

**Written Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance (FINA)
for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2021 Budget
August 6, 2020**

Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network

The National Women's Homelessness Network (NWHN) is a collective of diverse women from across Canada who are working to eliminate homelessness and housing insecurity for women and girls through research, policy, advocacy, training, and collaboration. The NWHN is an Allied Network of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness.

Recommendation 1: The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to immediately procure safe housing for women, girls, children, and gender diverse people experiencing homelessness and/or fleeing violence, with a priority on Indigenous communities.

Recommendation 2: The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada accelerates the allocation of funds to the Violence Against Women (VAW), family shelters and homeless sectors in particular to provide expanded services and resources for women and their children.

Recommendation 3: The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to enact and continue moratoriums on evictions and establish rent freezes across Canada during the pandemic and for a reasonable time thereafter.

Recommendation 4: The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada ensures equitable access to financial relief for all women, girls, and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness or housing precarity, including for those who are sleeping rough and/or depend on the informal economy for their livelihood.

Recommendation 5: The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to increase social and disability assistance rates.

Recommendation 6: The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments ensure equitable and non-discriminatory access to COVID-19 testing and healthcare supports, particularly mental health outreach and supports, for women and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness, including through expanded outreach efforts (e.g., mobile testing units, low-barrier mental health services).

Recommendation 7: The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada form a diverse national advisory body, spanning the women's homelessness sector and the violence against women (VAW) sector, to guide and monitor policy responses to COVID-19, and to ensure that responses are gender-informed, intersectional, and shaped by lived expertise.

COVID-19 is a gendered crisis. While the virus itself does not discriminate, systemic inequities faced by women, and gender diverse peoples, particularly Black, Indigenous and women of colour, means that our experience of this pandemic is unique. Working with members across Canada, the Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network (WNHHN) is deeply aware of the intersecting marginalization caused by COVID-19 and experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity. The Federal Budget 2021 provides an impeccable opportunity to re-think housing possibilities for those experiencing the most oppressive housing realities. Without taking experiences of gendered marginalization due to homelessness and COVID-19 into account, responses to the pandemic cannot lead to a path of equitable recovery and resilience for all.

Women's homelessness in Canada was already a crisis prior to the arrival of COVID-19. Making up approximately half of the homeless population in Canada, our experience of homelessness is uniquely gendered. Women are more likely to experience poverty and work minimum wage jobs, meaning that many of us face layoffs with limited savings. [Statistics Canada data indicates that women have experienced steeper job losses than men during the pandemic, and that 1.5 million women lost jobs over March and April 2020 \(a 17% drop in employment from February 2020\).](#) Given that women experience greater levels of core housing needs, this data suggests that it will be women-led households that are most likely to lose their housing across Canada in the wake of COVID-19.

For many women and gender diverse peoples, the directive to "stay at home" means we are trapped with partners or others who are abusive to us and our children. For those on the streets, "stay at home" public health ordinances are merely privileges and not rights that they have access to. This is elaborated on in a recent collection entitled [Vulnerable: The Law, Policy and Ethics of COVID-19](#). The report notes that emergency responses to homelessness in the wake of the pandemic lacked a federal oversight and failed to provide long-term housing solutions and supports to those experiencing homelessness during the pandemic. Ensuring preparedness for future pandemics or emergencies must entail adoption of human rights housing obligations at all levels of government.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to immediately procure safe housing for women, girls, children, and gender diverse people experiencing homelessness and/or fleeing violence, with a priority on Indigenous communities.

In alignment with the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, the WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada to fund the provincial or municipal purchase of buildings or units that can then be re-purposed, over time, for long-term social housing. It is critical that after the pandemic ends, all people who received housing during this crisis are ensured permanent housing, rather than transitioned back onto the streets. Living in particularly exacerbated conditions, First Nations, Inuit and Metis women require additional support. The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada offer financial support to increase staffing and expand the availability of safe housing for Indigenous women, including for those living in rural, remote, Northern, and urban communities. We applaud the Government of Canada's investment of \$157 million into Reaching Home, as well as the \$50 million specifically targeted to women's shelters and sexual assault centres; with that, additional funds need to be dedicated to acquiring permanent accommodations, given the circumstances of the pandemic.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada accelerate the allocation of funds to the Violence Against Women (VAW) and homeless sectors.

Many shelters have had their revenues greatly impacted by COVID-19 where individual donors are no longer present to support services. The WNHHN urges the accelerated allocation of relief funds to shelters, many of whom have still not received funding during the pandemic. Within communities that do not have adequate homeless or domestic violence shelters, it is critical that these services operate at full capacity, so women and gender diverse peoples are provided access to 24/7 safe spaces. Specific allocations must be made towards VAW and homeless supports on reserves, as those communities continue to be under-served and Indigenous-led sectors remain underfunded.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to enact moratoriums on evictions and establish rent freezes across Canada during the pandemic and for a reasonable time thereafter.

Irrespective of jurisdictional disputes, the WNHHN urges the immediate adoption and continued enforcement of a moratorium on evictions and a rent freeze in all provinces and territories. Recent research from 'Community-University Policy Alliance' (CUPA) through McMaster University's School of Social Work notes that service providers fear lifting of eviction moratoriums will cause unprecedented loss of housing among women, girls and gender diverse people who were previously housed with supports. Continued enforcement of moratoriums through recovery phases is critical for those who continue to experience the dire financial and health impacts of the pandemic. Given that women experience greater core housing need, higher rates of poverty, and face uniquely gendered forms of harassment from landlords, it is critical that strong policy measures are enacted to ensure women, children, and gender diverse peoples do not lose their housing as a result of the pandemic.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada ensures equitable access to financial relief for all women, girls, and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness or housing precarity, including for those who are sleeping rough and/or depend on the informal economy for their livelihood.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada remove bureaucratic barriers to accessing emergency financial aid for women and gender diverse peoples who are homeless or precariously housed. Lack of ID, a CRA account, a home address, citizenship, or other factors must not bar or significantly delay access to emergency financial relief.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments to increase social and disability assistance rates, ensuring rates are raised above poverty levels.

COVID-19 has brought on increased costs of basic necessities, loss of grey economies, and loss of access to social supports and childcare. The WHNNH recommends an increase in social and disability assistance rates to lift women and their children out of poverty and account for the disproportionate economic hardships that many are facing as a result of the pandemic (e.g., loss of employment because of increased childcare responsibilities).

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada work with provincial and territorial governments ensure equitable and non-discriminatory access to COVID-19 testing and healthcare supports, particularly mental health outreach and supports, for women and gender diverse peoples experiencing homelessness, including through expanded outreach efforts (e.g., mobile testing units, low-barrier mental health services).

The WNHHN urges the Government of Canada to ensure that housing status is not a barrier to accessing COVID-19 testing and healthcare and mental health services for women, girls, and gender diverse peoples during the pandemic, and that this population is a priority group for testing. The Government of Canada should support community-driven solutions to providing healthcare, social services, harm reduction, and mental health supports to people experiencing homelessness during this crisis. These efforts must be responsive to the unique healthcare needs and priorities of women and gender diverse peoples.

The WNHHN recommends the Government of Canada form a diverse national advisory body, spanning the women's homelessness sector and the violence against women (VAW) sector, to guide and monitor policy responses to COVID-19, and to ensure that responses are gender- informed, intersectional, and shaped by lived expertise.

Without the formation of the National Housing Council, the WNHHN urges the Government of Canada to involve diverse women with lived expertise in policy decision-making and the monitoring of policy outcomes during the pandemic and post-pandemic. We recommend the formation of a diverse national advisory body to do so, ensuring that this expertise is drawn from across the women's homelessness sector and the VAW sector. Such an advisory body must seek to represent the diversity of those experiencing homelessness and gender- based violence. Indigenous women's organizations and lived experience experts must be substantively engaged.

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