

EXPLORING SOCIAL SUPPORT, SPORT PARTICIPATION, AND RURAL WOMEN'S HEALTH USING PHOTOVOICE



A NATIONAL CURLING STUDY IN ONTARIO, MANITOBA,
NOVA SCOTIA, AND THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES



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The data presented in this booklet are part of a photovoice project conducted in Ontario, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and the Northwest Territories undertaken between 2009 and 2013. The project explored the influence of curling on rural women's health and community life. The information in this booklet represents data collected in seven rural communities by Dr. Beverly D. Leipert (Western University), Dr. Lynn Scruby (University of Manitoba), Dr. Donna Meagher-Stewart (Dalhousie University) and Dr. Heather Mair (University of Waterloo). Funding for this project was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Sport Canada Research Initiative Grant.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to:

1. examine the influence of curling and curling clubs on the social lives and health of rural women,
2. understand how curling activities and meanings differ for women across various rural communities in Canada, and
3. determine how sport and recreation are experienced and understood within the broader contexts of gender and community change in rural areas.

Using the photovoice research method, 52 women and girls, ranging in age from 12 to 75 years with an average age range of 50-60 years, in seven rural communities in Ontario, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and the Northwest Territories were provided with disposable cameras and asked to take pictures that illustrated the effect of curling on their physical, mental, social or other forms of health and the health of their communities. Each participant was also invited to record her perspectives in a log book that was provided to her. Collectively study participants provided 955 photos. These photos and logbook comments formed the basis of group discussions and interviews with the participants.

These rich data sources of photos and written and verbal information revealed four key themes about the significance of curling and rural women's health: 1) *Building Social Connections*, 2) *Facilitating Women's Health and Resiliency*, 3) *Strengthening Rural Community Life*, and 4) *The Past, Present, and Future of Curling*. Important topics and issues were highlighted in each theme.

In Theme One, participants noted that curling facilitates social connections with women and men of all ages, abilities, backgrounds, and curling experience, thereby fostering a sense of family, inclusion, and community.

Theme Two reveals the importance of curling for women's and girls' physical, mental, and social health, and that curling can help impart pride, self-esteem, and self-confidence.

Theme Three highlighted the importance of individuals' and communities' commitment to curling through substantial volunteering, and that curling 'gave back' to communities in its ability to develop and sustain a sense of community.

Theme Four revealed that the history of curling and curling rinks is highly prized in rural communities, and that youth are the future of curling. In addition, more resources, such as good coaches and school curling opportunities, Little Rocks programs, and more recognition in local, national, and international settings for curling and for girls' and women's curling are needed. Participants also noted that the future of curling in rural communities requires substantial financial support, sponsorship, and community commitment to ensure its sustainability and, in smaller communities, its very existence.

As this is the first study to explore curling and rural health issues, findings provide important new data that can help to strengthen rural recreation and rural health and well-being.

THEME ONE

BUILDING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

For the participants in this study, building social connections was probably the most important aspect of curling. Factors such as winter weather, distance, challenging road conditions, and limited recreational resources often combined to make rural curling rinks key local hubs for connecting and interacting. Study participants spoke fondly of curling team members as their “curling family” and everyone appreciated being accepted at the rink, whether as an active curler or as a spectator.

Participants noted that curling facilitates social connections with women, men, and children of all ages, abilities, backgrounds, and curling experience, thereby fostering a sense of family, inclusion, and community. Curling also helps add to the appeal of a community as an important part of the mix of social activities on offer for long-time residents and newcomers alike. The social importance of curling and the curling rink to rural communities was clearly revealed when participants in two provinces explained how quickly and beautifully their communities rebuilt rinks that had recently burnt down.



“I think it made me think more that curling is more than the sport. It is the socializing. It is the connecting. I enjoy the non-curling, non-exercise part just as much as I enjoy the stuff on the ice. Like going upstairs and having some laughs and sharing stories. I mean I didn’t realize how important that was to me. I always thought, well I’m going curling. No it’s not...it’s ladies night out.”

- Manitoba curler



“ [At] the curling club...people all around come...they’re talking to one another, they relax, and the big thing...is that at our [older] age usually your social circle dwindles. Well, with curling, it got larger. And it keeps changing...and it’s all ages...which I like a lot. And the big thing is we talk to one another.”

- Nova Scotia curler



“cuz if I didn’t have curling, I’d never hang out with...all my other family members so that really like brings us all together. If we didn’t have that, we wouldn’t spend as much time together. And I love spending time with my family.”

- Ontario curler



“I mean curling is kind of the same wherever you go. You have your A teams and your friendly teams but here I really do think there’s a bigger sense of community that I, I see that more in the winter than I do in the summer.”

- Northwest Territories curler



“It’s a great way to meet people as a new person to the community and even if it’s a place you’ve lived for a long time you get the opportunity to meet people that you may not have crossed paths with before.”

- Ontario curler

THEME TWO
FACILITATING WOMEN’S HEALTH AND
RESILIENCY

Participants noted the importance of curling for women’s and girls’ physical, mental, and social health. In addition to engaging in warm up exercises before curling, participants were also inspired by curling to engage in additional physical activities, such as walking and golfing. For women with young children, curling was a highly valued opportunity to socially interact with adult women. Getting together to curl was especially valued as a way to maintain mental health and to stay positive during the long, dark, winter months. This was particularly true for participants in Northern Canada, as they spoke of needing to keep active in order to stave off seasonal depression. In addition, by its competitive and social nature, curling helped to impart pride, self-esteem, and self-confidence, as teams gained skills and won games and bonspiels. As a result of the health benefits of curling, participants often experienced enhanced resiliency, the ability to encounter and deal with rural challenges, such as travel, weather, and economic and population downsizing that many rural communities are experiencing. However, some participants also described stress and even frustration due to the great commitment required and some struggled with the sense of obligation that was needed to keep the club alive.



“I was never a leader before...I would stand back and watch and I never wanted to step up... But once you do, it builds your [confidence]. I can do this.... And then maybe I can do something else.... And that’s what really helped me...”

- Manitoba curler



“Since the curling rink opened in 2008 it has helped everyone, young and old to live through winter easier.”

- Nova Scotia curler



“There’s a certain age where you can’t do a lot of the other things but you can still curl...”, and “...they’re using the stick which...allows you even when you get to be a bit disabled, you can still participate. Still get out and socialize and get exercise. So...curling gives an advantage that a lot of other sports don’t.”

- Manitoba curler



“Curling really motivates me to keep in shape. It really does. It's a big motivator.”

- Ontario curler



“Sometimes moving up North can be a harsh transition from summer to winter. I’ve seen others leave because they felt people hid or holed up. Having the curling club for the winter kept me busy, active, and involved. I’ve made many important relationships through the club.”

- Northwest Territories curler

THEME THREE

STRENGTHENING RURAL COMMUNITY LIFE

The curling clubs were viewed as more than a place to curl; they provided a much needed social and sport outlet in rural communities, particularly for women. The clubs also represented a special gathering place, a hub of rural camaraderie and identity for all ages and abilities. The women in the study strengthened their rural communities with the substantial volunteering they contributed on behalf of curling and the curling rink on a day-to-day basis as well as for special events such as bonspiels. They realized that in many rural communities, curling was sustainable only because of their substantial, sometimes almost overwhelming, volunteer contributions. Nevertheless, their belief in the significance of curling for building and sustaining quality rural community life sustained their efforts.



“Like I say, it’s a small town and we have a handful of people that are true volunteers that are working hard each year and our membership is growing and I think it has a good part in everybody’s health, not just women but the men as well in the curling club. Having, you know, some place to go during the long winter to come and get some exercise and it’s a social outlet.”

- Northwest Territories curler



“Each year when the season starts you can feel the joy in the rink when we are reunited with people we have rarely seen during the summer months, and hopefully...a few new members to add to our group.”

- Nova Scotia curler



“The community really supports us. I mean how many tickets did we sell [to our supper] last year? About 400 tickets...the sense of community that you feel in this curling club and also [curling] really encourages everyone to participate and take part in the community.”

- Manitoba curler



“The curling club has become a hub and the centre of winter.... In the morning (7 am) coffee is always on seven days a week. It’s a great gathering [place and] you ha[ve] curlers, ...people playing cards...people just come to watch the game, and...people working in the kitchen...there’s a lot of things going on at once.”

- Nova Scotia curler



“...we are doing the town a service by providing a sporting complex for the whole community, with after school programs or wellness groups have used it or seniors...it’s not just a club – it’s a service to the community.”

- Northwest Territories curler



“I was thinking about community and how the curling club is such a big part of the community especially in a small rural town like (ours).”

- Ontario curler

THEME FOUR
THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF CURLING

Participants in all four regions spoke fondly and loyally about the history of their clubs. It was obvious that the history of curling and curling rinks in these rural communities was highly valued. Curling and the curling rink seemed to represent community connection, community support, and community worth. The sustainment of rural curling rinks seemed to indicate and reflect belief in the sustainability of the rural community itself. Study participants frequently noted that youth are the future of curling, yet more resources, such as good coaches and school curling opportunities, Little Rocks programs, and more media and other recognition in local, national, and international settings for curling in general, and for girls' and women's curling in particular, were strongly recommended. In the north, participants described a need for resources to help players (especially youth and junior curlers) to travel the very long distances to gain experience and build their skills. In addition, participants noted that the future of curling in rural communities requires substantial financial support, sponsorship, and commitment, within and outside of the rural community, to ensure its sustainability and, in smaller communities, its existence.



“I called it the Curling Road. That road means a lot to me....It’s led me to something I had never even dreamed...be[ing] out on that ice taking a broom stick.... It’s brought me...a lot of new people, new friends, a little bit of confidence.... A new world altogether.”

- Nova Scotia curler



“And a lot of dedication, these kids are really dedicated. They spend hours and hours curling. And they just, they do really well.”

- Ontario curler



“[We have] the history of the curling club, a hundred years 1908-2008. It tells of the struggles and determination of the women before and here with us, who love the game, and work hard to make it available to us. It also gives us hope for the future.”

- Nova Scotia curler



“...there was an older curling club and it had burned down....And I don't think we missed a season. They had a new curling club up the next year...”

- Manitoba curler



“...being part of the curling club here...gives me, myself and other members, a great deal of satisfaction... I mean you can curl with kids, grandkids, friends, you can curl from the time when you are six until you are eighty...It’s such a good family sport and to spend time with family and friends – well, it’s just, well I can’t say enough about that. Personally, myself, I’m satisfied that you can go out and you can enter a bonspiel with your son or your daughter – your grandchildren, children – and to me that’s what matters in curling.”

- Northwest Territories curler

CONCLUSION

This research project revealed key themes regarding curling, rural women's health, and rural community life. Social connections, physical, mental, and social health, resiliency, rural community life, and the past, present, and future of curling emerged as particularly important themes. It is evident from this research that curling sustains not only rural individuals, but rural communities as well. However, substantial, almost overwhelming, efforts on the part of community members are needed in order to sustain the viability of curling in small rural communities. This has led to issues of stress and a deep sense of obligation that may have an impact on a curler's desire to remain a member of the club. In addition, the study revealed that the curling experiences and contributions of girls and women require more recognition and support if the sport and its benefits to individuals and communities are to be appropriately sustained and advanced.

Participation in this photovoice research project provided an important opportunity for rural girls and women to identify and discuss rural recreation, gender, and rural community issues. Study participants enthusiastically enjoyed taking and sharing their photos and perspectives. Given the diverse locations, needs, and resources of rural girls and women throughout Canada, and the limited research that focuses on rural well-being and recreation, additional research is needed to more clearly

understand the significance of recreation on the lives and well-being of rural individuals and communities.

Participants in this study clearly identified aspects of curling that require enhanced support, including improved financial support from municipal governments as well as from external sources, such as Sport Canada and provincial and federal health and recreation ministries, agencies and departments; greater local, national, and international media recognition of the contributions and achievements of rural girls and women in curling; and enriched coaching and curling opportunities for rural children and youth in school programs. Taking these recommendations seriously would help to sustain these essential places and to build and expand the future of an important Canadian sport.

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¹ All photos were taken by study participants and are reproduced here with their consent.

Some Interesting References

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