

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF HOMELESSNESS FOR WOMEN IN TORONTO

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Introduction:

Homelessness is an issue that affects the lives of many all around the world, including also in the city of Toronto, where this study is located. Homeless people suffer and struggle to find shelter and safety but, some groups of people suffer more than others. One such group is homeless women. Most academic articles and research studies dedicated to the topic of homelessness in Toronto focus on homeless men; single males are overrepresented on the streets, as seen in a survey conducted by Street Needs Assessment, City of Toronto (2018). Homeless women are being referenced as the ‘hidden homeless’ because they aren’t represented as visibly on the streets as men; their shadow existence also means that women are barely represented in the media – only 19% of articles on homelessness are dedicated to this category of homeless (SNA, 2018). Due to this underrepresentation, women’s shelters are lacking in aid, funding, and space (Update on Feasibility of 24-Hour Drop-in Services for Women, 2014).

In addition, there are many cases in which women’s shelters across Toronto are too full, resulting in homeless women having no place to go. Ashley Brown, executive at a women’s shelter in Toronto, explained,

“...I think shelters work but, I think that issue is that people are becoming stagnated in shelters because there's no permanent or transitional housing spaces available. It's no secret that there's a housing crisis in the city and so, what ends up happening is that there's a little bottleneck with very few resources around housing available for people. And this is not just housing but, different kinds of housing for different kinds of needs; whether it's transitional housing, whether it's independent units, whether it's supported, permanent so on and so forth, right?

While there are currently many homeless shelters for women in Toronto, this wasn’t always the case. It isn’t easy to open safe spaces for women to go to, especially when the

government doesn't prioritize the health and safety of its homeless population. In 2014, Toronto Mayor John Tory confirmed that there is a major housing and homelessness crisis while also denying claims for more affordable housing units (Dimatteo, 2020). There were numerous delays in getting a 24-hour drop-in for women, with fears that it would not happen at all (Monserbraaten, 2015). Another separate homeless facility for women was also delayed because two councilors didn't return to the city council meeting to determine the funding for the drop-ins. (Spurr, 2014).

Having a unit in a safe neighborhood with reasonable prices is becoming an unreasonable find. Yet, in addition to an ongoing housing crisis, emerging trends in homelessness indicate that people are staying homeless for longer, a fact exacerbated by an increasingly punishing labor market. People aren't stereotypically homeless; they are living paycheck to paycheck, which is a system that could fall apart very easily, as mentioned by Leslie Saunders, who has worked with the homeless population for 30 years in different capacities.

Realizing this lack of gender-specific research, I aim to study the causes that led to homelessness of women as well as the issues that arise during their assimilation back into mainstream society. Another facet of this study is the subtle social constructs that govern how women are seen and reacted to in everyday life; this includes the perceived gender roles in society. To understand these social constructs and the effects they have on homeless women, we need to take a closer examination of intersectionality; "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups," (Merriam-Webster).

As I demonstrate below, all the articles, reports, and research articles showcased here in my study noted the presence of a problem. They show that there is something wrong with the societal system, which causes more discrimination and hardships for homeless women, but don't discuss why or how. It is interesting to note that the problem is present and visible to everyone. People can see homeless people on the streets and can safely assume it is due to the rising rent prices and not enough affordable housing. However, there is more to this issue than meets the eye, especially for homeless women. Untangling the roots of this complex situation is one way to understand the problem and subsequently think of solutions.

For homeless women especially, social stereotypes constantly rear their heads; it is harder for homeless women to find a tenant willing to lease to them because tenants are under the assumption that homeless women will be lazy, as stated by an employee at a permanent housing agency in Toronto under the conditions of anonymity, "[the assumption is that] women play the role of a victim and that they just want to be taken care of, they don't want to work. They need to be taken care of and that they need to be taught how to be a hardworking individual and learn to take care of themselves." Sometimes, homeless women also begin to take these stereotypes and cultural misconceptions upon themselves.

In this paper, I present my analysis in three sections, arranged around the themes of violence/abuse, pregnancy/children, and substance use. Throughout, I also pay specific attention to the role of stereotypes in culture and society because they add to the multiple, intersectional forms of discrimination the female homeless faces everyday. Taken together, I argue that there needs to be a shift in the mindset of support given to homeless women. As explained by Leslie

Saunders, homeless persons are being lumped into this category of “hardest to serve”, which isn’t the case. By introducing more open spaces that separate the women based on their needs within the shelter system, one can receive better support for their problems.

Methodology:

I compiled 30 news articles from various Toronto newspapers and magazines as the key component to the archive which consists of news articles, government reports. The keywords used to find these articles were: homeless women, pregnant homeless women, and detox beds for women. All articles are from the last 15 years; the range is large to give a better perspective on the progression and trends of homelessness over time. I also included government reports to understand the government perspective on the homelessness crisis. “The State of Homelessness in Canada” from the years 2013, 2014 and 2016 were examined as well as the “Street Needs Assessment” from the years 2007, 2009, 2013 and 2018.

For a more accurate portrayal of homelessness for women in Toronto, all materials that were gathered for the archive ranged 2005 to January 2020; before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. With the outbreak of COVID-19, many shelters changed their standards to adhere to social distancing which results in less of an intake of homeless to these shelters.

In addition, I conducted interviews with participants who were chosen from social institutions in Toronto that help women find permanent housing or provide shelters for the homeless population. I also sought and received approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board on August 13th, 2020. Four of my interlocutors agreed to be cited in this report with their real names. One interviewee wished to remain anonymous. The interviews discuss the trends and reasons for why women have a harder time assimilating back into

mainstream society. As a final result of the research, all transcribed interviews, news articles, government reports and research studies will be hosted on a website (www.informwomen.com) that will be made available to the public for anyone to use as future reference.

The Dangers of Abuse and Violence

Abuse and violence affect both men and women but, is more prevalent for women who are living on the streets. Women, ages 16 and up, with and without children are considered the majority of 'hidden homeless' because they will go to extreme lengths to avoid living on the streets with its increased risk of sexual violence (Street Needs Assessment, 2018). In a report detailing the police-reported sexual assaults in Canada from 2009-2014, 87% of reported sexual assault victims were women with 98% of the accused being male (Rotenburg, 2017). There are many different types of violence that are experienced by women, such as intimate partner violence, familial violence during childhood and adulthood, and structural violence (Milaney et al., 2017).

This threat of sexual violence became prominent to the public eye on September 22nd, 2013, when a homeless woman was assaulted twice on the same night by two separate men, one after the other (Spurr, 2013). This tragic event brought to light the need for a 24-hour, barrier free, drop-in center for homeless women in Toronto. This is a general problem faced by all women in Toronto but is more often experienced by homeless women. Although there are drop-in centers for women across Toronto, none were barrier-free and open 24 hours. This was problematic for homeless women if they could not secure a bed at a shelter, as they had no other place to go at night. As Sheryl Lindsay, writer for the Homeless Hub, states,

“[s]ervice providers who work with women experiencing homelessness hear stories every day from women who have been assaulted on the street. As well, many women will find refuge from the street by sharing space with men that either demand sex in exchange for shelter and/or behave violently toward the women,” (2014).

This cycle of exchanging sex for shelter pulls the women back into a negative loop of homelessness which limits their capabilities to get back on their feet, as Lindsay makes clear.

Once a woman finds an apartment another issue arises, co-called “unit takeovers.” A unit takeover is an occurrence in which a tenant’s unit gets taken over by other people. This could occur in many ways and forms. In an interview with an employee at a permanent housing agency in Toronto under the conditions of anonymity, they state,

“...a unit takeover is when a woman is living in her apartment and a person or group of people who find it beneficial to utilize her space, they manipulate her and find ways to get into her apartment and they refuse to leave and they take control over her space. So, they may do this using substances or money. They may also take advantage of her; she may get trapped in a sex trafficking situation as well. Women who are using substances are much more vulnerable to this because substances may be a way that these people lure the woman in and then they may hold her in debt to them. They may threaten her with violence and force her to do sex work using violent threats. And she may cover for them because she's afraid for her safety.”

While women aren’t represented as visibly on the streets as men, they are the majority of lone parents in families experiencing homelessness (Milaney et al., 2017). Violence against women shelters have become abundant in Toronto; most of these women being homeless as some of these women experience violence but, may have some places to stay. To avoid staying on the streets and risking sexual assault or moving to shelters, abused women tend to stay with friends or family and most times, still with the abuser.

David Reycraft from Dixon Hall, a multi service agency that provides housing services, states,

“[t]here's a lot of abuse for women who live on the streets or lived on the streets for any length of time here or anywhere in the world. They are subjected to a kind of sexual and physical violence that men are not. Trauma is experienced, typically amongst women.”

Homeless women are subjected to a kind of violence that is not as experienced by men. It affects their mental and physical state, making it hard to move on.

Due to being sexualized in society and in the media, women are unable to escape the stereotypes. Annabelle Bernard, Community Engagement Associate at Sistering, explains,

“[m]en are less likely to be sexually assaulted by an employer or be taken advantage of, or men are probably less likely to have a landlord ask them for sex instead of rent. Or try to cut deals like that compared to what women are exposed to. So, I think that men don't have to deal with them the same way.”

As mentioned with an employee at a permanent housing agency in Toronto who spoke under conditions of anonymity, “[i]f women have less economic opportunities than men, then they may become more financially dependent on men. And so that financial dependence may make some more susceptible to [violence].” Without financial independence, homeless women don't have much freedom to take control of their lives thus, cementing them in a cycle of abuse and violence.

A Cloud of Grief: Pregnancy and Children for Homeless Women in Toronto

Related to the abuse, sexual violence could potentially lead to pregnancy, one of the many consequences of violence. As mentioned previously, family shelters are usually frequented by single mothers experiencing homelessness with their kids. In addition, being pregnant while

homeless has a whole host of problems that are exacerbated when these women aren't able to access safe healthcare.

The healthcare system is one that should be without bias or stigma and yet, homeless women rarely disclose their homeless status. In fact,

“[b]etween 2012 and 2014, the participating organizations tracked births among their underhoused clients [inadequately housed clients], compared the data, and found there were roughly 300 babies born each year to homeless mothers in Toronto alone — women who may be living in detention facilities, shelters, refugee centres, couch surfing or temporarily staying with family or friends,” (Cruikshank, 2017).

Most homeless women decide not to disclose their homeless status for fear of having the healthcare workers be biased against them. As such, there is a disconnect of between the health care system and the homeless women. As some new outlets have reported, the possibility exists that pregnant women are stereotyped which leads, not only, to them getting biased health care but, also to them possibly having their children taken away. Laurie Monserbraaten, social justice reporter for the Toronto Star, explains that some nurses and doctors believe that “[m]ost homeless women with babies are just "crackheads" having sex to pay for drugs,” (2008). This stereotype is simply incorrect as Jessica, a homeless woman interviewed in the same article, makes clear. She states,

“[y]eah, there are people out there who are crackheads and just get pregnant for having sex for money but, there are parents out there that when they find out they are pregnant will do anything they can... to keep the baby. I was living on the streets. I quit everything. I quit the drugs I was doing. I quit the drinking. I quit everything but, smoking cigarettes. My son is 3 years old now. I have a two-bedroom apartment of my own. I have two jobs and I still take care of him. And I'm an only parent. The best thing that could have happened to me was finding out I was pregnant,” (Monserbraaten, 2008).

Homeless women are also too afraid to reach out and ask for help due to previous experiences or lack of an effort for a relationship.

Leslie Saunders, who has worked with the homeless population for about 30 years in different locations and capacities, said to me,

“I guess the other thing too is that women that are homeless often have a history of having had a family, having had children. There's an enormous amount of grief and loss that they carried during this experience of homelessness because there's always a child or children somewhere in the not so distant past that they are heavily grieving.”

Women grieving over the loss of their children, whether they were taken away from them or they died, have a hard time pulling themselves out of their depressive slump. This affects women more so than men because women are usually the lone parent with the kids. This could be due to the societal norms of women being caregivers or because they are the victims of the abuse and want to protect their kids. Leslie further explained that,

“I've not encountered that many single fathers out there. Most men don't have their children with them and, the only single fathers that I've ever really encountered are the ones that have passed that stage. They have a place to live; it's sometimes not very stable housing but, they got the children and they do very well, and I admire men that do that. I don't see very many [fathers], it's usually the women or that neither one of them has the children because the children have been taken away.”

As most homeless women have their children with them, the stereotypes and stigma are doubled. It makes it harder for them to get back on their feet, as stated by Ashley Brown, executive at a women's shelter,

“[w]e always have to bring in that [gendered] lens because it's not so cut and dry like childcare needs again, the precarious employment, does she have children? Women are often left in positions where they end up having to take care of their children. There are not enough daycare spots. Daycares are not fully across the board subsidized or free so, if you're a newcomer you might only be able to access

work that is under the table work where you're exposed to a lot more vulnerabilities.”

With daycare centers not being subsidized, homeless women are limited in the types of jobs they can have as they need to take care of their children. This also occurs because of the maternalistic stereotypes in society. Ashley Brown, executive at a women’s shelter in Toronto, explains,

“I think there's more stigma attached to those behaviors... because of the maternalistic narratives, productivity and women being maternal and taking care of one another and being good caregivers and productive members of society. I think when people observe them in ways that might challenges norms that there's almost like this double negative of how it hits them.”

This was also reiterated in an interview with Annabelle Bernard, Community Engagement Associate at Sistering. She states,

“[w]hat we found is that woman who’s lived experience with mental illness or substance use get treated very differently compared to men. I think with mental illness and substance use, there's a lot of stigma the women experience especially women of color in navigating systems like Children's Aid Society; which is a an organization that looks out for the welfare children but, social work kind of has a certain history tool that is really impacted by colonialism. And sometimes Children's Aid has taken people out of homes that were not doing as well, purely based on economics rather than in families where the children were really quite loved, were taking care of otherwise but, just didn't look the same.”

As with the healthcare system, there is a disconnect between the government services and the homeless women. Due to these assumptions, women often have their children taken away from them which could potentially lead these women in a further spiral.

The intersectionality affects homeless mothers as it causes the health care system to discriminate against them, resulting in the women losing their children. The grief that surrounds this loss of children prevents the women from getting the help that they need.

Substance Use of the Hidden Homeless in Toronto

While the themes discussed above – violence/abuse and pregnancy/children were discussed in the media and research articles and government reports that I collected, these written documents barely mentioned substance abuse – if at all. My interviewees however all mentioned this theme. Perhaps there are societal and cultural stereotypes of women that don't allow for substance use to take up space in their narrative for women in society. I argue here that an in-depth understanding of the homeless crisis for women, must focus on all of these three recurring themes.

Substance use is the use psychoactive substances, this includes alcohol and drugs (WHO, 2019). While this affects both men and women, homeless women have more difficulty getting the help they need to quit as Leslie Saunders explained,

“[t]here's also I believe fewer treatment programs for women but there seems to be a lot for men. Now you'd have to check on that to be sure but, I know that I have work to refer women to treatment and it's difficult to get into a treatment program for women. So, don't underestimate how significant it is that there are not that many detox beds for women. That's very important and something that we've been struggling with for years,”

With fewer detox beds, women have a harder time quitting their substance use. As mentioned multiple times during the interviews, there is only 1 detox bed center available solely to women in, Toronto and it is not very accessible as the wait time are hours long. With long wait times, women already start to feel the effects of withdrawal which forces them to leave and relapse.

Many representations of drug use focus on males. This benefits them as, due to societal norms and expectations, it allows them to get low risk jobs easily. This underrepresentation limits the normalization of women drug users and limits the opportunities for work and access to social

services. This was explained by Annabelle Bernard, Community Engagement Associate at Sistering, who states,

“My own personal opinion is that the way that someone would go to a job site to [work] if they were male is going to drop site to do construction, make \$200 and leave and not necessarily be hired by the construction site. There's no action like that for women who are low income and who use drugs; that option is available to men who use drugs and are low income, they're kind of low enough they can go to a construction site.”

Homeless single mothers also suffer greatly from not having detox centers for women as they are the sole caretakers of their kids. An employee at a permanent housing agency in Toronto under the conditions of anonymity, put it as follows,

“I think that addiction often accompanies homelessness. For the some of the same reasons, we don't see it as much. Also, women are more likely to be caregivers, so they're less likely to have the capacity to take the number of days on their own to go to detox or treatment.”

Conclusion:

The most interesting point that I learnt from the interviews was the concept of intersectionality; the complicated connections between different forms of discrimination (racism, sexism, and classism) and how they interact to affect the lives of marginalized individuals or groups. Some of the articles I collected focus on how homeless women have started to become lumped into one category: they all have mental health problems and that they are in this situation as a result of their own actions. This isn't the case and, as many of my interviewees have stated, the stigma needs to be resolved in ways that does justice to the specific constellation of forms of discrimination that women face. It is only through attention to the complexity of problems that women face that women can get the specialized help that they need. Most fascinatingly, I learned from my interlocutors that women sometimes take the gender stereotypes upon themselves;

ideas that women can't be independent, and they need a man to take care of them or protect them. This is problematic because it leads the homeless women to getting into partnerships that traumatize the women further and leads to women being held back from achieving their full potential. These social misconceptions are so prominent and pressed onto women in every facet of society that women have started to believe these stereotypes and start to limit themselves.

Homelessness is a complicated issue that affects the lives of billions worldwide each year, there are 1.6 billion people without adequate shelter (Hathaway, 2014). While this is such a prevalent issue, one cannot apply a generalized strategy to fix this problem; it needs to be specialized. Homeless women cannot get the help and support they need to get back on their feet without examining the intersectionality that affects them more acutely than men. This intersectionality brings with it a multitude of problems, stereotypes and stigma that limits homeless women and makes it harder for them to assimilate back into mainstream society. To aid those without adequate housing, the different intersections and layers need to be examined; the gender specific struggles need to be considered as social and cultural processes make it difficult to navigate life as a women, doubly so for homeless women. Taking apart these stereotypes, stigmas and norms will allow homeless women to get the help the need and the support to get back on their feet and ease their assimilation back into mainstream society.

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