
Literature Review

Saskatchewan's
Housing Crisis:
Addressing the Needs
of Women and
Children Who Have
Experienced Violence

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The issues of homelessness and of violence against women have traditionally been viewed as separate and distinct problems. There have been many studies on homelessness and woman abuse in Canada but the overlap and interconnection between these two have been overlooked in the past. The literature of studies that have been conducted show that the experience and the needs of these two groups of marginalized women are similar. The data and scope of both homelessness and violence against women will never be fully understood until abused women are seen as homeless (Miller & Du Mont, 2000).

The reasons people become homeless are varied. Often they include unemployment, poverty, social policies (Miller & Du Mont, 2000), substance abuse, mental health issues, the lack of affordable housing and domestic abuse. Many of the studies of the past have had trouble defining homelessness. Subjective definitions would either include or exclude certain groups. The European Federation of National Organizations working with the Homeless “coordinates and encourages national actions and policy development to combat poverty and social exclusion” (FEANTSA website). FEANTSA has developed the European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS) to try to operationalize the definition of homelessness so that homeless people can be mapped, monitored and policies changed (FEANTSA, 2006). This organization has looked at what it means to have a home and if this is not present what it means to be homeless. According to FEANTSA there are three domains that constitute having a home: having an adequate space which one “can exercise exclusive possession (*physical domain*), being able to maintain privacy and enjoy relations (*social domain*) and having a legal title to occupation (*legal domain*)” (FEANTSA, 2007, para. 3).

FEANTSA has broken down the idea of homelessness into four main concepts: roofless, houseless, insecure and inadequate. This is meant to cover all living situations in all countries so

as not to exclude anyone who is, in fact, homeless. Men, women, children, youth, immigrants, different ethnic groups, people with mental health issues, physical disabilities, illness, victims of domestic violence, those that are both the visible and hidden homeless should be able to fall under at least one of these categories (FEANTSA website). The physical, social and legal domains are deliberately broad because homelessness is viewed as “a process (rather than a static phenomenon) that affects many vulnerable households at different points in their lives” (FEANTSA website). These three domains have led to four main concepts of what homelessness and housing exclusion actually mean for those who are lacking housing or are at risk of becoming homeless. These 4 concepts are roofless, houseless, insecure and inadequate housing.

Roofless refers to what is commonly thought of as homeless: those who are living on the streets (sleeping rough) in public spaces and those who are in one night emergency shelters, who have no usual place of residence (FEANTSA, 2006).

The houseless category is made up of 5 sub-categories of accommodation that is intended to be short term. This includes people in homeless shelters where the stay is meant to be rather short term, people in women’s shelters who are fleeing from domestic violence, and people in accommodation for newcomers and immigrants such as reception houses and temporary worker accommodations. These people are living in spaces that certainly lack privacy and social space (FEANTSA, 2006). It is important to include these people because they “are not generally included in homeless surveys since they are not considered as people experiencing homelessness” (FEANTSA, 2006, p. 7). The houseless concept also includes slightly longer-term accommodation for people who are due to be released from a penal, mental or children/youth institutions where there is no available/appropriate housing. As well as people who are receiving

longer term support such as residential care or supported housing for older or formerly homeless people (FEANTSA, 2006). This category of people is included in homeless because it “refers to a situation with a short tenancy and dependent on accepting support” (FEANTSA, 2006, p. 7).

To consider those in insecure housing as homeless is “useful for national policies based on prevention of homelessness” (FEANTSA, 2006, p. 7). People who fall under the concept of insecure housing are those that are living temporarily with family or friends, living on land or in a dwelling illegally due to lack of housing. People who are living with the threat of eviction or violence would also be considered to be in insecure housing.

Inadequate housing is a significant issue in Canada (YWCA, 2009). Inadequate housing includes those who are living in shelters that are unfit for habitation, as well as those living with extreme overcrowding. The UN Declaration of Human Rights states that access to “adequate housing is a basic human right” (Huang, 2009, p. 4). According to the UN adequate housing means “adequate privacy, adequate space, adequate security, adequate lighting and ventilation, adequate basic infrastructure and adequate location with regard to work and basic facilities - all at a reasonable cost” (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, 1991, para. 7).

Using FEANTSA’s typology the scope of homelessness is broad and encompasses many different groups. This is especially important when we think about who is considered homeless in Canada. Many women who are victims of domestic abuse do not access shelters and therefore are not considered homeless. It is important to recognize abused women as homeless, without it “the matter of male violence against women will confound our understanding of the aetiology, scope, and experience of homelessness” (Miller & Du Mont, 2000, p. 115). With the idea that to be homeless means to be without the physical, social, and legal domains set out by FEANTSA,

women who are victims of intimate abuse would certainly fall under one or more of the categories.

Homelessness looks different depending on who is homeless. Traditionally homelessness has been seen as only rooflessness because that is the most visible. These are the people who we see living on the streets and sleeping on park benches. For the most part it is men who fit in the image of sleeping rough. For men, the causes of homelessness are often things such as job loss, mental health problems, drug and alcohol addictions and the release from an institution. This is not usually the case for homeless women who tend to become homeless due to mental health problems, poverty, the lack of affordable housing and most especially because they are fleeing from violence.

One contributing factor to homelessness in women is mental health issues. Tutty, Ogden & Weaver (2008) state that 75% of single homeless women have been diagnosed with a mental health problem while only 30% of the general homeless population have such a diagnosis (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2004). Women with these types of diagnosis are rarely safe when homeless. 80% of mentally ill women had experienced physical violence and 40% had been sexually assaulted by an intimate partner (Goodman et al., 1995 in Tutty et al, 2008).

Poverty is a well-known pathway to homelessness. Many people live so close to the edge of being without adequate shelter. Women are among the poorest people in Canada. In fact, 19% of women live in poverty (National Working Group on Women and Housing, 2006 in Tutty et al., 2008). Many women and families rely on social assistance to help them survive.

Unfortunately, income assistance payments are not sufficient and do not meet the costs of accommodation and food. Tutty et al. (2008) state that even if someone in the family is working it is very difficult because “public assistance and minimum wage have not kept pace with the

average rents” (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2008). Homeless women with children are at an even larger risk to be repetitively homeless (Novac, 2006) than single women. For women to be able to get back on their feet and gain independence they will need to find childcare. Affordable childcare is not readily available and there is not much funding provided for it (Tutty et al., 2008).

Across Canada and in Regina, key factors that influence homelessness appear to be the combination of low-income and high rental and ownership costs, insufficient support for people who need it to maintain proper housing and systemic issues such as public policy and discrimination (Regina Homelessness Committee, 2007). The lack of affordable housing is “a leading cause of evictions and homelessness” (Shapcott, 2008, p. 3). Housing is considered unaffordable if a household must pay 30% or more of their pre-tax income on housing (Regina Homelessness Committee, 2007). Core need households are defined as those “which are unable to afford shelter that meets adequacy, suitability, and affordability norms” of Canadians (CMHC website). This means that people are spending more and more of their total income on their accommodation. One in four Canadian households are in core housing need (YWCA, 2009). In Regina, SK in 2006, core need rental households could afford to pay \$350/month on rent. However, even a basic 1-bedroom apartment was renting for approximately \$516/month (Regina Homelessness Committee, 2007). In 2008, a single person in Regina, SK who was making minimum wage could not afford the rent for a basic bachelor apartment (Spooner, 2009). This is problematic nationwide. Across Canada “more than half the renter households cannot afford the average rents being charged by private landlords” (Shapcott, 2008, p. 4). The Canadian Mental Health Association reported in 2004 that 1 in 5 households in Canada could not afford housing that was adequate (Tutty et al, 2008). The cost of rent and mortgage payments is increasing and

the “sustainability of housing affordability depends on income increases keeping pace” (Huang, 2009). The lack of affordable housing can cause people, especially women, to be evicted because they are unable to afford the rent. In Saskatchewan housing spending is up 24% but income earnings are only up by 3% (Shapcott, 2008). Some of the housing that is available or affordable is substandard in quality. In fact, 1 in 5 rental households are living in overcrowded conditions, housing that needs major repairs or both (Shapcott, 2002). Subsidized housing is available to those who qualify but the waiting lists are sometimes years long (YWCA, 2009). More housing unit are needed to be able to keep up with the demand of the people who need them.

Domestic violence is a problem that pervades our society. One of the primary Canadian researchers on the subject, Leslie Tutty (2006), states that violence against women is rooted in the social and political systems that restrict women’s rights and perpetuate the pervasive inequality that women face worldwide. Generally women say that the violent behaviour inflicted on them by others is a strong factor for contributing to their homelessness (Tessler, Rosenhek, Gamache, 2001 in Tutty, 2008, Novac, 2006, Trainor, 1999). Novac (2006) states that domestic violence is one of the main causes of homelessness. In fact, a study (Springer et al. 1998) completed in Toronto shelters shows that the admissions due to family violence nearly doubled between 1988 and 1996. Spousal abuse does not only happen to women but they are 83% the majority of victims (“Study: Family Violence”, 2009).

Intimate domestic violence not only effects women physically but also affects every other area of her life. Abusive relationships contribute to “diminish resources, social exclusion, economic vulnerability, and eventual homelessness for the women” (Wesely & Wright, 2005 in Tutty et al., 2008, p. 19). Many people who become homeless in their adult lives, especially women, have had experience with family violence during their lives (Novac, 2006). Correia &

Rubin (2001) state that “91.6% of homeless mothers had experienced physical or sexual assaults during their lives, 63% by an intimate male partner” (p. 2).

Homeless women live hard and harsh lives. Whether they are living on the street, staying with family or friends or in shelters and other supported housing, they face the danger of violence from strangers, acquaintances and abusive ex-partners. A study by Goodman et al. (1995) found that 34% of homeless women interviewed had been sexually assaulted and 30% had been physically assaulted (Tutty et al. 2008). This experience of violence for younger women is even more of a threat to their lives. Homeless women under 45 years of age are ten times more likely to die than women of the same age in the general population (Cheung & Hwang, 2004). Homeless youth have also been subjected to similar experiences. According to the Regina Homelessness Committee (2007, p.7) “70% of homeless youth have been abused, adding to their vulnerability”.

Aboriginal women face related but distinct issues when discussing domestic violence and homelessness. Because of systemic poverty and a history of institutional abuse Aboriginal people have a higher rate of exposure to violence in their lives, women especially experience more spousal abuse (Novac, 2006). According to Tutty (2006), Aboriginal women are significantly more likely to experience abuse by their male partners than non-Aboriginal women. Aboriginal people, especially women, are over represented among the homeless population (Regina Homelessness Committee, 2007 & Novac, 2006). In 2008, 70% of all people using shelters in Regina were Aboriginal, First Nations or Métis (Spooner, 2009). If and when Aboriginal women on reserves decide to leave their abusive partner, finding shelter, help, resources and support is even more difficult. Women in rural areas have similar experiences and needs but much less access to shelters and more problems with anonymity and confidentiality in a small community

(Tutty et al., 2008). Service providers need to be aware that practices that work with city dwelling women may not work in rural and Northern communities or on reserves (Tutty, 2006). Adequate housing is hard to come by on reserves. Because of this “lack of housing stock on reserves forces many people to live in overcrowded conditions and what housing exists is often substandard, not meeting basic health standards” (Tutty et al., 2008, p.17). Also because of the Matrimonial Real Property Act, housing ownership is through the men. This means that if a women decides to leave her partner she will not qualify for housing on her own reserve (Tutty et al., 2008). If an Aboriginal woman decides to leave her reserve and her band and seek help in another community she may not qualify for that band’s supports (Tutty et al., 2008).

The statistics on abused women are difficult to determine because not all women access Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters when they leave their partner. Most stay with family or friends (Novac, 2006) or keeping moving around to remain safe (Tutty, 2006). These women are part of the hidden homeless or, according to FEANTSA (2007), they would fit either in the houseless or insecurely housed categories. Often, women only seek help from a shelter or formal services after they have exhausted their personal community of resources (Novac, 2006). Even though not all abused women are utilizing homeless or VAW shelters, there is still a need for more shelters and resources to help the women who do come forward. In Saskatchewan, there has been a 16% increase in demand for homeless shelter beds not specific to victims of domestic abuse (Schiff & Greenburg, 2009 in Spooner, 2009). Also the “number of homeless shelter users rose by 30%” (Spooner, 2009, p. 5). Emergency shelters and transition houses provide temporary respite to women and children who are fleeing from abuse. However, it is sometimes not possible for women to access the shelters when they need them due to shelters being full. On a selected day in 2002 one-quarter of all family violence shelters in Canada turned people away

because there simply wasn't room (Novac, 2006). More recently, on a snapshot day in April 2008, 299 women and 148 children were turned away from VAW shelters across Canada because there were no available beds ("Study: Family Violence", 2009). Without access to shelters women may return to their abuser or end up on the streets as part of the people experiencing rooflessness. Homeless women are commonly former shelter residents who were not able to access adequate housing (Tutty et al., 2008).

To those who have never experienced domestic violence, it seems easy to say "why doesn't she just leave?" The factors that influence the ability for a woman to be able to leave or stay away from her abusive partner are complex and diverse. Some of these factors include the income that the woman will need to be able to support herself, whether from employment or adequate social assistance, access to permanent affordable housing and childcare (Tutty, 2006).

Women who are considering leaving an abusive situation often worry about the fate of their children. Sometimes she feels that the children are not served best by being looked after by a single mother (Tutty et al, 2008). If a woman decides to flee with her children, she faces the possibility of at least temporary homelessness. This possibility could cause her children to be taken away by social services because she is unable to provide them with secure and adequate housing (Tutty et al., 2008). Sometimes this fear is enough to stop the woman from leaving her abusive relationship.

The threat of increase violence is also a factor that might stop a woman from attempting to leave her abuser. Victims are "at enhanced risk of being seriously injured or even murdered when separated from their partners" (Tutty, 2006, p. 9).

Some women are able to leave their abusive relationship only to be faced with choices that do not support independence. Most women who return to their partner do so because of lack

of financial support, fear of the abuser, and lack of housing (Tutty, 2006). If there are no housing alternatives for a women once she has left her relationship or if she is coming out of the shelter system, she may feel that she has no choice but to return (Correia & Rubin, 2001).

Affordable housing is a primary concern for homeless and abused women. There is a shortage of available housing in Canada. In fact, the YWCA (2009) states that “shortage of housing options available to women escaping violence in their homes has reached crisis proportions” (p. 20) When deciding on a housing option, service providers and victims of domestic abuse need to consider safety, the maximum length of stay, the quality of housing available, if there are emotional supports in place and if the option is accessible in her area or situation (Tutty et al., 2008). Women who have safe and secure housing are much less likely to experience further violence from their intimate partner (Novac, 2006). These resources might not be available in every area and they might not be culturally appropriate or the best choice for each woman’s personal situation.

Emergency shelters may or may not cater exclusively to women experiencing domestic violence. These are intended to provide temporary (usually 1-21 days) housing and respite for women (Trainor, 1999). The women who do access emergency or VAW shelters often had the highest severity of violence in their relationship. In fact, shelter users were more than twice as likely to have feared for their lives than other abused women who did not access temporary shelters (Trainor, 1999).

Second-stage housing is “secure housing with support and referral services designed to assist women while they search for permanent housing” (Trainor, 1999, p. 2). This type of housing is less common than emergency shelters. Second stage housing often offers enhanced security and priority is given to the women with the most dangerous partner (Tutty et al., 2008).

Transitional housing offers “a supportive living environment, opportunities and tools for skills development and promotes the development of community among residents” (Novac, Brown & Bourbonnais, 2009, p. 1). Transitional housing is meant to help women make changes in their lives so that they are housing-ready when it is time to move to permanent accommodation. Successfully completing the transitional housing program often leads to increased rates of housing stability but the success rates of abused women are much lower (Novac, 2006). When these women have been given the opportunity to be involved in permanent subsidized housing, their chances of remaining safely housed is much greater (Novac, 2006 & Spooner, 2009). Women who have experienced violence often have other barriers such as addictions, employment, mental and physical health. It is more effective to address these issues when the women is in stable housing (Spooner, 2009). Novac (2006) found that while staff at shelters and housing programs were focused on issues like mental health, the women themselves thought that finding affordable and adequate housing was the primary priority. These women are often overwhelmed by all of the things that they are dealing with. The Canadian Mental Health Association (2004, p.3) states that “without a physical place to call ‘home’ in the social, psychological, and emotional sense the hour-to-hour struggle replaces all other possible activities” (in Tutty et al., 2008, p. 26).

Emergency shelters, transitional and second stage housing all cause the woman to have to leave her home and the security, even if it’s teamed with violence, that brings. Many researchers and advocates have wondered why it is the victim that has to leave and face further hardship. Protection orders are a way of keeping the woman in her own home and making the abuser leave by offering immediate protection (Tutty et al., 2008) and restricting his access to her and the house. Protection orders, even if they are only temporary, “represent public documentation that

abuse has occurred, and if the order is violated, the assailant is subject to prosecution” (McFarlane et al., 2004, p. 613). Studies on the effectiveness of protection orders present conflicting information. It seems to be most effective for women whose partners are a low risk to re-offend (Tutty et al., 2008). McFarlane et al. (2004) found that women who applied for protection orders experienced significantly lower levels of violence from their intimate partner. Even if the woman was not granted a protection order, the fact that she applied and spoke out about her abuse, seemed to lessen the amount and severity of intimate partner violence she experienced (McFarlane et al., 2004). It is thought that the act of filing for a protection order puts the abused woman in contact with social, health and justice services and her experience is shared and becomes public knowledge (McFarlane et al., 2004).

Women who are victims of domestic abuse are not all the same in their experiences or needs. There are those who require emergency shelter, those who can stay with family or friends, those who have relatively few safety risks (Tutty et al., 2008). Many women do not access services that are specific to victims of domestic violence. They may contact homeless shelters, doctors, nurses, counselors or other professionals who may not have the knowledge or training that is needed to effectively help these women (Tutty, 2006). To make sure that women are receiving the services they need, professionals who may encounter abused women should be cross-trained to that they know how to respond to their needs appropriately (Tutty, 2006). At the very least, professionals should know where to refer women too and take responsibility to make certain that they make contact with service agencies. The shelter staff and other agencies also need to have proper training. Women who enter shelters have complex needs that include needing emotional support, information on stress and anger management, improving self-esteem, employability skills, a safe place to stay, and referrals for housing (Tutty, 2006). Abused women

also tend to have lower education and job skills. They need training to be able to find work that will provide for their family and they need the shelter staff to prepare them and support them through this (Tutty, 2006). The people who work with abused women need to be compassionate, empathetic and helpful but they can easily become burnt out because of the stressful nature of this intense job. Shelter staff need “training, debriefing and self-care to effectively care for women” (Tutty, 2006, p. xx).

When abused women enter shelters or supported accommodation access to permanent housing was a significant concern. Without access to adequate, secure housing and financial supports women are faced with the choice between homelessness and returning to their abusive partner (Tutty et al., 2008 & Tutty, 2006). When leaving a shelter the majority of women were not planning to return to their abuser (Tutty, 2006). This means that women are needing permanent housing that offers them safety and stability. The ability and opportunity to transition into permanent housing was a major factor in determining women’s long-term safety from their abusive relationship (Novac, 2006). However, gaining access to affordable housing is not always easy. One third of women who have experienced domestic violence remain homeless for prolonged periods (Novac 2006). Many women are discriminated against by landlords who may have had concerns regarding her ability to pay the rent or the potential violence that might erupt at the hands of her abusive partner (Tutty et al., 2008). Many women rely on income assistance to be able to survive when they are first leaving the shelter systems. However “abused women cannot qualify for income support without an address; landlords refuse to take them as tenants without up-front money for damage deposits—cash these women don’t yet have” (YWCA, 2009, p. 21). Often accessing appropriate housing is dependent on one’s position within a family or in society (Novac, 2006). Once women have found housing that is secure and

adequate for them and their children they still rely on support from agencies serving abused women. Unfortunately, even though support will help women to remain housed, funding for these after-shelter services is very limited (Tutty, 2006).

It is important to recognize the complexity of issues that face women who have experienced intimate partner abuse. Most women do not access the shelter system but rather put up with abuse or stay with family or friends when they decide to leave. A home is not defined as a roof over one's head. It is so much more than that and includes having a safe, secure, affordable place to live and raise a family in. Traditionally, abused women have not been seen as homeless and have not been counted in statistics of homeless women. If we use FEANTSA's typography of homelessness and housing exclusion, we can see that abused women clearly fall under either the houseless or the insecurely housed categories. Women who do access shelters, transitional housing and other services for VAW have needs that include not only a safe place to stay, but also access to permanent affordable housing, childcare, employment readiness and training, emotional support and information about how to cope and remain independent and, above all, safe. Housing is a primary concern of homeless and domestically violence victims, especially Aboriginal women due the lack of adequate housing on reserves. When women leave their abuser they need to be able to safely connect with shelters, transition or second stage housing, permanent subsidized housing or protection orders. They need access to employment training programs, emotional supports and childcare. There still needs to be much work done to make our communities a place where women can safely access the services that they need to make the transition from abused victim to independent women.

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