



Rural Families and Gendered Relations and Divisions of Work and Care

What this research is about

Although research has explored the gendered divisions of paid work and unpaid care in diverse families, there is a knowledge gap about the experiences of rural families. Compared with large urban areas, families living in rural areas often have to travel longer distances to workplaces, schools, services, and amenities. Rural life also has different kinds of work and different lifestyles. Therefore, living in rural areas can influence “who does what” within households. This study aims to shed light on how work/care relations are negotiated and managed among families in Canada living in remote, rural areas.

What the researchers did

This study was part of a larger project that included a national survey and interviews with individuals and couples (a total of 155 people from 88 diverse families). The researchers carried out follow-up interviews with 22 people (11 mother/father couples) living in rural communities of 5,000 or less. During the interview, participants used a digital app called the Care/Work Portrait to sort cards outlining various responsibilities and tasks related to household work, childcare, extended family and community care/work, paid work, and self-care. The couples were asked to reflect on the divisions of tasks and responsibilities, what they preferred and disliked, and what their ideal of divisions of work and care would look like. The couples’ discussion and interaction during this process provided an in-depth understanding of how they planned, negotiated, and managed work/care relations in the rural context.

What the researchers found

Living further away from services, amenities, workplaces, and other households (the “distance-to-density” dimension

What you need to know

The distribution of work and care is gendered, but there is a knowledge gap about how this plays out in rural families. Rural areas have a lower population density, and families often have to travel longer distances to go to workplaces and access services and supports. The researchers interviewed 11 mother/father couples living in remote, rural communities in Canada on how they negotiate and manage work/care relations. These families discussed how they plan and divide paid and unpaid work, connect with others in their community to coordinate childcare, and engage in homesteading practices. The distance from services and supports means more and different kinds of work. For many families, these challenges are offset by the perceived benefits of rural life, such as safety, closeness to nature, and a stronger sense of community.

of rural life) affects how care and work are experienced by and negotiated within rural families. Participants mentioned having to factor the time, distance, and cost of long commutes into their work and care planning. Several couples mentioned using strategies such as “errand batching” and travelling to the city on occasion so that they could shop and accomplish multiple tasks in one trip. Living in rural areas also adds a “mental load” and worry about accessing needed supports and services.

Participants shared that they divide household work differently due to distance from amenities and workplaces, as it is more convenient for those who work outside of the home to run certain errands. For some families, errands that have traditionally been seen as a mother’s responsibility (e.g., grocery shopping) are done by the fathers who work

outside of the home, as some mothers do not have paid work or they work from home.

Participants also expressed that access to childcare is scarce, which affects their work/care relations and has gendered consequences for career opportunities. The lack of access to childcare keeps some women out of the labour force or limits their involvement in paid work.

For many rural families, there is a need to create and coordinate informal childcare. Some participants mentioned “teaming up” with friends in the community so that their children could socialize and play with other children of similar age.

“Distance-to-density” also means extra work and different kinds of work. Participants reported homesteading practices to combat the costs of living and to manage the distance from services and amenities, such as homeschooling or growing their own food. Their accounts pointed to the contributions of community or family members, including children, in this extra unpaid work.

One facet of rural life arising from the lower population density is having larger properties and “more space,” which offers some benefits but also presents its own challenges. The perceptions that rural areas are safer, close to nature, and more neighbourly shape care/work relations. Many participants thought that their rural areas are safer than urban areas, that closeness to nature is better for health and their children’s development, and that people help each other out in a rural community. At the same time, not all families were highly connected to their community, which could lead to a sense of social isolation and increase unpaid household work due to the distance from services and supports.

How you can use this research

A better understanding of how work/care relations are experienced by rural families can contribute to discussions on gendered divisions of domestic labour. This can inform what supports and services are needed for families living in rural communities.

About the researchers

Karen Foster is a Professor and former Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Rural Futures for Atlantic Canada at Dalhousie University. **Andrea Doucet** is Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Women’s and Gender Studies at Brock University and a former Canada Research Chair in

Gender, Work and Care. **Laura Fisher** is a Ph.D. student in the Interdisciplinary Ph.D. program (Social Sciences and Health), Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia. Questions about this study can be sent to Karen Foster at karen.foster@dal.ca.

Citation

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Research Snapshot by Mallory Maschke

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