

Countless Abused Women

Homeless and Inadequately Housed

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Le lien entre la violence des hommes envers les femmes et l'itinérance n'a jamais été bien compris. Dans le monde à la fois visible et caché des sans-abri, on a omis d'inclure les femmes qui cherchent refuge dans les maisons d'hébergement et celles qui ne sont plus en sécurité dans leurs propres maisons. Les auteures commentent la controverse autour de l'inclusion des femmes battues dans le premier sondage canadien sur les sans-abri et recommandent que dans la notion de "logement adéquat" il sera tenu compte de la sécurité des hommes et des femmes.

Homelessness in Canada has been termed a "national disaster"¹ yet problematic definitions have obscured its full magnitude. While it has been recognized that the pathways to homelessness are often gendered (Brown *et al.*; Brown and Ziefert; Lindsey; City of Toronto 1999), there appears to have been a systemic bias that attributes women's need for housing solely to poverty. The connection between male violence against women and homelessness has not been well understood (Malos and Hague; Novac *et al.*). Nor has there been an adequate appreciation of the ways in which federal and provincial changes to social and housing policies have exacerbated abused women's housing vulnerability. 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.

In this paper we review² the extent of the homeless problem in Canada, Ontario and Toronto. We critique

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existing definitions of the visible and hidden homeless that have failed to include women who seek refuge in transition houses³ and those unsafe in their own homes. Drawing on the experience of Canada's largest province, we examine the ways in which "people- and place-based cuts" (Mulroy and Ewalt) have made living apart from an abuser more difficult. We comment on the controversy surrounding the inclusion of battered women in Canada's first systemic homeless tally and recommend that gender safety be included in notions of housing adequacy. Finally, we urge the broader housing movement to support existing recommendations to address the complex needs of homeless and inadequately housed abused women.

The homeless problem

It is estimated that there are over 100 million people worldwide who are homeless, and that "significant

problems of homelessness ... exist in some of the most economically developed countries" (UNCESCR 2). The federal Government of Canada does not provide statistics on homelessness, an omission for which they have been publicly chastised by the United Nations (Hulchanski *qtd.* in TDRC). Housing advocates conservatively estimate the national level of homelessness at 200,000 (TDRC), and the problem is worsening (Wolfe; City of Toronto 2000). The homeless crisis has been variously attributed to unemployment and poverty, punitive social policies, and the lack of provincial and national willingness to address the shelter needs of its most vulnerable citizens (TDRC; CERA; City of Toronto 2000; UWGT; City of Toronto 1999; Raising the Roof; Hulchanski). As recently as 1998, housing advocates were critical that Canada was the only G-7 nation without a plan for homelessness (Hulchanski; Raising the Roof; TDRC). Since then, a "Federal Coordinator on Homelessness" has been appointed but, to date, federal, provincial, and municipal government initiatives for homelessness have dispersed little money, and what has been spent has gone to research and planning, not building homes (Housing Again 2000b).

At the provincial level, Ontario has a growing number of unhoused people (Dunphy 1999a). Toronto is a "magnet" for homeless people, many of whom migrate in search of services unavailable in smaller centres (City of Toronto 1999; Raising the Roof). Given current rates, it is estimated that 32,100 people will use the city's emergency shelter system by the end of 2000 (City of

Toronto 2000). Among the homeless, there is an "obvious imbalance" of race, disability and gender (Hopper). Aboriginal peoples comprise only three per cent of Toronto's total population but a full 25 per cent of the city's homeless (City of Toronto 1999); 15 per cent of hostel users are immigrants and refugees (Hulchanski; City of Toronto 1999). Approximately one-third are reported to have a significant mental illness (FCM 1999b) and this increases to three-quarters for single homeless women (City of Toronto 1999). Families are the most rapidly growing user group⁴ (City of Toronto 2000) with single mothers entering the hostel system at twice the rate of couples with children (City of Toronto 1999). Since 1982, the number of homeless women and children has increased in this city by over 1,000 per cent (Brown *et al.*).

The problem with homeless definitions

While these statistics are sobering, they refer exclusively to the literally or visibly homeless. The visibly homeless are those individuals who sleep rough, or who live out of their cars, in hostels, abandoned buildings, and make-shift squatter settlements similar to those by the Don River in Toronto. Visible homelessness focuses solely on capacity: the ability of a city's shelter system to respond to visible homelessness on any given night (Thompson). By contrast, a broader and more radical definition includes the "hidden" homeless who lack adequate housing: individuals and families who have doubled up with others out of necessity, who spend more than 30 per cent of their income on housing, and who live in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions (CCHS).

The concept of hidden homelessness has its origins in the United Nations Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Covenant recognizes not only the

right to housing, but specifies that such housing be "adequate" for physical and social needs (UNCESCR). Adequate housing is defined as affordable, accessible, and habitable; tenants must have secure legal tenure (Brown *et al.*; UNCESCR). Using these guidelines, it is estimated that over one billion people worldwide are

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inadequately housed (UNCESCR). In 1996, the federal Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) conducted a national evaluation using similar standards of adequacy, suitability and affordability. It was found that 18 per cent or 1.7 million households could be considered in "core housing need," an increase from 13 per cent five years earlier (CMHC 2000b, 2000c). In Toronto, almost half of all tenants pay more for rent than the CMHC affordability cut-off of 30 per cent pre-tax income, and the situation is equally serious in Peterborough (55 per cent), Ottawa-Carleton (41 per cent), Barrie (48 per cent) and Kitchener-Waterloo (41 per cent) (Dunphy 1999b). Affordability problems often lead to housing displacement. In Ontario, approximately 100,000 households were forced to move due to cuts in social assistance by the Harris government (CERA). Further, there is a "dramatic increase" in risk of visible homeless-

ness for tenants who pay more than 50 per cent of their pre-tax household income on rent (Dunphy 1999b) since they "live always on the brink of arrears and eviction" (FCM 1999a: 7). The situation is particularly acute among women-led families: lone mothers in Toronto pay an average of 63 per cent of their income on rental housing (Weckerle and Novac).

Homeless statistics exclude abused women

Sylvia Walby argues that male violence against women is "sufficiently common and repetitive, with routinized consequences for women and routinized modes of processing by judicial agencies, to constitute a social structure" (1990: 143). In Canada, the *Violence Against Women Survey of 1993* found that 51 per cent of all women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16 (Statistics Canada 1993). Moreover, 29 per cent who had been married or lived common-law had been similarly abused by their partners (Statistics Canada 1998). According to the General Social Survey of 1999, it is estimated that 690,000 women have been abused by a spouse within the previous five years (Statistics Canada 2000). Male violence cuts across social class, race, ability and education level (Greaves *et al.*), although women with disabilities, Aboriginal women, and those in conflict with the law have been noted as being particularly vulnerable (OAIH 1996a; Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women; UWGT). Abused women may experience a range of acute and chronic health problems: headaches, perforated ear drums, dental damage, internal bleeding, miscarriage, eating disorders, mental illness and disability (Day; Kinnon and Hanvey; Rogers; Stewart). Further, more than half of women killed are murdered by a current or previous husband or boyfriend (Crawford and Gartner).

In 1997-1998, there were 90,792

admissions of women and children to 413 shelters that provide services to abused women across Canada (Trainor). A snapshot taken on April 20, 1998 found that the 915 abused women who were in Ontario battered women's shelters had fled psychological, physical, financial, and sexual abuse. Almost 60 per cent of the women were mothers who had escaped with their children, the majority of whom were under ten years of age (Statistics Canada 1999). Nonetheless, research and policy practices of defining and counting the homeless have not included these women and children. For reasons that may originate in the accounting methods of statistics generated for funding purposes,⁵ residents of battered women's shelters are not enumerated in homeless statistics unless they present to general emergency hostels.⁶

It has been reported that as few as six per cent to eleven per cent of all abused women seek refuge in a shelter (Trainor; Statistics Canada 2000) with women over age 45 and those under 24 least likely to present (Trainor). Women may be unwilling or unable to leave the abuser, or the services may be culturally inappropriate or inaccessible (Trainor; UWGT). The Violence Against Women Survey of 1993 reported that an estimated 295,000 women who had been abused had neither counselling nor housing services available to them (Trainor). Most abused women cope by remaining with their abusers and living with the daily fear of violence. "The concept of home where one is safe is shattered. Home [becomes] ... a prison, a place ... more dangerous than anywhere else" (Zappardino and DeBare qtd. Novak *et al.* 20). Some escape to other locations, sometimes to little avail.⁷ Neither those who stay nor those who leave are counted among the hidden homeless. Unlike the category of affordability, neither the United Nations nor CMHC guidelines include the freedom from the actuality, threat or fear of male vio-

lence as an indicator of adequate housing.

Abused women: the impact of people- and place-based cuts

In Canada, "the sense that everyone matters" (McQuaig 5) has fallen prey to "vampire capitalism" (Cohen)

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and government restrictions on social spending. Cuts by the Ontario government to people-based income maintenance policies (e.g., welfare) and to place-based housing strategies (e.g., shelters) have resulted in increased homelessness (Mulroy and Ewalt). In 1995, a 21.6 per cent reduction to income support payments directly affected women's housing security: an increase in evictions and in the numbers of mothered families turning to hostels (Wekerle). Women were forced to provide for their families on monies which did not (and do not) meet subsistence requirements for food and shelter. Gerda Wekerle has noted that the shelter allowance component of social assistance does not meet the actual housing costs in 40 per cent of households currently receiving benefits. In fact, so inadequate are social assistance shelter allowances that 83,000 households require *both* a shelter allowance and a subsidized unit in order to survive

(Wekerle). Other reductions or eliminations in income support have included the provision of first and last months' rent, drug and dental benefits, furniture allowances, supplements for pregnant women, and a clawback of the federal child benefit (UWGT; OAIH 1998).

People-placed cuts to social assistance have had a "severe impact" on women who have been abused (OAIH 1996b). In approximately two-thirds of the shelters surveyed by the Ontario Association of Transition Houses (OAIH) in 1996, women cited cuts to social assistance as the primary reason for remaining with (66 per cent) or returning to (63 per cent) an abusive partner (OAIH 1996b). "A frightening 50 per cent of shelters said that the shelter was now being used more often as a temporary escape than as a new beginning for women and children" (OAIH 1996a: 22). Even abused women who were "lucky" enough to be in second stage housing were profoundly affected by the cuts. Donna Hansen of the Second Stage Alliance recalls,

Women on welfare were thrown into a tailspin.... Even the most careful budgeters became reluctantly acquainted with the area food banks.... The women living in the Emily Murphy Centre were distraught and so was I, as I was forced to ensure their rents were paid—I was not able to lower their rents by 21.6 per cent.

Since women are the primary users of social housing across Canada (Brown *et al.*), place-based cuts to housing programs and services have had a particularly disastrous and gendered effect. The federal government has rid itself of responsibility for social housing to an extent not seen in any other Western country, including the United States (Wolfe). In the past, federal and provincial housing programs had been pivotal to the supply of new affordable hous-

ing stock; this funding no longer exists (Brown *et al.*; Skaburskis and Mok). Further, in August 2000, the Ontario government announced plans for the "municipalisation" (Wolfe) of existing housing stock (Housing Again 2000a). As it stands, the Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation (CERA), a Toronto-based housing advocacy organization, claims that "it is ... virtually impossible for disadvantaged households to secure subsidized housing" (4). In fact, at the current rate of placement, a newborn would be 17 years old before her family obtained housing (City of Toronto 1999).

Women have also been assailed by the cuts to transition houses. Fully one-third of the abused women who use shelters in Canada do so in Ontario (OAITH 1998). In 1996, a five per cent cut in provincial funding to first stage shelters negatively impacted on programs in 60 per cent of the agencies. Reductions in service included crisis phone lines, in-shelter child care and food supports, interpretation services for deaf and immigrant women, and court accompaniment (OAITH 1998). At the same time, between 1994-95 and 1997-98 service needs increased by eleven per cent to 31 per cent across the province, and the average length of stay in a shelter by 18 per cent (OAITH 1998). These increases have been attributed, in large part, to abused women's difficulty in finding appropriate and affordable housing and supports (OAITH 1998).

Second stage housing was developed in Ontario in 1987 in response to the needs of abused women who faced extended difficulty in living independently from their abusers. The initial intent of second stage housing was to provide safe, affordable, rent geared-to-income homes and supportive programming for women who,

may be stalked, may feel unsafe, maybe have significant emotional or physical or psychological problems of their own or

their children's to deal with, may need assistance with protracted legal matters before the courts, may be hiding from a partner intent on abducting the children and so on. (Hansen)

Prior to the 100 per cent reduction in program funding to second stage

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housing in 1996, 28 second stage facilities operated throughout the province. The funding cuts resulted in the closure of four second stage shelters, including two in poorly serviced northern areas, and the absorption of others by umbrella organizations in order to survive (Hansen). These cuts have heightened women's vulnerability: women generally stay in second stage shelters during the first months after permanently leaving an abuser, a time when they may be at particular risk of being stalked, assaulted or murdered (OAITH 1996a).

Abused women are also having a more difficult time securing subsidized housing. Although the Ontario Ministry of Housing created a special priority policy in 1986 that would enable abused women to "jump the queue" on waiting lists for subsidized apartments, the waiting lists are now too long to be of much help (OAITH 1996b). Women are currently waiting an average of five

months for subsidized housing, and in certain areas of Ontario, the wait can be up to five years in length. Despite the original policy's inclusion of non-physical types of abuse, some local housing authorities have restricted application to women who have experienced physical violence. Further, women are being asked for increasing documentation of the abuse, including requests for graphic details (OAITH 1998). A lack of available units and tighter eligibility requirements have meant that fewer abused women are finding subsidized units (14 per cent in 1995-1996, 32 per cent in 1988, UWGT). In some areas, abused women are being told that rent-geared-to-income units are no longer available, leaving them with priority placement for market rent apartments they simply cannot afford (OAITH 1996b).

What do we do now? Make abused women count

To date, Canadian academics, policy makers and housing advocates have not viewed abused women still living in their own homes as being inadequately housed, or as literally homeless once they have sought refuge in a transition house. Researchers have recently suggested that a methodology for counting the visibly homeless should include battered women's shelters (Peressini *et al.*). Despite growing recognition to include such shelters, Canada's first systematic data collection on homelessness, the Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) initiative of the CMHC, has done so unevenly. Poised to collect "longitudinal, multi-locational and unduplicated data" on hostel clients, HIFIS is intended to identify "the unique characteristics" and services most frequently used by the homeless, situations most associated with becoming unhoused, and supports and services required to adequately re-house people (CMHC 2000a: 1). When fully operational, proponents argue that HIFIS will assist both hos-

tels and governments “to better plan, monitor and evaluate policies and programs designed to reduce the problem of homelessness” (CMHC 2000a: 2).

Regrettably, representatives from shelters for abused women were not included in the planning and refused initially to participate in the piloting of the project. Worries that women’s shelters would be “left behind” should policy makers use HIFIS to determine future priorities prompted Status of Women Canada to convene representatives from government and provincial transition house associations. Shelter advocates voiced concerns about women’s safety and privacy, the potential for the apprehension of HIFIS records by law enforcement, and the ways in which the label of “homeless” might be used against women by agencies such as the Children’s Aid Society. The CMHC countered that safeguards for protecting residents’ privacy should already be in place and that, as a “stand alone” project, the information collected would reside within, and under the control of individual shelters. Moreover, they argued that the software is no more susceptible to seizure than other types of records subpoenaed in the past. The meeting appeased some advocates and has resulted in the inclusion of several abused women’s shelters in Vancouver as a “pilot within a pilot.” Since then, additional requests for software and training have been made by women’s transition houses and provincial associations in Iqaluit, Toronto, Calgary, and Newfoundland (CMHC 2000a).

Nonetheless, some abused women’s advocates have declined to endorse the initiative, noting that HIFIS will not result in any additional social housing, and may replicate data already requested of transition houses by particular provinces. Resources for staff time and training have not been built into the initiative, and many shelter staff are already overtaxed in meeting women’s emergency needs. Thus, while HIFIS will make

novel contributions to our understandings of the visibly homeless, its design and intent may not be wholly compatible with the anti-violence movement nor the needs of the women whom they serve. Since the inclusion of abused women in Canada’s first homeless tally is critical to a national accounting of the relation-

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ship between male violence and visible homelessness, the current impasse between government and abused women’s advocates should be addressed through ongoing consultations. We recommend that shelters be provided adequate funding to undertake the project, and, to keep shelter disruption to a minimum, there should be a harmonization of record-keeping demands. Further, research needs to be translated into action: the imminent stewardship of the HIFIS project by the National Secretariat on Homelessness (CMHC 2000a) is an opportunity to encourage federal and provincial negotiations for the development of an equitable housing policy for abused women across Canada.

It is important to recall, however, that the majority of abused women never use shelters (Statistics Canada 1998). They continue to live in their own homes under the threat of violence or move from location to location to keep themselves safe. We

recommend therefore that abused women be properly designated as the hidden homeless via the inclusion of gender safety as a salient feature of housing adequacy guidelines under the United Nations and Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation. While the existing notions of adequacy might capture abused women who are living in overcrowded or unsanitary conditions, they are not enumerated as “abused” nor is gender violence seen as the genesis or aetiology of their homelessness. Moreover, abused women of higher economic status, whose homes would not be classified as inadequate, are not counted at all. While many theorists and housing advocates criticize or downplay the concept of hidden homelessness, arguing that to view even serious housing need as a form of homelessness is to disregard the “distress of actual homelessness” (Burrowset *al.* qtd. in Birrell 1; see also, Raising the Roof), such a disclaimer fails to recognize the extent to which abused women are forced to adopt “hostage survival strategies” (Graham *et al.*) as they trade bodily integrity, and sometimes their lives, to assure food and shelter for themselves and their children. Further, as researchers and housing advocates have so convincingly argued, the label of homeless ultimately decides “who will be the recipient of the funding, resources and services that are provided to deal with the problem” (Peressini *et al.*: 1; see also, Raising the Roof).

Address the complex needs of homeless and inadequately housed abused women

In the summer of 1999, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) endorsed a policy paper that examined the magnitude of the homeless and housing crisis and outlined measures that could be undertaken by governments to provide relief. Yet their “call for action” failed to address the particular housing issues of abused women, and survivors

of male violence were not considered a "priority" group (FCM 1999b). In stark contrast, four of the first ten recommendations of the province of Ontario's Joint Committee on Domestic Violence concerned housing issues. The Committee explained, "without long-term, stable, and affordable housing, women leaving abusive situations cannot be safe" (Joint Committee on Domestic Violence vii). Indeed, it has long been recognized by feminists that improvements in legislation around domestic violence are "pointless" without changes in housing policy (Smart). Re-housing abused women requires the commitment of all levels of government to redress the damage inflicted by people- and place-based cuts (Ontario Women's Declaration) and requires properly funded emergency and second stage shelters, expanded and portable rent subsidies, affordable and/or subsidized housing, adequate levels of social assistance and income support, legal aid and counselling services. Such pragmatic recommendations concerning abused women and the complexity of their housing-related needs have been repeatedly articulated by feminist and community organizations (OAITH 1996a, 1996b, 1998; UWGT). Their implementation now requires the support of the broader housing movement. Until then, as somberly noted by the authors of the Ontario Women's Declaration, the "life, liberty and physical and psychological security of women ... [is] endanger[ed]" (4).

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¹The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee first declared homelessness a national disaster that requires emergency humanitarian relief on October, 1998. One month later, the Big City Mayors Caucus of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities passed a similar resolution and called upon the Government of Canada to take immediate action.

²We have synthesized academic, government, and community research. We have synthesized academic, government, and community research. The inclusion of the latter acknowledges the immense contributions to research by community-based agencies on behalf of abused, homeless and inadequately housed women and children across Canada.

³We use the terms "transition houses," "abused women's shelters," "battered women's shelters" and "first stage shelters" interchangeably. The term "second stage housing" refers to longer term (three to twelve months) accommodation for abused women. The terms "emergency shelters" and "hostels" refer to accommodations for unhoused men and women.

⁴This is also true for the rest of Canada (Brown *et al.*), the United States (Letiecq *et al.*; CCHS).

⁵For example, due to per diem issues, homeless statistics for the City of Toronto do not include the women and children who stay in the 12 provincially funded battered women's shelters throughout the city.

⁶Although abused women who stay at emergency shelters are tallied as homeless, their numbers fail to be included in broader statistics on violence against women. The Toronto Report Card on Homelessness 2000 estimates that "at least as many assaulted women and children stay in emergency shelters as in abused women's shelters" (City of Toronto 2000: 34).

⁷For women who leave their partners, there is an increased risk of violence (Statistics Canada 2000). Separated women are six more times more likely to be murdered by their abusers (Statistics Canada 1998).

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