



Ending Family Homelessness

A Symposium
6 & 7 November 2008, University of Toronto

Morning Breakout Session 5

Ending Violence Against Women

Session Questions

Violence against women and girls is a primary cause of family homelessness. What changes in policy and culture can prevent violence? What changes to income supports, housing provision, and other policy areas can ensure access to safe, adequate housing for families fleeing violence? What are the opportunities for action, and what can organizations and individuals do?

Co-convenors

Marsha Brown (YWCA, Toronto), Wendy Komiotis (METRAC, Toronto), Cindy Cowan (Interim Place, Peel).

Session Participants

This session was attended by approximately 15 participants representing shelters in the sectors of homelessness and violence against women, advocacy organizations, and service providers.

Identifying the problems: policies and practices that need to change

Clarify and define the issue

- Violence against women along with gender, class, race, and ability discrimination are factors in homelessness.
- Homelessness is caused by interconnected factors: socioeconomic issues (childcare, education, equality, housing/shelter) and political issues (justice, barriers, discrimination, access, power inequities).
- Gender violence includes the disproportionate poverty and homelessness experienced by women-led families.
- Women face multiple oppressions; violence must be understood in a broad way.

- Address women experiencing homelessness as one group in order to challenge government practices that divide them into different groups.
- Recognize that it is predominantly mother-led families and single, working poor women who are living in overpriced and poor-quality housing.

Systemic issues

- Systemic barriers and discrimination trap women and girls. For example, women are stuck in jobs that do not realize their potential.
- "Liveable" by the standards of Toronto housing is a problematic criterion, because it is driven by racism and classism.

Access to services and education

- Young women who have experienced rape rarely disclose their experiences of violence or seek support.
- Policy makers need to be educated and better in touch with communities and service providers.
- Public education is a missing component in policy development.

Leverage points and opportunities for action

Legal advocacy

- Pressure the state for affordable housing.
- **“We have a right to housing and the state has a responsibility to provide it.”**
- Support legal challenges.

Integrate strategies

- Use integrated strategies to address the systems and services affecting women’s lives.
- Acknowledge the interconnections between child care, income supports, health care supports, and the impacts of violence and homelessness on physical and mental health.
- Legal Aid is an example of positive change that makes services more accessible. Women-friendly changes improve access.
- Promote positive change, or it will go away.
- Develop income and poverty reduction plans based on an integrated approach that accounts for discrimination (class, race, disability, etc.).
- Commit to improvements to child care, workers’ rights, immigration reform, and mental and physical health care. This commitment must be national, provincial, and local.
- Support a national women’s health strategy that addresses homelessness and addresses racism and oppression.
- Develop solidarity with Aboriginal women regarding violence against women strategies

“We have a right to housing and the state has a responsibility to provide it.”

that recognize the need for Aboriginal women-specific policy.

- Address urban- and rural-specific needs.

Labour market and housing strategies

- Develop a labour market strategy including reforms to monitor what wages are being paid.
- Press for a minimum living wage, immigrants’ and workers’ rights, a national housing strategy, and affordable permanent housing.
- Develop income security strategies addressing homeless women as a group.
- Challenge Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation’s market rent definitions. Ask: Do women want to live there? It is important to ensure that choice is consumer-driven.
- Consider aspects that affect consumer choice (e.g. apartments or houses, number of bedrooms needed, co-ops, rural or urban location, accessibility for people with disabilities, supportive housing, transportation for children, gardens, parks, and schools).
- Improve labour rights legislation regarding pay equity. Increase the minimum wage, pension rates, disability support rates, and employment insurance rates.
- Challenge social support systems that are punitive (e.g., maternity benefits are only 55% from 80% of a woman’s salary).

Action plans: what individuals and organizations can do and are doing

Political solidarity

- Focus efforts to support the high proportion of mother-led families.
- Examine the laws that categorize and separate women and strategize about improvements to income and cultural support.

- Build housing for women that acknowledges their social identities.

User-led policy and planning

- Address social conditions as well as economic conditions.
- Women's needs must be reflected in policy, planning, and strategy.
- Communities must determine housing standards for themselves and housing must be built in consultation with those communities.

Develop housing that is attractive, encourages physical activity, and fosters community as opposed to reinforcing the message that low-income women and their families are less deserving.

- 50% of the housing built must be social housing.
- Develop housing that is attractive, encourages physical activity, and fosters community as opposed to reinforcing the message that low-income women and their families are less deserving.

Self-determination by communities is crucial. People have a right to housing. Counter the stigma and oppression faced by communities experiencing homelessness and poor housing.



Cities Centre
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

This project received funding from the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). The research and recommendations are the responsibility of the authors of the report and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

The Ending Family Homelessness Symposium was held 7 November 2008 at Hart House, University of Toronto. Over 100 people participated from 12 different Southern Ontario regions, representing service providers, researchers, advocates, and people with lived experience of homelessness. All session notes are based on discussion in sessions, and do not necessarily represent the consensus of all present.

www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca