

Obstacle to a Safe Exit: Domestic Violence & The Whitehorse Housing Crisis

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Domestic Violence in Yukon

According to research done by United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM, 2003), “the direct annual cost of violence against women in Canada has been estimated to be Canadian \$684 million in the criminal justice system and \$187 million for police (p. 67).” With counseling and training included, the cost of violence against women in Canada is a whopping one billion dollars annually (2003). Clearly violence against women, including domestic violence, is an important issue in Canada. Yukon has the second highest rate of domestic violence nationally (Yukon Women’s Directorate, 2004). Shelter use in Yukon is the highest in the country (Statistics Canada, 2006). Shelters are places that provide emergency shelter for people in crisis. For every 100,000 people in Canada, 31 women use shelters compared to every 100,000 in Yukon where 234 women use shelters (Keevil, G., 2009). As reported by Statistics Canada (2006), “shelter use on a single day was [...] four times higher in the Yukon” than in other places in Canada (p.74). These statistics show that domestic violence is a major social issue in Yukon. Moreover, the rate of shelter use in Yukon shows that housing is also a major issue.

Like shelters, second-stage housing can provide shelter to women and their children fleeing domestic violence but for a longer period of time while they find other housing. In Whitehorse there is limited second-stage housing for women leaving violent relationships. The women’s shelter, Kaushee’s Place receives precarious funding and, as a result, has in the past threatened the government to close (Keevil, 2009). According to the website for Kaushee’s Place, women fleeing to the shelter and their children can stay up to one month. Many women and their children end up sharing rooms at the shelter with each other (Keevil, 2011). There are also apartments that women can stay in after the initial month, known as the crisis period, for up

to 6 months at the social housing rate of 25% of the client's income. Yet, there are currently only five apartments in Kaushee's Place that women can use as second-stage housing. The director, Barbara McInerey, has been working on securing funding for a second-stage housing unit with ten apartments since 2001. In 2011 the government promised a million out of the 3.2 million proposed to build the unit¹. She states that the proposed second-stage housing unit will fill instantly with women who are experiencing domestic abuse and living in unsafe conditions (Keevil, 2009). Women will be able to stay up to 18 months at the planned units (Keevil, 2011).

Currently, "women and their children are the fastest growing category of the homeless" in Canada (Yukon Status of Women Council [YSWC], 2007, p. 33). Moreover, single mothers have both the lowest earnings and the highest debt levels of any demographic in Canada (Baker, 2009). The gender gap and wage disparities in Canada as well as policies surrounding family law, social assistance, and social housing all contribute to the number of women and children living in poverty and homeless (Turnball, 2010; Bakht, Klassen, Radbord, & Turnbull, 2006). In the city of Whitehorse, between 2001 to 2007, rental rates increased by 47.6% and the vacancy rate drastically declined to a mere 2% (YSWC, 2007). Unfortunately, as reported by the Yukon Status of Women Council in 2007, women with children need 300 dollars more a month than what is provided monthly on social assistance to cover the cost of living in Yukon. In June of 2008, the Government of Yukon increased the rate of social assistance for families for the first time in seventeen years (Edelson, 2009). However, rental rates are 12% higher than the current rate of social assistance (2009).

Along with climbing rental rates, we are also seeing social spending cuts. As noted in a report on homelessness in Yukon done by the Yukon Status of Women Council (2007): "The

¹ Construction of the second-stage housing unit is currently underway.

retreat of governments from active involvement in social housing and dramatically increasing private market rental rates are producing a critical and growing shortage of housing (p. 129).”

The Yukon Status of Women Council (2007) argue, “women living in the three territories [Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut] have been seriously disadvantaged by the decision to reduce federal social housing dollars to all jurisdictions (p. 156).” Canada now has “the smallest social housing sectors of any Western Nation (p. 97).” Clearly, social spending cuts are creating more poverty and homelessness in Yukon as well as other areas in Canada.

At the same time, Yukon has been experiencing a boom for the past three years (Globe and Mail, 2012). In 2011, property sales were the highest ever seen in Yukon, and “Yukon saw a five point six percent rise in the GDP (para. 6, 2011).” Both “land availability” and “housing” have been cited as difficulties in the growth; thus “housing prices have doubled and land values tripled (para. 9, 2011).” The president of the Whitehorse Chamber of Commerce, Rick Karp, states that Yukon’s new economic development is attracting many Canadians (2011). Likewise, in his address to the Yukon Chamber of Commerce, Darrell Pasloski (2012), the premier of Yukon, argues, “Yukon today enjoys one of the most prosperous economies in all of Canada (p. 1).” Pasloski (2012) points out that Yukon has seen the highest population growth in the past five years in all of Canada. He states “Yukon’s economic growth rate has been strong, recording seven consecutive years of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) gains (p. 1).”

Despite this boom, women fleeing domestic violence and those who become single mothers, are often unable to access safe, affordable, and appropriate housing while Yukon and many of its citizens thrive economically. As a result, Yukon has the shelter use statistics and homeless single mothers that it does (Statistics Canada, 2006; YSWC, 2007). Until changes are

made to address the lack of affordable and social housing in Whitehorse, the alarmingly high rate of domestic violence and shelter usage will continue to plague the City of Whitehorse.

Nowhere to go: Domestic Violence and the Housing Crisis

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs lists physiological needs, like food, shelter and water as imperative necessities before individuals can progress. Thus, housing should be addressed immediately for women fleeing domestic violence (Phillips, 2009). The community of Whitehorse is experiencing what many are calling a housing crisis. Sadly, a report documenting women's homelessness in Yukon "suggests there are hundreds of women in the Territory who remain in unsafe or abusive situations, or who couch surf or use "survival sex" as a means to secure shelter (Edelson, 2009, p. 18)." The Whitehorse Housing Authority had 96 requests from victims of violence in 2009; only 48 were provided with housing (Keevil, 2009). Employees at the Whitehorse Housing Authority state that the women who are not granted housing generally disappear or return to the abusive housing arrangement they had before they applied for social housing (2009). Whitehorse Housing Authority consistently has a long wait list and according to the manager Dwanye Wheeler (personal communication, November 15, 2011), as of October 31st, 2011 there were 116 applicants waiting for social housing.

Women fleeing domestic violence are given priority for social housing units. Yet when women find somewhere else to stay while waiting for social housing, they lose priority (2011). For example, if an individual applies for social housing and finds housing in the interim while hoping to later access social housing for the income appropriate rental rates, they move down the waitlist. As quoted by the Yukon Status of Women Council (2007), "Not only do women become homeless because they are fleeing violence/abuse against themselves and/or their children, homeless women are at significant risk of further victimization (p.35)." Therefore, the

lack of affordable and social housing in Yukon puts women and their children fleeing domestic violence at an increased risk of returning to an abusive home or becoming entrapped in other potentially dangerous situations.

Transition homes provide temporary housing to homeless individuals as well as families. Statistics of transition homes in Canada show that of the women using shelters in Yukon, 33% report having used the shelter several times in the year (Statistics Canada, 2010). From these statistics, it is clear that women using shelters in Yukon struggle with finding housing. Edelson (2009) writes that there are many supportive agencies in Yukon but that there are inadequate resources available to make these supports effective especially in regards to housing allocation and poverty alleviation. Both can prevent women from leaving abusive relationships.

Poverty and Single-Parenting

Poverty is ever prevalent in Yukon. The Yukon Status of Women Council (2007) argues that the high cost of living and the high rates of social issues like addictions and domestic violence contribute to the rate of homelessness in Yukon. Poverty creates major obstacles for women exiting abusive relationships. The last Global Gender Gap Report in 2009 placed Canada at 29th, which has been a significant decrease from 18th in 2007 and 13th in 2006 (Turnball, 2010). Countries such as the Philippines, Latvia, Lithuania, Sri Lanka and Croatia have higher levels of gender equality than Canada (2010). Contributing factors to the increasing rate of homeless single mothers and the gender gap in Canada include policies surrounding family law, social assistance and social housing. Current family law and family social policies lack acknowledgement that mothers are economically disadvantaged as a result of bearing and rearing children (Bakht et al., 2006). Due to such policies, many single mothers find themselves unable to adequately support themselves and their children.

A significant wage gap is noted between men and some women in Canada (Bakht et al., 2006). Statistics Canada conducted a study in 1995 to explore the causes of the wage gap and found that the presence of children was the main factor in the wage disparities between the sexes (2006). Disparities in income acquisition between men and women are especially apparent for single mothers, Aboriginal, and disabled women (2006). Consequently, “the International Human Rights Monitor Committee condemns the scope and severity of woman's poverty in Canada, including the pervasive, deep poverty of single mothers (2006, p. 558).” Because many mothers are forced to make employment sacrifices as a result of having children, they have fewer opportunities to access employment benefits than men. These disadvantages are especially compounded for single mothers. It is not surprising that one third of employed single parents and their children in Canada live in poverty (Baker, 2009).

Sadly, the increased disadvantage of single mothers is not addressed in the policies surrounding child support. Single mothers are not always granted retroactive payments if the father hasn't been paying child support because there are no clear stipulations in the law advocating this practice (Bakht et al., 2006). As of March 2007, 65% of child support cases in Canada were in arrears (Baker, 2009). Equally important, changes in the father's income are not always represented in the amount of child support he provides to the mother depending on the area of Canada in which they live (Bakht et al., 2006). Likewise, the provision of financial information is not mandated but can be requested (2006).

According to Martha Jackman (1995), the government has become “less concerned with addressing poverty as a major source of social, economic, and political inequality for women in Canadian society (p. 410).” The change in the government's position on gender equality has become apparent in studies on the gender gap in Canada. In Maureen Baker's (2009) study of

three welfare states, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, she noted that the required assistance provided to parents so that they can become self-sufficient was hugely inadequate. Moreover, Baker (2009) discusses some practices in Canada that made it nearly impossible for families, especially single mothers, to get themselves and their children out of poverty. For example, the Federal government increased the amount of the child benefit while simultaneously reducing income transfers to the provinces. These reductions caused many provinces to cut social assistance payments and childcare subsidies (2009). Sadly, single parents in Nova Scotia, Ontario, British Columbia, Yukon and the Northwest Territories received less social assistance in 2007 than in 1997 (2009). Considering we've seen a 2.15 per cent annual inflation rate in this ten-year period, it is very concerning that the amount of social assistance has decreased (Bank of Canada, 2013). The decreased child-care subsidy is especially problematic because there is a direct correlation between a reduction in childcare costs and an increase in maternal employment or working moms (2009). If single mothers are able to afford childcare through subsidies, they are more likely to work, which could address the rate of children living in poverty.

Baker (2009) points to statistics that outline a positive correlation between cuts in childcare spaces and subsidies in Alberta and a decrease in the rates of maternal employment. Around the same time, Quebec increased the amount of child-care spaces and subsidies and the rate of maternal employment significantly increased. Therefore, Baker (2009) states: "the affordability of child care directly influences maternal employment (p. 628)." Since single mothers are especially vulnerable to poverty and homelessness, the provision of affordable child-care is crucial to the establishment of gender equality in Canadian society.

However, affordable childcare and maternal employment do not completely address the rate of poverty and homelessness in single-mother families. Even though Canada has the highest

rate of maternal employment among Canada, New Zealand and Australia, Canada also has the most poverty (2009). Therefore, there must be compounding factors that contribute to the rate of homelessness among single mothers and their children in Canada. Also, such statistics show that single mothers in Canada cannot adequately address the level of poverty they and their children experience without increased support (Baker, 2009). Ensuring that single mothers can access childcare subsidies, social or affordable housing, and child support based on the father's income could work to address the present numbers of women and their children living in poverty and homeless.

During the last few decades, research has shown a significant increase in children living in poverty (Chisholm & Anthony, 1997). From 1980 to 1995 there was a nearly five hundred thousand increase in children living in poverty (1997). Many attribute the increase to the massive deficit-cutting campaign that began to emerge in Canadian politics during the 1980s. In 1997 Canada had the second highest rate of children living in poverty of all the developed countries (1997). During the 1980s and 1990s funding for social housing was cut and this immensely affected many families, especially single parent families (1997). Moreover chronic unemployment became an issue and cuts to both social assistance and child benefits were made to reduce the federal deficit (1997). Such cuts contributed to the increase of children living in poverty as well as the rate of homelessness many low-income families in Canada experience.

As reported by Natalie Edelson (2009), social assistance for single parent families fell from 1997 to 2007 by about 7%. As aforementioned, single-mother homes represent the fastest growing demographic of the homeless in Canada as well as those living in poverty (YSWC, 2007). Therefore, the number of children living in poverty and/or homeless in Canada and Yukon could be directly correlated to social spending cuts made by governments.

Initiatives to address poverty are being made throughout Canada by Provincial and Territorial governments (Canadian Social Research, 2011). Some provinces and territories are making sure that the amount of social assistance is not below the poverty line. For example, social assistance in Quebec is set at 100% of the poverty line and Newfoundland provides 102% (Baker, 2009). Edelson (2009) argues that Yukon is lagging behind in addressing the level of poverty:

While many Yukoners have benefited from the economic development over the last few years, many others have not shared in the prosperity. Poverty and low incomes remain a considerable challenge in the Yukon, particularly in First Nation communities. And while different levels of government have acknowledged the issue of poverty, progress has been limited, in part due to ongoing conflicts over jurisdiction (p. 7). [...] The Government of Yukon does not have a formal anti-poverty strategy, but rather a patchwork of policies and programs that attempt to alleviate poverty and its impacts. [...] Recently, the [territorial] government has been criticized by the opposition and by anti-poverty groups for not moving forward with a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy like those adopted elsewhere in Canada. (p.8)

On one hand, the Government of Yukon has started some great initiatives to address poverty in Yukon. Such initiatives include the following: the Yukon Child Benefit, YTG Childcare Subsidy Program, Kids Rec Fund, Youth Investment Fund, Food For Learning, Yukon Children's Drug and Optical Program, and the "No Fixed Address" Outreach Van (2009). Further, the territorial government provides funding to the Yukon Housing Corporation, shelters throughout Yukon, and a youth shelter (2009). However, the basic necessity of shelter, and in the case of women fleeing domestic violence and single mothers, the need for more social and affordable housing

has been largely ignored. Quoting McInerey (personal communication, November 17, 2011) the director of Kaushee's Place, "nobody's building it [social and affordable housing] because there's no money in it." Therefore, women and their children living in poverty are left to fend for themselves despite the wealth of the Canadian nation. Moreover, women and their children fleeing domestic violence with low socioeconomic status can access several support services but they may not be able to secure housing.

Social Service Use and Socio-Economic Status

Stephanie Patterson (2009) writes that a woman's social services use when dealing with domestic violence is directly linked to her socio-economic status. She notes that Aboriginal women, women who have immigrated to Canada and do not speak French or English as their mother tongue, and women with a disability are far more likely to use social services in domestic violence cases. The aforementioned groups of women are also statistically more likely to live in poverty (Allagia & Vine, 2006). Patterson (2009) states that "women using women's shelters or community centers report the lowest personal and household incomes (p.36)" compared to their more affluent counterparts who tend to use more informal or private services when dealing with domestic violence. Women with limited resources often have nowhere else to go besides returning to the abusive home or shelters (2009). Since both lack of social and affordable housing as well as poverty are issues facing many women in Yukon, Patterson's observation could explain the exceptionally high rate of shelter use in Yukon.

Currently, the majority of government spending on domestic violence is invested in the criminal justice system, transition homes and shelters (2009). However, "reductions in social spending have meant that a number of shelters available and the operating capacity of those remaining have been drastically reduced (Baker, 2009, p.138)." Many have noted that many

women find themselves “inadequately housed or homeless as a result of IPV [interpersonal partner violence] (Du Mont et al., 2005, p.3).” In 2007 the federal government promised First Nations \$56 million to address family violence across Canada (Keevil, 2007). Even though Yukon has the second highest rate of domestic violence and the highest rate of shelter use in the country, the money was directed at those living on reserves in other areas of Canada. Since there are only a few reserves in Yukon communities, none of the money went towards addressing the alarmingly high rate of violence in Yukon (2007).

Ways to Address the Dire Need of Housing for Women Fleeing Domestic Violence

According to McInerney (personal communication, November 17th 2011), currently it is impossible to house all women fleeing domestic violence in the 30 day crisis period at Kaushee’s Place. One model that could help address the need of immediate housing for women fleeing domestic violence is Rapid Rehousing (Phillips, 2009). Rapid Rehousing assists those in need of housing by providing services that include locate housing, pay first month’s rent and/or damage deposits, help with moving, and practice landlord/tenant mediation. Moreover, the model works with clients to locate community, education, employment, health, legal, and child care services. Last, rent is often subsidized for a period, depending on the client’s needs, until they are able to pay rent on their own (Phillips, 2009). Adapting such a model would be applicable to the situation in Whitehorse. First and foremost, there is not the required amount of social and affordable housing to meet the needs of women fleeing domestic violence. Second, the rental rates are often impossible for women fleeing domestic violence as well as single mothers to afford and subsidizing the rent until second-stage and social housing is established could work to allay the vulnerability of women and their children.

Whitehorse could adopt programs used by Discovery House in Alberta, a family violence prevention society, like the Community Housing program, which uses the Housing First Model to ensure the needs of women and children fleeing domestic violence are met. According to the website, Discovery House supports women and their children by providing holistic and family-based services:

In the Community Housing program we use the Housing First model to place families who are dually impacted by homelessness and domestic violence in permanent stable housing first and then provide mental health assessments, financial, emotional and practical supports, case management, home-based counseling, referrals, and support services. Case managers work with families to develop safety plans, connect with longer-term support services, and navigate a complex social service and health system. Discovery House's Community Housing program, which began as a pilot project in early 2009, has surpassed all targets and expectations since its inception. While there are other programs using Housing First principles, the Community Housing program at Discovery House is the only one applying those principles to women and children fleeing domestic violence. (Discovery House, 2011)

Discovery House (2011) was one of only five agencies from 51 nations profiled as a model of excellence at the first World Conference of Women Shelters held in September 2008 in Edmonton. Also, Calgary, where the agency is located, earned the 'Safe Community' award granted by the World Health Organization in 2003 (Elliot, Keller-Olaman, & Vine, 2010).

Discovery House also provides services to the children of women fleeing domestic violence:

Discovery House's work with children impacted by domestic violence, particularly

young, non-verbal children is cutting-edge. Over the past few years our child and youth coordinator shared her expertise on using the children's developmental checklist as a clinical tool and the benefits of sand therapy with numerous shelters, social agencies and at conferences, including the Alberta Council of Social Workers and the World Conference of Women Shelters. (2011)

The holistic practices of both the Rapid Rehousing and the Housing First Model could have bold impacts on the lives of women and children fleeing domestic violence in the long-term. They could prevent many families from coming back into contact with health and social services, thus potentially saving the government money in the long-term. It is important to keep in mind the psychological impacts of domestic violence on both women and children. Some psychological impacts of domestic violence include "clinical depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse problems and eating disorders (Elliot, Keller-Olaman, & Vine, 2010, p.3)." In children behavioral and learning issues have been identified as connected to the stress of witnessing and/or experiencing domestic violence (Discovery House, 2011). Moreover, children in these situations tend to develop the same problems as seen in adults experiencing domestic violence once they become adults. All of these impacts can end up costing the health and social system. Governments might notice they have more money when programs are cut and funding is not allocated to support vulnerable Canadians. Yet not providing the needed support services to some of the most vulnerable sectors of society, for example women and children fleeing domestic violence and single parents, likely costs the system more financially and most definitely socially in the long-term. As quoted on the Discovery House (2011) website, "Social Return on Investment (SROI). For every dollar invested in working with children affected by domestic violence we save an average of \$11.47 (2011)." The Yukon Status of Women Council

(2007) argues that the lack of affordable housing contributes to health and social problems in Yukon. The Government of Yukon could explore the SROI in regards to creating the needed affordable and social housing as well as more second-stage housing for women and their children fleeing domestic violence and save money in the long-term.

**Recommendations: Addressing the Needs of Women Fleeing Domestic Violence in
Whitehorse**

As mentioned, Whitehorse is “service heavy”, however the resources available to women fleeing domestic violence are inadequate thus putting women at further risk. Kaushee’s Place proposed second-stage housing apartments need to be built immediately, which would provide women and their children a safe place for 18 months. This time frame is far more realistic than the crisis period of 30 days or 6 months, if a woman is able to access one of the 5 second-stage housing units at Kaushee’s Place, to locate and procure safe and affordable housing, especially given the current housing crisis in Whitehorse. Furthermore, the housing crisis needs to be addressed and both more affordable and social housing rental units need to be built in Whitehorse posthaste.

As mentioned in both *A Little Kindness Goes a Long Way* (Yukon Council on the Status of Women, 2007) and *You Just Blink and it Can Happen: A Study of Women’s Homelessness North of 60* (Four Worlds Centre for Development Learning, 2007) low-demand respite shelters are needed in Whitehorse. Low-demand respite shelters allow people to stay with few conditions. Also stated in both of these reports, Kaushee’s Place needs to be expanded or another women’s shelter needs to be built to address the disparity between the demand and the available social and affordable rental units in Whitehorse (2007).

During an interview with McInerey (personal communication, November 17th2011), she

noted a “backslide” in the maintenance of women’s rights within government departments. As a result, staff from Kaushee’s Place provide training sessions for government workers and judges in Whitehorse. McInerey mentioned that the staff at Kaushee’s Place have discussed meeting with new ministers to provide education about the housing crisis and its impact on women and their children. All sectors of the government and non-government agencies that are working with and/or overseeing policies that affect women fleeing domestic violence and the housing crisis should attend education and training sessions. Since McInerey identified that many victims of violence have stated that they have had negative experiences with social services, education and training sessions could work to improve the service and resource delivery to this vulnerable group in Whitehorse. Such sessions could provide enlightenment and evoke positive changes in policies that affect women fleeing domestic violence.

Furthermore, the *Yukon Landlord and Tenant Act* needs to be amended based on cases where landlords were legally able to evict women who have experienced domestic violence in their rental units (McInerey, personal communication, November 17th 2011). The disregard for tenant rights apparent in the *Yukon Landlord and Tenant Act* contributes to the statistics of shelter use in Yukon. The director of Kaushee’s Place, McInerey (2011) stated that there has recently been an increase in departmental questions surrounding the verification of violence after appeals made by women who were evicted as a result of having been “beaten up”. Sadly such appeals are ignored and landlords are able to evict women who are experiencing violence from rental units. This condones violence against women and is against basic human dignity. Amendments to the act should supplant this practice and make it illegal for landlords to evict women based on her having experienced violence in a rental unit.

Similar education and training should be given to landlords like the education and training

offered by Kaushee's Place to departments in the government, new ministers, and judges. This could be done in a pamphlet or booklet format and provided at Consumer Services. Content could include a plan for landlords when dealing with tenants who are being victimized. The plan could include a best practice model that requires the implementation of an automatic peace bond between the parties after violence occurs in a rental unit instead of an eviction notice. This could prevent the violent offender from accessing the unit and causing further disruption for a period of time and potentially prevent them from acting out violently towards women in rentals unit in the future.

Conclusion

All in all, addressing the rate of domestic violence and shelter use in Yukon will take various courses of action. These involve changes in policies that implicitly permit violence against women as well as providing further awareness on the issue through education and training. However, addressing the dire need for housing for women and their children fleeing domestic violence provides some immediate protection to this vulnerable group. Providing the needed housing resources to women fleeing domestic violence takes a definitive stance on ending violence against women. Directly quoting McInerey (personal communication, November 17th 2011), "justification of violence against women is not going to go away with more housing. But it [more housing] will make women and their children fleeing domestic violence far less vulnerable." Until societal shifts take place that end violence against women, the basic necessity of shelter needs to be provided to women experiencing domestic violence in Whitehorse.

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