

# Coming Together: Homeless Women, Housing and Social Support

With a special focus on the experiences of  
Aboriginal women and transwomen



Izumi Sakamoto, Josie Ricciardi, Jen Plyler, Natalie Wood, Aisha  
Chapra, Matthew Chin, Billie Allan, Rose Cameron & Monica Nunes

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## **Coming Together: Homeless Women, Housing and Social Support**

### **Final Report 2010**

**With a special focus on the experiences of Aboriginal women and transwomen**

#### **The Coming Together Research Team and Helpers:**

Principal Investigator: Izumi Sakamoto, Ph. D., Associate Professor, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto

Co-Investigator: Josie Ricciardi, MSW, RSW, Coordinator of Community Workers, Regent Park Community Health Centre

Project Coordinators: Jen Plyler, MSW; Aisha Chapra, MSW; Matthew Chin, BA (Hon.)

Community Artist: Natalie Wood, MA

Community Partner: Angela Robertson, (then) Executive Director, Sistering – A Woman's Place

Advisory Board Members: Brandi Nashkewa; Leahanne Swan; Katherine; Marie; Sheila A. Samuels; Teisha Anderson; Lida Baldwin

Student Researchers: Bixidu Lobo-Molnar; Billie Allan, MSW, Ph.D. student; Lily Grewal, MSW; Rose Cameron, Ph. D. candidate; Monica Nunes, MPH; Manini Sheker, MSW.

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Adelaide Resource Centre for Women  
The 519 Church Street Community Centre  
Sistering-A Woman's Place  
Native Women's Resource Centre  
Regent Park Community Health Centre  
Fred Victor Women's Drop-in

#### **Project Partners:**

University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work  
Regent Park Community Health Centre  
Sistering – A Woman's Place

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## FORWARD

- Izumi Sakamoto

This final report for *Coming Together: Homeless Women, Housing and Social Support* (Coming Together Project) marks five years of researching, story-telling, art-making and relationship-building as a means to share the voices and insights of women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness. The knowledge revealed through the Coming Together Project is meant to go beyond narratives of barriers and victimization to reveal the experiences of agency and embodied knowledge that women and transwomen with identified experiences of homelessness or marginal housing hold. As used in this report, the terms “homeless” and “marginally housed” are overlapping and not mutually exclusive. Rather, in this report the definition of “homeless” or “homelessness” includes the experiences of those who may be housed but whose circumstances are so precarious they may be at risk of losing their housing. As such, at times this report uses only the term “homeless” or “homelessness” to account for the experiences associated with being “marginally housed” in addition to not having housing (City of Toronto, 2003).

Overall, this final report summarizes activities, outcomes and recommendations of the Coming Together Project. It explains the methodology of the project as an arts-informed, community-based and participatory action research project that included the hiring of an Advisory Board of women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness. The Advisory Board actively helped shape the research process and outcomes. This report also identifies the research findings which emerged from interviews and arts-based group sessions using staged photography with diverse women and transwomen. The major findings of this study show that while women and transwomen experience trauma and violence through circumstances of homelessness or marginal housing, they also carry embodied knowledge and strengths. Finally, deriving from these findings, the report provides recommendations for policy and practice.

In addition, this final report expands on an earlier community report (Sakamoto, Ricciardi, Plyler & Wood, 2007; 40 pages, all-colour) which can be found on the Coming Together Project’s website ([comingtogether.ca](http://comingtogether.ca)). This expanded final report recognizes new thoughts on the Coming Together Project’s research as well as other outcomes to ensure that the key messages of the research shaped by our Advisory Board members and other research participants remain visible. For instance, since the release of the community report, the Coming Together Project team led the coordination of a collaborative research project (*Homelessness: Solutions from Lived Experiences through Arts-Informed Research*) linking the outcomes of seven other community-based research projects around homelessness. Through this collaborative work it has become even more apparent that solutions to these issues must be guided by those with lived experiences of homelessness and marginal housing. Many of the recommendations in this report reinforce important policy changes suggested in the collaborative report. More information on this report can be found on the website The Homeless Hub ([homelesshub.ca/Topics/Arts-and-Homelessness-492.aspx](http://homelesshub.ca/Topics/Arts-and-Homelessness-492.aspx)).

In addition to the collaborative initiative, the Coming Together Project team and its Advisory Board members have been active in speaking out to facilitate change. Our Advisory Board members have shared their stories in multiple public spaces for policy-makers, service providers, academics, and the general public. Recently, we have also produced a series of Information Sheets with insights and information from our research participants to support

service providers who are working with women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness.

Beyond the Coming Together Project, we also recognize the valuable work of other researchers who are producing knowledge from within frameworks that recognize the strengths and assets of those with experiences of homelessness. Thus, the Appendix of this report includes a bibliography of literature on the topics of women, homelessness and marginalization from a strengths-based framework.

Looking back the past five years, there are many people who helped the Coming Together Project to materialize and succeed. Josie and I had no idea that the project would grow so much and that we would be still involved with the Advisory Board members five years on! Waves of students worked with us, graduated and left, but some people continued to carry on the torch and helped the project proceed through many phases. I would particularly like to mention the crucial roles that the Advisory Board members played for this project – a huge thank-you to Brandi, Leahanne, Sheila, Lida, Katherine, Tiesha, and Marie. Some of these wonderful women/transwomen are still involved in the project, and I feel very fortunate that they want to keep working together. Without the expertise, connections, and insight of Josie Ricciardi this project would not have existed in any form. I'd like to thank Wellesley Institute and Brenda Roche (Director of Research at Wellesley Institute) for the valuable support which made it possible to actually conduct this research project. We were fortunate to have the three waves of dedicated research coordinators, Jen Plyler (2005-2007), Aisha Chapra (2007-2009) and Matthew Chin (2009-2010). Billie Allan and Rose Cameron generously ensured our understanding of Aboriginal women's experiences are embedded in indigenous ways of knowing and larger contexts surrounding Aboriginal peoples – thank you. The community agency staff and participants have generously opened up their space and time for our research – thank-you to Regent Park Community Health Centre, Adelaide Resource Centre for Women, Sistering – A Woman's Place, Native Women's Resource Centre, the 519 Church Street Community Centre, and Fred Victor Women's Drop-in. Many students took on various tasks through the years: thanks to Bixidu Lobo-Molnar, Lily Grewal, Monica Nunes, Nadia Bacheu; Manini Sheker.

We hope readers will find the report of the Coming Together Project useful and the stories bravely told motivating. We also hope you will understand that the work towards honouring the embodied knowledge of women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness, and ensuring their safety, is still emerging.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Coming Together: Homeless Women, Housing and Social Support* ("Coming Together Project") is an arts-based, community-based participatory action research project exploring how women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness build support networks with each other in order to survive. The project sought to supplement existing research around homelessness as these studies generally have not taken into account women and transwomen whose experiences of homelessness often differ from those of men. Operating from an anti-oppressive, empowerment perspective and focusing on the assets of people who are homeless, the project team also attempted to offer an alternative perspective to the deficit-based frameworks that tend to exist within the body of research around homelessness.

The Coming Together Project was a collaboration between the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and community agency partners, Regent Park Community Health Centre and Sistering - A Woman's Place. Drawing from the principles of community-based participatory action research (Israel, Schulz, Parker & Becker, 1998) and grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), the project was guided by an advisory board of women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness. The project team engaged in data collection through conducting interviews with women and transwomen who had experienced homelessness and their service providers as well as through art-making sessions with homeless women and transwomen in drop-in centres across Toronto. With the support of a community artist (Natalie Wood) and discussion with the Advisory Board, an art modality of *staged photography* was used as a research methodology to capture the experiences shared in these sessions. The resultant images were transformed into posters depicting participants' visions and stories of inclusion, friendships and safe spaces. Further, a community research report was published to more fully capture the process and outcomes of research (2007). In addition to providing strong research data, using arts-based approaches was meaningful to many participants. As one advisory board member noted:

*"Lots of laughter [in art-making sessions]...[This project was] not only research but medicine."*

Through the analysis of the data gathered, three major themes emerged. A first theme revealed was the importance of social support networks amongst women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness. Although our research also showed that violence and trauma were ubiquitous in the lives of women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness, social support networks often evolved as sources for protection, advocacy within the shelter system, information, resources and healing. One transwoman that we interviewed shared that:

*"We are constantly being on guard, because as transwomen we are at more risk of violence so we are always looking out for each other as a form of protection."*

A second theme from the research highlighted that individual experiences of homelessness are often affected deeply by the historical and current systems of marginalization at the group/structural level, which, in our study, was particularly pertinent in how Aboriginal women and transwomen experienced homelessness. From an empowerment and anti-oppressive perspective, the specific barriers these groups of individuals face must be understood from a structural level, and that services to support those with experiences of

homelessness must consider the specific barriers these groups face due to oppression. As one Aboriginal woman with experiences of homelessness interviewed for the project stated:

*"[We] need a system in place to meet each woman's specific needs. They need to realize that we are individuals and we have individual needs. We shouldn't be treated like criminals. The humiliation is re-victimizing – we've already left abusive situations, and now get treated like this in the shelter."*

Aboriginal woman with experience of homelessness

A third theme from the research pointed to recommendations for action that centre on the need for services that build on the strengths of women and transwomen who are homeless and which recognize and address the challenges they face. This theme indicates specific policy recommendations that promote:

- Changes in social services and counselling services which are more responsible, accountable and accessible to the unique and common experiences of women/transwomen who are homeless;
- Safe spaces and housing for women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness;
- Aboriginal-led services to better support Aboriginal women with experiences of homelessness;
- Transinclusive and trans-only social services to promote the safety and wellness of transwomen with experiences of homelessness.

In addition to these findings and recommendations, during the research process, women and transwomen advisory board members and research participants spoke about their positive experiences as a result of being involved in the project. Adhering to the principles of community-based participatory action research, the insights gained from the Coming Together Project have been disseminated and mobilized to challenge the structures of inequity that negatively impact the lived experiences of those affected by homelessness. The project has been and continues to be involved in sharing the insights gained in different venues to diverse audiences such as service providers, students in helping professions, policy makers, funders, and academics.

For more information, please visit: [www.comingtogether.ca](http://www.comingtogether.ca)

# Coming Together Strength and Healing through Helping

"I have a good set of ears.  
I can sit and listen to someone  
cry cause I know it's helping them  
and sometimes it helps me..."



"I feel better 'cause  
I'm helping..."

"Coming Together: Homeless women, housing and social support" is an arts-based community research project exploring how women and transwomen who are marginally housed build support networks with each other in order to survive. This research project collected data and identified key themes that were then explored in the art making process with other women and transwomen at drop-in centres across the city. Through painting, drama and photography women and transwomen depicted their visions and stories of inclusion, friendship and safe spaces.

Supported by: Wellesley Institute, University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work, Regent Park Community Health Centre, Sistering - A Woman's Place, The University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work, Royal Bank Fellowship, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Institutional Grant, The Adelaide Resource Centre for Women, The Native Women's Resource Centre & 519 Community Centre.

For more information, please contact the Principal Investigator, Professor Izumi Sakamoto, University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work or email us at [comingtogetherproject@gmail.com](mailto:comingtogetherproject@gmail.com) <<mailto:comingtogetherproject@gmail.com>>

Artist: Natalie Wood 2006

## RESEARCH OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

Homelessness is “a condition of people who live outside, stay in emergency shelters, spend most of their income on rent, or live in overcrowded, substandard conditions and are therefore at serious risk of becoming homeless.” (City of Toronto, 2003, p. 58). It is “one of the most severe manifestations of the denial of housing rights” (UN-Habitat, 2002, p. 57) and is a serious and growing social problem that affects many people in Toronto. Although the exact number of homeless people living in Toronto is unknown, approximately 32,000 different people slept in a Toronto homeless shelter in 2002 (City of Toronto, 2003), and about 6,500 individuals stayed in a shelter on any given night in 2006 (Shapcott, 2006). Additional thousands who are either at risk of homelessness or experiencing hidden homelessness<sup>1</sup> remain unaccounted for. In 1998, the City of Toronto endorsed a declaration acknowledging homelessness as a national disaster.

Women and transwomen’s experiences of homelessness are often different from those of (non-trans) men. Disproportionate numbers of single women and women with children utilize shelters in Toronto, with approximately 1,313 women staying in shelters nightly (City of Toronto, 2006). Transwomen are particularly overrepresented in the homeless population because of exclusion in many key domains of life - home, work and school (Mottet & Ohle, 2003). Homeless women are ten times more likely to die than women who are housed (Cheung & Hwang, 2004). Further, women and transwomen who are homeless also face discrimination and exclusion based on their multiple and overlapping identities and experiences including (but not limited to) race, Aboriginal heritage, sexual orientation, gender identity, class, ability, health status, language, and immigration status.



Violence is often a constant presence in the lives of women and transwomen who are homeless as cycles of abuse from childhood through adulthood are mirrored in cycles of unstable housing and homelessness. Social isolation and lack of services help to keep these cycles in place (Sistering, 2002). Many women have lived their entire lives without a ‘home’ that is safe. Even for women living in supportive housing, 50% will return to the shelter system or the streets because they often feel unsafe in co-ed environments (Novac, Brown, Guyton & Quance, 1996). For many, social services are used as a survival tactic to escape abusive relationships and unsafe housing conditions (Novac, et al, 1996; Novac, Serge, Eberle & Brown, 2002; Tomas & Dittmar, 1995). Often, these women arrive at social services in Toronto after being forced to flee their homes or communities in small towns, rural settings and/or reserves to escape violent men. Survival strategies on the street seem to differ between women and men who are homeless. Women tend to become invisible in order to survive the male-dominated space of the streets, while men can seek protection in numbers and claim ‘ownership’ of public spaces. Women have, at best, an ambivalent relationship to the street and are never able to be as comfortable as men (Wardhaugh, 2000, cited in Novac et al, 2002), since they are more likely to experience violence.

<sup>1</sup> Hidden homelessness includes “those in transition homes, jails and detox centres, and those who live in overcrowded, unstable, or inadequate housing. It also includes “couch surfing,” which is when people stay at a friend or family members’ dwelling for a short period of time, then move on to another person’s home” (Baskin, 2007, p.33)

The best known and most studied examples of organized responses to homelessness are provided by formal social services and faith-based services. Far less known and studied are the efforts made by those who experience homelessness themselves to organize collectively for their needs (Mandiberg & Sakamoto, 2003). One consistent example of such self-organized or grassroots efforts is the encampments/squats of people who are homeless that have appeared constantly throughout history in North America (Mandiberg & Sakamoto, 2003). Tent City, until its eviction, was the most well-known example in Toronto. However, even within homeless-led initiatives such as Tent City, it is not clear what roles women have been able to play. As in our broader society, squats and housing takeovers tend to be led by men, while women, particularly women of colour and Aboriginal women, tend to be excluded from leadership (Smith, 2000). In order to participate and benefit equally, organizing efforts need to be better grounded in homeless women's networks and resourcefulness.

Much research has been done to help better understand why women are homeless and how to address the issue at the municipal, provincial and federal levels. It has been shown that women's lives could be improved by more affordable housing, livable social assistance rates, a higher minimum wage, universal daycare and more inclusive and accountable social and health services (Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse et al., 2006; Sistering, 2002; Wellesley Institute, 2006). Despite this knowledge, political, economic and social decision-makers have not put forth the effort needed to end the injustice of homelessness in Toronto.

With the failure of public policy and social programs, women experiencing homelessness have increasingly been forced to depend on themselves and each other for survival. Although there has been a great deal of research and writing on homelessness in Toronto since the 1980s, there has been little attention paid to the strengths and resiliency of homeless people and their ability to support themselves and each other, create a community, or forge a social movement. This gap is largely caused by charity-based perspectives of homelessness that view women as victims and well-meaning social services as the only solution (Chan, 2004). The Coming Together Project aims to address this gap by placing women's strengths and resourcefulness at the centre of solutions to homelessness. Examining how women come together to share knowledge and support each other in the face of homelessness, and how their efforts and challenges are affected by their multiple identities and marginalizations, needs to be recognized, better understood, celebrated and defended.

In seeking to better understand the strengths, experiences and marginalization of women and transwomen who are homeless, the Coming Together Project is guided by the following research questions:

- How do women and transwomen who are homeless form and use social support networks?
- What is the impact of differences among women and transwomen (e.g. Aboriginal heritage, immigration status, substance use) on their membership in informal support networks?
- How can social services assist women in enhancing these support networks?
- What do homeless women and transwomen envision safe and appropriate housing to look like?

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach of the Coming Together Project was twofold. The methodology involved both a community-based research approach (e.g., Flicker & Savan, 2006; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998), using a grounded theory method, (Charmaz, 2000; Straus & Corbin, 1998) and staged photography as an arts-based research method for the identification of key issues, action and dissemination. In Phase I, in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews for both service providers/researchers as key informants (n = 13) and service users (women and transwomen who were homeless; n = 20) were conducted at either the participant's location or at a mutually designated location. (please see Appendix A for interview guides). For service user participants, each interview participants received \$25 honorarium and 2 transit tokens as a token of appreciation and partially to compensate for their time and contribution.

As is often the case with community-based participatory research, the ethics approval process involved multiple steps to allow for flexibility in research design to reflect participants' opinions and increase the trustworthiness of research findings. First, an institutional ethics approval was obtained through the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board prior to data collection for this research project. Next, in order to obtain feedback on our findings from the communities with whom we conducted research with (member check), additional ethics approval was obtained at a later date so that we could re-engage and seek feedback from groups of women at the four drop-in sites that we had visited earlier for data collection (art-making sessions, interviews). Further, an ethics approval was obtained to conduct a focus group with the advisory board members to evaluate the research process and the quality of their experience with the project (the decision that the facilitator of the focus group not be someone who was involved in the research process earlier was motivated by the desire for the advisory board members to provide honest opinions).



Of the 20 women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness interviewed, eleven were between the ages of 40-59 and nine were between 25-39 years old. Six identified as transwomen and fourteen identified as non-transwomen. Nine of the women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness interviewed identified as Aboriginal or Métis, seven as White or of European descent and four identified as people of colour. At the time of their interviews, five women/transwomen had been homeless or marginally housed for over ten years, two had been homeless or marginally housed between five to ten years, six had been in similar situations between one to five years and seven had been without stable housing for up to a year. The living situations of the women and transwomen at the time of the study varied. Two women/transwomen were living on the street, two were living in subsidized housing, four were living in private housing, five were staying with relatives or friends and seven were accessing shelter or hostel services.

Based on the findings from Phase I, Phase II was designed to be more participatory, action-oriented and arts-based. This was made possible by the funding from the Wellesley Institute because initially the project did not have an operating budget that allowed for the compensation of peer researchers in a sustainable manner. To ensure that this project was based on participatory, anti-oppressive and empowerment approaches (Gutiérrez & Lewis,

1999; Ristock & Pennel, 1996; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005), an advisory board was created consisting of women and transwomen who were experiencing homelessness. Advisory board members were recruited from the communities where the initial interviews had been conducted. Many of the members were asked to participate because of their reputations for supporting other homeless women.

In consultation with the Advisory Board and a community artist (Natalie Wood), the art form of “staged photography” was chosen, allowing women and transwomen to participate in four-art making sessions at drop-in centres across Toronto. Eight to fifteen women/transwomen participated in each session, with over 50 women participating overall. One group consisted of all transwomen and another group took place in an Aboriginal service agency. One group had at least seven women who were immigrants and non-native speakers of English. Through the art-making process, the participants spontaneously expressed themes related to their identities as women, transwomen, Aboriginal women, immigrant women, and linguistic/cultural minorities. All the participants signed consent forms before participating, and received \$25 as an honorarium for their time and efforts and two transit tokens.

### Grounded Theory

Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is a qualitative research methodology in which the process of data collection and analysis is conducted simultaneously to allow explanations of the phenomena to emerge from the data. The interviews conducted were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. Initially, the researchers attempted to suspend our knowledge as much as possible (Caelli, 2001) by utilizing culture review, horizontalisation and open coding techniques (Creswell, 1998; McLeod, 2001), so that the themes and categories unique to the current data were allowed to emerge.



Multiple coding strategies were used, including open, axial and thematic coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The emerged themes were further compared and contrasted to each other by complex intersecting identities of our participants (constant comparison method; Charmaz, 2000). NVivo qualitative software was used to assist in data management and analysis. Previously interviewed women and service users from the Advisory Board as well as service providers were invited to give feedback on the study findings (member check/member validation process). The themes arising out of the arts-based research were also analyzed for the theorization of the experiences of women and transwomen. After the Phase II data analysis and initial dissemination process were complete, the research team and advisory board returned to the four art-making sites for further feedback.

### Arts-based research

Despite a rich history of the application of art in social services, the combination of using arts for research in social work settings and working from a community-based participatory research perspective is a more recent phenomenon. Caroline Wang's Photovoice is a well-known example of the use of arts for participatory action research (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, Cash & Powers, 2000).

Arts-based research uses art to explore questions, problems and solutions. The process of making art can allow for the creation of alternate and inclusive knowledge: "Arts-based research is meant not to 'master' an area but to uncover and express alternate ... interpretations of the phenomena under scrutiny" (Barone, 2001, p.24). Since community-based research aims to be accessible to the community involved, using art to carry out research allows community members to participate in a variety of ways regardless of different abilities such as literacy level or language. Involving communities through art not only encourages their participation but also promotes their sense of ownership and investment in the results. By working through art together, the participants created something that represents their collective experience.

This project focused primarily on instrumental values - the outcomes associated with arts-based research. We were particularly interested in collecting visual information on the experiences of support or lack of support that homeless and marginally housed women provided to each other.

### Staged Photography

As mentioned above, the project utilized *staged photography* to conduct its arts-based research. Traditionally, in 'staged' photography the artists take on the role of the director, creating or staging an image (McDonald, 1999). They use models, props, costumes or



lighting, often creating a sense of theatre that is then photographed. This kind of photography has ties to theatre, dance, sculpture, painting and literature. It is well suited to making stories from experiences because the images that are photographed are always out of context. The viewer is therefore invited to make the connections between the "before" and "after" sections of the story.

In this project, the participants were asked to engage in a group or communal director's process, which gave them the opportunity to essentially construct a snapshot of their own realities. They were their own writers expressing their stories/truths, costume directors choosing costumes, directors directing the 'action', make-up artists, scene and backdrop painters. The advisory board members were given a 'crash course' on the artistic form, collaborative methodology and how to transform the language of experience into visual metaphors that were unique and not stereotypical. The role of the community artist who led this 'crash course' was therefore to listen, understand, question, challenge, suggest and photograph the stories. The philosophy guiding this process was based on the ideas associated with Cultural Democracy, an approach committed to promoting and supporting pluralism, participation and equity in community life. In other words, the goal of this approach was to give voice to those individuals whose voices have been silenced, marginalized and socially isolated – in this case, women and transwomen who are homeless or marginally housed.

The art-making experiences at the four drop-ins were varied. Below is a brief synopsis of the art-making process, including some of the issues that the participants emphasized. In one drop-in centre, the women focused on expressing how they



supported each other on an individual and community level with respect to issues of poverty, isolation and accessing social services. In another setting, the women expressed the pain and trauma of violence against women, the tragedy of addictions and the problem of language in accessing support and preventing social isolation. In another group, transwomen expressed problems of support and inclusion based on transphobia, homophobia, gender discrimination, poverty and isolation. In the final setting, a group consisting of largely Aboriginal women and women of colour focused on expressing issues related to housing and homelessness by creating their ideal homes and places where they received comfort and inclusion.

## Coming Together Courage Through Friendships



"We are constantly being on guard, because as transwomen we are at more risk of violence so we are always looking out for each other as a form of protection."



"Coming Together: Homeless women, housing and social support" is an arts-based community research project exploring how women and transwomen who are marginally housed build support networks with each other in order to survive. This research project collected data and identified key themes that were then explored in the art making process with other women and transwomen at drop-in centres across the city. Through painting, drama and photography women and transwomen depicted their visions and stories of inclusion, friendship and safe spaces.

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For more information, please contact the Principal Investigator, Professor Izumi Sakamoto, University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work or email us at [comingtogetherproject@gmail.com](mailto:comingtogetherproject@gmail.com) <[mail:comingtogetherproject@gmail.com](mailto:comingtogetherproject@gmail.com)>

Artist: Natalie Wood 2006

## GENERAL FINDINGS

Three major themes emerged from the Coming Together Project. The first theme emphasizes some of the experiences that were common to most of the women we interviewed. These findings focused on characteristics and functions of the social networks of women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness as well as the ubiquity of violence and trauma in their lives. The second theme revealed that the Aboriginal women and transwomen, respectively, have specific needs in relation to homelessness and marginal housing due to systems of marginalization. The third theme of the findings points to recommendations for action that centre on the need for services that build on the strengths of women and transwomen who are homeless and which recognize and address the challenges they face. However, a comprehensive delineation of these recommendations is provided following the discussion below on the study's findings.

### Characteristics and Functions of Social Networks

*"My biological family fed me, housed me and clothed me. But my street family kept me alive." – transwoman with experiences of homelessness*



Networks and informal groups amongst people on the streets help to challenge social exclusion and isolation. While poverty brings women/transwomen together out of necessity, it also limits what they have to share with each other. Within these networks, women/transwomen provide each other with protection, advocacy within the system, information, resources and social support. Reciprocity and loyalty are very important and interconnected. Quite often women will share everything they have (for example, money, transit tokens, tampons) with other women on

the street, in spite of how little they have. Marginalized women experience life on the street in certain ways, for example transwomen and sex-trade workers tend to stay together for safety, and do not often mingle with other women or men. Age, sexual orientation, immigration status (e.g., non-status immigrants), substance use, language background and Aboriginal status all affect how women survive and who they associate with.

### From Violence and Trauma to Safe Space, Homes and Housing

*"Transwomen [who are homeless] are at more risk of violence so they are always looking out for each other as some form of protection. Transwomen inform each other about which streets are safe, where's safe to stay and what parks and bridges are safe to access." – trans service provider*

One striking finding was how common the experience of gender-based violence was in the lives of women/transwomen that are homeless or marginally housed. Violence was often both a cause and a consequence of homelessness for women/transwomen. Many women/transwomen on the streets have survived waves of violence and abuse since childhood, which were not only traumatizing, but also made them more susceptible to future violence. Women/transwomen stressed that housing is appropriate and sustainable only when it is safe and free of violence. Caring for and supporting other women/transwomen is a primary source of healing and strength for many women on the streets, as is a sense of

spirituality and assistance from non-judgmental social service workers. Transwomen and sex workers often form their own support networks which also help them to avoid violence. Years of struggling to survive has enabled many of the women we spoke with to develop very strong instincts for safety and trust. Many of the women/transwomen felt that they had accumulated street knowledge that they wanted to share with younger and less experienced women/transwomen.

## FINDINGS SPECIFIC TO ABORIGINAL WOMEN AND TRANSWOMEN

In addition to the general findings discussed above, a second category of findings emerged from the research centering on the experiences specific to Aboriginal women and transwomen respectively. With respect to the experiences of Aboriginal women, the findings are grouped in three themes: 1) Context; 2) Action; and 3) Embodied Knowledge. In addition, with respect to transwomen the findings are grouped according to three major themes: 1) Marginalization; 2) Social Support; and 3) Making Change

### Aboriginal Women: Helpers Not Helpless

Homelessness is one of the most visible forms of marginalization faced by Aboriginal women in Canada. It is a painful reminder of our colonial legacy – to be left homeless in one's homeland. In the Coming Together Project we were able to learn about the experiences of Aboriginal women who are homeless or experiencing marginal housing, how they support each other and what recommendations they offer to guide change. Specific findings are described through the themes below.

#### Context

Participants described the context of both how they had come to experience as well as their day to day experiences of homelessness and marginal housing, including violence and poverty traps. As one root cause of homelessness, some Aboriginal women described violence within the shelter system as promoting or reinforcing their experiences of marginal housing.



*"I don't even feel safe being in a shelter. I mean, right now, I don't feel safe. [...] Like the shelter I was in, it made me so angry with all the information on woman abuse and they were allowing it to happen. [...] I had to listen to the man next door beat his wife every night in the room next to me."*

Aboriginal woman with experience of homelessness

In addition to violence, poverty was another context for homelessness among Aboriginal women. As one research participant describes:

*"I can't go to school and work. I can go to school and work, you know, but then I'll be neglecting my daughter. She needs that time with me. And you're just stuck in this rut because you can't further your education. You can't get the training you need so you can work in a good job where you get paid well."*

Aboriginal woman with experience of homelessness

### Action

The theme of action as a major finding in the experiences of Aboriginal women who experience homelessness or marginal housing speaks to the strength and wisdom of Aboriginal women in the actions they take to help themselves and each other. In this way, Aboriginal women expressed their agency when sharing their stories through the Coming Together Project. Their actions confront pervasive stereotypes of Aboriginal women in poverty as helpless, victims or lazy. Instead, Aboriginal demonstrate agency by providing social support and acceptance to other women, sharing stories and by volunteering.

### Social Support and Acceptance

*"I have a good set of ears. I can sit and listen to someone cry, 'cause I know it is helping them. Kind of like I'm helping you right now."*

Aboriginal woman with experience of homelessness

### Sharing Stories

*"I can share stories, I can say 'this is what happened to me/ I went through this/ this is what I did/ this is what helped me/ this is the direction they pointed me in / it worked or it didn't work/ could work for you/ maybe you want to try it/ maybe you don't/ here's your options."*

Aboriginal woman with experience of homelessness

### Volunteering

*"I teach a children's course on Wednesdays. I really think the children are important to me. They give me a lot too. They give me confidence and... a feeling of goodness... While I'm there with those kids I just forget my stresses. I'm just there for those kids and it's just nice."*

Aboriginal woman with experience of homelessness



### Embodied Knowledge

As another central finding relating to the experiences of Aboriginal women, participants offered many recommendations to improve service provision based on their lived experiences, insight and the wisdom they carry inside themselves – their embodied knowledge. Recommendations for change ranged from micro-practices such as improving communication between and within agencies, to increased outreach services, development of services

for women with disabilities and experiences of homelessness, and addressing structural barriers to services for women who are actively using drugs and alcohol. As one woman stated:

*"[We] need a system in place to meet each woman's specific needs. They need to realize that we are individuals and we have individual needs. We shouldn't be treated like criminals or like we've done something bad and need to be punished. The humiliation is re-victimizing – we've already left abusive situations, and now get treated like this in the shelter."*

Aboriginal woman with experience of homelessness

As service providers, policy makers and community members, we must seek to honour this embodied knowledge and to apply it in practice to create change. Aboriginal women who have or are presently experiencing marginal housing or homelessness should hold central roles in creating change, including membership in policy making groups, agency/organization Boards of Directors, and representation among staff responsible for designing and evaluating programs and services.

## Transwomen: Marginalization and Social Support

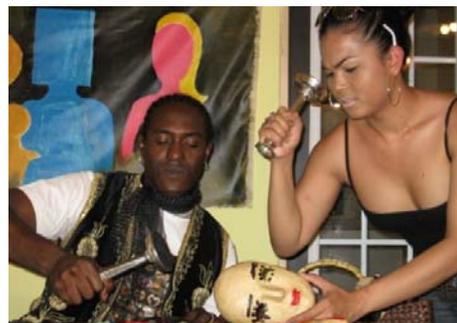
The transwomen who participated in the Coming Together Project also shared their own insights on their experiences relating to homelessness and marginal housing. *Trans* refers to people whose gender identity does not match with the one to which they were originally assigned. It is an umbrella term which often applies to people whose experiences are different from society's conventional gender expectations and roles. In the Coming Together project we use the term *transwomen*, to reflect how many participants self-identified. Although transwomen are estimated to be overrepresented among people that are homeless, little research has been done to explore their experiences, strengths and challenges (Strang & Forrester, 2004).

In the Coming Together Project we were able to learn about the experiences of transwomen who are homeless or experiencing marginal housing, how they are support each other and what recommendations they offer to guide change. Specific findings are described through the themes below and relate to marginalization, social support and making change.

### Marginalization

*"There are a lot of transwomen living on the street only because they can't access shelters and are rejected by housing workers for subsidized housing."*  
service provider working with transwomen

As the quote above suggests, transwomen who are homeless experience severe marginalization and discrimination on the basis of their gender identity and other categories such as race, class, substance use, sexual orientation, ability, and age. In interviews, transwomen often described experiences of transphobia (or discrimination on the basis of gender identity). Some examples of marginalization included being cut off from biological family members, being rejected for housing or a job, or experiencing violence and verbal abuse on the street or in shelters.



There were also stories of marginalization within the social service system and among providers of shelter, housing, and detox centres. One transwoman spoke of the stressful need to meet a high standard of femininity in order to receive the same services that non-trans (biological) women received. As one of our research participants expressed:

*"I think transwomen are held up to a much higher standard of femininity. I don't think biological women in shelters who yell, scream, throw things, etc...I don't think that anybody says they're acting like men [about these biological women]."*  
trans-identified service provider

Social Support

Despite experiences of marginalization, the transwomen we interviewed were not passive victims. They supported each other by making their own friend and family-like networks. Through social supports, transwomen not only provided one another with instrumental support (e.g., food, cigarettes, a shower), emotional support (e.g., listening ears), informational support (which worker to see, where to get a free meal), and appraisal support (advice and feedback) but also a basic sense of protection and safety (Berkman, Glass, Brissette & Seeman, 2000).

*"We are constantly being on guard, because as transwomen we are at more risk of violence so we are always looking out for each other as a form of protection."*

transwoman with experience of homelessness

Making Change

*"We still need to make shelters safer...When I come home I just want to be secure.*

*I just want a place that I'm safe, in peace."*

transwoman with experience of homelessness

Like the Aboriginal women we interviewed, transwomen also carried embodied knowledge that inform recommendations that would better support transwomen who are homeless or experiencing marginal housing. These suggestions ranged from direct service changes to broader systemic change. For instance, transwomen in the project spoke about a need not only for more trans-only programs, but also a need for transwomen to have greater access to programs and services specifically for women. For transwomen, being able to access women's services is essential for safety and survival. In addition, general awareness raising and stronger anti-oppression training among those who work with transwomen who are homeless was another identified area for improvement. The subsequent section delineates comprehensive recommendations for policy and practice that affect women/transwomen who are experiencing homelessness or marginal housing.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Several key recommendations derive from the research undertaken in the Coming Together Project. These policy recommendations address the need for: 1) Changes in Social Services and Counselling Services; 2) Aboriginal-Led Services; 3) Trans-Inclusive Services; and 4) Safe Space and Housing. Although many of the recommendations within these categories derive directly from the Coming Together Project research, some suggested actions have been further developed through a collaborative research project, *Homelessness – Diverse Voices, Common Issues, Shared Solutions: The Need for Inclusion and Accountability*, where the findings from eight community-based and arts-informed projects on homelessness in Toronto were synthesized to create a series of common recommendations (Sakamoto, Khandor, Chapra, Hendrickson, Maher, Roche, & Chin, 2008).

### Changes In Social Services And Counselling Services

*“I don’t think the staff were trained well enough in understanding homeless women.”*  
woman with experiences of homelessness

Existing social services need to be grounded in the strengths and networks of the women/transwomen they serve. Women/transwomen reported that service providers do not always understand or respect the importance of their friendships and informal networks and shared their stories of being abused, shamed and criminalized within social service settings by service providers who are uncompassionate and who abuse their power (including police violence). Many homeless or marginally housed women/transwomen felt that agencies are more accountable to funders than to the women they serve and that this priority of accountability needs to change. In addition, women/transwomen report that they would like to see more outreach so that they can receive more information about what resources and services are available to them (it is often difficult to keep up with frequent changes on available services as funding situations may change).



Related to changes in social services, women/transwomen who are homeless or marginally housed need more counselling services in order to support their survival and healing. The stories of homeless women/transwomen included violence and trauma. The forms of violence that women/transwomen are subjected to, and how they experience this violence, is determined by their social location and the many aspects of their identity, including (but not limited to) gender identity, race, Aboriginal status, age, sexual orientation, experiences of displacement, imprisonment, abandonment, and childhood trauma. Colonialism and subsequent experiences in residential schools and foster care, transphobia and involvement in sex work (under unsafe working conditions) stand out as issues that are connected to extreme violence. Substance use is often a coping tool for managing and escaping the pain of trauma. Consequently, counselling services for women/transwomen who are homeless or low-income need to be informal, flexible, based on a drop-in model and grounded in harm reduction approaches. Counsellors need to understand the impacts of trauma (including the trauma of poverty, oppression and homelessness) in women/transwomen's lives.

### **Recommendation 1:**

*Change social services and counselling services by ensuring that policies and programs affecting homeless people are responsible and accountable to the unique and common experiences of women/transwomen.*

#### Specific Solutions

- Directly involve women/transwomen in developing hospital and community-based agency programs and policies.
- Provide education and training: for policy-makers, politicians, government, stakeholders, funders, managers and board members in health and social service organizations to increase awareness and understanding of the various issues affecting women/transwomen who are homeless are experiencing marginal housing.

#### Who is Responsible

- The appropriate government departments at all levels, hospitals and community-based agencies providing health and social services.

### **Recommendation 2:**

*Ensure that health and social services are accountable, accessible and responsive to the unique and common needs of women/transwomen that are homeless.*

#### Specific Solutions

- Funders (including the City of Toronto) in partnership with health and social service providers should specifically support the development of a women/transwomen counselling initiative (perhaps nested within an existing operation or independently) that would have the mandate and resources to provide the social and informational support that women/transwomen who are homeless require.
- Develop and support counselling services that are informal, flexible, based on a drop-in model and grounded in harm reduction approaches
- Train and adequately support health care and social service providers in government, hospital and community-based services to: increase their awareness and understanding of the various issues affecting women/transwomen who are homeless or low-income; to be respectful, non-judgmental, responsive and sensitive to the people they serve; to operate from empowerment and anti-oppressions perspectives; and to provide trauma-informed service delivery.

#### Who is Responsible

- The appropriate government departments at all levels, funders, hospitals and community-based agencies providing health and social services.

## Aboriginal-Led Services

*"[We need] more funding for programs for people who have been impacted from the residential school era"*

Aboriginal service provider

Given that colonialism is an ongoing and violent reality for Aboriginal women/transwomen living on the streets, more initiatives are needed to break such racist cycles. All service providers should be educated about the impacts of colonialism (e.g., sexual, physical, and psychological abuse committed in residential schools) and properly trained to work and communicate with Aboriginal women/transwomen. Aboriginal women/transwomen should also be able to access services that are provided for and by Aboriginal women/transwomen including ones that are specific to residential school survivors.

### **Recommendation:**

*Aboriginal women who have or are presently experiencing marginal housing or homelessness should hold central roles in creating change, including membership in policy making groups, agency/organization Boards of Directors, and representation among staff responsible for designing and evaluating programs and services.*

### Specific Solutions

- The City of Toronto could develop a formal Advisory Committee of Aboriginal women who have, or are presently, experiencing marginal housing or homelessness. This Committee should be involved in program planning and policy-making around relevant issues and should provide support to health and social service organizations who are interested in more substantively involving Aboriginal women in the planning of supports and resources for Aboriginal women who are experiencing homelessness and marginal housing.

### Who is Responsible

- The City of Toronto, appropriate health and social service organizations.

## Trans-Inclusive Services

*"Transgendered women are very isolated from services and don't necessarily fit into the current programming offered, resources to serve this population are also very scarce"*  
service provider

For transwomen, being able to access women's services is essential for safety and survival. As a result of grassroots activism, shelters and drop-ins have become more accessible to transwomen in Toronto. However, there is a continued need to raise awareness in order to break down barriers and challenge stereotypes and violence. There is also a need for more trans-only services, created by and for transwomen, such as counseling, housing, shelters and harm reduction services.

## Recommendation:

*Transwomen who have, or are presently, experiencing marginal housing or homelessness should hold central roles in creating change, including membership in policy making groups, agency/organization Boards of Directors, and representation among staff responsible for designing and evaluating programs and services.*

### Specific Solutions

- The City of Toronto should support the development of a more formal Advisory Committee of people from the trans community, including transwomen, or a similar entity to monitor and assess the range of services available (or not) to transwomen and whether these services adequately meet the needs of transwomen.
- It is imperative that ALL shelters comply with Toronto Shelter Standards. Toronto Shelter Standards state that shelters must support transsexual/transgender (TG/TS) and intersexed people in accessing services in the gender that the individual identifies “will best preserve their own safety and dignity” (City of Toronto, 2002, p. 14).

### Who is Responsible

- City of Toronto, appropriate health and social service agencies.

## Safe Space And Housing

*“What do I want? To be able to live free, not be harmed, to be around love and respect and understanding and lots of happiness with some sense of security so that if I ever get stuck or anything like that I know I can talk to somebody or go somewhere I can hang out if I want to sit or sleep or whatever. That’s what we need. A safe place.”*

woman with experiences of homelessness

Women/transwomen need housing that is safe. Unsafe housing, where women experience violence and discrimination, is unsustainable and traumatizing. The experience of violence and abuse at home is one of the main reasons why women/transwomen end up in the shelter system or living on the streets in the first place. Bare-bones, subsidized housing, on the outskirts of the Greater Toronto Area that functions without transitional or supportive services is not only unsustainable, but also isolates and undermines women/transwomen’s networks. When trying to secure housing women/transwomen often face discrimination based on race, substance use, gender, gender identity or 'looking homeless'. Few believe the government will ever provide sufficient and/or appropriate social housing.

**Recommendation 1:**

*Increase the availability of affordable, adequate and supportive housing*

Specific Solutions

- Construct new affordable and supportive housing, provide rent supplements, and renovate existing sub-standard affordable and supportive housing to meet current housing needs.
- Provide adequate transitional supports for people who are moving from homelessness to long-term housing
- Ensure new and existing social and supportive housing is flexible and responsive to the strengths and needs of people with diverse experiences and identities, including Aboriginal women and transwomen. This includes: providing accessible housing for people with disabilities; supporting specific cultural needs; facilitating access to physical and mental health care; providing harm reduction housing to support those with alcohol and substance use issues; providing psychological and physical safety; and allowing people to continue to access their social supports and networks.
- Allocate a director's position on the board of Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) to be held by a woman/transwoman with lived experiences of homelessness or marginal housing.

Who is Responsible

- The City of Toronto and the Toronto Central Local Integrated Health Integration Network (for supportive housing), with adequate funding from the Government of Canada and Ontario.

**Recommendation 2:**

*Ensure that the Government of Ontario incorporates the unique needs of women/transwomen experiencing homelessness and marginal housing in policy-making and program planning.*

Specific Solutions

- The Government of Ontario is currently in the process of developing a Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy for the province to be released in 2010. Relevant stakeholders and advocates should ensure that provincial policy-makers are aware of the unique needs of women/transwomen in the development of such a strategy.

Who is Responsible

- Appropriate health, housing and social service advocates, the Government of Ontario.

## DISCUSSION OF IMPACT AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION

In the process of conducting the research, the women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness who shared their stories communicated that participating in the research project was a very positive experience for them.

*"Lots of laughter [in art-making sessions]... [This project was] not only research but medicine."*

*"Positive and healing thing...[because I] talked about the negative experiences. [I] feel less alone when others say they felt [the] same way."*

- Quotes from Advisory Board Members

The research process employed an empowerment perspective to help ensure that the research sessions were an open forum and space for women/transwomen to express themselves through stories and arts. Participants, in turn, took advantage of the opportunity to get their stories and vision heard. Exhibiting the art provided an opportunity for public recognition of their experience. The staged photography sessions provided a space to reflect upon their painful realities and dream about their own future in a playful manner, which was very powerful since many homeless women/transwomen do not have such space to do so in their daily lives. Finally, what was perhaps the most rewarding part of this research project for many participants was the knowledge that their voices would be heard at higher levels, which was also distinctly different from other art programs they might have attended in the past.



Based on the principles of community-based participatory action research, it is important that the knowledge generated by this research project is disseminated and mobilized to challenge structures of inequity and change the situation of those affected by the issues. Since its completion, the Coming Together Project has taken leadership and participated in a multitude of activities to these ends. The knowledge translation and community engagement activities of the Coming Together Project's team are outlined below.

### **Award:**

In 2007, The Coming Together Project received the **Community-Based Research Award of Merit Honorary Mention**, from the Centre of Urban Health Initiatives and Wellesley Institute.

The Coming Together Project also took the leadership in "Homelessness – Solutions from Lived Experiences through Arts-Informed Research." This initiative was a collaborative that sought to disseminate and mobilize the knowledge gained from eight arts-informed community-based participatory action research projects around homelessness in Toronto. Continuing to operate from the principles of community-based participatory action research,

the collaborative actively involved peer researchers (people with experiences of homelessness), staff from community agencies, artists and academics.

### **Public Events:**

- Mounted two public shows of staged photographs from the project
  - University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work Nov 14-29, 2007
  - City of Toronto Metro Hall, Rotunda Dec 20-23, 2007
- Extensively disseminated the final report and posters among community members, service providers, policy makers, funders and activists at the latter events and beyond.

### **Invited Community Presentations:**

- *Shooting back: Resistance, power and participation.* York University Faculty of Environmental Studies, Toronto, 2010.
- *Community Social Planning Council, Toronto (CSPC-T) Research Roundtable: Research for Policy Change: Poverty Reduction "Research and Public Policy – Challenging Poverty"*, Metro Hall, Toronto, 2009.
- *Environmental Health Justice Research Interest Group*, Centre for Urban Health Initiatives, University of Toronto, 2009.
- *Ontario Association for Social Workers (OASW) and OASW Student Representative*, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.
- Additional invited presentations at:
  - University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work (classroom presentations);
  - University of Toronto Interdisciplinary Doctoral/Post-Doctoral Program on Health Care; Technology and Place/Faculty of Nursing;
  - Ryerson University Internationally Educated Social Work Professionals Bridging Program;
  - Women's College Hospital Annual Social Work Week Presentation;
  - COSTI
  - Daily Bread Food Bank Arts Collective

### **For Policy Makers & Service Providers:**

- Distributing posters, releasing the community report and this research report
- Developed three Information Sheets for service providers to learn about the unique experiences of Aboriginal women and transwomen, respectively, who are homeless or marginally housed.
- Briefing international conference delegates
- *Community-Campus Partnership for Health* 10th Annual International Conference Site Visit (April 2007)

As part of the grounded theory orientation of this research, theorization from this research project has developed over time as we continued to reflect on and analyze the research outcomes. Through presentations in national and international conferences, papers written for journal publications and classroom presentations, we hope to provide improved theoretical understandings of women's and transwomen's intersecting marginality and resiliency. We also hope that sharing women's/transwomen's messages in the academy may

help students and academics to use this new knowledge in their professional work (as nurses, social workers, etc.) and in their research and teaching (e.g. talking about homeless women from an empowerment perspective).

**Presentations at Canadian and international academic conferences:**

- *Annual Program Meeting, Council of Social Work Education, Texas, USA, November 2009.*
- *American Psychological Association Annual Convention, Toronto, Canada, August 2009.*
- *Growing Home: Housing and Homelessness in Canada, Calgary, Canada, February 2009.*
- *Annual Program Meeting, Council of Social Work Education, Philadelphia, USA, November 2008.*
- *Social Work National Conference, Toronto, Canada, May 2008.*
- *Fourth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA, May 2008.*
- *Transnationalism, Arts and Activism Conference, University of Toronto, March 2007.*
- *American Psychological Association Annual Conference, San Francisco, USA, November 2007.*
- *Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work Annual Conference, York University, Toronto, Canada, May 2006.*

**Publications:**

Sakamoto, I., Chin, M., Chapra, A. & Ricciardi, J.A. (2009). 'Normative' Homeless Woman?: Marginalisation, Emotional Injury, and Social Support of Transwomen Experiencing Homelessness. *Gay & Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review*, 5(1), 2-19.

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**Research Reports:**

Sakamoto, I., Khandor, E., Chapra, A., Hendrickson, T., Maher, J., Roche, B., & Chin, M. (2008). [Homelessness --Diverse experiences, common issues, shared solutions: The need for inclusion and accountability](#). Toronto: Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social

Work, University of Toronto. ISBN: 978-0-9811128-0-0 (book). Also available at:  
[http://www.artsandhomeless.com/download/Homeless\\_Proposal\\_LR.pdf](http://www.artsandhomeless.com/download/Homeless_Proposal_LR.pdf)  
or <http://homelessuhb.ca/Topics/Arts-and-Homelessness-492.aspx>

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<http://www.comingtogether.ca/>

### **Other Writing:**

Sakamoto, I., Ricciardi, J., & Chapra, A. (2007). "Coming together": Arts-based community research project with women and transwomen who have experienced homelessness. Centre for Urban Health Initiatives Newsletter, Fall 2007, p.4. Available at:  
[http://www.utoronto.ca/cuhi/about/newsletters/NotableNewsFall\\_07\\_.pdf](http://www.utoronto.ca/cuhi/about/newsletters/NotableNewsFall_07_.pdf)

### **Media:**

*24 hours*. (2008, October 2). Exhibit tells the story of homelessness in pictures. *October 2, 2008*. p. 3 (with a picture (written by R. Solomon).

*Toronto Star*. (2008, October 1). A glimpse into life on city streets: Exhibit gives homeless a chance to tell their stories in a way organizers hope will get people thinking. Oct, 1, 2008. p. A10 (with a picture; Written by N. Javed).

*OMNI TV* (2007, February 3). Coming together: Homeless women, housing and social support. TV interview and showing of the art exhibit at the Faculty of Social Work. Mandarin Weekend Program (producer: Yawei Cui).

*News@UofT* (University of Toronto Department of Public Affairs). (2006, November). Social Work project combines art and research: Coming Together photos on display through Nov. 29. , *November 2006, vol.6, Issue 9*. Toronto, ON: . (Written by W. D. Lighthall.)

### **Websites Developed:**

- Coming Together: Homeless Women, Housing and Social Support. (PI: Izumi Sakamoto) [www.comingtogether.ca](http://www.comingtogether.ca) (October 2008)

### Other Websites featuring the images of Coming Together project

Learning and violence: Understanding violence. Image gallery.  
<http://www.learningandviolence.net/violence/imgallery.htm>

**Knowledge Translation from the collaborative project, "*Homelessness: Solutions through Lived Experiences from Arts-Informed Research*":**

- Obtained the funding from Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada, Wellesley Institute, and Centre for Urban Health Initiative at the University of Toronto (Principal Investigator: Izumi Sakamoto)
- Launched a Joint Arts Exhibit at the City of Toronto Metro Hall Oct 1-4, 2008 (*Homelessness: Solutions through Lived Experiences from Arts-Informed Research*)
- Released a Policy Report that has been distributed to community members, service providers, politicians, academics, students and activists
  - Sakamoto, I., Khandor, E., Chapra, A., Hendrickson, T., Maher, J., Roche, B. & Chin, M. (2008). Homelessness – Diverse Experiences, Common Issues, Shared Solutions: The Need for Inclusion and Accountability. Toronto: Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.
- Attracted print media Attention:
  - "A glimpse into life on city streets", Toronto Star, Oct. 1, 2008
  - "Exhibit tells the story of homelessness in pictures" 24 Hours, Oct 2, 2008
- Established a website at: [www.artsandhomeless.com](http://www.artsandhomeless.com) (October 2008)
  - o This site will be integrated into the Homeless Hub website by Summer 2010 and found at: <http://homelesshub.ca/Topics/Arts-and-Homelessness-492.aspx>)

**Coming Together  
Home Should be Safe and Fun**



"When (we) get together...it's just to have fun and enjoy each other's company... So the little bit of joy, the ray of sunshine, the pat on the back, the piece of bannock...that enriches (us ) a lot."



**"Bare-bones housing without support is unsustainable and isolating for women."**



"Coming Together: Homeless women, housing and social support" is an arts-based community research project exploring how women and transwomen who are marginally housed build support networks with each other in order to survive. This research project collected data and identified key themes that were then explored in the art making process with other women and transwomen at drop-in centres across the city. Through painting, drama and photography women and transwomen depicted their visions and stories of inclusion, friendship and safe spaces.

Supported by: Wellesley Institute, University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work, Regent Park Community Health Centre, Sisteering - A Woman's Place, The University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work, Royal Bank Fellowship, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Institutional Grant, The Adelaide Resource Centre for Women, The Native Women's Resource Centre & 519 Community Centre.

For more information, please contact the Principal Investigator, Professor Izumi Sakamoto, University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work or email us at [comingtogetherproject@gmail.com](mailto:comingtogetherproject@gmail.com) or [emailtogetherproject@gmail.com](mailto:emailtogetherproject@gmail.com)

Artist: Natalie Wood 2008

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDES

### Key Informant Interview Guide:

1. What is your understanding of street culture and street families (informal support networks, friendship networks), and how do women/transwomen fit into it?
2. How do women/transwomen look out for themselves and for each other?
3. What forms of support, outside of formal services, do women/transwomen use?
4. Do these informal networks intersect with formal services? If so, how?
5. What are the negative and positive aspects of these groups?
6. Do you see any patterns emerging in these groups in terms of race, class, education, age, sexual orientation, immigration, children or any other identity grouping?
7. What can be done to support existing networks and groups and at the micro, mezzo and policy levels?

### Interview Guide for Women/ Transwomen who have experienced homelessness:

How do you identify your gender?	
What is your age group?	
How do you describe your ethnic/racial background and/or Aboriginal status?	
For how long have you been homeless and/or marginally housed?	
Places Stayed (Multiple answers – from the most recent location)	

1. Where are you sleeping/staying at the moment?
2. How long have you been in this current situation?
3. Where do you spend your time/hang out?
- 4a. Who do you usually hang out with/spend your time with?
- 4b. Can you tell me a little bit about the most important people in your life?
5. In the places you hang out, are there people or groups of people that you don't like/stay away from?
6. What issues are important to you and to other women in similar situations?
7. Is there anyone you turn to for help with the issues that you just mentioned (above)?
8. How have you helped out any of your friends when they need it?
9. What can agencies do to help your situation?

## APPENDIX B: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RELEVANT LITERATURE (2006-2009)

### **Beyond the Coming Together Project: A Bibliography of Literature that Explores Women, Homelessness and Marginalization**

- Prepared by Monica Nunes for the Coming Together Project

In its inception, the Coming Together Project sought to supplement existing research around homelessness which did not take into account the particular experiences of women and transwomen. To explore what additional research has emerged on this topic since the start of the Coming Together Project, the Coming Together Project research team recently conducted a non-systematic review of relevant literature. Below is a compilation of recent articles and publications that address the experiences of women and transwomen who have been homeless or marginally housed. Articles were located by searching the following databases: Scholars Portal, Google Scholar, and Ovid. The search terms included were *women*, *transwomen*, *male-to-female*, *homelessness*, and *marginalization*. The selected articles were written within the last four years (from 2006 – 2009), and include mostly academic journal articles with a few that were taken from non-academic, popular periodicals given the scarcity of subject topics for transwomen in particular. In the attempt to break from the schools of thought that conceptualize women and transwomen with experiences of homelessness as victims, which can be disempowering, articles selected for this bibliography reflect “assets-based approaches” to understanding the lived experiences of women who are homeless. In this way, the included articles, while recognizing the barriers that those with experiences of homelessness face, spoke to the strengths and agency of women and transwomen.

The articles in this bibliography are organized in chronological order beginning with the most recent articles available. The articles are also divided into three categories. The first category describes the experiences of women with homelessness without speaking to the stories of a specific population of women. The second category of articles speaks specifically to the experiences of Aboriginal women. The third category of articles relays stories of transpeople and transwomen and their experiences with homelessness and marginalization. In all articles, a summary is provided as well as implications for practice and policy.

Overall, the reviews of these articles complement and underscore many of the findings of the Coming Together Project. Indeed, the selected articles in this bibliography reveal that women, including Aboriginal women and transwomen, have particular experiences of homelessness. While women with experiences of homelessness may have been the recipients of trauma and violence, they are also active agents in their own lives. Some types of agency that the women in the articles below demonstrate include: creating networks of support; developing strategies for living in public spaces; and sharing their knowledge on how to improve the services that they access. Many articles reinforce that women with experiences of homelessness should be meaningfully consulted in the development of programs and policies that affect their lives. Not only will such participation enable more appropriate services, such processes are necessary to reverse the systems of oppression that create and sustain the inequality that women and transwomen experience.

## Women and Homelessness

### **Working girls: Abuse or choice in street-level sex work? A study of homeless women in Nottingham.**

Harding, R. & Hamilton, P. (2009).  
*British Journal of Social Work, 39(6)*, 1118-1137.

#### Summary

Utilizing fifteen indices of abuse and a specific definition of 'coercion', this study investigates how women that are homeless conceptualize their decision to do sex work. As a qualitative research study, a questionnaire was developed to explore links between the choice a woman makes to do sex work and previous experiences of abuse and coercion. The questionnaire was completed by twenty-six homeless women, nine of whom identified as having done sex work. Outcomes of the research show that many women who are homeless who do sex work make such a choice as a result of familial abuse and due to coercion from abusive partners. At the same time, the authors make the claim that although experiences of abuse and coercion may influence decisions to do sex work, it is not accurate to label these women as 'victims'.

#### Implications for Practice

While the broader discussion of 'victimization' may provide insight into the experiences of women that do sex work, women should not be labelled as victims. Doing so, the authors of this study claim, negates individual agency, reinforces stereotypical perceptions of female sexuality and is disempowering. It is important to develop support strategies for women on their own terms such as through participatory methods.

### **Home spaces and rights to the city: Thinking social justice for chronically homeless women.**

Klodawsky, F. (2009).  
*Urban Geography, 30(6)*, 591-610.

#### Summary

In this article Klodawsky makes the case that the Housing First (HF) model is being taken up as superior to the Continuum of Care (CC) model as a response to chronic homelessness. (The HF model spoken of relates to an aggressive approach to housing where individuals are moved into non-segregated housing, where participating in psychiatric treatment is not a requirement, and any support services are provided by an outside agency – also known as *supported housing*). In contrast, the CC model bases itself in a continuum of residential facilities that offer varying levels of supervision and social support, where residents are often required to be in outpatient treatment, where individuals are expected to move up the continuum to independent housing – also known as *supportive housing*). The author argues that a wholesale shift to HF might serve to further exclude marginalized populations. She makes the case that HF may actually reflect a neoliberalization of public space, where the aims of HF actually find their basis removing homeless people from public spaces than with concerns over finding decent housing and securing the autonomy of homeless people. In this context, Klodawsky puts forth an alternative policy framework informed by the theories of Fraser (2003) and Purcell (2008). Informed by these theorists, Klodawsky puts forth that

policies relating to homeless women derive from a gendered and race sensitive analysis. This is critical as most current policies fail to recognize the experiences of women that are homeless with implications for the outcomes of said policies.

Implications for Practice

Ultimately, future policies must take a gender and race inclusive approach that acknowledges the marginalization women who are homeless may experience as result of current and historical oppressions (e.g., histories of childhood trauma, sexual abuse and colonial oppression especially in the case women who are Aboriginal and homeless).

**From the inside out: Efforts by homeless women to disrupt cycles of crime.**

Wesely, J. & Wright, J. (2009)  
*Women & Criminal Justice*, 19(3), 217-234.

Summary

This qualitative research study explores how homeless women disrupt patterns of violence in their lives. Through semi-structured interviews the research reinforces previous studies that demonstrate how histories of trauma and violence are over represented among women that are homeless. The article engages with the 'cycle of violence' theory which reflects that individuals often reconstitute experiences of violence in their current lives as a result of having histories of trauma and violence. This particular article engages differently with this theory from other research by exploring how women resist this cycle in their own lives. The research shows that homeless women, rather than being passive victims, resist this cycle through moments of recognition (e.g., an awareness of current violence) and action (e.g., engaging in counselling, leaving abusive relationships).

Implications for Practice

The implications of this research are two-fold. First, the 'cycle of violence' theory is an ineffective model for guiding long lasting change as it often ignores the agency of women experiencing violence. Second, the research shows that although women acted to resist violence their interventions were often temporary without external support. In this study, even small amounts of long-term assistance made a difference in the ability of women to intervene against cycles of violence (e.g.: support from shelter services that included counselling and parenting classes as some examples). The final broad implication of this study is that it is crucial to research issues of homelessness beyond individual discourses. In order to develop effective social policies, it is essential to consider the structures of inequality that contribute to violence against women and homelessness in the first place.

**"Trying to eat healthy": A Photovoice study about women's access to healthy food in New York City.**

Valera, P., Gallin, J., Schuk, D., & Davis, N. (2009).  
*Affilia*, 24(3), 300 - 314

**\*\*Note – Arts-informed Research**

Summary

This study involved the use of Photovoice as a participatory action approach to document the challenges that women living on low-incomes face in accessing healthy food in New York City. Based on focus-group interviews with nine low-income women, this research demonstrates three main findings:

1. Low-income women, especially those living in shelters, find it difficult to access healthy foods like fresh fruits and vegetables;
2. Participants were aware of the impacts of the external social environment on their food choices. For example, the women interviewed were highly conscious of the accessibility of cheap, fast food in their communities and the shortage of affordable, healthy food sources;
3. Despite experiencing barriers to accessing healthy food, the women interviewed acted as self-advocates. For instance, as a result of their participation in the project, those interviewed collectively wrote a letter to elected representatives identifying the study's results and recommending policy changes (e.g.: in addition to food stamps it was identified that cash to purchase healthy foods would be useful).

Implications for Practice

The primary implication of this research is that qualitative research assists in identifying the actual barriers that women face in accessing healthy food. Ultimately, speaking directly with women that are living on low incomes should enable better-informed and more appropriate social policies.

**Characteristics of home: Perspectives of women who are homeless.**

Walsh, C.A., Rutherford, G.E., & Kuzmak, N. (2009).  
*Qualitative Report, 14(2), 299-317.*

**\*\*Note – Arts-informed Research**Summary

This study employed participatory, community-based research methods to explore the understandings of 'home' among twenty women who are homeless. Using methodologies such as qualitative interviews, digital story telling, creative writing, photovoice, and design charrette, the research participants defined the characteristics they felt were essential to their conceptualizations of 'home', long-term housing and an ideal shelter facility.

Implications for Practice

The authors suggest that the characteristics that participants identified as reflecting 'home' should be applied in policy and service delivery contexts to assist women in exiting homelessness and accessing safe long-term housing. Some of the specific characteristics women saw as reflecting home included: feelings of privacy; access to a supportive community; clean and quiet environments; and accessibility to neighbourhood amenities.

**Dignity and Indignation: How people experiencing homelessness view services and providers.**

Hoffman, L. & Coffey, B. (2008).  
*The Social Science Journal*, 45(2), 207-222.

Summary

This article examines how people experiencing homelessness perceive their interactions or relationships with social service providers. From a large sample of over 500 qualitative interviews with people experiencing homelessness, the researchers found that participants frequently described their interactions with service providers as negative. In addition, due to experiences of infantilization or objectification, many research participants explained that they had made the choice to not engage with the social service system as a means of self-respect. The researchers make the claim that the provider-client relationship often perpetuates social inequities that people who are homeless experience.

Implications for Practice

Qualitative research is an important tool for informing socially just policies and programs. Qualitative research offers opportunities to learn about the diverse experiences of homelessness from those with such lived realities.

**Homeless women in public spaces: Strategies of resistance.**

Casey, R., Goudie, R. & Reeve, K. (2008)  
*Housing Studies*, 23(6), 899 - 916

Summary

This paper is based on research involving women that were homeless in England in 2006. Through survey questionnaires data was collected to investigate how women that are homeless use public spaces and buildings. The aim of this research was to subvert research which suggests that women who are homeless only access specific institutional spaces and are less likely to access public spaces. This paper argues that homeless women also use highly visible public spaces. The authors make the claim that this use of public space represents the active resistance and agency of women that are homeless. Some strategies that women use to access public spaces include creating invisibility of their homeless status so as to pass in public spaces, managing their time so as to conduct their activities during more socially acceptable timeframes, and adapting their behaviours so as to again not be directly identified as homeless (e.g., by maintaining their hobbies such as listening to music or reading in libraries). At the same time, the authors recognize that in many cases this resistance does not occur in isolation. Homeless women must negotiate with others (oftentimes gatekeepers) to use public space (e.g.: by making arrangements with security guards when best to occupy space).

Implications for Practice

One implication the authors highlight is how generic public service providers (e.g.: libraries) can better be linked to homeless services providers. For instance, libraries can be a space where homeless women can access important social and health information. The authors

also note that consultation with homeless women is essential to inform this type of policy and program making.

**'You've gotta learn how to play the game': Homeless women's use of gender performance as a tool for preventing victimization.**

Huey, L. & Berndt, E. (2008).  
*Sociological Review*, 56(2), 177-194.

Summary

This article explores how women use gendered spaces to avoid victimization when living on the street or engaging in street-involved activities. This study utilizes data drawn from interviews with homeless women and service providers in Edinburgh, San Francisco, Vancouver, Montreal and Ottawa, to explore the survival strategies women that are homeless employ to prevent criminal victimization. The authors present that, as a masculinist space, 'the streets' present a variety of dangers to women that are homeless. Through interviews the authors observe that four different gender performances are employed by women including: feminine identities; masculine identities; genderless identities; and sexually disinterested identities.

Implications for Practice

While these performances reflected the agency of women to resist unwanted attention and violence from others while being homeless, the outcomes of such actions were still problematic at times. Passing with these gendered performances often caused significant stress for women as they sought to maintain these identities. Moreover, as many women were just as fearful of experiencing violence within shelters as out in the streets, it is apparent that much work still needs to be done to preserve the safety of women who access shelters.

**Telling My Story: From Narrative to Exhibit in Illuminating the Lived Experience of Homelessness among Older African American Women**

Washington, O.G.M. & Moxley, D.P. (2008).  
*Journal of Health Psychology*, 13(2), 154-165.

**\*\*Note – Arts-informed Research**

Summary

In this study the authors discuss the use of methods from the arts and humanities into a social research and development project using participatory action research methodology. The goal of the research was to explore interventions helpful in assisting older homeless African American women get out and stay out of homelessness in the city of Detroit, Michigan, USA, by sharing their lived experiences through images, text and.

Implications for Practice

By involving participants in creating artistic portrayals of their homeless experience the authors feel this research helped humanize a social issue that is often "faceless". The use of arts/ humanities in participatory action research can facilitate the empowerment of

participants while communicating the research results in a way that is more accessible than traditional academic formats. Ultimately, creating alternative forms of knowledge are important to social action in research.

**Invisible Mothers: Parenting by Homeless Women Separated from Their Children**

Barrow, S.M. & Laborde, N.D. (2008)  
*Gender Issues, 25(3), 157 - 172*

Summary

This study explores the reality that there is little information on the circumstances of separations between homeless women. This study uses data from in-depth interviews to demonstrate the disconnections between the perspectives of mothers and the agendas through which institutional systems manage the family life of women experiencing homelessness.

Implications for Practice

The article shows that women's agency is evident in their efforts to maintain parenting roles. However, without supportive structures women experience challenges in exerting such agency. Service systems might mitigate barriers to mothering in several ways. As more immediate actions, shelter workers can avoid using visitation with children as a way to ensure compliance among women. At the broader level, shelters can collaborate with agencies serving families to better negotiate the roles of mothers. Upstream approaches such as including women on research around homelessness can also assist women in fulfilling their parenting goals.

**Alternative cartographies of homelessness: Rendering visible British women's experiencing of 'visible' homelessness.**

May, J., Cloke, P., & Johnsen, S. (2007)  
*Gender, Place and Culture, 14(2), 121-140.*

Summary

This article explores the languages and conceptualizations used to describe women that are homeless. It focuses on the growing number of 'visibly homeless' women in Britain. The study draws on in-depth interviews with 19 'visibly homeless' women to delineate between four 'alternative cartographies' of homelessness, each identifying different gendered homeless identities. The article suggests that while it is important to recognise that women experience challenges as a result of being 'visibly' homeless, the experience of visible homelessness differs for different women.

Implications for Practice

It is crucial to identify the diverse experiences of women who are homeless given that how we understand social phenomena impacts on how policies and programs are planned.

**Colliding narratives of homeless mothers: Exploring the relationship between stories lived and stories told.**

Hickerson, R.L. (2007)

*Dissertation Abstracts International, A: The Humanities and Social Sciences, 67(8), 2815.*

Summary

This abstract describes the author's dissertation research which explores the relationship between the public and private discourses surrounding homelessness and motherhood by exploring the connections and disconnections between the stories lived by homeless mothers and the stories told about them by participants in public meetings. The results of the author's research are that homeless women with children are made nearly invisible in the public discourses surrounding homelessness. Nonetheless, the women interviewed for this research as described in the abstract did not recognize or appropriate stereotypical representations of their experiences. Instead, the women interviewed claimed an alternate identity of 'the self-aware good mother'.

Implications for Practice

The research described in this dissertation abstract suggests that the voices of people experiencing marginalization are often absent in the construction of their own identities. This research also calls attention to the importance of creating spaces where individuals can share their lived experiences in their own words, rather than relying on the voices of others to speak to those experiences.

**Fear, romance and transience in the lives of homeless women.**

Radley, A., Hodgetts, D. & Cullen, A. (2006).

*Social & Cultural Geography, 7(3), 437-461.*

Summary

This article explores through qualitative data the reasons that three women respondents became and stayed homeless. The article shows that while women do perceive fear and danger by being homeless, they also construct positive experiences from their realities. For instance, women described feeling a sense of freedom by living on the streets. In addition, to survive on the streets the women interviewed developed various strategies such as spending time with groups of friends that were either housed or also homeless.

Implications for Practice

The women in this study were able to develop strategies to cope with some of the threats they identified in being homeless. However, in order for women to realize these strategies it was important for the women to have access to public spaces in the same ways that non-homeless people access public spaces.

## Aboriginal Women and Homelessness

### **Uprooted and displaced: A critical narrative study of homeless, aboriginal, and newcomer girls in Canada.**

Berman, H., Mulcahy, G. A., Forchuk, C., Edmunds, K. A., Haldenby, A., Lopez, R. (2009). *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 30(7), 418-430. (part of the Special Issue: Mental health of the girl child)

#### Summary

This article explores the experiences of uprooting and displacement among Canadian girls (under the age of 18) who are homeless, Aboriginal or newcomers and how these experiences shape mental health. This qualitative study reveals that many of these girls experience multiple forms of individual and systemic violence on a regular basis. Narrative themes in the research also show that these girls experienced disconnections in their relationships as a result of uprooting and displacement. Specifically, uprooting led the girls interviewed to live within dangerous spaces and to experience societal marginalization. At the same time, the research shows that the girls negotiated new meaning within these spaces by forming and re-forming new relationships that offered support, hope, and a renewed sense of belonging.

#### Implications for Practice

The findings indicate the usefulness of the construct of uprootedness in girls' lives. Recognizing experiences of uprootedness serves as a strong impetus for the design of gender-specific and culturally meaningful interventions. At the direct service level the findings of this research have important implications for mental health nurses who work with girls and young women. Most importantly, the research shows that girls need safe spaces where they can talk openly and honestly about their experiences. In speaking about these experiences there lies the opportunity for young women to acquire a new sense of belonging and overall well-being.

### **"A Story I Never Heard Before": Aboriginal young women, homelessness, and restoring connections.**

Ruttan, L., LaBoucane-Beson, P. & Munro, B. (2008). *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 6(3), 31 – 54. This article can be accessed online at: [http://www.pimatisiwin.com/online/?page\\_id=196](http://www.pimatisiwin.com/online/?page_id=196)

#### Summary

This study explores the assets of nine Aboriginal young women while homeless or transitioning out of homelessness in Edmonton, Alberta. Results from interviews with these young women reveal that histories of intergenerational trauma and ongoing systemic inequities contributed to their current homelessness. Nonetheless, interviews with these women also reveal that opportunities to reconnect with their culture allowed for the development of new positive narratives that were facilitating their transitions from homelessness.

Implications for Practice

The authors of this research assert that ceremony and cultural connections can facilitate transitions out of homelessness. It is important that programming and services that support young Aboriginal women who are homeless acknowledge and address systemic barriers that are marginalizing.

**Transwomen and Homelessness****A 'normative' homeless woman?: Marginalisation, emotional injury, and social support of transwomen experiencing homelessness.**

Sakamoto, I., Chin, M., Chapra, A., Ricciardi, J. (2009).  
*Gay & Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review*, 5(1), 2-19.

**\*\*Note:** This research is based on the Coming Together project.  
Arts-informed/arts-based research.

Summary

This study was part of a larger community-based, arts-based research project, Coming Together: Homeless Women, Housing and Social Support, which explored how transwomen and non-trans (biological) women who are homeless build support networks with each other in Toronto, Canada. Using grounded theory to analyse multiple data sources including semi-structured interviews, narratives from feedback sessions and other public events, and data from arts-based research, the research indicates that transwomen who are homeless experienced emotional and psychological injury in their everyday lives due to oppression resulting from transphobia, heteronormativity, poverty and the lack of stable and safe housing. Even in social service environments participants expressed feeling unwelcome as some service providers would create informal and discriminatory rules to control their behaviour. However, far from being passive victims, transwomen with experiences of homelessness supported each other by constructing their own family-like networks, which not only provided instrumental and emotional support (e.g., listening ears), but also a basic sense of protection and safety.

Implications for Practice

Recommendations for policy and practice rooted in empowerment and anti-oppressive principles are discussed within this study. Some suggestions relate for the need to create safe spaces for trans people within the shelter system. This can include the creation of formal policies and the hiring of staff that work within anti-oppressive frameworks and have knowledge of the barriers that trans people face in shelters.

**"I Don't Think This Is Theoretical; This Is Our Lives": How Erasure Impacts Health Care for Transgender People**

Bauer, G.R., Hammond, R., Travers, R., Kaay, M., Hohenadel, K.M., Boyce, M. (2009).  
*JANAC -Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care*, 20 (Suppl. SI; 5), 348-361.

Summary

This article asserts that access to primary, emergency and transition-related health care is often problematic for people who are transgender, transsexual, or transitioned (trans). Specifically, this article documents results from the initial phase of the Trans PULSE Project, a community-based research project in Ontario, Canada. Based on qualitative data from focus groups with 85 trans community members, the authors explain how processes of 'erasure', resulting from transphobia and cisnormativity (the assumption that all people's gender identities correlate with their gender assignment at birth), place the onus upon those accessing services to remedy deficiencies from systemic discrimination.

[Coming Together April 28r.doc](#)

Implications for Practice

[Coming Together April 28r.doc](#)

This article advances discussions on the barriers trans people face due to informational and institutional discriminatory practices. The introduction of the term cisnormativity provides a language to better discuss these issues. The authors suggest strategies to counteract cisnormativity in institutional settings (e.g.: shelters) such as by developing intake forms that allow patients to self identify their genders and indicating that spaces are trans friendly with signage.

<p><b>Transitioning our shelters: Making homeless shelters safe for transgender people</b></p>
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<p>Mottet, L., Ohle, J., Adelman, M., Segal, E. A., &amp; Kilty, K.M. (2006). <i>Journal of poverty</i>, 10(2), 77-100.</p>
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Summary

This article explores the experiences of trans people in homeless shelters in the United States. According to this article, the sex segregated nature of homeless shelters in the United States places transgender youth and adults at risk of being physically unsafe. In addition, the sex segregation of these shelters does not protect the privacy of residents and does not enable individuals to identify with their own gender identity.

Implications for Practice

This article aims to highlight how shelters can be made safe for trans people. The first suggestion the authors advance for making shelters safe for transgendered people includes the creation of a "Policy of a Respect". Such a policy in shelters would enable individuals to receive respect at a shelter regardless of self-identified genders and even if individuals exercise their gender identification inconsistently. The authors further advocate that a Policy of Respect should play out in terms of language (e.g.: speaking about an individual as "she" if that is how one identifies), confidentiality, and protection from harassment. The authors also recommend strategies for implementing such a policy by creating welcoming environments (e.g.: signs in the lobby), developing inclusive intake forms and establishing that trans people are welcome during intake conversations. Other suggested policies are also recommended in the article address sleeping arrangements, restrooms, and dress codes.

-----Three Articles from Popular Print Media to Follow-----

**Five Ways to be a Trans Ally**

Spade, D. (April 2008).  
*Out*, April 2008, 22-24.

This article can be accessed online at: <http://out.com/detail.asp?id=23547>

Summary

This article was taken from the "Letters" section of *Out*. It offers five policy recommendations for being an ally to trans people. It is copied in verbatim below.

- Work with trans people to push your city's homeless shelter system to place residents according to gender identity and safety rather than birth gender. Such policies have already been won in San Francisco, New York, Boston, and Washington, D.C., and are an attainable goal that can save lives. For information about how to get started, visit SRLP.org
- Establish gender-neutral bathrooms at the places where you work, go to school, shop, eat, or get essential services. Trans and gender-nonconforming people face harassment--sometimes even arrest--when using gendered bathrooms. Gender-neutral facilities are also beneficial for parents with kids who are a different gender, people with disabilities whose assistants are of a different gender, and even women who are tired of waiting in line while men's rooms sit empty.
- Fight for the inclusion of trans health coverage in the employee benefits package at your job, school, or in your state's Medicaid program. For resources visit [AFSC.org/lgbt/trans-health-care.htm](http://AFSC.org/lgbt/trans-health-care.htm).
- Support a prisoner. Trans people in U.S. prisons face violence and isolation, and something as simple as a pen pal can help enormously with making post-release plans, locating helpful resources, and coping with the stress of incarceration. See [BlackAndPink.org](http://BlackAndPink.org) to get connected with prisoners seeking support.
- Donate to trans organizations, which struggle to keep their doors open. Some to consider include TGI Justice Project ([TGIJP.org](http://TGIJP.org)), focusing on trans prisoners; the Sylvia Rivera Law Project ([SRLP.org](http://SRLP.org)), providing free legal help to trans people; the National Center for Transgender Equality ([NCTEquality.org](http://NCTEquality.org)), working on federal legislative issues; FIERCE! ([FierceNYC.org](http://FierceNYC.org)), organizing trans youths of color; and TransJustice ([ALP.org](http://ALP.org)), part of the Audre Lorde Project, dedicated to ending racism and transphobia.

Implications for Practice

While all five points offer relevant advice, the most salient strategy in the context of the issue of homelessness is point 1. Although, this information is taken from an American setting, the issue of transphobia is present in Canadian shelters. Shelters should place the safety of individuals before an association with gender assigned at birth.

**Gimme Shelter**

Anderson-Minshall, J. (2008).  
*Just Out*, 25(16), 16-17.

This article can be accessed online at: <http://www.justout.com/news.aspx?id=1>

Summary

This is an article that reports on the alleged gender discrimination of Bradley-Angle House to a bi-gender client Lee (Liza) Iacuzzi in Oregon. It states that substantial evidence has been determined by the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries (BOLI) which reveal that Bradley-Angle House failed to accommodate Iacuzzi. It notes that the shelter's policy that requires its residents to identify as female regardless of the resident's actual gender identity contributes emotional injury to transgender people. Toronto's Trans Communities Shelter Access Project comments on the story saying that this decision is completely not acceptable as Iacuzzi was not permitted in the women's shelter, yet would face risks at a men's shelter.

Implications for Practice

Shelters must be made safe for transgender people. This has implications for policy change in shelters and for the training shelter staff and administrators receive.

**'Victory' for Homeless Trans**

Straube, T. (2006).

*New York Blade*, 10(5), 1-5.

This article can be accessed online at:

[http://www.indypressny.org/nycma/voices/209/briefs/briefs\\_2/](http://www.indypressny.org/nycma/voices/209/briefs/briefs_2/)

Summary

The article deals with a new housing policy developed by the Department of Homeless Services in New York City in February 2006. The policy aims to end discrimination against transgender clients in homeless shelters. The city's shelter system is based on single-sex segregation. The new policy will begin in both a male and female unit of a general shelter, a substance abuse shelter and a shelter for those with mental health concerns.

Implications for Practice

This article speaks to the discrimination trans people face in shelters. In Toronto, it is important to re-evaluate the policies and programs that are in place to protect trans people within the shelter systems as research and anecdotal evidence reveal discrimination is still occurring.

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## Coming Together Surviving Addictions



"To be able to live free,  
not be harmed, to be  
around love and  
respect and  
understanding and  
lots of happiness..."



"That's what I need.  
A Safe Place."



"Coming Together: Homeless women, housing and social support" is an arts-based community research project exploring how women and transwomen who are marginally housed build support networks with each other in order to survive. This research project collected data and identified key themes that were then explored in the art making process with other women and transwomen at drop-in centres across the city. Through painting, drama and photography women and transwomen depicted their visions and stories of inclusion, friendship and safe spaces.

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For more information, please contact the Principal Investigator, Professor Izumi Sakamoto, University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work or email us at [comingtogetherproject@gmail.com](mailto:comingtogetherproject@gmail.com) <[comingtogetherproject@gmail.com](mailto:comingtogetherproject@gmail.com)>

Artist: Natalie Wood 2006



45 Charles St. E. Suite 101  
Toronto, ON, M4Y 1S2  
416-972-1010  
[contact@wellesleyinstitute.com](mailto:contact@wellesleyinstitute.com)  
[www.wellesleyinstitute.com](http://www.wellesleyinstitute.com)

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