



Native Women's
Association of Canada



L'Association des
femmes autochtones
du Canada

Violence Against Women Shelters and the Experiences of Indigenous Women

Policy Brief for the House of Commons
Standing Committee on the Status of Women

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Shelters and Transition Houses Serving Women and Children Affected by Violence Against Women and Intimate Partner Violence

The Impacts of Colonization

While colonization has marginalized Indigenous populations and communities, this marginalization has not necessarily been equal. Indigenous women have experienced many historical, gender-specific disadvantages. To be an Indigenous woman is to be marginalized by both culture and gender where high levels of violence committed against them embody this systemic devaluation. The experience of homelessness and housing insecurity for Indigenous women is specifically framed by the social realities of patriarchy and colonialism.

Colonialism has resulted in various forms of systemic violence yet discussions are often narrowly framed as male violence against women, rather than structural, systemic, or state violence, a process that serves to normalize family violence in Indigenous communities.¹ Holistic concepts of health, healing, and culture are fundamental to family violence prevention and intervention, especially when taking into account the connections between place, history, culture, and other socio-economic and political factors. Within Western models, violence is largely understood as an individual or family issue and is not connected to the wider social and historical context that structures violence within Indigenous communities.²

Violence Against Indigenous Women, Girls, and Gender-Diverse People

Racialized violence disproportionately affects Indigenous women and girls in Canada, with housing issues being a contributing factor to the lack of safety and security they may feel. The insufficiency of accessible shelters and affordable housing for Indigenous women leaving abusive situations, especially in rural, remote, and Northern communities means they cannot live in safety, free from violence with any sense of stability or permanency. For Indigenous women, housing, homelessness, and safety from violence are inseparable.

Many women do not have access to emergency shelters in their communities and must physically leave their homes in order to access safety and services. While this creates distance from the abuser, it also creates a disconnection from family, friends, land, and community, all of which are vital supports to women leaving situations of family violence. Emergency shelters, especially on-reserve, are chronically underfunded and the need for services far outweighs the available resources.³ Expanding access to shelters for women escaping violence and women's homeless shelters and creating an equitable standard of services across the country, including in rural, remote, and Northern communities, would mean no women would have to return to a violent situation because a shelter is

¹ Cindy Holmes & Sarah Hunt. (2017). *Indigenous communities and family violence: Changing the conversation*. Retrieved from the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health Website at 13.

² Policy Wise for Children and Families. (2016). *Housing and homelessness policy recommendations for Indigenous women affected by domestic violence: A scoping review*, at 1.

³ *Supra* note 2 at 33.

too far to access. In small communities where capacity or privacy concerns present barriers to shelter access, transportation to other nearby shelters or communities should be made available.⁴

Further, in defining violence as male violence against women we marginalize those outside the gender binary and those in non-heterosexual relationships. The language used in family violence resources is often exclusionary, meaning consideration for the needs of members of the LGBTQ and Two-Spirit community are often excluded from conversations on violence prevention, intervention, and response. These groups experience greater rates of violence and must be meaningfully involved in the creation of anti-violence resources to ensure these materials reflect their lived experiences of violence. The denial of this recognition places Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people at greater risk but denies them the programs and services that would support them in leaving situations of violence.⁵

Community-Based Responses to Violence Against Women

The forced assimilation and marginalization of Indigenous peoples by the government has led to the loss of control over their communities and a consequential dependency on the state. Government solutions to violence and housing issues requires a meaningful relationship between government and Indigenous peoples. However, given the ongoing interventions by the state in the lives of Indigenous peoples, asking Indigenous women to trust this same government to protect them from violence is asking too much. Indigenous people have come to understand that government systems do not exist to support them, but to maintain and reinforce colonial and patriarchal norms. This needs to change.

Violence against women is not an isolated issue and the creation of more shelters spaces is not the only solution. Significant investments in affordable housing, infrastructure, services, and supports, are necessary. Housing insecurity is a significant barrier for women leaving situations of family violence. Indigenous communities often lack safe, adequate, secure, and affordable housing, and Indigenous women often experience a disproportionate share of this housing burden.⁶ In this way, investments in safe, secure, affordable, and accessible permanent housing is also an investment in violence prevention. Communities must also have access to gender-based, culturally-appropriate, trauma-informed services that are responsive to the needs of Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse people leaving situations of violence. These services must be provided in a way that respects dignity and agency and does not try to impose paternalistic standards of recovery and healing. Supports and services should also be community-based so that traditional teachings and understandings of healing can reflect the specific knowledge and kinship relations of local communities.⁷

Much of the literature surrounding family violence and Indigenous women takes a Pan-Indigenous approach rather than a distinctions-based approach, reinforcing the need for community-based, culturally-appropriate shelter programs and services. The National Housing Strategy reinforces a distinctions-based housing strategy for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis partners grounded on principles of self-determination, reconciliation, respect, and cooperation.⁸ Applying these same principles to the creation and provision of shelter services, rather than a Pan-Indigenous approach allows communities to incorporate their specific cultural and spiritual practices.

⁴ Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada, *Aboriginal Women and Family Violence* (Ottawa: National Clearing House on Family Violence, 2008) at 5.

⁵ *Supra* note 1 at 19.

⁶ *Supra* note 2 at 8.

⁷ *Supra* note 1 at 7.

⁸ Government of Canada. (2017). *Canada's National Housing Strategy* at 5.

The denial of self-determination for Indigenous peoples is directly connected to the loss and disconnection from their lands, forced relocations to reserves or urban centres, and exploitation of natural resources. European influence disrupted the traditional roles of women as caretakers of the land, water, and environment. As a response to the role colonization has played in the devaluation of Indigenous women, initiatives designed to restore missing elements of Indigenous culture have been suggested as a response. In this way, the revitalization of Indigenous cultural practices through land-based teachings is a necessary step in shifting norms related to family violence.

Moving Beyond Shelters and Housing

In addition to resources to fund Indigenous-led shelters and anti-violence programs, federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments must invest in trauma-informed training for first responders, training related to privacy and confidentiality, and increased transportation for programs and services.⁹ Solutions to family violence must be informed by the knowledge of those with lived experience of housing insecurity, homelessness, and family violence.¹⁰ Understanding lived experience as policy expertise is essential to the implementation of strategies that meet the needs of women, as determined and defined by women themselves. Comprehensive restructuring, reform, and long-term engagement is also necessary within many government systems including healthcare, education, housing, policing, justice and child welfare.

Policies to address violence against women must also actively engage with the underlying issues of social and economic inequality that have created the conditions that place Indigenous women at greater risk of experiencing family violence. A holistic approach would extend beyond the provision of physical shelter space to consider ways in which the socio-economic position of Indigenous women can be improved. Colonization has created the conditions by which Indigenous women experience disproportionate rates of violence, but also the conditions which prevent them from accessing relevant supports and services. Poverty, economic insecurity, and financial dependence directly impact the ability of women to leave situations of family violence while continuing to provide for themselves and their children. From this perspective, anti-violence initiatives should also focus on remedying the social inequity disadvantaging Indigenous women, understanding limited self-determination as a contributing factor to the high rates of violence committed against them.

It is not an accident that Indigenous women experience disproportionate rates of housing insecurity, homelessness, and family violence. Indigenous women experience multiple intersecting forms of family, state, and structural violence. Many shelter services are failing Indigenous women by ignoring the ways in which colonization has normalized violence in Indigenous communities, but also the ways in which culture can support pathways to healing. When we support women escaping family violence in meeting their physical, emotional, mental, and cultural needs, we interrupt the cycles of violence in their communities. Investments in community-led, gender-based, culturally-appropriate, trauma-informed shelter services, transitional housing, and permanent housing for women leaving situations of violence empowers and protects Indigenous women, children, families, and communities.

⁹ *Supra* note 5 at 6.

¹⁰ Emily Lindsay Jackson, Julie Coleman, Gayle Strikes with A Gun, Doris Sweet Grass, "Threading, Stitching, and Storytelling: Using CBPR and Blackfoot Knowledge and Cultural Practices to Improve Domestic Violence Services for Indigenous Women" (2015) 4:1 *Journal of Indigenous Social Development* 7.