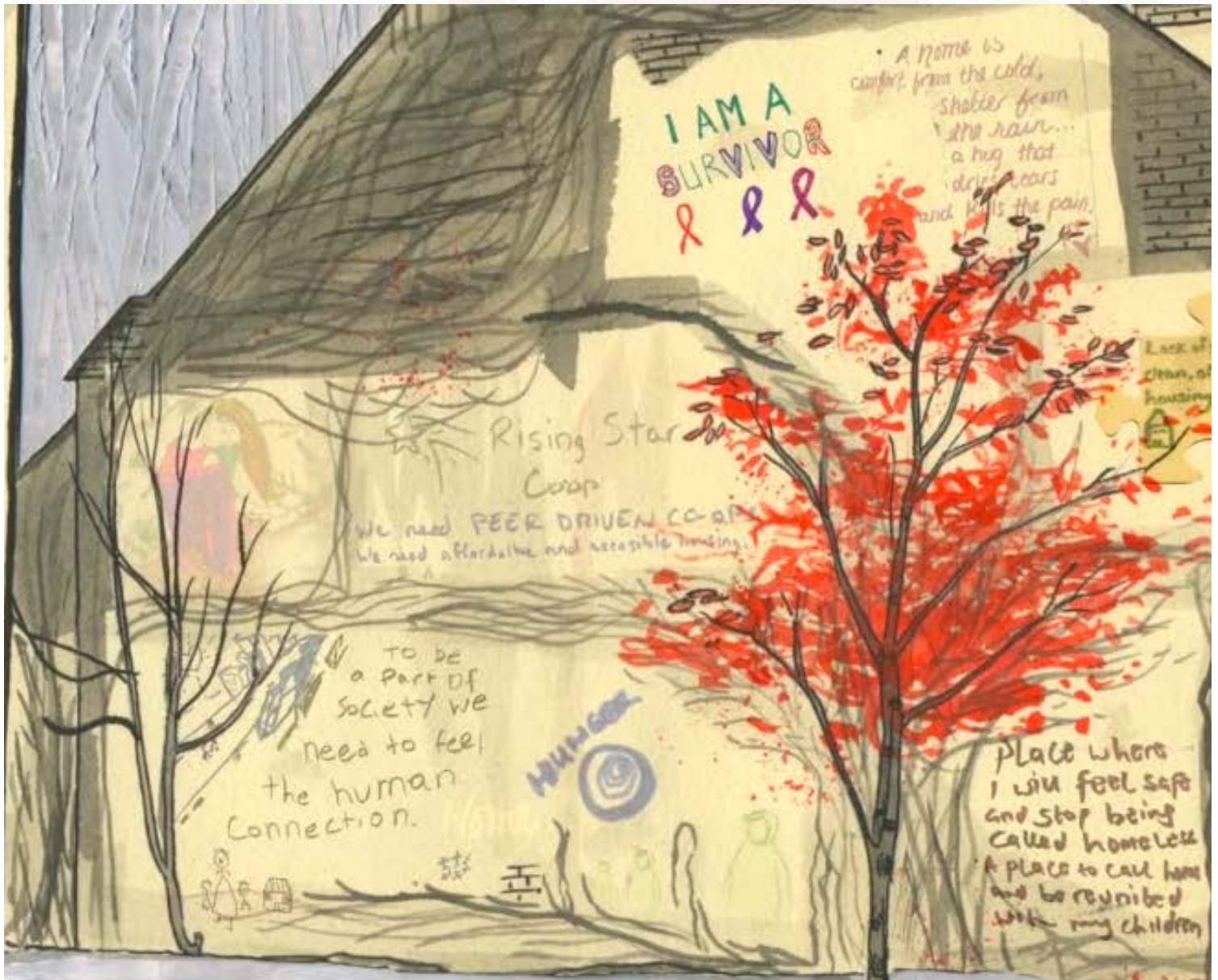




## THE [IN]VISIBLE PROJECT

# Considerations for Permanent Housing

Ideas and perspectives of women and gender-diverse people experiencing complex homelessness



This report introduces and explores eight key elements that contribute to good permanent housing, from the perspectives of women, and gender diverse people experiencing complex homelessness, who participated in the [in]visible project.



The content of this report draws together women's narratives (direct quotes), their art-work, and available literature.

Research done in collaboration with the Women's Housing Planning Collaborative of Hamilton.



Funding provided through Women's Xchange (Women's College Hospital, Toronto, Ontario).



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To the research participants,

*Thank  
you!*

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for sharing your stories and your ideas for  
better housing and support.



# About the [in]visible Project

The [in]visible project is a community-based research project, focusing on women and gender diverse people, without children in their care, who have been homeless for a long time, in Hamilton, Ontario.

This study was completed in collaboration with the Women's Housing Planning Collaborative of Hamilton. Funding for the project was provided through Women's XChange (Women's College Hospital, Toronto Ontario ).

Using narrative interviewing and arts-based research approaches, the [in]visible study engaged 70 women and gender diverse people, who had been homeless for one year or longer, to learn about:

- 1) The housing and homelessness histories and trajectories of women, and to better understand the ways women experience and navigate long-lasting homelessness in our community.
- 2) The ways women imagine and describe the kind of housing they would like to live in to better understand how to develop women-centered solutions to homelessness.



COMMUNITY  
RESEARCH  
ETHICS OFFICE

1. Addressing Chronic Homelessness in Canada - <https://www.homelesshub.ca/solutions/prevention/addressing-chronic-homelessness>
2. Women's XChange: Women's College Hospital: <https://womensxchange.womensresearch.ca>



# Executive Summary of the Report

As part of the [in]visible project, all of the participants were asked to either describe (narratively) or depict (using arts-based methods), the ways they imagine their ideal, permanent housing.

While there has been a lot of research done on the experiences, causes, and complications of long-term (or chronic) homelessness for women and gender diverse people, very few studies explore solutions to homelessness from the perspective of those experiencing it.

The intention of this report is to highlight the ideas, perspectives and preferences that women and gender diverse people experiencing long periods of homelessness have relating to potential housing solutions.

It is our hope that this report can elevate the voices of those experiencing homelessness. Our intention is to bring the important perspectives of women experiencing homelessness into dialogue, planning and decision-making relating to developing permanent housing and supports, for chronically homeless populations.



## Our Participatory Approach

The [in]visible project is grounded in a participatory approach and feminist community-based research framework.

We received ethical clearance from the Community Research Ethics Office (Kitchener-Waterloo) to engage 70 unique women and gender diverse people, who were experiencing chronic homelessness in our project.

In collaboration with community partners through the Women's Housing Planning Collaborative, and women with lived experience of homelessness, we developed a methodological approach that offered women a choice in how they participated in this project.

Women could choose to share stories narratively, or depict their stories, experiences and ideas through art, written text and/or other visual imagery.

Our participatory approach reflected a commitment to working towards developing inclusive, and low-barrier ways to meaningfully elicit the expertise of women experiencing complex, street-level homelessness.

All of the women received an honorarium for participating.

# Our Participatory Approach

We engaged **forty-women** in semi-structured narrative interviews, that asked questions about housing and homelessness experiences, and preferred models of permanent housing.

**Thirty women** participated in arts-based workshops, whereby participants engaged in reflective dialogue, and used a range of artistic mediums to depict preferred models of permanent housing.

**Six women** participated in ongoing participatory data analysis, focused on developing key recommendations for permanent housing development.

The women who participated in this project also engaged in creating a project video to share the findings, and co-facilitated an arts-based workshop using the findings from the [in]visible project at a national conference on housing and homelessness.

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# About the Participants of the [in]visible Project

## AGE

Participants in this study ranged from ages 18.-76.

The average age of participants was 46.

A lot of the participants who were older, shared concerns relating to housing that was accessible and desired a space where they could age in place.

## LENGTH OF HOMELESSNESS

The majority of participants in this study shared having experienced long and complex periods of homelessness.



**We found that 34% of participants, had experienced four or more years of homelessness and housing instability.**

Some participants (15%) reported having been homeless for 25+ years, with other participants reporting never having had their own stable, permanent housing.

## SOURCE OF INCOME

**60% receiving ODSP**

Over half of the participants were living with some sort of disability, and receiving financial support through the Ontario Disability Support Program.

## EXPERIENCES AS GIRLS AND YOUTH

We learned that almost half (48% of participants) experienced homelessness for the first time before the age of 18.

Many of our participants shared living in foster care, or group home settings at some point during their childhood or youth (38%).

We also learned that running away from foster homes and group homes was a common entry point into homelessness.

## MOTHERHOOD

**The majority of women (72%) were mothers.**

All of the women who had children under the age of 18, no longer had children in their care. Many women had lost custody of their children to child welfare agencies. Some of our participants shared having adult children, and some of our participants were grandmothers.

## VIOLENCE, MENTAL HEALTH, AND ADDICTION

100% of our participants shared about the ways that violence, mental health and/or addiction had an impact on their experiences of homelessness and housing.

# Eight Recommendations for Housing Development

1

## SPACE AND PLACE



2

## SAFETY AND SECURITY



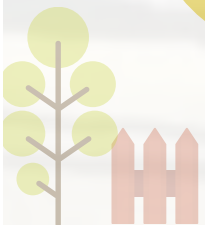
3

## ON-SITE SUPPORTS



4

## COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION



# Eight Recommendations for Housing Development

5

## AGING AND ACCESSIBILITY



6

## EQUITY AND INCLUSION



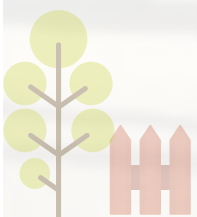
7

## MOTHERING



8

## AFFORDABILITY





# 1

## Space and Place

The space and place in which people and their housing are located, has been shown to have an influence on health and social outcomes, and it is an important social determinant of health. [1]

The location (space) and structural design (place) of housing emerged as important elements of housing from the perspective of our participants.

For women and gender-diverse people, particularly those who have experienced violence, housing must be a space and place that feels safe. [2]

Access to nature and green space is an important element of housing, and this has been proven to have physical and emotional benefits, and promote housing stability. [3]

Being closely situated to social supports, whether this be people, or community services/networks, can be critical for women living with low incomes, and is an important factor in keeping women housed. [4]

The [in]visible project found that for many participants, the space (structural design and physical infrastructure) and place (location in the city), were important elements of good permanent housing.

Unfortunately, women and gender-diverse people who experience homelessness, often face limited choices in relation to where affordable and adequate housing is located, and how it is designed.





## Space in the City

Through the [in]visible project, participants shared some of their own unique needs and preferences, relating to where housing should be located in the city.

For some women, it was particularly important that housing be centrally located, and within walking distance to their existing community support networks. Other women shared about the importance of nature and green space, while others described wanting a quiet space, close to spiritual and religious centers and supports.

“

“Close to downtown but not too close to downtown ... near a food bank, and the places you can go to for help, counselling or stuff like that. Close to [women’s drop in day program], my doctor, my trauma counsellor. I’d like to be able to walk downtown”

**- 46 years old, 15 years of homelessness**

“

“I took a picture of this park, because that is important to me. It is important that I live somewhere near a park, or somewhere I can spend time outside.”

**- 34 years old, 2 years of homelessness**





“

“Near a church, and quiet hopefully, because I’ve never really had a quiet place.”

- 60 years old, 7 years of homelessness

Our findings demonstrate that women have varying preferences relating to where permanent housing ought to be located.

Ensuring that women and gender-diverse people exiting long-term homelessness have an array of choices relating to where their housing is located is important!

### Place (Structural Build)

The physical structure of a home provides shelter, but we know that housing is much more than just shelter, and that ‘good housing’ provides comfort, privacy, and a sense of security, and brings about feelings of ‘home’. [5]

There are direct and indirect housing circumstances related to the physical structure of housing that have a tremendous effect on our physical and mental health and well-being.

For example: pest issues, heating/cooling issues, mould, and a lack of privacy all contribute to poor housing, and in turn, can lead to poor health outcomes. [6]

Our findings from the [in]visible project, help to illuminate some important considerations relating to the structural build of good permanent housing.





“

“Just a clean house, bug-free, critter-free, and maybe like some supports in the housing. Good landlords are important, because your toilet could be backing up, your ceiling could be caving in, leaking, and they don’t show up to fix it.”

**- 55 years old, 10 years of homelessness**

“

“I’d like a big window, a neat kitchen, a little bit of space. It doesn’t have to be really big, it has to be clean and that’s about it.”

**- 56 years old, 4 years of homelessness**

“

"A room and a bathroom and a hot plate. I don’t care, as long as there is a window to put an air conditioner in or in the winter time, a heater you know? Just my own space kinda thing.”

**- 43 years old, 12 years of homelessness**





“

“Just a room is good, laundry facility, showers and washrooms I could share, like at the (transitional housing program for women). I loved that place, if I could live somewhere like that again, I would want to.”

- 44 years old, 25 years of homelessness

## Key Considerations for Good Permanent Housing:

- 1 Permanent housing should be located in close proximity to women’s existing formal and informal support networks, and should have access to nature or green space.
- 2 The structural building of housing should promote good health and well-being, by being clean, properly heated/cooled and free from pests and other environmental hazards.
- 3 There is a need to develop good quality, affordable one-bedroom or bachelor units, that ensure residents have their own space, access to standard on-site amenities such as: reliable building maintenance, laundry facilities, windows.

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# 2

## Safety and Security

Existing research that focuses on the experiences of women, and gender-diverse people, who endure long periods of homelessness, notes that gender-based violence is both a factor leading to homelessness, and a consequence of experiencing homelessness. [1]

Findings from the [in]visible project echo existing research, and demonstrate that women and gender-diverse people impacted by chronic homelessness, are disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence throughout their lives, often beginning during childhood or adolescence. [2]

Almost all of the participants in the [in]visible project described experiencing some instance of trauma, violence or exploitation, that had an impact on their housing security. Participants in the [in]visible project described experiencing violence both within, and outside of intimate relationships, and shared about experiencing violence in foster-care/group home settings, within their family of origin, street-based violence and/or from roommates.

Women and gender-diverse people, without children in their care, who experience gender-based violence face barriers in accessing the housing options, support services that exist for women (and children) fleeing domestic violence. [3]

There is an urgent need to mobilize a gender-based lens in the development of housing and support, through recognizing the ways trauma, violence, and exploitation, leads to a unique set of housing needs for women. [4]

Experiences of violence, both present day and historical, emerged as one of the most significant themes across the narratives within the [in]visible project. And, when women were asked about what makes 'good' permanent housing, safety and security were the top priorities of many participants.

## Built-in Safety Features

Participants in the [in]visible project described their ideal permanent housing, as having an array of built-in safety and security features. This was described as necessary, in order to be able to feel that housing was a safe place to be.

For example, some participants wanted a controlled entry to their building, often described as on-site staff monitoring the front-door. Other participants described wanting extra bolts on doors and windows.

“

“For the door, I would need those big bolts for when I am sleeping, good windows... like if they are old windows I could put screws in them, to bolt them shut for when I am sleeping. Just regular safety measures, because I don't trust people”

**- 40 years old, 12 years of homelessness**

“

“Security is starting to be a huge issue for me now, I would prefer to live somewhere that had a door man or some kind of security so people could not just get into the building, maybe somebody on-site, like a staff or something, so I am not going crazy in the middle of the night, thinking someone is breaking in or something.”

**- 55 years old, 4 years of homelessness**



“

“I would need to be in a place that would have video camera and controlled entry. I need to feel safe. I need someone to keep an eye out for me, especially if I am thinking, 'is that a good person to let into my house or not?'"

**- 28 years old, 12 years of homelessness**

## Feelings of Safety and Physical Space

Women who have experienced violence, exploitation and trauma, and who live with ongoing safety concerns, require the physical space of housing to be designed in ways that elicit<sup>5</sup> feelings of safety and security. [5]

There is a growing body of literature that considers how to design space and architecture in trauma-informed ways. [6,7,8]

“

“I want something safe, somewhere I don't have to let anybody in. I would want four walls around me, but I would not want to feel claustrophobic. I would want a door before my front-door, so I know it is really safe and no one can get in.”

**- 54 years old, 20 years of homelessness**





“

“One always wants safety and security, a sense of peace, I think one also wants to know that you are not going to be violated, so I would not feel comfortable to live in one of those three story walk-ups, because to me, they are not safe.”

**- 50 years old, 7 years of homelessness**

There is a need for future research relating to the intersection of trauma-informed space, and gender-based housing development. This is particularly important for housing and support options that support girls, women and gender-diverse people to live free from violence, trauma and exploitation.

## Women's Only / Gender-Specific Housing

Gender-specific housing can support women, girls and gender diverse people to live free from violence and exploitation.

There is a plethora of available research that demonstrates women, who have experienced gender-based violence/exploitation, identify wanting to live in women-specific housing options. [1,2,8,9]

This was a significant finding within the [in]visible project, as participants shared about their desires to live in gender-specific housing, that is intentionally designed to support women, girls and gender-diverse people.

Although we know that this is an important aspect of the housing and support continuum for people who have experienced the intersection of homelessness and violence, gender-based housing remains underfunded and limited across Canada.



“

“I drew this picture of a house to show where I want to live. I imagine it is a big house located downtown, and that I live here with maybe, five or six other women who are in similar situations to me. I think it would be really nice to not have to live alone, and to share a house with other women.”



**- 28 years old, 12 years of homelessness**

“

“Something that is kind of like a shelter, where there are just women, and maybe some staff working there, that has like, some supports and safety nets for the women.””

**-25 years old, 9 years of homelessness**

“I would like to live in a building with just women, as long as they understood that safety and security is number one.”

- 48 years old, 4 years of homelessness

## Key Considerations for Good Permanent Housing:

- 1 Housing that meets the unique needs of women, girls and gender-diverse people who have experienced violence must have an array of built-in safety and security features, including: controlled entry, on-site staff and adequate locks.
- 2 Developing housing for people who have experienced violence, trauma and exploitation should adapt a trauma-informed lens to architecture and structural planning.
- 3 There is a need for substantial investment to develop gender-specific housing and supports, that are designed from a gendered-lens to meet the unique needs of women, girls and gender-diverse people.

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# 3

## On-site Supports

Women and gender-diverse people who experience long-term chronic homelessness and other complex health and social care needs may benefit from living in permanent housing options that have available on-site supports. [1]

This housing and support model is recognized by a Housing First perspective as ‘Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), and is an identified best-practice for supporting chronically homeless adults. [2,3,4]

Typically, PSH combines deeply affordable rental housing, with individualized, flexible and voluntary on-site support services for people, relating to physical/mental health care, ability, and/or substance use. [5]

During the [in]visible project, we learned that women and gender-diverse people who had experienced homelessness for long periods of time, were more likely to describe wanting to live in a supportive permanent housing arrangement.

Some participants described wanting to live somewhere that had staff on-site, while other participants described wanting access to an array of on-site supports in their housing: including social support, support with activities of daily living, on-site access to health-care, food security/meal programs and support with medication management.

By asking women and gender-diverse people experiencing chronic homelessness about what makes ‘good’ permanent housing, we were able to learn about the kinds of supportive elements that should be considered when designing gender-specific PSH.





“

“Somebody just to talk to, that’s what I love about here (transitional living). I can go down at 3 o’clock in the morning and talk to one of the advocates if there is an issue, even if it’s only a nightmare or something. It’s really, really, beneficial to have that for me.”

**- 55 years old - 4 years of homelessness**

“

“I like a lot of independence but I like the security of having somebody there too, the last good place I lived (Residential Care Facility), I got my clothes washed for me, my food was done for me, but we still had our independence”

**-42 years old - 8 years of homelessness**

Based on our findings, some of the features of permanent supportive housing, such as the availability of on-site staff, reflect the housing and support preferences of women experiencing chronic homelessness.





## Variety of On-Site Supports

When we asked participants to describe their ideal permanent housing, we heard about a variety of on-site supports that would need to be available in 'good' housing. Many of the supports described mirrored what is available in PSH models that exist across Canada and internationally.

Participants of the [in]visible project described wanting to live somewhere that had access to low-barrier forms of health and social care, including doctors, nurses and support with medication adherence.

Older women who participated in the [in]visible project, described wanting on-site support available to assist with tasks of daily living, such as grocery shopping and cleaning. We also learned about the importance of on-site support to assist with food security and meal preparation.

“

“Like a shelter, like permanent though, where they have a doctor that is like a psychiatrist or something, that like helps people, because so much of homelessness is mental health, right? They could have apartments, and then have counsellors and all types of stuff, maybe a little pharmacy to get your meds. All types of stuff.”

- 29 years old, 12 years of homelessness





“

“I would like to live in a building that has stuff that you could do, like activities. Or, if you need support, or if you need to talk, or like they do day trips, or they help you with things in your home”

**- 54 years old, 20 years of homelessness**

“

“Maybe have a little foodbank on premises, and help for mental and physical health, maybe rehabilitation, therapy and other stuff like that”

**- 31 years old, 15 years of homelessness**

Through the [in]visible project, we learned that women who have experienced long-periods of homelessness often describe wanting to live somewhere with available on-site supports.

There is an urgent need to use a gendered lens when designing and developing permanent supportive housing in cities across Canada, to ensure the kinds of supports offered can support women and gender diverse people in achieving housing stability, and optimal health and social well-being.





## Supportive Environment

One of the most significant findings from the [in]visible project was that many of the participants described fears of loneliness and isolation as a significant barrier that prevented them from finding and maintaining permanent housing.

Many of the participants had experienced homelessness for multiple years, and had spent long periods of time living in women-centred communal spaces, such as emergency shelters and transitional living programs.

When we asked participants to describe the kinds of housing they would like to live in, we heard about the importance of intentional community, a supportive environment, and the benefit of simply living somewhere, that had other people around.

While we learned it is incredibly important for women to have their own space once permanently housed this can also be experienced as isolating.

Many participants shared that their preferred model of permanent housing would be located within a supportive environment and intentional community, made up of other women and gender-diverse people.

“

“It is just to have presence there, like people around, and then you don't really have to talk to them if you do not want to cause it's not like you totally live with them, you can just do your own thing and talk if you want and if you don't, you don't”

**-29 years old, 12 years of homelessness**





“

“I don’t want to be alone, live alone. I like being by myself but I don’t want to live alone so this (transitional living) is a perfect place for me, because I stay in my room all the time, but when I do need company, I can come out.”

**- 48 years old, 30 years of homelessness**

“

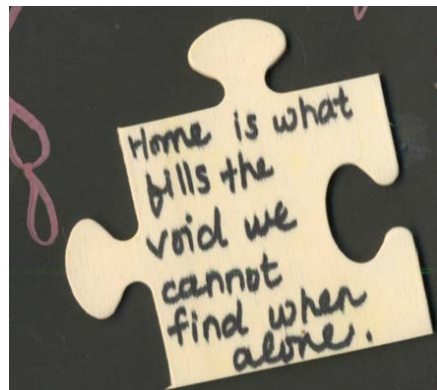
“If I get bored in my room, I just come out here and there are ladies here, there is always somebody. But when I live on my own, when I have my own place I’m not going to be able to do that, that’s the scary part. That’s what I’m scared about, is like the loneliness, right?”

**- 45 years old, 6 years of homelessness**

“

“Home is about not being alone. It is about being with other people and knowing you are safe there.”

**- 45 years old, 6 years of homelessness**





Developing housing for women and gender-diverse people who have experienced chronic and long-term homelessness, requires addressing some of the unique barriers that prevent housing stability, such as loneliness and isolation.

Integrating intentional supportive environments in ways that replicate what we know works in other housing models, such as transitional living, is a promising practice approach when developing PSH from a gendered-lens.

## Key Considerations for Good Permanent Housing:

- 1 Permanent housing with available on-site staff supports (PSH) is an important housing model with the potential to meaningfully address the needs of women and gender-diverse people who experience chronic homelessness.
- 2 Housing being developed for women and gender-diverse people who experience chronic homelessness should offer a variety of on-site supports from a gendered-lens, to address the complex housing, health and social care needs of this population.
- 3 Good permanent housing should reduce loneliness and isolation, by fostering a supportive environment whereby women, and gender-diverse people can be a part of an intentional community.

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## Community and Connection

Community and connection are important features to consider, when developing good permanent housing for women and gender-diverse people, who have experienced long-lasting homelessness.

Existing literature highlights that women and gender-diverse people who have experienced chronic homelessness, sometimes describe the transition into independent, permanent housing, as lonely and socially isolating. [1,2,3]

Throughout the [in]visible project, participants shared about wanting to live in permanent housing arrangements that intentionally fostered social connection and community.

Many women who have experienced long-lasting homelessness have spent significant amounts of time living in communal settings, while growing up in the child welfare system, living in emergency shelter and transitional housing, and/or staying long-term in other institutional settings, such as hospitals and jails. [1,4,5]

These kinds of communal living settings are not without their challenges, but through these spaces, women and gender-diverse people often find support, mutual-aid, connection and community, with one another, and through available support networks.

There is growing interest in co-housing, as a promising practice in meeting the unique housing and support needs of women and gender diverse people who experience chronic homelessness. [6,7]

8





## Co-Housing

Co-housing is a type of intentional community, through which a group of people come together to create a micro-community, characterized by mutual aid, social support, and caring relations. [8,9]

Throughout the [in]visible project, many participants described wanting to live in permanent housing that combines having a space of their own, with some aspects of communal living, or co-housing.

Participants shared about their desires to live in housing arrangements that were more communal in nature and similar to other places they had lived in, such as transitional living programs.

“I do not like to be alone, that is my thing right? So I would really like to live somewhere like [transitional housing program] but not with so many people. I don't know if I could handle living completely on my own.”

**- 60 years old, 15 years of homelessness**

“

“I like when there is a closeness of the group, other girls, Christmas. That (transitional living) was good for me, I'd like that structure again.”

**- 40 years old, 12 years of homelessness**





“

“I want to have someone to talk to, like if I am lonely, or just want some company. I want to live somewhere like here (transitional living), where I can just go outside of my room, and bam, there’s somebody right there I can talk to.”

**- 24 years old, 2.5 years of homelessness**

Many of the participants in the [in]visible project made reference to transitional living programs as preferred models of housing, because of the ways these spaces fostered independent living, within a communal setting.

Good housing was conceptualized by many participants, as having your own space, while also co-habiting with others, in gender-specific co-housing models.

### Sharing and other forms of mutual-aid

There is a substantive body of literature, that explores the ways women and mothers negotiate poverty by taking care of one another in community, through processes of mutual-aid, such as<sup>10,11</sup> sharing and pooling limited resources. [10, 11]

During the [in]visible project, we learned about the ways women and gender-diverse people experiencing complex homelessness rely on one another and engage in mutual-aid.

Participants' descriptions of their preferred housing, helped to illuminate the important connections between mutual aid, community and sustainable housing.





“

“Something with other women would be beautiful. Same kind of situations, everybody in the same situation economically, and some people have more families and friends than other people, but somewhere that you could say, ‘good morning, I’m making myself a coffee, would you like one?’ and not everybody has the coffee, or sugar, or their own cup, but sometimes they do, and sometimes they share.”

**- 44 years old, 25 years of homelessness**

“

“I’ve noticed that here (transitional living), if someone’s got butter, and someone’s got pasta, and someone’s got sauce, well then between the four of us we can all eat very well instead of just chowing on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. And it is kinda nice, and if we struggle, most people are more than happy to share their experiences to bring you forward, because everybody has come from such a different aspect, that they know of resources that you may not.”

**- 36 years old, 7 years of homelessness**

Additional research and consideration is needed, focused on how to mobilize and promote mutual aid, as an important aspect of community and connection in gender-specific housing.

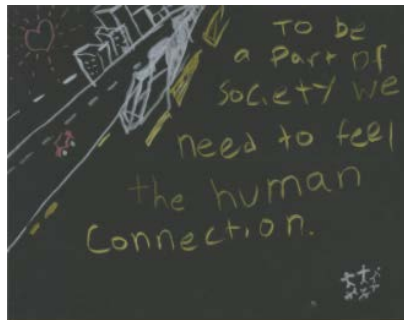


## Intentional Community

Feeling included in a community is a widely recognized social determinant of health and well-being. [10]

By feeling connected to a community, women are better able to cope with a variety of circumstances, for example: pooling resources can help to alleviate the difficulties of living in poverty, and having close connections with neighbours can lead to feeling safer at home, and in neighbourhoods.

“



- 60 years old, 15 years of homelessness

“

“I want to still be with the community if I can, that would be safe for me, you know, more programs, somebody to talk to, go to a safe place if I feel scared about something, you know?”

- 48 years old, 19 years of homelessness



Participants in the [in]visible project shared about the importance of being a part of a community, and feeling connected to others, and described this as a key component to good housing.

Fostering meaningful and intentional community and social connections is an important aspect of developing gender-specific housing and supports. [3,5,6]

## Key Considerations for Good Permanent Housing:

1

There is a need to develop permanent co-housing (independent living space, with shared communal spaces) for women and gender-diverse people who have experienced chronic homelessness, and to widely recognize co-housing as an important part of the housing continuum.

2

Developing gender-specific housing and support services should intentionally build upon the ways women already engage in mutual-aid, and community.

3

Connection, and intentional community are critical components when developing good housing for women and gender-diverse people.

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# 5

## Aging and Accessibility

There are many accessibility considerations that must be addressed from an intersectional lens, when developing good housing for women and gender-diverse people who have experienced homelessness. [1]

The intention of this section is to highlight aging and accessibility concerns, in relation to the housing preferences of women and gender-diverse people who participated in the [in]visible project.

While there is a lot of available literature on older women and housing/homelessness in general, very few studies focus specifically on the housing preferences of older women.

The few studies that do exist suggest the importance of accessible design, affordability and security of tenure, safety, and the importance of having social networks and health care supports embedded in their living arrangement. [2,3]

Aging in place is another important consideration within the available literature on older women and their housing. In order for housing to be sustainable, it must be built in ways that can support its residents through life changes, such as shifts in mobility, aging and changing support needs.

Some promising practices exist to meet the unique housing needs of older women, such as Older Women's Co-Housing (OWCH). [3,4]

This demonstrates an ability to mobilize housing ideals such as mutual support, intentional community, accessible design, through the co-development of sustainable and supportive housing, for aging women. [3.4]





## Built in Mobility Features

We heard about the ways mobility concerns, including being unable to climb stairs and/or using a walker or wheelchair, shaped the housing preferences of participants in the [in]visible project.

Often the kinds of places that women could afford did not have the kinds of mobility features needed to make the housing option sustainable.

“

"I have to be in an accessible place, where I can bring my scooter and my walker in, cause I can't climb stairs. I have a lot of different issues, it's not just about the affordability, it's about my mobility. I'm 52 years old with disabilities, I need stable housing. I want to be able to move some place and say this my home until I die. I'd like to be able to move into a place like that."

- 52 years old, 12 years of homelessness

“

"All I wanted was a simple, little, bachelor apartment with a shower, because tubs don't do me any good, with an elevator, I would need apartment that had grab bars and things like that, for mobility."

- 57 years old, 7 years of homelessness





We heard about women's desires for permanent housing that had an elevator on-site, an accessible washroom and enough space to store mobility devices (walkers, wheelchairs, electronic wheelchairs).

## Grandmothering

Some of the [in]visible project participants were grandmothers, who viewed permanent housing as a way to play an active role in the lives of their grandchildren.

A few participants were grandmothers to children involved in the child welfare system, and for them, securing permanent housing was viewed as a way to provide stability in the lives of their grandchildren.

“

“It does not need to be a big place, but it has to be somewhere safe. I need to make it safe for me, and my grandchildren.”

**-66 years old, 7 years of homelessness**

“

“Once I move on from here, I want it to be somewhere nice. I would like to be able to have my grandson come and visit me, so it has got to be a decent place, you know?”

**-64 years old, 6 years of homelessness**





As women transition to grandmothering, permanent housing must be a safe and suitable place to visit with their grandchildren.

## Supports with Activities of Daily Living

Some participants reflected on their changing abilities and described wanting some support with managing activities of daily living such as cleaning, grocery shopping and cooking.

“

“I would like someone to help me in my home, because I am at that stage, so it can stay nice and clean and I am comfortable. I need help from the community, cleaning my house, because I have a hard time even getting in and out of the tub now... I need help cleaning, functioning.”

- 54 years old, 20 years of homelessness

“

“It’s not really possible for me to go to the grocery store, and carry my stuff home. I know of some housing that takes you to the store, or provides your food and that would help me.”

- 64 years old, 6 years of homelessness





There is a need for housing with supports that are specifically designed to address the in-home care and support needs of aging women and gender-diverse people.

## Aging in Place

A lot of participants in the project shared that once they found permanent housing, they did not want to become homeless, or have to move again.

In order for permanent housing to be sustainable over the long-term, it must be designed in a way that promotes aging in place, by being adaptable to women's changing housing and support needs.

“

“Once I get my apartment, that is going to be my apartment until I f\*\*\*\*\*g die. I'm not going to leave it, you know what I mean? That is the place I am going to grow older in, so it needs to be set up for that.”

- 45 years old, 6 years of homelessness





## Key Considerations for Good Permanent Housing:

- 1 There is a need to develop accessible housing for aging women and gender-diverse people. Accessible housing must be designed using an intersectional lens to understand and attend to varying abilities.
- 2 Older women and gender-diverse people have changing housing and support needs relating to mobility, completing activities of daily living and their roles as grandmothers.
- 3 It is critical that housing is somewhere that women and gender-diverse people can 'age in place', as this will prevent re-entering homelessness or having to move again.

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# 6

## Equity and Inclusion

Participants in the [in]visible project had a range of intersecting identities, which influenced the ways they experienced homelessness, and shaped how they described their preferred models of housing and support.

A substantive body of literature describes the ways particular identities (Indigenous, LGBTQ2S+, immigrant, those living with complex health/ disability concerns) are over-represented amongst those experiencing chronic homelessness in Canada. [1,2,3,4]

Intersecting sites of marginalization, including racism, colonization, ableism and the exclusion of LGBTQ2S+ women and gender-diverse peoples, have a profound impact on the ways housing, healthcare and support is accessed and experienced. [1,2,3]

In response to the disproportionate representation of particular identities, there is an understanding that adapting an equity and inclusion lens is a critical component to developing good policies and practice in the housing and homelessness sector.

There is limited research available that draws on the perspectives of women and gender-diverse people experiencing homelessness, to understand how their identity shapes their experience of homelessness and their preferred housing outcomes.

Stories shared by participants throughout the [in]visible project highlight the ways marginalized identities impacted the experience of being homeless, and complicated accessing and sustaining adequate housing and support. We were also able to learn about how the identities of women and gender-diverse people influence the kinds of housing and support they believe would be best suited for them.





## Stigma, Exclusion and Marginalization within the Housing Sector & Housing Market

Through the [in]visible project, we heard about the ways participants' intersecting identities led to unique barriers when trying to access and sustain housing supports and/or market-rent housing.

For example, women and gender-diverse people who are new to Canada, reported experiencing racism within the housing market and described the barriers they faced when trying to navigate and access available housing supports.

“

“Fifteen years ago, when I came from my county (India), I was in a women’s shelter for the first time. I did not know anything about the city. I did not know the language. I did not know where to find the help I needed. No one wanted to rent to me.”

**- 35 years old, 1 year of homelessness**

For women and gender-diverse people that occupy marginalized identities, such as trans-women, and women who use drugs, stigma and exclusion within the housing market was described. We heard stories of profound stigma and discrimination from landlords and other tenants, which ultimately led to eviction.





“

“The landlord was sending me so many illegitimate eviction notices that it was like, at this point, I can’t call it safe housing. He either thought I was gay, or he didn’t like the fact I was transgender I think.”

**- 30 years old, 16 years of homelessness**

“

“I got a room in a students’ house and I was kicked out a week later. I was given my last months rent back, but it was due to the fact that I didn’t click with the students, right? If you are a woman who is coming from the streets with a past or a history of drugs or whatever, you are not going to fit and they are not going to understand you.”

**- 28 years old, 2 years of homelessness**

## Identity Specific Models of Housing and Supports

Findings from the [in]visible project highlight the urgent need to develop housing and supports that are responsive to the intersecting identities of women and gender-diverse people who experience homelessness.





For example, Indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse people are disproportionately impacted by violence and homelessness, and yet there are few Indigenous-led services offering culturally appropriate women-only, or gender-diverse inclusive supports. [1,3]

During the [in]visible project, Indigenous women shared about their experiences of colonial violence, trauma and about how this shaped the kinds of culturally specific models of housing and support they preferred.

“

“I’ve been through like, the pain and the emotional pain, as a child I was very traumatized and abused. I am going through a lawsuit right now for the government, it is called the Sixties Scoop. They kidnapped me, I was one out of 42 babies taken illegally out of [hospital name]. That still impacts me today.”

**- 43 years old, 21 years of homelessness**

“

“I feel that I am looking for more of a holistic approach. I’m not looking for market rent housing at the moment, I am interested in (Indigenous-specific transitional living program for women), to do a bit of healing, and that is what will progress me out of this (homelessness) so I am hoping for that.”

**- 48 years old, 4 years of homelessness**





Another important consideration that emerged throughout the [in]visible project relating to identity was connected to ways ableism impacts housing and support preferences.

Throughout the [in]visible project, participants described the need for applying a gendered-lens, when designing programs that attended to women's varying physical and mental health concerns.

“

“As a mental health consumer/survivor, I get it, because I’ve been through the system and I’ve gotten the help I need and I try every day to push forward and I think I could use what I know to help others in housing. Peer support, you know?”

**- 38 years old, 3 years of homelessness**

“

“I’m a 52-year-old woman. I have disabilities. I need to live in housing with supports for me.”

**-52 years old, 4 years of homelessness**





## Key Considerations for Good Permanent Housing:

- 1 Developing housing and supports for women and gender-diverse people who experience complex homelessness, requires understanding how identity impacts experiences of homelessness and access to housing support and market rent housing.
- 2 There is an urgent need for Indigenous-led and culturally specific models of housing and support to meet the needs of women and gender-diverse people who experience chronic homelessness across Canada.
- 3 Applying an equity and inclusion lens requires understanding the ways intersecting identity shapes housing and support preferences.

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# Mothering

The [in]visible project focused on women and gender-diverse people experiencing chronic homelessness, who did not have children in their care. It is important to note that while none of our participants had children in their care at the time of the research study, 72% were mothers. Mothering and its connection to housing and support needs emerged as a significant theme throughout our findings.

Research shows that mothers who experience homelessness, are often impacted by violence and other negative socio-economic conditions that complicate their experiences of housing stability. [1]

Available literature documents the complicated set of structural and systemic barriers experienced by mothers, and their children who become homeless. [1,2,3]

Mothers who experience homelessness are at a heightened risk for unwanted involvement from child welfare agencies, and are more likely to experience having their children apprehended by child welfare services. [1,4,5]

Mothers often face tremendous systemic obstacles when attempting to regain custody of their children from child welfare services. [3,5,6]

There is a profound lack of gender-specific transitional and supportive housing options that fulfill the housing and support needs of mothers and their children. [1,7]

1,7

Findings from the [in]visible project highlight that mothers lost custody of their children due to issues related to their housing and homelessness status. When we asked about housing and support preferences, we learned about the importance of designing spaces, programs and services that support women in their roles as mothers.





## Homelessness, Housing Instability and Child Welfare Involvement

Throughout the [in]visible project, we were able to learn about women's experiences of navigating unwanted involvement and intervention from child welfare agencies.

Many participants shared that child welfare agencies were concerned about the quality, safety and stability of their housing. We heard stories about the ways women's homelessness and housing instability perpetuated involvement from child welfare agencies, and resulted in women losing custody of their children to the child welfare sector.

“

“I was pregnant with my last child and the Children's Aid were giving me a really hard time. I guess I picked a bad building to live in, but at the time, because of my credit and eviction and stuff like that, it's all I could get so, I ended up losing the baby to child welfare. My parents have my kids. I visit with them but I would like to have more time with them.”

- 40 years old, 12 years of homelessness

“

“I gave my daughter up three months ago, cause being homeless is just not safe, it's scary, it's not normal. I just want a place where I can stabilize, not use, have a home and get my family back.”

- 33 years old, 15 years of homelessness





## Housing as a Way to Reconnect with Children

Securing permanent, sustainable housing was viewed as an important way for many participants to reconnect with, and in some instances, regain custody of their children.

We heard about women's desires to secure permanent housing for themselves, and from there re-establish their roles and relationships as mothers.

“

“My place was beautiful, with my son, my home was beautiful, it's been 8 months since then. I am looking for a new place, so I can have my home back, my son back, and have my place beautiful once again.”

**- 35 years old, 1 year of homelessness**

“

“I have my eleven-year old son, he lives with his dad. I am supposed to have him every weekend but under the circumstances you know, I can't. But when I get an apartment, he will come down, every other weekend and stay with me.”

**- 48 years old, 19 years of homelessness**





**- 49 years old, 3 years of homelessness**

## Mothering, Housing and Supports

Participants in the [in]visible project shared about their need for housing and support that promote mothering and dismantle some of the barriers that led to child welfare involvement.

We heard about women's desires to live in permanent supportive housing arrangements that were tailored to their unique needs as women, and as mothers.



“I want to live somewhere that helps me, so that I can do the things the Children’s Aid wants me to do, so I have my baby back and maybe get a cat to take care of.”

**- 32 years old, 4 years of homelessness**



“

"I won't go there (transitional living program for women) because I can't bring my son up, even to visit, because it is female only and you can't bring anybody else up. That program would be good for me, but I can't not have my son visit with me."

- 25 years old, 9 years of homelessness

## Key Considerations for Good Permanent Housing:

- 1 Housing and support programs for women and gender diverse people who experience complex homelessness must be designed to remedy the barriers that perpetuate child welfare involvement and mother-child separation.
- 2 Gender-specific housing and support programs must prioritize the needs of mothers who require permanent housing to re-establish relationships with their children.
- 3 There is an urgent need for the development of transitional and permanent supportive housing options that meet the needs of mothers and their children, who experience chronic homelessness.

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# Affordability

The rising costs of rental housing, substantial increases to the cost of living, and the limited financial resources available to recipients of social assistance, shapes the landscape of housing instability and homelessness in Canada. [1]

Affordability emerged as an important key consideration when developing good housing for women, and gender-diverse people who experience complex and chronic homelessness.

Stories shared by participants in the [in]visible project highlight that without significant changes to the social welfare system, including increased rates to social assistance and a substantial investment in affordable housing, there are very few adequate housing options available.

The majority of women and gender-diverse people who participated in the [in]visible project, received financial assistance through the Ontario Disability Support Program. The second most reported source of income was Ontario Works.

A single person (without dependant children) who receives social assistance in Ontario, does not receive enough financial resources to afford suitable market rent housing and sustain costs associated with other basic needs, including access to food, telephone and transportation. [2]

We heard about the ways women and gender-diverse people who are living in deep poverty negotiate housing affordability, and try to make ends meet in the absence of responsive social welfare programs.

Our findings echo what is already known about the need for deeply affordable rental housing and increase to social assistance, to ensure women and gender-diverse people can resolve their homelessness. [1,2]





## Urgent Need for Adequate Social Assistance Rates

When participants in the [in]visible project were asked about their housing and support preferences, we heard about the need for increased social assistance to ensure adequate housing was accessible and affordable.

We heard stories about women and gender-diverse people, who rely on social assistance, securing housing, but being unable to sustain that housing because of inadequate financial supports.

“

“I have to have my own place and I just can't afford it. The cheapest thing I can get is \$650 for a bachelor, and they are really gross. And then I would have to pay my own utilities on top of that, and then I get like seven hundred and something on OW, how am I supposed to live?”

- 58 years old, 3 years of homelessness

Participants called attention to the ways social assistance rates have not changed despite the rising cost of living and market rent housing in urban centers, such as Hamilton, Ontario.





“

“One thing that would be very good, is if the government raised the payment amount for ODSP to the current living expense levels, since it has been left at the same amount for many years, it hasn’t changed since a two-bedroom apartment was \$700... I just want a bed I can sleep in when I’ve had a hard day.”

**- 30 years old, 8 years of homelessness**

Some participants who were not supported through social assistance programs, described the insurmountable barriers they faced when struggling to afford both adequate housing and other basic needs.

“

“I’m not on OW or ODSP, and when you are not on OW or ODSP, it seems like you get nothing. I have to pay my own drug plan. I have \$200 left for the month. That’s for everything. Now when I leave here (transitional living program), I’m going to have to find a place that’s really, really cheap.”

**- 52 years old, 12 years of homelessness**





## Housing Affordability increases Overall Quality of Life

Throughout the [in]visible project, we heard from participants about the ways their overall quality of life was compromised because of limited financial resources and a lack of affordable housing.

In an effort to ‘make ends meet’ and sustain market rent housing with limited financial resources, participants shared experiences of going without food, heat, a working telephone and other basic necessities of life.

“

“I was paying \$745 a month rent. I also had to pay my own hydro which I didn’t realize when I moved into the unit that the hydro was going to overwhelm me... it was running me like \$467 the first two months. I could not afford to keep paying the hydro bill so I went without the hydro for a bit, and eventually, I wound up homeless again.”

- 55 years old, 10 years of homelessness





“

“I couldn’t afford nothing, I had \$50 a week is what I lived off of, that’s for everything. I had to wash my clothes by hand and hang them up, I couldn’t afford to do my laundry. There were some weeks where I couldn’t afford anything to eat, some weeks I made like a pot of chili or something, and that had to last me all week. That is very hard living, and it’s not very healthy living.”

**- 52 years old, 12 years of homelessness**

## Key Considerations for Good Permanent Housing:

- 1 There is a need to increase social assistance rates across Canada, to reflect the rising cost of living and market rental housing.
- 2 Housing that is developed for women and gender-diverse people who have experienced complex homelessness, must be deeply affordable.
- 3 Housing with supports for women and gender-diverse people should consider including access to basic needs (utilities, telephone, laundry, and food) as a part of the program/lease agreement to offset the cost of living.

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# Eight Recommendations for Housing Development

1

## SPACE AND PLACE

Women describe wanting standard and simple housing units, but emphasize the importance of having a choice relating to the structure of building, neighbourhood, location and the level of security for the building.



2

## SAFETY AND SECURITY

Women who have endured gender-based violence require housing that offers an array of built-in safety and security features, above and beyond what is available in standard market-rent units



3

## ON-SITE SUPPORTS

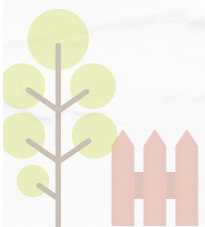
There is an urgent need to invest in the development of permanent supportive housing, that offers women with complex housing, health and social needs, access to 24-hour on-site supports and services.



4

## COMMUNITY & CONNECTION

Women described wanting to live somewhere that fosters a sense of community and connection, through built-in communal spaces such as living space, kitchens, and gardens and mutual-aid, such as sharing resources and responsibilities.



# Eight Recommendations for Housing Development

5

## AGING AND ACCESSIBILITY

It is important for housing to be built intentionally, that allows for women to age in place. Future housing developments should adhere to a high standard of accessibility.



6

## EQUITY AND INCLUSION

All housing that is developed for women must be done through an equity-lens that meaningfully creates pathways for the inclusion of those who have been marginalized from accessing housing.



7

## MOTHERING

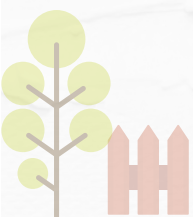
Housing must be responsive to the needs of mothers, grandmothers and caregivers, even if women do not have children in their care. It is important for housing to be accessible to children and for there to be on-site amenities and supports for children and caregivers.



8

## AFFORDABILITY

There is a need to develop deeply affordable rental housing that allows for those on social assistance and those who receive a low-income, to have enough financial resources to remain housed and meet their basic needs.



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