

WNHHN Call to Action

The Gendered Crisis of COVID-19 for Women and Gender Diverse People Experiencing Housing Need and Homelessness

COVID-19 is a gendered crisis. While the virus itself does not discriminate, systemic inequities faced by women and gender diverse peoples means that our experience of this pandemic is unique. Responses to the pandemic need to take into consideration the path and profile of gendered homelessness.

Women's homelessness in Canada was already a crisis prior to the arrival of COVID-19. Making up approximately half of the homeless population in Canada, our experience of homelessness is uniquely gendered. Women are more likely to experience poverty and work minimum wage jobs, meaning that many of us face layoffs with limited savings. We disproportionately live in core housing need, head single-parent households, and bear the burden of childcare, putting us at risk of eviction when we face the impossible choice of paying the rent or feeding our kids.

For many women and gender diverse peoples, the directive to "stay at home" means we are trapped with partners or others who are abusive and violent. On the streets we fear not only exposure to COVID-19, but profound sexual and physical violence. Many of these challenges are magnified for those who face multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization, including Indigenous women, transwomen, newcomer women, 2SLGBTQ2+ people, women of colour, and women with disabilities. Gender diverse peoples face distinct and severe housing challenges as well.

In the context of this pandemic, access to adequate and safe housing is the difference between life and death for many of us – whether we contract the virus or not.

The emergency shelter system in Canada was not designed to meet the needs of homeless women and gender diverse peoples. We fear for our safety in mixed gendered shelters, as well as the apprehension of our children by child protection authorities when accessing these spaces. Many high-barrier shelters deter women from accessing them.

Research also reveals that both homelessness and domestic violence shelters had been systematically operating at (or over) capacity, and that women disproportionately struggle to access affordable housing in Canada. For these reasons and others, many of us are forced to couch surf, trade sex for housing, or live on the street, putting our safety at high risk. This is particularly true for Indigenous women, over-represented in homeless populations, given the clear link between homelessness and the number of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada. The legacy of colonialism and residential schools creates barriers for Indigenous women seeking safety and support, putting them at higher risk for violence and exploitation.

COVID-19 has drastically worsened the challenges women and gender diverse people face with respect to housing. As we see increases in poverty, eviction, and domestic violence, we fear that our communities will face profound suffering and loss of life.

These realities demand a gender-informed response to COVID-19 that reflects the unique vulnerabilities of women, girls, and gender-diverse people who are homeless or precariously housed, and includes the broad continuum of ways that women and gender diverse people experience homelessness. This response must be shaped by people with lived expertise in diverse contexts.

Given the centrality of housing to any effective pandemic response, Canada has an unprecedented opportunity to end homelessness among women, girls, and gender diverse peoples. The Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network urges all levels of government to seize this opportunity. We applaud the Government of Canada's investment of \$157 million into Reaching Home, as well as the \$50-million specifically targeted to women's shelters and sexual assault centres. These are life-saving investments, and we hope these investments will align with Reaching Home's GBA+ approach.

But there is an immediate need to do more.

The Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network calls on all levels of Canadian government to urgently enact the following measures to equitably protect women, girls, children, and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness during this pandemic:

1. Immediately procure safe housing for women, girls, children, and gender diverse people experiencing homelessness and/or fleeing violence, including through the use of hotels, motels, office spaces, and other properties.

- It is clear that the most effective way to address COVID-19 is through the immediate provision of housing to all people who are precariously housed or homeless. This can be achieved through procuring vacant units or buildings to provide emergency housing, ensuring that these spaces are safe, consider the access needs of people with disabilities, and provide appropriate facilities and programming for children. Residents must be provided with supportive measures such as: access to nutritious food, hygiene supplies, social supports, and resources to assist in daily living (e.g., transit tokens). In alignment with the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, we encourage the government to purchase or expropriate buildings or units that can then be re-purposed, over time, for long-term social housing. It is critical that after the pandemic ends, all people who received housing during this crisis are ensured permanent housing, rather than transitioned back onto the streets.
- Where emergency homeless and domestic violence shelters continue to operate as an immediate measure during the pandemic, these spaces must be upgraded to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Such measures should include: improvements in cleaning protocols, increased staffing, personal protective equipment (PPE) for all staff, the creation of self-isolation spaces (within existing or new spaces), adoption of measures to enable physical distancing (e.g., by distancing sleeping cots), and improved collaboration with public health departments. Within communities that do not have adequate homeless or domestic violence shelters, it is critical that women and gender diverse peoples are provided access to 24/7 safe spaces.

2. Expand the availability of safe and adequate housing for Indigenous women, girls, and gender diverse peoples on an urgent and priority basis, ensuring all housing development and policy is guided by Indigenous self-determination and an intersectional gendered lens.

First Nations, Inuit, and Metis women and gender diverse peoples live in the worst housing conditions in Canada and face the highest rates of sexual and physical violence, including murder. Indigenous peoples are also at greatest risk of having their children apprehended, and face significant barriers to accessing homeless and domestic shelters. On an urgent and priority basis, Canadian governments must increase staffing and expand the availability of safe housing for Indigenous women, including for those living in rural, remote, and urban communities. All housing development and policy must be self-determined by Indigenous peoples and guided by an intersectional gender lens. Leadership by Indigenous women's organizations will be critical for ensuring culturally safe

supports and programming. Given high rates of housing precarity and gender-based violence towards Indigenous women and girls in Canada's North, we emphasize the particular need for investment in safe housing in Northern communities.

3. Enact moratoriums on evictions and establish rent freezes across Canada during the pandemic and for a reasonable time thereafter, working across all levels of government to ensure consistent protection across the country.

Echoing the excellent recommendations of numerous organizations and groups, we urge the immediate adoption of a moratorium on evictions and a rent freeze in all provinces and territories. Given that women experience greater core housing need, higher rates of poverty, and face uniquely gendered forms of harassment from landlords, it is critical that strong policy measures are enacted to ensure women, children, and gender diverse peoples do not lose their housing during this crisis.

4. Ensure equitable access to financial relief for all women, girls, and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness or housing precarity, including for those who are sleeping rough and/or depend on the informal economy for their livelihood.

- Governments must remove bureaucratic barriers to accessing emergency financial aid for women and gender diverse peoples who are homeless or precariously housed. Lack of ID, a CRA account, a home address, citizenship, or other factors must not bar or significantly delay access to emergency financial relief. Governments can help prevent homelessness by ensuring women and gender diverse peoples who engaged in precarious, home-based, and casual work are able to access financial relief. We particularly note the importance of access to financial aid for those engaged in survival sex, sex work, or other informal activities given that these community members' livelihood is likely to change significantly during COVID-19.
- Increase social and disability assistance rates in all provinces/territories to alleviate increased costs of basic necessities, loss of grey economies, and loss of access to social supports and childcare. These must lift women and their children out of poverty and account for the disproportionate economic hardships that many women are facing as a result of the pandemic (e.g., loss of employment because of increased childcare responsibilities).
- Longer-term, the Government of Canada should consider the implementation of a universal basic income in order to mitigate the economic downturn resulting from COVID-19 and to protect against future challenges.

5. Ensure equitable and non-discriminatory access to COVID-19 testing and healthcare supports for women and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness, including through expanded outreach efforts (e.g., mobile testing units, mental health outreach).

- Governments must ensure that housing status is not a barrier to accessing COVID-19 testing and healthcare services for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples during the pandemic, and that this population is a priority group for testing. Governments should support community-driven solutions to providing healthcare, social services, harm reduction, and mental health supports to people experiencing homelessness during this crisis. These efforts must be responsive to the unique healthcare needs and priorities of women and gender diverse peoples (e.g., the provision sexual and reproductive healthcare for those who are pregnant and homeless).

- Homeless populations currently experience high levels of multi-morbidity, putting them at higher risk for complications associated with COVID-19. We urge governments to increase provision of barrier-free access to safe medical respite services for those with acute and post-acute health needs.

6. Provide and/or expand free childcare services across the country for women with children living within various types of unstable housing, such as shelters and transitional housing, as well as for women who are deemed essential workers during the pandemic.

- Childcare and supportive programs should be funded and amplified in shelters and transitional housing to support mothers, particularly given that daycares and schools have closed. Shelters, transitional housing, and other emergency housing should seek to ensure that families stay together wherever possible, and child authorities must be directed to prioritize providing support and resources over apprehensions.
- In alignment with YWCA Canada, we recommend the expansion of free childcare services for women deemed essential workers during the pandemic. Childcare workers must receive additional financial compensation and relief support to provide these services.

7. Provide food relief measures in shelters and in outreach, ensuring that these efforts meet the needs of the most marginalized women, girls, children, and gender diverse peoples.

Food banks, meal programs, and other food relief programs are scaling back, closing, or adapting in the wake of COVID-19. Governments must fund the expansion of food relief measures to ensure access to adequate nutritious foods, including through expanded outreach efforts. Food banks and related measures must be included in the list of essential services, with providers given the necessary resources to safeguard safety and continuity (e.g., PPE). Action to ensure food security in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities is particularly critical given that food supply chains are threatened and these communities face high food costs.

8. Establish national and regional 'warm lines' and online support networks to reduce the negative consequences of isolation for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples with lived experience.

Online and phone support lines and networks are necessary for providing both peer and professional supports during the pandemic. Peer support phone lines and online communities for women and gender diverse peoples with lived experience are particularly valuable and should be funded. These supports will help mitigate mental health challenges, substance use, and interpersonal conflicts that might otherwise result in hospitalizations and further burdens to the healthcare system.

9. Form a diverse national advisory body, spanning the women's homelessness sector and the VAW sector, to guide and monitor policy responses to COVID-19, and to ensure that responses are gender-informed, intersectional, and shaped by lived expertise.

We urge the federal government to involve diverse women with lived expertise in policy decision-making and the monitoring of policy outcomes during the pandemic and post-pandemic. We recommend the formation of a diverse national advisory body to do so, ensuring that this expertise is drawn from across the women's homelessness sector and the VAW sector. Such an advisory body must seek to represent the diversity of those experiencing homelessness and gender-based violence. Indigenous women's organizations and lived experience experts must be substantively engaged.