

WOMEN, INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE, & HOMELESSNESS

40% of people in Canada experiencing visible homelessness – living in shelters or rough sleeping – are women¹

25% of those women cited domestic abuse as a factor leading to their most recent housing loss²

This newsletter will:

- Explain the connections between IPV and homelessness
- Identify barriers to safe, secure, accessible, and affordable housing when fleeing violence
- Discuss the impacts of IPV and housing issues through women's narratives
- Highlight the resilience of women

[Please click here to evaluate this newsletter.](#)

While the circumstances around individuals seeking shelter are complex and varied, we know that oppressive structures, such as economic injustice, racism, and sexism, play a key role. These systemic forces interact to shape the experiences of women living with intimate partner violence (IPV) and housing issues. The narratives in this newsletter come from the courageous women who shared their stories with advocates and researchers that work to bring greater understanding and attention to this serious social issue.

Definitions

[Definitions are placed in house outlines]

Intimate Partner Violence includes physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse. IPV is predominantly perpetuated by men and against women.

Women have diverse and intersecting social identities depending on their age, social class, gender identity, sexual identity, race, culture, Indigeneity, physical and mental abilities, and other features.³ Women self-identify and express their gender and sexuality in a variety of ways. Our organization and this newsletter are inclusive of trans, gender expansive, and two-spirit women.

Homelessness refers to “the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means, and ability of acquiring it.”⁴

Narratives throughout this issue are used with permission. We are grateful to the researchers and the women who shared their experiences.

BRINGING INTERSECTIONALITY TO THE ISSUE

Intersectionality is a useful framework for examining how forms of privilege and disadvantage shape women's experiences of violence and homelessness, and their access to resources and supports.

Fundamental to this framework is understanding social location, including that individuals belong to various groups or communities. Kimberlé Crenshaw describes how groups or communities intersect to influence an individual's social location and the way one experiences the world.⁵ For instance, social class, gender, sexual identification, race, culture, disability, economic status, education, religion, age, immigration status, and occupation all contribute to social location.

An individual may face oppression based on their social location. Oppression produces inequality, exclusion, fear, and violence. It is created and reinforced through harmful social norms, practices, and institutions.

An intersectional approach tells us that the experiences of various groups of women will differ based on factors such as race, disability, age, sexual orientation, etc. These intersecting social locations and associated oppressions shape experiences of violence, homelessness, support seeking, and responses from services.

[Image from Youtube of a girl in a shirt that says “This Ain’t Yo Mama’s Civil Rights Movement”]
– [Click here for video on intersectionality with subtitles.](#)

We start with this core newsletter to set the stage and highlight the main links between homelessness and violence. Next will be a newsletter developed by women with lived experience so as to center their knowledge and highlight their narratives.

Four additional newsletters complete the series. Each is a piece of intersectional work and thought that focuses on groups often overlooked or given minimal attention, and who experience additional barriers when fleeing violence and seeking safe, secure, accessible, and affordable housing:

- Indigenous Women
- LGBTIQ2S Youth
- Immigrant and Refugee Women
- Women Living with Disabilities and Deaf Women

Upcoming Newsletters

- **Women’s Voices**
- **LGBTIQ2S Youth, Homelessness, and Violence** with Dr. Alex Abramovich (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health)
- **Indigenous Women, Homelessness, and Violence** with the Ontario Native Women’s Association
- **Immigrant and Refugee Women, Homelessness, and Violence** with the Ontario Council Of Agencies Serving Immigrants
- **Women Living with Disabilities and Deaf Women, Homelessness, and Violence** with the DisAbled Women’s Network of Canada

Get these newsletters direct to your inbox by joining our mailing list - just send a request to vawln@uwo.ca!

[Click here to read our newsletter on intersectionality.](#)

HOUSING IS ALWAYS AN ISSUE WHEN A WOMAN IS NOT SAFE IN HER HOME

These are some thoughts and considerations women have when fleeing violence:

[A series of thought bubbles surround a center image where one individual is tossing over a table while another individual protects their face from the flying debris]

- I am not emotionally, physically, or sexually safe in my house.

- Does the shelter accept trans women? Will I encounter transphobia in the shelter?
- Will my belongings be thrown outside tonight?
- Will my partner follow me?
- I live on reserve and his sister runs the shelter. Everyone will know.
- Can my 14-year-old son come? He doesn't want to, but I can't leave him with my partner. What about my pets?
- Will the shelter be accessible? Will I be put into an institution because there is no accessible housing with supports?
- Is it really safe in shelters? I've heard stories... What about the violence on the streets?
- How can I afford to live on my own?
- Where will I go? How long can I stay?
- Will going to shelter affect my immigration status?
- The nearest shelter is 4 hours away – how will I commute to work?
- Why do I have to be the one to leave?

WHAT CAN A HOUSING ISSUE LOOK LIKE FOR A WOMAN?

Many women do not experience just one form of housing issue. Rather, the instability of their housing is felt in different ways depending on a multitude of factors including violence, race, immigration status, disability, and geographic location.

Her housing difficulties may be visible

[Image shows rocks under a bridge]

- Her belongings are thrown outside by her partner and she sleeps in a tent.
- *"I lived under the bridge for three months... under the bridge, no blankets, having to sleep on rock and eat wherever you could, having to panhandle. Going to different churches, where you line up to be the first one to eat, for a good shower. There are lice in your hair."*⁶
- She stays in an emergency shelter with men and women for 2 days.
- She lives in domestic violence transitional housing for 3 months.

Or it may be hidden

[Image shows a couch in a room with a mug and book on the coffee table in front]

- She loses her house while in hospital for physical abuse from her partner, and has nowhere to go once discharged.
- She sleeps on a couch in an already overcrowded home.
- *"I stayed with one friend but she was such a drug addict that I would rather be on the street. It was horrible. It was crack cocaine and the house was dirty... I slept on a dirty mattress, a dirty pillow. I was scared that some guy was gonna come in my room; the door was kicked off."*⁷
- She engages in survival sex in exchange for a roof over her head.

Even when she has housing, it may be unaffordable, inaccessible, & unsafe

[Image of a well-kept house]

- She may only be able to afford rent by paying it over bills, food, and other needs (e.g. hygiene products).
- The house is not accessible to her as she is living with a physical disability.
- *“I was living in a big house but without peace because I was abused. Even the kids were abused. Mentally. Physically. Sexually. Every which way. And it didn’t matter what size of house it is. It’s the condition of living.”⁸*
- She is unsafe in her house due to threats of violence and confinement by her partner.

A Poem of Lived Experience

[Background image is a park at night with street lights shining on the sidewalk. It is fall and there are no leaves on the trees]

My Home

The lights that shine so bright at night
 Home on the streets just isn’t right
 The sound of the cars as they pass by
 Try to relax, at least I try
 Sleeping in doorways, no way to live

To have a home what I wouldn’t give
 Those cold winter nights that lie ahead
 Life on the streets is what I dread
 People pass by like they just don’t care
 Life for some just isn’t fair
 A home is a necessity would you not agree
 To have respect and dignity

Maggie Traynor

Women’s Voices newsletter coming soon! *Subscribe to our mailing list to have it delivered to your inbox - send your request to: vawln@uwo.ca*

WHAT BARRIERS TO SAFE, SECURE, ACCESSIBLE, AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING EXIST FOR WOMEN FLEEING VIOLENCE?

Poverty reduces options for a woman experiencing violence and may stem from her partner withholding wages, work absences due to abuse, low wages, precarious employment, and a lack of services and programs assisting women fleeing violence.⁹

[Speech bubble in purple has the quote:] *“I remember I would have to change my PIN number all the time because he would make me give him my PIN number and he would take all the money out of the account.”¹⁰*

Shortage of affordable housing means that the housing that is available costs more than what is considered reasonable for most people. In Canada, housing that takes less than 30% of one's pay is considered affordable. When housing costs are more than that, the risk of homelessness increases, especially for women fleeing violence.

[Icons of four houses with one coloured in purple and the remaining three coloured in grey]
1 in 4 households spend more than what is considered affordable on housing¹¹

[Icons of ten coins with a money sign on them. 4 of the 10 are coloured in green while the rest are coloured in grey]
4 out of 10 renters spend more than what is affordable¹²

Discrimination affects women's ability to obtain housing and employment. For instance, the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation has found that landlords discriminate against women fleeing IPV, thus making their housing search even more difficult and limited.¹³

Transgender youth, in particular trans women of colour, face some of the highest levels of discrimination when seeking housing and shelter.¹⁴

"Landlords were almost 10 times less likely to indicate that a rental unit was available to a caller staying at a shelter for battered women."¹⁵

[Footer of the page includes a box that has a change in colour from purple to blue]

Lack of shelters for transitioning from an abusive house to a safe, secure, affordable, and accessible home can result in women being turned away from shelters. When a woman cannot stay in shelter, she may sleep in her car or on the streets. If the shelter is not accessible, a woman living with a disability may be sent to the local hospital or a long-term care facility if there are no other options.

[Image of individual holding a child]

On April 16th, 2014: 338 women and 201 children were turned away from women's shelters.¹⁶

Out of those turned away, 56% were due to the shelter being full.¹⁷

Lack of accessible shelters is felt especially by women fleeing violence in rural, remote, and Northern communities.¹⁸

Impacts of abuse and other stressors compromise a woman's search for housing when leaving violence. Finding housing is stressful at the best of times. However, women experiencing IPV are trying to find housing while navigating the obstacles and risks generated by an abusive partner, such as threats against her and her children, stalking, withholding of money, and destruction of property.

[Speech bubble in blue has the quote:] *"I had three places and my partner would find out. He'd promise that he would smarten up and then the same thing. I got evicted. I'd get another place; he'd try to kick the door down. I got evicted. The last time he started fighting me. I got evicted. I got tired of forever moving and buying stuff; everything gets thrown out or he sells it."¹⁹*

Compounded barriers are experienced by some groups of women who face oppression related to race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, social class, etc. A woman who is discriminated

against due to her race, disability, sex, or gender has additional difficulties in securing housing and employment.²⁰

[Image of a series of suitcases stacked on top of each other.]

Cheryl is an immigrant from China who lives with a disability. When Cheryl leaves her abusive partner she makes active efforts to find a new house, but she needs a house that meets accessibility standards and she has trouble finding one.

When Cheryl is able to find a house that meets her needs, the landlord asks her various questions around why an immigrant woman would leave her partner who sponsored them and about the financial assistance Cheryl receives through the Ontario Disability Support Program. The landlord decides not to rent to Cheryl.

CHERYL FACES ABLEISM, RACISM, SEXISM, AND CLASSISM.

[Exploring the Intersections: Immigrant and refugee women fleeing violence and experiencing homelessness in Canada](#) - This 2017 report explores the intersections between immigrant and refugee women fleeing violence and experiencing homelessness, health/mental health and disability issues, and trauma in Canada.

Changing Narratives

Narratives around women fleeing violence and experiencing homelessness present homelessness as the fault of women, with a focus on weakness and damage, rather than recognizing the broader systemic conditions that create barriers for women to obtain and secure long-term housing.

WOMEN'S NARRATIVES BRING IMPACTS TO LIFE

Impacts of violence and homelessness can be visible, invisible, short-term, and long-term. Supports are needed before, during, and after housing is secured to assist with healing and transitions.

[Each identified impact is in a distinct box over a background image of a blurred home. Next to these impacts are icons of various women from different groups and communities.]

Employment Difficulties – *“That’s another pressure. I really would like to move out but I can’t because before I don’t find a job so it’s kind of this circle. So I feel since a while a little bit depressed.”²¹*

Revictimization – *“Guys see you walking around with a black eye, then figure they can abuse you too. You’ve got to be very careful. I didn’t want to go downtown cause I was scared I was gonna get raped or drugged. Or, some guys gonna beat the shit out of me and get me to be a prostitute. Because I’m on the street, I’m vulnerable.”²²*

Substance Use – *“I became an alcoholic; I chose that life. I thought, maybe it’s the way for me to get out. Now I know it’s not. Alcohol does kill you. If not, somebody or something will kill you.”²³*

Health Difficulties (e.g. physical health issues, mental health issues, reproductive health issues) – *“It was stressful, having migraines all the time. I am the kind of person that only very rarely I get sick with a cold. And I was constantly getting sick with that. It felt like my immune system was just going down. Plus I was overeating, Oh, I had low self-esteem, where I felt that I couldn’t accomplish anything.”²⁴*

Loss – *“I came back to my house. I had my kids’ Christmas presents and bought a huge tree. The shelter donated some furniture and it was nice. He put gas all over and set my place on fire and stayed in the house. He was trying to kill himself.”*²⁵

Compromised Parenting Potential – *“I had one kid. We ended up getting kicked out of an apartment because there was too much fighting and drinking on his [ex-partner] part. We ended up on the streets. It was pretty scary; I thought I was gonna lose my son. Three weeks we stayed from place to place and I knew that wasn’t stable for my son.”*²⁶

Lack of Psychological Safety – *“My current housing suits me very well, I like the independence, I like to have my own space, I feel comfortable here but I don’t feel safe.”*²⁷

Financial Problems – *“I was working and paying this girl a whole bunch of money, like for daycare and stuff and like, right, and so I’m like, yeah, I’m not making ends meet either even though I am in housing and my, my costs have gone up a bit, it’s not market rent, but I was spending all this money on daycare... So I’m like, sure, come here for a month and then watch the kids for me, I’ll give you a bit of money, and find a place to stay. And then I got the crap kicked out of me.”*²⁸

*“I’ll never forget the day that I found out that we were evicted. I found the eviction notice in the glove box. He had been lying to me since October that he was paying the rent. We were in March. He got the eviction notice back, I believe it was end of February or early March. I got the letter like March 5 and they were going to be changing the locks with the sheriff on March 12. I was pregnant.”*²⁹

WOMEN ARE RESILIENT

[Image of the poet Rupi Kaur on a stage with a red background and in a white dress]

[Click for video of Rupi Kaur with subtitles.](#)

“It takes a broken, twisted person to come searching for meaning between my legs, but it takes a whole, complete, perfectly designed person to survive it.

It takes monsters to steal souls, and fighters to reclaim them.

This home is what I came into the world with; was the first home, will be the last home.

You can’t take it.”

- Rupi Kaur in *I’m Taking My Body Back*

Women have “the ability to succeed in the face of adversity” and to work with supports to heal and help those around them.³⁰ Resilience is not obtained in a single “a-ha” moment. Women experience extremely difficult times and setbacks. In spite of these adversities and even when things are at their worst, resilience exists and can be strengthened.

Resilience is in “the doing.”³¹ It requires action, moving, and relating. At times, it will require experimentation so that a woman’s individual path to strengthened resilience can be found. Some possible routes include mentoring, peer support, safe spaces, culture, religion, and personal support networks. Women benefit when informal and formal supports recognize a woman’s potential and work with her to build on her strengths, like her passion for dance or her sharing through writing.

THE RESILIENCE OF MOTHERS

[Image of a young child smiling and holding their teddy bear]

Mothers experiencing homelessness continually note the importance of their children in their efforts to move forward. They want better lives for their children and use their strength to keep their children safe. The hopes and dreams of mothers continually include a healthy environment where their children are doing well in school and spending time with family.

“I don’t know... my life has been like a real struggle but I’ve come to realize it’s going to take a lot more than the situations that I’ve come through to stop me from doing what I need to do to provide for my family.”³²

THE NEED TO CREATE SAFE HOMES

Housing First is a promising model in the field of homelessness within Canada. It works to move those experiencing housing issues directly into their own independent house or apartment, with subsequent supports. This approach offers the most promise when adapted to the needs of particular groups and communities. Two examples of such adaptations include:

1. **Nihik Housing First, Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society** – A program based out of Homeward Trust in Edmonton that addresses Indigenous homelessness. It considers how to integrate Indigenous culture into Housing First, including being representative of diverse Indigenous teachings, maintaining connections to local Indigenous groups, and having an inclusive governance structure
2. **The Vivian** – A Housing First program from RainCity Housing and Support Society in Vancouver. The Vivian is by women, and for women. It employs a harm reduction approach and its first goal is to provide a safe house in order to prevent violence while living on the streets³³

LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE

- [*We’re not asking, we’re telling: An inventory of practices promoting the dignity, autonomy, and self-determination of women and families facing homeless*](#) provides a model to center the lived experiences of women through their use of participatory action research and a human rights approach³⁴
- A groundbreaking example of inclusion and advocacy is [*All Our Sisters*](#), a network focused on improving women’s access to safe, secure, and affordable housing. They continually embody the best principles of inclusion, as exemplified by their 2014 conference sponsoring 1/5 participants to share their lived experience³⁵

A MUST READ!

Women’s Shelters Canada created a list of 11 recommendations for the fall 2017 National Housing Strategy entitled Housing, Homelessness, & Violence Against Women (VAW).

Their work is grounded in an intersectional gender-based analysis and was developed through a cross-sectoral roundtable on housing, homelessness, and VAW. Their recommendations include pieces on the national housing fund, investments in affordable housing, and a homelessness partnering strategy.³⁶

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