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# Written Submission to the National Housing Council Review Panel on the Financialization of Purpose-Built Housing

**YWCA Canada**

June 2023

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### Part I - Introduction

As Canada’s largest and oldest gender justice organization, YWCA Canada is a leading voice for women, girls, Two-Spirit, and gender diverse people. For over 150 years, we have been at the forefront of a movement to: fight gender-based violence, build affordable housing, implement national childcare, and advocate for workplace equity. We work to advance gender equity by responding to urgent needs in communities through national advocacy and grassroots initiatives.

Annually, local YWCAs invest more than \$260 million in communities to support 330,000 individuals nationwide across nine provinces and two territories. YWCA Canada is the largest operator of emergency shelters for women, the largest provider of employment and counselling services to women, and the second largest provider of childcare in Canada.

YWCAs are also experts in housing solutions that meet the needs of women, gender diverse people and their families. Over 1200 people have a safe place to sleep every night in our network of 35 shelters across the country. Over 3500 women, gender diverse people and their families live in our 2283 units of affordable housing. YWCAs provide not only a safe place to sleep, but also the wraparound services and supports that women and gender diverse people need to thrive.

YWCA Canada welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the National Housing Council’s review panel on the financialization of purpose-built rental housing. We would be pleased to participate in an oral hearing regarding the gendered impact of this issue and our recommendations for action by the Government of Canada and can be contacted directly.



## **Part II – Gendered Impact of the Financialization of Purpose-Built Rental Housing on the Right to Adequate Housing**

Financialization is a term used to describe how housing is treated as a commodity through investment and wealth management, rather than a human right and a social good for people and communities. [i] The process of financialization is made by the growing dominance of financial actors in the housing sector. [ii] In other words, financial actors will invest in rental housing, including social housing and affordable housing to make investments and profits through increased rent. The housing system is a central pillar of financialization. In 2016, real estate made up 60% of global assets, and of these assets, 75% was residential real estate. [iii] It is within this reality, where housing—and specifically residential housing—is commodified and traded as an asset by financial actors, that women and gender-diverse people navigate increasingly complex barriers and difficulties in finding a safe and affordable place to call home for themselves and their families.

In Canada, such as in the world, the business model of financializing purpose-built rental housing has a huge impact on equity-seeking groups and low-income communities. Women and gender diverse people are disproportionately impacted by housing needs and the types of barriers they face in accessing housing are unique. 1 in 4 women-led, single parent households live in unsuitable, inadequate, or unaffordable housing. [iv] Furthermore, it is well-established that women and gender diverse people are more likely to experience hidden forms of homelessness, such as couch-surfing or staying with friends and family, meaning the full scale of the gendered housing crisis is unknown. [v]

In recognition of this reality, and as result of the advocacy by YWCA Canada and other feminist organizations, the Government of Canada made the commitment that 25% of all funds under the National Housing Strategy be dedicated to projects for women. [vi]

YWCA's across the country have seen firsthand the impact that the financialization of purpose-built rental housing has had on the components of adequate housing as defined in international law, including affordability, habitability and security of tenure. Even where YWCA's do not provide housing, they see the impact that the housing affordability crisis has had on service users, program participants and community members. Women and gender diverse people, as a result of systemic inequities, including the gender wage gap and gender-based violence, are disproportionately impacted by the rising costs of market rents.



The impacts of high market rent on women and gender diverse people is pervasive. In 2020 and 2021 the Women’s National Housing and Homelessness Network conducted a pan-Canadian survey on housing challenges and inequities experienced by women and gender diverse people. It concluded that women and gender-diverse people experience widespread, chronic housing affordability issues linked to low incomes. [\[vii\]](#) We also know that the impacts of high market rent disproportionately impacts equity-deserving groups. Housing inequality is disproportionately experienced by people who are Indigenous, racialized, disabled, and newcomers to Canada, as well as those with low or fixed incomes. [\[vii\]](#)

Average wages across Canada have not kept pace with the average cost of rent. A recent report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives highlights that across every city in Canada, the hourly wage required to afford average market rent for a one-bedroom or two-bedroom apartment calculated on a 40 hour work week far exceeds minimum wage. [\[ix\]](#) This disproportionately impacts women who are paid lower wages on average than men. [\[x\]](#) The gender pay gap is heightened for Indigenous women, racialized women and women with disabilities. Women are also overrepresented in minimum wage and part-time jobs. Women are also more likely to be in non-permanent employment, and consequently are much less likely to have access to employment-associated benefits including pensions and access to employee assistance programs. [\[xi\]](#)

Women’s ability to pay high market rents are also impacted by their caregiving responsibilities, which can act as a barrier to full-time employment. In 2022, more than half of women aged 15 and older provided some form of care to children and care-dependent adults. Women are significantly more likely to provide care than men. Women also provide the majority of unpaid care, with nearly one-third of women providing unpaid care to children and almost one-quarter providing care to adults with long-term conditions or disabilities. [\[xii\]](#) Despite the introduction of Canada’s Early Learning and Childcare system, demand for childcare continues to exceed available spaces, making childcare inaccessible for many families, including single women-led households. [\[xiii\]](#)

Competitive rental markets and low vacancy rates also impact women’s ability to find housing. In Canada’s most competitive rental market, 53% of single-parent households in British Columbia live below the poverty line, and these households are predominately led by women. [\[xiv\]](#) It is unsurprising that there is a huge demand for deeply affordable housing. Currently, there are over 2,000 women seeking permanent affordable housing on YWCA Metro Vancouver’s waitlist. [\[xv\]](#)



The pressures that financialized actors have put on the housing system results in routine experiences of harassment and discrimination as part of the housing experiences of women and gender diverse people, including in their experiences of finding housing. Racialized and newcomer women are particularly vulnerable to experiencing discrimination. Research by the Canadian Centre for Housing Rights reveals that newcomers in Toronto experience 11 times as much discrimination as non-newcomers. Racialized newcomer women face a 563% increase in discrimination when they disclosed they were caring for a child, compared to racialized newcomer women who did not disclose their parental status. [\[xvi\]](#)

### **Part III – Financialization of Purpose-Built Rental Housing and Gender-Based Violence**

An examination of the financialization of purpose-built rental housing cannot ignore the realities of gender-based violence and how it violates survivors' rights, including their right to adequate housing. There is a linear relationship between homelessness and gender-based violence for women and gender diverse people. Experience of domestic violence, intimate partner violence and gender-based violence within families is a key pathway into homelessness and housing precarity for women and gender diverse people. For women and girls who are experiencing homelessness, gender-based violence is a routine, sometimes daily reality. 91% of women who are homeless have experienced assault in their lifetime. [\[xvii\]](#)

The housing crisis exists alongside the shadow pandemic of gender-based violence. There has been a sharp rise in gender-based violence across the country (and around the world) since the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. National sexual assault rates are the highest in Canada since 1996. [\[xviii\]](#) YWCAs are seeing a steep increase in demand for services. For example, the Amethyst Project of YWCA Lethbridge, which provides support to survivors of sexual assault and their families has seen a 37.5% rise in emergency room calls and a 70% increase of women who accessed YWCA Peterborough Haliburton's Crossroads Shelter, a 24-hour emergency shelter for women and children who experience violence of any kind.

Survivors of gender-based violence, women experiencing homelessness and housing precarity and the sectors that support them understanding that realizing the right to housing is intrinsically linked to ending gender-based violence. In November 2022, the federal government released the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence. As part of a national Community Engagement Initiative funded by Women and Gender

Equality Canada, YWCA Canada coordinated consultations with civil society organizations and grassroots groups to ensure community insight and expertise was considered and incorporated into the creation of a National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence. Safe and affordable housing is a key component of the social infrastructure needed to end gender-based violence. [xix] In the words of one survivor:

A housing spectrum should include the following: affordable housing options lower than 80% average market rent unless it includes available and stackable benefits to offset the cost and policies that will adapt to changing family size; prioritization of women and children fleeing violence within rent-geared-to-income programs; housing first programs that include housing finding services and intensive in-home and community supports... [xx]

These consultations underscored how high market rents impact women's decisions to stay in violent or unsafe situations. As articulated by one participant in a consultation convened by the FCJ Refugee Centre in Toronto:

Rent here is very expensive and it is very difficult to survive, women cannot leave because they cannot afford to pay for an apartment on [their] own, so [they] cannot leave. So while it is a violent relationship, it is also a violent system, the system of capitalism. It is one of the biggest issues women face—how can they leave the house to pay at least 1K in a basement apartment or room? A woman who is in a relationship for many years will not want to leave to live with a stranger. [xxi]

Even in situations where there may not be a threat of intimate partner violence or abuse, high market rent impacts women's experiences of housing precarity and homelessness. Experiencing a breakup with a romantic partner was the primary reason that women and gender diverse people lost their most recent housing. Housing is deeply dependent upon maintaining a personal relationship with a man, partner or other person. [xxii] This reality deeply implicates women's security of tenure, based on the inherent precarity of one's shelter being dependent on one's relationship with another person. For example, in Canada's most expensive rental market, the costs of rent in Metro Vancouver have forced many women to continue living with former partners even after their relationship breaks down. [xxiii] Simply put, women are stuck, with high rent acting as a barrier to their ability to live safely, independently, and in conditions where they can thrive.



For women fleeing violence, shelters and transitional housing are essential, lifesaving social infrastructure. However, they are too often not considered as part of the housing continuum but are rather siloed into gender-based violence supports. Yet, shelters and transitional housing straddle both these sectors. In particular, the role of transitional housing or second stage shelters is often misunderstood within housing policy. Second stage shelters offer wrap-around support and afford survivors additional time and space to heal, develop independence, establish long-term goals, build community and networks of support, access programming, and transition to a life free from violence. In the context of Canada's affordable housing crisis, one vital part of the programming second-stage shelters offer is housing support, including helping residents look for housing, tenancy education, advocacy with landlords and financial assistance. The majority of second stage shelters in Canada are operated by violence against women (VAW) shelters, and the majority also provide support to survivors in an ongoing way once they are no longer living there. [\[xxiv\]](#)

Our consultations also highlighted that the number one reason that women and gender diverse people stay in unsafe and abusive situations is due to financial considerations. YWCA Canada and 12 of its member associations over the last year have disbursed over \$810,813 of direct financial assistance to 626 survivors through the National Emergency Survivor Support Fund. The single most common use of these funds have been towards payment of rent and utilities. [\[xxv\]](#)

Even for survivors who have escaped situations of violence, financial considerations often prolong their stays in shelters when they may be ready to continue their healing journeys, as they are unable to pay high rents. This puts pressure on the shelter system as a whole, decreasing the number of available beds for others in crisis. It is a reality every day in Canada that survivors of gender-based violence seeking safety will be turned away from a shelter due to lack of space. [\[xxvi\]](#) It is estimated that nearly 1000 women and children are turned away from shelters every night due to lack of space. YWCAs know all too well that need far exceeds available resources– as but one example, in June 2023, 753 calls to YWCA Saskatoon's crisis shelter had to be turned away due to no available space. Without the financial resources to find housing or even temporary shelter, women often return to unsafe situations.

#### **Part IV – Recommendations for the Government of Canada to Address the Impacts of the Financialization of Purpose-Built Rental Housing**

As the preceding paragraphs demonstrate, the financialization of purpose-built rental

housing and its impacts on women, gender diverse people and their families do not exist in a silo. Rather, this issue must be considered within the wider context of the systemic inequities faced by women and gender diverse people, including the gender pay gap, uneven childcare responsibilities, and the ongoing emergency of gender-based violence.

YWCA Canada recommends that the federal government take the following measures to address the impacts of the financialization of purpose-built rental housing and to advance the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing for women and gender diverse people:

**1. Fully fund the spectrum of women’s housing, including shelters, transitional housing and permanent affordable housing.**

Of all the programs under the National Housing Strategy (NHS), the Women and Children Shelter and Transitional Housing Initiative was arguably most impactful in meeting the needs of women and their children. This Initiative was a \$250 million investment supporting the construction, renovation and repair of shelter beds and transitional housing units. The Initiative was specifically designed for women’s shelters and transitional housing. As such, it significantly advanced the federal government’s commitment that 25% of all funds under the NHS be dedicated to projects meeting the needs of women and their children. Crucially, the program allocated funding for both capital and top-up operational costs.

For this reason, there was enthusiastic uptake of the Women and Children Shelter and Transitional Housing Initiative among women’s and gender justice non-profits. Demand far exceeded available funding. Today, there remain dozens of shovel-ready projects across the country. If funded, these projects would go far in ensuring that no person in Canada is turned away when seeking refuge at a domestic violence shelter.

YWCA’s and other non-profit housing providers are the federal government’s partners in achieving the goals of the National Housing Strategy. We are at the forefront of meeting the housing needs of women, gender diverse people and their children, particularly those fleeing situations of violence and those who face the most complex barriers to accessing housing—the very people whose housing needs must be prioritized in the government’s commitment to the progressive realization of the right to housing.





Across the country, YWCAs are ready and able to build and operate more permanent affordable housing but are lacking the funds to do so. To keep the women and gender diverse people we serve housed, we must provide permanent housing at a deep level of affordability and with necessary wraparound services and supports. The calculation is simple: addressing the multifaceted barriers that prevent women and gender diverse people from accessing safe and affordable housing means that YWCAs are not able to repay loans for construction costs or cover operational costs through rents.

Specifically, YWCA Canada recommends that the Government of Canada:

- a.** Renew the Women and Children’s Shelter and Transitional Housing Initiative
- b.** Expand the Women and Children’s Shelter and Transitional Housing Initiative to include permanent affordable housing for women, gender diverse people and their families;
- c.** Adequately fund the operations of women’s domestic violence shelters; and
- d.** Support non-market, community housing providers and operators in building, maintaining and operating deeply affordable housing, with a minimum of 25% of all units dedicated towards housing women, gender diverse people and their families;

## **2. Embed a rights-based approach to Canada’s National Housing Strategy**

The *National Housing Strategy Act* recognizes that the right to housing is a fundamental human right and that housing is essential to the inherent dignity and well-being of the person. [xxvii] The *Act* further articulates that it is the housing policy of the Government of Canada to further the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing. [xxviii] The progressive realization of the right to housing requires that priority in housing policy must be given to vulnerable groups and those in greatest need of housing, recognizing homelessness as a violation of human rights and committing to addressing it as a human rights violation, eliminating it in the shortest possible time. Particular focus, resources and policy interventions must be directed towards the experiences of women and gender diverse people as they navigate the housing crisis and its interconnection with the epidemic of gender-based violence.

As part of this rights-based approach, the Government of Canada must meaningfully implement its commitment to a gender-based plus analysis. The progressive realization of the right to adequate housing demands requires prioritizing housing outcomes of

priority vulnerable groups identified in the National Housing Strategy. However, the Auditor General's recent evaluation of the National Housing Strategy and Reaching Home revealed that although a GBA+ analysis was considered in the design of both programs, neither the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation nor Employment and Social Development Canada collected disaggregated data to assess the impact by gender or by other identity demographics. [xxix] A GBA+ analysis needs to be embedded throughout the design and implementation of housing supply and other programs.

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