



Nellie's Position on Homelessness

Principles

All women and children have the right to safe affordable permanent housing. The *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* affirms the basic and fundamental right to have housing that provides protection from the elements; allows access to safe water and sanitation; is accompanied by secure tenancy; protects personal safety; is within easy reach of employment; education and health care; and does not cost more than is required to fulfill other basic needs such as food. Canada has ratified this instrument and thus is obliged to adopt measures to guarantee that everyone has access to housing, but it has failed miserably to live up to its obligations.

It is unacceptable that Canada, a country of prosperity and economic growth, should tolerate steadily increasing numbers of homeless women, both with and without children. Canada's wealth is more than sufficient to ensure that all women and children have access to secure, safe, and accessible housing.

Canada has taken a passive approach to this societal crisis, and thus exacerbated it by ceasing to build and/or sustain affordable housing. Instead of taking action, Canada spends time and money researching homelessness. Unfortunately, this research does not increase the living standards of those who experience homelessness.

Homelessness is a national disaster. A response to homelessness requires a response from all levels of government. Federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments must address homelessness as the national emergency it is. A range of housing is required in order to be accessible to the senior aged and those with physical or mental health issues.

Women's homelessness is a result of social, political, economic and gender inequality. Women who are survivors of domestic violence are at an increased risk for homelessness. So long as gender inequality remains entrenched in society's values, domestic violence will continue, and with it, the homelessness of women and children.

Homelessness is primarily a result of a lack of housing that women can afford. Affordable rental units in urban areas have been sold, demolished and replaced with upscale single-family homes or condominiums. This process of "gentrification" has led to a loss of housing units previously available to the poor and a resulting increase in homelessness. Current social assistance rates & lack of rent control make affordable housing unattainable.

Homelessness has real and lasting health consequences for both women and children: the forced movement inherent in homelessness causes stress, depression, anxiety and respiratory problems. For senior aged women and women with disabilities these health concerns are exacerbated even further.

All women have a right to safe housing, and all children have a right to housing that ensures they are able to grow to their full potential.

Homeless women, with or without children, include those who sleep in shelters and on the street. The definition of homeless includes the "invisible homeless", women who are marginally or insecurely housed because of a tenancy that is under constant threat due to insufficient resources to pay rent.



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Shelters, though necessary for short-term or emergency purposes, are not adequate long-term housing. Responding to the crisis of homelessness demands the creation of safe, affordable, permanent housing, not the creation of more shelters.

Domestic violence and relationship breakdown often lead to homelessness for women as many lack the resources to become financially independent when they escape a violent home.

Our Position

Nellie's analysis and framework is shaped by a feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppression approach, which means we understand society as being fundamentally based on patriarchal social relations as well as by racism and multiple other forms of oppression on the basis of class, age, sexual orientation, disability, gender identification, color, place of origin, ethnic origin, citizenship, religion, political affiliation, record of offences, marital status, family status, life experiences and appearance. Our analysis also highlights the complexity of dominant power relations, including the ways these multiple forms of oppression work together to create differential impacts and diverse needs and issues for different groups of women.

Systemic racism, discrimination, and oppression based on race, class, sexual orientation, gender identification, age, and ability must be addressed as part of an integrated approach to addressing homelessness and poverty in the lives of women and children.

Provincial and federal governments have offloaded much of the responsibility associated with homelessness onto municipalities. However, cities do not have the capacity to implement comprehensive solutions. Offloading of provincial portfolios onto municipalities has not been accompanied by the corresponding financial resources and real estate needed for a long-term response to homelessness.

Canada must implement a National Housing Strategy. This strategy must include adequate, affordable and accessible housing that is not for profit; reflects the needs of communities; does not cost more than 30% of one's income; has access for disabled and those requiring physical accommodation; mix not for profit, market housing. While shelters should be included in the National Housing Strategy, they should be a focus only for emergency situations. Shelters/hostels are not appropriate, adequate housing for anything beyond emergency situations. Regardless, many women and children, particularly newcomers to Canada who have no status, are forced to reside in shelters for long periods of time. Shelters generally allow women to stay for limited periods of time, meaning that women without status are forced to move around to different shelters. This has a negative impact on children and youth as they must change school or daycare locations with each shelter move.

The number of homeless women and children is increasing, and has real and lasting health consequences. Homelessness in women leads to an increased number of low birth-weight babies and pre-term babies. Such babies are at increased risk of dying or having long-term neuro-developmental and respiratory disorders. Inadequate nutrition, lack of access to prenatal health care, and stressful life circumstances lead to compromised health of women's and children's health. This in no way means that homeless women are unable to parent effectively, and such an assumption is a moral one rooted in classism.



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Current income support programs such as Ontario Works are insufficient to meet the needs of women and children who have a right to safe, affordable housing. Women who are homeless or are marginally housed are forced to consider housing that is substandard, poorly maintained, over-crowded, vermin-infested accommodations. Further, rents even for substandard housing are inaccessible on current income support programs, and are thus insecure in that women and children are one unforeseen expense away from being unable to afford their rent and consequently from homelessness.

Housing is adequate when it is structurally sound and provides protection from cold, damp, heat, rain, wind, noise, pollution and other threats to health. Housing is affordable when it is available at a cost that does not compromise a woman's ability to access other requirements such as food, clothing, education, transportation or recreation.

There is insufficient housing available to women who are survivors of violence. Although a "priority system" is in place for survivors of violence, the eligibility criteria are too stringent and unrealistic for many women to qualify. Many women who are survivors of violence but do not qualify for priority housing know the possibility of accessing safe and affordable housing with an income support program such as Ontario Works is unlikely at best, and choose instead to return to their abuser. Further, women who do qualify for priority housing are often told that they are "jumping the queue" and are the reason that there is a ten year wait list within social housing. The stock of social housing must be drastically increased so no women and children, where they are survivors of violence or not, are forced to wait for safe housing.

Homeless women have unique needs, yet current services for homeless people are inappropriate or exclusive of such needs. Although many homeless women are survivors of violence (either domestic, sexual or familial), most homeless shelters are not equipped to respond to the resulting trauma. Most homeless shelters do not have adequate resources to fully address the needs of women who are survivors of violence.

A disproportionate number of homeless women have children in the care of a child protective agency. Homelessness limits choices, particularly relating to parenting and sexual and reproductive health. Homeless women have fewer choices about whether or not to get or remain pregnant, whether or not to parent their child, or the choice of securing a doctor or mid-wife for pre-natal care.

A response to homelessness must include reinstating and/or increasing social housing programs, increasing shelter allowances and social assistance rates to levels that reflect market rents, the provision of services for those with disabilities, and ensuring protection of tenants through comprehensive, enforceable legislation.

Strategies for Change

Board, staff and clients in service will be active in the strategies for change. The work will be based on our organization's mission and informed by the work we do with women and children in our programs and services.

We will work with other women's groups in coalition and partnership at the municipal, provincial and federal level to address the issues of women's homelessness.



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We will maintain membership in women's organizations and other organizations that support the elimination of poverty, violence, homelessness, and oppression.

We will maintain membership in children's justice organizations that support equality and the prevention of violence, poverty, homelessness, and oppression.

We will work across sectors in the areas of community education and advocacy to change the social and economic conditions that contribute to women and children's homelessness.

We will ensure that in all the anti-poverty work in which we are involved, we bring to the discussion a feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppression framework for action. In addition, we will remain actively involved in anti-racist, anti-oppression work.

We will actively lobby the municipal, provincial and federal governments to provide proper funding for programs that address women and children's homelessness.

The methods we will use to effect social change may include participation in coalitions, public education and media campaigns, and direct political action such as participation in protests and rallies, deputations, complaints and refusal to participate in oppressive government programs.

We will respond with programs and services that meet the needs of the diversity of women and children who have experienced homelessness. Programs and services that address the needs of women and strengthen their economic and social position will enable them to protect and support themselves and their children.

We will continue to identify the changing realities and oppression in all systems and laws through inclusive consultation with the women and children we serve, to identify the areas where they are failing women and children, and to advocate for changes that will serve the goal of ending poverty and homelessness in the lives of women and children.