

# Saskatchewan's Housing Crisis:

Addressing the Needs of Women and Children  
Who Have Experienced Violence

PATHS

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## Executive Summary

**Objective:** The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the intersection between homelessness and the experiences and perceptions of women who have experienced violence by an intimate partner in Saskatchewan. Through participation in this study, research participants were directly able to give voice to their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. By doing this, women who have endured the circumstances of violence and homelessness will enable us to better understand the relationship between the two and therefore better inform how we serve them.

**Method:** Thirty-five women who had experienced intimate partner abuse and were accessing sheltering services in Saskatchewan participated in individual interviews addressing both their experiences with abuse and in attempting to access safe, adequate, and affordable housing after exiting an abusive relationship. Qualitative interview data were digitally recorded transcribed and analysed using qualitative coding techniques. Themes were then derived from the data.

**Results:** Women's perceptions and experiences of homelessness aligned with FEANTSA's ETHOS. Eight key themes relating to homelessness in the context of intimate partner abuse emerged from the data. These included: Landlord Issues, Living Conditions, Consequences of Abusers' Actions, Dealing with Addictions, The Importance of Family and Children, Despair vs. Optimism, Neighbourhoods and Communities, and The Need for Quality Support Systems.

**Conclusions:** The issues of homelessness and intimate partner abuse are intricately interconnected. Using FEANTSA ETHOS, women who are experiencing abuse by an intimate partner can be considered as homeless. Recommendations to better support abused women in accessing safe, adequate housing are included in the discussion.

## **Introduction**

In Saskatchewan, homelessness has become a grave concern and a serious reality for many women and children. Saskatchewan has the highest rates of homelessness in the country with one in five people saying that they are homeless or at risk of being homeless (Salvation Army, 2010). In the past 3 years in Saskatchewan the vacancy rate has been dropping with the rate for 2009 being 1.5%. Regina and Saskatoon have vacancy rates below 1% (HRSDC, 2010). Homelessness is compounded by poverty. More than 41% of female-headed lone-parent families in Saskatchewan struggle to provide the basic needs of their families because they live below the poverty line (Child and Family Fact Sheet, 2009). Saskatchewan has the third highest child poverty rate in Canada (Child and Family Poverty Fact Sheet, 2009). With sky-rocketing home ownership costs and a constantly decreasing availability of safe and affordable housing, the women and children of Saskatchewan who are attempting to exit abusive situations are faced with incredible challenges. If women cannot find adequate and affordable housing their chances of succeeding in leading lives free from violence are diminished. While the causes and consequences of violence against women exist beyond housing, there is no question that without an adequate, suitable and affordable home to which one can escape, women are choosing to stay in violent relationships or return to abusive partners because they feel they have no other option.

The purpose of this study is to give women who have experienced violence and homelessness a voice with government, policy makers, service providers, advocates, landlords, and the general public. It is our intention to disseminate the ideas and recommendations from this report so that the necessary changes can be made to laws, policies, and programs. We need to ensure that women leaving violent relationships will not be held back because of the housing issues they face.

## **Background**

In the fall of 2009 a report was published by Dr. Leslie Tutty entitled '*I Built My House of Hope: Best practices to safely house abused and homeless women*'. It examined what models of emergency and second stage shelters best addressed women's housing needs and what models and or strategies might better assist women who are at high risk for becoming homeless to access safe, affordable, and permanent housing. Tutty (2009) interviewed 62 women from across Canada who had been abused by their intimate partners and were, at some point in time, homeless. The research participants were asked to give their perspective on what is needed to adequately provide housing for themselves and their children. A number of recommendations as to how to address the issue of appropriately housing women who had been abused were identified. Of the 62 interviews conducted for this study, 10 were completed with women from Saskatchewan. The present study builds on the previous research and aims at enhancing our understanding of the experiences and perceptions of women from Saskatchewan.

It is worthwhile looking more closely at the Saskatchewan experience for several reasons. First, Saskatchewan is currently one of the few places in the world which is maintaining a strong economy in the midst of a global economic crisis. When the economy is going well, people with needs that cannot be met through employment in good jobs tend to be overlooked. In many ways, particularly in terms of housing, the struggles of people excluded from the wealth being generated are exacerbated. Rising home ownership costs typically translate into constantly increasing rental costs as the demand for rental units is high (National Post, 2008). The result is that even middle income earners struggle to find affordable and adequate housing. A second reason to examine the Saskatchewan experience is because of the relatively high number of Aboriginal people who reside in the province. This demographic representation is reflected in the province's women's shelters. Over 75% of the women using Saskatchewan shelters are Aboriginal. The violence experienced by Aboriginal women is one of the most pressing problems facing Canadian society. This research will give Aboriginal women an opportunity to talk about the housing challenges which inhibit their ability to effect positive change in their lives. This research is also important in that it builds on Tutty's research and indeed follows up on her recommendation to develop concrete strategies to improve the housing circumstances of women leaving violent relationships. We offer clear policy recommendations directed at government and communities which if implemented will improve the situations of women and children leaving violent relationships.

## **Methods & Procedures**

Twenty-five women over the age of 18 who had experienced intimate partner abuse were recruited from women's shelters in rural and urban areas throughout Saskatchewan. Also, the original ten Saskatchewan interviews from the Tutty (2009) study were analysed and included in this study. The interview protocol and procedures for both studies were identical resulting in a total of 35 interviews analysed in this study. Each of the women who volunteered for the study participated in an individual interview that was digitally recorded for transcription. The women were asked about the status of their homelessness and their perspectives on preventing homelessness for women exiting abusive situations. The status of a woman's homelessness was assessed using FEANTSA's ETHOS (defined below). It was explained to all participants that the purpose of the research is to enhance services to women who are in similar circumstances. All interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist who assured confidentiality. Interview transcripts were then analysed using qualitative data analysis techniques. The qualitative data were separated into categories and themes.

## **Current Definitions**

Homelessness has traditionally been difficult to define. Subjective definitions either include or exclude certain groups. In an attempt to operationalize the definition of homelessness, The European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless

(FEANTSA) developed the **European Typology of Homelessness (ETHOS)**. This framework enables the mapping and monitoring of homeless people and helps identify when there is a need for policy changes (FEANTSA, 2006).

FEANTSA has examined what it means to have a home and what it means to be homeless. According to FEANTSA (2007) there exist three domains that constitute having a home: 1) **Physical Domain** – having adequate space over which one can exercise exclusive possession, 2) **Social Domain** – being able to maintain privacy and enjoy relations, and 3) **Legal Domain** – having a legal title to occupation. The state of homelessness has been broken down by FEANTSA into four main concepts: **roofless, houseless, insecure, and inadequate**. **Roofless**, or ‘sleeping rough’, refers to what is commonly thought of as homeless: those who are living on the streets, in public spaces, and those who utilize one night emergency shelters who have no consistent place of residence (FEANTSA, 2006). The **houseless** category includes people in homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, reception houses for immigrants, and temporary worker accommodations. The **insecure** category includes individuals who are temporarily living with family, friends, living on land or in a dwelling illegally due to lack of housing. People who are living with the threat of violence or eviction would also fall under this category. Lastly, **inadequate** housing refers to those who are living in shelters that are unfit for habitation, as well as those living with extreme overcrowding (FEANTSA, 2006). Using FEANTSA’s typology, the scope of homelessness is broad and encompasses many different groups.

## **The Lived Experience**

Certainly it is evident from the interviews in this study that the women’s description of their experiences could be categorized with FEANTSA’s ETHOS. We can see that their comments fit within all three domains previously described and all four concepts of homelessness surfaced in the conversations which reinforces the notion that homelessness is complex and varied. These constructions are important in order to formulate policy and to ensure a common framework for understanding the problem. It is our view however that it is not until one hears and reads about women’s lived experience that one can come to understand what being homeless really means. Talking to women who have experienced homelessness due to violence gives meaning to these typologies and categories. Their comments make the situation real and emotional. They serve to evoke an empathic response and appeal to our common values of fairness and generosity. It is by calling upon these values that we enable the possibilities of change in the laws, policies and professional relationships that affect the circumstances of these women. We are combining a phenomenological approach with aboriginal philosophy. That is to say, the analysis is grounded in the subjective experience which is then translated into a public policy that is informed by a Canadian value system which is rooted in aboriginal beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Embedded in the interviewees’ comments are solutions to the problems. These articulations of possible remedies are the ideas which will inform the policy recommendations

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<sup>1</sup> Saul says that Canada as a nation has a value system informed by aboriginal philosophy resulting in values that are grounded in fairness, collaboration and negotiation (Saul, 2009).

which will be conveyed to government and other policy makers. Women who have experienced violence will have a direct influence on the decisions affecting their lives.

### **Participants' Definition of Homelessness**

Participants were asked "How would you define homelessness?" Many women expressed the idea that 'a home' is intimately connected to a sense of self, an identity. They expressed that housing is intricately and intimately connected to all aspects of one's life. They convey how our home, where we live, is fundamental to our sense of self. They said that having a home means that they have a place to relax; a place where one has their own personal space and privacy where a woman can be herself. They stated that home is a place where one is safe to express who they are. One participant who was fortunate to have permanent housing explained what a 'home' meant to her:

My home means everything to me. You walk through the door and it's yours. You can close that door, you can cry and you can laugh. You can watch TV and you can read a book. You can crawl into bed. It's yours. Nobody's gonna come and take it away from you. But if you have to stay somewhere and you don't have your own, the pain must be incredible. And the children, children need their security. My little granddaughter is two years old next month. She was tired at my place. Around Thanksgiving they were over and she said, "Home, Mama, home." I said, "What's the matter, sweetie?" And she said, "Home, Mama". She wanted to go home. They took her home and she zonked out. There's a baby who wants to go home. So, these women and children who don't have a home to go to, yeah, it hit me when she said that.

Many participants also expressed how important it is as an adult to have a home for a sense of independence. Further, lacking the supports necessary to live independently is also homelessness. It was also evident from the data that being homeless evokes an emotional response. One participant explained how "It's a hard feeling to describe...And hard to cope with when you are newly sober and contemplating your situation." Another woman said that "being homeless is hard work...You have to learn the language and know the resources that can support you when you're homeless." Some women identified homelessness as 'being on the streets'. They described homelessness as 'not having a roof over your head'. Others explained that they feel homeless when they are living in dirty environments that are in disrepair or in an apartment building which is in poor condition in the common areas.

Some participants said that homelessness means not being able to look after their children properly – not being able to feed them adequately or keep them safe. The homeless often cannot have a shower, wash their clothes, and do the everyday things necessary to carry on a 'normal life'. One participant said that "Homelessness is me staying in a van with my kids." In this respect, homelessness means living with uncertainty, instability and no social supports. It is leaving friends behind. For many women homelessness also represents a disconnection from community. It also emerged from the data that a woman's connections with family are

perceived as being very important. Some participants described having supportive parents which makes them feel that they always have a place to go. So in a sense they say they never feel homeless regardless of their circumstances.

Other women identified staying in a shelter as a form of homelessness because there are rules to follow in shelter that one would not have in their own home. Women also expressed a sense of stigma related to staying in a shelter. Some identified second stage housing as not really home because it is essentially living in a temporary place because of safety issues. There is no long term stability. Other participants felt that shelters feel like home because of other places they have lived which are far worse by comparison, such as residential schools, and also because of the hospitality of the shelter workers.

## **Themes**

Several themes emerged from the data collected in this study.

### **Landlords – Generous vs. Exploitative**

In some of the interviews, women spoke about the generosity of landlords, and because of this generosity their rents were affordable even if they were living on social assistance. In essence, these landlords were renting below market value, because they genuinely wanted to help in some way. In contrast, many participants described situations where their landlords were clearly slumlords. The women reported that they were never around to maintain the unit and put no resources into the upkeep of the building. One participant explained that there was prostitution occurring in the building. When asked what her landlord thought about this she replied “Oh, he was okay with that. He was actually willing to pimp for us for a cut in the proceeds”. Another woman explained how her landlord was her abusive partner’s drug dealer. Some women described situations where they were discriminated against because of race or children. In situations where women lived in homes that were owned by their abusive partners they described feeling as though their partners used home ownership as another means of controlling them. One woman said “Just because you bought me this house, don’t think you own me.”

In a sense, women who experienced violence lived in their homes either at the discretion of the landlord or their partner who owned the home. They perceived that they had no control over their ability to stay in the accommodation or over the physical condition of the home, and no control over the amount of rent they would pay in the future. A definite power imbalance was evident between renters and landlords.

### **Appalling and Challenging Living Conditions**

Many of the women described the conditions of rental accommodations as inhabitable and appalling. One participant explained:

...my house was not too far from the garbage dump...they would burn, when they would burn garbage or whatever...it got really bad. There was probably like a bunch in my house. Rats I'm talking about, big fat rats.

Another woman recalled:

The building smelled bad, seriously bad. The caretaker was hardly ever home to collect rents. It was horrible...and it was cold. The windows weren't even like [double paneled]...They had plastic on the windows. I remember that upstairs mostly was cold. The doors weren't even properly locked...the owners don't know how to look after their properties....He [the landlord] didn't even look in the cupboards, but when I looked in it, it had little bugs crawling and cockroaches. I remember when I looked at that. I took pictures of it. I was living there with my son...They didn't even want to clean their carpets. The caretaker was always drunk. The front lawn used to be bottles all over. Garbage never been taken, he would leave some of them laying in the hallway like by the stairs, sitting there for days. Then there's the cigarette burns on walls, railings. Needles would be there. Needles would be up everywhere. With my boy...I lived there...with my son.

Many of the women described the challenges that came along with homelessness. Some participants explained how they often had to sleep rough, at times with their children. They reported staying in abandoned houses, sleeping in hallways, and setting up house in tents. The women also described a pattern of bouncing around from place to place. This pattern in particular caused challenges. As one participant explained:

Because, of course, I have to move around all the time and then next there's the social workers and the family workers [saying], "Why are you moving so much?" "Well, find me a decent house! Pay for a house that's something that you would live in! And then I'll stop moving.

A common challenge reported by the participants was living in overcrowded conditions once they had left their abusive partner and tried to live with family members. One participant spoke about moving in with her aunt:

[There was] me and my 4 boys, and...I had a nephew and a niece that...I was looking after. So that was seven of us there. And then her four girls, and then she's got grandchildren she looks after and that's 13, 14, and then her two daughters...her oldest has three kids, so that's 17, 18. At least 18, 19 people were living there. I used to just stay upstairs. It was just too chaotic for me there. And then she thought I was getting depressed, and it was not me getting depressed, it was just that I couldn't handle...a lot of people in...a house...There were three [bedrooms].

Living with family also posed other problems in addition to overcrowding. Many women reported that family members were struggling to deal with their own problems like drug and alcohol addictions and abuse. In the end, these women and their children were being re-

exposed to many of the unhealthy situations from which they were attempting to escape in the first place.

### **The Inability to Access Housing is Connected to the Abusive Relationship**

A lack of affordable housing in Saskatchewan was identified by research participants as one of the most powerful barriers in keeping women from exiting dangerous, abusive, and violent situations. Participants described that they simply had nowhere else to go. The women explained that shelters in Saskatchewan often have long waiting lists and that they were turned away because other women were staying in shelters longer because they could not find accommodations either.

Even when women were able to find alternative accommodation, their previous partners' past actions affected the women's present and future. As interviewees described their experiences living with abusive partners, it became evident that there existed a direct relationship between the abusers' actions during the relationship and the women's experience of homelessness after separation. Many women recounted how they did not have references because he had damaged or destroyed their rental accommodation or he hadn't paid the bills. In almost all cases they had to leave all their furniture behind and start fresh in their new environment. They often lived in fear of him, having to stay in shelter, second stage housing or move to a new community. Some women lost their children because of the abuse that their children witnessed. One woman reported moving 11 times in five years in order to escape people connected to the drug trade in which he had implicated her. Numerous women told stories of trying to sustain a stable and normal lifestyle but always being thwarted by his abuse or addictions.

### **Contending with Addiction**

Many women reported that their own addictions had often been a contributing factor to their state of homelessness. One woman described her situation:

Like it was easy for me to go back into relationships and keep getting beaten up and keep getting whatever, you know, because I didn't care. I didn't care about life, I didn't care about anybody. I didn't care about nothing. All I cared about was drugs and alcohol. I didn't care where I was going to sleep. I didn't care of anything, you know. It was because I was unemployed, I was involved in drugs or drinking, or you know whatever was thrown my way I tried to deal with and things are a lot different now. Like I said, I'm not drinking and doing drugs and things have changed a bit, but still it's still hard for me to find housing now and it makes me think well what was even different back then? Because I have a job too now. So what's *really* the difference here?

In other cases, women described being so troubled and desperate and had such a long recovery in front of them that they could not even think about looking for housing. Recovering from their addiction and coming to terms with the past abuse in their lives was their immediate priority. Leaving the shelter at that point to move into inadequate and unsafe housing or any

kind of independent living environment would mean a certain return to their addictions and possibly abusive situations.

### **The Importance of Family and Children**

The role of family members, positive and negative, and the effect of their children being exposed to violence and abuse were the two topics most talked about by research participants. It was evident that family and children played major roles in their lives. The women consistently expressed their desire to make a good home for their children. Participants acknowledged that children live their mother's cycle of going from abusive partner to the shelter to living with family and then back to their partner again. Most women also realized the impact that this lifestyle was having on their children and they identified that having a stable home was a priority.

Some women explained that they had already lost their children because of the violence and abuse to which the children had been exposed. Some participants also described the tight scrutiny they were under because of their involvement in the human service and judicial system. One woman had her child apprehended because her bus was late getting her home from school and her child arrived home before she did. She was required to stay in shelter for several days and then the landlord evicted her because he thought she was a bad mother. She says,

Yeah for like that whole year it seemed like I kept moving. And it was hard on my kids too because you know they have to change schools and they got used to one place and we had to move again. Like you could tell it was stressing my kids out too.

Another woman explained the impact the abusive lifestyle to which she had been subjected had on her son. Her efforts to support her children made finding the accommodation she felt would be most appropriate difficult:

I could have found housing if I didn't have the dogs. There were places open but...I was saying no. The kids had lost everything. I felt the dogs had been very important in their lives because they didn't have a good circle of friends. Without friends, without things like...they didn't have bikes. My son had never had a hamburger, a hotdog. He never tried pizza. No wonder the poor child was having problems in school. Everything in the world is pretty unknown. I wanted them to have that, at least have that as their support system. If they were scared or worried, there's an animal that's not judging them that they can sit and pet and brush, or hug or cry on. Under the circumstances, no, I didn't want them to lose that. So, I was a bit stubborn in saying "No, I'm going to look for a place where we can have pets." And there are zero places in this town that allow a pet.

Families were often supportive and the women readily identified that they could not have made their transition without the help of their families. Many participants also identified that in order to give their children some semblance of a normal life they had to rely on financial support from family members. But while they were often required to stay with family because there was nowhere else to go, they pointed out that this could never be a long-term solution.

They needed their independence. Also, there were often conflicts in child rearing with mothers and other family members about how to raise the children.

Many women reported that they had dysfunctional families of origin so that their own lives with their partners were just an extension of what they had seen growing up. Although most often they were determined to break this cycle, they seemed to continually find themselves in these circumstances. Lacking a supportive family was a barrier to being able to establish a stable lifestyle. Women seemed to find themselves drifting back to live with their birth family in order to try to form a healthy relationship, when often that was not possible.

### **Neighbourhoods and Communities**

Many participants also talked about their desire to live in a safe neighbourhood. Some women reported living in fear of gangs and how violence in the neighbourhood affected their children. One woman said:

I don't like the neighbourhood. Like, I don't know if it was a month ago, but my son, I told him to put the groceries away, and, but, when he was doing that, he had to take the garbage out. And he come back in and he told me, it's not, I don't know if it's the neighbours that do it, but they do have friends that stay with them, and they come and go as they please, but that one person was just outside injecting drugs. And my son is standing there watching him, and that guy's doing it right in front of my kid." "And the other night, I woke up and I heard this big, you ever hear little metal balls hit the floor? That noise. I got up, and when I come out of my bedroom into the living room, I saw smoke. Someone had threw a fire... it's a shotgun shell, but it was like a, like firecrackers. Somebody, I don't know if they stopped, and this person ran, and the door was open, the front door was open and he threw it into the house. [Another time] at 3 o'clock in the morning, somebody was banging on my door, but I didn't get up and answer it. I have my doors locked all the time. That's what I do. I constantly have my doors locked. I was gonna apply for low-income housing, and that's hard, too, to get into. Just to get away from the neighbourhood.

Many women from smaller cities and towns spoke about a sense of connectedness. Leaving their community most often was not something they would consider. This often posed safety issues for them, but they said that they were willing to take the risk. At times the police might be aware of their situations and would look out for them. Finding housing in small communities seemed somewhat more manageable since rents were lower than in the cities and people in the community assisted in locating accommodation. The rural shelters were very proactive in finding housing for their clients. In a community such as La Ronge there is the added significance of cultural identity and this came through in the interviews. There was a profound commitment to the community grounded in the aboriginal values of reciprocity and generosity. Yet here too this living culture was juxtaposed against painful stories of the turmoil that results from cultural genocide.

## **Despair vs. Optimism**

Many participants expressed a deep sense of despair in their circumstances, some to the point of contemplating suicide. Many reported that the obstacles facing them seemed completely overwhelming. Women reported that housing was just one piece of life's necessities and that having affordable and adequate housing would not necessarily solve all of their problems. Many reported that they needed to be able to deal with the abuse they experienced. Another frequently cited issue that appeared to be the most overwhelming for the women was poverty. They might have adequate housing but if income was insufficient to meet other needs, then success was impossible. They painted a picture of facing an uphill battle to which there seemed to be no end. Perhaps only the most resilient women were able to get by on the meagre funds allotted to them through social assistance. These women said that if they budgeted very carefully, had subsidized housing, and had some help from family, then they could just barely make things work financially.

In contrast many women expressed optimism and hope for the future. Most had plans to return to school. All talked about wanting to be in the workforce, although they placed priority on having jobs that would accommodate their parenting responsibilities particularly since they were committed to helping their children recover from the family's upheaval. Daycare was sometimes mentioned as an issue although there were many cases where daycare and respite were readily available. One woman expressed her optimism by saying

Oh, yes, yes. I came here [to a second stage shelter] with nothing. Look what I have [now]. I have beautiful, beautiful stuff which I never had over there. We slept on the floor when we first came here [to second stage] for three or four days, then J. [son] got a bed, and then J.[daughter] got her bed. I still slept on the floor in the room and then I got a bed. The furniture...people are really generous. I don't know. People are very generous and I have a beautiful place now. Today's the last day [to go back to the house she shared with her husband] and tomorrow will be so much better. The house will be gone. I took what I needed and the rest can go because it's all bad. This is a new, fresh, good start, a new beginning, a new life, a good life; the best that I can do. Healthy, no sickness around me; just the best for my little kids and my big boy and for me.

## **Need Quality Support Systems**

Women spoke about how appreciative they were about the various systems and services which supported them as they transitioned into lives free from violence. They also pointed out areas where they could be improved. For example, there is still room for improvement of the police response in terms of laying charges and ensuring that the women's shelter is presented as an option. One poignant case described a financial worker's refusal to help a woman who was leaving an abusive situation, resulting in the woman and her children sleeping rough. Some financial workers, on the other hand, were more solution focused and provided funds to cover a damage deposit for example. Second stage housing was noted to be particularly valuable because, in this setting, women were appropriately housed in a safe

environment with supports available. Women were always very appreciative of having a place in second stage housing, in spite of some of the challenges of communal living.

## **Recommendations:**

The conditions described by our interviewees illustrate that we are clearly in a housing crisis in Saskatchewan. These conditions and circumstances were consistently reported by women throughout the province - urban, rural, on reserve, off reserve. Listening to their stories causes us to ask the questions, “Is this the kind of society we want to live in?” “Are these the kind of communities we want to create?” “What can decision-makers and professional helpers do to ensure that women and their children who have experienced violence can access housing so that they do not feel that living with an abusive partner is their only choice?” For the women interviewed, the emergency shelter was their first point of contact in leaving their abusive relationship. The following recommendations are elicited from their narratives and seek to address the policy questions that enable women to take the next step after shelter.

- **Rent Control:** We need a system of rent controls which would work for both the landlord and the tenant. Engaging in dialogue about this with government, property owners, and tenants groups will ensure that all parties are represented. We know that 80% of Canadians already live in communities which have rent control. Saskatchewan citizens with such high rates of homelessness deserve the same protection as renters across the country. CMHC (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation) states that people should not be paying more than 30% of their income on housing. But in Saskatchewan, people regularly pay more than 50% of their income. This percentage is even higher for people receiving social assistance.
- **End the Practice of Converting Existing Apartment Buildings into Condominiums:** We need laws that do not allow for the conversion of existing apartment buildings into condominiums. Turning already scarce rental units into homes for purchase further reduces affordable accommodation options for those with low incomes. Even when the condominiums are turned into rental units because they cannot be sold due to a glut on the market, the rents are always higher than they were pre-conversion. Having the option to turn an apartment building into condominiums encourages landlords to refrain from keeping properties in good repair on an ongoing basis. They make the argument that they must sell condominium units in order to have sufficient funds to do repairs that had been ignored over the years.
- **Rules and Regulations for the Upkeep for Rental Accommodations:** A stringent set of rules should be enforced for the upkeep of rental accommodation to ensure that no resident of Saskatchewan is allowed to live in poor and unacceptable conditions. One way to help ensure that properties are kept up to building codes would be to establish a rental property registry system whereby landlords and their properties would be monitored.

- **Access to Safe, Adequate and Affordable Housing:** The federal government must be encouraged to develop a housing policy that includes a financial commitment to affordable housing. All levels of government need to make a commitment to ensure that Canadians, and particularly vulnerable Canadians, have access to safe, affordable housing where they can live with dignity and security. This initiative would include a substantial financial investment in increasing the supply of not-for-profit social housing through government housing corporations, community based organizations, and housing cooperatives.
- **Liveable Income:** Many women and children struggle with poverty after exiting abusive situations. Women who choose to stay home or work part-time in order to help their children deal with trauma and to overcome the challenges that cause their despair need to be able to sustain themselves and their families. Living in poverty is a barrier that makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to live successfully free from violence. Comprehensive and innovative approaches to extending and strengthening the income security safety net are required.
- **Supportive Housing Programs:** We need supports for women who have experienced violence built into housing programmes. These programmes will be sensitive to the needs of this population and will provide creative options to address the variety of presenting issues. Innovative child protection, addiction counselling and social support approaches should be part of this programming.
- **Advocates:** Women should have access to advocates not only in finding housing but in accessing all other supports, programmes, and resources that might help them in exiting abusive situations and dealing with the trauma of abuse. Advocates understand the unique circumstances of women who are leaving violent situations which often need to be explained on their behalf.
- **Neighbourhoods:** We need to do everything possible to make neighbourhoods welcoming and safe. We can do this through funding community associations, church programmes and community policing initiatives. There must be places within people's nearby environment where they can go for services, participation in community activities, and dialogue with local decision makers.
- **Public Awareness and Education:** Many people identify homelessness only as being 'roofless' and usually affecting primarily unattached men. Government and the general public should be made aware of the challenges women face when attempting to access safe, affordable housing after exiting an abusive situation. Tenants should also be provided with information about their rights and responsibilities.

## **Conclusion**

Implementation of these policy imperatives would ameliorate the Saskatchewan housing crisis and the situation of women leaving violent relationships. Actions based on these recommendations would go far to ensuring that each and every person, including women who have experienced violence, has what they need to be capable of leading rich and fulfilling lives. The alternative if we do not take action on housing is that women will stay in abusive

relationships, and children will grow up in mentally and physically unhealthy environments. We will foster a class of people who are excluded from the basic necessities and dignities that the more fortunate in our society enjoy. We can contemplate even more dire future repercussions of allowing people to live in third world conditions by reflecting on the comments of one of the participants in this study who had lived in a squatter area in Manila: “Why did I have to live in that certain place with people who lived like criminals and in poverty? I came to understand why people killed other people, why they did criminal works just to survive.”

The women interviewed for this study raise compelling questions and present tragic stories. They can be supported in their goals to create safe, adequate and long-term homes for themselves and their children if we take action on the recommendations above. Failure to move forward or continuing with the status quo is an unethical choice – a betrayal of our values. We have an obligation to provide everyone with housing -and it needs to be housing which is more than just accommodation. Housing needs to be a place where people are adequately sheltered. It needs to be a place where they are able to express their identity, where they can reach their potential and live in dignity – a home in the true sense of the word.

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