

When Rural Men's Work Disappears:
Implications for Rural Women Experiencing Abuse in Intimate Relationships

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Social and economic changes occurring over the last 50 or more years have created major challenges to rural men's masculine identity; thus, their power has become fragile. While job losses have occurred in both urban and rural contexts, especially in the past few years, many researchers insist there is more considerable economic decline and social impact in many rural communities across the U.S. The 'rural crisis' caused by economic restructuring, unemployment, and changes in the types of available jobs for men has generated a crisis in masculinities in small rural communities across the globe. As economically displaced men struggle to maintain gendered expectations from an ideal type of rural hegemonic masculinity that evades them and is losing legitimacy and power in their communities, some men compensate by exerting more control over women, which often ends in violence. It is imperative to continue thinking critically about rural gender relations, recognizing that economic and social change potentially creates or reinforces new forms of patriarchy. Secondary data analyses of qualitative interviews with 43 rural Ohio women and supplementary findings of back-talk interviews with 12 women from similar rural Ohio towns highlight the symbolic function of employment as it contributes to the construction of masculinities and re-construction of rural identities when 'men's work' disappears or changes. This study reveals that as new forms of patriarchy are brewing, women actively resist their abusive relationships while working, both literally and figuratively, to re-articulate a new rural gender order in the face of social and economic changes.