The Politics of Poverty

Homeless Women and Children in Canada

By Thomas O'Reilly Fleming

L'auteur présente une analyse d'expériences vécues par les personnes pauvres sans-abri de la société canadienne et examine aussi les conséquences de la détérioration structurelle du tissue social. L'analyse traite des effets du phénomène sur les femmes et leurs enfants. Le cheminement de vie de ces personnes est irrévocablement modifié en raison du piège de la pauvreté. Les expériences quotidiennes des femmes et des enfants sans foyer doivent être liées non seulement aux grandes questions d'économie politique mais aussi aux domaines témoignant d'un manque de volonté politique et sociale pour permettre une intervention efficace. Les programmes sociaux actuels contribuent généralement au manque de confiance en soi des femmes et des enfants sans-abris. Par conséquent, il est urgent d'instaurer des programmes novateurs qui garantiront l'autonomie et l'émancipation des femmes sans-abri plutôt que de les plonger davantage dans le labyrinthe des organismes de contrôle social.

Suffering is not an apparent in contemporary society. Often it is relegated deliberately to back spaces in our cities, in out of the way places where few of us have to have our sensibilities disturbed by looking into the faces of those who are in pain. While this pain may not always be that of the body, the agonies of the soul are certainly evident in the many worlds that homeless women and children are forced to inhabit in Canada. One of the deepest and most fundamental forms of violence that is carried out against women and children is their entrapment within the chains of economic dependency and destitution. When one is stripped of home, belongings, and dignity, the road to full civil status is not in sight, life becomes a moment-to-moment search to escape depression, to search introspectively for 'what went wrong' and to think about finding oneself again against incredible odds.

In this article I will present an analysis of the lived experience of the homeless poor in Canadian society examining the consequences of structural deterioration in the social fabric. The analysis will also address the effects of homelessness upon women and their children. The life courses of these homeless, it is argued, is irrevocably altered by their entrapment within poverty. The article attempts to demonstrate that the everyday experiences of homeless women and children must be related not only to broader issues of political economy, but also to issues reflecting a lack of political and social will to provide effective interventions. Current social programs contribute to a lack of self esteem amongst homeless women and children generally. Therefore, innovative programs which empower homeless women rather than build administrative bureaucracies, which emancipate rather than direct the homeless further into the interstices of social control agencies, are urgently required.

Talking to homeless women and children

For the majority of Canadians, the homeless are an invisible group of undeserving individuals who are generally considered to be pathological in their behaviour. In other words, the homeless are to blame for their station in life, whereas few observers would look to the political, social and economic conditions which may cause a person to become homeless. Few of us take any notice of the homeless on the street, despite the fact that their numbers have been steadily growing throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Canadians tend to hold stereotypical views of the homeless as comprised of mainly decrepit, wine sopping older men. The myth bears little relation to the reality of the 'new' homelessness in our country. The average age of homeless men is roughly 29 years and dropping according to a variety of shelter sources. Homeless women and children are becoming more numerous in Canada's large urban centres, victims of a variety of forces over which few have any control. While homelessness is not a new phenomenon in our society the depth and extent of the problem should be a cause of considerable concern. In Metropolitan Toronto alone there are by conservative estimates some 10,000 young people under the age of 24 who are homeless at any one time. The Canadian Council on Social Development estimated in 1989 that over 200,000 Canadians are homeless every year. That estimate could not have foreshadowed the escalation of unemployment in our nation, the daily closing of factories which resulted in 30,000 jobs being lost per month in Ontario by 1992, the rising cost of housing, the continuing loss of housing stocks due to 'gentrification.'

Since 1989 I have been talking to homeless Canadians, in shelters, church basements, on sidewalks, in parks and in 'motel programs' about their experience of being homeless. My three central foci have been: (1) the exigencies that lead them to be homeless; (2) the experience of homelessness as lived by them; and

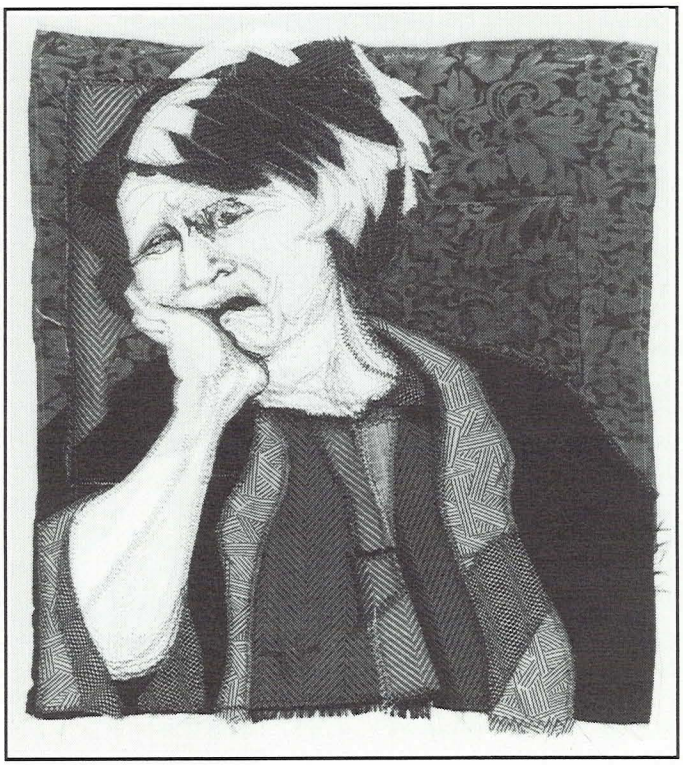
(3) their recommendations for dealing with the homeless and their thoughts about their futures. These interviews have not only deeply disturbed me as a social scientist, but have forced me to examine some of the fundamental precepts upon which our society operates. My conclusion, to be explored herewith, is that we have abandoned homeless women and children, burying them in a sea of rhetoric, red tape and neglect. This constitutes a fundamental attack upon those who have been, and remain, most vulnerable when we examine the economic, social and political position of the homeless. Feminist scholars have long been aware of the patriarchal nature of relations in our society which have left women to predominate, overwhelmingly, in all forms of poverty from birth through the senior years. The question which this article raises, is how this knowledge can be translated in praxis, and not reduced to the level of more sympathetic rhetoric.

Towards a political economy of homelessness

Women predominate in the poverty network in Canada. By the end of the 1980s over 86 per cent of low income, single parent families were headed by women. Over 50 per cent of these single parent families live below the poverty line according to government data. Beyond this there is the chronic problem of underemployed, that is, work that is part-time rather than full-time, and the disproportionate number of women who work in low paid jobs. Because of the inadequacies of our pension system, and the remnants of the patriarchal nuclear family system we find that amongst women over 65 more than 50 per cent are living at or below the poverty line (O'Reilly-Fleming, 1992). Overall, women account for the majority of seniors who are poor in our country. If the ranks of homeless women are swelling it should come as no surprise given these figures.

But our understanding of homelessness would not be complete if we did not consider a political economy analysis of the structures which have significantly contributed to this national crisis. The deindustrialization of the Canadian state began in earnest in the mid-1970s as real wages began to fall and unemployment began its gradual, now escalating rise. Under the Canada-U.S. Free Trade agreement private capitalists (elites and entrepreneurs), have been given a substantial leeway to substantiate the movement of jobs out of Canada. As factories shut their doors each day in Ontario manufacturers move to the southern United States and Mexico where concerns regarding the environment and union rights are negligible. The economic reality of global economic developments is that nations have far less control over their economy than we presume, while multinational corporations promote the lowering of trade boundaries in order to permit the free flow of capital from one location to another, following cheap labour and lowered manufacturing costs. The crucial impact this has on the production of homelessness can be seen at present in rising mass unemployment which by April 16,1992 according to Statistics Canada had reached 1,695,000 and "shows that more Canadians are out of work now than at any other time in history." This figure is, of course, quite conservative for it cannot take into account those who have simply given up looking for work, nor the millions of Canadians who are underemployed. Welfare rolls in Ontario have doubled in the last years alone creating significant problems for city councils and provincials governments in trying to provide increased social services from an ever-shrinking tax based. It is interesting to consider that service cuts have now become the brunt of government cuts in that ludicrous assertion of public policy that argues that somehow if we encourage business, a 'trickle down' effect will result for the poor. This has not been the case in either the United States or Canada, where the gap between wealthy and poor is ever-widening (Barak) and the term 'middle class' is quickly disappearing from our national vocabulary.

All of these political and economic policies impact most severely upon women and children in our society. Rhetoric concerning the value of motherhood and that views children as our 'greatest natural resource' is not substantiated by political will to effectively restructure our welfare programs, particularly, for the purposes of this argument, for the homeless. While it is not within the scope of this article to explore the many variations that homelessness takes among women, one example should suffice. In my research with homeless Canadians I have interviewed many teenaged women who have fled their parental homes generally because of physical, sexual and psychological abuse as well as neglect. The family home, as analysts of violence are aware, is more commonly the site of a variety of assaults against women and children than the street (DeKeseredy and Hinch; O'Reilly Fleming, 1990). These children most typically drift very quickly into a life of prostitution because of inadequacies in the current provision of support services that fail to understand the mistrust these children have of adult helpers. Society takes great pains to avoid this problem, as though by ignoring it the tragedies associ-



Deidre Scherer, *What If Only*, 1987. Fabric and Thread. 23" x 21"

Photo: J. Baird

ated with teen prostitution will somehow go away (Visano; Webber). I should point out that I am not arguing here for state control of women's bodies, an approach that I do not support, but rather that at the point of entry for children into prostitution we must work to provide more than emergency shelter programs—real alternatives to the street. The proof that current programs do not effectively address lone teens' homelessness is evident in the continuation of child prostitution in our country at significant levels.

The plight of women and their children who become homeless in Canada is characterized not only by the crisis of place and security they must suffer, but also the predominance of conservative and liberal views of homelessness and its genesis which predominate in our societal approaches to the homeless. Briefly stated, conservative viewpoints see homelessness arising from personal pathologies, that is as person-centred rather than

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societally produced. In this model, the homeless are either products of derangement, failed familial groupings, generations of welfare dependency or, in the most transparent hypothesis, exploitative and lazy women who want a life of leisure (Hopper). Such typifications while serving to assuage the guilt of the well-to-do in our society also provide a distancing from the homeless as non-deserving individuals. The homeless in this schema are viewed as a different type of person, someone who has come to misfortune through their own actions (or lack thereof) and therefore our societal approach should be to force these persons to change their ways. Work for welfare schemes, the cutting of benefits, and even official attempts to count the homeless (which always seriously underestimate the number of homeless so that services may be further cut) are all part of this denial of the structural roots of homelessness.

Liberal approaches to understanding the problem of homelessness are able to articulate a variety of sources inherent in the process of becoming homeless such as the drying up of affordable low income housing, lack of government investment of policies in regard to the development of independent, long-term housing for the homeless, and the de-institutionalization of mental patients, but do not connect these to central political, social and economic changes in our society. This results in an emphasis on the processes that lead to homelessness rather than an examination of the structural arrangements which produce the framework for homelessness.

In Toronto some 500 people, predominantly families, live in motel accommodation while they wait for suitable low rental housing. The motel program takes two forms: (1) clients are placed in motels that are paid a per diem rate for the duration of their stay; (2) clients are placed in a motel which is owned by the city and has been slightly converted for their needs. Life within these units is grim, but is obviously preferable to living on the street.

Two women and their children

Sally and Sean[1]

Sally, a 29 year-old woman is living with her 9 year-old son Sean in a motel program in Toronto. In the far east end of the city a group of decaying motels are clustered at the entrance to the 401 highway, over an hour's public transit ride from the downtown core. While one of the motels has been purchased by the city and is undergoing renovations to make the rooms more liveable for a family, the rest of the 500 people living in this program are spread throughout motels which are also used by 'paying' customers, many of them prostitutes and their customers, couples with little money seeking a place to make out, and the poor who find themselves temporarily without accommodation. The rooms are typical of a motel, about 10 x 14 feet with a double bed and a bunk for Sean. There are hotplates in some rooms and microwaves in others, and a fridge for storing food.

Sally was married for five years but the relationship fell apart when her husband began to have sexual relations with another woman. As Sally relates it, he established a patriarchal household. "My husband never wanted me to work, he wanted me to stay home raise our son...." At the time I interviewed her, Sally had been separated for five years from her husband. She began a relationship within a year with another man, and, being unaccustomed to handling money, and having existed in a position of dependency throughout her life, gave her savings away to her 'boyfriend.' Soon her resources were used up and her husband "stopped his support payments ($300 a month) because he met another girl." Sally and her son had moved through a variety of apartments in Toronto, each time moving down on the scale of desirability in terms of accommodation. Sean suffered as did his schoolwork understandably as their lives were constantly disrupted. "Sean, my son, suffered a lot throughout this, like his grades have gone way down." Sally's family are unable to help with resources, her mother and father have been divorced for many years.

Living in the crowded world of motel room has had serious effects of Sean's behaviour. "My son was so well behaved before I'd just tell him to do something and he'd do it. Now if I ask Sean to do something he gets mad, upset, and says 'Why do do I have to do it? Why don't you do it?' or stuff like that. He'd never been like that and my friends even said they'd noticed a change in Sean since all this happened." Sean's sense of self-worth has diminished through this process, and he feels alienated from his classmates. As Sally observes, he not only feels different but expresses it frequently. "Like he says to me, 'Mom, all my friends go to a home, like they go home. I have to come back to this motel every night.'" How does Sean feel about living in one room? "He hates it."

Life in the motel is punctuated by the dealing of hookers with their johns, arguments and fights that often occur in the early morning hours which often sound like they will break through the walls. Other families come and go quickly so children like Sean are unable to make lasting friendships and begin to view relationships as fleeting and disconnected. Sally and Sean receive $17.50 a day for food which means, in common with most

mothers, Sally often goes hungry to ensure her child is well fed. "There's like two slices of luncheon meat left. I'm gonna give it to my son before I give it to myself." The food Sally and Sean can afford to buy is of questionable nutritional value. The food stores located within walking distance from the motels overcharge for staple items, and cooking facilities are so inadequate that it is impossible to provide a balanced meal.

These two urban outcasts, like their contemporaries who number in the hundreds of thousands, survive on an endless diet of pasta, canned foods, sandwiches, hotdogs, hamburger, and powdered milk. Sally and Sean have few possessions aside from the meagre assortment of clothes they own. Sally suffers from periodic depressions but perseveres hoping for a better future for she and her son. His winter clothes are often inadequate due to a lack of resources. For entertainment they watch television, work on his homework together, walk around the mall, or go for long walks. In a hostile environment they have only each other to depend on. Their great love for one another permeated my interview, but as Sally commented, "This is no place for a child at all."

Martha, Adam and Mary

Martha is a 33 year-old woman who has resided in Canada for the majority of her life. She recently sought shelter in the motel program with her two children, a five year-old boy, Adam, and her seven year-old girl, Mary. She had been married for eleven years, relatively happily, and had worked at a hospital until the birth of her first child. Her husband's sister died of cancer about six months before Martha became homeless. After this death, Martha's husband became abusive towards her, beating her severely. "He hurt me physically and mentally and it came to the point where he was threatening me, and describing my death in detail. He choked me and he loved to grab me by the shoulders and my neck and throw me against walls. He would do this in front of the kids, too, and my daughter would be in-between us."

Her husband's pattern of abuse corresponded with the decreasing amount of work he found in the field of contracting where he had previously made a good living. He became increasingly depressed and would not leave their apartment during the day, spending all his time watching talk shows on TV. Although he was unemployed much of the time, he would not allow Martha to find a job as he was initially fearful that her male co-workers would seduce her. In the end, he accused her of wanting a job so that she could have sex with other men. The event which caused Martha to take her children and leave her husband was his discussion, with the children, of her death: "On Monday he picked them up from school and told them I was dead.... The whole night he kept telling them he was going to Florida with them. On Tuesday he did the same thing but in more detail. I was trying my best to pretend that everything was going to be okay and that I could manage on my own, saying I could put up with this, you don't give up. But then when I drove the children to school and they cried and hung onto my neck and said they didn't wanna go because I wouldn't be there after school for them because I would be dead. That really put the knife through my heart. My son even asked me if I'd remember them after I was dead. He said he couldn't come to my funeral because they would be going to Florida." The children modelled the father's behaviour in the motel room for the first few weeks. "They were very agitated. They would be hitting each other. My daughter was using the same words that he used to make me cry inside."

Martha is undergoing counselling and taking a computer course so that she can return to more highly paid employment. It will be hard for her to get a job, she concedes, for her address is a motel—not considered a fixed address for employers. Like most of the motel residents who have children it will take her from three months to one year to secure suitable rental accommodation as children are not welcome in many buildings. Martha also recognizes that there is a catch-22 inherent in taking a job. The type of employment she will likely get will be low paid, and the cost of child care for her kids for the times she cannot be at home is high. For many mothers with pre-school children the choice to work is simply not an option. Full-time paid employment less daycare, transportation, clothing and related expenses would leave them with substantially less money than they are eligible to receive on various support schemes. Martha is optimistic that she and her children will escape poverty and she has taken a number of positive steps to achieve that goal. She is afraid of her husband finding her and the children, a fear shared by many victims of male violence (Fleming, 1975). She hopes for a new future in a different city.

A cry from the heart: the feminization of homelessness

There are many routes to homelessness for Canadian women and their children. While it has only been possible to present a few examples in this article, it is evident that our research and praxis efforts in the future must be directed away from theo-

ries which view homelessness as a personal trouble, or simply provide analyses of the process of becoming homeless. Homelessness is a *public* problem which requires the researcher to speak with the homeless and give them voices. At present, the homeless are not empowered politically; it is others that advocate on their behalf. The homeless are a forgotten group in Canada, a large and rapidly escalating social problem with serious ramifications for the lives of women and children who are the victims of our political and economic policies. As long as the lived reality of the homeless is interpreted through the subjective and ideologically repressive viewpoint of a variety of social control agencies we are unlikely to be able to address the structural issues which produce homelessness. For children, the experience of homelessness is likely to be disruptive to education and to produce lasting emotional and psychological scars.

Life as a homeless woman or child, whether it means life on the streets, life in substandard housing, life in a series of motel rooms, or a life of enforced dependency on the welfare system, must be attacked with a focus on the lack of effective governmental intervention. While governments scurry to disavow responsibility for homeless women and children in our society, sociologists can make a significant contribution by empowering the homeless through research that informs the public and policymakers alike.

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[1] The names used in this account have been changed. Any identifying information has been removed from accounts. The author wishes to express his appreciation to The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation who supported part of the research which informs this article.

CORRECTIONS

In our Winter 1992 issue, "Growing Into Age," a typographical error occurred in Janice Andreae's review of Mary Meig's book, *In The Company of Strangers.* On page 114, the first quotation should read: *(Constance) got to her feet, having left her plate untouched, and wandered over to contemplate the chocolate layer cake and pastries on a side table, and came back looking like a guilty schoolgirl.*

In the same issue, in Susan A. McDaniel's article, "Women and Children in the Later Years: Findings from the 1990 General Social Survey," we failed to remove references to figures provided by the author but not published with the article. Our apologies for both of these errors.

CALL FOR PAPERS

In May 1993, the Centre for Refugee Studies and the Centre for Feminist Research at York University will be hosting a conference focusing on

Gender Issues & Refugees: Implications for Development.

The conference will embody a North/South feminist perspective on refugee issues. Paper presentations and panel discussions, in either French or English, will address issues of a timely nature, and will stimulate broader cross-cultural analysis in this area. Abstracts are invited from academics, service providers, policy makers, and, particularly, former refugees. Subject areas may include:

•feminist inquiry and refugee studies •cultural issues (in asylum, settlement, resettlement, repatriation, and reintegration) •environment; ethnicity/race; work; political persecution; human rights; the state •family reconstitution; health; sexuality; violence •North/South feminism

Some travel funding will be provided for paper presenters and discussants from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Deadline for receipt of abstracts is December 1, 1992. Abstracts should be forwarded to: Farhana Mather, Conference Coordinator, Centre for Refugee Studies, York Lanes, York University, 4700 Keele St., North York, Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3.

For registration information, and for inclusion in a subsequent bibliography, please submit your name, address, research interests, precis of published/unpublished research, and/or research in progress, to the above address.