

## **examining the increasing rates of homelessness amongst inuit women within montreal.**

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*Author's note: This paper addresses the issue of the varying degrees of homelessness amongst Inuit women who have migrated from Nunavut to Montreal. It focuses on addressing the structural factors that contribute to experiences of homelessness, as well as the lack of adequate, appropriate and accessible social resources within Montreal available to Inuit women. This research is contextualized in the decades long Nunavut housing crisis, and examined in relation to the incidence and prevalence of homelessness amongst Inuit women within Montreal today. This issue is also examined through the ways in which it is related to and perpetuated by the prevalence of racism, discrimination, stigmatization, criminalization and the deserving/undeserving dichotomy. While volunteering at Chez Doris, a daytime shelter for women located in Montreal, this issue was brought to my attention by the workers and members of the organization.*

*As a non-indigenous researcher, I aim to be an ally to Indigenous communities in both the academic and community context. I identify as coming from a model of solidarity work, and acknowledge my positionality in the academy as privileged. Although this research in no way reflects directly the lived experiences of Inuit women, the framework and analysis that has been developed is influenced by conversations that took place between myself and individuals from Chez Doris.*

The rates of homelessness amongst Inuit women in Nunavut and Montreal are rapidly increasing, and the relationship between Inuit women's homelessness in the rural north and the urban south of Canada are inextricably linked. Women and youth continue to comprise the majority of homeless Inuit peoples today both in Nunavut and in southern urban centers. Homelessness among Inuit women in the rural north and urban south is rooted in structural factors such as a severe shortage of affordable, safe, and sustainable public housing due to inadequate federal, provincial, and territorial housing policies; a lack of adequate, culturally appropriate social and community services such as shelter organizations; and flawed social assistance programs based on exclusionary, discriminatory policies. It is through accessible, affordable, and sustainable subsidized public housing on and off reservations in both Nunavut and Montreal, in conjunction with adequate social and community services and social assistance programs, which have the potential to provide long-term solutions to this systemic problem.

With regards to housing policy, the Canadian federal government states that a "fundamental entitlement of all Canadians is the provision of adequate shelter" (Qullit Nunavut Status of Women Council). Yet First Nations, Inuit, Métis and Aboriginal populations of Canada are not given this entitlement, and Nunavut is a prime example of what happens when the federal government is ignorant of its own previously stated obligations.

In Canada today, women are the fastest growing homeless and at-risk population and there are more women represented in the Native homeless population than in the non-Native homeless population. For example, in the Greater Vancouver Regional District 35% of the Native homeless population is female versus 27% amongst the non-Native homeless population (Native Women's Association of Canada.). The federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments must take responsibility and respond adequately to this reality. Through partnerships between governments and existing social and community services and social assistance programs, both the immediacy of homelessness and the underlying root causes must be addressed.

The population of Inuit people in Canada has drastically increased since the 1980s, and there has also been an increase in Inuit migration from the rural north to southern cities. Today over half of the Inuit population in Nunavut live in overcrowded conditions and 38.7% are considered to be in core need because they do not live in and cannot access proper housing (Qullit Nunavut Status of Women Council). The annual fiscal budget of Nunavut is less than half the amount required to bring overcrowding

down to levels comparable to the rest of Canada, and it would take at least three thousand public housing units to obtain such levels (The Government of Nunavut). The lack of affordable subsidized rental units in the public sector and on reserves in Nunavut is a major factor which contributes to the prevalence and incidence of homelessness throughout the territory.

The housing crisis is a major factor in many women's choice to migrate south from Nunavut. The wait lists to receive public housing in Nunavut can be as long as ten years, with tenants paying up to 25% of their income on rent alone (Qullitit Nunavut Status of Women Council). The severely long wait list also means that women in abusive relationships can potentially be stuck in their situation unless they choose to be homeless. Despite the existence of some shelter organizations throughout Nunavut, there is no transitional housing and many women end up cycling from abusive situations into public housing and then into shelters; but when their allotted time in the shelter expires they often go back to the same abusive situation or inadequate public housing unit. Nunavut needs to implement priority-housing policies which would ensure that women who are in violent and abusive relationships could be prioritized, since they comprise the majority of those in immediate need of housing in the north. The housing crisis in the north can only be adequately addressed through the immediate intervention of federally funded social assistance and community programs with money specifically allocated to shelter organizations, second-stage or transitional housing and affordable subsidized public housing, developed in partnership with Inuit organizations and coalitions.

Other major reasons for migration include the severe shortage of jobs in Nunavut and domestic and sexual violence, which has been linked to over-crowded living conditions. Reasons for migration tend to stem from the idea that there are better resources in urbanized cities such as affordable housing, employment, education, and medical assistance. However, the lived realities of Inuit women who migrate from Nunavut to Montreal are often characterized by varied experiences of homelessness due to discrimination and a severe shortage of these resources in urban centers. Women who are at the highest risk of homelessness are those fleeing abusive relationships, and many Inuit women who migrate from the north have already been deeply affected by homelessness. Upon migrating to Montreal, many women cannot escape poverty and homelessness because they are not eligible for social assistance due to various regulations and requirements, and because of the stigma against alcohol or drug use and perceived mental illness. High unemployment, low levels of education, language and cultural barriers, issues of mobility, racism and discrimination, domestic, sexual, and substance abuse are all structural factors,

which perpetuate cycles of homelessness amongst Inuit women in urban centers.

Income Support is a social assistance program which aims to temporarily support women, but its framework is embedded with flaws and limitations. For Inuit women the concept of assistance based on a headcount of biological children doesn't mesh with the Inuit cultural norm of sharing resources, which means that women could have more people dependent on them than just their biological children. If women only have access to substandard and unsafe housing, they remain at risk of other consequences such as having their children taken away by social services. Furthermore, according to the Income Support policy, women must be assessed as having made "productive choices" within two months of receiving Income Support (Qullitit Nunavut Status of Women Council). Thus, Inuit women migrating from the north who have experienced severe homelessness rooted in systemic factors and who seek support in urban centers are not seen by Income Support policy to be 'deserving' unless they can prove they have made 'productive choices'. The ambiguity of what counts as a 'productive choice' creates an opportunity for service providers to make decisions about who receives social assistance based on discriminatory, judgmental, and uninformed opinions. Policies like this are embedded in and emerge out of dominant discourses that perpetuate cultural normativity and an assimilationist mentality tied to a colonialist legacy. The idea of a woman having to exemplify and prove that her choices are 'productive' is horrifically subjective, problematic, and offers an automatic window of opportunity for the government to stop giving social assistance to an individual at any given moment. The inclusion of Inuit women's organizations as active partners in the creation of public policy within social assistance programs is essential in ensuring that their voices are heard within the framework of the policy.

A common response to the lack of affordable, safe, and sustainable subsidized housing is to provide temporary shelter and support in the form of social and community services. Native women and youth already under-utilize the existing shelters and programs in both urban and rural environments, and there is a severe lack of Native shelters for women that address the specific needs of Native women in a culturally appropriate way and within a framework sensitive to the historical context of colonialism. Native women with mental health and/or substance use issues often find emergency shelter spaces difficult or impossible to find in rural and urban settings and are left with nowhere to go. There is also often a lack of services and programs that are accommodating and appropriate to Native women with children.

Discrimination in social services is a major contributing factor in the perpetuation of Native women's homelessness. Through research conducted through census reports

and case studies it is apparent that a “majority of homeless Inuit tend to avoid using several of the shelters and charitable organizations because they are discriminated against by non-Inuit workers and homeless persons” (Kishigami 2). This reflects an experience common among Native women from all over Canada. In Montreal, where a large population of women accessing shelters are Native and specifically Inuit, it is necessary to note that shelters’ views on issues such as family violence and homelessness in Native communities are often filtered through what is referred to as a “justice” lens. This implies that the shelters don’t necessarily work to incorporate a Native emphasis on healing in their mandates or in the services provided, even though the majority of the women accessing the shelter in Montreal are Native (and predominantly Inuit). In urban centers Native women frequently encounter resources such as shelters and social assistance programs that fail to acknowledge the importance of specialized services that are informed by Inuit culture, values, and ideology.

The Native Friendship Center in Montreal is a shelter specifically for Inuit, First Nations and Métis women, whose mandate is informed by Native beliefs, traditions, culture, and history. Social workers at the shelter help homeless Native people prepare the documents necessary to access Quebec welfare, which consists on average of about \$550 per month. This amount of money is nearly impossible to live on without compromising basic needs such as food and clothing, and this is why available subsidized housing provides a more sustainable solution to supporting those who are on social assistance.

In the north, people living in shelters cannot receive social assistance. Most shelters only accept women on a long-term basis based on accounts of physical abuse and violence in their households. Shelters that do exist lack adequate training for their staff and confidentiality in their services, have a limited capacity of bodies that are allowed in the shelter, and have a flawed student-housing program. An even greater barrier to the shelter system in northern Canada is the ways in which shelters are funded. Often they are funded by INAC (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada), which receives lower rates of support than shelters funded through other sources. This puts greater limitations on the creation and implementation of specialized services geared towards meeting the needs of Inuit women and their children. It is extremely difficult to track homelessness in the north because many people don’t access services, largely because they feel that these services are judgmental (Qullit Nunavut Status of Women Council).

Culturally appropriate services are necessary in order to be able to address and

meet the needs of Inuit women in rural and urban centers. This relates directly to the importance of addressing the need for adequate support systems that emphasize Inuit values of family ties and sharing. In order to address the structural aspects of homelessness in a way that offers sustainable solutions, a social and community service would ideally provide resources that directly address poverty and the lack of affordable, sustainable and safe housing; sexual and racial violence; and education and employment opportunities. The federal and territorial governments should support these kinds of resources and allocate adequate funding to both urban and rural areas where homelessness is prevalent.

We must continue to generate more comprehensive research which addresses Inuit, First Nations, and Métis women's homelessness and the structural factors that contribute to and perpetuate it in order to further develop a clearer understanding of the determinants of women's homelessness in both northern Canada and southern urban centers. This research is critical to developing effective theories of change and to demonstrating the severity of the problem to the federal government, in hopes that they will act on it accordingly and adequately. Improvements must be made to existing social assistance programs, and care models should be implemented in social services for Native women that are informed by Native cultural traditions, history and ways of life and which provide opportunities for education programs and affordable daycare for their children. In order to consistently and effectively address homelessness, it is necessary to provide better funding to service agencies to allow them to keep appropriate records and to access and share statistical information. It is also crucial that the federal government continues to examine and actively address the issue of homelessness in northern Canada, specifically amongst Inuit people, and especially women and youth.

If the federal government recognizes homelessness as primarily structural, then it can also create more appropriate and effective policies to address issues such as affordable housing and adequate funding to community and social services. The relationship of homelessness and specifically of Inuit women's homelessness to public awareness is also something that needs to be addressed through public education. This is an immediate call for action and a demand for legislative changes to end discrimination against homeless Inuit women and to work towards improving the structural factors that cause homelessness. These issues include: the national shortage of affordable, safe, and sustainable public housing due to inadequate federal, provincial and territorial housing policies, the lack of adequate and appropriate social and community services such as shelter organizations, and the inadequate and exclusionary social assistance programs which are based on unaccommodating policies, in the hopes of eventually putting an end to homelessness.

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