

Book Review Symposium: Women Abuse in Rural Places

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Abstract

In this review symposium, four readers present their views on Walter DeKeseredy's book, *Woman Abuse in Rural Places*. These reviews emerged from an author meets critics session at the 2022 annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology (Atlanta, Georgia). The four reviewers were: (1) Venessa Garcia, Criminal Justice Program, New Jersey City University; (2) Deena A. Isom, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of South Carolina; (3) Jessica Peterson, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Southern Oregon University; and (4) Ralph Weisheit, Department of Criminal Justice Sciences, Illinois State University. Walter DeKeseredy then addresses the various comments of the reviewers with a response titled "If I had to do it again".

Keywords: rural; women abuse; male peer support; power; class; gender

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Once again, Walter DeKeseredy adds to the knowledge on abuse against women in rural places. As a left realist, DeKeseredy argues that the only way to end (or at least substantially decrease) violence against women in rural places is to eliminate patriarchy and systematically change capitalist and government structures that work to marginalize and directly and indirectly victimize rural women. In his book, *Woman Abuse in Rural Places*, DeKeseredy examines several forms of woman abuse, which he recognizes as violence that is “primarily committed by men and by male-dominated corporations and governments” (p. 13). With this focus, he examines interpersonal violence, including intimate femicide, non-lethal forms of interpersonal woman abuse (Chapter 2), as well as corporate and state-corporate violence against rural women (Chapter 4), all of which are found on the continuum of woman abuse (also see Kelly, 1987, 1988). DeKeseredy’s book provides a detailed review of the literature on intimate woman abuse pointing to findings that male peer support, rural male patriarchal attitudes and beliefs (including proprietariness and acceptance of woman abuse), booms in places with resource-extractive economies, exposure to pornography, and rural gun culture are among the primary variables that distinguish interpersonal woman abuse in rural places from nonrural places. The pursuit of profit, militarism, and institutional sexism are strong predictors of corporate and state-corporate violence against rural women. DeKeseredy argues that corporate and state-corporate woman abuse bleeds into interpersonal woman abuse by reasserting patriarchy, hence, to stop the latter the former must also be stopped.

Examining the inadequacy of theories to explain rural woman abuse (Chapter 3), DeKeseredy calls for increased sociological research that examines women in the margins. He calls for more research, including quantitative studies and studies using innovative methodologies. He also calls for longitudinal studies as well as data collected from male offenders, especially those who have not been arrested. DeKeseredy argues that many feminists have capitulated to mainstream academe and the pressures of tenure and have moved away from conducting original data collection for time-consuming studies needed to expand knowledge in this field (p. 79). He closes his book with suggestions for ending woman abuse in rural places (Chapter 5), including interagency cooperation and coordination, stricter gun control, creating women’s police stations, changing the male peer support culture, increasing preventive and protective services and personnel in rural places, increasing economic opportunities for rural women (including increasing wages and work hardening initiatives), establishing initiatives to help Indigenous women, moving away from progressive retreatism by enacting systemic structural changes that do not render the crimes of the powerful invisible, creating a new left realist human rights agenda that takes on all woman abuse, and creating community-based initiatives that investigate and call out corporate harms.

Indeed, DeKeseredy does an excellent job of bringing forth the major concerns of rural criminology and its investigation of woman abuse. Furthermore, he identifies many limitations within his own work, however, there are some limitations he does not

acknowledge. DeKeseredy rightly acknowledges that there is not enough rural woman abuse research outside of rural Australia, Europe, and North America. He attempts to remedy this by including research from other nations. However, the vast majority of the studies he reviews are from the very geographic areas named. DeKeseredy does include research from other countries but either addresses them in passing or does not provide the rich detail he does with studies from Australia and some other nations within the Global South, Canada, and the United States. Understandably, the research is scant, but more space should have been given to other nations and cultures. In essence, while DeKeseredy criticizes European colonialism and addresses attempts of southern criminologists to address crime and justice more accurately in the Global South, DeKeseredy approaches the topic through a cultural lens that likely will not adequately address woman abuse in rural places in many African and Asian nations. For that matter, South American nations were not visited in this book to any real extent that knowledge could be gained. DeKeseredy acknowledges the lack of research in many regions of the world and the language barriers and access to published works in non-English speaking countries. Yet, his book added to the missed opportunity. Over the years, DeKeseredy has collaborated with many renown scholarly. There was an opportunity for him to do so here.

Among the suggestions for change provided by DeKeseredy is the creation (or continuation) of women's police stations (WPS) (pp. 104-105). In recognizing their existence in Brazil, other South American countries were mentioned as well as Asian and African countries. He cites findings on the successes of WPS, and suggests they be used in the Global North. However, not discussed were other findings that revealed a form of ghettoization of WPS and women police as "other" and undesirable in the field. Among other studies of Brazilian WPS (Hautzinger, 2020; Santos, 2005), researchers found that women police working in a male-dominated profession hostile to women were given few resources and pushed so far to the periphery that they became hostile to the cause of helping victims of woman abuse and worked toward being transferred to a general police department. In India, researchers have found that WPS tend to be the only recourse for victims of woman abuse (see Garcia, 2021). Yet, some WPS in India have not impacted the rate of woman abuse (Amaral et al., 2019). On the other side, women police experience a form of state-corporate violence there, as in most other nations, when they are treated unequally and do not receive equity in the workforce. DeKeseredy's discussion of the political and economic conditions of women farmworkers also pertains to women police. Women police experience a high rate of sexual harassment and sexual assault as well as sex discrimination within the police organization (Garcia, 2021). Within many nations, women police worked very hard to get away from WPS, which limit their abilities to gain fair treatment. DeKeseredy's call to systemically change the structure of corporations and governments to weed out patriarchy that victimizes women applies to women in law enforcement. Corporate/government abuse of women is very real for women police. In an organization that rejects women within its own ranks and still ghettoizes woman abuse within police work, it is not realistic to believe that WPS is a solution, and pushing women police into WPS within nations that worked hard to gain gender equality would be experienced with a sense of moving backward. The suggestion to create more WPS is a conversation that needs more discussion.

Another area that needs to be expanded in the book is intersectionality. DeKeseredy provides a brief discussion of intersectionality within feminist research and recognizes the necessity to examine woman abuse among marginalized women. However, he does not include enough research on Indigenous women victims in his discussion of interpersonal woman abuse and barely touches abuse of other racially and ethnically marginalized women, or of women of marginalized ages, religions, nationalities, and sexual orientations, etc. DeKeseredy describes that “rural critical criminology is also starting to engage with intersectionality” (p. 54). Within this book, the reader is given the impression that the victims are neutral in identity (gender, race/ethnicity, age, religion, etc.). We know that women of various backgrounds experience crime and justice differently, thus, his approach, especially when revisiting colonialism and Indigenous initiatives in Chapter 5, suffers from a generalizability approach (see Belknap, 2015). To include intersectionality in his analysis, DeKeseredy must address difference in every aspect of his discussion. Approaching the topic in a predominantly neutral discussion inherently renders marginal women invisible.

The limitations discussed above are likely not news to DeKeseredy as he is probably the biggest critique of his own work. Walter DeKeseredy works tirelessly to close loopholes in the research, and I am confident that his is up to the challenges presented here. DeKeseredy’s book, *Woman Abuse in Rural Places*, is a must read for all scholars of woman abuse. Even with the limitations described above, DeKeseredy adds vital information to the field of woman abuse in general and woman abuse in rural places. DeKeseredy logically outlines the issues with the field, the theoretical limitations, and endeavors to put forth new ideas. I look forward to reading his next book.

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The abuse of women is an epidemic that spans the globe. DeKeseredy's (2021) *Woman Abuse in Rural Places* is a much-needed work that not only bridges the gaps in the literature between feminist theories of woman abuse and critical rural criminology but pushes us forward through integrating cultural comparisons and globalization by thinking beyond our Western borders. Such analysis is vital to knowledge building as the lines between countries and cultures are continuously blurred. DeKeseredy provides compelling critiques of the terminology and definitions often used in the abuse literature that not only limit research, policy, and laws but are far too often weaponized by politicians and some orthodox theorists and researchers, leading to further harm and victimization of some of the most vulnerable within society.

DeKeseredy seamlessly synthesizes, integrates, and extrapolates on extant literature to provide a multi-level and broad definitions of woman abuse, capturing all harmful actions between online harassment to abuses from the powerful and the state against women. DeKeseredy also centers the harms of patriarchy and hegemonic (toxic) masculinity, not only in his theorizing, but with his deliberate choice of labeling the problem – woman abuse. By limiting the focus on cisgender, arguably heterosexual relationships, DeKeseredy also highlights the unique and distinct lived experiences and social positionings of those from varied gender identities and sexual orientations and how specialized attention is warranted and needed for diverse groups so the assorted harms against them are not discounted. But what is most novel of DeKeseredy's argument is the incorporation of rural as a space and place that discordantly conditions the likelihood of woman abuse. Power, class, and gender (and even sexuality) are embedded throughout his critical theorizing, yet one central factor is overlooked – race, especially in rural spaces.

While DeKeseredy discusses the importance of intersectionality and incorporates it in many ways, including featuring works on the experiences of Indigenous women, a deep discussion of race and racialization are missing in *Woman Abuse in Rural Places*, particularly given a central focus of the book is the role of power. Rural is commonly defined as geographic areas consisting of low population numbers and an agricultural driven economy that often supply food, water, energy, and other natural resources. In the US, 'rural' may be considered synonymous with white given most rural communities' populations are typically upwards of 90% white, and that rural has been treated as such in the empirical literature, especially in recent qualitative works (e.g., Hochschild's (2016) *Strangers in Their Own Land* and Wuthnow's (2018) *The Left Behind*). Yet, while much of rural America is white, particularly in the West and Midwest, this is not always the case, especially in the South. The vast majority of Black Americans reside in the South, with the largest populations living in Texas, Florida, and Georgia (Tamir, 2021). Furthermore, Blacks make up a large proportion of rural populations across the South, accounting for 22.2% in Alabama, 25% in Georgia, 30.5% in Louisiana, 38.6% in Mississippi, 20.4% in North Carolina, and 38.1% in South

Carolina (Rural Health Information Hub, 2023); thus, the South is not the ‘Black Belt’ solely for its soil. And, ‘rural’ should not be assumed synonymous with white.

To incorporate a critical race lens to DeKeseredy’s *Woman Abuse in Rural Places* opens the door to several more empirical questions. For instance, how does whiteness condition rural, white men’s likelihood to engage in abuse? How does whiteness impact rural, white women’s experiences of abuse? How do the associations between patriarchy and masculinity with abuse vary for rural Black, Indigenous, and people of Color (BIPOC) compared to their white counterparts? How does systemic and institutional racism, rooted in the myths of white supremacy, impact BIPOC people’s risks of engaging in or experiencing woman abuse? Are there varied coping mechanisms or escape routes between white women and various BIPOC women? Are there variations between woman abuse in rural BIPOC communities? If so, why? These are just some of the questions that arise when race is integrated into the model, and such brings us closer to a true intersectional understanding, particularly from an integrative structured identities model (Isom, 2020) standpoint.

A significant contribution of *Woman Abuse in Rural Places* is its global perspective. Yet, most of the work highlighted is still focused on white-dominated places (e.g., Canada, Australia). Racialization, the history of race, and racial hierarchies obviously vary across the planet. Yet, so much of the world has been impacted by European colonization, and we are seeing the reawakening of populism in white majorities across the globe (Kaufman, 2019). Thus, we also need to examine these differences within a global context. For instance, what about the abuse experiences of multi-marginalized women in the Global South? Applying such a lens further builds on the already expansive reach of DeKeseredy’s important work.

DeKeseredy ends *Woman Abuse in Rural Places* with some radical suggestions for social and political shifts to mitigate woman abuse, particularly as he quotes Audre Lorde stating that the “master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (1983, as cited in DeKeseredy, 2021, p. 113). This is a reminder that as progressive scholars, thinkers, and activists, we must never forget the current systems and structures were never meant to support and protect the most oppressed and vulnerable. Thus, we need a radical imagination to stop woman abuse and other social atrocities. And, as DeKeseredy so boldly argues, this applies to pushing against our orthodox theoretical traditions as well as revered outlets. When ‘science’ is uplifted for being experimental, atheoretical, statistically complex, or supportive of the status quo over critical, radical, and progressive scholarship and theory that aims to challenge and reimagine the system (and society), we all lose, particularly those harmed, trapped, marginalized, and oppressed by those systems. DeKeseredy provides a loud call for us to keep up the good fight, to get into good trouble, and to push against the orthodox boundaries to help make a better, safer, more just world for women and for all.

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I had the privilege of reading and critiquing Walter DeKeseredy's 2021 book, *Woman Abuse in Rural Places*, in an Author Meets Critic panel at the annual American Society of Criminology meeting in 2022. I am not an expert in intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, or victimization studies. However, as a scholar who predominately focuses on rural policing, I provided a critique from both a broad criminological perspective and a justice system perspective. A few of my key critiques are described in this essay.

Early in the manuscript, DeKeseredy expresses disagreement with the term intimate partner violence (IPV) which is the common phrase used in discussions of abuse or violence between sexual and romantic partners/ex-partners. He argues that the gender-neutral term erases the fact that men are predominately perpetrators in these encounters and women are predominately the victims. Instead, he uses "women-abuse" in the book and suggests that scholars should develop a term to describe each category of abuse:

"Thus, to avoid buttressing the interests of right-wing men and the women who support them, more specific terms that describe the violent experiences of LGBTQ community members should be seriously considered." (p. 11)

DeKeseredy goes on to suggest that violence between intimate partners be categorized, discussed, and researched by specific populations, including, "'intimate partner violence against lesbian partners,' 'intimate violence against gay partners,' and 'intimate violence against trans partners'" (p. 11). While I appreciate DeKeseredy's concerns, I am not convinced that these suggestions provide a solution. First, this suggestion implies that "woman abuse" as discussed in the book only refers to violence perpetrated by cisgender men against cisgender women. Second, terminology such as "lesbian" or "gay" may be less favorable terms for many in the modern queer community, particularly as this language has rigid implications for sexual orientation and favors cisgender identities. Given our constantly evolving understanding of gender and sexuality, dozens of phrases or fields of study would be needed to capture violence committed between a variety of partnership styles if we followed DeKeseredy's suggestion. Lack of parsimony aside, the term "woman abuse" does render some victims of intimate partner violence invisible; patriarchal structures and socialization impact all genders – albeit perhaps in different ways – and does not only apply to "male-on-female" violence.

One potential solution to the author's concern is to adopt the term "male-perpetrated intimate partner violence" to describe woman abuse, as defined in the book, as well as violence that is perpetrated by cisgender or transgender men against a partner of any gender or sexuality. Certainly, factors that impact violence or relationship strains may differ in relationships where one or more of the members are part of the LGBTQ+ community. However, many of the arguments made by DeKeseredy concerning patriarchal structures and culture must certainly also impact men who are in non-heterosexual relationships.

I should first note, that “patriarchy” as discussed throughout the book seems to really mean “white male patriarchy.” However, it is unclear if the patriarchy mentioned is *simply different* in rural areas (e.g., a uniquely rural “brand” of patriarchy) or *facilitated differently* via the rural environment. For example, DeKeseredy uses the noted increase in women abuse seen in rural boomtowns to explain how patriarchal ideas that *are already present* are *exacerbated* by the influx of young working men. In communities that are notorious for resisting outsiders, how do these outsider men adapt and integrate so quickly? And if such a process is so quick and easy, is “rural patriarchy” simply patriarchy in rural places? It should then follow that theories focus on the rural place as shaping male patriarchal behavior – or outcomes – rather than rural men having any different motivations for their behavior when compared to men in any other location.

Additionally, as a policing scholar focused on decision-making within and operations of criminal justice systems, I was disappointed in the lack of discussion of system actors’ role in perpetrating or maintaining women abuse in rural places. Prosecutors, judges, probation officers, and other system actors can all impact women’s access to justice. DeKeseredy mentions the issue of the “Ol’ Boys Network” regarding police officers, but does not go into depth or explain how other system actors might be a part of such network.

Finally, chapter 5 – titled “What is to be done about woman abuse in rural places?” – was largely unsatisfying. In part, this dissatisfaction may simply be due to my personal cynicism as I have difficulty in believing that “changing men and challenging male peer support” is an achievable goal. More pointedly however, some of the provided solutions contradict sentiments expressed earlier in the book. For example, DeKeseredy recognizes all-women police stations, such as those that first emerged in Brazil in the 1980s, and explains that these all-women police stations do not exist in the Global North. He goes on to propose they be established in rural communities around the globe. Although a conversation about culture and context regarding such policing practices would be in order, DeKeseredy’s support of such an approach contradicts his own observations regarding rural women.

DeKeseredy claims that women’s police stations would “definitely [...] be very distinct from the good ol’ boys network” (p. 105). Yet, when discussing Ohio women working on farms, he explains that women conform to the patriarchal culture when working in a male-dominated field and may even help perpetuate the culture. Additionally, DeKeseredy agrees with Friedrichs’ claim that the approach of simply replacing male leaders in the corporate world with women will not likely change the environment (p.93) and calls on feminist theorists to “effectively address that fact that, though mainly committed by men, there are cases [of crimes of the powerful] where women play active roles in these crimes” (p. 96). He explains how women becoming involved in the production of pornography has not changed the culture of the industry or resulting harm, but rather has exposed female porn producers as apologists for the status quo. He even begs the question, “would this also be the case in other industries if women achieved total gender equity or dominated corporate leadership?” (p. 95). Remaining consistent in this logic, how would women becoming more involved in law

enforcement or dominating certain police agencies change the culture of policing, alleviate the harm done by the institution, or eradicate barriers for women experiencing abuse in rural settings?

Regardless of the above critiques, *Woman Abuse in Rural Places* is an extensive and timely addition to the literature on victimization and rural justice studies. While reading, I found myself noting questions that would then be answered in the next sentence. DeKeseredy does a nice job of evaluating the topic both theoretically and empirically. He rightfully critiques the academy for discouraging qualitative research and case studies that are so important to furthering our understanding of issues such as woman abuse in rural communities. DeKeseredy's decades-long experience and work in this field provide wonderful insight into the otherwise overlooked victimization of rural women and the path forward.

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Woman abuse is a global phenomenon that has probably been around as long as there are women and men. *Woman Abuse in Rural Places* provides an overview of what is known about the abuse of women in rural areas. The book is impressive in the range of dimensions of the problem it covers and in the number of resources it draws on for its description. One is hard pressed to find a more comprehensive coverage of the topic. The chapter on woman abuse and crimes of the powerful is a welcome discussion, as is the inclusion of examples from around the globe.

The book also proposes a theoretical framework for understanding the problem. One of the valuable contributions of the book is that it repeatedly points out areas in which more research is needed. This is a great source of ideas for new scholars looking to stake out a research area. The book is also highly readable, making it useful for undergraduate as well as graduate students. Throughout the book DeKeseredy generously sprinkles quotes from abused women. Making the narrative personal gives the narrative a power it might not otherwise have.

There is another practical advantage to this book, one that authors and publishers sometimes miss. The book is relatively short at 150 pages, 118 pages if one excludes references. It is also an affordable paperback. This means it can be used as a supplement in a variety of courses, both undergraduate and graduate. Affordable supplements like this are all too rare but are invaluable learning tools for students.

As is true of most who study rural crime, DeKeseredy struggles with finding a definition of rural that is completely satisfying. Early in the book he suggests there are four criteria for considering an area rural:

1. smaller populations/lower population density;
2. residents more likely to know each other's business and come into regular contact with each other;
3. less autonomous than before with a reduced gap between rural and urban; and
4. cultural, social, and economic divides more obvious in rural communities than ever before

Points 1 and 2 are true, but they are vague and ultimately not helpful as a guide for deciding if a particular area is rural. Points 3 and 4 are based on time and suggest a contemporary definition of rural that might not have been applicable in the past. Are places that have not become more like urban no longer considered rural? Are places not considered rural if they have low population density but have not seen an obvious expansion of cultural, social, and economic divides? How large must those expansions be to consider an area rural?

Related to the common problem of defining rural is the problem of failing to fully take into account the extreme variability among rural communities – economic, political, social (race, age, and religion, as examples), and geographic. Some of this is touched on in his discussion of theory, but more could have been said. Ultimately there is the challenge of having a definition of rural that is parsimonious while simultaneously recognizing rural variability. This, too, tends to be a problem faced by most who study rural crime.

None of these criticisms take away from the value of the book. I can't think of any research that is based on a wholly satisfying and clearly operationalizable definition of rural, an operational definition that goes beyond simple population counts to include measurable cultural, economic, and social factors. The reality is that most who study rural crime end up using highly subjective definitions.

DeKeseredy rejects the terminology intimate partner violence (IPV) in favor of the term violence against women (VAW). He also makes a distinction between VAW and such categories as “domestic violence”, “intimate violence against lesbian partners”, intimate violence against gay partners”, and “intimate violence against trans partners”. I can think of three reasons why he might make such a distinction. First, and his primary argument is that VAW more explicitly recognizes the power imbalance between men and women and gives priority to the idea of women as victims. This is in contrast to IPV or the term domestic violence, in which men may also be victims, downplaying the reality that by far the most frequent victims are women. I believe there are two additional reasons for using VAW rather than IPV, though he does not focus on these. Second of the three reasons is that by limiting the book to VAW he is keeping the discussion manageable. There is plenty to talk about by focusing only on VAW. Third, the theoretical framework for the book draws heavily on the concept of patriarchy. Perhaps such things as lesbian-on-lesbian violence or gay-on-gay violence don't easily fit a model based on patriarchy. That may be a discussion for another paper or book, but it does raise an interesting question. Do each of these different forms of interpersonal violence require an explanation using a separate theoretical model?

I would also raise a minor point about language. Figure 1.1 on page 18 is titled “The continuum of woman abuse.” However, the text accompanying the figure says “Again, each item on this continuum is not deemed to be more serious than the other.” However, the word continuum implies an order. In this case the figure is more a typology than a continuum. DeKeseredy is to be commended for attempting to couch violence against rural women within a theoretical framework. I would take issue with including patriarchy among the variables included in his theoretical framework. There is no question in my mind that patriarchy exists and drives the abuse of women, but it strikes me as more of a constant than a variable. For example, on page 40, the book cites Renzetti (2013) (sic) “In most societies around the world,” regardless of whether they are urban, suburban, or rural,” “the gender structure is patriarchal.”

For patriarchy to be useful in a theoretical model it must be shown to vary. Just as such things as income or race can be useful because they are variables. A model including

patriarchy would need to argue that the level of violence against women is related to the level of patriarchy in a community or society. However, nothing in the discussion suggests such variability in structural patriarchy, or how it might be measured.

Regarding theory, I also have concerns that DeKeseredy suggests a number of situations involving violence against rural women in which a separate theory would be required (e.g., theories of corporate/state crime, male peer support theory, theories regarding natural resource extraction, and abuse in boom towns). On page 70 DeKeseredy states "... it is not only about crafting new theories of rural woman abuse, but it I also about generating fresh sociological theories of male-to-female abuse in any context." Is there a point where we have a separate theory for every type of setting in which rural women are abused? Is such a proliferation useful?

There is no question it is a good thing when women are placed in positions of power, including increasing the number of women as police officers. That has proven to be a challenge in rural areas where small population sizes mean this might not be practical. Having more women as police officers is a noble goal. However, a goal that might be easier to achieve would be to have more women as dispatchers, the people who make first contact with women seeking help from abuse. It is also true that putting women in positions of power won't always mean those women will aggressively work to improve the condition of all women. Such political figures as Lauren Boebert, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Sarah Palin, and Karie Lake may be counter examples.

Knowledge about woman abuse in rural places is likely to expand, perhaps in part because of the ideas presented in this book. I have some recommendations for future research and for the next edition of this book. First, the book includes only two fleeting mentions of the importance of religion in rural woman abuse. This would seem to be a fertile area for research. Second, there are two books by Kevin Bales that would provide useful information about the abuse of rural women. The first is *The Slave Next Door: Human Trafficking and Slavery in America Today* that provides an excellent coverage of the abuse of women in agriculture in the U.S. The second is *Blood and Earth: Modern Slavery, Ecocide, and the Secret to Saving the World*. This book takes a global look at the abuse of people (including women) in such areas as mining, fishing, and timber extraction.

Third, the concluding chapter discusses how the problem of woman abuse in rural areas can be addressed. The section on legal reforms focuses almost entirely on criminal justice. It would be useful to add civil justice to the discussion. Lawsuits have a way of encouraging change by individuals and organizations that are reluctant to change.

Women Abuse in Rural Places is a strong addition to the literature on rural crime. The book deftly summarizes much of what is known about the issue while providing readers with ideas for future research.

“If I Had to Do It Again...”: A Response to My Colleagues’ Commentaries

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Writing *Woman Abuse in Rural Places* was a privilege for three key reasons. First, I had the pleasure of crafting this book while I was on sabbatical in the winter of 2020. This temporary reprieve from the tyranny of an educational landscape that horrifically evolved from the once ongoing, rigorous (though periodically nerve-racking) pursuit of what British ultra-realist Simon Winlow (2018) refers to as *genuine intellectualism* to something much worse than the *iron cage of bureaucracy* featured in Max Weber’s (1904) book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Returning to Winlow, there is now limited time to “conduct innovative research” (p. 35), and as Joe Donnermeyer and I (see Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2018) pointed out five years ago, university/college administrators’ decision-making, more so than any time in the past, is based on standards of efficiency and control of the lower echelons through new rules and regulations, with barely enough time for procedures to be learned before more revisions create another round of workshops, retreats, and on-line training videos (with testing and certification) and thus create a treadmill of demands for the time of faculty.

In his book *The Criminological Imagination*, a firecracker of a scholarly work heavily influenced by C. Wright Mills’ (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, Jock Young (2011) claimed, and rightfully so, that abstracted empiricism’s (e.g., sanitized statistical research divorced from theory) iron clad grip on contemporary U.S. criminology “has expanded to a level which would have surely astonished Mills himself” (p. viii). Similarly, the iron cage of a heavily bureaucratized society that, in the words of Ritzer and Stepnisky (2014) “worried Weber so much” would be his worst nightmare today (p. 136). When he was alive, quoting again Ritzer and Stepnisky, he declared that in totally rationalized and bureaucratized society like the current one, “the only hope lies with isolated charismatic individuals who somehow manage to avoid the coercive power of society” (p. 136). I wouldn’t define myself as charismatic, but I managed to avoid, in Winlow’s (2018) words, wasting time “on pointless tasks foisted upon us by our employers” and write a book that four distinguished experts in their fields find an interesting read and one worthy of critique (p. 35).

The second reason for why producing this book was a privilege was that doing so offered me not only a sanctuary from the iron cage, but also from COVID-19, which killed thousands of people in the winter of 2020. As I state in the preface, I am lucky to have had the chance to compose this monograph in the safety of my home and to have the financial security to do so. Even so, always at the forefront of my mind was the life events stress experienced by those who were not so fortunate, especially the millions of women and children around the world trapped in domestic/household settings with misogynistic, violent men because of state-imposed, rigid safety measures (e.g., social distancing), unemployment, and other factors related to the pandemic. My fear and anxiety were well-founded considering

that since the pandemic, violence against women “increased to unprecedented levels” (by 25 to 33% globally) (Mineo, 2022, p. 1).

Jackie Ferguson (2021), Head of Content & Programming for the Diversity Movement (<https://thediversitymovement.com/team/jackie-ferguson/>), notes that “For most people, privilege is a dirty word. It carries a stigma that feels shameful and heavy.” Yet, she also reminds us that “privilege is reflected in many situations, many lifestyles, and many demographics” and that “almost every one of us has some privilege that we can leverage to build a better culture” and to “advocate for equity and inclusion across their organizations and communities” (p. 1). The third reason, then, why writing this book was a privilege was that it gave me the time and opportunity to contribute to the ongoing and ever-changing struggle to help bring the plight of abused rural women out of the darkness. Rural women were always at high risk of experiencing a wide range of deadly and highly injurious male behaviors, but they were historically given short shrift by the academy, government agencies, the mass media, and the general public. The good news, though, is that the scholarly literature on woman abuse in rural places has, as described in my book, rapidly grown since 2006, but we still have much more work to do to reduce an alarming amount of pain and suffering.

I would be remiss if I didn’t follow in the footsteps of male feminist violence against women researcher James Ptacek (2023) by noting that my privileged social location has *both* strengths and limitations. The primary strengths that I brought to the process of writing *Woman Abuse in Rural Places* are that I have nearly 40 years of experience doing critical feminist research on various types of violence against women, I am very involved in grass-roots anti-violence work, I have been mentored by some of the world’s leading experts in the field, and I have a loving family and dear friends and colleagues.

Ptacek’s limitations are the same as mine and warrant careful consideration when men like us do the type of social scientific work that we do:

I am a straight white, professional man... I identify with the gender I was assigned at birth. While I have occasionally encountered angry men on the streets, I actually have no experience of being truly terrified, of fearing that someone actually meant to do me serious harm. Most women I know can’t say this. Many gay men I know can’t say this.

I have no history of abusive treatment of the police. I assume that my gender, class position, race, sexual orientation, religious background, and citizenship have generally served to protect me from violence. These are privileges, which operate as the flip side of discrimination (pp. 10-11).

This reflective statement is a good segue to responding to Deena Isom’s commentary. She, like Venessa Garcia, is correct to direct readers to the fact that an in-depth discussion of race and racialization is conspicuously absent from my book. All too often, as Isom reminds us, is that “rural” is assumed to be synonymous with “white.” It was not my inattention to perpetuate this stereotype and much, if not most, of the blame for the selective inattention

given to race/ethnicity is the fact that, as I state in Chapter 2, women “at the margins” (Sokoloff, 2005), including those who are lesbian, transwomen, and women of color have thus far been overlooked in the extant rural woman abuse literature, an issue to be revisited in my response to Jessica Peterson’s commentary. There is, though, an emerging body of research on the violent experiences of women in the Global South (see, for example, Bunei & Rono 2018; DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2018; Miedema & Fulu, 2018) but rural Black and Latina rural North American women have thus far remained exempt from the purview of progressive criminological inquiry. To reiterate what I proclaim at the end of Chapter 2, this selective inattention needs to be remedied soon because when we design rural research projects, “we should always be conscious of who is not there and that we are not hearing their perspectives” (Gilfus et al., 1999, p. 930). This point is also made by Venessa Garcia, and I vow to work much harder to expand my coverage of marginalized rural women in both the Global North and Global South.

Noted in Ralph Weisheit’s commentary is that definitions of rural are important and warrant considerable scrutiny. Indeed, the ways rural, or any other concept for that matter, are defined have major effects on research techniques, theorizing, policies, and ultimately the lives of many people (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2011; Ellis, 1987). Weisheit’s point about the need to “take into account the extreme variability among rural communities” is valid and is much better addressed in an article I published a few years ago (see DuBois et al., 2019) than in my book. In this piece, my colleagues and I concur with the observation that while the lack of recognition of rural settlements’ heterogeneity is often bemoaned, most research considering rural-urban differences in social problems fails to account for this diversity. Although only the most obtuse still believe that “sticks is sticks” when dealing with rural and remote places, the measure typically used to distinguish settlement types actually extends this faulty notion to suburban and urban settlements as if to say “burbs is burbs” and “urbs is urbs” (with apologies to Weisheit et al., 2006). What is needed, and I see eye to eye with Weisheit, is to move beyond noting this limitation to providing a definition and measurement that both is meaningful and can better elucidate the heterogeneity of rural places.

Space limitations preclude me from addressing all of Weisheit’s subsequent constructive criticisms, but there is one in particular that I must tackle. Weisheit takes issue with including the concept of *patriarchy* in one of the theoretical models featured in my book. More specifically, he states, “There is no question in my mind that patriarchy exists and drives the abuse of women, but it strikes me as more of a constant than a variable.” In fairness to Weisheit, the model he is referring to is only very briefly reviewed in Chapter 2 and thus he is not aware that in other descriptions of my offering (DeKeseredy et al., 2004; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009), my colleagues and I make clear that it is a constant and I have always stated this throughout my entire career studying various types of violence against women.

Definitions, too, are of central concern in Jessica Peterson’s critique of my book. She says that my use of the term *woman abuse* renders “some victims of intimate partner violence invisible.” Missing from her critique, however, is more detailed reference to the section in my

book about how gender-neutral terms like *intimate partner violence*, though deemed by many to be more inclusive, are highly dangerous and are being used as you read this rejoinder by men's rights groups and the politicians who support them to eliminate major legislative efforts to curb woman abuse. Nonetheless, Peterson and I agree that it is essential to clearly name the behaviors researchers are talking about, which is a key point of Chapter 1.

Peterson's critique can be construed by people who don't know me to mean that I am insensitive to intimate violence in LGBTQ communities, which is not the case. Near the end of Chapter 2, for example, I discuss the fact that lesbian and transwomen have thus far been overlooked in the extant rural woman abuse literature and that this selective inattention needs to be addressed. Today, one would, indeed, be hard pressed to find more than a handful of in-depth studies of intimate violence committed by and against rural LGBTQ people. Hopefully, this trend will change in the near future and if so, I will be among the first to cite the new directions in empirical and theoretical work on violence against members of LGBTQ communities that occurs behind closed doors.

Like Australian male feminist scholar and activist Bob Pease (2019), I strongly agree with academic and political efforts to move away from the gender binary, but one scholar alone cannot be expected to focus on everyone, everything, every country, and every political, economic, and social context. As Peterson graciously admits, she is not an expert on violence in intimate relationships and nor should not be expected to be. Similarly, I cannot be required to cover every type of intimate violence or crime of the powerful. Admittedly, however, I have always (for close to 40 years) examined issues related to male-to-female violence because, as demonstrated by a voluminous literature on masculinities and crime, it is cisgender men who commit the bulk of the violent crimes throughout the world and the targets of their violence in intimate settings are overwhelmingly women.

Peterson and Garcia raise some legitimate concerns about my optimistic view of women's police stations (WPS). Garcia is spot on, in fact, to state that, "The suggestion to create more WPS is a conversation that needs more discussion." Then again, the three of us agree that the status quo is not working and that rural criminal justice systems throughout the world require major reforms.

My colleagues mention significant issues and have carefully read my book with lenses dissimilar to mine, which is all to the good, and I am deeply honored that they took the time and effort to engage with my work. Rural criminology, as the commentators prove, is more vibrant and useful with meaningful and sincere recognitions of different ways of knowing. Nonetheless, what I and the commentators definitely have in common is a commitment to enhancing the health and well-being of people living in rural and remote places. We may advocate for different ways of doing so, but collectively they will make a difference. What is more, while three of the four commentators have problems with my policy proposals suggested in Chapter 5, we agree that it is necessary to avoid simplistic solutions and embrace the value of engaging in a multi-pronged approach.

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Erratum

9/28/2023: Corrected author's name to Venessa Garcia. Added "Associate Professor" to author's affiliation.