



**YWCA**  
CANADA

A TURNING POINT  
FOR WOMEN

UN POINT TOURNANT  
POUR LES FEMMES



**M**ORE THAN A CENTURY AFTER the first International Women's Day, there are women in Canada who remain severely disadvantaged and without a crucial necessity of life: A safe home. Despite 100 years of progress toward women's equality, recent decades have seen a tragic and needless rise in women's homelessness in this country.

Women sleep on the streets of our major cities, a virtual guarantee of experiencing sexual assault. Women trade survival sex with men for a place to crash for the night. Teenage girls, fleeing sexual abuse, violence and homophobia at home, squat in unsafe abandoned buildings, or move in with older men to survive.

The traditional image of a bundled man asleep on a sidewalk may be what comes to mind for most Canadians when homelessness is mentioned. The reality is more varied and complex. Conservative estimates suggest anywhere from 150,000-300,000 people are homeless in Canada. Street counts show 25-30% of people living on the streets or in shelters in large Canadian cities are women. Toronto shelters saw a 78% increase in shelter use among single women between

1992 and 1998. Young women are homeless in alarming numbers. Families experience homelessness, and single parent families, mostly led by women, make up the majority of homeless families.

Without a roof over their heads and a door to lock safely behind them, women are at great risk of physical, emotional and psychological harm. Women living on the streets of Canadian cities are highly vulnerable. Many street-involved women are abuse and trauma survivors struggling with resulting mental health and addiction issues. Yet, there remains a severe shortage of detox beds dedicated to women. Street-focused programs specifically for women are few and far between.

Women's homelessness is often not visible. Studies focused on women identified the pattern of hidden homelessness. A woman couch-surfing with friends or relatives to avoid the street is among the hidden homeless. An older woman living with relatives who are exploiting her, or abusive, is among the hidden homeless. Women cycle through stays with friends, time in a shelter and time on the street, changing locations to avoid wearing

out their welcome and closing off a crucial lifeline.

Every year, tens of thousands of women leave their homes, many with their children, for the temporary safety of a shelter for abused women. For these women, violence is the immediate cause of their homelessness and a women's shelter or transition house may be the bridge to safe, permanent housing, or it may only be a respite in the cycle of violence and homelessness.

Losing housing, and having nowhere to call home, can arise from complex root causes, but is inextricably tied to poverty. Women who disproportionately experience poverty – single unattached women, women raising families on their own, First Nation, Métis and Inuit women, young women, women with mental health and addiction issues, racialized women and women with precarious immigration status – live at greater risk of homelessness.

That risk increases in times when incomes are stagnant or falling, when jobs get harder to find, and governments focus on cuts to spending, not services to citizens. In short, in times very much like today.

## Inadequate Income Supports Leave Women at Risk

In Canada, living on social assistance means living in poverty and women rely on forms of social assistance much more heavily than men: 17% versus 8%. Welfare rates range from 20-76% below the poverty line (LICO-AT) across the country. Rent allocations within social assistance rarely meet the actual cost of rent, leaving women struggling to cover essential needs like clothing, utilities and medical costs or taking the risk of not paying the rent and losing their housing. It is no surprise, that food bank use increased 20% between 2001 and 2011. Forty-seven per cent of food bank users nationally in the month of March 2011 were women and girls.

## Parenting Alone - Homelessness on the Rise for Women with Children

Approximately 300 babies are born to homeless women in Toronto annually, one-third to teenagers.

Health Status of Homeless Women:  
An Inventory of Issues, 2002

Changes in social program funding in the 1990s sent family homelessness on a startling upward spiral. Most homeless families are one-parent families, and women parenting on their own enter shelters at twice the rate of two parent families. More often than not these are young mothers with young children.

Just over half – 51.6% – of single-parent families headed by women are poor, and more than half of single mothers rely on welfare at some point. The failure of child support from non-custodial parents remains an issue,

with financial support agreements with the non-custodial parent often not in place or in arrears. When social assistance deducts 100% of a child support payment, no benefit reaches mothers and children. Lack of access to affordable child care adds another barrier for mothers raising children on their own.

Single mothers face these affordability and access issues, and may be further hampered by discriminatory practices on the part of landlords based on factors such as: youth; family size; low income or receipt of social assistance; race, ethnicity or language proficiency; lack of references.

Better Off in a Shelter? 2008

## Working Women Struggle with Homelessness

“Six dollars an hour job is not enough to live on. That is the minimum wage.”

Being homeless is getting to be normal:  
A Study of Women’s Homelessness in the  
Northwest Territories, 2006

Having a job is not enough to ensure a woman isn’t living in poverty and that her housing is secure. Women account for 70% of part-time employees and two-thirds of Canadians working for minimum wage. By 2009, 56% of people holding more than one job to make ends meet were women. More than a third – 37% – of single mothers with paid employment are working for less than \$10 per hour. Working at \$10 an hour full-time on a forty-hour work week – work many women cannot acquire – generates an income of \$20,800 per year, barely over the poverty line for a single person in half of the provinces in Canada, and well below it for an adult and two children everywhere in the country. As of December 2011, the minimum wage was at or below \$10 an hour in nine provinces and two territories. Almost half the users of food banks in March 2011 – 48.5% – were not recipients of social assistance.

“You can’t possibly live on minimum wage unless you’ve got free rent somewhere.”

Being homeless is getting to be normal:  
A Study of Women’s Homelessness in the  
Northwest Territories, 2006

# LEGACIES OF COLONIALISM, RACISM AND ABUSE

## On the Frontlines of Homelessness – First Nation, Métis and Inuit Women and Girls

First Nation, Métis and Inuit women are homeless in alarming rates, especially younger ones. A BC study found that 42% of homeless girls in Vancouver were First Nation, Métis or Inuit, a rate 10 times their representation in the general population. With an average annual income of \$13,300, the link between the poverty of Aboriginal women and homelessness is clear. The poverty rate for First Nation, Métis and Inuit women raising children on their own is over 70%. Legacies of residential school abuse and racialized violence are also factor, with a Vancouver-based study revealing that 84% of the

First Nation, Métis and Inuit girls who were homeless having experienced sexual abuse.

The Native Women's Association of Canada has documented almost 600 cases of missing and murdered women, and this is not unconnected to women's homelessness. Homeless women live at high risk of violence, including murder. Across the country, and acutely so in northern Canada, access to adequate housing for First Nation, Métis and Inuit women is severely limited. One shelter worker in Iqaluit estimated 150 women were homeless women – almost 6% of the female population.

Characteristics specific to the Northwest Territories that contribute to homelessness in general, as well as among women in particular, include things such as cross-territorial migration with minimal funding to supply adequate social housing and other services to migrants, as well as on-going colonialism and government policies and programs, such as the NWT Act, which destroy Aboriginal culture and self-reliance.

Being homeless is getting to be normal:  
A Study of Women's Homelessness in the Northwest Territories, 2006

## Cold Comfort for Teenage Girls Leaving Troubled Homes

In major urban centres, 30-50% of homeless youth and 6-12% of all homeless people are teenage girls. Across the country almost a quarter of shelter users are between 15 and 24. What drives girls from home? Domestic sexual abuse was the most striking similarity in the

**"When I first slept in a park I was 10 years old. I ran away."**

More than Bricks and Mortar:  
A Rights-based Strategy to Prevent Girl Homelessness in Canada, 2008.

life experiences of homeless girls interviewed in a Vancouver study. Almost 60% of girls in a separate study of homeless youth aged 12 to 18 had been sexually abused. Most homeless girls leave due to sexual abuse and violence, only to find violence and abuse waiting

**"I used to go to those free mail boxes, you know the ones with the free newspapers, and I'd take the newspaper out of there and lay it on the ground and then we'd burn some of it to keep warm or sleep on it on the ground..."**

More than Bricks and Mortar:  
A Rights-based Strategy to Prevent Girl Homelessness in Canada, 2008

for them on the street. Others are escaping homophobia, or leaving foster and group homes or aging out of care. More First Nation, Métis and Inuit children are currently in the custody of child welfare authorities than attended residential schools, and as many as 40% of homeless youth have been in care. With social assistance levels too low to live on, homeless girls are often exploited by older men who

can offer accommodation. Stories of homeless teenage girls enticed into addiction are all too common. It has been estimated that as many as 80% of people working in the sex industry began as children, and between 80 and 95% left home due to sexual abuse. For teenage girls, homelessness also carries the risk of criminalization. Teenage girls who have experienced homelessness stressed the need for girls-only housing to provide a home free from sexual harassment and violence.

**"I woke up one night and a guy was trying to feel me up in my sleeping bag."**

More than Bricks and Mortar:  
A Rights-based Strategy to Prevent Girl Homelessness in Canada, 2008.

# Trapped in Complex Connections - Violence, Abuse, Trauma and Mental Health

Women's shelters and transition houses provide temporary safety and a wide range of supports to the tens of thousands of women and children who leave their homes every year due to violence and abuse. While shelters strive to move women directly to long term housing, when they cannot, women may begin a cycle of violence and homelessness that can become permanent. Despite experiencing high rates of abuse, women with disabilities are often unable to access shelters serving women fleeing violence. One third of violence against women shelters don't have an accessible bathroom, less than a quarter offer specialized

**"The physical part is one thing, but keeping your mental health is hard because you do not have a place to live - no job, no money - even for the telephone."**

Street Health Report 2007

services for women who are Deaf or hearing impaired and less than 20% have services for blind or visually-impaired women. The average annual income of women with disabilities under 35 is \$13,000.

As the Women's Housing Equality Network has noted, "There is a reciprocal relationship between women's homelessness and mental health problems." Homelessness

impacts heavily on women's mental and emotional health, yet a lack of housing with appropriate supports leaves many women with mental health and addiction issues homeless. One study showed 55% of homeless women in Toronto have a mental health diagnosis, double the rate of homeless men.

**Until abused women are recognized as homeless, the matter of male violence against women will confound our understanding of the aetiology, scope, and experiences of homelessness, as well as our ability to redress the problem.**

Countless Abused Women Homeless & Inadequately Housed, 2000

## H4W not P4W - Housing for Women, Not Prisons for Women

Women are the fastest growing prison population worldwide, especially poor women, Aboriginal women and women with disabling mental health issues. This dramatic growth of women prisoners can largely be attributed to such global phenomena as the retreat of the state social safety and the evisceration of affordable housing, health care, child care, social assistance, and other community supports and educational opportunities, combined with a simultaneous intrusion of the state

in terms of surveillance, monitoring, criminalization, and institutionalization.

Cuts to social programs, health services and other support services have contributed to homelessness and criminalization. Poor women, women escaping violence, women with mental health issues, racialized women, particularly Indigenous women, have high rates of homelessness and they are vastly overrepresented in the prison population. Homeless women are at increased risk for incarceration. Criminal justice and correctional

systems are increasingly the only "services" in Canada that cannot turn away those in need; they are consequently becoming a repository for the mentally ill, drug addicts, and poor, sick people for whom depleted social services and health systems no longer provide adequate accommodation.

The more marginalized the women released from prison, the more vulnerable they are to homelessness. Prisons are not an appropriate response to homelessness.

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