

Rural Women's Needs Assessment Study Wellington County & Ontario



January 2005

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INTRODUCTION

In 2003, Women in Rural Economic Development (WRED) in partnership with local training boards across Ontario, hired Garven and Associates to conduct a series of thirteen focus group sessions held throughout rural Ontario. The results of these focus groups have led to the identification of trends regarding the employment barriers and skill gaps that rural women experience. Research results indicate that despite being from different regions of the province, there are many similar considerations that influence barriers to employment and self-employment.

Focus group participants were asked to comment on the results of a broad-based telephone survey of rural women (250) and on the results of a survey of rural employers (164). In addition, the focus group discussions provided a more in-depth understanding of the employment barriers and associated issues that rural Ontario women experience.

In WWTAB's area, a focus group was held in Guelph with women from across Wellington County. Details from this section can be found on page 3. A compilation of results from across Ontario can be found on page 13.

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Development
Study conducted by Garven & Associates in partnership with the
Local Boards Network of Ontario**



Focus Group – Wellington County

The Guelph Focus Group was held on May 14, 2003 at the Guelph Holiday Inn.

1.0 **Participants**

Chris Baginski-Hansen	Second Chance Employment
Irene Cole	Wellington County
Donna Dube	Anishnabeg Outreach
Deborah Debu	Morrison
Karen Dunn	Lutherwood
Mary Lynn Elliot	Fergus
Angela Kennedy	Fergus
Lisa Saunders	Acton/Erin (farm)
Carol Simpson	Waterloo Wellington Training & Adjustment Board
Anita Zomer	North Wellington County

Medbh Bidwell and Nikki Hipkin of Garven & Associates were recorder and facilitator for the focus group. Sarah Luk-Hill and Azza Mustafa observed on behalf of WRED. Tony Mileno observed on behalf of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC).

2.0 **Employment Barriers and Skill Gaps**

The employment barriers and skill gaps facing women in the Guelph area can be categorized into four specific areas: personal, societal, training, and access issues.

Specific access-related barriers identified by the group included the need for childcare and transportation. The unavailability of local training and employment opportunities, male chauvinism, and overall personal and economic depression were considered to be significant barriers for women when accessing employment. The group commented that women need help assessing what skills are actually needed in the workplace and that existing employment programs must be promoted more widely. Gender specific training was considered unnecessary for the most part.

2.1 **Difficulties Experienced by Rural Women When Finding Work**

The results of the broad-based telephone survey, the literature review and the key informant interviews was introduced and shared with the participants. Focus group participants were asked to brainstorm the reasons why rural women have difficulty finding meaningful work. The following reasons were raised:

• **Transportation**

Women without a driver's license are at a distinct disadvantage. Public transit is very limited outside of the city of Guelph and therefore rural women without reliable transportation have severe limitations to employment.

- **Lack of opportunity**
Very few jobs are available in the area. The number of women looking for work exceeds the opportunity.
- **Rural training unavailable**
Training is not accessible to rural women. Programs that are offered are often short-term, or are not consistently offered.
- **Childcare**
Evening and shift-work is nearly impossible for mothers with young children because daycare is difficult to find.
- **Lack of permanent positions**
Many employers hire for short-term or contract work, but do not hire permanently.
- **Physical disability and/or health concerns**
Very few employers will consider women for long-term positions if they have physical disabilities. Health care concerns and related costs put stress on low-income working women.
- **Lack of experience**
Employers look for experience, certification and demonstrated credentials and many rural women do not have these.
- **Few high-paying jobs**
Women cannot afford to work for minimum wage, but are not able to find higher paying work. Housing and cost of living is expensive in Guelph – low paying jobs make it difficult to make ends meet.
- **Farming is unprofitable**
Farmers have assets but low income and little support. Many women are seeking employment that will subsidize the expenses of the family farm.
- **Lack of government support**
'Ontario Works' does not provide enough financial support to low-income families. Women starting businesses are not supported at a high enough level to keep them out of debt.
- **High stress levels and depression**
Many rural women are trapped in a cycle of unemployment which leads to stress and illness.
- **Chauvinism**
Women still face bias from male employers and co-workers.

- **English as a second language**

Increased immigration means that many women do not have the language skills necessary for employment.

- **Training programs are not well promoted**

Often employment training programs have a very short lead-time prior to the delivery decision – therefore promotion is limited and ineffective.

- **Employers are not committed**

Many employers who participate in government employment programs are not committed to hiring once the subsidy period ends. Women access the training and employment program and then are stranded without meaningful employment.

2.2 Skills Gaps of Rural Women

Participants were asked to consider whether rural women have the necessary employment skills to successfully acquire meaningful employment.

The following points were raised:

- Women who want to upgrade their high school at the adult level must travel to Guelph to do so.
- Computer training is not offered in smaller areas but is needed.
- There is little assessment done to determine which skills women actually need. Many women may already have the necessary employment skills, but are advised to take computer training that is not actually needed. Many employment positions can be filled without additional training being required.

2.3 Availability of Local Training Opportunities

Women were asked where they can find training opportunities in the Guelph area. The following points were raised.

- The closest training often 45 miles, or a one-hour drive away. Transportation is an issue for many rural women, and rural women face winter driving conditions that can make travel impossible.
- There is a lack of funding for rural training.
- Promotion of training opportunities is often insufficient due to lack of funding.
- Most training opportunities are in Guelph. Few opportunities exist in rural communities.

The group discussed what might stop rural women from accessing the training that they need. The following suggestions were made:

- Transportation issues;
- Lack of high-speed Internet connection;
- Male-dominated professions in the trades leaving a low level of employment opportunity for women;
- Lack of previous experience with post-secondary education;
- The attitude that rural women should “stay down on the farm”;

- Family commitments such as child and eldercare; and
- Inflexible training times.

2.4 Requirement of Customized and/or Specialized Training

The group discussed whether there should be specialized or customized training for women who have identified skill gaps. The group agreed that there is little to no need for gender specific training. Rather, programs could specifically target older workers who need retraining.

2.5 Employment Barriers Specific to the Region

When asked to consider whether there are employment barriers specific to the Guelph region, the group noted that transportation is particularly difficult. Networking is also difficult for women in the area who are isolated.

3.0 Self-Employment Barriers and Skill Gaps

The Guelph focus group participants were invited to provide their feedback on what barriers and skill gaps that prevent local women from pursuing self-employment. Participants reported that women find it difficult to access financing and to establish credibility. Many women are hindered by an overall lack of business confidence. Additionally, rural women struggle with balancing work and life pressures, and the expectation that they should “sacrifice themselves” for their family. The lack of benefits was considered to be an issue not only for self-employed people, but also for the employed.

• Work/life balance

The issue of balancing work and personal life has increased over time as women take on more responsibility, juggling multiple roles.

• Credibility

It is difficult to establish a new business, particularly if you have had business failure in the past.

• Maintaining good financial records

Paperwork has increased over time, though software had made the job easier for many women.

• Business confidence

Women are more confident now than in the past. This is due in large part to the mentors and success stories that are available to women.

• Establishing a market

Establishing a market is a long process. It can be made more difficult in isolated, rural areas.

• Establishing a network of business contacts

Establishing a good business network depends on individual women. Women now have more access to contacts through the Internet.

- **Financing**

Women without assets do not qualify for loans. Today, more women own assets so it may be easier for some to access bank loans. However, the requirements needed to access a bank loan are more stringent than ever.

- **Preparing a business plan**

Developing a business plan is a requirement for women entering self employment. Many women do not know the steps needed to develop an effective plan.

- **Securing support of family and friends**

Family and community support often depends on whether you have had success in the past.

- **Establishing an effective exit strategy**

Exit strategies require planning. For many rural businesses, the challenge comes when it is time to sell. There aren't enough potential buyers to consider the purchase of the business.

- **Attracting and retaining employees**

Attracting and retaining employees is difficult in rural Ontario. Some government self-employment programs do not allow start-ups to hire employees while they are in the program.

- **Business training and education**

Business and education training opportunities are plentiful although they can be difficult to access for rural women. Women with Internet access are able to undertake distance training, but few rural communities have high-speed connections.

3.2 Barriers Specific to the Region

The group discussed whether there are any barriers to self-employment that are specific to the Guelph area. Participants noted that transportation is a particularly difficult issue for the region. There are also fewer tourism opportunities in the Guelph region that can be found in other areas of the province.

3.3 Response to Barriers

When asked what could be done to overcome the various barriers to employment and self employment, participants made the following suggestions:

- Infrastructure to support high-speed Internet is needed and should be provided as soon as possible.
- Lobby government for seed money for start-up businesses. Women with sound business plans but no assets should be able to access micro-loans to establish credibility.

3.4 Need for a 'Self-Employment Benefits Plan'

Participants were asked whether the lack of benefits to self-employed people is a barrier to self-employment for rural women. It was noted that:

- Lack of benefits is a much bigger issue for single women, or women without the benefit of a marital or common-law partner.
- Low-income women have access to some benefit programs but these benefits are suspended if they achieve a limited amount of business success. It is important not to suspend the benefits too early in the development of the business.
- Lack of benefits is not just an issue for self-employed women. Many employed women do not have pension plans or other benefits, unless they have high-paying and/or full-time jobs.
- Self-employed women whose businesses have employees have additional costs such as EI contributions.

4.0 Program Awareness

The Guelph focus group participants engaged in a discussion of program opportunities and awareness. The group reported that there is a need to establish greater employer 'buy-in' and to coordinate more effective promotional campaigns. Participants also suggested that more support should be provided to women and employers in the form of wage subsidies and program flexibility. The participants indicated that programs are offered in the Guelph area, but that there is a need for programs that target greater than minimum-wage workers.

Participants generally agreed that there is little need for gender specific programming. Women and men can attend training together. There is a demand for a comprehensive directory of grants and loans that are available.

4.1 Effectiveness of Existing Programs

Participants were asked what programs and services are currently being offered to women seeking employment or self-employment in the Guelph area. The following programs or organizations were named:

- Second Chance Employment
- Guelph Business Centre
- Lutherwood Community Opportunities Development Association
- Guelph Career Counselling
- HRDC
- Anishnabeg
- Guelph Disabilities Association
- Canadian Mental Health Association
- Torchlight
- Arc Industries

The group discussed programs and services offered by training and service providers and agreed that improvements could be made by:

- Better promotion – a central repository of all programs (possibly in booklet format)
- Gaining employer support – the employer community must ‘buy in’ to the programs and services and support the concept of employing women.
- Better transportation or transportation subsidies.
- Outreach to rural communities and delivery of programs at the rural level.
- Ongoing support to women in employment and self-employment programs (coaches, mentors, etc.)
- Recognition that rural communities cannot support the numbers required by urban programs. Funders must allow for fewer participants in programs delivered in rural communities, and must fund program deliverers accordingly.
- Local flexibility in programming that reflects the needs of individual communities.
- Linking existing programs to the market demand.

4.2 Additional Programs and Services Needed

The group discussed what additional programs and services should be offered. The following comments were made:

- There are many programs in the area. Awareness of existing programs is the biggest issue.
- Training programs geared at above-minimum-wage workers are needed. All programs currently offered are targeted towards low-wage employment.
- Provide limited grants to support those with the ambition to upgrade skills or enter employment. Grants could cover costs such as childcare, travel, bills while in training, and start-up costs.
- Mentorship programs.
- Basic self-employment skills development such as time management and office setup.
- Expanded subsidies for low-income women.
- Education upgrading – specifically for computer skills.

4.3 Gender-Specific Programming

Participants were asked whether there is a need for a customized loan program for women who need financial support to access employment and/or self-employment. It was noted that:

- Existing loan programs are too difficult to access. Grants are preferable, and should require credible business plans and demand that specific criteria be met.
- Flexibility to offer loans or grants depending on individual situations may be appropriate.
- A comprehensive directory of available grants and loans, or an ‘employment ombudsman’ is needed.

5.0 Employer Support

During the discussion on employment supports provided by employers, the focus group participants indicated that employers in the Guelph area are not doing enough for rural women interested in entering the workforce. It was suggested that rural employers attend job fairs and form partnerships with educational institutions in order to engage in open and meaningful dialogue with rural women. It was also reported that employers should offer more full-time positions, provide in-house childcare, and give greater flexibility in compensation packages.

5.1 Existing Employer Support in the Region

Participants expressed surprise at the number and types of programs offered by employers, as reporting in the broad-based telephone survey of rural women. Few of the supports identified in the survey are reported to be offered in the Guelph area. Employers in the Guelph area offer the following supports:

- Medical/dental benefits are offered by larger employers. However, most employers are smaller and do not offer these benefits.
- On-site training is offered by most employers. There are fewer opportunities for off-site training or continuing education.
- Education and learning opportunities are sometimes offered by larger companies.

Participants were asked what more employers in the Guelph area could be doing to help support rural women in the workforce. It was noted that:

- Employers could offer more full time positions, or offer partial benefits to part-time employees.
- Employers could attend job fairs and employer panels to better understand the needs of the workforce.
- Employers should be encouraged to hire employees rather than to use temporary agency placements.
- Employers should be encouraged to take in-person resumes rather than faxed or e-mailed applications.
- Employers could offer in-house daycare services in collaboration with those families using the service.
- More flexibility in compensation packages should be offered by employers to allow for different employee needs.
- Employers should consider difficult-to-hire employees – whether disabled, single mother, Aboriginal, lacking experience, etc... in their employment strategies.
- Employers could form partnerships with educational institutions to encourage job growth. Employers could be helping to set curriculum and providing co-op work opportunities to encourage targeted training.
- Employers should allow employees to contribute to the strategic planning of their companies.

Participants were asked how employers can be made more aware of what needs to be done to support rural women. The following suggestions were made:

- Increase connections with the chambers of commerce.
- Research studies (such as this one) should be used to educate employers.
- Bringing women together to lobby employers.
- The onus should be on employers. Employers should ask rural women what their needs are and connect with training boards to determine what they can do to support rural women.

6.0 Program Delivery

Participants of the Guelph focus group discussed key considerations related to program delivery. They suggested that the length of the training courses and the availability of childcare and transportation subsidies influence participation levels. It was suggested that programs be delivered as one-day workshops that incorporate the involvement of employers and provide opportunities for networking. The group reported that on-line learning is not useful in areas without high-speed Internet connections.

6.1 Design and Delivery Principles

Participants discussed program delivery methods and preferences. The group was asked to consider what the important principals are in the design and delivery of programs and services. The following principals were named:

- Short courses or one-day workshops are preferred over longer courses that keep people out of the workforce for longer periods.
- A networking component is important.
- Transportation and child care costs should be subsidized or covered.
- Business centre services could be offered.
- Employer participation is essential. Internships, co-op placements and trial employment opportunities assist potential employees to gain experience.
- Programming should only be offered where a market exists for employment.
- Transportation is a key issue when considering the method of program delivery. Some areas do not have sufficient public transportation to support travel to programs and services.

Participants were asked what some of the key topics for training and information should be. The following topics were named:

- Networking;
- Labour market information (programs, grants, types of jobs in regions, finding employers); and
- Basic computer skills.

6.2 On-Line Training

The group discussed the potential for training and/or information delivery through the Internet. It was agreed that:

- Information is accessible by Internet, but training requires high-speed connection.
- Internet delivery depends on the type of client and the training.

It was noted that Internet training is not useful in areas without high-speed connection.

Rural Women's Needs Assessment Focus Groups Summary - Ontario

1.0 Employment Barriers and Skill Gaps

Focus group respondents offered opinions and views that were based on their own personal experience regarding rural women's employment issues.

Participants identified the following key **barriers to employment** for rural women:

1. Lack of full-time job opportunities.
2. Cost and availability of flexible child-care.
3. Cost and availability of transportation to and from employment and training.
4. Lack of awareness about employment opportunity and inaccessible information on jobs.
5. Various societal issues (stereotyped role for rural women, lack of employment equity, discrimination on the basis of age, etc.)
6. Regional factors, specifically relevant to communities located in remote parts of rural Ontario. (Male dominated work force, lack of employment programming and support, limited employment opportunity, etc.)

Rural women were asked to identify the key skill gaps that limited access to employment. The following themes were presented:

Skill gaps and programming needs of rural women include:

1. Basic education, literacy, and numeric skills.
2. "Soft" employment-skills training: self-esteem, self-worth, mentoring, confidence building.
3. Technical skill development: computer training, bookkeeping, job-specific technical skills.
4. Pre-employment skills: job seeking and development skills, resume writing, personal presentation skills, interviewing skills, etc.

Common employment barriers and skills gaps reported in the focus groups fit into four main categories: personal development, societal issues, training, and accessibility issues. These issues are not mutually exclusive, and often over-lap each other.

2.1 Personal Development

Personal development issues were reported as an employment barrier. Focus group participants identified that some rural women exhibit a low level of self-confidence and self-esteem because they do not have a formal work history. Many rural women have a tendency to downplay or to underestimate employment skills. Often, their skills have been developed as a result of caring for children or helping to manage a family farm or business. Because these skills were not acquired through formal education and have not received certification, they are not considered to be "employable" skills. The result is that many rural

women, particularly older rural women, report that they do not have relevant employment skills.

It was also reported that some rural women lack the basic pre-employment skills needed to find and retain employment. Skills such as resume writing, job interviewing, and office management skills are required by many rural women who do not have formal employment experience. Technical business skills related to computers, bookkeeping, and office management are also required by many women seeking to enter the work force for the first time.

Some focus groups reported that smaller communities are less able to provide job-readiness programs or work placement centres that would provide rural women with the information on how to find employment, or where to look for employment.

2.2 Societal Issues

Despite being from different age groups, and from different regions throughout the province, many focus group participants reported a common set of societal issues. For instance, it was commonly reported that rural women are expected to fulfill the traditional roles of wife, mother, and family farm worker. Women who are seeking employment outside of the home may experience guilt and/or tension by going against societal norms.

The job opportunities for rural women tend to be dominated by traditional employment options in areas such as nursing, teaching, secretarial, and service/retail positions. The number of employment opportunities in rural communities continues to shrink with the reduction in rural population throughout the province. Some rural women report that they are more likely to encounter chauvinism, sexual harassment, or limited career advancement in a rural workplace.

Childcare responsibilities are often an obstacle for women seeking employment or for women who want to attend a training/employment program. In rural communities, childcare facilities are not as common as they are in urban centres. When childcare facilities are available, they often operate within traditional business hours, which leave limited time for commuting and likewise reduces opportunities for shift work. The high costs associated with childcare may offset the benefits of employment for rural women, where many employment options are low paying. As well, transportation to and from childcare facilities may be a barrier to access for some rural women.

2.6 Training

Focus group respondents indicated that rural women often face the barrier of distance to the employment training opportunities. Travel time to training averages approximately one hour to the location and another hour home. Due to household and farm obligations, rural women cannot relocate to urban centres to further their education.

Women who have access to training centers in their community often report financial obstacles due to the expense of the courses. In addition, locally operated courses are available on a limited basis.

Rural women who are new entrants to the workforce do not qualify for Employment Insurance (EI) funded training programs because they have not been able to contribute to the fund in the past. Focus group participants report that good, local training programs are often restricted to EI recipients, youth, or women who are on social assistance programming.

2.7 Accessibility

Limited access to public transportation was identified as a barrier for many women who are seeking employment training or who want to access employment opportunities.

2.0 Program Awareness

All focus group sessions reported that rural women had a general lack of awareness regarding existing training programs that are available in rural locations. The lack of awareness was attributed to frequent changes in program scheduling and availability, poor promotion and advertising, and to an overall lack of organizational awareness. Many women could not identify employment and self-employment programs and services that were available within their own communities.

When asked to consider whether there was a need for training programs that were designed specifically for women, more than half of the focus groups reported that they favoured some gender-specific training. Gender-specific training was most appropriate for soft-skill training such as self-confidence and pre-employment skill programming. Job-specific, technical training could be offered in non-gender specific environments. Some focus group participants were in favour of a customized training program specifically designed for older women. It was reported that older women have specific employment development needs to enter, or to re-enter, the work force after a long period of unemployment.

3.0 Employer Support

Although it was recognized that some employers in rural communities were already doing what they could to support women in the workforce, focus group participants indicated that employer support was still a barrier. For example, in order to help encourage more women to enter the workforce, it was reported that

some employers could provide better on-the-job training, improved orientation, higher wages, and more flexible hours. Other needed accommodations from employers include on-site childcare, childcare subsidies, and transportation subsidies.

4.0 Program Delivery

Focus group participants noted areas where programming and program delivery could be strengthened. They noted the following specific needs:

1. Improved access to flexible training program, distance delivery options.
2. Gender-specific training programs for pre-employment and employment development, 'soft' skills.
3. Computer and Internet training.
4. Access to locally-based training programs.
5. Broader training inclusion for rural women who are excluded from EI sponsored employment training, training for youth and training for women on social assistance.

When asked about what kind of training delivery options would be beneficial to rural women, the focus group participants reported a desire for flexible delivery methods. Rural women would like the training programs to be offered at various times during the year, and at different time during the day. To support training attendance, many focus group participants expressed the need for transportation and childcare costs to be subsidized.

Many of the focus group participants reported that they were not familiar with computers so internet-based training was a poor option for them. In addition, many rural communities do not have access to high speed Internet so computer-based training is difficult.

5.0 Self-Employment

Self-employment issues and related rural concerns were explored through the telephone survey of rural women. During the focus groups, the results of the telephone survey were further explored and validated. Self-employment barriers included:

1. Management of home/work balance.
2. Lack of self-employment benefits.
3. Customized loan programs and support

Although the needs of rural women seeking employment are similar to the needs of rural women who are self-employed, there are some issues that are unique to the self-employed.

6.1 Maintaining a Home/Work Balance

Many focus group participants indicated that the complexity of maintaining a home/work balance was a major barrier to those who were interested in considering self-employment. It is commonly understood that self-employed businesswomen work irregular hours and can often work more than an average

full-time employee. Work commitments often conflict with their household, childcare, family, and volunteer responsibilities.

6.2 Lack of Benefits

Focus group respondents provided a mixed response to the need for a benefit program for self-employed women. Approximately half of the focus group participants reported that the self-employed women had to accept the fact that there were no publicly funded benefits available to the self-employed. For many rural women, working without employment benefits was a common scenario. The lack of benefits was a greater issue for women who were unmarried and therefore not covered by a spouse's benefit plan, and for those women who had the responsibility of children.

6.3 Financial Support/Customized Loan Program

Focus group participants reported that a lack of financial support and access to business loans was a barrier to self-employment. Many rural women reported that they had difficulty acquiring business loans due to their limited credit history and to the bank's perception of them as higher risk. The majority of focus group participants agreed on the need for a customized loan program designed specifically for self-employed women.

6.0 Trend Analysis

Key issues that were covered during the focus group sessions have been analyzed through the following set of trend analysis tables. The documented results of each of the focus groups have been reviewed to determine how often each of the issues was raised.

Focus group sessions have been divided into two categories. The first category reflects communities that are located outside of the population core of southern Ontario and are noted as "Remote Rural". The remaining communities are identified as "Rural" although they are typically located within 1 – 1 ½ hours of a large urban centre located in the population core of southern Ontario.