

HIGHLIGHTS



A survey of shelter and housing needs for women and girls including two-spirited and Indigenous women, who have a history of involvement in the sex industry, in the context of the pandemic.



Femmes et Égalité
des genres Canada

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un toit
pour elles

*There are words that attract
propel us forward faster than our
limits
words to justify every movement
every step*

- MURIELLE ROCK

Innu de Mani-Utenam, Innu of Mani-Utenam, extract from the poem "Words" in
Languages of Our Land, Indigenous Poems and Stories from Quebec.



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Cover image: An indigenous percussionist protests in Montreal on July 1, 2021. | Andrej Ivanov / AFP.

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Context

The present survey was proposed as part of the project Un toit à soi, itself an important step towards autonomy and security, with the goal of clarifying the shelter and housing needs of Indigenous women and girls, including Two-Spirited women with a history of involvement in the sex industry, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Existing information on this issue was found to be insufficient or non-existent, with the most recent data dating back to 2014. To address this, at the start of 2022 our working group began a literature review and reached out to potential partners who might be interested in being part of the project.

Initially, we had planned to establish links with various Indigenous organizations, set up an advisory committee made up of Indigenous women who are active in the field, hire a researcher who was also Indigenous to carry out the research, and organize focus groups with women who have a history of involvement with the sex industry. We quickly realized the scale of the task and the difficulties involved.

In the context of decolonization of knowledge, current power relations, and according to OCAP principles, Indigenous members and organizations want to choose and conduct research on themes that concern them. Although our initiative to lead the project as a non-Indigenous organization made the opportunities for collaboration more complex, we succeeded thanks to the openness and positive response of certain organizations.

Goals

The goals of this survey are to document and disseminate the housing and shelter needs of Indigenous women and girls with a history of sexual exploitation, before, during and after the pandemic, as well as to identify the various obstacles that have impacted their access to safe housing and services.

While we acknowledge the fragmentary and non-exhaustive limitations of this document, it nevertheless opens the door to other potential work and research to be carried out by and for Indigenous women on issues of interest to them.

Methodology

This survey has been produced in accordance with two complementary principles of the feminist approach: feminist intervention and the feminist intersectional approach.

The feminist intersectional approach (FIA)¹ is a rights-based approach, recognising housing as a fundamental right. As such, it seeks to understand how the housing and shelter situation of Indigenous women and girls including Two-Spirited women is also affected by colonialism, following the framework used by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019), "Four Pathways that Maintain Colonial Violence."



¹L'intervention féministe : un modèle et des pratiques au cœur du mouvement des femmes québécois- Christine Corbeil et Isabelle Marchand, 2010, page 25

The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019) demonstrated how the housing and shelter situation of Indigenous women and girls is marked by colonialism, as well as the practices used to maintain colonial violence. This investigation brought to light the extent of the violence suffered by these women and girls, as well as the impact of the numerous acts of violence in all spheres of their lives.

Indigenous intersectional feminism is a form of feminism that recognizes the multiplicity of acts of oppression based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, and other aspects of identity, particularly for Indigenous women in Canada and Quebec. *"Indigenous feminism" takes shape through decolonization. The Western feminists' critique of patriarchy, which pits men against women, does not correspond to the values of Indigenous people, who are more inclined to consider everyone in the search for solutions. Indigenous women criticize not only the patriarchy brought about by colonization, but also the system that encompasses this colonization.*"

Natanaël Béguin Paul, Fondation Tshuapamitin, 2023

Foundations of FIA

A socio-political analysis

completed following a socio-structural method, taking into account the impact of power relations between the sexes and their consequences on women, their environment, their self-representation, and their ability to control their own destiny.²

An intersectional perspective

Considers the intersection between different types of discrimination (class, gender, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, religion, disability, etc.) when analyzing problems and developing practices. And;

A holistic approach

within which the cognitive, emotional, physical, and material dimensions must all be taken into consideration during the feminist intervention process.³

² Ibid, page 27

³ Worell and Remer, 2003.

Finally, the following survey is based on a review of the literature as well as our analysis of responses to a questionnaire sent to support workers employed at women's organizations that offer services to Indigenous women and girls, including Two-Spirited women with a history of involvement in the sex industry.

This method allowed us to consider the specific needs of these women, while recognizing the cultural differences that exist and working to better understand and integrate them into our future collaborations.

We are very grateful to the organizations and individuals who have shared their knowledge and practices with us throughout this project and beyond.

What the literature review reveals

About the issues faced by Indigenous people throughout their colonial history, including matters of shelter and housing.

The homelessness experienced by Indigenous, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples finds its roots in the structural violence of their colonial history, which continues to this day.

Displacement and a forced sedentary lifestyle removed from the traditional biopsychosocial

and spiritual context have increased and accelerated the movement of Indigenous peoples towards cities, as living conditions within the communities are very difficult. *“Additionally, there continues to be severe underfunding for on-reserve housing and infrastructure, encouraging migration to urban centres. For example, lack of plumbing and electricity, poor insulation, mould, lack of major repairs, and overcrowding continues*



Photo: Maison longue nationale de Wendake (Québec), Galerie photo <https://tourismewendake.ca/>

to impact a significant proportion of reserves. Although Canada has more freshwater than anywhere else in the world, 75% of reserves have contaminated water, with some communities declaring a state of emergency because of toxic chemical levels in the water.”⁴



PHOTO: JONATHAN HAYWARD
LA PRESSE CANADIENNE

About the major and systemic insecurities surrounding access to housing for Indigenous women and girls, and the impact of the pandemic on housing and shelter.

Housing-related challenges in Indigenous communities are marked by a history of colonization and the marginalization of these communities in Canada through established systemic and institutional constraints. In particular, recurrent barriers limiting access to safe, decent housing specifically designed for Indigenous women and girls are rooted in colonial oppression.

Factors such as low income and overcrowded housing have also disproportionately affected the living conditions of Indigenous women and girls as compared to the general Canadian population. Indeed, they are more likely to be unemployed or to earn insufficient wages, and they experience more hidden homelessness, meaning they live in precarious, temporary and/or overcrowded housing situations and survive in conditions of severe insecurity. Finally, poverty and the lack of opportunities to improve their situation are structural barriers that affect all aspects of their lives.⁵ As mentioned below, they are more likely to experience violence, including sexual violence.

⁴ Lou Seltz et Dimitrios Roussopoulos (2020). MONTRÉAL HOMELESSNESS & INDIGENOUS HOUSING : A Policy report with recommendations for action, Report prepared by Milton-Parc Citizens Committee, 2020, pag 8

⁵ NWAC, 2020, Final report to Indigenous Housing: Policy and Engagement, Service Canada

A recurring theme in the research is the unavailability of culturally adapted services or, when they are available, the issue that they are offered too far from where certain populations are located.⁶ "It is all the more difficult for Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people because services are seldom culturally sensitive and safe. For example, the public services in Quebec for dealing with domestic violence focus on separating the spouses to end the violence, whereas Indigenous women are instead seeking services that take a holistic approach to intervention which includes all family members."



About the shelter and housing conditions of women and girls, including Indigenous and Two-Spirited women, who are or have been involved in the sex industry in Canada and Quebec

Indigenous women and girls have experienced and continue to experience violence, including sexual violence, within their own homes, families, and communities. Deplorable housing conditions, poverty, and lack of positive opportunities increase the risk of physical, mental, and sexual violence, making Indigenous women and girls more vulnerable to entering prostitution.



The over-representation of Indigenous women and girls in sexual exploitation and trafficking has a long history in Canada, "however, the identified root causes never seem to change. These are the impact of colonialism on Aboriginal societies, the legacies of the residential schools and their inter-generational effects, family violence, childhood abuse, poverty, homelessness, lack of basic survival necessities, race and gender-based discrimination, lack of education, migration, and substance addictions."⁷

⁶ Reclaiming Power and Place: a supplementary report of the national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, Kepec-Quebec. 2019, Vol 2, pag 45

⁷ Native Woman's Association of Canada; Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of Aboriginal Women and Girls: Literature Review and Key Informant Interviews Final Report 2014, P11

Statistics confirm that the continuum of violence and abuse experienced during childhood has led to the exchange of sexual services for housing, food, and so on, and/or to entry into prostitution networks.

“Various studies⁸ have shown that sexual abuse is a leading cause of homelessness among girls, as they are either forced to leave home to escape sexual abuse or are forcibly removed from their homes for their protection.⁹ Once Indigenous girls leave home, their vulnerability increases: Homelessness exposes women to an additional range of physical and emotional dangers. Homeless women, particularly young women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, sexual trafficking, and drug abuse. Homeless Indigenous women were also reported to be at higher risk of systematic murder/disappearance.” Cherry Smiley – 2010

The Questionnaire

We developed a questionnaire intended for support workers from Indigenous organizations, to help us collect factual data rather than a questionnaire with psychometric properties. The questionnaire includes 13 questions that are mostly multiple-choice, divided into 3 sections. In all, we had 13 participants comprised of support workers or managers and field workers from 6 participating organizations.

The goals of the questionnaire:

- ✓ Understand how Indigenous women identify their experiences in relation to the sex industry.
- ✓ Learn whether these women talk about their experiences in the sex industry with support workers
- ✓ Determine the housing situation of the women concerned.
- ✓ Determine the the type of support sought by the women in terms of accommodation and housing.
- ✓ Understand their needs in terms of services within the support organizations.
- ✓ Identify the accommodation and housing preferences of the women concerned.
- ✓ Understand how the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected their accommodation and housing situations

⁸ Asia Czapska, Annabel Webb and Nura Taefi, *More Than Bricks and Mortar: A Rights-Based Strategy to Prevent Girl Homelessness in Canada*, report of Justice for Girls (Vancouver, BC: 2008): 33.

⁹ Cherry Kingsley and Melanie Mark, *Sacred Lives: Canadian Aboriginal Children and Youth Speak Out about Sexual Exploitation*, report of Save the Children Canada (2000): P4.

Organization	Population served by the organization
Centre d'amitié autochtone de La Tuque	First nations, Inuit and Métis
Projet Autochtone du Québec - PAQ	First Nations, Inuit and Métis
Centre Asperimowin du Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw	First nations, Inuit and Métis
Chez Doris	Inuit women
Centre d'hébergement Tipinuaikan	First nations and Métis women
Centre Ashpukun Mitshuap	First nations women

The table above shows the participating organizations and the populations they serve within the different regions of Quebec. These organizations offer a variety of services and support. We focused on interventions with women and girls, including Two-Spirited women.

Results

How Indigenous women identify and talk, or not, about their experiences related to the sex industry

From the responses received, we learned that many Indigenous women and girls, including Two-Spirited women with a history of involvement in the sex industry, have exchanged sexual favors for services such as housing, food and clothing, or money. There have also been exchanges of sexual favors for drugs. As a result, the sex industry is still omnipresent for these women, highlighting the need for discussion within the organizations working with them, and for concrete actions such as prevention, raising awareness, and specific support. However, it is essential to take the time to build a bond of trust with them, so that they feel comfortable talking about their experience. An option worth exploring is to offer training to support workers on how to identify the specific needs of these women, and to use language that is adapted and non-judgmental.

According to the answers provided, 92% of the support workers consider that the Indigenous women and girls who frequent their organizations exchange or have exchanged sexual favors for money. 69% of them note that the women have made these exchanges for goods or services. 23% of workers report that some women have exchanged sex for drugs, or mention being victim of trafficking for sexual exploitation.



PHOTO : GETTY IMAGES / PAUL MCKINNON

More than 50% of the participating workers consider that most of the women and girls in question do not feel completely comfortable talking to them about their experiences in the sex industry. Nevertheless, 43% seem to have established a trusting relationship allowing them to discuss the topic:

"Girls take a while to open up. Generally speaking, it's not completely open. When they talk, [they] use words with double meanings to keep the conversation from being explicit. it's VERY rare and usually reserved for support workers or people they really trust. Sometimes they do it, but when they don't, it's often for fear of consequences from the people they're involved with (i.e. Johns, those who traffic them, etc.). Usually, when people do open up, they don't give too many details."

Comment from a case worker in the context of the survey

Housing situation, type of housing and accommodation support, and services requested for women

Shelter is cited as the most urgent need expressed by Indigenous women and girls, including Two-Spirited women who have resorted to the sex industry, when seeking help from participating organizations. Other necessary services include food assistance, protection, and front-line services (street work).

The housing situation of these women is very precarious, as most of them have no fixed address or are staying with a friend. The support workers report that finding housing is the most sought-after service when it comes to accommodation.

The most frequently cited needs/services include housing or help in finding it (mentioned by 100% of support workers), and access to physical and mental health services (mentioned by 69%). In the same response, support workers mentioned emergency food assistance, clothing donation and protection, and front-line services (street work). 46% placed advocacy services, social services, and protection for the women and their families within their communities and towns in third place. In last place, 15% mentioned employability services.

According to 92% of the support workers, many women have no fixed address, while (according to 46%) others live temporarily with a friend or family member. On the same level, 23% mentioned the following housing locations: housing rented on a temporary basis, with roommates, or at a women's hostel. For 38%, the women's place of residence is in housing for Indigenous peoples. According to 15%, only a few women live in a proper home, apartment, or house.

The housing and shelter needs of Indigenous women and girls with a history of involvement in the sex industry are varied. The main needs identified by support workers are: the need for referral and assistance in finding housing for 84%, emergency housing and accommodations with culturally and spiritually adapted services for 76%, the search for transitional housing for 61%, finding affordable housing for 69%, the need for administrative support to access accommodation and housing resources for 53%, and the need for a better understanding of their rights as tenants for 46%. One response also points out that some women who obtain transitional housing may be forced to prostitute themselves further, as they experience pressure related to now having a stable place to receive clients.



The Effects of the Pandemic COVID -19

The results show that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant negative impact on access to housing and shelter for Indigenous women and girls with a history of involvement in the sex industry. According to most support workers (100%), the women in question have been driven to homelessness or hidden homelessness, while between 38% and 46% of support workers assert that the women have been forced to leave their communities, or to return to them. According to 69% of support workers, the women felt forced to live on the streets, or to return to them. Women also had difficulty finding affordable housing and accessing other important resources. Moreover, the pandemic has exacerbated other problems, including invisible violence, difficulties in seeking help, a decrease in women's incomes, an increase in drug circulation in certain spaces, and a stronger presence of pimps who exploit the situation.

Housing: a lever for change?

In response to the question of whether access to safe, stable housing or shelter could help prevent the sexual exploitation of Indigenous women and girls, including Two-Spirited women receiving services from the organizations, 60% of support workers felt that this could be an important lever for change. The remaining 40% gave a negative response, but the reasons for this were not established. This issue may be worth exploring in future projects. Nevertheless, the literature review indicates that lack of access to safe, suitable housing is one of the factors likely to contribute to entry into prostitution for the women in question.

Towards the decolonisation of knowledge

As emphasized throughout this survey, the support workers have identified the following as factors to be addressed in a process of decolonisation: intergenerational trauma as a complex health problem, systemic racism, violence, understanding the situation of women within their communities, specifically, their precarious socio-economic situation, lack of training and work opportunities, domestic violence suffered by the women, and the importance for them to have "spaces for community building as well as private spaces where women can relax and feel safe."

"Understanding the realities and mechanisms of the sex industry and sex trafficking (many of our participants are forced/manipulated), meeting people right where they are, listening to their needs while explaining the possibilities, not dwelling solely on their experiences in connection with the sex industry but considering each of them as a whole person." Mention was also made of working on "self-respect, self-esteem, belief in one's truth and in one's right to exist and live."

When working with Indigenous women with a history of involvement in the sex industry, many support workers stress the importance not only of understanding the realities and mechanisms of the sex industry and sex trafficking, but also of ensuring that the women feel safe and have access to resources to prevent the dangers associated with prostitution. Others stress the importance of harm reduction, non-judgment, cultural approaches, and respect for the individual.

Culturally adapted approaches were also identified (community, respect, spirituality). The need for support worker training regarding experiences with the sex industry was identified as an important factor, as was "recognizing that substance use and addiction often go hand in hand with sex trafficking. Avoid passing judgement and reduce the shame. "

Recommendations

Emphasize, first and foremost, the importance of designing housing and shelter initiatives that are specifically adapted and culturally safe for Indigenous women and girls, including Two-Spirited women with a history of sexual exploitation

Adopt a specific and holistic approach to address the various causes underlying the realities experienced by Indigenous women with a history of sexual exploitation. They have immediate needs in terms of safety, protection from abuse, and access to healing from the violence they have suffered.

Enable Indigenous women who have experienced sexual exploitation to access culturally appropriate support services that take into account their collective experience of trauma and colonization. Such services can help them redefine and rebuild themselves by reclaiming their identities, their autonomy, and their dignity, and freeing them from the cycles of violence and trauma.

Work towards reducing the stigma associated with experiences of sexual exploitation, by recognizing that substance use and addiction (effects of colonization) often go hand in hand with sex trafficking, and by offering respectful, non-judgmental spaces for discussion.

Establish spaces for community building, promoting reconciliation, access to culture, spirituality, and family.

Provide training that equips support workers to offer specific services that are culturally adapted to the multiple realities and problems experienced by these women.

Train intervention teams to better understand the realities and mechanisms of sexual exploitation, as well as the associated dangers, and the resources available to help those involved.

The creation and realisation of the **Programme Québécois de Soutien à la Sortie de la prostitution**, covering all the aspects discussed, is the solution to the above-mentioned issues. As a feminist organization, we are committed to integrating the specific needs of Indigenous women into this program. To achieve this, collaboration with Indigenous women and organizations is crucial and could be considered as a concrete first step towards helping Indigenous women and girls trapped in situations of sexual exploitation to realistically and sustainably break free from prostitution.



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*I grew up in a world
That was not mine
In that world of incomprehension
My life toppled like a tree
Uprooted from its mother culture
Today the stranger fells your forest
Strips you bare
All to build
A stationary home*

- MANON NOLIN

Innu from Ekuanitshit, extract from the poem "Lost origin" in
Languages of Our Land, Indigenous Poems and Stories from Quebec



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