

Women's experiences of homelessness and violence during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada's largest city

An integrated qualitative analysis of clients of violence against women organizations and encampment residents

Inequities exacerbated: abuse of power and control as pathways into women's homelessness

Men (often with greater social and economic power) leveraged control over women in their lives—often through abuse—creating unsafe conditions that led to homelessness or staying in the abusive situation.

“Okay, so yeah, so I was in a bad relationship. I decided to run away from the relationship. Got a condo [...] My ex decided that he wanted to get me kicked out of the condo, because he wanted me to be where he was, which was on the street and being a loser. [...] He went to the condo, beating on everything, on the floor, on every floor. And then he went and sexually, like, not sexually assaulted, but like, made vulgar comments to the lady at the front desk. [...] And yeah, so they put us both out. But he got arrested and I, yeah, had to leave, I guess.” (Encampment participant)

VAW and encampment participants often chose living options that best balanced safety and autonomy



Social control and physical barriers in emergency homeless shelters



Autonomy and safety in encampments

“We need to go to a women's shelter [...] because the emergency shelters are horrible, like, literally, like, I was feeling very depressed. [...] It wasn't clean or anything. [...] We was hearing other families. People could have brought alcohol, like, you would have heard people yelling, we felt very unsafe there. My kids would literally sleep right on my chest, both of them” (VAW survivor participant)

I feel I should make a formal complaint to the city about that guy's behaviour. [...] You make a complaint, you get evicted, you make a complaint, you get kicked out. [...] Every camper in every park is dealing with that all the time. We're the unwanted members of society. And at any given time, we can all be criminalized, you know, and kicked out of the park.” (Encampment participant)



Promoting human dignity: when women preferred women's shelters, it usually involved considerations around enhancing human dignity

“They were feeling like home, that that shelter was not like prison, you can go in the kitchen, the cooks are good, they behaved good with you.” (VAW survivor participant)

Gender stereotypes versus gender-transformative approaches



'Deserving' women: the belief that poverty and homelessness are personal failings, promoting individual solutions like working harder or staying abstinent.

“Well, they basically told me, yeah, you know, they didn't want me to stay there. Because this is for women who are trying to change their lives. And you know, trying to make it, structure, and to be out looking for a job, and, you know, to be out doing something with yourself. And that's not looking for drugs and then sleeping all the next day.” (Encampment participant)



Intersections with motherhood: for VAW participants living with children, experiences of shelter life centred around whether they felt they had the agency to care for their children.

“They talked to you like a human. We make jokes, we laugh. If they have anything funny to share, they'll talk to us. They didn't make you feel broken and that was the best part. Like I have one of the staff who was amazingly great with me and she used to work with disability kids. And like, if I'm having a hard time with the girls. I will cry to her and I'm like, I can't do this right now. Like, they're having a huge meltdown and she'll tell me, she teach me some ways how to deal [...] I have so much love for them, for them who helped me grow as a single mother of two disability children, cause that I felt like at the beginning and never could've did it by myself.” (VAW survivor participant)



Shelter experiences varied depending on the environment and available support, positive experiences were often linked to gender-specific programs.

“I think seriously looking and being so intentional in training people for those roles within the VAW and against gender-based violence is so critically important because [sigh] you know, you just, you have so many women, unfortunately, and female-identified individuals that are going through so much pain and they just need some, like something or some kind of compassion or empathy and to know there's a different way.” (VAW survivor participant)

RECOMMENDATIONS



Define homelessness inclusively to reflect women's hidden homelessness.



Provide parenting and child support for women.



Invest in gender-specific, trauma-informed VAW and homeless services that use harm reduction approaches



Fund emergency preparedness in VAW and homeless sectors.



Ensure safe, accessible environments in service design.



Expand safe, affordable housing with wraparound VAW supports.

