

# More Than Bricks & Mortar

A Rights-Based  
Strategy to Prevent  
Girl Homelessness  
in Canada

by Asia Czapska,  
Annabel Webb  
and Nura Taefi

In cooperation with young  
women determined to  
make a difference

With the support of Status of Women Canada  
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May 2008

### ABOUT THE STUDY

This strategy incorporates the knowledge of women and girls with whom we have talked and whose writings we have read. It is based on the individual and collective experiences of girls and young women; it is a response to violations of their rights that they described; and it articulates what they told us they need in order to experience freedom, dignity and safety in their lives. Girls and women who have experienced poverty and homelessness led the direction, content and work of the project and this report is the culmination of that work.

The report concludes that prevention of and responses to girl homelessness *must* begin with the goal of achieving girls' basic human rights and, especially, freedom from male violence. Ultimately, we hope that other community groups will embrace rights-based strategies for ending girl homelessness, resulting in girls' human rights becoming a reality in Canada and around the world.

### ABOUT JUSTICE FOR GIRLS

Justice for Girls (JFG) advocates for the rights of teenage girls who are homeless and low-income. We promote justice, equality and freedom from violence in the lives of girls who are socially and economically marginalized. We speak out against male violence, poverty and racism. We stand beside girls and fight together to end oppression. We have been advocates for girls' rights for over eight years.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Asia Czapska began working at Justice for Girls when she was 17 years old as part of a Young Women's Internship Program for girls who were low income or had been homeless. Asia then worked as a court monitor for JFG and eventually became the coordinator of a multi-year project on young women and the criminal justice system. She monitored years of cases of male violence against girls and carried out media and public education around violence against girls who are homeless. She has worked as an advocate with individual young women who were experiencing violations of their human rights, as well as for systemic change that would bring girls' equality to reality. In 2004, Asia began to coordinate a federally funded three-year initiative, the Feminist Housing Strategy for Girls Living in Poverty, to develop solutions to girl homelessness. This report is the culmination of that initiative.

## ANNABEL WEBB

Annabel Webb is the co-founder of Justice for Girls and currently works as an advocate and coordinator of the organization. She has been a feminist activist for over a decade and has worked to prevent violence against women and girls in various contexts. She has 10 years of frontline experience in organizations for women and homeless youth in Vancouver. Annabel is formally educated in Psychology. While working with homeless youth, Annabel saw that teenage girls were marginalized within co-ed youth organizations because services did not address pervasive male violence or social inequalities. She also found that homeless girls were unable to access women's organizations because of girls' legal status as children and barriers relating to extreme poverty. Annabel and Carman Benoit (a young woman who was also a youth worker and who spent her teenage years on the street) started Justice for Girls to provide girl-specific individual advocacy and to push systemically for the equality and human rights of girls in poverty.

## NURA TAEFI

Nura Taefi came to Justice for Girls as a law student and human rights activist. Her dedication to pushing for the international human rights of girls in Canada and around the world has no boundaries. She is a fearless advocate for the rights of girls. She recently completed a conjoint degree in Arts and Law at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. She is currently completing a Master of Laws degree in Human Rights Law at the University College of London in the UK.

## CONTRIBUTORS

We would like to sincerely thank the following women for their vision, written contributions, encouragement, and fight for young women's right to adequate housing: Crystal Radke, Angela Sterritt, Christina Dorris, Saara Bhanji, Davi Pang, Kelly Woloshansky, Cherry Kingsley, Leilani Farha, Summer-Rain Bentham and Melissa Wagner.

*The Committee recommends that [Canada] give special attention to the difficulties faced by homeless girls who are more vulnerable to health risks and social and economic deprivation, and take all necessary measures to provide them with adequate housing and social and health services.*

—Recommendation of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to Canada at the Committee's 5<sup>th</sup> review of Canada's compliance with the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 2006.

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# Introduction

Justice for Girls (JFG) was founded on a vision of social justice and equality in the lives of teenage girls and the belief that young women who live and have lived in poverty must define the solutions to girl homelessness. Given resources and support, especially from feminist women's groups, young women in poverty can, and must, define what they need, and push for that change. Following from that premise, in 2004 Justice for Girls began a three-year project, the Housing Strategy, to identify pathways to, impacts of, and solutions to girl homelessness. Girls and women who have experienced poverty and homelessness led the direction, content and work of the project.



Throughout the Housing Strategy we interviewed 50 young women who were homeless or who had been homeless as teens. We interviewed activists who worked with homeless girls and visited several youth and women's housing organizations in Surrey, Vancouver and Toronto. A guiding group of women who had various knowledge and personal experiences of homelessness helped to guide this project. We reviewed literature on youth homelessness with a critical eye to issues that affect diverse groups of girls: Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> girls, young moms and racialized girls, for example.

This strategy incorporates the knowledge of women and girls with whom we have talked and whose writings we have read. It is based on the individual and collective experiences of girls and young women; it is a response to violations of their rights that they described; and it articulates what they told us they need in order to experience freedom, dignity and safety in their lives.

Girl homelessness must be understood within a context of social and economic inequality and cannot be stopped without a full-fledged fight for girls' equality. We can only achieve equality in the lives of girls when we commit ourselves to ending racism, poverty, male violence and other conditions of oppression that young women encounter every day.

People's basic human rights are entrenched in international law. This includes the right to an adequate standard of living and adequate housing.<sup>2</sup> Under Article 11 of the United Nations Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which Canada ratified in 1976, Canada recognizes:

*...the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself [sic] and his [sic] family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.*

Moreover, under Article 27 of the UN International Convention on the Rights of the Child, every child has the right to:

*...a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.*

Our housing strategy thus moves beyond the “bricks and mortar” approach to stopping homelessness and instead focuses on how to ensure an adequate standard of living—including the right to live in security, peace and dignity—as a concrete reality in the lives of girls. We begin with a reframing of girl homelessness that locates the problem within a feminist understanding of social and economic inequality in Canada. We explore how social and economic inequalities both create and exacerbate situations of homelessness and violence in young women's lives. We then move on to demonstrate how the government has sometimes created, and often contributed to problems of girl homelessness and violence against girls by failing to fulfill its legal obligations to girls under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and various international treaties.

Prevention and responses to girl homelessness must begin with the purpose of achieving girls' basic human rights and especially freedom from male violence.

We propose a strategy that prevents girls from becoming homeless and ensures that girls are housed in safety and dignity. We argue that prevention and responses to girl homelessness must begin with the purpose of achieving girls' basic human rights and especially freedom from male violence. Ultimately, we hope that other community groups—women's groups, youth organizations, anti-poverty advocates—will embrace rights-based strategies to ending girl homelessness and that girls' human rights will become a reality in Canada and around the world.

We recommend four key actions to prevent and respond to girl homelessness in Canada:

- Prevent and respond to domestic sexual abuse of girls;
- Implement a rights-based national housing strategy that focuses on girl homelessness and the eradication of poverty;
- Stop the continued colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada; and
- Create transitional and long-term housing that is *girl-only* and based on *feminist* principles and practices.

# Defining Girl Homelessness

## What is Girl Homelessness?

Girl homelessness is any situation in which a teenage girl is living on the street, in a park or other outdoor environment, or in housing that is unstable, unsafe or otherwise inadequate. The United Nations has articulated that the right to adequate housing is not simply a roof over one's head. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has defined the right to adequate housing more broadly:



*The right to housing should not be interpreted in a narrow or restrictive sense which equates it with...the shelter provided by merely having a roof over one's head.... Rather it should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity.<sup>3</sup>*

The right to live in security and dignity is especially important in light of the fact that teenage girls who are homeless and otherwise inadequately housed are subject to extreme violence and degrading conditions of living.

## Couch surfing

When girls are first on their own, many “couch surf” for days, weeks and months at a time. Girls we interviewed frequently started sleeping temporarily at friends’ houses when they first left home. Girls would eventually be compelled to leave these temporary living arrangements as the friends they were relying on were also living in poverty and were not able to support an added person and/or host parents became afraid of criminal sanction for housing them.<sup>4</sup>

Couch surfing does not always refer to staying on friends’ couches, as one young woman describes:

*If I didn't have a place to stay, or a dealers' house to stay at, I slept anywhere I could. I'd get drunk and sleep at a strangers' house...I didn't feel safe, but when you're drunk and high you don't care if you wake up or not.*

In 2004 the Wilder Research Centre found that “the number of homeless children and/or youth living ‘doubled up’ or in precarious housing situations was almost 2.7 times higher



than the number of children or youth in emergency shelters.” Certainly, the number of girls who are homeless and couch surfing is much higher than the number of girls who are staying in youth shelters.

### Absolute homelessness

Despite the perception that homeless teenage girls do not often “sleep rough,” homeless girls in fact often sleep outside in parks, stairwells of buildings, or on sidewalks when they do not have a place to stay. They also sleep in abandoned derelict buildings (“squats”). Many girls we spoke to had experienced “absolute homelessness.” One young woman talked about being sexually assaulted while sleeping in a park:

*I woke up one night and some guy was trying to feel me up in my sleeping bag.*

Another young woman described:

*When I first slept in a park I was 10 years old. I ran away.*

This young woman at age 20 is still sometimes forced to stay in parks. She described how her fear of attack prevents her from falling asleep when she is sleeping outside.

One young woman talked about how as a teenage girl she would burn free newspapers to stay warm on the street:

*I used to go to those free mail boxes, you know the ones with the free newspaper, and I'd take the newspaper out of there and lay it on the ground and then we'd burn some of it to keep warm or to sleep on it on the ground...in the park....*

Another young woman told us:

*If you have no place to go you just curl up and go to sleep and you wake up the next day.*

Several of the girls described sleeping in squats (abandoned derelict buildings). Girls described squats as extremely unsafe. One young woman who found herself living in a squat at the age of 15 or 16 described how bitterly cold it was inside during the winter, while another reported being in a squat fire where she almost lost her life, and another described living in a squat full of garbage and bloody needles.

Although one teenage girl described the conditions of the squat she had lived in as unsafe, she eventually became detached and desensitized from her surroundings:

*When you've been living with stuff for so long you're not scared, and don't think it's wrong that you're used to it.*

Young women experience extreme male violence in squats that are dominated by male peers. The following is a poignant statement about the extreme conditions of violence and environmental hazards that young women are subject to in squats:

*In most of them, there was exposed asbestos, strangers coming and going, incidents of rape and theft, police brutality, rats, dead pigeons, animal and human feces and urine, broken glass, rusty nails, holes in the floors and ceilings, mould, extreme coldness and a number of other physical hazards.*

*I can remember at least four times being badly beaten by men in “squats” and on the street. One time I was so badly beat that I could not move for three days, I have to have people pick me up and put me in a bath. A street worker finally noticed that both my eyes were red where the white was supposed to be and, fearful that I had a major head injury judging from the bruises on my head and face, took me to the hospital.<sup>5</sup>*

## Living with older men to have a place to stay

When governments fail to provide safe accessible housing for homeless girls, older exploitive men step in. Girls who are homeless “trade” sex with older men in exchange for a place to stay. The majority of the girls we spoke with had lived or were living with older males in order to survive. Activists who work with homeless girls explained that girls often end up living with older men because they don’t have enough money from adult income assistance<sup>6</sup> to live on their own. Many girls described situations in which they were 14 or 15 and met a “boyfriend” in his 20s–30s (and sometimes much older) and began living with him because they didn’t have a place to stay.

## Single room occupancy hotels

Young women who live in poverty, especially those with addictions, are forced to live in the most deplorable environments in the form of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) suites. These single rooms in rooming houses are often infested with bed bugs, cockroaches and rodents, inhabited by violent predatory men, and toxic with environmentally hazardous chemicals, building materials and pesticides. Many young women live in these hotels.

The majority of SROs are privately owned and therefore are not commonly regulated by the government. SROs usually fail to meet even the most basic standards of sanitation and building services. Neglect of desperately needed building repairs has resulted in deaths, as fire escapes and emergency exits are barred or blocked making them inaccessible for tenants.<sup>7</sup> People living in SROs lack protection from the elements, access to safe water and sanitation, and affordable, safe and secure housing at the whim of their landlords.<sup>8</sup> In some cases, it has even been reported that building managers require tenants to leave their rooms for a day or two in order to circumvent the law that states that residents acquire permanent tenancy after thirty days. These evictions put young women on to the street for a day or two of every month, a practice which makes them the “relative homeless.”

## Extent of the Problem

In May 2006, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights reviewed Canada’s housing and homelessness record and declared homelessness in Canada a “national emergency.”

Teenage girls constitute between 30–50% of the homeless youth in big cities across Canada<sup>9</sup> and make up between 6–12% of all homeless people in large Canadian cities.<sup>10</sup> Federal, provincial and territorial governments are failing to respond to teenage girl homelessness. Income assistance and child welfare agencies’ responses to violence against girls are dismal.

Most youth housing and shelters across Canada have not begun to deal with sexism and the issues that affect homeless girls. Indigenous girls are highly overrepresented among homeless girls. At the same time, lesbian and racialized girls are missing from homelessness research and their needs remain unmet within youth housing programs. Girls who flee male violence or homophobia in their family home, or the racism and alienation they experience in foster homes, do not get the housing they need or deserve. Despite all of this, reports on youth homelessness rarely discuss the specific experience of homeless girls. Most reports, youth shelters and government programs for homeless youth fail to respond to the needs of girls, and the needs of Aboriginal, racialized and lesbian girls in particular.

Homeless girls move between numerous unsafe living situations. The story of Zara is a common one: Zara's step-dad sexually abused her when she was a child. At school, she was teased by kids who called her "fat." She was holding in a lot of anger and pain from the sexual abuse and brought a knife to school thinking she could protect herself from the taunts. At age 13 her mom told her to leave home because she could not cope with the anger her daughter was feeling. The children's ministry moved Zara through group homes where she was teased, foster homes where she felt like a "paycheque," and "sterile" safe houses.<sup>11</sup> She slept in parks—where she was sexually assaulted—and couch surfed. At age 15 she met a 25-year-old boyfriend who "gave" her a place to stay and got her hooked on heroin. Now, at age 20, Zara is living in a rooming house in the Downtown Eastside, where her landlord recently tried to break into her room while she was changing.

When governments fail to provide safe accessible housing for homeless girls, older exploitive men step in. Girls who are homeless "trade" sex with older men in exchange for a place to stay.

The girls and young women we spoke with are continuously moving through unsafe living environments, negotiating their safety with predatory older men in exchange for a place to stay, and are constantly searching for a stable safe place to live.

The issue of teenage girl homelessness has only recently been explored.<sup>12</sup> *On Her Own*, the first Canadian report on young women and homelessness in Canada, concluded that very little was known and documented about girls' experiences of homelessness. Likewise, little had so far been discovered about prevention and what steps should be taken to provide teenage homeless girls with safe, accessible, affordable housing or what constitutes safe housing for girls.

Most of the girls interviewed by Justice for Girls became homeless (left or were made to leave their family home, foster home or group home) between the ages of 12 to 14. Almost all had become homeless between 11 and 19, with a majority becoming homeless before age 16. It has been noted by researchers that among younger youth (under 15) homeless girls outnumber homeless boys.<sup>13</sup>

Similarities in the experiences of the young women we interviewed include: experiences of sexual abuse, "couch surfing," living with an older boyfriend to have a place to stay, sleeping in a park, and distrusting the children's ministry. Many of the girls we interviewed made attempts to attend school even while homeless (including while couch surfing and sleeping in parks). Almost every girl we interviewed said that girl-only housing was important or very important. Girls named sexual harassment and sexual assault in co-ed housing as a primary reason for why girl-only housing matters.

# Inequalities That Lead to Girl Homelessness

Girl homelessness is the result of inequalities that girls face in their day-to-day lives. Social inequality, male violence, colonization, poverty and institutionalization weigh heavily on the backs of young women and push them onto the street rendering them homeless.



## Violence Against Girls

If there is one overreaching, extremely harmful similarity in the experiences of the girls we interviewed, it is domestic sexual abuse. The extent and impact of sexual abuse in the home on the lives of teenage girls cannot be ignored or underestimated. A majority of the young women with whom we spoke talked about experiencing sexual abuse in their homes and then experiencing further male violence while homeless or living in deplorable housing conditions.

When a young woman told us that being sexually abused by her dad was “the whole reason I ended up on the street,” her statement rang like an echo of the stories of numerous other girls with whom we spoke.

*JFG: What could have helped you at that time, when you were first kicked out or left?*

*Young Woman: Probably if my dad didn't molest me, and all that stuff, and if my mom's boyfriends weren't the way they were, it probably would have helped me stay at home.*

Male violence—sexual abuse, physical assault, psychological torment—pushes Canadian girls out of their family homes. As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, Miloon Kothari, recently pointed out:

*Studies from both Canada and the United States identify sexual abuse in the family home as one major contributing reason for homelessness among girls.<sup>14</sup>*

Sexual abuse is one of the only topics in youth homelessness studies that is “gendered.” According to recent Canadian statistics, most often the men that abuse girls are family or community members, and many homeless girls have experienced sexual abuse both at home, in their communities, and on the street:

- In a 2007 survey of 762 homeless youth aged 12 to 18 it was found that 57% of the girls had been sexually abused.<sup>15</sup>
- In a 2000 Vancouver study on youth homelessness it was found that 84% of Aboriginal homeless girls had experienced sexual abuse.<sup>16</sup>
- In 2002, girls represented 79% of the victims of family-related sexual assaults reported to a subset of police departments. Rates of sexual offences were highest among girls between the ages of 11 and 14, with the highest rate at age 13.<sup>17</sup>
- Young women under the age of 25 are at the highest risk of domestic male violence and to be murdered by a male spouse.<sup>18</sup>

While sexual abuse is a major cause of girls' homelessness, physical, psychological, and emotional abuse in girls' family homes and child welfare placements are also causes.

When girls attempt to escape male violence within the family home, Canadian state authorities—police, child welfare—tend to respond in a discriminatory manner both in breach of girls' right to equality pursuant to Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and in breach of Article 3 of the Covenant on the Rights of the Child. Government authorities often send girls back into their family homes where the abuser remains, sometimes remove girls from their family homes/communities to be placed in unsafe and/or inadequate government homes/youth shelters, but rarely remove the abusive adult male from the family home or pursue criminal prosecution against him.

Recently, the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, Miloon Kothari requested that nation states:

*...act with due diligence to prevent, investigate and punish acts of violence against women given the linkages between violence against women and women's adequate housing.*<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, we believe the governments must act to prevent, investigate and punish violence against girls, especially given the links between this violence and girl homelessness.

## Colonization

Historical and current colonization of Aboriginal peoples, lands and families has created a situation in which Aboriginal teenage girls are one of the most oppressed groups in Canadian society. Aboriginal girls face the deepest poverty, extreme male violence in the form of domestic sexual abuse, rape, racialized sexual harassment and racism, as well as institutionalization in prisons, mental health institutions and child welfare placements.

The impact of Canada's assaults on Indigenous girls is egregious and the statistics speak for themselves: Studies have found that 42% of homeless girls are Aboriginal. Up to 75% of victims of sex crimes in Aboriginal communities are female and under 18 years of age, 50% of those are under 14 and almost 25% of those are younger than 7 years of age.<sup>20</sup> Despite these facts, Canada does little to protect and support Indigenous girls and address the violence.<sup>21</sup>

Cultural genocide—exemplified by an epidemic of suicides, murders and disappearances

of Indigenous girls—criminalization, systemic racism, racialized male sexual violence, especially childhood sexual abuse, and sexist discrimination against Indigenous girls are poignant examples of how colonization continues to ravage the lives of Indigenous girls in modern-day Canadian society.

Studies have found that 42% of homeless girls are Aboriginal. Up to 75% of victims of sex crimes in Aboriginal communities are female and under 18 years of age, 50% of those are under 14 and almost 25% of those are younger than 7 years of age.

White men specifically target Aboriginal girls for violence. In court cases of sexual abuse and exploitation that we have witnessed in our years of work, in every case where multiple girls were exploited, most or all of the girls targeted for male violence were Aboriginal:

*Aboriginal girls are targeted by violent men because of their vulnerability, including the vulnerability created by the non-response of the police and courts to violence against them.*<sup>22</sup>

52% of all Aboriginal children are poor.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Aboriginal girls are highly overrepresented among homeless girls in Canada.<sup>24</sup> The overrepresentation of Aboriginal girls among homeless girls is a product of historical and current colonial oppression which includes ongoing racist practices by child welfare officials. The systematic removal of Aboriginal children from their families is part of an ongoing colonization of Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal girls are disproportionately removed from their homes by the government. About 30–40% of children in state care in Canada are Aboriginal.<sup>25</sup> Being taken into government care and living within an alien Eurocentric system and culture has a profound effect on Aboriginal girls. As numerous inquiries, articles and reports have confirmed:

*Aboriginal children have been taken from their families, communities and societies, first by the residential school system and later by the child welfare system. Both systems have left Aboriginal people and their societies severely damaged.*<sup>26</sup>

Once in government care, Aboriginal girls are often placed in non-Aboriginal foster homes and group homes where they experience racism, alienation and abuse. This is in direct breach of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, which states that when a child is deprived of her family environment in her best interests, her placement must regard the:

*...continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background.*<sup>27</sup>

Non-Aboriginal foster homes can be environments of profound alienation, abuse and racism. As a result, girls often leave these state homes only to become homeless.<sup>28</sup> A children's commission report found that in BC:

*...only 2.5% of Aboriginal children in care were placed in Aboriginal homes despite a statutory requirement to give Aboriginal homes preference.*<sup>29</sup>

Aboriginal girls we interviewed spoke strongly about how child welfare authorities separated them from their families, and about the profound racism and intense alienation they felt living in white institutional environments. One Aboriginal girl explained that her concept of family does not include government institutions like the children's ministry—"government is not family." She recognized the child welfare ministry as a colonial agent which, with its concept of a "paid-for-family" or "government as family," was completely alienating

and demeaning to her culture and understanding of what a family is. This girl ultimately refused to live in child welfare placements because of the intense alienation she felt within them. Other Aboriginal girls echoed her words, also recognizing child welfare as a force of colonization and wishing that the government had supported their families to stay together rather than removing them and putting them into abusive or neglectful institutional environments.

## Institutionalized Poverty of Girls and Their Mothers

In 1989 the Canadian House of Commons unanimously resolved to eliminate poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000. As of 2004 Canadian children were more economically disadvantaged than in 1989.<sup>30</sup>

- 17.7% of Canadian children lived in poverty as of 2004.<sup>31</sup>
- 20.9% of children in British Columbia live in poverty. BC has the highest child poverty rate in Canada.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, certain groups of children are disproportionately living in poverty:

- 27.7% of children with disabilities are living in poverty.
- 40% of Aboriginal children are living in poverty.
- 33.6% of visible minority children are living in poverty.
- 49% of recent immigrant children are living in poverty.<sup>33</sup>

The concept of child poverty adopted by the Canadian government is problematic in that it erases the fact that poor children live in poor families. For many teenage girls, poverty is a reflection of the denial of economic security to their families, which are very often led by single mothers, the poorest group in Canada.<sup>34</sup> Immigrant, refugee, Aboriginal and racialized single mothers, and thus their children, are at extreme disadvantage in Canadian society and are virtually guaranteed to live in poverty. Girls we interviewed talked frequently about growing up in poverty, and how difficult life was for their moms.

When mothers are poor they are less able to leave abusive partners (who may also be abusing their daughters). If mothers are not able to leave violent men because of economic need, their daughters are also at risk of abuse and may be forced to leave home only to become homeless.

Poverty in the lives of Aboriginal girls is the result of historical and current colonization. Throughout this project Aboriginal girls frequently talked to us about intergenerational family poverty. They spoke about their mothers, fathers, sisters, cousins, uncles and other family members living on the streets and in substandard or inhumane conditions.

The state further punishes Aboriginal families, often families of Aboriginal single moms, for living in poverty by taking their children into care, under the category of “neglect,” instead of providing an adequate standard of living to all families:

*The primary reason why Aboriginal children come to the attention of child welfare is neglect, with the key drivers being poverty, poor housing and substance misuse.<sup>35</sup>*

## Homophobia

Lesbian and bisexual girls are overrepresented among homeless girls.<sup>36</sup> Lesbian youth are at greater risk of homelessness, ostracism and other types of social marginalization. Once on the street, lesbian young women are less likely to use health care facilities and other youth programs, and are at extreme risk of violence, rape and homophobia.

In the Pridehouse Project's *No Place Like Home*—a recent study on the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) homeless youth—24% said they left home because of parental homophobia, while many others were kicked out of their homes by their parents. At the same time, the school system does not offer a refuge from homophobia they may experience at home. Instead, they face rejection, stigma and threats of violence in school and in the community.<sup>37</sup>

LGBT youth experience rejection, intimidation and harassment in school from teachers and students. This often causes them to leave school, which increases the risk of them ending up on the street.<sup>38</sup> Youth in the Pridehouse study describe school life as “rough,” “shitty,” and as being a homophobic environment. While at the same time one youth in the study commented that school “saved me from home.”

The needs of LGBT youth, and especially young lesbians, are largely forgotten in housing programs for youth, often because their existence is not acknowledged. In a recent consultation with youth with experience of BC safe houses, 41% self-identified as LGBT or questioning, while safe house staff estimated this percentage to be between 20–30%. This disparity points to the fact that housing programs do not fully recognize the needs of gay and lesbian youth. When we asked one service provider who worked with youth about the needs of lesbian girls, we were met with silence and comments that girls' sexual orientations have not been an issue. This brings up two possibilities, both of which are likely: firstly, that lesbian girls are not accessing safe houses and other youth housing as much as non-LGBT youth despite the fact that they are overrepresented among homeless youth; or that when lesbian girls do access youth housing their realities and needs are not necessarily met or understood.

Young homeless lesbians may be silent about their identities because of fear for their safety. One young woman in the Pridehouse study stated:

*It just means you have to keep [being a lesbian] more secret...you're in survival mode...so you're not gonna do anything that will get your ass kicked or...killed. It's not something you talk about.*

The Pridehouse report further pointed out that lesbian young women are least visible among street youth. Many girls don't identify to others that they are lesbians because “all youth, male and female on the street are dependent on the material goods of the male consumer so queer identity is not available to queer girls because it works against them.”<sup>39</sup> This invisibility makes it difficult for researchers to interview lesbian girls, thus lesbian girls' needs are overlooked in youth homelessness studies and services tend not to be created to meet the needs of lesbian homeless girls.

LGBT youth are one of the least likely groups to seek support from mainstream services



designed for heterosexuals.<sup>40</sup> LGBT youth experience discrimination in street youth housing programs. A recent BC government review of youth safe houses found that lesbian and gay youth had experienced homophobia and discrimination in the safe houses. Furthermore the review could not identify any resources that specialized in serving LGBT homeless youth.<sup>41</sup> Many mainstream services for youth—including immigrant services, community centres, food services and legal aid—were identified as overwhelmingly not LGBT-positive by youth in the Pridehouse study.<sup>42</sup>

## Racism

While there is very little research and writing about girl homelessness, even less is written about the struggles of racialized refugee and immigrant girls and Canadian-born racialized girls who are trying to survive on their own and who are impacted not only by sexism, poverty and male violence but also by the compounding effects of living with systemic and individual racism.

For racialized girls the experience of being “invisible” is a real one. Canadian institutions, including schools, children’s ministries and services for youth (such as youth shelters, counseling, etc) are built based on beliefs and norms of white Anglo-Canadian culture, and can be alienating, racist and inaccessible to racialized girls (both Canadian-born and refugee and immigrant girls). Mainstream services—youth shelters, foster homes, etc—are often staffed and accessed by white people and so many racialized girls are barred *both* because they do not see people who are like them in the service and because they know from experience that they will likely experience racism, racist stereotyping and a general lack of understanding of their lived experience, in services designed for non-racialized people. Racialized girls we interviewed were often unaware of what resources exist for girls who are on their own and how to access those resources. Some girls were not aware of the existence of children’s ministries, while others feared that ministry workers would not understand their experiences as racialized people and would react harshly to their families because of racist assumptions and stereotypes.

Racialized immigrant and refugee girls also long to share a sense of belonging, with their family in particular, in order to feel whole and to survive marginalization within the dominant culture.

For refugee and immigrant girls, their experiences of racism and alienation from “mainstream” services are compounded because their original cultures are devalued and made “less-than” in a system of cultural inequality where Anglo culture is considered to be the “norm.” Racialized refugee and immigrant girls must deal with institutions, such as schools, that devalue their original culture. As such, they are forced to “assimilate” into the dominant Anglo-Canadian culture. Language barriers compound young women’s difficulties when they try to access services of almost any kind. Few services exist for non-English-speaking youth, who if they attempt to access an English-speaking service, may leave quickly due to the language barrier. Language and communication barriers were named as major sources of adversity, frustration and distress among this group. Young women also expressed the fear that children’s ministries would not understand the stress and difficulty of immigration and poverty on immigrant and refugee moms and remove girls from their homes or ostracize their mothers. Racialized immigrant and refugee girls also long to share a sense of belonging,

with their family in particular, in order to feel whole and to survive marginalization within the dominant culture. One young woman we interviewed expressed the desire for a housing resource that would encourage girls to stay connected to their families because it would help them be strong in the face of marginalization within the dominant culture.

Racialized lesbian and bisexual girls experience harsh discrimination and alienation in their day to day lives. They experience both racism and homophobia in safe houses and group homes.<sup>43</sup> In a recent government review of youth safe houses, racialized youth talked about being targets of racism and harassment by peers in the safe houses.<sup>44</sup> During our interviews, girls pointed out that staff in youth shelters did not respond to other youth's homophobia, which made lesbian and bisexual girls vulnerable to harassment and violence. Some immigrant and racialized youth who are LGBT face homophobia in their family homes, go to children's ministries for help and are placed in equally abusive and homophobic foster families. Children's ministries do not have enough appropriate, accepting placements for youth who are LGBT, especially for those youth who are also racialized.<sup>45</sup>

## Inequality in the Lives of Young Mothers

*My mom kicked me out of her house, but she kept my daughter and I had nowhere to go. So I went to my boyfriend's house and we got into a fight, and he kicked me out of his place...I had nowhere to go...and I just went and sat on the street for three hours.... It was so cold but I had nowhere to go...shelters weren't taking me because I was not 19. Shelters that I wanted to get into—shelters that would take children...I couldn't take my daughter, I couldn't be with her because I didn't have anywhere to go [that would take children]. — Young woman, Justice for Girls interviewee*

Teen moms are at very high risk of becoming homeless because they are one of the poorest groups of girls and women in Canada. In its third periodic review of Canada, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was “concerned at the crisis level of homelessness among youth and young families,” and further noted that “according to information received from the National Council of Welfare, over 90% of single mothers under 25 live in poverty.” In addition to experiencing severe poverty, single teen moms face further barriers because of discrimination when trying to rent accommodations.

In a focus group conducted by Justice for Girls in October 2006, young moms described the process of finding housing as discriminatory and difficult. Moms explained how the combined effects of poverty, ageism, sexism and racism contribute to their inability to find housing for themselves and their children. As one young mom told us:

*Landlords don't like youth on welfare or if you have a baby.*

Yet, teenage moms have almost no access to subsidized housing in Canada. There is very little, if any, subsidized or long-term supported housing for teenage moms and their children. Young women living in poverty, especially teenage moms, are in desperate need of subsidized housing suites with supports so that they do not become homeless.<sup>46</sup>

Young moms described decent housing as being: safe, clean, affordable (including utilities such as heat and hot water) and being in close proximity to programs, services and grocery

stores. Some young moms we spoke with finally found housing in a program designed to help young moms transition into an independent living situation through BC Housing but are only permitted to stay as long as their children are under 18 months old. Once they leave the program they are again at the mercy of market rents. This greatly contributes to the fear they have about becoming homeless with their young children.

Despite the fact that young moms are at high risk of becoming homeless, there isn't a single safe house or youth shelter for teenage moms in the Lower Mainland of BC. There are only four emergency safe house beds in the Lower Mainland for parenting youth who find themselves homeless.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, some young moms decide not to access shelters for fear their children will be apprehended. Moreover, safe houses are not always safe for children; one young mom we interviewed had stayed in a safe house with her child and commented that she feared for the safety of her daughter because others in the house were using drugs intravenously. She wanted to go to a women's transition house but found that she could not get in because she was under 19.<sup>48</sup>

Childcare is an important issue for all mothers, including teenage moms. Daycare is essential for young moms to attend school. As one young mom told us, "I think it would be easier for us to get an education if we had help with childcare." The issue of adequate, affordable daycare is particularly acute in northern communities where there are not enough affordable, licensed daycare centres:

*I know some teen mothers that can't go to school because they don't have any way to get their kids to daycare. In the Yukon and up North they don't have [much daycare]. By the time [mothers have a spot for childcare, their children] don't have to go to daycare, they can go to kindergarten. So I think it would be easier for us to get an education if we had help with daycare.*

## Northern and Rural Preliminary Issues

While we primarily interviewed girls in the Lower Mainland of BC, we sometimes heard from girls about issues faced by girls in the interior and in northern BC who became homeless in the Lower Mainland. We also reviewed literature which spoke to rural and northern issues. Teenage girls in the North and in rural areas face extreme poverty, unemployment and male violence. Aboriginal girls told us that they frequently encounter racism when attempting to rent accommodation. Some young women leave their home communities in search of better opportunities and to flee violence, poverty and racism. Aboriginal young women from northern BC come to the Lower Mainland and often have no stable housing when they arrive. Many become homeless quickly as a result. Specific assistance is needed for girls making the transition from rural, and especially northern, communities to urban environments.

Sexual assault in the Northwest Territories is reported at a rate that is eight times the national average.

Sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of Aboriginal girls is a serious issue all over Canada, but is particularly prevalent in the North. Sexual assault in the Northwest Territories is reported at a rate that is eight times the national average.<sup>49</sup>

In a recent study on youth homelessness in the Williams Lake area, Aboriginal youth were highly represented among the homeless.<sup>50</sup> Youth in the study reported that when they are without permanent housing they couch surf, stay with a girlfriend or boyfriend or sleep outside. Support workers for youth reported that they believe youth are having sex for shelter. Experience suggests that this is an issue that affects young women in particular. Clearly, this is an area that warrants further research and action.

# The Consequences of Homelessness

It is difficult to separate the impact of oppression and violence that pushes young women out of their homes and communities from the ravages of homelessness itself. The trajectory of young women who leave their homes in search of safety is more often than not a devastating path to more violence, crippling poverty, addictions and dehumanization.



## Male Violence and Exploitation

It is widely accepted that homelessness is a key factor in young women's vulnerability to various forms of victimization. Once they are on the street, girls experience staggering levels of violence, from assaults by passers-by, abuse through prostitution, rape and assault by boyfriends and male street "brothers," extreme mental and physical cruelty by pimps and drug dealers, to sexual harassment, assault and brutality by police, private security and prison guards.

*Homeless women are 10 times more likely to die than women in the general population.<sup>51</sup>*

Once girls are homeless, older exploitative men step in and often "offer" girls a place to stay in exchange for sex. One girl told us that after finding herself homeless at the age of 15 she met a 25-year-old male who supplied her with drugs and got her addicted to heroin. Another young woman said that when she was 14 she met a 19-year-old boyfriend, began selling drugs for him, and eventually became addicted to heroin. Other girls told similar stories and explained that once on the street (while panhandling, for example) older men would approach them, offer them a place to stay and sometimes introduce them to hard drugs.

While some of the girls said their older boyfriends or ex-boyfriends were "unsafe" or "violent," many did not name their boyfriends as exploitive despite their age difference. Some in fact framed these adult men as caregivers. In the words of one young woman who met her 21-year-old boyfriend at age 15:

*When I first got on the streets, like within the first week, I met the guy who I am with now...yeah, it's awesome living with him, he really takes good care of me.*

Clearly, when girls are not “taken care of” by the children’s ministry they are vulnerable to being “taken care of” by older males who prey on their vulnerability and lack of support.

Girls also referred to boyfriends as “protection.” This self-identified need for protection demonstrates the degree of violence these young women routinely face. One young woman explained:

*I had a boyfriend...and usually if I'm alone it kind of feels weird that I don't have like the protection, like the added protection....*

Girls who are homeless are at very high risk of sexual exploitation/abuse in prostitution.<sup>52</sup>

*70–80% of those involved in the Canadian sex industry began as children. And 80-95% are fleeing sexual abuse that usually began at home.*<sup>53</sup>

Adult men, often framing themselves as “boyfriends,” push young women into prostitution by initially offering them an escape from extreme poverty and homelessness. Once young

Despite government rhetoric about stopping the sexual exploitation of children and youth, very few men are charged and convicted for pimping or sexually exploiting girls. In 1999, Daum found that men who buy sex from children and youth are 20 times less likely to be charged than if they buy sex from an adult.

women are in prostitution pimps use extreme violence, psychological manipulation and torture, drug addiction and constant surveillance to keep them there. In a recent PACE survey of 183 people in prostitution, the average age of entry into prostitution was 16,<sup>54</sup> and the overrepresentation of Aboriginal women was significant at 31%.<sup>55</sup>

When young women spoke to us about sexual abuse through prostitution they described being trapped in very dangerous situations with no hope for escape or their futures. For instance, one young woman talked about how she had lived in a rooming house where a pimp had keys to all the girls’ rooms and where mostly underage girls were exploited. Another young woman described the extreme mental effort involved in maintaining a sense of hope for her future or a concept of life outside of prostitution. She also described changing her hair colour frequently, even years after her escape, in fear of being found by her pimp.

Despite government rhetoric about stopping the sexual exploitation of children and youth, very few men are charged and convicted for pimping or sexually exploiting girls. In 1999, Daum found that men who buy sex from children and youth are 20 times less likely to be charged than if they buy sex from an adult. While since 1999 more men have been charged for sexually exploiting youth, there are still few men charged and a small number are convicted. Men who are convicted for sexually exploiting girls often receive laughable sentences, including a few months of house arrest, and some a “victim fine surcharge” of \$100. Justice for Girls witnessed a case in which a man in his sixties was convicted of sexually exploiting a teenage girl and sentenced to two months of house arrest while he was allowed to work as a grocery store owner. His store was situated across the street from the only elementary school in a small community.<sup>56</sup>

Recent improvements have been made to the Canadian Criminal Code to help protect children who are victims of violence. These changes, made through Bill C-2, give additional protections to child witnesses and set mandatory minimum sentences for sexual

exploitation, albeit these minimums are very low. These first steps in improving protections for child victims of violence are positive. However, many of the improvements are contingent upon their vigilant enforcement by criminal justice system officials. For these changes to have a positive impact in the lives of girls who have experienced violence they must be strongly enforced by courts and judges.

As researcher Yasmin Jiwani highlights:

*Canadian service providers have developed impressive expertise in developing programs for battered women.... They have also learned to respond to the challenge of women choosing to go back to their abusive partners. These patterns are very similar to the process of children and youth moving in and out of prostitution as they search for solutions for themselves. It raises the question of why services to women and children involved in prostitution cannot be understood as similar to services for battered women.<sup>57</sup>*

Indeed, we believe that strategies like those developed to support women escaping violent partners should be created for girls escaping prostitution and domestic male violence.

## Addiction

In order to cope with extreme poverty, male violence and the effects of colonization and racism, girls try to numb themselves by using drugs. In a consultation with 10 Aboriginal girls, young women spoke of using drugs in an attempt to not feel the pain they were experiencing.

*When I was younger I got sexually abused...when I'm down and out I usually do drugs. I always thought drugs could heal the pain right, but they don't [because] drugs make the pain worse, because drugs hurt your family, those that are close to you.*

Some support workers label girls as addicts when they are very young. Under the guise of harm reduction, some workers have “accepted” that girls who are addicted will remain addicted. Teenage girls with addictions may internalize these beliefs and become hopeless about their ability to stop using addictive substances. One young woman told us that staff at a group home in which she lived as a teen understood she would always be an addict. She ironically framed this as respect:

*They respected the fact that I couldn't change who I was.*

Another young woman told us how she felt that staff gave up on her at detox, she was following the program but they told her:

*“This isn't working for you”...and they told me I had to leave.*

While harm reduction is important, it must be recognized that being actively drug-addicted has serious detrimental effects on every aspect of girls' lives, and ultimately, helping girls move out of addiction is paramount. It is important not to lose sight of the person within the addiction and become hopeless about a young woman's ability to stop using addictive substances. Given supportive, safe treatment that addresses the conditions of violence and oppression that lead girls into addiction, girls can move beyond addictions into safer lives.

The necessity of drug treatment for girls cannot be overstated. Many homeless young women are living with addictions, some are in recovery, and others wish to undergo treatment. Yet there is very little treatment available for youth, and virtually none is specifically for girls or based on feminist principles. Most girls are left alone to battle their addictions and the underlying causes of their drug abuse, unless they make an immense effort to gain access to treatment and support.

While commenting on drug treatment, one teenage girl told us:

*The reason I'm going into treatment right now is I fought tooth and nail just to go there because I'm so stubborn.*

Another young woman told us she was forced to wait a year before being accepted into a treatment program.

A young Aboriginal woman believed she needed to stop using drugs before she could stay in stable housing, but could not find treatment that was culturally appropriate for her. The only treatment available to her was connected to the child welfare ministry, which she found oppressive as an Aboriginal person. The need for addiction treatment that is independent, feminist, centred in Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices and girl-only was a reoccurring theme in discussions with Aboriginal girls.

Girls we interviewed talked about how important it is that detox is available at the moment when a girl wants to stop using drugs. In a recent review of BC youth safe houses, parents, youth and workers all focused on the lack of detox services for youth in BC. Crystal meth (methamphetamine) use in particular was noted as a serious challenge by most of the safe houses and emergency shelters in BC, yet there are few detox and treatment programs for youth in BC to deal with this growing problem. Staff at one safe house admitted that youth who need to detox are sent to the adult detox centre and comment “youth are not well served in this environment.” Waiting lists for detox programs are long and very few focus on harm reduction, making it common for youth not to finish.<sup>58</sup> Young women face detoxing in environments where there are predatory older men. Given that sexual abuse and violence is often the underlying issue for girls who are addicted to drugs, it is potentially extremely damaging to put girls into co-ed detox centres, especially with adult men.

## Disease and Death

Girls' bodies and minds are brutalized through homelessness and the violence that accompanies it. Rates of depression and suicide are very high among homeless youth.<sup>59</sup> Homeless women are 10 times more likely to die than housed women.<sup>60</sup>

The range of health problems that homeless young women face is extensive and includes: hepatitis A, B and C, infection, self-harm, eating disorders, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, addiction, scabies, lice, irregular menstruation, headaches, depression, anxiety, phobias, overdoses, sexual identity crises, tuberculosis, jaundice, diabetes, malnutrition, collapsed veins, abscesses, dental problems, suicide, mental illness, drug-induced psychosis and foetal alcohol syndrome. While some homeless people are in and out of hospital frequently, despite the range of clinics and street-level health services available to homeless young



women, those who are involved in prostitution tend to avoid hospitals and regular medical care due to discrimination, negative staff attitudes<sup>61</sup> and pimps preventing access.

In their commentary on the gendered nature of HIV/AIDS transmission, researchers Patricia Spittal and Martin Schecter describe the following typical scenario of a young woman's path to HIV infection:

*When Marie was 12 years old, living in a suburb of Vancouver, she was raped by her father while her brothers slept in adjacent beds. After this incident Marie and her brothers were put into foster care. When she was 14 years of age, a 42-year-old man picked her up from a street corner at dusk. She was already strung out on acid and she recalls that "he got me wired, he got me doing coke, he injected me that very night. He was a user and a pimp, so he saw me and I guess he knew how easy it would be to get me out on a corner.... At first it felt great 'cause men wanted to pay to be with me."*

*According to Marie, this man became like a father figure for her and showed her love like she had never known. But then he began to beat her, and her predilection for injected powder cocaine intensified. "He said to me, this is what happens to you if you enjoy being with a trick.... He wanted to make sure that all that was in my head was to make money, to get the money and go back and give it to him." She sometimes tried to make her money and run; however, he would track her down, inject her and then batter her, sparing only her face. Controlled by both fear and drugs, Marie's vulnerability escalated. "I just started using a lot, and every time I got into a trick's car, I felt relieved. I could escape." By the time Marie was 17 years old, drugs and tricks had become the only reality she knew. Today, at age 28, although she has survived gang rape, incarceration, miscarriages and two suicide attempts (slashed wrists and a heroin overdose), she is infected with both HIV and hepatitis C.<sup>62</sup>*

Young women involved in prostitution tend to avoid hospitals and regular medical care due to discrimination, negative staff attitudes and pimps preventing access.

Homeless and low income girls are exposed to numerous pesticides and other environmental hazards. Repeated exposure to moulds, pesticides such as Lindane or Nix, air pollutants and toxic building materials are part and parcel of living in squats, single room occupancy hotels and substandard rental accommodations. The long-term effects of such exposures can result in numerous health disorders including respiratory illnesses, neurological and/or liver damage. For Indigenous young women, water contamination on-reserve is common and extremely harmful.

In most of the communities where girls in poverty live, access to healthy food, clean water and safe housing is not attainable. This form of environmental discrimination undermines girls' physical health and safety and substantially contributes to the oppression and marginalization of homeless girls in wider society.

## Education Denied

While sometimes girls choose to leave school or are expelled from school as a precursor to homelessness, many girls we spoke to tried to keep attending school while they were

homeless (especially when couch surfing and sometimes even while on the street). One young woman interviewed described:

*I stayed in school up until the 10<sup>th</sup> grade when I dropped out [because] my grades weren't getting any better, [because] I was living on the street and I had to go to school, so it was really hard. I didn't mind being somewhere during the day but...it was kind of hard because I was sleeping in parks and I still had to go to school, and I was going to a public school so it was really weird. I'd come in dirty all the time, so people would be looking at me, I left at 16....*

A recent JFG report on educational experiences of homeless girls confirmed that young homeless women have a strong desire to access education:

*Contrary to commonly held beliefs about homeless young women's desire to participate in educational programming, almost all of the young women and girls who participated in this project conveyed the importance of obtaining a formal education and expressed a sincere desire to attend school as a means out of social, political and economic forms of deprivation.<sup>63</sup>*

Young women in this study explained that because they were unable to access stable, safe and affordable housing, their ability to participate in the educational system was seriously hampered. The basic requirements of the public educational system, such as regular timely attendance, school fees, dress codes and personal hygiene, were all barriers to girls who were living in unstable environments. As one focus group participant explained:

*I think that is one of the reasons I keep dropping out of school...because I have an unstable living situation...like you are living in one place and then you get kicked out and like you can't go home or something...you have to get away from school for a couple of weeks and then they kick you out...if it is something you can't help and you still want to be in school then it is not really your problem and they should keep you there.*

This report further confirmed that the material requirements of schooling do not accommodate teen mothers. Lack of good and affordable childcare was a major barrier to young mothers participating in schooling. As one young female interviewee described:

*I had three kids and trying to go to school...and...uhm, well the childcare I did have I didn't like it for my kids, it wasn't good enough for my kids. It was too far from where I was living....*

Girls we interviewed pointed out that adult income assistance does not provide bus passes so they sometimes can't get to school because they don't have bus money. Teenage girls in all of the interviews and focus groups talked about how a disruptive environment at home negatively impacts their ability to access and succeed in the educational system:

*I had a lot of family problems, you know...my parents had split up and my dad was like doing a lot of things he shouldn't have been doing and I just kinda left, I couldn't take it anymore.... I tried to attempt suicide a few times and then they sent me right to a shelter and...(sighs)...and I am gettin' really tired of this whole chaotic lifestyle and I am just getting back in school and I should be graduating this year and I still have to push myself to stay in school....*

## Criminalization

Once young women are homeless, drug-addicted and experiencing extreme male violence, the criminal justice system often steps in and criminalizes girls, ostensibly for their own “protection.” Criminologists have documented,<sup>64</sup> and Justice for Girls has witnessed, over many years, that girls who are homeless are criminalized in an attempt to protect them from homelessness, drug addiction, sexual abuse through prostitution and other male violence. But the criminal justice system only exacerbates the problem when it criminalizes girls.

The typical path to imprisonment for homeless young women involves initial charges of relatively minor and mostly poverty-related offences (shoplifting, theft, drug trafficking). Young women are placed on extremely restrictive probation conditions that they are unable to meet due to their situation of homelessness or poverty. Then, they are incarcerated for breach of probation and enter into a seemingly never-ending cycle of incarceration and “administrative” or “non-compliance” offences such as “breach of probation” or “failure to appear in court.”<sup>65</sup>

Prison is often used as a “protective” measure, a way to respond to young women’s lack of safety in the absence of adequate housing, protective policing or prosecution of male violence, and/or social service intervention.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, men who abuse girls rarely face the judgment of the criminal justice system. Homeless girls, particularly those who are sexually exploited in prostitution, are criminalized for violence committed against them. Until recently, girls who were sexually abused through prostitution were charged under prostitution-related statutes approximately 60 times more often than adult males who exploit them.<sup>67</sup>

Until recently, girls who were sexually abused through prostitution were charged under prostitution-related statutes approximately 60 times more often than adult males who exploit them.

For Aboriginal girls, “profound, but nearly invisible racism”<sup>68</sup> is clear in their criminalization. Indigenous girls continue to be over-criminalized and incarcerated as a form of forced assimilation in Canada. Historically:

*Attempts to “rehabilitate” First Nations girls, mainly through incarceration in training and industrial [and residential] schools, were embarked upon with open admission that the aim of such ventures was to make the girls relinquish their cultural ties and embrace white, middle-class values.*<sup>69</sup>

Indigenous young women are targeted by the criminal justice system and remain over-represented in Canadian prisons. In the province of BC, Indigenous girls make up about 58% of incarcerated girls.<sup>70</sup> Racism is part and parcel of the criminal justice system. Until very recently youth were punished and shackled in a British Columbia youth prison for engaging in a First Nations sacred spiritual ceremony.<sup>71</sup>

Justice for Girls researcher Amber Dean concluded girls are often incarcerated for their own protection yet they seldom find safety behind prison walls as violence and human rights abuses are the norm:

*Unfortunately, the criminal justice system is seldom, if ever, a “safe place” for girls, as sexual harassment from police officers, male guards and inmates is common in these*

*young women's experiences, and violence, segregation, strip searches and invasive psychological assessments combine to put girls at as much if not greater risk within the prison walls.<sup>72</sup>*

Forced confinement of homeless, sexually exploited and addicted girls is legislated in Alberta under the Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution Act (PCHIP). Under this Act, girls can be forcefully confined without criminal charges for up to 47 days for their own “protection.”<sup>73</sup> Similar legislation, the Secure Care Act, has been introduced in British Columbia but has not been put into force.

Justice for Girls strongly opposes forced confinement of young women both because it constitutes a breach of girls’ human rights and because:

*Forced confinement doesn't work! There is no evidence that forcibly removing young women, confining them for a period of time and coercing them to form a treatment plan reduces the risk to youth outside of the time they spend in confinement. Time in confinement can work to increase risk of self-harm as young women feel anger, depression and panic at their lack of control. The Secure Care Working Group (1998) did a literature review that showed that confinement actually worked to increase substance abuse, homelessness and isolation in youth.<sup>74</sup>*

## The Last Stop: Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside

The consequence of homelessness over time are more extreme conditions of homelessness. The Downtown Eastside (DTES) of Vancouver is a neighbourhood that epitomizes some of the worst living conditions imaginable for teenage girls and is often the last rung on the ladder of homelessness and addiction for girls. We are deeply concerned that teenage girls live in some of the most dangerous and inhumane conditions in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. Many girls consider sleeping outside less damaging or frightening than living in single room occupancy hotels in the DTES. Most young women are in the DTES as an almost inevitable consequence of persistent, often intergenerational homelessness and failed child welfare intervention. Girls living in the DTES are on a path likely to lead to early death by disease or male violence. Surrounded by disease and devastation, many girls living in the DTES desperately want to be somewhere else.

The environmental hazards endured by young women living in SROs—the primary form of “housing” in this neighbourhood—are many: locked fire exits; mould and biohazard exposures (blood, feces, urine, etc); bug and rodent infestations; chemical, pesticide and hazardous material exposure; exposure to disease (tuberculosis, HIV, hepatitis C). One visitor to an SRO described the living conditions as such:

*The hallways had a persistent smell similar to old kitty litter, and the garbage was stacked up near the elevator on each floor. A duo of non-resident drug dealers ran up and down the stairs, sometimes threatening the residents. The open rooms with kicked in doors and bashed walls presented a potential hazard to the residents.<sup>75</sup>*

Beyond the psychological torment of living in such conditions, young women also deal with constant threat and experiences of male violence. Older men threaten, sexually harass,

assault, exploit and rape girls in these rooming houses. By forcing girls to live on extremely low adult income assistance and low child welfare ministry support rates, these ministries are forcing teenage girls to live in inhumane conditions and putting them in extreme danger and abuse.

We spoke to young women who have lived or live in the DTES, as well as activists who work with people who live in the area. Girls who are living in the DTES were the most difficult group of girls to access for interviews during the course of this project for two reasons. Firstly, girls living in the DTES often try to stay “under the radar” of the children’s ministry and thus do not trust any adult “official.” Secondly, many of the girls in the area experience extreme violence and control at the hands of older males and thus are not free to access supports or organizations.

One 20-year-old young woman living in the DTES reported that her landlord tried to break into her SRO room while she was changing, and subsequently evicted her. She went on to explain that in rooming houses other people have keys to your room door, that there are many abusive older men living in the “hotels,” and landlords are “creepy.” Young women said they were unsafe in these rooming houses, but sometimes downplayed the danger of living in them, likely because they have no other housing options:

*It’s okay, but it’s an unsafe situation, doors get kicked in every day.*

One young woman lived in a rooming house facing a garbage dumpster. Her window was broken for months and she was afraid someone would climb into her room. Another young woman described being pregnant while living in a rooming house filled with mice and cockroaches. She tried to find subsidized housing and found a program with a five-month wait list. Shortly afterwards she suffered a miscarriage and was placed on the back of the list.

By forcing girls to live on extremely low adult income assistance and low child welfare ministry support rates, these ministries are forcing teenage girls to live in inhumane conditions and putting them in extreme danger and abuse.

# Canada's Failure to Meet its Obligation to Protect Girls

*I think it's the government, they don't really listen, and I think it's great that there are people that do advocacy...but you know what happened with the tsunami and people donated all this money, and I think that's great, that's awesome we're contributing, but why aren't they helping your own province? Even the Olympics are coming and what are they gonna do with all the homeless people, what just push them somewhere else? Yeah, so just like more affordable housing.... I'm trying to find my own place and it's really hard....*  
— Young woman from focus group



## Legal Lapses

Right to adequate housing and standard of living not enshrined in Canadian law

Contrary to what most would assume, there is no specific right to adequate housing or to a basic standard of living for anyone, including for children, in Canadian law. Canada is however obligated under international human rights treaties, to recognize that everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living including housing.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>77</sup> the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,<sup>78</sup> the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,<sup>79</sup> and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights<sup>80</sup> all note the vulnerable position of children in society and the obligation of states to provide adequate protection for children. However, these international laws are not domestically enforceable.

Despite a context of economic prosperity and relatively progressive social policy in Canada, teenage girls who live in poverty are very often denied access to the most basic human rights. More often than not, girls who live in poverty are criminalized for the oppression they face and encounter additional abuse in state-run facilities such as youth prisons and child welfare agencies. The Canadian government consistently fails to provide teenage girls who live in poverty with secure homes and communities in which to live in peace and dignity.

Canada is failing in its obligation to realize the right to an adequate standard of living and adequate housing for teenage girls. Canada has also failed in its human rights obligations by failing to enshrine the right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate housing, into Canadian law. We believe that these rights are inherently tied to other human rights and can not be considered in the absence of a full understanding of various interlocking forms of oppression that shape the lives of teenage girls in Canada.

### Denial of domestic human and equality rights in the name of “child protection”

The justification of child protection is often used to erase children’s equality rights.

Equality rights of persons in Canada are guaranteed under Section 15(1) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.<sup>81</sup> The right to be equal before and under the law in Canada without discrimination on the basis of age can be restricted under Section 1 of the Charter which justifies such “reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.” Such limits to the rights of children are usually argued in the name of child protection. Furthermore, provincial and territorial human rights laws also protect the human rights of Canadians and yet various provincial human rights codes across Canada specifically disqualify children (under 18 years) and seniors (over 65) from legal protection from age discrimination.<sup>82</sup>

In 2004, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld a law that decriminalizes parental use of physical force against children and denied children age-based equality rights. The court viewed physical assault against children as an acceptable “corrective use of force,” and thus beneficial to the child. Not unlike the oppressive legal history of domestic violence against women, where male violence in the home was protected by the framing of families as private institutions that should not be subject to criminal law, the Supreme Court of Canada stated the following in relation to the domestic assault of children:

*The decision not to criminalize such conduct is not grounded in devaluation of the child but in a concern that to do so risks ruining lives and breaking up families—a burden that in large part would be borne by children and outweigh any benefit derived from applying the criminal process.*<sup>83</sup>

The Court also expressly denied the “best interests of the child” as a principle of fundamental justice in Canada.

In a similar “for their own good” logic, in 2002 the Supreme Court of Canada found that a social welfare program that reduced rates of youth social assistance to extreme poverty levels in the province of Quebec, in fact, assisted young people. The court found there was no age discrimination in this case, despite the fact that only youth social assistance rates were affected. The Court viewed the Quebec government’s imposition of abject poverty as beneficial to youth and argued that it was a legitimate way of motivating young people into the workforce.<sup>84</sup>

Ironically, it is precisely the protected or special status of children and youth that is often used to justify the denial of girls’ access to rights, freedoms and dignity in Canadian society. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Canadian child welfare system, with its failure to

provide protection from abuse and/or adequate housing to children and youth. Aboriginal girls and their communities have experienced horrendous human and equality rights violations in the name of child protection.

## No National Anti-Homelessness Strategy That Recognizes Gender

In 1999, the federal government, through the National Homelessness Initiative, allocated much-needed funds to emergency shelters, housing programs and other anti-homelessness programs. This initiative almost completely ignored the impact of gender and the specific needs of women and girls who are homeless.<sup>85</sup> While some funds were allocated towards ending “youth homelessness,” the initiative did not mandate funds towards stopping girls’ or women’s homelessness. Thus, most housing funded under this initiative was coeducational and very few programs were created with the specific needs of girls and women in mind. In 2006, the federal government earmarked funding for subsidized housing and emergency housing through the Affordable Housing Trust. Once again, no mention was made of gender.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recently called on the federal government to honor its international housing obligations and develop a national housing strategy that includes the community, private sectors, and provincial, territorial and municipal governments.<sup>86</sup> Yet, the federal government to date has made neither a long-term commitment nor an action plan for ending homelessness. Instead, one-time project funds are granted to fund basic emergency shelters through short-term programs such as the National Housing Initiative and the Affordable Housing Trust. These programs do not meet, or even identify, the needs of girls and women who are homeless. Meanwhile, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), the federal government’s national housing agency, is running a profit estimated at \$1 billion in 2006.

The federal government has rejected calls to reinvest the national housing profits in new affordable housing initiatives and is instead considering a plan to fully privatize CMHC.<sup>87</sup>

## Colonial Policies

The colonizing policies and practices of the Canadian government can be seen within institutions—including child welfare, social services, health, education and the criminal justice system. While professing a desire to right the wrongs of the past, the Canadian government continues its process of colonization with the effect of controlling virtually every aspect of Indigenous life.

*Canada has severely restricted Indigenous girls’ right to self-determination through the Indian Act.<sup>88</sup> Indigenous societies, many that were traditionally matrilineal with genealogical descent traced through the mother’s line, were subjected to the patriarchy of European laws—now internalized by many Indigenous men and women. Indigenous girls’ daily lives are shaped by the Indian Act. Homelessness, sexual abuse, immense poverty, poor health, mental illness, criminalization, alienation from education and*



*a loss of culture among Indigenous teenage girls are symptoms of colonization under the Indian Act.*<sup>89</sup>

The impact of both historical and current colonization of Indigenous nations and lands is extreme and brutal for Indigenous girls:

- The poverty rate amongst Aboriginal children is more than double the rate for non-Aboriginal children in Canada.<sup>90</sup>
- About 70% of on-reserve Indigenous youth will never complete secondary school. The numbers are similar for Indigenous youth attending provincial schools off-reserve.<sup>91</sup>
- According to Justice Canada's 2004 *One-Day Snapshot of Aboriginal Youth in Custody Across Canada*, 33% of youth in custody are Aboriginal even though Aboriginal youth make up only 5% of the Canadian population.
- The suicide rate for adolescent Aboriginal girls has been measured to be 8–20 times the national average of non-Aboriginal adolescent girls.<sup>92</sup>

Aboriginal children in British Columbia are seven times more likely to wind up living in government care than non-Aboriginal children.<sup>93</sup> It is likely that this high rate of child apprehension in BC is related to the large number of single Indigenous women who are raising their children in abject poverty.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, this high apprehension rate relates to systemic racism and, thus, is reminiscent of the colonialist legacy of residential schools, which made it standard Canadian practice to apprehend Indigenous children into state care throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Government Policies and Practices

### Child welfare system failing to protect girls from domestic sexual abuse

The Canadian child welfare system does not protect girls from sexual abuse. In 2003, child maltreatment investigations involving allegations of sexual abuse numbered 17,321 in Canada.<sup>95</sup> Sexual abuse was considered substantiated in only 23% of cases, while 16% remained suspected and 61% were considered “unsubstantiated” by child welfare agencies. In cases where child welfare agencies found children had been sexually abused, 13% of perpetrators were stepfathers, 9% were fathers, and 35% were non-parental relatives.<sup>96</sup> Alarming, 90% of children in cases of substantiated sexual abuse were left in the home. Researchers noted that a referral to family and parent counseling was child welfare agencies' most common response to sexual abuse. Family and parent counseling was recommended in 76% of cases of substantiated sexual abuse.

Abusive fathers are typically allowed to remain in the home while their daughters are removed and institutionalized in group homes, youth prisons, youth mental health facilities and other forms of government care.

In our experience as advocates, we have repeatedly witnessed the child welfare ministry's failure to investigate sexual abuse in the home. We have rarely seen male child abusers removed from the home or criminalized. The child welfare system is slow, and sexist, in its

response when girls report male sexual or physical violence. Child welfare ministries often have to be forced to act when male family members rape and/or assault girls in their homes. Justice for Girls has advocated for girls who were being sexually abused in their homes at times when the children's ministry refused to properly investigate abuse. When child welfare ministries do take action, abusive fathers are typically allowed to remain in the home while their daughters are removed and institutionalized in group homes, youth prisons, youth mental health facilities and other forms of government care. Sometimes girls leave home and fend for themselves in the face of abusive or neglectful child welfare ministries. When children's ministries abandon girls, do not investigate allegations of abuse thoroughly, tell girls to "go home," or send girls to adult income assistance, they fail girls, and are complicit in setting them up for further victimization at home or on the street.

### State neglect of mothers

The child welfare system attempts to impose white, middle-class values on families who are struggling in poverty. Many children are taken into the care of the government under the category of "neglect," a word that thinly disguises the fact that children are taken into government care because their families are poor and sometimes cannot provide their children with basic needs. The child welfare system most often removes children from the home on the basis of "neglect." Children are pulled out of the home in 28% of cases of confirmed neglect. This is a higher number and percentage than the number of children pulled out of the home because of sexual abuse (10%), physical abuse (16%) or emotional maltreatment (19%).

In child welfare law, neglect includes: the failure to supervise children, leading to physical harm; the failure to provide for the child adequately, including failing to provide adequate nutrition and clothing; and living in unhygienic or dangerous living conditions.<sup>97</sup> Given these definitions, it would seem that the Canadian government should be charged with neglect of mothers and families living in poverty.

Household risk factors for child maltreatment, as defined by Canada's premier report on child abuse, included housing, source of income and frequency of moves. In fact, the study specifically pointed out:

*Almost a quarter (24%) of households depended on social assistance or other benefits as their major source of income, 13% of households lived in public housing, 9% were considered to be living in unsafe conditions, 28% had moved at least once in the past 12 months, and 11% had moved two or more times.<sup>98</sup>*

Single mothers are the targets of harsh criticism and are at particular risk of having their children apprehended under the category of neglect. Lone female parent families make up 42% of cases of substantiated neglect in Canada.<sup>99</sup> Thus, government policies first create a situation in which half of single mothers and their children live below the poverty line<sup>100</sup> and then punish mothers for this poverty by taking away their children.

The government of Canada is in direct breach of its international obligations when its agencies remove children from their families because of poverty.<sup>101</sup> The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child's Preamble describes "family" as follows:

*The fundamental group of society, and the natural environment for the growth and*

*well-being of all its members and particularly children, [that] should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community.*

Yet, instead of providing families with adequate financial support so that they can raise their children, the child welfare system pulls children out of their families and into institutionalized environments. Foster parents receive about two to three times more money than mothers on income assistance receive in order to survive and parent their own children.<sup>102</sup> As the Child Welfare League of Canada notes:

*Current funding does not encourage reunification with adequate supports, or prevention of child welfare placement in the first place.*<sup>103</sup>

The child welfare system is active in blaming mothers for male violence that is directed at them and their children. Children are sometimes apprehended by the state when mothers are experiencing domestic male violence. In Alberta, for example, a child can be taken into care because of “exposure to domestic violence” according to the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act.<sup>104</sup> The Alberta Provincial Court recently granted full guardianship of a child to the child welfare ministry when a daughter witnessed her mother being domestically abused by the mother’s male partner. The mother was seen as responsible for the male violence and the judge commented on this in his reasons for judgment:

*The child was exposed to a great deal of domestic violence, both directly and indirectly.*<sup>105</sup>

*There is a concern that if the mother had the child in her care, she would not be able to keep the father from the child.*<sup>106</sup>

The judge also noted that the psychologist:

*...also expressed a concern that in situations of domestic violence, patterns of choosing inappropriate and abusive partners even in a separation may continue.*<sup>107</sup>

Another psychologist testified that the mother had:

*...a general recognition that, yes, it’s not a good situation for the child, but didn’t have the insight to look at the behavioral and emotional consequences that the child would experience if she continued to be placed in a situation of domestic violence.*

As the judge noted, the psychologist further commented that:

*...the mother has in the past demonstrated limited ability to protect the child and consequently the child would also be at risk.*

Instead of holding the male abuser responsible for his violence, or charging him criminally, the state took guardianship of this woman’s daughter. Instead of supporting the mother financially and in other ways to leave the abuser, the state took her child away and left an extremely violent man to continue his abuse of women and children.

Government policies first create a situation in which half of single mothers and their children live below the poverty line and then punish mothers for this poverty by taking away their children.

## Child welfare ministry failing girls

A disproportionate number of homeless youth have been in the care of the government at some point. In a recent BC study on youth homelessness, 40% of homeless youth had lived in a group or foster home.<sup>108</sup> Many of the girls we spoke to had been in the care of the government prior to becoming homeless. The fact that so many girls who are homeless have been in the care of the government points to a systemic failure within the child welfare system to properly care for and house girls.

Girls in state care are moved through many inappropriate, alienating and unsafe institutional environments. When girls eventually leave these placements, they often have nowhere to go and find themselves homeless. As a young woman in a focus group described:

*I remember when I was younger I never really talked to social workers. They just made me mad, because everyone just read from the book...and we need people out there who have been there, it's just like easier to talk to people like that. When I was 15 they wouldn't send me to a foster home, I don't know why, the ministry just got me some scummy hotel in \*\*\* for a bed, the system's all messed up. There needs to be more help out there, especially for the younger girls.*

One young woman who was removed from her home at age 12 was refused by the Ministry when she turned to them for help at age 17. She was told that she was too old to be taken into care and was subsequently referred to adult income assistance. To survive, she became involved in prostitution:

*This is how I could put food in my mouth and find a place to stay, you know?*

Neglect along with violations of young women's right to privacy, foster a deep distrust of the children's ministry among the majority of young women we encountered. It is not uncommon in our experience as advocates for us to encounter serious breaches of young women's rights to privacy by youth workers (social workers, probation officers, outreach workers, etc). We are often taken aback by how liberally social workers share sensitive personal information without young women's permission to do so. On many occasions we have had to stop social workers from speaking to us about young women in the absence of consent to release information.

Aboriginal girls in particular are highly distrustful of the children's ministry for very good reason. The colonial destruction of Aboriginal ways of life and family care-giving via residential schools continues today through the state's apprehension of Aboriginal children into non-Aboriginal institutional placements. In interviews, Aboriginal girls in state care voiced that government care is not a real home, that state intervention in their lives has been mostly harmful to their families, and that state care cannot replace family because "it's government."

## Inadequate group homes

Most of us would find it very difficult to be placed in an institutional living environment. Most would also find it difficult to move into a communal living space with roommates we have never met and under conditions of close supervision and scrutiny. Yet, this is what happens to girls who are taken into government care and placed in group homes.<sup>109</sup> Girls'

discomfort is compounded when they have experienced multiple devastating traumatic events prior to apprehension by the state—sexual abuse, rape, assault, neglect, witnessing overdose deaths—and then are forced to live with male peers and male staff.

When girls have survived on their own or taken care of entire families from an early age, it is very difficult for them to enter into institutional settings that are highly structured and often disrespectful of their experiences of survival. Particularly if they have been living on the street for a time, girls are accustomed to “setting their own rules” and consequently find it very difficult to live under the strict structure of group home programming.

Girls are constantly under surveillance in group homes but receive little support or helpful structure. Group homes limit activities youth can engage in, set unreasonable curfews, impose inflexible schedules and endless lists of rules. These environments are rigidly structured. Some of the young women we interviewed explained that meal times are scheduled and if a young woman misses a meal, she may not be fed until the next meal time.

In a recent BC study on youth homelessness, 40% of homeless youth had lived in a group or foster home.

It is increasingly recognized that highly structured, institutional group home environments do not meet the needs of young people in government care and that girls are much better served within foster family homes and supported semi-independent living:

*Youth who are in less restrictive placements such as foster homes fare best academically, while those in more restrictive placements such as group homes are less likely to succeed.*<sup>110</sup>

*One outcome of greatest concern is the growing number of children being served in group care and institutional/residential treatment...a 58% increase has occurred since 1990.*<sup>111</sup>

*There is a shortage of family-based resources and thus many vulnerable children are inappropriately placed in group-care settings.*<sup>112</sup>

Girls that we interviewed left group homes for a variety of reasons, including fear or experience of assaults by other youth in the group home, harassment or feeling unsafe. One young woman explained:

*I've been threatened in group homes for being the fat kid.... I was actually beaten in group homes.*

Another stated:

*This kid, he was chasing me around the house and I went into my room and I had my feet up against the door and my back up against my bed keeping the door shut. He was kicking my door in, he kicked it off the hinges, and finally, finally, after he kicked it off the hinges [the staff opened the office door].*

Studies from the United States have found that gay, lesbian and bisexual youth are considered “hard to place” and face delays in finding spaces in group homes.<sup>113</sup> Similarly in Canada, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth experience homophobia in state placements such as foster care, which they may subsequently leave. Many youth who do leave state placements find themselves homeless.

## Inadequate foster care system

A Canadian study of youth homelessness found that 43% of foster children experience violence within the foster home setting.<sup>114</sup> Young women with experience of foster care often report feeling unsafe in foster homes where male youth are living. For example, a young woman prisoner, who was repeatedly AWOL from housing placements, reported to us that she had been sexually assaulted by a male peer in a foster home and thus no longer felt safe staying in foster or group homes. Another young woman, who was taken into care because of sexual abuse at home, left a foster home at age 12 and started living on the street:

*I was living in care which to me was unsafe, like being a molested child. My foster mom would ask to leave the bathroom doors unlocked and her sons would come in and go to the bathroom while we were having our bath. If we didn't sit up at the table we got our heads smacked, we got our ears pulled [the foster mom] told her friends why we were there.*

Another young woman commented:

*I felt safer in my real home, but it was fine.*

In addition to living under the threat of male violence, girls experience the loneliness and degradation of being institutionalized. Girls in foster care frequently talked about feeling like an “unwanted guest” or a “paycheque.” Girls reported that they were given different food from the rest of the family, that the “real” children got better gifts on holidays, and that they constantly struggled to be on equal footing with other children in the home.

## Barriers to obtaining youth agreements

A “youth agreement” is a contract between the BC children’s ministry and a youth who is between 16 and 18 years of age and not a ward of the state. Youth agreements offer young people financial support if they adhere to certain requirements of the contract. To be eligible, youth have to satisfy two out of the following four “primary risk factors:” being homeless and not in school; having serious substance misuse issues; having serious mental health issues; and being sexually exploited. A youth agreement grants a young person a bit more financial support than adult income assistance.

Sexism is often a barrier to young women accessing youth agreements. Some of the girls indicated that the children’s ministry often refuses to give girls financial support through youth agreements if they are living with their boyfriends. This refusal to support girls is often based on the sexist belief that men should support women. Social workers sometimes argue that by giving financial support to the girls, they are supporting older exploitative men. This reasoning is completely contrary to a feminist understanding of the needs of women and girls who are trapped in relationships with abusive men. It is precisely the economic independence and support offered by a youth agreement that is the prerequisite to young women escaping abusive men whom they otherwise are dependent on for financial support.

Strict policies of the children’s ministry, especially safe house and youth agreement rules and policies, bar girls who are addicted and living in extreme poverty from accessing support. For example, girls who use drugs, and who cannot come home on time because they are addicted and find it very hard to keep a schedule may not be allowed into safe houses and are

unlikely to be granted youth agreements. This is true despite the fact that originally, youth agreements were meant to be for “at-risk” youth who needed specific attention and care. Yet because the requirements for being allowed onto, and keeping, a youth agreement are so stringent, the most marginalized girls are often denied access. In fact, instead of stringent rules and requirements, the opposite approach is needed to help girls who are the most marginalized. To bring girls who are highly marginalized back into housing, the needed approach must be slow, careful and flexible. Having contact with a young woman who is severely marginalized, when she chooses to do so and it is voluntary on her part, is the most important factor in bringing her back into safety.

Strict policies of the children’s ministry, especially safe house and youth agreement rules and policies, bar girls who are addicted and living in extreme poverty from accessing support.

Whether or not a teenage girl is in school or in an employment program, child welfare ministries have a responsibility to support her beyond sending her to adult income assistance. Homeless girls, especially those with addictions, should not need to comply with unrealistic requirements before child welfare ministries will provide them with the basic necessities of life. The child welfare ministry’s failure to support girls puts these young women in serious danger. Governments are therefore culpable for the abuse and damage that girls endure as a result of this neglect.

### The “go home” response

Often when girls run away from or are kicked out of their homes, they are met with a “go home” response from the children’s ministry. Or, if they are over 16, they may also be told to access adult income assistance instead of child protection services. One teenage girl we interviewed reported that her social worker asked her to prove that she could not go home or work things out with her parents before the child welfare ministry would give her financial support or safe housing. The ministry’s failure to give her support eventually forced her onto the street:

*It doesn’t work because if your parents won’t give you into the care of [the children’s ministry] then you’re on the street.*

Other young women spoke to the issue of the children’s ministry abdicating responsibility if parents said their daughter was allowed to come home.

*[The ministry] denied me...a social worker was there [so my dad] was, like, “yeah she can come home,” so that was preventing me from getting any housing right.... [The ministry should help girls] without getting permission from parents, if they phone parents and say “will you let your kid back in the house,” [and the parent says “yes”,the ministry] wouldn’t let the kid into the shelter.*

Throughout our interviews, we noticed a disturbing trend. Namely, the children’s ministry in BC is systematically sending 16- and 17-year-old girls to adult income assistance instead of providing them with child protection supports and services. One 17-year-old young woman described requesting help from the children’s ministry and being redirected into the adult system:

*I asked [for] independent living, anything, and I didn't [get it], and I had to go on welfare [adult income assistance], so that's the only option they gave me, after taking me out of my home.*

This young woman was taken out of her home by the children's ministry as a child, and the ministry later refused to support her.

Many girls described similar experiences of being redirected into the adult income assistance system:

*JFG: Did you ever go to the [child welfare] ministry for help? What happened?*

*Girl: Not [until] this year, and they put me on [adult income assistance]*

*JFG: Okay, so you're 16 and they put you on welfare?*

*Girl: [nods]*

### Grossly inadequate income assistance

The financial support given to teenage girls on adult income assistance is dismally low. Renting a safe, affordable apartment while on income assistance is almost impossible for teenage girls (and many others on income assistance). A young woman summed up the problem:

*You can't get a decent place for \$325 a month...if [the rent is] over that, it comes out of your support [money] so that you starve.*

Although British Columbia adult income assistance rates were recently raised by \$50 a month for a single person, this small increase still has not brought assistance to a level where it would provide adequately for the basic necessities of life.

Teenage girls receiving income assistance do not have enough money to rent apartments independently. They are often forced to rely on adults, who landlords will more readily accept. Unfortunately, in many cases, these adults are men who abuse and exploit young women. In one of our focus groups, young women repeatedly told us how much easier it is for their older boyfriends to rent apartments than it is for them as girls:

*My boyfriend would always find a place because he was 19 but I could never find one because I wasn't 19.*

Another young woman from the focus group claimed:

*If I didn't have my boyfriend with me right now, I don't know where I'd be.*

If they are not living with an older boyfriend or some other exploitative and abusive male, girls often share inadequate and small suites with adult roommates. In one focus group, girls talked about how hard it is living with roommates, especially with those who are older, drink heavily and use drugs. Girls find it hard to go to school or work and/or to stay away from drugs and alcohol when living in such environments. Finding trustworthy, responsible, stable roommates is a serious problem for teenage girls on adult income assistance. In addition, the apartments or rooms that girls can afford with the low adult income assistance rates are often uninhabitable and unsafe. One girl said:



*The place we got into was the scummiest pit. It's falling apart...it's got, like, tons of cockroaches and mice. And to keep the junkies out of the stairwell they're pouring [chemicals] on the carpet...we're getting really sick from that.*

The United Nations has repeatedly cited Canada for violations of poor people's economic human rights in relation to the extremely low rates of income assistance in the country. In its fifth periodic review of Canada, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was concerned that:

*In most provinces and territories, social assistance benefits are lower than a decade ago...they do not provide adequate income to meet basic needs for food, clothing and shelter, and...welfare levels are often set at less than half the Low-Income Cut-Off.*

Since 2002, the British Columbia provincial Liberal government has undertaken a program of social cutbacks aimed at severely hurting people living in poverty. As part of this devastating program, access to income assistance has become highly restricted, preventing many marginalized people from accessing any financial support from the government. Teenage girls living in poverty have been affected harshly by new strict eligibility rules for accessing adult income assistance. In March of 1998, there were 1273 female youth under 19 on adult income assistance in BC; in March of 2005, there were only 159.<sup>115</sup> Young women in one of our focus groups waited four months to receive adult income assistance and thus became homeless in the interim.

The BC Ministry of Human Resources has set up many barriers for people trying to access adult income assistance, including minimum three-week waiting periods, job search requirements prior to application and numerous administrative hurdles. With no supports or financial assistance, teenage girls who can't access adult income assistance are being forced into dangerous situations: prostitution and crime (theft, drug trafficking); living with older exploitative and abusive men, finding shelter in rat infested rooming houses and substandard apartment suites with friends or acquaintances (if they can afford the nightly guest fee in rooming houses); or sleeping in parks, stairwells or doorways. While co-ed safe houses provide some short-term relief (typically seven days), girls are on their own to survive.

Despite the fact that in 2002 there were 3,450 young women housed in Toronto shelters (half of whom became pregnant), there is only one young-women-only shelter in the city, which can only house up to 27 young women.

### Lack of girls' transition houses across Canada

There is a serious lack of transition housing for girls who are homeless and escaping male violence across Canada. While there are youth shelters and safe houses in some parts of Canada (mainly in large cities), these most often do not meet the specific needs of girls who are escaping violence and other oppression. After reviewing the youth emergency housing that exists in some parts of Canada, we will explain why youth shelters are not the answer to girl homelessness and why girls' transition houses that operate on the basis of feminist understanding and principles must ultimately be created so that girls can escape male violence.

Despite the fact that in 2002 there were 3,450 young women housed in Toronto shelters (half

of whom became pregnant),<sup>116</sup> there is only one young-women-only shelter in the city, which can only house up to 27 young women. The City of Toronto has designated some subsidized housing suites specifically for youth at risk of homelessness. However, these suites are few in number and are subject to extremely long waiting lists, so few girls can access them. In 2004, the total City of Toronto subsidized housing list was 63,791 people long.<sup>117</sup>

Virtually all shelters for homeless girls in Alberta are part of a legislated program of forced confinement that allows the provincial government to incarcerate girls in locked facilities as a means of “protection.”<sup>118</sup> It is no coincidence that up until very recently, Alberta refused to endorse Canada’s ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, arguing that it undermines the rights of parents.<sup>119</sup>

There are not enough beds for girls trying to access safe houses in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia and all of the area safe houses are coeducational. Recent statistics indicate that youth are most often denied entry to safe houses because they are full.<sup>120</sup> From the four BC safe houses that kept statistics, there were over 2,000 incidents in 2003/2004 of youth being turned away from their doors.<sup>121</sup> The Homeless Action Plan of the City of Vancouver recently recommended that 100 more transitional beds for youth and 50 short-term beds be created in Vancouver alone (not including the whole Lower Mainland area). We strongly believe that feminist transition houses for girls must be created as the emergency response to girl homelessness (rather than “youth safe houses”).

Youth shelters, drop-ins and other co-ed services fail to meet the needs of young women and furthermore can be a place of male violence and harassment for teenage girls.<sup>122</sup> A recent national study found that young women are reluctant to make use of co-ed services for street youth due to “fears of intimidation and violence by male patrons.”<sup>123</sup> When we asked one young woman whether she’d ever been “creeped-out” when staying at a safe house she answered:

*If you’re going in there to have a break off the streets you don’t want people cat-calling you.... I don’t wanna be hit on when I’m going to a shelter...so if there’s a women-only shelter that’s better.*

Other young women commented:

*It’s like minimized in the safe house compared to what you get wandering around Granville Street at like three in the morning. I think it’s nothing compared to that so it doesn’t bother me.*

*You do get hit on a lot, but that’s pretty much everywhere you go right?  
It’s pretty dangerous if you’re a girl.*

Through this project we also became aware through our interviews with advocates that, several years ago, a BC youth shelter was shut down because male staff and security were pimping teenage girls living in the house. Our guiding group was particularly concerned that young men who sexually exploit girls are living in “safe houses” with girls. In a recent government review of BC youth safe houses, the need for safety was a prevailing issue raised by past and present residents. Notably, the review mentioned a specific incident of violence involving “threats to a female resident’s safety when a male co-resident tried to climb into her room through the window.”<sup>124</sup>

The establishment of “girl-only” shelters and services is a chief recommendation of many Canadian studies examining violence prevention and services for young female survivors of sexual assault.<sup>125</sup> The majority of girls we spoke with told us that girl-only housing is needed. Girls named sexual harassment and sexual assault in youth shelters as the primary reasons why girl-only housing is a necessity. Members of our guiding group described co-ed safe houses as a “recipe for disaster.”

### Few youth shelters have specified anti-oppression as a basis of their work

No safe house or long-term housing program in the Lower Mainland of BC has principles of social justice and equality as its core. This marks a major disparity between housing for homeless youth in Vancouver and in Toronto, where we found that anti-racism and anti-homophobia were core beliefs within the housing/homelessness organizations we visited. It is necessary for groups who provide housing to youth to have anti-oppression principles at their core. An understanding and commitment to working against oppression within housing programs acknowledges and properly responds to the lived realities of marginalized teenage girls. Also, by hiring diverse groups of women, houses can be made more accessible to diverse groups of girls. For example, lesbian girls have identified that feminist transition houses were helpful to them because they are often lesbian-positive and sometimes have openly lesbian staff.<sup>126</sup>

Girls named sexual harassment and sexual assault in youth shelters as the primary reasons why girl-only housing is a necessity.

Furthermore, youth safe house policies make them inaccessible to girls who are using drugs and their short stay periods don't offer stability. Safe houses limit stay periods to a maximum of between seven and 30 days. Throughout interviews, girls voiced that safe houses expect them to have their whole lives “together” and have a place to go to in a few days, and that this sets them up to become homeless. Some girls get creative in how they stay housed for longer than the requisite safe house period. One girl described:

*If you stay [in a safe house] that certain amount of days they kick you out and you have to be out for a certain amount of time to get back in.... That's what I was having trouble with. That's how I ended up on the streets...I'd stay at this [safe house] for too long and then I'd go to [another one] and stay too long and go back [to the first safe house] and they realized that I was jumping after a while, and they just told me that I had to get out...they figured I'd go home or something.*

Ultimately girls wind up on the street if they are unable to find respite and stability.

Most safe houses have a 72-hour clean policy that bars girls who are actively using drugs and are under the influence. Recently, the Homeless Action Plan of the City of Vancouver cautioned that “there are no beds available for youth with substance abuse problems.” In our interviews with advocates, we discovered that some safe houses workers will allow youth who have used substances in the last 72 hours into the house as long as youth don't use in front of other youth from the house. However, most often, girls who are actively using drugs are refused entry into houses and can be asked to leave.

For girls who are not using drugs, it is best not to be housed with young women who are in active addiction. A recent review of BC youth safe houses confirms that it is “hard for youth

who want to quit when others are using around them while at the safe house.” Young women we interviewed echoed this sentiment. One young woman left a long-term housing program for this very reason. She stated:

*I wasn't really involved in drugs or anything like that so it was hard to stay there.*

It is important that separate accessible and safe housing is created for both girls who are living with addictions and those who are not using substances. Young women who use drugs should be able to access housing that focuses on *both* harm reduction and access to treatment. According to members of our guiding group for this project, girls who are not using drugs should have access to houses where “everyone has to be clean.” This was felt very strongly by girls we interviewed, and by all of the women in our guiding group. Girl-only drug treatment that deals with underlying conditions of oppression and violence is critical, as is girl-only housing for girls who are not using or addicted to drugs or alcohol.

### Almost no access to subsidized housing

National and international researchers maintain that youth homelessness is a growing problem partly because so little affordable housing is accessible to young people. The chronological waiting system for subsidized housing in effect bars those most at risk of homelessness, young mothers and recently arrived immigrant women in particular, from access to affordable housing. Young moms and recent immigrant women must survive years of living in sub-standard housing or homelessness before they reach the top of the subsidized housing wait

Teenage girls have no access to subsidized housing in BC, despite having the legal ability to rent suites under the Residential Tenancy Act.

list.<sup>127</sup> Moreover, in some provinces, including British Columbia, youth who are on their own cannot access subsidized housing at all. Teenage girls have no access to subsidized housing in BC, despite having the legal ability to rent suites under the Residential Tenancy Act.<sup>128</sup> Therefore, many young women live with older exploitative males, abusive boyfriends and unsafe roommates, and in deplorable rooming houses because they cannot afford to live alone in decent housing.

Across Canada, many of the organizations that provide long-term housing to youth are run by Christian religious organizations. Young women who had lived in some of these long-term housing placements told us that they were sometimes asked to pray before meals, and that religious symbols were present in the physical environment. As religious groups have been devastating colonial agents in the lives of Aboriginal people, including through racist and abusive residential schools, young Aboriginal women often find these religious-group-run programs to be continuing agents of colonial control and to be highly alienating. One Aboriginal young woman we spoke to left such a housing program commenting that it was “too Christian,” a sentiment echoed by other Aboriginal girls we spoke to. Many young women, support workers and Aboriginal advocates maintain that religious-based housing is highly alienating, sometimes racist, and can't meet the needs of Aboriginal girls.

## Abdication of Responsibility Legislated

In Ontario, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland/Labrador, PEI, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, girls are not guaranteed child welfare support once they turn 16 years, at which time the province is no longer responsible for the child's protection. Indeed, these provinces and territories do not consider a 16-year-old a "child."<sup>129</sup> The irony remains that homeless girls have very little access to adult income assistance schemes because of stringent eligibility rules. Furthermore, youth under the age of 18 are ineligible for income assistance in some areas, such as Nunavut. Thus, girls between the ages of 16 and 18 who are on their own are without any financial support.<sup>130</sup> As the Child Welfare League of Canada has identified, this is in breach of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which defines a child as a person under the age of 18 with the right to specific government protection and assistance.<sup>131</sup> The child welfare ministries' current practices of abdicating responsibility for girls does not correspond with the National Homelessness Initiative's statement that even at the age of 18, independence is premature.

This evident age discrimination against young people was challenged in a recent Nunavut Court of Justice case, *S.(J) v. Nunavut (Minister of Health and Social Services)* in which the court found that the provincial Child and Family Services Act discriminates against young people who are between 16 and 18 years of age by not guaranteeing them the basic necessities of life.

In this case, a young Aboriginal boy who was severely visually impaired lost his "in care" status once he turned 16 and was left with virtually no government aid.

The judge found:

*It is essential that the Government of Nunavut considers the appropriate legislative provisions for the care of young people between the ages of 16 and 18. We have many who are homeless, parentless and poor and are not being adequately served by the present legislation.<sup>132</sup>*

# Strategy

## A Rights-Based Approach Along Feminist Principles

Girl homelessness must first be understood and responded to as the product of social inequality and violence in the lives of girls and their mothers. Any response to girl homelessness must address sexual abuse, colonization and poverty. Housing alone is not sufficient to resolve homelessness among young women. Supportive environments, like girl- and women-only foster homes and supported living situations (for example subsidized female co-op suites and supported subsidized suites) are best suited for providing safe housing to girls who are on their own.



## Ten Ways to Prevent Girl Homelessness

1. Respond immediately to violence against girls.
2. Reframe girl homelessness from “running away” or being a child welfare issue to a feminist issue in which girls are experiencing violence and oppression and thus in need of a feminist response to violence.
3. Put 10% of federal money earmarked for anti-homelessness initiatives towards preventing girl homelessness.
4. Anti-homelessness initiatives for girls must stem from women’s equality ministries and Status of Women Canada, and from provincial ministries that fund transition houses (not from child welfare ministries).
5. Connect girls to women in their families (mothers, aunties, grandmothers) and to women in their communities.
6. Gender government youth policies across Canada and base policies on equality principles so that they meet the needs of girls.
7. Women’s groups must advocate, both individually and systemically, for the rights of girls, especially girls who are marginalized because of poverty.
8. Advocate for girls’ transition houses, rent subsidies and supports for homeless girls Canada-wide.
9. Become a feminist foster mom.
10. Bring all provincial child welfare legislation in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and guarantee all children under the age of majority support from child welfare ministries.

# Government Actions

## Rights of Aboriginal girls

The Canadian government must specifically uphold the inherent rights of Aboriginal girls and make every effort to remedy the consequences of colonization. In so doing, the Canadian government must engage the leadership of the Native Women's Association of Canada, Pauktuutit<sup>133</sup> and provincial/territorial Indigenous grassroots women's groups.

## Economic security

Economic security must be legally recognized as a constitutional right in Canada. Canada must take immediate action to alleviate poverty in the lives of teenage girls and their families by ensuring that all persons have access to the means by which to live in peace, security and dignity. Given that many children are taken into care because their mothers are poor, that so many girls who are or have been in care become homeless, and that Aboriginal girls are pulled out of their families and cultural communities, child welfare ministries should work to alleviate this situation and should support mothers to parent their children. Mothers, including teen moms, need housing and childcare that is both safe and affordable, as well as community support.

## Federal and provincial plan to address homelessness

The federal government, along with the provinces, must create an informed plan for the creation of a continuum of housing options for homeless people, including a specific plan for stopping girl homelessness. To date, Canada does not have a strategic and coordinated provincial/territorial or national approach to housing homeless teenagers nor any national anti-homelessness plan. Although the provinces hold constitutional responsibility for housing, the federal government has a distinct role in ensuring that people are housed decently across Canada. For example, under the Canadian Constitution, the federal and provincial governments share joint responsibility for guaranteeing public services of a reasonable quality to all Canadians.<sup>134</sup> Further, under the National Housing Act, it is the federal government that is responsible for "the improvement of housing and living conditions."<sup>135</sup> Finally, "the federal government...is responsible for Canada's compliance with international human rights law guaranteeing the right to adequate housing."<sup>136</sup>

## Girl-specific homelessness action

The government of Canada and provincial governments must allocate specific funds towards ending girl homelessness. As per the recommendation of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women that governments should "give explicit attention to the girl child in budget processes at all levels, including allocation of resources,"<sup>137</sup> funds must be specifically earmarked for tackling girl homelessness. Given that between 6–12% of the homeless in large cities across Canada are teenage girls,<sup>138</sup> a minimum of 6% of federal funding for anti-homelessness initiatives should be allocated to programs to end girl homelessness, including funding for both emergency transition housing and subsidized supported housing. In order

for young women to transition from poverty, homelessness and a life of instability and male violence, a continuum of housing options that addresses girls' specific and diverse needs is essential.

The federal government must allocate specific proportionate funds to housing options for homeless girls. The government of Canada must fund long-term subsidized housing for homeless teenage girls, in particular teenage mothers who are at serious risk of homelessness and state apprehension of their children. Subsidized housing and rent subsidies must be allocated specifically for teenage girls living in poverty, especially to those who are young mothers. There is urgent need for suites in Aboriginal subsidized housing designated for young women. Aboriginal women's organizations must be funded to advocate for and/or provide subsidized housing for Aboriginal teenage girls who are homeless.

### Ending violence against girls

Canada must take steps to prevent and respond to violence against girls, especially the extreme rate of violence against Indigenous girls. Canada must remove and prosecute the perpetrators of violence in the home, especially in cases of child sexual abuse. Girls must be free from violence within their own homes and without fear of being removed if they report sexual or physical abuse by male family members. Provincial child welfare ministries must create policies to remove sexual abusers from the home when sexual abuse is being investigated or has been found, instead of removing the child. When a child is removed from her home in cases of abuse, she is made to feel that she has done something wrong. Moreover, if the perpetrator is left in the home and is not criminally charged, he continues to be a danger to other children (and likely women).

Canada must ensure that the criminal justice response to violence against girls is immediate, thorough and complies with girls' right to equality under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

### Girl-only transitional housing

Canada must provide supports such as girl-only transitional housing to girls who are escaping violence and/or who are homeless. Given that male violence is pervasive in the lives of teenage girls who are homeless, and that it is often the reason for their homelessness, we believe that services similar to those available to adult women who are escaping violence need to be created for teenage girls. Girls' transition houses must be modeled after transition houses for adult women and be created specifically for girls who are on their own. The UN Commission on the Status of Women recently recommended that governments "provide age-appropriate and gender-sensitive services to girls subjected to all forms of gender-based violence."<sup>139</sup>

Aboriginal women's organizations must be supported financially to create transition houses for Aboriginal teenage girls who are homeless.

Justice for Girls has formulated a series of principles on providing housing to homeless teenage girls based on our interviews with girls and activists and under the direction of our guiding group. The full listing of housing principles can be found at Appendix A.



Transition house policies must respond to the needs of marginalized girls. Policies in emergency housing for girls must meet the needs of those who are highly marginalized, and as such we have written a girls' transition house policy which can be found at Appendix B.

### Women's equality policy

Programs and policies for teenage girls must be developed and administered under the auspices of Status of Women Canada and provincial/territorial women's equality ministries.

Such policies and programs must be understood and developed as part of a response to social inequalities in Canada.

### Funding for girl-specific advocacy

Canada must fund girls' rights, advocacy and anti-violence centres in order to properly respond to male violence against girls and to protect the social, economic and cultural rights of teenage girls in Canada. As per the recommendation of the UN Commission on the Status of Women that governments "facilitate girls' empowerment, including through developing and adequately funding safe and supportive spaces."<sup>140</sup>

### Addiction treatment for girls

Canada, along with the provinces and territories, must fund detox services and residential and non-residential addiction treatment programs specifically for teenage girls. Treatment programs should be provided by community and health agencies. Girl-only detox and treatment programs which respond to the multiple issues girls face, including male violence and exploitation, are critical for girls who are homeless and addicted. Voluntary detox and treatment are critical to helping girls be safe and healthy.

### Gender-specific youth policy

Canada must revise youth policies and programs, both federal and provincial, to make them gender specific. Housing (transitional and long-term), anti-violence/advocacy centres, addictions treatment and detox programs and education and health services—that are specifically designed to meet the needs of girls—are critical in order to address current social inequalities and to meet Canada's obligations to girls' equality under Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the present Covenant.

### Stop criminalizing girls

The government of Canada, as well as provincial and territorial governments and courts, must stop the criminalization, incarceration and forced confinement of teenage girls in response to poverty, male violence and colonization. Provincial legislation which fails to comply with the federal Youth Criminal Justice Act by allowing for forced confinement for girls' own "protection" must be rescinded, so that provinces are in agreement with federal legislation, including the Charter. The incarceration and forceful confinement of girls for their own "protection" must stop.

## Access to Education

Education is an integral part of being able to move out of poverty. As such, housing must be connected to accessible education programming for girls. Moreover, the following initiatives should be undertaken:

- Alternative educational programs specifically designed for homeless girls must be developed across Canada.
- Bus passes for all children under age 19 should be free. Free transportation allows children to travel to and from school. Free bus passes would also allow girls to leave abusive environments and move around more freely.
- Professional development and training in areas of social inequality, specifically as it relates to issues of poverty, sexism, racism and homophobia, should be a part of training for teachers, school administrators and personnel.
- Anti-racist, anti-homophobia and anti-sexist education and policy development should be a part of the education system Canada-wide.
- Governments and community groups must shift the focus of programs for homeless youth from one of employment training and “employability” to that of access to education.

## Community and Feminist Actions

### Women’s groups must respond and be active in the fight for girls’ equality

Women’s groups must assume an active role in advocating for the rights of girls in all institutions. In particular, groups must become actively involved in the effort to prevent girl homelessness. Because of their feminist understanding of women’s rights and violence against women and girls, women’s groups are very well situated to advocate for girls. Youth organizations often do not have the necessary understanding of gender, power and violence against girls to respond to girl homelessness. Also, youth organizations are often funded by child welfare ministries that girls distrust based on their negative experiences.

### Encourage and support girls’ relationships with their mothers and female family members

Mothers, aunties and grandmothers are the best source of safety, support and strength for teenage girls. Girls often choose to stay in contact with their mothers and other female family members when they are homeless and in unstable housing. A recent review of BC youth safe houses found that many youth (38%) keep in touch with their moms when they are staying in safe houses,<sup>141</sup> and most girls we interviewed were still in contact with their mothers. During interviews, young women frequently related the significance of this link in their lives. This is particularly true for Aboriginal girls, who identified that strong connections to their families are inherently necessary for their sense of self and well-being.

## Access to women's transition houses for teenage girls escaping male violence

Women's groups can actively support young women by opening the doors of transition houses to teenage girls who are escaping male violence. Some transition houses already house young women under 19. Young women we spoke to expressed their appreciation for those transition houses that allowed them to stay despite their young age. They said they identified with the other women in the houses and liked that the homes were women-only spaces. Transition houses could designate a youth bed to be reserved for young women escaping violence.

## Girls' and women's co-ops with support services

The creation of subsidized co-operative housing for both teenage girls and adult women will significantly decrease young women's homelessness and marginalization and increase their safety. Young women who are homeless need housing that allows them both a degree of independence and community support. As such, co-operative housing for both women and teenage girls may help young women to have both safety and some independence. Co-ops should include subsidized suites for teenage girls, including teen moms; and for adult women, including mothers with children.

Allocating suites to mothers makes it possible for them to leave exploitative and abusive men who may also become violent to their daughters. This arrangement also makes it possible for women and young women who have experienced violence to link together and build community. Co-ops can create safety for mothers and daughters by providing safe housing to girls and women at various stages in their lives.

The principles and agreements of such co-ops could follow the Justice for Girls' Principles of Respectful Housing for Homeless Girls in Appendix A.

## Community projects to recruit feminist foster moms

Girls who are taken into the care of the government need safe and supportive foster homes where caregivers understand their lived realities of male violence. While care should be taken to ensure that girls are first placed in homes of their family members, this is not always possible. One way to support girls and prevent them from becoming homeless is to provide them with foster homes that are girl- and woman-only and thus safer than mixed-gender homes. In these homes, girls' relationships with their mothers, aunts and grandmothers would be encouraged (if young women wish to continue contact). Foster moms would receive feminist education on issues like violence against girls, addictions, and homophobia, to better understand the realities experienced by girls in their care. Another main objective of a feminist foster moms program would be to find and support Indigenous foster mothers for Indigenous girls in the care of the government. Indigenous women's groups must be financially supported to create a framework of such feminist foster homes that respond to the needs of Indigenous girls in government care.

Women's rights groups must take on the challenge of recruiting, training and supporting feminist foster moms, and creating networks that support and promote feminist foster parenting.

## Recommendations for Working with Girls Who are Sexually Exploited

Girls who are sexually exploited and abused through prostitution require an enormous amount of support to bring them into safety and to help them exit prostitution. Often, women and girls in prostitution cannot admit, even to themselves, that they are being exploited and abused. They may need to keep up a facade of control because the oppression and violence they face is so extreme. For this reason it is important to approach young women slowly and carefully in terms of building relationships with them and talking about the extreme violence they have experienced.

Responding to the social and economic conditions that force young women into prostitution—poverty, sexual abuse and other forms of male violence, colonization—is key to working with them. It is not enough to simply faintly reduce the harm of prostitution by offering girls ways to be safer while selling their bodies to sexually abusive adult men. Prostitution must be responded to as a form of violence against women and girls and rejected as an inevitable social condition or time-honoured profession.

When working with young women who have been abused by organized pimps, one also needs to understand the insidiousness and extreme violence of pimping—which involves isolating young women in the world of prostitution, employing extreme physical violence, including various techniques of torture, and intense psychological control over young women—in order to assist young women in getting out of prostitution. All of pimps’ methods are aimed at having control, especially control over the mentality of young women they are pimping.

Working with young women in prostitution requires a careful, patient, flexible, age appropriate and feminist approach. In the face of other peoples’ criticism of pimps, many young women respond with defensiveness, similar to a woman who is battered defending her husband at the suggestion that he is an abuser. When working with girls who are sexually exploited it is important to first focus on building trust. This can be done by advocating for girls and challenging the many institutions that have failed them and/or continue to oppress them and where injustices and discriminatory treatment is the norm. Once a trusting relationship is established, girls often feel more comfortable disclosing the sexual and physical abuse of prostitution. When talking to girls it is critical to link domestic sexual abuse with the sexual exploitation they are currently experiencing. It is important to tell the young woman, “You don’t have to do that anymore” and to help her imagine life beyond prostitution and sexual abuse. Most girls who are being exploited have no sense of entitlement to safety, economic security, freedom, justice or dignity. It is critical to build their sense of entitlement and assist them in developing hope and a sense of future.

Encouraging re-admission into a girls’ transition house is essential. It is important to understand that the process of exiting prostitution takes time and it may take numerous attempts before a young woman is free from the abuse and exploitation of prostitution—much like it takes time for women to leave violent partners in intimate relationships.

## Creating a Girls' Feminist Housing Strategy in Your Own Community

We hope that the methods we used to create our housing strategy will be a roadmap for other organizations that want to end girl homelessness in their communities. The project was based in the lived and learned knowledge of poverty and homelessness among a diverse group of young women and women. Some methods we used to ensure the project was young-woman-led and respectful of their/our knowledge include:

- The Housing Strategy Coordinator and other women involved (through contracts, as staff and as a guiding group to the project) were young women who have lived in poverty, including many who had been homeless as girls.
- The strategy was grounded in Justice for Girls, an anti-oppression organization that advocates for the rights of marginalized girls. We believe that by advancing the rights of girls and giving them access to resources, (rather than blaming young women or their mothers for being poor) we can help girls move into safe, supported lives and realize girls' human rights.
- We interviewed a wide range of young women, in terms of race, sexual orientation, age and experiences. We aimed to capture the specific needs of diverse groups of girls in the report.
- We carried out the literature review with a particular eye to what was missing in research of girl homelessness. We found that teenage girl homelessness is often eclipsed in writing about youth homelessness. Intersections of oppression that girls experience—like homophobia and heterosexism, racism, colonization, poverty and sexism—are rarely researched. Often these intersections are not taken into account in designing housing for homeless girls, or programs for youth in general.
- A guiding group made up of women with a range of knowledge and personal experience of homelessness helped to guide the growth of the project, steer the interview questions and formulate potential solutions to girl homelessness.
- A young Indigenous woman who had been homeless as a teen was hired as the intern for this project and helped JFG link with other organizations, especially Aboriginal groups in other areas of Vancouver. Her specific knowledge about Aboriginal girl homelessness was invaluable in the building of this project.
- We recognize that racialized young women experience specific and significant barriers and oppression. JFG hired a very knowledgeable activist who had been homeless and who is a racialized refugee woman to help carry out interviews with racialized teenage girls about their experiences of homelessness and other oppressions. We collaboratively disseminated interviews with girls to determine what issues were critical to understanding homelessness in the lives of racialized girls.
- We began with the understanding that “bricks and mortar” approaches to creating housing for homeless young women have not proven successful because a room alone will not prevent girl homelessness. Instead we sought to create a descriptive plan and set of principles for providing accessible, safe housing that responds to the needs of young women, as well as a plan for how to promote and enforce their human rights.

## Actions at the International Level

A Special Rapporteur on the Rights of the Girl Child must be appointed by the United Nations to guarantee that there is a mechanism for challenging breaches of girls' human rights at the international level. In order to meet girls' needs, and address issues of violence, human rights must be interpreted in a way that is meaningful specifically to girls. A Special Rapporteur can accomplish this by identifying human rights abuses, bringing international attention to the problems experienced by girls internationally, and advocating for their needs. The right to adequate housing, which is inseparable from other social, cultural, economic, civil and political rights, must be interpreted as it relates to girls within a specific girls' rights convention. This could best be accomplished by a Rapporteur who focuses specifically on girls' equality rights.

There is a desperate need for the integration of girls' rights in international law. The development of a specific girls' convention may further promote and protect girls' international human rights. Further, the development of an optional protocol under this proposed convention would allow redress for specific human rights violations. Such a mechanism would provide an advocacy tool for relief in concrete cases and provide a framework for inquiry into individual cases.

Once girls are specifically integrated into the international legal framework there will exist a forum from which their distinct needs can be addressed. International recognition of girls as a specific group with specific needs will create a tool that can either directly or inadvertently influence judicial decision making, the drafting of legislation and formulation of government policy. The mere possibility that complaints may be brought forth on an international forum will encourage governments to ensure that there are adequate and effective remedies for violations of girls' rights.

## APPENDIX A

# Justice for Girls' Principles of Respectful Housing for Homeless Girls

## Basic Understandings

We understand that girls are a diverse group of people who face challenges and oppression on many levels because of racism, sexism, violence, poverty, homophobia and ableism. In order to help girls we must recognize their lived realities.

We understand that male violence affects the lives of girls every day and that girls have many coping strategies for dealing with and surviving abuse. We understand that to stop girl homelessness we must stop violence against girls, and help girls build a sense of entitlement to safety.

## Principles

The following principles should be followed when planning, building and running housing for homeless teenage girls.

### Sustainable

Housing programs must be long-term and sustainable. The project (i.e. house, rent subsidy program, etc.) should be planned in a way that it is ongoing. When planning a project prepare for at least three years of functioning at a time. One-year short-term projects leave young women without security. From the outset of a pilot project, work towards acquiring the future funding necessary to sustain the project for the two following years. Insist that funding agencies commit to ongoing funds of at least three years. Do not be tempted into short-term funding for housing projects.

### Safe

Housing created for teenage girls must be safe. A transition house or treatment program for girls *must be girls-only and staffed by women*. Some housing programs may be coeducational in certain circumstances, for example subsidized housing suites. At the same time, the primary aim should be to create safe, girl-only spaces for girls who are homeless.

Housing must be structurally safe and comfortable to live in.

We understand that for girls to be safe they must be free from racism, homophobia, poverty,

sexism and other oppression. We see this as part of our work towards equality and as a way of making sure that the needs of diverse girls in terms of their race, class, culture, sexuality and ability are met. Housing and supports should be continually evaluated as to whether and how they are meeting this mandate. Housing programs must be structured to be anti-racist and anti-homophobic and planned and run by diverse groups of women including racialized women, Aboriginal women, lesbian women, women who have lived in poverty and differently-abled women.

While safety is the primary concern of this collective, we believe that young women who have acted out anger in a housing situation deserve a chance to come back into the house, provided that they understand they have a responsibility to others living there to treat them respectfully. When a young woman has been violent against another person in the house, staff must work as a collective in deciding whether she should leave the house. Evictions are an extreme last resort and only considered because of serious acts which endanger another person's safety. For this purpose, shouting and throwing objects for example, may not be reasons for eviction, unless someone is put in danger.

### Supportive

We understand that girl homelessness cannot be fixed by providing a room and a bed alone. All housing for homeless girls must include adequate supports for the young women who live there. Counseling and education programs must be available on site.

Women working with girls who are in any form of housing for homeless girls must be advocates for the girls and their rights. Advocating goes beyond merely listening, and involves proactive action in pursuit of equality for young women.

### Understanding

Any women staff, whether working in a house or as support people to girls living in subsidized apartments or other housing programs, must be a source of support for young women through "relapse." Relapse may include returning to relationships with abusive males, addictions or prostitution. We encourage readmissions because we understand that girls always need a safe place to come back to.

Girl homelessness is not inevitable and no situation is hopeless. We remember that sometimes being safe for a few nights and knowing what that feels like can give hope to a young woman.

## Agreements

Women and girls, both as staff and as young women living in the house, should make agreements with each other rather than making rules. Agreements should not be designed as a method of control over young women. We make agreements because we strive to make the house a safe home for the young women living in it and to avoid making the house into an institutional environment. Our house agreements must all centre around creating a safe environment for the young women. Safety and equality should be the primary "rules" in the house. Ultimately, house agreements are to be written according to these feminist principles of social justice.



Other house agreements should include: to practice anti-racism and anti-homophobia; to keep the house girl-only; and to not be violent towards any other person in the house. In a drug-free house we agree that there are not to be any drugs or alcohol in the house, and no use of these substances inside in the house.

## Addictions and Distinct Housing

We believe it is critical to have distinct housing for girls who are in active addictions and those who are choosing not to use addictive substances. We make a distinction between a house that is for girls who are not using drugs and alcohol or are in recovery and housing for girls who are in active addiction. We believe it is necessary to have separate housing for girls who are in either of these situations.

We believe that treatment for girls who are in active addictions must be created and run according to principles similar to these housing principles. Advocating for safe, girl-only treatment is a large part of our work towards ending girl homelessness. We believe that no one's situation is hopeless, and that girls have a right to accessible safe treatment.

## Other Guiding Principles

### Community

Housing should be based in a community that fosters a sense of acceptance and where girls will feel comfortable. To the extent that it is possible, housing should be based in girls' home communities, provided they wish to remain or return there.

### Mothers matter

We believe that girls' links to their mothers, and to other female family members such as aunts and grandmothers, are very important. We encourage and help girls build their relationships with their mothers and other female family members (provided girls are willing to have contact). We respect the situations and difficulties faced by mothers.

### We believe girls

We believe young women when they tell us about their lives and the violence (including the most extreme forms of violence) they have experienced. Many times girls are met with disbelief and questioned when they describe violence they have experienced. It is harmful to the healing process if girls are met with disbelief when they speak of the oppression and abuse they have experienced.

### Long-term

We operate under the principle that "You can stay as long as you need to." Projects and programs should always aim to be long-term.

## APPENDIX B

# Girls' Transition House Policy

TRANSITION HOUSES MUST BE GIRLS-ONLY and staffed by women.

THEY SHOULD BE BASED ON GRASSROOTS FEMINIST PRINCIPLES of transitional housing and created to provide respite and stability in a flexible environment. The philosophy of the house must be based in principles of equality, and support must be framed as a response and resistance to oppression.

STAFF MUST TAKE DIRECTION FROM THE YOUNG WOMEN on what they want in their lives and what changes they would like to make. In particular, direction must be taken from young women with regard to their contact with the child welfare ministry.

ENCOURAGE GIRLS TO SEEK SUPPORT from people who they define as their family and community, especially female family members.

WHEN A YOUNG WOMAN FIRST ARRIVES AT A TRANSITION HOUSE, she should be given time—at least several days—to settle in and rest. Girls should not be required to make plans and set goals within the first few days of entering a house. Girls are often in times of crisis upon entering a transition house and need time to recuperate before making future plans.

HOUSES SHOULD EVALUATE, THROUGH AN ONGOING PROCESS, whether they are accessible to racialized girls, lesbian and bisexual girls, young moms and Aboriginal girls to increase girls' access to the house. Houses and long-term housing programs should hire staff who are diverse in terms of race, sexual orientation and experiences of homelessness and poverty.

TRANSITION HOUSES NEED TO HAVE FLEXIBLE curfew hours.

HOUSES MUST BE ACCESSIBLE to young mothers with children.

HOUSES MUST BE OPEN TO READMISSIONS from girls and evictions must be an extreme last resort.

IN EACH COMMUNITY, there should be at least one girls' transition house that accepts young women who are under the influence of drugs or alcohol. At the same time, transition houses for girls who are choosing not to use addictive substances must be available.

GIRLS MUST BE ABLE TO LOCK THE DOOR TO THEIR OWN ROOM. Privacy is critical to allowing girls to feel safe and like their space is their own. This is especially important for girls who have experienced sexual exploitation and extreme violence at the hands of pimps (pimps often have keys to the rooms or suites of girls they exploit, they terrorize girls by entering their space, and enacting extreme brutality including rape).

GIRL-ONLY TRANSITION HOUSES MUST BE CREATED IN COMMUNITIES ACROSS CANADA—in rural, urban and northern communities.

RESOURCES, SUCH AS SCHOOLING AND COUNSELING, should be available in the house so that girls can easily access them.

# Notes & References

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- Within the Lower Mainland, 12% of the homeless are teenage girls. This percentage is based on a compilation of statistics, as follows: The 2002 *Research Project on Homelessness in the Greater Vancouver Regional District* found that youth make up about 23-28% of the homeless in the GVRD. According to studies such as *No Place to Call Home: A Profile of Street Youth in BC-2001*, *Between the Cracks: Homeless Youth in Vancouver 2002*, and according to the 2003/04 Vancouver Underage Safe House statistics, girls make up about 42-53% of the youth homeless in the GVRD.
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# MORE THAN BRICKS & MORTAR

## A Rights-Based Strategy to Prevent Girl Homelessness in Canada

In 2004, Justice for Girls embarked on a three-year project to identify pathways to, impacts of, and solutions to girl homelessness in Canada. Our aim was to create a detailed and comprehensive strategy for ending girl homelessness in Canada.

This strategy incorporates the knowledge of women and girls with whom we have talked and whose writings we have read. It is based on the individual and collective experiences of girls and young women; it is a response to violations of their rights that they described; and it articulates what they have told us they need in order to experience freedom, dignity and safety in their lives. Girls and women who have experienced poverty and homelessness led the direction, content and work of the project and this report is the culmination of that work.

The report concludes that prevention of and responses to girl homelessness must begin with the purpose of achieving girls' basic human rights and especially freedom from male violence. Ultimately, we hope that other community groups will embrace rights-based strategies to ending girl homelessness and girls' human rights will become a reality in Canada and around the world.

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**JUSTICE FOR GIRLS advocates for the rights of  
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