner would be closer to his work. Mostly it meant keeping her children safe:

"At least I know here my children are a bit safer, at least from the likes of him. I know there are many like him out there and I'm sure they are here as well. I also know I can't constantly protect my children, I can't constantly watch them, but I'm sure as hell going to try."

Descriptions of what is rural are usually more helpful when treated as models than as exact definitions. But, as indicated in this chapter, rural communities have distinct features that create particular lifestyles for their members. As revealed in the women's stories above, the life history of a person can tell much about their belief systems and worldviews. Although all five women interviewed grew up in rural Newfoundland at different times, their lives are similar. Commonalities are reflected in their personal experience narratives of the treatment of women in rural communities. Significant as well is the fact that four of the five women interviewed belong to one extended family. In the next chapter, I focus on the definitions of violence against women as offered by these five women and compare them with conceptions found in feminist literature.

### **CHAPTER THREE:**

#### **“WHAT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN MEANS TO ME”**

MacLeod once stated that “To be a battered woman is, by definition, to be isolated” (*Battered...* 22). This is particularly the case for rural women who not only face physical and mental isolation, but geographical separation as well. As Milne writes: “Rural women have very little opportunity for post-secondary education, retraining programs, and basic adult education” (6). Within Town’s Grove, women have few opportunities to obtain higher education. Thus, beliefs or worldviews are often based on personal experiences, or experiences of others within or around the community. As noted in the previous chapter, much information is circulated through local gossip. Many isolated communities, Town’s Grove included, do not have a local newspaper, local cable or any other form of media. Most people have satellite dishes that bring in programs originating from outside of Canada. However, the televised events, most of which take place in urban settings, are difficult to relate to daily life.

These factors mean that the definitions of violence against women that the women I interviewed offered are often noticeably less developed than that of many urban women. This does not mean, however, that these women’s definitions, as a whole, differ drastically from their urban counterparts, they simply portray a different lifestyle. In this

chapter I compare the definitions of assault as taken from current feminist literature with the views shared with me by the five women interviewed and discuss the importance of naming in defining violence against women

When originally undertaking this project, I had not given much consideration to the word I would use to define the situations these women found themselves in or witnessing. A dilemma arose when I tried to define this cultural concern and realized that all names given to the different forms of violence do not necessarily contain the same underlying meanings. I found for some people violence is defined quite differently from abuse, which is defined differently from assault. By naming these women's experiences as "assault" before the research began, I came to realize that I took for granted other names given to violence. Kelly would argue that in doing this I risked the "distortion and even exclusion of instances of violence, as it fails to take account of the complexity of how women define and understand their own experience(s)" ("How Women ..." 116). After completing my research, I decided to replace "assault" with "violence against women" because it better reflects the experiences of the women I interviewed. In this chapter, I refer to violence against women as sexual, physical and/or psychological violence. Against the backdrop of feminist literature, I provide definitions of violence, as told by the women interviewed.



## Definitions

### Violence Against Women

The origins of violence lie in the inequality of power between women and men. Sadly, this abuse of power continues to be directed at women, who are still the “weaker gender.” According to one researcher, violence is:

the intentional infliction of immediate and physical pain on another person or direct threat with a firearm or edged weapon. [Includes] ‘patriarchy’ to refer to gender relations characterized by explicit male dominance in all aspects of the household and family ... ‘instrumental violence,’ [which] refers to violence used as a patently coercive tool, to force another person to behave in a certain way ... and ‘affective violence’ ... [which] is to relive pent-up emotions or to express anger or anxieties not directly related to the victim (Peterson del Mar 5-6).

Websdale refers to the individual forms of violence. He describes physical violence which includes assaultive behaviors such as punching, kicking, choking and burning. Sexual battering includes forced sexual intercourse with violence or the threat of violence. Psychological battering refers to intimidation and threats of violence. It is the unidirectional flow of this emotional abuse and the duration of the abuse that distinguishes it from occasional acts of emotional abuse engaged in by partners in most cohabiting relationships (73). Hanmer also states that violence not only includes the actual violent acts, but also the threat of violence. She indicates that men control and dominate women economically as well. Men withhold money and/or prevent the woman from working outside the home. This leads to lack of money for food, clothing and other

household necessities.<sup>1</sup> Based on my studies, I found deprivation, which typically stems from psychological abuse, to be quite common. Women were sometimes denied, or prevented from caring for their own or their children's daily needs. They may be prevented from bathing, doing laundry, eating, or caring for children. I found many instances of deprivation in my research as I will explore in the next chapter.

### **Sexual Assault**

Minch and Gunn define sexual violence as "...any sexual act on a female against her will by means of physical force, intimidation, blackmail or authority" (x). One of my informants used the term "rape" to describe her experience of sexual violence. Rape was how she named the violence. In *No Safe Haven*, Koss refers to rape as:

non-consensual sexual penetration of an adolescent or adult obtained by physical force, by threat or bodily harm, as at such time when the victim is incapable of giving consent by virtue of mental illness, mental retardation, or intoxication. Sexual penetration includes 'sexual intercourse, cunnilingus, fellation, anal intercourse, or any other intrusion, however slight, of any part of a person's body, but emission of semen is not required. Social scientists have delineated several types of rape including stranger, acquaintance, date and marital rape. However, the essential meaning of the word rape is unaffected by the relationship of the parties (159).

Price and Sokoloff expand on this definition:

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<sup>1</sup>I have chosen not to expand on economic abuse in this thesis because most of the women I interviewed lived in a community/household where poverty was the norm. Lack of food and clothing were common simply because of the lack of employment or insufficient pay for employment. However, I recognize that economic power is certainly an important aspect of abuse in many households.

Rape and related sexual assaults are acts of violence in which desires for power (to dominate, subordinate, control) and feelings of hostility (contempt, anger) are vented on the victims, transforming them from persons into objects, and often plunging them into a 'rape crisis syndrome'(188).

As well as being "designed to control, dominate and express authority and power [over women]" (Hanmer 8), sexual violence/rape "... enforces a restricted lifestyle on *all* women. The ever-conscious threat of an attack limits the behavior and activities of females throughout their lives" (Minch/Gunn vii).

### **Violence Against Women in the Home**

Violence against women in the home has historically been referred to as physical violence. Current research shows that sexual and psychological abuse are just as effective a hegemonic tool as physical abuse. Feminists continue to struggle to find an adequate name to effectively describe the full spectrum of violence against women in the home. It has been referred to as wife battery, wife abuse, woman abuse, marital violence and domestic violence. Although the names given to violence have constantly changed over time, the acts of violence remain similar.

Violence against women in the home can be best defined in action oriented or behavioral and verbal terms:

Wife abuse is not just slapping or shoving – it is described as punching with fists, choking, kicking, knifing, slamming the victim against the wall, throwing her to the floor, or shoving her down the stairs. Beatings can last anywhere from a few minutes to over an hour. Threats of violence – punching holes in the wall, breaking down doors, and wielding a gun – can be as frightening and intimidating as actual physical attack (Price et al 264).

Based on a study conducted by transition-house workers across Canada, domestic violence is:

the loss of dignity, control, and safety as well as the feeling of powerlessness and entrapment experienced by women who are the direct victims of **ongoing or repeated** physical, psychological, economic, sexual and/or verbal violence or who are subjected to **persistent** threats or the witnessing of such violence against their children, other relatives friends, pets and/or cherished possessions, by their boyfriends, husbands, live-in-lovers, whether male or female. The term ... will also be understood to encompass the ramifications of the violence for the woman, her children, her friends and relatives, and for society as a whole (MacLeod, *Battered* ... 16).

Feminists have accomplished a great deal in making people more aware of domestic violence. Since the 1970s, the feminist movement has helped many women realize that abuse extends beyond hitting or slapping by their partners. Sexual acts engaged in against one's will are rape and verbal insults are psychological abuse.

### **Psychological Violence**

Psychological violence often acts as an early warning sign of the physical and/or sexual abuse to come. Hanmer states that it is the "humiliation [that] is an important strategy in obedience training" (9). Many women describe this form of abuse as the worst because of its lasting effects. They state that physical scars often heal on their own while the mental scars often do not. DeKeseredy and Hinch use Straus et al's definition of psychological abuse as:

[any act] intended to cause psychological pain to another person, or a communication perceived as having that intent. The communicative act may be active or passive, and verbal or non-verbal. Examples include name

calling or nasty remarks (active, verbal), slamming a door or smashing something (active, non-verbal), and stony silence or sulking (passive, non-verbal) (13).

Isolation is one of the more powerful forms of psychological abuse. The abuser often intentionally removes the woman from any opportunity to seek sources of help, including family and friends, by threatening their safety. He may monitor phone calls, withhold transportation and limit the amount of money she is allowed. He may threaten the children with abuse and discredit her in the eyes of the community and law. In rural communities, women victims of violence face the added obstacle of geographical isolation. Even if a battered woman leaves the household, she may be faced with living in the same small community. Therefore, in rural locations, women often are unable to escape their abusive partners, even when they want to.

### **The Women's Definitions**

In the previous chapter, I looked at definitions of rural and explored how growing up in a rural community is different from living in an urban centre. There are limited services. While shopping centres are few, women's shelters do not exist at all. Therefore as MacLeod notes, rural women may be disadvantaged compared to urban residents when it comes to knowledge about violence against women and available services to combat it: "battered women who live in rural areas need more basic information on wife battering and their options than do battered women living in urban centres" (*Battered ...* 22). When I asked the five women I interviewed for their

definitions, they responded generally. They described all forms of violence without actually naming them, giving examples of what they felt physical, sexual, verbal and psychological violence is based on their experiences.

According to Faith, violence is “when you do something to another person that’s going to cause harm, one way or another, either mentally or physically. If a person says no and gets beaten or if they’re forced to do something, that’s assault.” Lisa expands: “Assault is another person abusing, hitting, pounding, doing what shouldn’t be done to a child or to another adult.” She emotionally and powerfully adds: “Assault is just not right. And I don’t think another human being has the right to beat and pound someone else.” Kirsten separates the degrees of assault and strongly suggests that it “works” both ways. Women, she states, also assault men: “I know of a woman who hit her husband... and sexual assault is where, um, a guy, or for that sake, a girl, forces a guy to do something [sexual] he doesn’t want to do.” Kirsten’s description reflects some of the experiences of the women detailed in this thesis who experienced violence at the hands of female as well as male members of the family. She concludes that assault is “words that do damage.” Although the other women noted that there are different degrees of assault, only Kirsten declared that it is not just a woman’s problem. Sara defines violence more in physical terms. She states that: “physical assault would be, to me, if [husband] put his hand to strike me and sexual assault would be if he forced me into having sex that I didn’t want to have.” She continued to say that it is caused by an imbalance of power: “the man thinks he’s got more power over the woman and we’re left powerless.”

All women interviewed share the same general idea of what violence against women entailed. They all agree that it was wrong and that little action, both socially and legally, had been taken to end it in their home community. Although all the women refer to physical violence, indicating it to be the most common type of abuse, only Faith and Kirsten directly detail all three levels of violence, namely physical, sexual and psychological. Only Lisa directly mentions the abuse of children. This may be explained by the fact that Lisa had been raped at a young age. Interestingly enough when offering their definitions, the women shift to the third person. Only Sara talks about violence in the first person, illustrating her definition with personal examples. When talking about power imbalances, she brings in the example of a close relative and referred to some of the injuries suffered as indicative of physical abuse.

As is frequently argued within feminist literature (e.g., see MacLeod) all women agreed that control was the main reason behind the violence. Lisa feels that patriarchy plays a large role in this control:

I feel that they [men] need to be in control of another human being. They feel that they're more powerful and if they're not in control and powerful, then I think they feel that there's something wrong with them. Probably because they were controlled all their lives [by their fathers].

Sara reinforces this idea: "the man thinks [because] he's the breadwinner, he's got more power over the woman. And we're left powerless." After generations of men exerting legal as well as social and cultural power over their wives, it is not surprising that women became powerless in these respects. Carolyn Strange in her article "Historical

Perspectives on Wife Assault” states: “the civil and the criminal law upheld the deeply patriarchal character of marriage, both by granting husbands enormous latitude in exercising their power, and by severely limiting married women’s ability to extricate themselves from violent partners” (296).

All except Lisa indicate that television played a large role in enforcing this idea of power that leads to violence. According to Sara, “I think it’s TV. They [men] see it on movies and stories – husbands beating their wives or husbands having sex with other partners saying no.” The National Research Council’s findings reinforce Sara’s views that many television depictions of violence send the message that violence works. According to the National Research Council, television and movies often portrayed women as victims who were being “threatened, raped, beaten, tortured, and murdered ...” (64) and these scenes may cause viewers to become desensitized over time. As well, “television shows virtually no consequences of violent behavior, victims are not harmed and offenders are not punished” (64). Joan claims that violence is rampant today because “Youngsters see so much on television.” She continues: “That’s the reason why. There was no television, there was no radio, there was no nothing when we were growing up. We didn’t know what a television was.” It is interesting to note here that feminist theory praises the media because it has helped bring awareness of violence into people’s homes, while the majority of the women I interviewed believe the media is the cause of violence. Of course, it is the depictions and contexts in which the violence is presented that determines these views. While feminists praise documentaries on violence against



women as programs intended to inform, the women I interviewed referred to fictitiously violent stories or movies that entertain.

Both Lisa and Kirsten indicate that violence against women is intergenerational; it is a way of life that can teach both males and females to resort to abusive behaviour. It is considered normal because it happened to the abused woman's mother and her grandmother and other female relatives. According to Lisa:

I feel that it stems from way back, not just my generation, but my grandparents and my grandparents before that. I think that's all they knew. I think it was their way of life and I feel that they really didn't know any better. They were abused so they abused their children. And it was just one vicious circle handed down and handed down and handed down and to me I think that these people are very, very sick people.

Lisa's opinions support MacLeod's research that children who grow up in violent homes where they witnessed or were victims of violence were "socialized to accept violence as normal, appropriate or inevitable behaviour in a marriage" and that often children of violent homes accumulated criminal records (*Wife Battering* ... 24). MacLeod warns, though, of accepting this theory as the sole reason for family violence for "Our lessons about the acceptability of violence run deep and have many channels" (*Wife Battering* ... 25).

Of all five women interviewed, only two were aware of the feminist movement and its impact on violence against women. Lisa and Faith, who both currently live in urban centres, became aware of the movement after leaving Town's Grove. While watching television, Lisa recalled the sexual assault she had experienced as a young girl but had repressed. It was then she discovered the women's movement. The feminist

literature she read helped her cope with her experience of violence. Faith heard of the feminist movement while still residing in her home community of Town's Grove but was unaware of what it entailed. It was only upon leaving the community many years later that she had the opportunity to increase her awareness. At that time, Faith had full access to cable television where she watched programs that enhanced her understanding of the issues surrounding violence against women. Reading further increased her knowledge. I asked Faith if she felt the feminist movement had affected Town's Grove and she replied: "No, not even today. Women there today probably still don't know what it is". When I questioned Kirsten, the youngest woman interviewed, about what she felt the feminist movement is, she replied "the what?"

Of all women interviewed Joan, the eldest, was the one who offered the least in regards to both the feminist movement and her views on violence against women. She states simply: "there was never any violence around here." Joan claims not to have any knowledge of assault and declared that violent situations did not arise when she was a child and especially not when she was a married woman. Violence only exists today, she argues, because of the influence of television. When I asked for a definition of violence, she simply stated "I don't know." After I gave some examples, Joan agreed that they were violent incidents but maintained that such behaviours did not exist in her home or community.

On the other hand, according to Joan's daughter, Faith, violence did occur: "My Mom, she got beat. There was times my Dad would go on a drinking spree, come home

polluted, beat up on her, beat up on us kids, for no good reason. Just because he felt like it, I guess.” Why did Joan respond differently? There are a number of possible reasons why Joan claimed not to have experienced or witnessed violence. The following suggestions are in no particular order of importance and arise from my observations and conversations with the women. As noted above, historically women were considered men’s property. Joan’s comments may reflect her generational position. Second, Joan may have wanted to protect her dead husband’s reputation. The combination of respect for the father of her children, even after death, and the belief that it is taboo to say bad things about the dead, may prevent Joan from disclosing.

On the flip side of this theory, it is possible that Joan did not want to talk about her husband/assaulter because it would continue to give him power over her. Lawless confirms this notion: “to name the evil, the violence, the abuser, is to continue to give it/him continued power in and over their lives...” (“Transformative Re-membering ...” 72). And, it is possible Joan is in a state of denial. In “Survivors of Terror,” Graham et. al state that “denial is used to get through an ordeal” and there are several techniques that battered women use. They include:

the assumption that the batterer is a good man whose actions stem from problems that she can help him solve; denial that the batterer is responsible for the abuse, which instead is attributed to external forces; denial that the abuse ever occurred; belief that she is the instigator of the abuse and thus deserves the punishment; denial that she would be able to survive without the batterer’s support (emotional and/or practical); and belief that marriage and/or following the beliefs of her religion, which may tell her to obey her husband, are more important than her health (Yllö 224).

It would seem possible then, that Joan may have repressed the violence and prefers to forget it.

Silence is also a coping mechanism as we will see in Chapter five. According to Faith, and the other women I interviewed, domestic violence did take place within the community so chances are Joan knew of other abused women. It is also possible that these women were in a worse situation than Joan was and she felt that her assaults were minor and therefore not worth mentioning. Hester et al write "... As women we tend, and indeed are systematically encouraged, to minimize the violence that we experience from men" (19).

Joan may feel she has to keep violence within the home. Joan knew that it was wrong and that it was "untellable" as is elaborated in Chapter five. Lawless writes of women not knowing how to tell: "...failure of language in describing that which cannot be de-scribed..." (Lawless 71). And they may be trained not to tell as Faith recalls: "...we were told to mind our own business and look the other way." As Lawless argues, battered women lose voice in their pain: "... she cannot speak what has happened to her; she is unable to find words to re-present that moment... because - we must acknowledge - to re-present the moment creates it anew for her and she must relive it: memory becomes reality, the past emerges and converges with the present" ("Transformative Remembering..." 71-72).

Finally, when Joan experienced violence at the hands of her stepfather, stepmother and finally her husband, she may not have considered it assault. According to

Faith, violence, especially domestic violence, was so common in Town's Grove that maybe Joan did not feel her husband's beatings were abusive. Collins states that "Because hegemonic ideologies make everyday violence against ... women appear so routine, some women perceive neither themselves nor those around them as victims" (159). It is also possible that Joan may have believed that because family, not strangers, perpetrated the acts, they were not violent. She may have more commonly associated violence with strangers.

Feminist writers, like Kelly, suggest that Joan may be expressing repression, denial or minimization, all of which are common reactions to the kind of abuse she suffered. Graham, et. al relate in "Survivors of Terror," that women become attached to their abusers and most do not leave because of the "Stockholm Syndrome" (219). He states that there are four stages of victimization identified with prolonged contact with an abuser. For its relevance within this chapter, I will refer to stage two, which is known as "traumatic psychological infantilism" which causes a person to become attached to their abuser. The woman becomes aware that the abuser has the power to kill her but because he has chosen to let her live, the abuser eventually becomes seen as the "good guy." This is "pathological transference." The victim internalizes and freezes her reactions and feelings which produces a "constipated rage." While in the abusive situation, this "rage" becomes a coping mechanism. However, even when physically free of the abuse, the psychological hold remains and women often continue to remain silent for fear of retribution (220). While impossible to know for sure if any of these dynamics are

behind Joan's silence, this "untellable" kaleidoscope reveals the problems some victims face in naming and defining violence.

### **Naming the Violence**

Liz Kelly summarizes Joan's experience when she states "what is not named is invisible and, in a social sense, nonexistent" ("How Women ..." 114). Joan states that she, and many children before and after her generation, were taught not to talk about things like maturation, menstruation, childbirth and sex. By remaining silent they "went away." Joan continues "it [sex] just wasn't talked about, you just did it and that was it. There were too many other things to do in the run of a day than to sit down and talk about that with your kids. Nobody did it, it just wasn't right."

Joan may forget the past to help her deal with the present. As Kelly states: "Women's understandings of what happened to them often change over time" ("How Women ..." 128). Lawless insists that there is more to it than that. She says that we have to listen to what women do not say in order to understand what they are expressing:

In fact, to ask them to go back and to fill in the gaps may be to ask them something they are not able to do. Respecting the gaps and ruptures and learning how to peer through them where they bleed into the narrative event but away from recognized language is, instead, our task ("Transformative Re-membering ..." 68).

As Joan's experience indicates, one problem many women have in trying to deal with violence is deciding what it really is. Only then can it be named and defined. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, I had not realized the problem of naming violence. I

was unaware that certain names would be foreign to the women interviewed, as was the case with Joan, or that some terms were used to refer only to certain forms of violence. As my research continued, I felt it was necessary to look at how the women named the violence in their lives and what those names, or lack of them, mean.

How does one define violence against women to include all it represents? The question is still an important one in feminist literature. The study of violence against women has evolved over the last decades yet it continues to seek an all encompassing term for violence that would apply to all women and all situations. If feminists have been unable to adequately define violence then it is no wonder that abused women also have difficulty. The women of Town's Grove can only define their experiences of violence based on what they observe and/or learn in the home and in the community. Geographical isolation only further limits their definitions and opportunities. Although abused rural women face similar problems to those in urban settings, the fact remains that their lifestyles are different. It is these differences that lead them to turn to other ways of dealing with violence. In the next chapter, I look toward formal coping mechanisms open to women victims of violence.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### COMMUNITY SUPPORTS FOR COPING WITH VIOLENCE

With the gains of the feminist movement in the 1970s, formal strategies for coping with violence were made available to women. In practice, this availability did not always reach victims in rural communities. In a study conducted in 1981 by Dobash, Dobash and Cavanagh, it was found that women "usually have little knowledge about social agencies and many have negative conceptions about such agencies that lead to a reluctance to make and/or sustain contact" (Pahl 47). Kelly, who defined coping as "the actions taken to avoid or control distress," states that "Women's coping responses are active, constructive adaptations to experiences of abuse. The responses of any particular woman will depend on how she defines her experiences, the context within which it occurs and the resources which are available to her at the time and subsequently" (*Surviving ...* 160). Due to the lack of resources in rural settings, abused women there often respond differently than urbanites.

In this chapter, I look at formal services available to women in Town's Grove, primarily the church and judicial system and examine the women's responses to these options as effective means of coping with violence against women in rural Newfoundland. Because no doctor or clinic was located in my study community, and



thereby did not play a direct role in the community life of Town's Grove, I will not discuss the medical system as an option. According to Faith, women often did not visit the local doctor or clinic for non-medical reasons. This was due to the substantial distance to the clinic and the fact that women generally had no form of transportation outside of walking or being taken by their husbands.

### **Formal Coping Methods**

#### **The Church**

Traditionally, the church was a powerful force that played a large and meaningful role in the lives of Newfoundlanders. In addition to offering spiritual guidance, the church acted as an important form of social control. It also provided needed social opportunities. As well as attending religious services and meetings, church members organized activities that benefitted the church, often through fund-raising. In the small community of Town's Grove, there were two predominant religions. The community was evenly split between the Anglican and Roman Catholic parishes and competition often ran high between the two. There were common links however. As Milne writes, "the patriarchal attitude of the church often perpetuates the violence, and makes women feel responsible" (9). In Town's Grove church doctrines reinforced the idea of patriarchy within the community and clergy sometimes blamed women for the abuse that they endured. Koss notes that this is not unusual: "many clergy, in their counseling capacities, subtly reinforced traditional attitudes that create and foster abuse between

intimate partners" (*No Safe ...* 102). Given these attitudes, women often did not contact their local religious leaders for help and/or counseling with problems like abuse. In his study, Bowker confirms that clergy are often the last source of contact for battered women (94).

In Newfoundland during the time the women I interviewed were growing up, women's problems were silenced. They were often uncomfortable talking to male authority figures like the clergy about "womanly" problems. Added to their discomfort was the problem of accessibility. They did not always have the opportunity to seek the help of a minister or priest. The local minister resided in a nearby community and visited Town's Grove once a week for church services. Visitation was part of his responsibilities but because he serviced three other communities as well as Town's Grove, he was often unable to visit parishioners outside of the sick or elderly.

When I asked the women I interviewed if the church was a source of counseling for abused rural women, Lisa informed me that when she was raped as a young girl in the 1940s, the church "was not an option back then; actually it was not even considered." Lisa continued, "it [rape] was a thing that was hidden. You didn't talk about it, you didn't bring it out in the open. Everything was kind of hidden in the closet." Faith echoes, "The church didn't want to deal with it anyway." Even though Faith admits that domestic violence was a common and accepted occurrence within the community, "It wasn't ever brought up in a situation where you would sit down and talk about it. Not like today."

Faith's comments support the findings of studies done elsewhere. For example, researchers found that clergy would often recommend the victim "try to be a better wife" or to be "more considerate of him" and "obey him" (Alsdurf and Alsdurf 21). Because the church sanctioned the unity of family above all else women were encouraged to return home and keep the family together. Folklorist Marjorie Bard states:

Abused women are so often told by ministers, elders, priests, rabbis and other religious leaders that it is their religious duty to stay with their husbands no matter how bad the situation. The church, perhaps more than any other institution, is responsible for forcing the *woman* to 'keep the family together.' She can go to counseling if she likes, but the duty appears to be hers alone (59).

According to the women in my study, instead of receiving counseling, encouragement or even sympathy from church leaders, women could be further pushed into submissive roles. In seeking the counsel of a clergy member, a victim risked receiving more verbal abuse, this time from a community authority figure rather than her husband. As a result, women experiencing violence in Town's Grove shied away from the church. Another option was to turn to the law.

### **Criminal Justice System**

The feminist movement has lobbied and succeeded in changing some laws to benefit women. However, the Canadian justice system has not always been the best source of intervention or prevention for violence against women. It takes a significant amount of time to implement new laws and rural women sometimes face added obstacles in law enforcement. When I spoke to Sara, she responded strongly: "When it comes to

sexual assault, wife beating or any physical violence, our justice system stinks.”

### **Sara's Story**

On Christmas Eve a few years ago, Sara was unsuspectingly waiting for a girlfriend to arrive. Her husband had gone with his friends visiting, as is their holiday tradition in Town's Grove. According to Sara, she had the lights turned off in her home and was lying on her couch in her living room, watching a movie on television. Between 10:30pm and 10:45pm, the front door opened. Sara's back was to the entrance so she heard, but did not see someone enter. She thought this was her girlfriend until the movie went into a commercial break. At that point she realized the other person in the room was Glen, a locally known trouble maker within Town's Grove who had committed crimes against his family and community in the past.

In a normal tone of voice, Glen asked Sara if her husband was home. Sara remembers: “ [I] jumped and grabbed myself and said ‘Jesus, what are you trying to do, give me a heart attack?’” Glen again asked if her husband was home and Sara told him “no, you should have passed him or met him. He hasn't been gone very long. You hurry now and you might be able to catch him.” Glen asked: “So, you wants me to leave?” Sara told him to leave but that he could return when her husband was at home. Glen ignored this statement and continued to make small talk. Eventually, he moved to the couch where Sara was sitting and said: “give me a hug.” Sara refused and again told him to leave. He then said “you're my woman” to which Sara disagreed and for the third time

told him to go. He repeatedly asked for a hug and Sara, at this point extremely frightened, jumped up from the couch. Glen, who had also risen, then pushed her down on the couch and jumped on top of her. According to Sara "his hands were all over me, trying, tearing at my clothes." She screamed out to her young son, who was upstairs in his bed asleep, but did not get a response. Shortly after, Sara managed to get her hands, which had been pinned between Glen and herself, free. She tore at his face, grabbed his glasses and threw them across the room. Finally, by giving him a kick and a hard punch to the face, they both rolled onto the floor. Sara was then able to stumble to the kitchen where she phoned for help. Just before Glen rushed out of the house, he repeated "What have I done? What have I done?" Sara looked him straight in the eye and with all the courage she could muster, she responded: "You'll know what you done when I get through with you, because this ain't gonna stop right here, right now, because I'm gonna call the RCMP." Glen left and shortly after her next door neighbour, Kirsten, who Sara had also called, ran in the door. According to Sara: "she [Kirsten] had a knife with her 'cause she knew what a reputation he [Glen] had." Kirsten proceeded to try to comfort Sara and find out exactly what had happened. After hearing Sara's story, Kirsten reassured her that "He's gone now." Little did they both know that Sara's nightmare had only begun.

### **The Police Officer**

Sara claims: "And I had a hard time with them [RCMP] too." After making two

phone calls, one to her husband, the other to her next door neighbour and friend, Kirsten. Sara's house was filled with family and friends. Her brother, Carl, who had been out with Sara's husband, called the nearest police station about an hour's drive away only to be connected to an RCMP station at a distance of about three hours. Sara's brother informed the dispatcher that he wanted to report an attempted rape and was told that no officer was available in the closest station. After Carl demanded that they "get someone on call," the dispatcher told him that he would see what he could do. According to Sara, "With all of them there, [about seven family and friends] I still wanted to know the cops were there too. That they were gonna come down and take him away. Give me peace of mind. That didn't happen."

When a police officer finally returned her call, his first questions were: "Was Glen drinking? And, were you drinking?" Sara, who was becoming more agitated, answered "no, and what does that have to do with it?" When Sara said that her Christmas was ruined, the police officer responded: "What about Glen's Christmas?" Sara could not believe what she had heard and what was happening. She explains what happened next:

[The RCMP officer] said: 'Well, do you really need me to come down? You got all that support there, you don't need us.' I said: 'I want you down here tonight. I want to press charges now.' The cop asked where Glen was and I said: 'Probably home fast asleep.' I said, 'I'm not going to get any sleep tonight.' 'I'll come down tomorrow,' he said.

Sara's husband decided he had heard enough. He took the phone from Sara and threatened to take care of the situation himself. According to Sara, her husband

demanded, "You come down now! I'll give you an hour. You be down here or else I'm gonna take care of Glen myself." Sara continued, "Do you know what he [The RCMP officer] said to my husband? 'If you go over and touch Glen, I'll be down to arrest you.' Now, here was Carl, trying to defend me! It was okay for Glen to come into my home, with no lights on, attack me and then go home and sleep. But if Carl went over to Glen's to pick up and defend me, his wife, then they would come down and actually lock him up. Yeah, there is definitely something wrong. Definitely something wrong."

According to Sara, her husband calmed down and asked the police officer to "put yourself in my shoes." At that point the officer replied that "we'll handle it." Within an hour he was at Sara's house taking her statement. He then returned home. Sara sarcastically remarked: "Now, he handled it alright." The police officer did not approach Glen to record his statement until two nights later on Boxing Day. At that point, Sara says that he warned Glen to "not come within thirty feet of me and no drinking until his court was over." Sara moved out of the community in February of that same year.

The RCMP officer's response to Sara's assault shows that the church is not the only source of patriarchy: men and male values also are a force in the judicial system. In fact, according to MacLeod, the law "significantly limits the options open to women who have been battered, because ... the attitudes underlying such behaviour have not been legislated out of existence" (*Wife Battering* ... 47). Because the police are the law enforcement, they decide if a crime has been committed and whether or not it will be taken further legally. Although it is now law that an officer press charges after an assault,

flexibility is still shown in rural communities. According to MacLeod police officers are “usually left to their own discretion” (*Wife Battering ...* 38) when handling assaults against women. This is unfortunate considering the attitudes that some police officers still embrace. The RCMP officer, in Sara’s case, expressed patriarchal attitudes towards sexual assault. First, he refused to drive to Town’s Grove to take her statement: he indicated that he did not feel her assault important or urgent enough to necessitate the trip. Sara was upset and felt cheated by this reaction. As Dunhill writes, “Women need a swift response when they call out the police in an emergency and they need them to take effective action against the violent man” (23). Second, he responded inappropriately by sympathizing with her perpetrator; the officer appeared more concerned about Glen than he did Sara. MacLeod states that “the way they [police] ‘cool the situation out’ is frequently to side with the man and so to reinforce the woman’s feelings of isolation and helplessness” (*Wife Battering ...* 38). This is particularly damaging for according to Madigan and Gamble, a woman who has just experienced an assault is extremely sensitive to the attitudes she perceives in those around her and a negative response from the police can discourage her from pressing charges: “This time period is critical, and it is unfortunate that a sex crime investigator may not arrive to interview the woman until twelve to forty-eight hours later. By this time the woman’s self esteem has been destroyed” (72). Sara’s story shows the extent to which male law enforcement officers can exert power over women: the actions of both the RCMP officer and the perpetrator forced her to feel she had no choice but to leave her home



Progress has been made toward changing patriarchal attitudes and actions. Many police officers are being especially trained to deal with violence against women. However, this process is slow. According to Dunhill, it still seems that the police quite simply do not take violence against women in the home seriously enough (26).

### **The Lawyer**

The days and weeks that followed were stressful and confusing for Sara. She thought that she was doing the right thing by pressing charges. She believed that she was protecting other women in the community. She felt that she had the law on her side and she expected the support of community members, especially those who had also been assaulted by this man. She was wrong.

The wheels of justice turned slowly and after many court postponements, Sara finally felt that justice was going to be served. That was not to happen. According to Sara, the first time they went to court, Glen "didn't enter a plea because he didn't have a lawyer." Another court date was set. He "got a lawyer and he pleads not guilty." Sara was upset by the plea. However, she was shocked when she learned Glen's lawyer was same woman she herself contacted earlier and with whom she had discussed her case.

When Sara learned of the original court date, which was scheduled six months after the assault, she contacted a lawyer in the nearest urban centre to seek professional advice: "I called just in case he pleaded not guilty and I wanted somebody to be there for me, to speak for me." Sara talked at length with a female lawyer: "I was talking to her

and described and told her what happened and who done it. And she said to talk to the prosecutor and if he tells you you need a lawyer, then phone me back. I never called her back because when I went to court the next time, before I could talk to the prosecutor, she was representing him. And I felt like a bloody fool.” Sara felt disadvantaged by her discussion with this lawyer. The lawyer told her that she probably would not need legal counsel but then ended up representing the perpetrator.

Like the police, church and other formal help services, male attitudes also dominate the legal profession. According to Buzawa and Buzawa:

The prosecutors, while clearly sworn to uphold laws, have expressly been given the powers to use their discretion in enforcement. In cases where the particular prosecutor does not happen to share the value judgements embodied in a statute, it is relatively simple for him or her to use discretion and merely not charge an offender or fail to take a victim's requested action (110).

Although the lawyer Sara contacted was female, she did not sympathize with Sara or her situation. In fact, Sara felt betrayed when the lawyer she spoke with later represented her perpetrator. As she said, she felt “like a bloody fool.”

### **The Judge**

Sara's encounters with the RCMP officer and the lawyer made her leery about her choice to press charges. Not only did she feel sexually violated and forced to move from Town's Grove, her experiences actually made her feel that she was the perpetrator. Her court appearance reinforced these feelings. The judge, who held court in a community near Town's Grove, was disbelieving. According to Sara: “It's like they don't believe

you. The Judge said: 'You only hear about that [sexual assault] in St. John's or Corner Brook or places like that.'" Sara believes that contraband and narcotics are the major interest of law enforcement in Town's Grove and surrounding areas: "I've been in court enough now that I find he [judge] comes down on those two things a lot harder than he came down on sexual assault or physical abuse. It's unreal. And the cops, they're just as bad."

Finally, seven months after the incident and a number of rescheduled court appearances, Glen pleaded guilty to the sexual assault. Sara declared: "When he pleaded guilty, I said: 'you dirty bastard.' I was as bad that day as the day after it happened. You know, Christmas Day I don't remember nothing. I'm ashamed to say that."

The final court date took place a month later. The sentencing was scheduled the following month. In the meantime, Glen was free. When the sentencing date finally arrived, Sara was frustrated with the results. However, she was not surprised when Glen was sentenced to only six months in jail. He was released after about three months and then placed on probation. Glen was informed that he was not to speak to or go within fifty feet of Sara and if he saw her walking towards him, he was to turn the other way. Sara sarcastically remarks: "Yep, justice has been served!" Buzawa and Buzawa emphasizes the judge's authority: "They have the ability to refuse to enforce the statute, and the rights of a victim to contest the actions of a criminal court are virtually non-existent" (110).

Sara felt let down with the final outcome of the legal proceedings. She

considered her perpetrator's punishment to be a light sentence. Madigan and Gamble write that during legal proceedings "the survivor often experiences it as a second rape because she views it as a betrayal" (98). Although Sara experienced personal and legal difficulty in her decision to press charges against her assaulter, she was glad that the case did make it to court and her perpetrator was punished, albeit lightly. In fact, she felt a sense of accomplishment for following through with her decision to press charges against her assaulter. Sara states,

The first case I ever heard of sexual assault being taken anywhere [within Town's Grove and surrounding communities] was mine. I never heard of anybody taking anybody to court. I heard of a story of a man crawling into a neighbour's window and raping her and today they're the best of friends. I can't deal with it that way, see. I don't think I'll ever be friends with him. And I don't think I'll ever get over the fact that he came into my home and tried to rape me.

As Sara's comments suggest, typically abused women fear the justice system because it often neglects their needs for the good of the overall community. Gunn and Minch explain that women often do not report assaults:

The low number of reported assaults conceals the actual nature of the offence on both a personal and institutional level. A vicious circle emerges whereby the stereotypes of 'legitimate' victims and assaults are upheld by society and the legal system. The victim responds in kind by experiencing shame, guilt and fear, and this response limits use of the legal system as a means of justice for the offence committed (21).

Benedict supports this theory: "in court, as has long been known, the system is more concerned with protecting men from false accusation than with convicting rapists or protecting victims from further humiliation" (5).

Although feminists have succeeded in making positive changes to the legal system, Sara's personal experience narrative clearly reveals there remain many problems. With little support from the church, law enforcement and the legal system, women like Sara feel alone. As Koss comments, "It is not surprising that abused women still experience difficulty interpreting the meanings of their assaults and deciding on a course of action, given the fact that society has traditionally offered more protection to the perpetrators than to the victims" (*No Safe ...* 102). However, in rural communities like Town's Grove, women may feel added pressure when community members and so called friends are unsupportive. Following her assault, Sara sometimes was left to wonder who her friends were.

### Community Support

Throughout all that she endured, Sara's pain was deepened when the community support she expected did not materialize:

I really felt alone. I didn't get any support whatsoever, only my friends. The rest of them, as far as I'm concerned, they're just as bad as Glen. I was willing to go to court, turn him in for the sick person he is and he has done just as much, if not more, to other people and they're just not saying. I thought this would be the time. I said to Carl 'I think I'm gonna do something. I AM gonna do something about it. He's not getting off with it cause next thing it could be our granddaughter or somebody else's little girl.' And I thought once I went to court I was going to have all the support of that community, people would actually come out and say 'you're not alone.' To come into my home and see the shape I was in then, they might have changed their minds about telling what happened [to them]. It kills me, it do!

Sara was devastated when she realized that aside from family and friends she was

basically alone in her decision to press charges. Although Sara felt she was helping other women by attempting to prevent future assaults by this man, other victims acted as if past assaults, hers included, did not occur. In fact, their reactions indicated to Sara that they felt she was to blame for the attack. In a study conducted in 1996, the Community Services Council of Newfoundland and Labrador found this silence is not an uncommon reaction: "They are not supported by their family or by the community. In sharp contrast, offenders are supported not only by their families, but often by the wider community. Families and communities deny that there is a problem, that anything is wrong" (*It's Hard ...* 8). Benedict elaborates on the repercussions community responses can have for the victim: "the greatest injustice of all is that almost everyone sees a victim as less than human. The unsympathetic consider her contaminated and whorish, the sympathetic see her as neurotic, crippled, or at least pitiful. Everyone, on some level, is ashamed for her. she is thought of as a failure" (5).

Family dynamics was one reason Sara felt that she was not supported by community members. Her perpetrator was born and raised in Town's Grove. His family made up a large part of its members and, as happened many times in the past, these members chose to ignore his actions. Sara, however, married into the community. Although she lived there for a long time, she was still considered an outsider. She commented "They [community members] may feel that there's no point in pressing charges because he will only get off with it, as he did in the past." The casualness with which Sara felt many people in Town's Grove regarded her assault is perhaps not unusual

in rural areas. For example, Milne writes that “many rural people don’t believe that assault is happening in their area” (4).

Another reason Sara gives for the lack of community support is closed-mindedness. She states that residents believe that “bad stuff” does not happen within their community and especially not to them. The Community Services Council talks about the harmful nature of such silences:

Families and communities are actually contributing to the abuse through their belief that it is a private matter not to be discussed or confronted. This means abuse is effectively supported by a long-standing and accepted set of family and community attitudes and behaviours which excuse offenders and blame victims (*It’s Hard ...* 7).

However, Grauserholz, et al suggest that of all the changes required concerning violence against women, personal attitudes are the most difficult and most important to transform. They write that “changing the terms of the laws may not be as important as changing society’s attitudes about what constitutes violence” (5).

As this chapter indicates, there are options available to rural women who experience assault. However, as Sara’s story demonstrates, there may be reasons why women hesitate or refuse to utilize these services. Victims of assault may feel abandoned by the Church, the law and the community. Alone, they find other ways to cope with violence. The strategies which women use to deal with assault are the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### TRADITIONAL STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH VIOLENCE

There is a long history of women deconstructing the problem of violence against women and creating traditional strategies for dealing with it. In this chapter, I explore some of the ways that women in Town's Grove have coped with assault. Sara's experiences described in the last chapter suggest that Town's Grove may support Koss's observation that: "In many areas, women living in poverty reside in communities in which all levels of assault across all relationship categories are quite high" (*No Safe ...* 50). And, as the last chapter also shows, a lack of viable alternatives silences rural women. Organizations and services that help women deal with assault in urban areas are unavailable to women in places like Town's Grove. As Websdale states: "We cannot just take the politics that appear to have worked in urban settings and assume they will be comparably effective for rural battered women" (189).

This chapter looks at some of the strategies used by victims of violence in Town's Grove including indirection, repression, minimization, role obstruction and drug dependency. These strategies constitute what Joan Radner and Susan Lanser refer to as coding. They define code as "a set of signals - words, forms, behaviors, signifiers of



some kind - that protect the creator from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages" (5). They continue, "coding occurs in the context of complex audiences in which some members may be competent and willing to decode the message, but others are not. In other words, coding presumes an audience in which one group of receivers is 'monocultural' and thus assumes that its own interpretation of messages is the only one possible, while the second group, living in two cultures, may recognize a double message - which also requires recognizing that some form of coding has taken place" (5). Radner and Lanser argue that coding reveals feminist messages "that is, messages critical of some aspect of women's subordination" (3). The kinds of behaviours I explore in this chapter fall under implicit coding in that their very codedness is arguable (Radner and Lanser 6). Several of the strategies below match those forms of implicit coding described by Radner and Lanser: appropriation, juxtaposition, distraction, indirection, trivialization, and incompetence.

### **Disclosure? Or Enforced Silence?**

The women I interviewed highlighted ways in which victims of domestic violence are silenced.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that "a major barrier in rural communities is the pervasiveness of denial, compounded by misogynist and victim-blaming attitudes"

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<sup>1</sup>Although I only look at the ways the women I interviewed were silenced, there are others. For example, Collins writes about silence as resistance, hooks differentiates between silence and not being listened to and Belenky et al stress the complex social, economical and educational dimensions of women's silence.

(Milne 4). Assaulted women fear further punishment from their partners if they speak out as well as rejection by family, friends, and community for doing something that they consider wrong or immoral. Women may also lack a safe place to go. Some have internalized cultural attitudes that blame women for male violence, and/or support a man's "right" to hit his wife. Isolation, lack of resources and lack of confidentiality are only some factors that encourage women to keep silent.

Lisa remembered: "Nobody, no one, not even my close girlfriend knew. I never told anyone. I couldn't." As a young teenager, Lisa was very naive about sex, childbirth, and maturation. Rape was her initiation into the world of sexual activity. She was aware that rape was wrong because it felt wrong. After the act, Lisa states that she thought that she was to blame, that maybe she enticed her perpetrator. She describes feeling dirty and violated but comments that telling was "not an option back then." She especially could not tell her parents:

I felt, I felt I couldn't go to my Mom because I felt she wouldn't understand. Yeah, so I never ever told. Because I, again, for some reason, I just thought I would be the one they would blame. And I would never, ever tell my Dad because I knew [he would blame me and] I would wind up with another beating.

According to the Community Services Council, this is a common reaction because "Families did not always provide the necessary support to victims of abuse. They were often unapproachable from the perspective of the victims, did not treat the incidents seriously if told, or in some cases, actively sided with an offender rather than the victim" (*It's Hard ...* 10). By the time she was a teenager, Lisa had learned to push incidents and

feelings aside:

My Mom would brush things aside and you know what she would tell me? She'd say 'go to bed.' Yeah. That's what I would get. Because I honestly feel that she didn't understand at all either. She didn't have the knowledge to understand.

Joan also did not talk about her assaults. According to her, "Nothing like that ever happened around here." As was stated in chapter three, Joan did not feel that she was being assaulted even though her husband often beat her and her children while intoxicated. Milne states that this was a common reaction to violence: "... women were expected to obey their husbands and follow a path of self-denial" (4). bell hooks writes that "Feminist scholarship about women who are physically assaulted by men is full of autobiographical accounts punishing women for speaking, whether we speak to defend ourselves, to engage in critical argument, or just to say something - anything" (128).

For Joan, Faith and Lisa, assault was a deeply guarded secret that was kept to oneself. Women did not feel safe enough to talk publicly. Their experiences support bell hooks's point, "It is as though the very act of speech, wherein a woman talks to a man, carries embedded in that gesture a challenge, a threat to male domination" (128). If their secret got out, the assault would only be whispered about as a topic of gossip that, as Thorne-Finch states in *Ending the Silence*, "served to further victimize the few unfortunate women whose stories did become the talk of the town" (4). No constructive action would come from disclosure. Lisa reinforces this view: "they probably would have said 'you know, she must been out looking for it or she wouldn't have got it.'"

In small communities, gossip is a replacement for local media. Women

especially are aware of the power of this form of communication and often make great effort not to be the subject of "grapevine" curiosity. Through gossip about others, the women I interviewed learned early in life that one did not become involved in other people's family business. As Faith states, community members, especially women, were conditioned since birth to, "look the other way" and "mind your own business." Because domestic violence fell under the category of a "family matter," women were often left alone.

Faith shared a narrative based on another woman's experience of assault that further illustrates how disclosure was not necessarily a successful strategy for change; even when the secret got out, people did not offer assistance. She told of how in the 1960s, a young developmentally delayed girl in the community got pregnant on three occasions by a young man also from Town's Grove. Each time the girl's family sent her to the nearest urban centre where she delivered her babies and gave them up for adoption. Each time nothing was done to prevent further pregnancies until finally, after the third, a doctor performed a tubal ligation, or as Faith claims, "[they] tied her tubes" to prevent further "accidents." Women in Town's Grove gossiped about how "shocking" the pregnancies were but not even the girl's parents interfered. Faith believes that shortly after the family moved to another province, the girl was gang raped by five men, two of who rolled up a piece of newspaper, shoved it inside her vagina and lit it. Someone found her and rushed her to the hospital where she was treated for severe burns. Reports of the incident that circulated in the community indicated that two men were given five

year sentences. The other three men were not charged. Faith strongly believes that if this girl had not gone to the hospital, then the assault would not have been reported. As Lisa says, "it would have been gossiped among the community for awhile but then it would have been brushed aside."

Women often feel unable to speak about violence in their lives because of isolation, lack of resources and lack of confidentiality. These factors are especially pertinent in rural communities. However, some women refuse to remain totally silent.<sup>2</sup> They try, either consciously or unconsciously, to disclose their experiences indirectly through coded messages. One of these informal coping strategies might include repression.

### **Repression**

Repression or forgetting is another form of coping with assault. "I had forgotten it. I had blocked it out, for so long" Lisa told me. According to Liz Kelly in her article "How Women Define Their Experiences of Violence:" "We forget experiences in order to cope with an event that we do not understand, cannot name, or that places acute stress on our emotional resources"(124). Kelly states that there are several forms of forgetting. One happens when women have no words to name and understand their experiences. This is what happened to Lisa: "[I] blocked it out" but "[I] can't explain how I did that."

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<sup>2</sup> Collins highlights the use of silence as resistance. She reminds readers that silence is not always to be interpreted as submission (98).

For Lisa the effects of the assault showed themselves in unexplainable ways:

I always knew from then on I was scared of men. I did not trust men; I did not like them. I couldn't figure out why I felt that way but eventually, as time went on ... little things started coming back and I started to remember.

Women regain their memories only when they can make rational sense of the event(s) and their reactions to it. Something often happens that triggers some sort of memory like watching a TV show, reading a book or talking to other women. Lisa started to remember bits and pieces of the rape when she married and had her first sexual encounter after the assault. Eventually, she remembered everything when she was watching television:

I watched a program on television about women coming forward and saying how they were raped and what rape really meant and how a person could be charged; how it affected their lives. I had no idea of that until the later years.

Repression is one way women deal with violence. Eventually, though, the memories resurface and the assault remains to be faced. Often the event is harder to deal with after the memories resurface than at the initial stage of the assault. However, not all women repress their memories of abuse. Some inadvertently choose other ways of coping like minimizing the incident(s).

### **Minimization**

The women also pointed to minimization as an important coping mechanism. Three of the women I talked to initially downplayed the seriousness of the abuse they received. This occurred in two ways: the minimizing of the event and/or the minimizing

of its effects. Comparing one's own experience with something worse may enable a woman to view her own experience as less serious and provide the means to continue with her daily life. Doing this may also minimize the threat of future assault. As Kelly states: "Minimizing requires women to deny the reality of their experiences at the time, and to define as 'not serious' consequences that may, in reality, be lasting and severe" ("How Women ..." 127).

When questioning Joan about the emotionally and physically abusive relationship she had with her mother-in-law, she downplayed the seriousness and its effects on her by insisting "we got along." Others suggested to me that Joan and her mother-in-law "got along" because of Joan's compliance and her silence. Although understanding this relationship would require further exploration with Joan's help, it may be that she is exercising selective recall. Thorn-Finch indicates that sometimes women experience the loss of "selected memories from conscious recall. [Women] forget the numerous beatings they have endured; to remember them could be too traumatic" (36). They minimize the event(s) and/or the effects of the assault(s) but this often only temporarily solves the problem. Eventually, women realize the true effects of the violence. Role obstruction represents another way of informally coping and coding the violence.

### **Role Obstruction**

Unable to speak openly of their plight, women embrace other ways of coping. The women I interviewed told of victims who turned inward and kept to themselves or

withdrew from community activities in an attempt to mentally escape where there was no physical escape. This resulted in shattered self-esteem, learned helplessness and deteriorated mental and physical health. However, while some women undoubtedly completely gave up any notion of resistance and accepted their fate in life, the women I interviewed also told of those who could not force themselves to believe that abuse was normal and acceptable behaviour. These women stepped outside of accepted roles within the household and community, risking and sometimes earning the label of "bad": bad mother, bad housekeeper and of course bad wife. At the very least, they were branded as having "bad nerves."

In Town's Grove, "bad nerves" was a commonly used phrase. As well as implying a nervous condition, which could be treated with "nerve pills," it was used to refer to other illnesses and situations, violence being only one of them. Faith told a story about an assaulted woman who had "bad nerves."

Linda had a real hard time of it. We, uh, we just didn't know what to do with her, what she was going to do next. Her house was always a mess because she was always in bed, sick she said. Mom said she was lazy. I don't know how many times, she, you know, she ran away. We would always find her up behind the house, in a little spot in the trees that the youngsters had cleared away. And jealous, god was she ever jealous. I don't know if she thought Jim was going to leave her or what. That probably would have been a good thing.

Linda's role obstruction was her way of objecting to the daily physical and mental abuse she experienced at the hands of her husband Jim. As Dinham states in *You Never Know What They May Do*, someone with "bad nerves" demonstrated certain behaviours such as "explainable, benign, normal and acceptable personality traits or moods such as shyness,



jealousy, or fatigue or poor family environment”(22). He believes that nervous conditions were “considered a common affliction” (51). It was regarded, as “abnormal (‘something wrong’) and actionable (‘something should be done’) behavior” (51). Therefore, it excused women from role obligations that they would otherwise have had to fulfill or been penalized for neglecting.

Women stepped outside perceived roles within the household and community as a coded way of coping with violence. By doing so, they risked categorization and eventual diagnosis as having “bad nerves.” This diagnosis often led to the prescription of “nerve pills” and women eventually became drug dependent.

### **Drug Dependency**

To numb the pain of their assaults and in “an attempt to live with a problem they do not know how to solve”(Thorne-Finch 41), some rural women turned to alcohol or were prescribed anti-depressants or tranquilizers, locally known as “nerve pills.” These pills temporarily gave women what they needed to cope with an intolerable situation.

According to Faith, the “nerve pills” helped Linda get on with her daily life:

Linda was in top form when she had her ‘nerve pills.’ It was bad though when she ran out. Money was tight for them and there were lots of times when she didn’t have her pills. Yeah, that was bad. And the pills weren’t a big deal for Jim, he didn’t care. So, a few days after her pills ran out we would go in the woods and look for her again. This was normal after awhile and nobody thought anything of it.

Once the pills were gone, Linda reverted back to a sick person in need of medication.

The pills used to fix Linda’s “bad nerves,” or dull her pain, was her coping mechanism as

an assaulted woman. Her way of dealing with assault was taken out of context by community members, medical professionals and possibly mental health workers as well. As Walker states in *The Battered Woman*: "many women reported being given heavy doses of anti-psychotic medications by doctors who were responding to their overt symptoms rather than attempting to understand their family situations" (21).

Left to apply interstitial knowledge to develop their own solutions to an intolerable situation, women turned to repression, minimization, role obstruction and drug dependency. Unfortunately, these coping mechanisms usually only treated the surface problem. Often they neither stopped the abuse nor prevented the assault from reoccurring. The experiences of the three women I interviewed, Joan, Faith and Lisa, reinforce Milne's conclusion that "More and more women have broken the silence, public awareness has increased, and many agencies are responding to the real issue of gender imbalance. But there remains a disturbing sense that their efforts represent only a "Band-Aid" response to a problem that must be solved" (11).

### **The Silence**

Rural Newfoundland women remain silent about violence for various personal and cultural reasons. Based on my research, women maintain silence in order to avoid the consequences that surround talking about something that is considered taboo. Women may face the rejection of family, friends, and community for doing something considered wrong or immoral. They may fear further punishment if they talk, they may

not have a safe place to go, and they may feel responsible for the violence. All these factors play a role in maintaining silence. As Gager and Schurr suggest "Little girls, like their mothers before them, learn at an early age to endure being used. A few experiences with the disbelief, shock, shame, embarrassment and anger of those closest to them provide good training in silence" (30).

Women continue to put up with their fate in life for fear of further punishment from those around them including some women in authority roles within their family. In rural Newfoundland, all of my informants married men from outside their community and lived with their husband's parents until they could afford to build or buy their own home. In this situation problems often started between the new wife and the mother-in-law. My oldest informant, Joan, referred to her early married life under her mother-in-law's roof. Her mother-in-law was clearly in charge when it came to domestic matters. Joan, an outsider, had invaded this space. When Joan became a part of this household, her threatened mother-in-law enforced her authority. According to Joan's daughter Faith, her mother was often treated like a slave. She was verbally, mentally and physically assaulted by her husband's mother. When Joan tried to defend herself and "talked" back, her mother-in-law retaliated, going outside the household with rumors that further isolated Joan. Joan states:

I was washing the clothes and my mother-in-law said I was not doing it right. She showed me how to do it right, you know, her way, and to keep the peace, I did it. A little later she wanted me to bring something out to her friend and I said 'I'm almost finished doing the washing,' but she wanted me to do it now. She got mad because I was being saucy. A few days later when I went out to put clothes on the line

again, two old women in the community looked at me and whispered: '[her mother-in-law] says she's some saucy.' That upset me.

Joan continues: "[my mother-in-law] said I was lazy but I always did the work. One thing I never was was lazy." Joan's daughter, Faith, further elaborates:

When we got older and left home, Mom would talk about living with Nan and Pop. She would talk about how Nan would draw off and slap you in the face or head or kick you or something like that. Dad learned how to do this from Nan. Nan was a 'tough bird.'

According to Faith, at one point her father talked to his mother about her abusive treatment of Joan but this only escalated the abuse. When telling her husband did not end the violence, Joan decided to keep further abuse to herself. Being new to the community where she did not know anyone, Joan wanted to fit in. She did not want to be thought of as a troublemaker. Joan states: "I spoke only when I was spoken to. That's what I was taught. People probably thought I had some problem with them but I just wanted to keep the peace." She quietly listened to her mother-in-law because it seemed her only option.

Joan's husband built them their own house and Joan finally had her own space. But eventually her husband became abusive. By this time Joan's shame and pain had become a part of her life. There was no escape and she had no choice but to continue to cope. She could not tell anyone. As Joan indicate "It just wasn't talked about." In order to survive, Joan became an expert on what Wyckoff terms "untellability." To help better the lives of her daughters in similar situations, she passed on her training of silence. Children, especially girls, were taught early in life to look the other way and mind their own business.

Wyckoff writes of women expressing the untellable through symbolic displacement. Like Radner and Lanser, Wyckoff believes women may talk about painful subjects like assault through the use of coded or hidden messages. For example, in rural communities there are many culturally bound health belief systems, and in Town's Grove, as I indicated earlier, the phrase "bad nerves" was used to explain a woman's nonconformity. Although the bad nerves syndrome was a coping mechanism, it was also a way of silencing. Bograd explains why women might develop "bad nerves": "When men's lives, values, and attitudes are taken as the norm, the experiences of women are often defined as inferior, distorted, or are rendered invisible" (15). Women are forced to find other ways of expression. Unfortunately, as in the case of bad nerves, these are not always interpreted positively by community members. Unemployment, high alcohol consumption and stress are some social factors that help explain violence against women in Town's Grove. On the other hand, bad nerves focused attention on the individual's performance.

Wyckoff's work shows how women have used legend as symbolic displacement. She concludes that many sexual abuse constructs are "more legend than personal narratives" (367). Women may also voice their pain through other narratives or through supernatural beliefs in fairy lore, witch lore and devil lore. Wyckoff states that some women created their own special vocabulary to get their points across; they used song, or wrote their feelings down in a diary (367). Benedict also found that women recorded their feelings in the form of a song, poem or in a diary to help them cope with the assault(s): "Even if you do have people to tell, writing can be a release" (60).

### Fairy lore

As Rieti argues in her study of fairy belief in Newfoundland, there is a complex of factors that influence people's interpretation of an event (*Strange Terrain* 86). While none of the women I interviewed remembered belief in fairies being used as an explanation for violence against women, it was relied on elsewhere. In some rural communities in the province, members turned to fairy lore when they felt it necessary to explain abnormal behaviours. Supernatural events involving fairies were sometimes used to explain assault or domestic abuse. Narvaéz talks about the fairies being used as an excuse to cover up unjustifiable behavior or violence: "fairy explanations could be used by participants to mask actual deviant behaviors such as extreme tardiness, premarital sexual relations, infidelity, incest, child molestation, wife battering, and sexual assault" (357). As Narvaéz argues, fairy belief was an effective means of social control in the community and acted not only to discipline children, but to cover up the unexplainable or untellable. If a person did not conform then others sometimes turned to the fairies to explain their behaviour. Fairy lore may also have allowed residents to avoid facing the issues of domestic violence, rape and infidelity. Narvaéz elaborates "fairies have furnished one of the few *culturally sanctioned explanations* available for temporal disjuncture and embarrassment, an acceptable rationale everyone has been familiar with" (357).

### **Witch lore**

Like fairies, witches were used as an explanation for violence against women in some Newfoundland communities, but apparently not in Town's Grove. Rieti writes, "Newfoundland witch lore puts the banal reality of violence against women into striking forms which heighten its essential features ("Riddling ..." 84). However, as she argues it is difficult to read men's actions as either strictly symbolic or actual when they "riddled a witch." Nonetheless, she notes that "when women limped or sported bruises, there is always the possibility that a 'supernatural' explanation could be concocted to cover real abuse" ("Riddling ..." 85-86). Rieti also states that "Though no longer socially institutionalized, both the idea of witchcraft and the practice of violence against women retain considerable currency" ("Riddling ..." 78).

Community members may also have used belief in witchcraft to downplay, hide or silence actual violence against women. Like the women with "bad nerves," witches were considered "different, they are daring, they shatter our images of normality, they test society's limits and boundaries" (Madriz 29). And because they stepped outside the roles enforced upon them they were labeled and punished.

### **Devil lore**

Devi lore was another form of supernatural belief that controlled women and one that was present in the area of Town's Grove in the past. Faith told of how belief in devil possession was a factor in her grandmother's death. In the 1930s, Faith's grandmother

was a young wife and mother who had moved to her husband's community about five kilometres from Town's Grove. Thought to have "bad nerves," she could not cope with the stresses of her life. According to her granddaughter Faith, when she sought professional help her only recourse was the local veterinarian. Isolation limited scientific knowledge in small rural communities so when he was unable to explain her behavior medically, the veterinarian diagnosed her as being possessed by the devil. Faith describes her actions as abnormal; she would scream with rage and she would not work at her daily chores. She was depressed and she was angry. According to Faith, she was placed her in the local jail that was without heat or blankets. She was fed bread and water for awhile until she became violent. She was tied to the bed to control her "demon." Faith believes that no one visited her, she was no longer fed and eventually she died of starvation. She was a battered woman. This narrative from the 1930s is a powerful example of what could happen to abused women in earlier generations when they tried to speak out.

Belief in the supernatural remains prevalent in parts of Newfoundland today. And even when violence against women is not given a supernatural explanation, victims may be treated similarly today as in the past. There are many parallels in how area residents dealt with Faith's "possessed" grandmother in the 1930s and how they treated Sara more than sixty years later. As outsiders, both women were shown little community support. Instead residents rallied around the perpetrators who "belonged." The community's reaction and their way of dealing with the assaults reinforced both women's



silence.

These women's stories show the price of keeping violence against women quiet. Hester et. al write that "Silence has been a major weapon in men's arsenal which has prevented women and children from talking about their experiences of sexual violence, let alone finding ways to get support and join in campaigns and movements for justice" (35). For too long both physical and sexual assault have been considered women's issues to be kept in the home. Today, these attitudes are changing although progress is slow. While the narratives contained in this chapter show that sometimes women feel that they have no other choice but to express their abuse through symbolic or coded means, Walker states that "Many of the coping strategies that protect women from further harm, such as minimization of the abuse, denial that it was so bad, forgetting or repressing the acute battering incident, or even self-blame can become barriers" (*The Battered Woman* 171).

In the concluding chapter I look at some of the long term effects of violence against women on its victims and consider why some women stay in abusive relationships. Finally, I reflect on the role of traditional culture in naming and interpreting violence against women in rural Newfoundland.

## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **CONCLUSION**

Through an analysis of five women's personal experience narratives, this thesis has explored traditional coping strategies used by victims of violence. Set in the context of rural Newfoundland, it presented the life histories and experiences of women growing up in the community of Town's Grove. In comparison to published literature the women's definitions of violence against women were general. Some women emphasized the physical dimension of abuse while others had a problem naming the violence. In the face of limited community services, rural women often relied on traditional strategies for coping. These include coded expressions such as repression, minimization, role obstruction and drug dependency. While in the past traditional belief in fairies, witches, and the devil allowed community members to explain a victim's behaviour, it did not solve any underlying problem. Nor was it a useful expression for the women themselves.

Silence characterizes all aspects of this study. Isolation and poverty limit the women's access to formal services and as Sara's story illustrates, when women who are brave enough do try to press charges, the results are not all positive. As well, local and family attitudes reinforce the importance of keeping things behind closed doors. That women in Newfoundland usually relocate after marriage to their husband's home

community, means their outsider status leaves them vulnerable and sometimes without allies. The women I spoke with also highlighted the importance of gossip and the fear of becoming a subject of gossip as a restriction they felt. In the face of few other possibilities, women develop strategies that are neither direct or always effective. For example, the traditional explanations of bad nerves or supernatural belief did not offer women in Town's Grove viable options for dealing with or ending their abuse. So, throughout the history of my study community, women attempted to solve their problems of violence but they often found that silence was the best solution available.

Unfortunately, this causes problems that are psychologically damaging in the long-term.

### **Long-term psychological Effects**

Kelly believes that "it is not possible to distinguish simplistically between long term] effects and the coping strategies that women use" (*Surviving ...* 160). According to Kelly, women's coping strategies and long-term effects of violence intertwine and often become interchangeable. She continues "When abuse occurs more than once, coping responses will already have interacted with effects making their separation almost impossible" (*Surviving ...* 160). Long after the violence has ended, the women I interviewed experienced various psychological effects which include nightmares/flashbacks, self-blame, depression and sexual dysfunction.

### Nightmares/Flashbacks

Nightmares and/or flashbacks are common effects of violence that tend to remind women of prior assault. If the woman is in the repressive stage, these effects often act as a subconscious reminder of an unresolved problem or issue. Lisa experienced nightmares that she could not understand while repressing her rape. She recalls "I had nightmares sometimes, but, huh, on the surface, never really showing [that anything was wrong]. I can't explain."

According to Kelly, there are two forms of flashbacks. The most common is triggered by a specific reminder of the event, like a particular smell, place, name, kind of movement, a man who looked like their abuser, or representations of violence. Lisa experienced flashbacks prior to remembering her assault that left her upset and confused. She would remember "bits and pieces" of her rape and was only able to place those pieces together during the viewing of a television program numerous years after the event. This program was a documentary of women coming forward and sharing their experiences of rape, what it meant and its effects on their lives. It was then that Lisa was able to fit all those pieces together and remember her assault. Kelly believes this momentary flashback "makes it possible for women to retrieve buried memories or alternatively to dismiss the thought from their minds" (*Surviving ...* 193). In Lisa's case, it caused her to remember her assault. Kelly describes the other form of flashback, which tends to occur less often and generally appears without warning after the woman has remembered the initial experience of assault. It seems to bring forth aspects of the

experience that had been suppressed (*Surviving ...* 193). Lisa states that it was after she remembered her assault, that “I started to learn what impact it really had on my life.”

Nightmares and/or flashbacks are generally due to some type of fear. Lisa recalls: “I always knew from then on I was scared of men.” According to Kelly: “Some women are driven to desperate measures such as moving many miles away, changing their names and cutting off all contact with their previous life and identity. This is the price some women have to pay for safety” (*Surviving ...* 196). Sara left her home of two decades because she feared for her safety. She felt betrayed by community members and the law. Kelly states that “The impact may be greater when the abuse takes place in a location previously thought of as ‘safe’” (*Surviving ...* 198). In both Lisa and Sara’s situations, the perpetrators were free to assault again.

### **Self-blame**

It is not uncommon for women to fear men after an assault. According to Lisa, “I did not trust men, I did not like them. I was very scared of them.” Her experiences echo Pahl’s observation that “women share the commonly held fallacy that they are to blame for the violence, that they in some way caused it to happen” (81). Lisa reflects: “I felt that maybe if I hadn’t been there at that time, that maybe I did something to entice him to do this to me. Did I, did I just lead him on not knowing.”

## Depression

Depression is a common reaction to both rape and domestic violence and often includes feelings of lost innocence and suicidal thoughts. Pahl writes: "although it is the men who commit the violence, it is the women who have to bear the psychological pain and hospitalization" (132). The women in Town's Grove who were treated for "bad nerves" were probably depressed. The "nerve pills" that were prescribed were antidepressants. Sometimes the depression became so severe that women experienced a nervous breakdown. Both Lisa and Faith refer to nervous breakdowns as a common reaction or effect of abuse within Town's Grove. Lisa makes a brief reference to the breakdown she experienced while trying to come to terms with her rape. According to Kelly, breakdowns generally occur during "this period of remembering and coming to terms with the past" (*Surviving ...* 195). Faith describes some women within the community who had breakdowns due to "bad nerves." She makes specific reference to a man and his wife who both had breakdowns after he severely beat her. Faith also speaks of a number of her family members who had breakdowns due to violence.

## Sexual dysfunction

Koss notes that "Rape victims experience less sexual satisfaction and more sexual problems than non-victimized women... Most of the problems among victimized women were early response cycle inhibitions including lack of desire, fear of sex, and arousal dysfunction" (*No Safe ...* 190). Lisa refrained from having sex until she got married. She

states that even then, she was sexually uncomfortable: "I found that sexually I could not relax and I still thought sex was very dirty I couldn't totally love, if you know what I mean – totally and completely let myself go and love. I always held part of me back."

Johnson writes: "the emotional or psychological impact, which can be difficult to assess and often remains invisible, can have a much more profound effect on the victim's long-term health and well-being" (201). While some women require less time to heal, others never fully recover. According to Lisa, it took fifty years before she could say that she "no longer has a black, empty hole that could never be fulfilled." It took years of reading, viewing and hearing other women's stories of violence to help her come to terms with her assault. It seems as if Joan has not dealt with her abuse and she may never do so. Sara continues to cope with her assault "one day at a time." Subsequently, Kelly notes "How women cope, and were enabled to cope, directly affects the impact of abuse on them" (*Surviving ...* 160).

Nightmares, self-blame, depression and sexual dysfunction are some psychological long-term effects of the violence experienced by the women interviewed. It is because of society's way of dealing with violence that women generally take the blame. Self blame is one of the reasons why women stay in abusive relationships.

### **Why Women Stay**

There are a number of reasons why women stay in abusive relationships. They may fear for the safety of family, friends, children, pets or even cherished possessions:

“... the real fear is of the abuser finding [her] and retaliating even more violently than in the past (Goodman and Fallon 44). Fear of the unknown and being alone causes women to prefer the familiar, if abusive place. A victim may worry that she will be unable to cope and take care of herself and her children. Others have no safe place to go. Concern about finances keeps some women in dangerous situations as does refusal to admit failure in their relationships. Each abused woman has her own particular reason or reasons for remaining in an abusive relationship. Most, however, are connected in some way to fear. Sadly, often women decide it is safer to stay.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

My study concludes that rural women have a history of resorting to traditional coping mechanisms when faced with violence. It shows how, in the past, many felt that they had no choice but to keep violence silent. This thesis just begins the discussion of coping strategies used by abused rural women and its findings suggest the need for future work in a number of different directions. Future work on violence against women from a folklore perspective might explore women's silences in various aspects of their lives. The insider/outsider dynamics experienced by a woman when she marries into a community and her interactions with her husband's family suggest a rich field of investigation. My original goal of researching the impact of the Rape Crisis Centre and the feminist movement in rural communities also requires exploration. Finally, the women I interviewed reflect complex attitudes towards the influences of popular culture



on their experiences of violence and this is yet another area of possible study. As they point out television's role in bringing the untellable into their homes, I hopefully wonder if the media is not dragging rural communities kicking and screaming into a new tellable era.

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