

# CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN LIVING IN RURAL COMMUNITIES



Submission to The Standing Committee on the Status of Women



**Mokami Status of Women Council**

# ABOUT US

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In 1979, a group of women began the Happy Valley-Goose Bay Status of Women Council. Soon afterward it adopted the name Mokami Status of Women Council (MSWC). Their initial focus was to start a transition house in the area (which they achieved with Libra House in 1986), but their work soon incorporated other women's issues such as rape crisis, day care, women and the constitution, and housing.

They also supported the Women's Health Education Project, which was being run by the Newfoundland Status of Women Council (later known as the St. John's Status of Women Council) and the Women's Institutes in the early 80s.

Today, Mokami Status of Women Council is an equality seeking feminist organization that links women by sharing ideas, resources, skills, experience and knowledge. Mokami Status of Women Council is dedicated to serving the needs of the women in its community.

MSWC is a frontline service organization that works to empower all women to help themselves, their families and their communities to build safer and healthier lifestyles. We work on the traditional and ancestral homelands of the Innu and Inuit (NunatuKavut and Nunatsiavut).

We speak out publicly on issues that affect women, such as:

- Violence against women;
- Sexual harassment;
- Poverty;
- Employment opportunities and pay equity;
- Equal marriage;
- Reproductive freedom; and
- The need to increase women's representation in politics

# GAPS IN SERVICES

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It is simply impossible to articulate fully the pervasiveness of the challenges that exist in our community and the urgency in which they need to be addressed. Women and other marginalized genders in rural and Northern communities such as Happy Valley-Goose Bay and even more remote communities along the Southern and Northern coasts of Labrador are suffering, hurting and dying.

The Mokami Status of Women Council has decided to highlight the following topics in this brief:

- Housing and Homelessness
- Gender-Based Violence
- Access to Justice
- Access to Health Care

## HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS

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There is substantial research and literature regarding homelessness in urban centres. This however does not mean that homelessness does not exist in our rural, remote and Northern communities. In fact, this is one of the most prevalent issues in our community and it is broadly accepted that we are experiencing a housing crisis.

Currently, there are two emergency shelters in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. One shelter is accessible to all genders, the other is specifically for women and children fleeing domestic violence. This may initially seem like a suitable amount of services for a community of just over 8000 people but absolute, relative and hidden homelessness is widespread. Indigenous people in particular are disproportionately represented

among the homeless and transient population in Happy Valley-Goose Bay. Shelters in our community are consistently full which has resulted in overflow into local hotels and individuals being forced to take to the trails in extremely hot weather during the summer months and frigid cold temperatures throughout the winter. Sadly, it is not uncommon for individuals to die on our trails due to unsafe weather conditions and lack of safe housing.

“While there are supportive and assisted living units available in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, they are insufficient to meet current needs as demand comes not only from the Town, but also from other communities as the Town acts as a regional center for services, users of which need accommodation” (Jewczyk, 2018, p.50). Our organization is proud to offer eight affordable supportive housing units to women in our community. However, this is not enough. We consistently have an extensive wait-list and struggle with transitioning residents out of our program because of the shortage of second-stage housing opportunities and affordable rental units. Our organization is not alone. Accessible units are also limited which further impacts seniors, women and other marginalized genders who live with disabilities. “Many of those who can't be accommodated are couch surfing or live with other family members, often resulting in overcrowding in those homes. [Others] set up tents in the Town's open spaces and on the outskirts of the Town.” (Jewczyk, 2018, p.51).

It is important to note that how women with children in care are particularly affected by this housing crisis (Tutty, L., et al.,2009). There is an expectation on child protective services that parents have a stable and safe place in order to work towards reunification and begin access visits. Homelessness is preventing families from being together and housing options are incredibly limited.

The housing-first model is an approach rooted in the values of harm-reduction. Instead of prioritizing housing-readiness, this approach believes that it is critical to address homelessness and safety before

other challenges such as mental health, addiction, employment, spiritual or social needs can be addressed. Many other stakeholders in our community advocate for and believe in this model, but we lack the funding and infrastructure in making it a reality.

## GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

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Gender-based violence is entrenched in our society and Labrador is no exception. The rates of domestic violence and sexual violence against women and other marginalized genders here in Labrador are staggering. Police reports from across Canada were analyzed and it was determined that Happy Valley-Goose Bay had the sixth highest rate of violence against women in the country (Smellie, 2018).

Undoubtedly, the numbers are higher than the data suggests since for a variety of reasons, women do not or cannot report gender-based violence. For instance, we know that in situations of intimate partner violence (a known gendered issue), attempting to leave an abusive relationship is the most dangerous time for women oftentimes resulting in more violent or lethal actions by the perpetrator. Women understandably choose to stay in the relationship and not report violence in an effort to not escalate an already unsafe situation. The housing crisis creates another barrier to leaving as the potential of homelessness is very real. This makes women even more vulnerable to gender-based violence. In short, sometimes it's either safer to stay or return to abusive relationships because women quite literally do not have another choice.

Despite incredibly high rates of violence against women, we have limited access to organizations whose mandate is specific to addressing gender based violence. Local organizations that do aim to address this

issue are incredibly understaffed and therefore do not have the capacity to address the high rate of occurrences or support our vast geographic area. Reports also indicate that members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community are equally at risk or at higher risk of intimate partner violence (Langenderfer-Magruder et al., 2016). Currently, there is no 2SLGBTQ+ specific organization in Labrador which again speaks to lack of funding and infrastructure.

There is also a lack of bystander training and gender-based violence education for helping professionals. As you can appreciate, appropriate training and education requires time, resources, staffing and consultation with the community to ensure culturally appropriate approaches. In the case of Labrador, this means development and facilitation of training also requires extensive travel which can be quite expensive. With limited funding, it is impossible to connect with all of our Labrador communities.

## ACCESS TO JUSTICE

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Indigenous groups have been demanding restorative justice approaches in our justice system but it simply is not happening. This is particularly concerning given that Indigenous people are overrepresented in our courts in Labrador. It is understood that much of the violence that occurs in our communities is rooted in intergenerational trauma and colonialism. When the way justice is enforced is not culturally appropriate and community focused, offenders are further traumatized. This undoubtedly leads to more gender-based violence.

Upon sentencing to a jail-term, women-identified offenders from Labrador are sent to Newfoundland & Labrador Correctional Center for Women located on the island portion of the province in Clarenville. Incarcerated women are forced to be physically away from their

supports and their communities. This also means intermittent sentences or weekend custody is not available for women in Labrador unless they are willing to fly themselves to Clarenville for each required weekend. This would be an enormous financial obligation that could only be considered for those most privileged in our community. Without this option, women have to leave their supports, mothers are obligated to leave their children and employees are forced to leave their jobs. This is systemic racism.

Additionally, access to justice and legal navigation services are extremely limited in our most isolated communities. This support is critical. The organizations doing this work need more support and more funding so that they can expand.

## ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

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Residents of communities along the coasts of Labrador must travel to Happy Valley-Goose Bay and oftentimes to the island portion of the province to receive specialized health-care. While some virtual health-care options exist, internet services are often not suitable to meet the demands of telehealth appointments, nor is virtual care necessarily culturally appropriate. It is also important to note that internet access is a privilege.

Travelling for medical services is very costly and time-consuming. While there is provincial funding to assist with travel expenses, it is only partial coverage and has limitations to annual use. As a result, individuals and families are incurring enormous costs in an effort to get appropriate medical care or they simply do not get the care they require. Health care may be free in Canada, but access to health care certainly is not.

Recruitment and retention initiatives for health care professionals can improve as well as access to education to train more local people in these professions. Health care providers in isolated communities are particularly under-resourced and consequently, overworked. This has a major impact in the community as patients struggle to build trusting relationships with health care providers due to the transient nature of their employment. It makes trauma-informed care challenging as individuals must re-tell their story and advocate for their needs over and over again.

We are also lacking essential specialized services such as Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANE) despite the incredibly high rate of sexual violence in our communities, Labrador does not have a SANE program anywhere in the region. This type of service ensures trauma-informed care in what is inevitably a very scary and vulnerable time for people.

## CONCLUSION

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It is important to note that rural Labrador is significantly different from other rural communities on the island of Newfoundland and across the country. We experience unique challenges as a result of our history, cultures, population and geography. This means that a rural approach is not necessarily transferable to all rural communities. An equity based approach is necessary rather than an equality based approach. It is critical that the government considers the distinctive challenges of individual communities and the diverse and often marginalized populations that live there. We hope that the points outlined in this brief demonstrates that it is critical to utilize a gender-based approach in order to effectively fully address the needs that exist. Trans women, cis women, non-binary folks, two-spirit individuals and intersex people in Labrador deserve change. We appreciate the opportunity to advocate for the needs of our community.



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