I dream I have a little more money

TO BE MORE HELPFUL TO OTHERS

make poverty history

hope

my Hope good Life

TO JOIN WITH OTHER WOMEN TO CHANGE THE WORLD!

I hope my life is getting better

putting my needs first

We're not asking, we're telling

An inventory of practices promoting the dignity, autonomy, and self-determination of women and families facing homelessness

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Farida Athumani
Ingrid Pereira

the homeless hub
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We're not asking, we're telling:

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"Canada ends at the doorstep of the shelters. When you're outside, it's Canada. When you go in, it isn't. When I go in the door I know I've left Canada behind. When I say Canada, I mean everything – the values, the principles, what they stand for, everything."

"We are the ones, in the shelters, we have to make the change … we have to say, 'This is our space.' Some day they will have to listen to us."

Two participants in our "Old Babes" focus group (for mid-life and older single women facing homelessness).

Credits, Acknowledgements and Dedication

Please note, the project team has agreed on the importance of voicing the report in the first person. Because the majority of members of this team are women living in poverty / facing homelessness, we use the first person when referring to women facing homelessness. However, when referring to specific groups of women we sometimes use the third person, for instance, where we refer to women from countries other than Canada, or in places where we refer specifically to focus group participants.

Like the promising practices we describe, this project has been challenging, messy, imperfect and full of possibilities. We hope that the wisdom gathered here can inspire organizations to stand beside women, transwomen, and families facing homelessness, and work together for an end to homelessness.

We dedicate our work to all the women, transwomen, and families facing homelessness who have claimed dignity, autonomy and self-determination for themselves and others.

An inventory of practices promoting the dignity, autonomy, and self-determination of women and families facing homelessness

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Contents

Introduction

Project Background

This study builds upon the findings of several recent participatory projects in which women facing homelessness have taken the lead and voiced their knowledge about the causes and consequences of, and the solutions to homelessness.

These projects—including *Count Us In! Inclusion and Homeless Women in Downtown East Toronto* (2006); *Coming Together: Homeless Women, Housing, and Social Support* (2007); *Homelessness – Diverse Experiences, Common Issues, Shared Solutions: The Need for Inclusion and Accountability* (2008); the *Ending Family Homelessness Symposium* (2008); and the *Women's Report from the Grid* (2010)—all concluded that affordable housing, adequate incomes from employment and income assistance programs, and appropriate, accessible supports such as childcare and harm reduction initiatives are necessary to end women's and families' homelessness.

These projects are not alone in drawing these conclusions – the same recommendations have been made over and over in relationship to homelessness for more than two decades, and homelessness will not end until they are followed.

However, while advocates, researchers, and service providers work alongside people facing homelessness to demand these necessary changes from the federal and provincial governments, there are also changes we have the power to make ourselves, closer to "home."

The above studies, as well as other qualitative research with women facing homelessness, point to these types of local changes. They document women's concerns about how services operate and their recommendations for improving services. Women consistently state the need for

- improvements in service providers' sensitivity and accountability;
- better integration of services;
- fewer barriers to service;
- approaches based on empowerment, not control and surveillance; and
- better recognition of their skills, knowledge and strengths by service providers.

In sum, women are demanding that services promote and respect their rights to dignity, autonomy and self-determination[1].

Charter for Offering Services to Women

1 Respect our rights and freedoms as women.

2 Support our needs as women.

3 Show us respect and treat us with dignity.

4 Recognize our rightful place as equals, with all of our human, political, social and economic rights.

5 Create safe spaces where discrimination is challenged and actively resisted.

6 Take the time needed to hear and understand us.

7 Strive to offer us helpful and timely assistance.

8 Involve us in your decisions as you plan and implement programs.

9 Ensure that your organization's staff and the materials you distribute recognize and reflect the diversity of the communities you serve.

10 Make your organization a place where each of us feels safe, welcome and free to be who we are.

(Count Us In: Inclusion and Homeless Women in Downtown East Toronto: 14-15, http://www.owhn.on.ca/Count_Us_In_Final.pdf)

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1. These terms are discussed further on page 9.

These projects also demonstrate that women are already doing a lot, both inside and outside services, to successfully navigate the system[2], stand up for their rights, and make their own and others' everyday lives easier. It takes amazing strength and resourcefulness to survive homelessness and poverty, and women have a lot of wisdom to share that can make a difference.

Through the above research projects, women experiencing homelessness have shared their insights about services, and about their own strengths. Now, the time has come to urge services to adopt good practices that address the above issues. We believe that services are more likely to uphold women's autonomy, dignity, and self-determination when they:

- directly involve women facing homelessness in designing and delivering policies and programs;
- promote women's strengths, skills, self-reliance, and mutual support; and
- reflect and respond to diverse needs, identities and experiences, including women both with and without children, who may be Aboriginal, women of colour, immigrants, refugees, non-status migrants, fleeing violence, involved with child protection agencies, young, older, LGBTQ, two-spirited, and living with chronic illnesses, physical disabilities, mental health concerns, and substance use issues.

Services aim to address the effects of poverty and homelessness: they provide food, a place to sleep, emotional support, and resources. But disempowerment is one of the most important effects of poverty and homelessness, and services must address this too. Being poor or homeless, in our society, means being demeaned, silenced, looked down on, ignored, controlled, and even seen as less than human. It is up to services to create environments of mutual respect in which women's power is recognized and restored.

We know that many services locally, nationally, and internationally are using inclusive practices that reflect these goals. We also know that even while some services may strive to honour the power and rights of the women they serve, there are many challenges to making services fully democratic—from individual attitudes, to funding limitations, to organizational structures and regulations. But in spite of these challenges, services have a moral obligation to stand beside women facing homelessness, promote our basic rights, and work to end the conditions that violate those rights. In one focus group, a woman captured the everyday rights violations that come with homelessness with these powerful words:

"Canada ends at the doorstep of the shelters. When you're outside, it's Canada. When you go in, it isn't. When I go in the door I know I've left Canada behind. When I say Canada, I mean everything – the values, the principles, what they stand for, everything."

We recognize that these words may sound harsh, and service providers may find them difficult to hear. But we believe that services can and must become part of the solution, part of restoring the values and principles that Canada claims to believe in. They can do this by working alongside women to ensure that women's voices, perspectives, and priorities take the lead in planning, delivering, managing, and evaluating services.

In order to put in place practices identified as necessary by women and families experiencing homelessness, service providers need models and tools that are relevant to their own service contexts. To gather more information about models, tools, and practices and how these can be implemented, our project drew upon a range of sources:

- A web search, literature review, and site visits, to identify innovative democratic practices in local, Canadian, and international services for women and families facing homelessness.
- Interviews and focus groups with managers and front-line staff in organizations serving women and families facing homelessness, in order to analyze practices and policies in local services that respond to the above recommendations, and the challenges that services face in fully implementing them.
- Peer knowledge exchange meetings and focus groups with women and families facing homelessness, in which participants shared and documented the good practices they use, and their recommendations for making services more inclusive.

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2. "The system" refers to the multiple institutions and systems we encounter in our everyday lives, including the social housing, child protection, social assistance, psychiatric, shelter and prison systems, as well as the housing and labour markets. These are intersecting parts of a larger system that marginalizes low-income women.

This report presents inspiring models, inclusive service practices, and women's own strategies and resources. While we keep up the struggle to end homelessness, we can also draw upon the information here to make changes in our everyday lives, our work, and our organizations.

Framework

This project was a partnership between three organizations:

- Cities Centre, an urban research unit at University of Toronto;
- FORWARD For Women's Autonomy, Rights and Dignity, a multicultural grassroots group of homeless and underhoused women; and
- Ontario Women's Health Network, a women's health research and advocacy organization and one of the lead groups in the Count Us In project.

The study employed a participatory action research methodology. For us this means that the study was led by women facing homelessness, who made up the majority of the research team and advisory committee. We strove throughout the project to put the perspective, analysis and priorities of poor and homeless women at the centre. We also worked from a framework that is feminist, anti-racism, anti-oppression, decolonizing, and pro-poor. This means that throughout the research process, we tried to recognize, name and challenge all forms of dominance and oppression. Our understanding of homelessness is rooted in our larger understanding of unequal power relations and how they structure society, and we know that women's homelessness is a result of all of these forms of oppression.

Finally, we take a human rights approach, meaning that we recognize and uphold the universal human rights to autonomy, dignity, and self-determination. These rights cannot be separated from social and economic rights—such as the right to adequate housing, a decent standard of living, protection of the family, social security, and health—or from civil and political rights, such as the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of movement, privacy, and security of the person. All of these rights are set out in international agreements Canada is bound by. We see homelessness as a violation of all of these rights. Even providing adequate housing and incomes will not be enough to reverse this violation, unless the welfare and housing systems also begin to uphold the basic rights of dignity, autonomy, and self-determination.

How we understand women's and families' homelessness

Homelessness is a temporary experience, not an identity or a permanent trait. It includes a continuum of housing circumstances. Women and families facing homelessness may move between different states of housing, including adequate housing; inadequate housing (i.e. housing that is unsafe, unaffordable or overcrowded); invisible homelessness (i.e. couch surfing or sending one's children to stay with other families because of a housing problem); and visible homelessness (i.e. living on the streets). In spite of this reality, homelessness is often stigmatized and seen as defining a person's identity.

Homelessness is not just an individual experience; it is also a social phenomenon. The existence of homelessness in society—what makes it possible, how it happens, how it affects people, and how it can be stopped—should be the central focus of research on homelessness, not the vulnerabilities, personality traits, or health diagnoses of the people who experience it. We want to understand homelessness in order to end it.

Women's and families' homelessness in Canada is produced by the current social and economic system, not by individual women's vulnerabilities or failings. What we mean here is, women's homelessness is caused by a lack of affordable and adequate housing, cuts to social assistance and employment insurance programs, inadequate supports for people with disabilities, the increase in low-wage and insecure jobs, violence against women, and discrimination that shuts some groups out of housing and jobs – all of which are systemic. Often, women facing homelessness are blamed for their situation, with their circumstances seen as being the result of substance use, mental health problems, bad choices, laziness, or simple bad luck. But no matter how a woman's individual problems may have contributed to her becoming homeless, it is not any individual's fault that homelessness is now a "common occurrence" (Kappel-Ramji, 2002) among women who are vulnerable.

putting my needs first
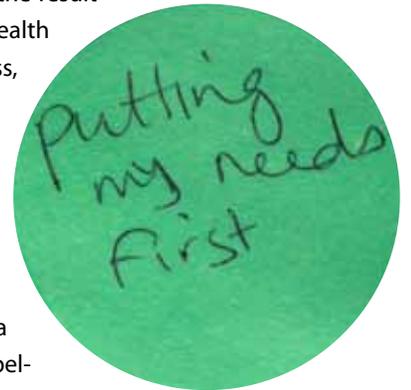
Women and families who are most impacted by oppression are most at risk of experiencing homelessness: those who are poor, racialized (people of colour), Aboriginal, young and old, queer

and trans, single mothers, survivors of violence, living with precarious immigration status, and facing physical or mental health disabilities and addictions. With rents always rising, incomes falling, services being cut, and ongoing discrimination, losing one's housing and ending up in a shelter is becoming more and more part of the ordinary range of possibilities for women and families who are poor and marginalized. This is why we use the phrase "women and families FACING homelessness." Many systems and institutions are responsible for women's and families' homelessness – most obviously the labour market and housing market, and government systems such as income security programs and social housing; but also immigration policy, Aboriginal policies, child welfare laws and agencies, the health care and psychiatric systems, and even the old, patriarchal institution of the family.

For most women and families facing homelessness, multiple oppressions intersect in our lives, including sexism, racism and ableism[3]. Regardless of our economic situation and social class before becoming homeless, once women and families are homeless we also experience poor-bashing, which one report defines this way:

"Poor bashing is when people who are poor are discriminated against, stereotyped, humiliated, despised, pitied, patronized, ignored, blamed, and / or falsely accused of being lazy, drunk, stupid, uneducated and not wanting to work"
(Pederson & Swanson, 2008, p. 12).

We see homelessness as an extreme collective form of poor-bashing by society at large, because it is made possible by the policies and practices of government and the private sector. As well, women who are poor and homeless face poor-bashing in public spaces, in the media, and in agencies and institutions, including those that are supposed to provide them with support.

How we understand services

Material and emotional supports are best provided within the circles of women, families and communities in a holistic way. But many traditional ways in which communities meet human needs have been broken down by colonization, displacement, and a market economy based on individualized employment and consumption. The transformation of care into social services provided by paid workers to "clients" is part of this larger picture. In this system, women's poverty and homelessness become the raw materials for what some call "the poverty industry" – what is known in economic terms as the social service sector.

It is important to remember this is the larger context in which social services have become institutionalized, instead of being provided within families and communities. At the same time, we recognize that many service organizations do criticize this context and are working to restore the power of individuals and communities. Social service workers, too, are often struggling with the same low wages, precarious working conditions, and intersecting oppressions as the "clients" they are serving.

Many service-providing agencies came out of social movements against oppression; for example, shelters for women fleeing violence in Canada were first created in the 1970s out of the feminist anti-violence movement. However, over time, many such agencies have become *institutionalized* and *professionalized*, meaning that their activities become more like those of a traditional institution, and people's roles become more rigidly divided into "client" and "worker." When this happens, there is a risk that the rules, structures, and activities of an organization will reflect poor-bashing attitudes, aiming more to control and "fix" women than to work together as equals to challenge homelessness.

How we understand research

One question we heard repeatedly throughout our project was, "Why more research? What will this project do to help change our situation?" Women facing homelessness wonder if research is just another way for people to make money from their situation. Service providers are wary of requests from researchers to take time away from their already-overloaded schedules. Researchers worry about contributing to those piles of dusty reports that never seem to have any impact.

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3. Discrimination against people with disabilities.

Indigenous activists have often pointed out that Aboriginal peoples have been "researched to death" – that stacks of government-funded reports have done little to improve the circumstances of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. If anything, much of that research has paved the way for policies and practices that contribute to colonization and genocide. Much of the enormous volume of homelessness research in the past three decades has similarly made little improvement and often just legitimized policies and attitudes that perpetuate homelessness by focusing on the individual problems of homeless people rather than the root causes of homelessness.

So, why more research? Mohawk professor Marlene Brant Castellano, in her article Ethics of Aboriginal Research (2004), recounts the story of a workshop where an Elder pointed out:

"If we have been researched to death, maybe it's time we started researching ourselves back to life."

Community-based, participatory, feminist and decolonizing research[4] projects like ours try to do research in a new way, to support communities in "researching ourselves back to life." Instead of using homeless people as "subjects," our study was done by, for, and with women facing homelessness, who were at the table at every stage of the project. Instead of treating homeless women like a problem to be solved, this project has been a forum for women facing homelessness to describe the problems they encounter in services, and to propose solutions. Instead of providing salaries to academic researchers, the majority of this project's budget was placed in the hands of women facing homelessness, through wages and training for the research team, compensation for participants, and food and transit fare for women's meetings.

Because of funding cuts and changes to regulations about charitable status, services face ever-increasing restrictions on their ability to promote social change, and ever-shrinking staff resources. In this context, participatory research provides an important opportunity to support women's self-organizing through research activities such as focus groups, peer knowledge exchanges, team meetings, community consultations, networking, conferences, workshops, and report preparation. By engaging women facing homelessness in all of these activities, our project has built skills and networks that contribute to our capacity to work together to end homelessness.

Dignity, autonomy, and self-determination

Poverty, homelessness, and dealing with institutions and systems pose enormous physical, emotional, mental and spiritual challenges to women. Much of the time women are faced with making "choices" in a situation where there really is no choice, and struggling for mere survival. However, we believe that women's choices and actions also emphasize the primary importance of dignity, autonomy and self-determination. Dignity means being recognized as inherently worthy, capable, and deserving of respect. Autonomy is independence, and carries with it freedom of choice, of expression and of movement. Self-determination is the ability to work out our own values, choices and future. Like food and shelter, these are basic rights. As noted above, they are the foundation of human rights. These values lie behind the good practices described throughout this report.

Using language in a new way

The assumptions we learn from the dominant social system are embedded in our everyday language, so challenging oppression often means using language in a new way. We have been "named" or labelled by others—researchers, service providers, psychiatrists and politicians—and now we are standing up to name our own experiences. This is complicated, since some words take on new meanings, and we do not always agree on which words to use.

The first word we need to draw attention to is "women," which appears hundreds of times in this report. When we say "women" we mean to include transwomen and two-spirited people. We do not see "women" as a single, identical group – we know that women differ from each other in race, ethnicity, birthplace, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, class and income, citizenship, Aboriginal status, age, physical and mental ability, family status and many other factors. Each of these differences affects how women experience homelessness and poverty.

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4. Community-based and participatory research includes people with direct experience of the issue being studied as leaders, researchers and advisors, not just as research "subjects." Feminist research questions the idea of an "objective" or neutral researcher, and critically examines power inequities based on gender, race, class, disability and other factors. Decolonizing research challenges colonialism, sometimes using Indigenous methods of inquiry.

Another big word is "homelessness." We see homelessness as a range of circumstances, from living on the street, to staying in a shelter, to living in substandard unaffordable housing, to facing abuse within one's home. As a team we did not get too hung up on defining who is and is not homeless. To us it is hard to identify exactly where poverty ends and homelessness begins. Instead of talking about "homeless women and families" we refer to "women and families FACING homelessness," because we recognize that housing and homelessness are shifting circumstances for many.

Much of this report looks at what service providers can do to better promote the dignity, autonomy, and self-determination of women accessing services. In this report we have referred to people working in services as "staff," "managers," "front-line staff," "workers," and "service providers." We refer to people using the services as "women," "women facing homelessness," "women and families," and sometimes as "service users." We sometimes also use the words "participants" or "members." None of these are perfect words and not all women agree on what to be called, though most would like to be simply recognized as "people." When the word "client" is used we put it in quotation marks, because most women in our project object to being referred to in that way. We recognize, though, that the categories of "staff" and "women" can and should get very blurry. Of course, most staff are also women; many staff have faced homelessness; and many women facing homelessness have been or could become staff. Some members of the research team, and many of the "staff" and "women" we spoke to, have been in both positions – facing homelessness at one time, and working in services at another, or even both at once.

In fact, we are arguing here for the creation of organizations in which the categories of "service provider" and "service user" are broken down, and where instead we are allies with each other in the struggle to end homelessness. A good step to take when beginning this work is to sit down together and negotiate the language that we use, starting with what we call each other.

Sections of this Report

This report brings together the project's findings about practices that enhance the dignity, autonomy and self-determination of women and families facing homelessness. Each section presents information from different parts of our study.

Because our project is centred in the perspectives of women and families facing homelessness, we begin in Section One with a discussion of the good practices of women and families working to meet their needs, navigate the system, and stand up for their rights. The purpose of this report is to put forward good practices; however, we have also included in this section some important critiques, concerns, and recommendations women raised about shelters, drop-ins and other services. Most of the content in this section comes directly from the women and children who attended the peer knowledge exchange meetings and focus groups, as well as from discussions among our research team and advisory committee.

In Section Two, we look at ways of working that come from activism, counselling, and other fields outside the "homelessness sector" but could be—or have been—applied within organizations for women facing homelessness. We briefly describe each model and its origins, provide examples of how it has been implemented in relationship to homelessness, and look at the advantages and challenges of applying it to homelessness. Many of these models and frameworks were part of the inspiration for this project. Team members had learned about them through our past work, and over the course of the project we gathered more information about them from books and websites. The section provides links and references to help readers find out more about these inspiring models.

In Section Three, we review a broad range of practices that organizations in the homelessness sector can use to improve the direct involvement and democratic representation of women and families using their services. We present concrete and specific techniques for including women in service planning, service delivery, management, and service evaluation, as well as for implementing peer service models and promoting women's leadership and civic engagement. Brief profiles of organizations employing innovative practices can be found throughout the section. The information here came from many sources: websites and site visits, interviews with service providers, and discussions with women facing homelessness.

Good Practices of Women and Families

This section presents the practices women and families draw upon
to meet their needs, navigate the system, and stand up for their rights.

This project reflects the collective wisdom of about 150 women facing homelessness, including 4 on the research team, 4 on the project advisory committee, 87 who participated in focus groups and at least 50 others who attended women's meetings and workshops. These women come from a vast range of experiences, identities and backgrounds: Aboriginal, of colour, and white; born in Canada, China, South Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Africa, the Philippines, and Latin America; aged from under 20 to over 80; able-bodied, and living with physical and mental disabilities; transgendered and cisgendered[5]; straight, bisexual, lesbian, and two-spirited; women without children, and mothers with young children, adult children, and children they had lost to child protection agencies or violent death. Children also attended team meetings, women's meetings, and focus groups, and contributed their knowledge through drawings, words, and even their very presence that reminded us of what is most important in this world.

The skills, strengths and knowledge of women, transwomen, and families facing homelessness came through loud and clear throughout our project. In women's meetings, focus groups, and meetings of the research team and advisory committee, women led the way with an uncompromising analysis of the changes needed to end homelessness.

Women have a lot to share with each other, and a lot to teach organizations. The practices below represent collective wisdom that women can draw upon, but they also provide important information to agencies about values, models, and programs that could improve their work. Women's practices can show organizations new, appropriate and accessible ways to operate with limited resources, provide respectful support, and take action to end homelessness. Women's critiques of agencies, some of which are also discussed here, can also teach important lessons about improving services.

The good practices shared here are not only aimed at securing basic needs such as food, shelter, and care: they also embody the principles of dignity, autonomy, and self-determination.

These same values should also inform services. One focus group participant spoke of the importance of services "not just filling my belly." Women are calling upon services to promote and uphold their dignity, autonomy, and self-determination as a basic human need and right. Services can learn a lot from women's ways of claiming these rights even in situations of extreme hardship. The importance of dignity, autonomy and self-determination is expressed in the words of one participant:

"The way they address you, it's like a child who doesn't know anything. The way they speak to you, it's better just leaving. My recommendation is, when we are older, talk to us friendly like, 'Here is what is here for you, we hope it will help you get on your feet. Whatever you need, take it.'"

Many women we heard from agreed with this participant's message: even when services are providing the basic means of survival, if they do not promote our dignity, autonomy, or self-determination, then "it's better just leaving." Many women described walking away from situations where these rights were being violated, even if it meant losing access to a material need.

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5.   Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook defined "cisgender" as a label for "individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity."

For example, some said they would sooner go hungry than eat at a meal program where they were told **"If you don't pray, you don't eat."** Others described times they were kicked out of shelters for standing up for their rights, or those of other women.

These values are the basis for many of the strategies women use to make it through all of the daily challenges that homelessness and poverty bring. Make no mistake: no one should have to live this way, and everyone should be confident that their dignity, autonomy, and self-determination will always be upheld. But women facing homelessness, confronted with daily threats to survival and well-being, have developed incredible abilities. Below we explore some of the good practices women draw upon for getting by, getting support, supporting each other, and standing up for our rights.

1. Getting by

Women facing homelessness know a lot about getting by, meeting basic survival needs with little or no money.

In spite of living with constant scarcity, women are skilled at sharing resources with each other. The theme of **sharing** came up more often than any other throughout the focus groups and women's meetings, both as a strength women learned from their families and cultures of origin, and something they draw upon now in everyday life.

"Sharing resources, whatever we can whenever we can."

"Sometimes you feel like others need more than you and even if you are in need you can help them."

Most women expressed sharing as a basic human value that upholds everyone's dignity. However, some also pointed out that it is OK to not always share – learning to set limits and not feel bad about it is another skill women rely upon:

"I used to give and give and give but something I've learned over the years is I can't give if it's at the expense of my own needs or my family's needs. I used to feel so bad if I didn't give every time."

Figuring out the ethics of these situations – when is it ok to say no? When is another person's need more important than my own? – is something women take very seriously. By contrast, women commented frequently on the stinginess of many organizations, where food, transit tickets, donations, and even emotional support are limited and measured out, or provided reluctantly. A common statement was,

"She acts like it's coming out of her own pocket."

This contrast made the research team think about how workers in social services are set up as gatekeepers of scarce resources. They are held responsible for distributing limited resources, and as a result they act out the same message that society as a whole uses as an excuse for poverty: "There's not enough here for everyone." Women, on the other hand, know the truth: "There's enough to go around if nobody hogs more than their share."

There is also a difference in values and cultures here – one team member who has not lived in poverty points out that white, middle-class values emphasize accumulating possessions rather than sharing, because everyone is supposed to be able to take care of themselves. Instead of sharing, middle-class values promote charity, where giving your leftovers to someone else is a sign of superiority. Coming from this background, it can be hard to learn to share. We believe some services, planned and directed by middle-class professionals, are replicating these middle-class values in their structures and regulations. Instead, agencies should reflect the values of the women they serve, whose life experiences and cultural backgrounds have taught them about pooling resources in a respectful and dignified way.

Another strategy that women shared with each other in a peer knowledge exchange meeting was **salvage or "freecycling"**: collecting and re-using or selling discarded items. Some women collect bottles, others collect metals. Some gather and re-sell furniture, small appliances and clothes. Some find these items for their own use. To do this successfully, women have to learn the best times and places to collect, how to recognize items of value, and where these items can be re-sold or re-used. In addition to being an income-generating activity, salvage is also a community service, diverting waste from landfills, helping households and businesses get rid of unwanted items, and allowing items to be re-used. Salvage, especially of beer bottles, is becoming more and more organized, and sometimes this is even leading to competition between women for "territory." However, there is still a wealth of free materials available for creative re-use, and this is an opportunity for women to get together. There are great examples from other parts of the
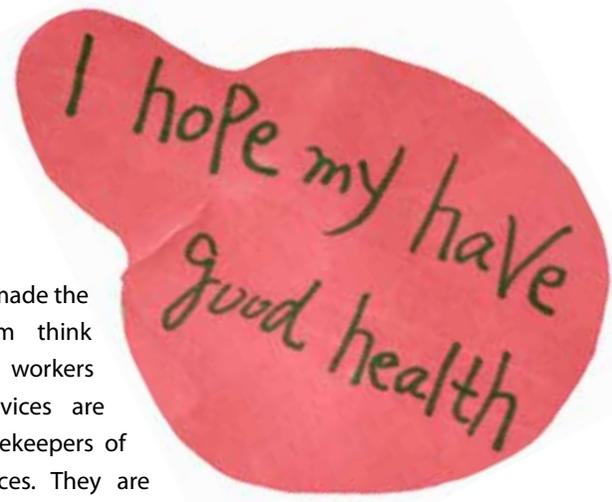
world: in Vancouver, "binners" who collect cans and bottles are so organized they even hold "binners Olympics"; in many poor countries, women have developed co-operatives that produce crafts out of salvaged materials, for example shopping bags made from used juice boxes.

Women also use knowledge about **food and gardening** to get by. Many women raised in Asia, Europe, the Caribbean and Latin America, as well as some from rural Canadian backgrounds, spoke of the farms and gardens they grew back home. Some are putting this knowledge to use in community gardens, and many would like to see more gardens, closer to where they live, and with more autonomy rather than being overseen by an agency. Getting access to free food is another important skill area. Women learn the schedules, rules, and locations of multiple food banks and drop-ins, as well as finer details like the best day to go for fresh vegetables. Knowing how to supplement these food sources is also important:

"I get whatever I can at soup kitchens and what money I have I buy beans and eggs for protein."

One team member recalled how as a teenager on the street, she learned about going to restaurants at closing time to collect good food that had to be thrown out due to food service regulations.

In a consumer-oriented society, where everything is a commodity to be bought and sold, surviving with no money can seem almost impossible to do. However, this consumer society also relies on excess – on people buying more than they need, and replacing old possessions with new ones before it is necessary. Women have recognized the opportunities in this situation and have found strategies that make use of the excess that is usually wasted.

Living on extremely low incomes also requires women to have strong **budgeting** abilities, knowing exactly how much money is available to get through the month and accounting for every penny. Negotiating with landlords, staggering bills from month to month, dealing with creditors and collections, and balancing debt are all important skills that women use to manage on incomes that are far below the cost of living. Women also spot where to get stuff cheap and share this information with each other. This contradicts the stereotype that low-income women need to learn how to budget as a way to get out of poverty. One woman joked that budgeting courses should be taught by the "clients," and taken by the "workers," not the other way around.

Finally, **recognizing and eliminating waste** is another skill that women use to survive poverty and homelessness. In our focus groups and discussions, many applied this ability to examining the services they access, identifying the waste there. One participant pointed to the high cost of keeping women homeless, versus the small amount provided to women through welfare and disability:

"A good practice would be reintegration of women into society. We feel the money is just thrown at us. We want our life back. … We know how much the city provides per day for us to be in a shelter and feeding us garbage. We need somebody to help us get a job and get back where we used to be. …We understand we are costing the city of Toronto $2,500 per month. We believe it's too much and we don't see anything being done. Nothing real is being done."

Another noted the inefficient use of staff time in a shelter:

"The system is set up so the worker is spending lots of time recording information about you but not much time giving actual help!"

Women have a lot to contribute to discussions about how organizations can be more efficient and effective.

There are many examples from all over the world where women have drawn upon these skills in a collective effort to improve their own living situations and the livelihoods of whole communities. Community kitchens, craft cooperatives that "upcycle" used materials, and women's organizations that run on shoestring budgets are just a few examples of what women facing homelessness can accomplish with their detailed knowledge about how to get by.

2. Getting support

Managing constant scarcity is extremely stressful, and women draw on emotional and spiritual strengths to cope with the daily pressures and worries. In focus groups and women's meetings, participants shared many **strategies for healing and managing stress:** exercise, humour, laughter, spirituality, faith in a higher power, letting go, focusing, spending time alone, reaching out to others, eating well, and thinking positive thoughts are some examples.

Some Aboriginal women said that **cultural practices** help promote healing and relieve stress. One woman recommended smudging (burning sage or other sacred medicines) as a way

of making services and groups more welcoming. In response to a question about what helps women feel strong, another explained,

"I'm doing more cultural based activities. I made a dream catcher for the first time since I was 13, I made myself a medicine pouch, I'm learning to drum and sing."

In addition to coping on their own most of the time, women also seek support from workers and organizations. Women in this project showed that they know best what kind of support is helpful, and **assess situations very carefully** before opening up and making themselves vulnerable. In our first focus group, one participant referred to the idea that in every agency there are a few "angels" she knows she can count on. From then on, throughout the project, we brought forward her concept of "the angels" and found that women everywhere seemed to agree with it.

There was strong consensus on **how to recognize "the angels"** – staff and volunteers who can be depended upon for support. "The angels" are competent, hardworking, resourceful, genuine and honest. They will go out of their way to help, and follow through until you get what you need. They know the rules, apply them consistently, and know how to be flexible within them. They make the simple gestures of caring that mean so much:

"One man got me a glass of ice water and it was the sweetest water I ever tasted."

"Yesterday I went in and the woman looked at my flip-flops and she said, "I have a pair of shoes for you!" She had saved them for me…they just felt so comfortable, they were wide and I have wide feet."

Women point out that often "the angels" are drawing on their own lived experiences of homelessness, poverty and violence for their understanding of how to support others:

"The best counsellors and the best staff are the people who have been there, lived it, breathed it."

Many women also believe that "the angels" often have less power in organizations:

"The volunteers are better – they're not in it for the money."

"Front line staff who are powerless help you more than our counsellors."

There are different theories about this. Some suggest that due to their lower positions "the angels" are less likely to see themselves as more important than other women. Others state that "the angels'" commitment to the women means they are less likely to advance in organizations – some even suggested "angels" are sometimes fired for standing up for women. Some participants opposed this idea altogether, stating that they had met managers who were "angels." Either way, **women recommend that agencies look for these qualities in their hiring process**, base worker training and evaluation on these criteria, set high standards for service delivery, and help workers to maintain these standards by promoting workers' self-care, and creating a safe space for workers to share their concerns with each other.

Besides looking for the right person when support is needed, women also look for a safe environment. One of the most important aspects of this is **confidentiality** – having control over what information is shared, and with whom. As one participant explained,

"The one thing I really dislike is every week the staff and counsellors have a meeting and discuss every client together. So the whole staff knows my personal business and it makes me not trust my counsellor. If you're having an issue your counsellor will discuss it with the whole staff. … They also might tell management if they deem it's a "major concern." They decide what's "major" and if they deem it worth discussing. I think they should tell every client when you come in that they might share your information. And then they should ask your permission to share each piece of information. For example why does the housing worker need to know what's going on in my personal life?"

Women also agree that a safe environment has to be **non-judgemental.** Finally, the **rules and procedures have to be reasonable and consistent, and make women's lives easier, not harder.** One example that was discussed at length in a focus group was a shelter's seemingly random and unpredictable bed-check procedure. Women shared stories of being woken up, having their children woken up, having notes slipped under their door that they did not see until the next day, being required to go down to the front desk to confirm their presence even after the mandatory children's bedtime, being marked absent when they were present, and never knowing exactly what they needed to do to avoid these problems. None of them had discussed this with other residents before, but all agreed that this daily inconvenience added stress to the overwhelming burdens they were already dealing with. Whenever possible, women will avoid these kinds of environments.

3. Supporting each other

Besides sharing resources, women support each other in many non-material ways as well. One key skill that women discussed in meetings was **providing referrals and information.** In the course of accessing services, women determine which ones are most helpful, and share this information through the grapevine. Some women pointed out that referrals based on first-hand experience are the most accurate and appropriate:

"I try to help people find services to help them. One thing I find really annoying with government services is that they don't go out of their way to help you find the services you need. It's not that the services aren't there, it's just that women don't know about them."

Some women collect this information and are known in their network as a go-to person for resources. One project women recommended was a **guidebook and map of services based on women's input.** The best model for this would be specific local neighbourhood guides by and for women facing homelessness. The guides would be based on first-hand information about the things women consider most important – for example, not only the time and day of a free meal at a drop-in, but information about the quality of the food.

When asked "what are the ways you reach out to help others," women in all focus groups had the same most common response: **listening**. Women offer each other a non-judgemental, caring, supportive ear, and a shoulder to cry on. This is a good reminder that even when no practical solution is immediately available, it can help to just talk.

Finally, many women in the focus groups said they have accompanied a friend through a difficult situation, providing both a caring ear and practical help. Women take time to help each other, even when in crisis situations themselves:

"I helped a friend find housing while I was homeless. I would look for places for her, call places for her, take her to places to see them, and she ended up settling in one."

Women point out that sharing support is also a source of strength and comfort for the person helping. Many women expressed a desire for an ongoing meeting or program for women to give and receive mutual support:

"I'd like a forum like this, with all the women. There should be a forum where we get together regularly, get to know each other. I might take a path for myself from hearing about your problem, and it will arise ourselves as women. We can encourage each other, feel each other's warm embrace."

Women's mutual support highlights the values of reciprocity (giving and receiving) and interdependence. Rather than a service provision model where one person is the "provider" and the other is a "client," women understand that everyone plays both roles at times, and also recognize the emotional and spiritual benefits of helping someone else. Our research team believes that these values of interdependence and reciprocity should also have an important place in agencies serving women.

4. Standing up for our rights

Poverty and homelessness violate women's social and economic rights, and make women more vulnerable to having other rights violated as well. Systems and agencies that provide vital resources often have rules that limit women's access. In order to survive, women become skilled at advocating for themselves and standing up their rights.

Some women have adapted to years of being harmed, mistreated, ignored and demeaned by carrying **anger** like a shield. Research team members even noticed this in focus groups, where some women initially approached the facilitators in a way that felt pushy, abrupt, or even aggressive. One team member pointed out,

"Women aren't coming here to be our buddies. Women may come in with a certain disposition, but we don't know what they're dealing with. It's like when we go to agencies, and our frustration is misinterpreted as anger. That's why we need to deal with our crap, so we don't take it personally when women first approach us with rudeness, anger, or frustration."

We also learned that the women who started out in a way that appeared "pushy," often turned out to be some of the strongest leaders in the group. This was an important reminder that women may enter a new situation with a somewhat aggressive stance until it is clear that the space will be safe and respectful.

Some women, especially those whose communities of origin have faced oppression and marginalization, explained that they **draw upon cultural traditions of self-advocacy.** For example, an African-Canadian woman said,

"I come from five generations in this country and they never took 'no' for an answer. Just get up and do it!"

Many other women have been through relationships where standing up for themselves was life-threatening, but also necessary. One shared,

"My marriage was very abusive. I used to tell my mom but she just belittled me. From the day I left him and he was charged, I have a different outlook and now I always speak my mind."

When dealing with services, women draw upon these histories and learnings. How to **manage frustration and righteous anger** was a common point of discussion in focus groups and women's meetings. Almost everyone in the groups could relate to the sense of rage and desperation that can arise when service providers are unhelpful, disrespectful or abusive. Women's strategies for dealing with these situations differed. Some explained that **staying calm and dignified** helped them preserve self-respect and win the respect of the worker. One explained,

"I've had my share of workers. I used to yell and that got me nowhere. Now I just keep talking and they hear that I'm educated. If I yell and scream that just confirms their assumptions."

Others have found that **letting a worker know the situation is desperate** can help focus her attention, especially in understaffed agencies where workers are trying to prioritize among multiple needs. One recounted,

"I needed a kind of medication for my child and when I'm told to go there they tell me to go somewhere else, I'm running back

and forth for that child but I have six children. Finally I went to somebody and said, 'Listen. I just need you to listen because I'm almost broken down.' And she said, 'Leave it to me. Don't worry. Just go.' And then people started calling me who hadn't been returning my call."

Women agreed that sometimes it's better simply to **do things yourself** than to struggle with a worker:

"I spent about six months homeless and went through about seven housing workers who gave me inaccurate information and they didn't understand my issues. I found my own place."

Several women noted the importance of **putting things in writing**, especially when making a complaint or advocating for policy change.

"I have to email everything. I don't like having conversations with service providers when I'm not happy with what's happening. I like to put everything in writing. I don't fax or send a letter because I want a record of it. I often find people say things off the record and later if I bring it up they say they didn't say it. So email has been great that way."

Another strategy many recommend is **going up the chain of command** to a supervisor or manager. One participant's story reminds agencies to see women's comments or complaints not as an annoyance, but as a learning opportunity:

"When I had a concern about a worker I was listened to by her supervisor. It went to the next step, and the three of us got together and worked something out, and the behaviour changed! I felt important, that somebody believed me, and hopefully that the worker learned for her future when she goes out into the field. You never know, you may make that person a better worker!"

Even when self-advocacy is not successful, women recognize that **standing up for our rights can provide hope and inspiration** for ourselves and others. One explained:

"The little things count. When we do things in our own lives that makes a lot of difference. I represent a lot of people. When I speak up, even though I go knowing they're not going to listen to me, it has a major impact. At least they are forced to hear my voice."

TO START A SMALL BUSINESS TO BE MORE HELPFUL TO OTHERS

Women's self-advocacy skills are not only important for individual survival, they are also the basis for women's ability to **organize together to challenge poverty, homelessness, violence, racism, and other oppressions.** This was brought home powerfully by a comment that drew cheers at the end of one focus group:

"I would like us to unite and fight for our rights together because we haven't been able to do it alone."

Finally, many women voiced that in order to make change, women must **work together across differences:**

"We need to support one another, no matter what race, ethnic background, whatever. We need to support one another because we're all fighting for the same thing."

In the end, many women believe that change can only come when women facing poverty and homelessness demand it. One participant explained,

"We are the ones, in the shelters, we have to make the change. In my country it got to the point where they had to listen to us. Our mothers had to strip naked to demand our space and protest police brutality. The same here – we can't wait for them to recommend us – we have to say, 'This is our space.' Some day they will have to listen to us."

These good practices that women have developed are important on many levels. On an individual level, these are the everyday strategies that enable women to survive circumstances of extreme deprivation, danger, and dehumanization.

On a group level, women share these strategies with each other through informal conversations, testing out, building upon, refining and adapting their practices so that they are effective in a range of situations and for a diversity of women.
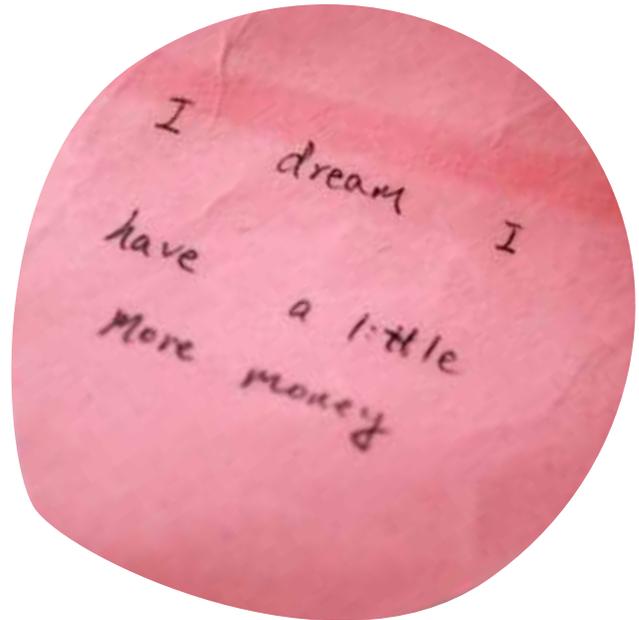
On a collective level, these strategies can become the basis for women's self-organizing, as has happened all over the world. For example, in the CONAMOVIDI movement in Peru, 10,000 community kitchens—originally set up by local women to meet the immediate need for affordable food—have organized into a national network through which women take leadership in political processes.

For agencies and services, women's good practices offer a vital resource that is too often overlooked. Women have learnings and skills to share that can assist organizations in: promoting the dignity, autonomy and self-determination of women; making creative use of limited resources; operating efficiently and effectively; cultivating values of reciprocity and interdependence; providing services in a sensitive and responsive way; standing up for women's rights; and working together to end homelessness, poverty, violence, racism, and other oppressions.

Inspiring Models and Frameworks

This section looks at models, frameworks, and philosophies that have come from outside the "homelessness sector" but could be applied, or have been applied, within organizations for women facing homelessness.

When we began this research we were inspired by projects we had come across in the past. Often these projects were guided by philosophies and frameworks outside the mainstream, rooted in social movements for equity and justice. These models show us a new and different way of doing things, in which stereotypes are challenged, rigid roles and hierarchies are broken down, and people directly affected by an issue lead the way in addressing it. Some of the service practices we discuss in Section Three have been influenced by these models and frameworks.

1. Alliance

What is it?

- Alliance is when people who are in a position of power support the advancement and liberation of people with less power.
- Some examples: when men support the feminist movement, when white people support struggles against racism, when non-Indigenous people stand alongside Indigenous peoples in actions to claim land – this is alliance.
- In order for long-standing systems and structures of oppression to change, people on both sides of these systems must take action: those disadvantaged by the system, but also those who gain power and privilege from it.
- Alliance means taking responsibility for one's power and privilege, taking action to change oneself and the system, and being accountable to the people who experience oppression.
- Alliance is not about charity, or "fixing" the disadvantaged person or group – it is about justice.

Who has done it and how has it been done?

- The labour movement promotes the concept of "solidarity," people sticking together to demand their rights. This is similar to "alliance" except it assumes that all the people in the community share the same position of disadvantage.
- The concept of "alliance" has been developed within the anti-racist feminist movement, and within the Indigenous solidarity movement. Both of these movements recognize the need for people in a position of privilege to take responsibility, be accountable, and work alongside people who face racism and colonization. White women, and non-Indigenous people, are called upon to take on active roles in these movements, in support of the demands of women of colour and Indigenous peoples.
- The White Ribbon Campaign is a campaign by and for men to end violence against women. http://www.whiteribbon.ca/

How has it been, or could it be, adapted to work with women facing homelessness?

- Some organizations incorporate anti-oppression training into their programs. Through this training, women accessing the service discuss and learn about issues of oppression. However, the focus is usually on making the service a "safer" space where racism, ableism, and other oppressions are challenged, rather than on building alliances among women against oppression.

- We believe that the framework of alliance could be useful in helping organizations re-imagine their work with women facing homelessness. Could agencies, and the workers within them, begin to see themselves as allies to the women and families they serve? What happens when services change their goal from addressing the individual harms of homelessness, to standing alongside women in the struggle to end poverty and homelessness?

What are the advantages and challenges when implementing it in this context?

Advantages

- Services and workers who see themselves as allies will strive to uphold the dignity, autonomy, and self-determination of women facing homelessness.

- An alliance framework can help organizations to re-examine their activities and structure.

- Alliance shifts the focus of agencies from "fixing" or "helping" women to standing up against poverty, homelessness, and poor-bashing.

- When agencies work alongside women as allies, everyone's resources increase. Women gain access to and influence over the distribution of the agency's resources. Agencies benefit from the strengths, skills, and knowledge that women bring, which are often overlooked in a service-oriented setting.

- Being an ally is a positive, active role that workers and organizations can take on to address oppression.

- Alliance fosters positive ethical relationships of accountability, transparency, humility, interdependence and respect, rather than relationships of control, mistrust, and resentment.

- Social service workers and women facing homelessness both have skills and knowledge that can contribute to building a framework of alliance in organizations. Women bring strengths of supporting each other, sharing resources, recognizing power imbalances, and standing up for their own and each other's rights. Social service workers have often learned about a model of alliance or anti-oppression in their social work education, and welcome an opportunity to work within these models.

Challenges

- Alliance is a major change in framework for many organizations. Policies, structures, activities, staffing, and funding of organizations may have been based on a charity model or service model, and may need to be reconsidered.

- When their policies, structures and funding are based on a traditional model, institutions themselves can be resistant to change regardless of the intentions of the individuals working within them, and the pace of institutional change is slow.

- Alliance is about changing relationships. Both staff and women may bring old beliefs and habits based on control and mistrust. It can take time to unlearn these and adopt new ways of relating to each other based in interdependence, respect, accountability, and power-sharing. The organization and the staff within it are responsible for modelling these changes consistently so that women can trust that power will be shared.

Where to learn more

- Jen Margaret, a Pakeha (non-Indigenous) Treaty worker from Aotearoa (New Zealand), interviewed a number of non-Indigenous allies doing Indigenous solidarity work, and white allies doing anti-racism work, and wrote a brief and straightforward report called Working as Allies on how these workers view alliance, the characteristics of an ally, and the challenges of committing to alliance. http://awea.org.nz/sites/default/files/Jen%20Margaret%20-%20Working%20as%20allies%202010.pdf

- The book Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People by anti-oppression trainer Anne Bishop, is Canadian and specifically addresses social work and social services. It includes not only alliance across lines of race and gender, but also the role of working-class and middle-class allies in anti-poverty work. http://www.becominganally.ca/

- The book Poor-Bashing: The Politics of Exclusion by anti-poverty activist Jean Swanson examines poor-bashing and includes an honest discussion of the advantages and challenges for poor people of forming alliances with professionals. It also includes guidelines for non-poor allies who wish to get involved in anti-poverty work.

- A recent, edited book looks at the alliances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada: Davis, L. (ed.) (2010) Alliances: Re/envisioning Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

2. Recognizing grassroots women's practices

What is it?

- The model that we are calling "recognizing grassroots women's practices" comes from an international development context, drawing on the organizing skills of women in the poor countries of the global South.

- It is based on the understanding that local women are always on the front lines of dealing with poverty, natural disasters, health issues, and other crises within their communities. Women provide care for the sick, create and maintain homes even in times of financial crisis, tend to the injured and rebuild after disasters.

- When facing a challenge or crisis, women take action, evaluate the effectiveness of the actions they have taken, talk to each other, and refine their strategies further. Through a process of trial and error, women responding to crises develop practices that are well-adapted to their own environments, the needs of their community, and the resources available.

- These methods or practices developed through trial and error and specially adapted to a specific context, are usually more effective and efficient than "top-down" methods developed by governments, institutions, or others outside the immediate situation.

- When women have the opportunity to come together to discuss and learn from each other's practices, they can create more formal "models" that can be shared with and adapted by women in other locations.

Who has done it and how has it been done?

- The Huairou Commission, a women's international development agency, works with grassroots women's groups all over the world to advocate for women-centred models of responding to crises and building stronger communities. They host international Peer Knowledge Exchange meetings where women come together to record, share, and learn from each other's practices. The Commission also supports grassroots women leaders in attending international meetings, such as the World Urban Forum. In those meetings, women demand that policy makers recognize and fund their models, instead of imposing expensive,inefficient, top-down solutions. http://www.huairou.org/

How has it been, or could it be, adapted to work with women facing homelessness?

- The Huairou Commission does much of its work with organizations of women who are poor, homeless, and landless (displaced from their traditional land base). These organizations work to start small businesses, build and maintain housing, and organize to claim land and housing rights.

- In this project, we adapted the Huairou Commission's model of Peer Knowledge Exchange. In regular meetings open to all women facing homelessness and poverty, women shared and documented the strengths and skills they use to survive homelessness, navigate the system, and stand up for their rights. This is the basis for the information presented in Section I.

What are the advantages and challenges when implementing it in this context?

Advantages

- Women can learn a lot from each other about resources, strategies, and information.

- Learning from each other brings women together. It reduces the atmosphere of competition and mistrust that women often adopt in response to scarcity.

- Women's solutions are often more responsive, flexible, appropriate, efficient and effective than solutions developed from the outside.

- Any organization that works with women facing homelessness has the opportunity to learn from and support women's solutions.

Challenges

- Top-down solutions developed by "experts" are often seen as more valuable and legitimate.

- Women's practices and strategies in response to poverty and homelessness—such as urban camping, or salvaging and storing discarded items—have often been criminalized and pathologized instead of being recognized and respected.

- Grassroots solutions are developed through trial and error, which takes time. They are generally suited to a very specific context, and may not apply to others.

- Agencies might appropriate women's solutions without giving credit to women, or without changing the basic power structure of the agency.

- Women facing homelessness in Canada have been consistently depicted to ourselves and to others as incompetent, ignorant, and in need of "expert" assistance. This image interferes with our ability to work together, create our own spaces, and develop our own models.

- Poverty, homelessness, violence, racism, and disability force many of us into systems (such as welfare, shelters, child protection, immigration, and the mental health system) that control, scrutinize and punish us if we stand up for ourselves or try to do things our own way.

Where to learn more

The Huairou Commission's website includes a library of reports and handbooks: http://www.huairou.org/library/general

3. Self-help

What is it?

- A process of mutual support and information-sharing by people who share a common experience or issue.
- Initiatives are organized by and for participants.
- Activities are free of charge.
- Participants have the opportunity to give and receive help, emotional support, information and resources.

Who has done it and how has it been done?

- The self-help model developed within the women's movement (consciousness-raising groups), the psychiatric survivor movement (mental health self-help groups instead of therapy), and recovery movement (such as Alcoholics Anonymous).
- People directly affected by an issue lead meetings and other activities with others who share their experience. Sometimes groups are initiated by a health or service agency, or supported by a professional, but the main emphasis is on mutual support.

How has it been, or could it be, adapted to work with women facing homelessness?

- Aboriginal Mothers' Centre, Vancouver, BC – the drop-in space was modelled on self-help principles, with mothers providing emotional and practical support (e.g., childcare) and information to each other, instead of having these services provided by paid social workers. http://aboriginalmothercentre.ca/home

What are the advantages and challenges when implementing it in this context?

Advantages

- Self-help is empowering because participants need not depend on professionals. The skills and knowledge gained through lived experience can be applied to helping others in the same situation.
- Participants may gain new skills and new perspective on their circumstances.
- Self-help reframes lived experiences as a form of expertise, helping women to recognize and build upon the skills and strengths they have used to get through difficult situations.
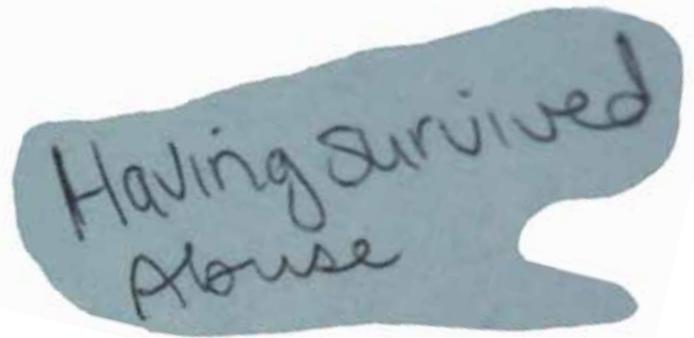
Challenges

- In our culture of professionalized service provision, participants may have learned the belief that they need to be "experts" to help others.
- Women have had few opportunities to recognize and build upon their own expertise based on lived experience, so it may take time for participants to build confidence.
- Securing resources such as meeting space may be difficult.
- Agencies may have rules requiring staff involvement in any program taking place there – women may not be free to meet on their own for self-help activities.
- Women's material circumstances may make it difficult to attend (e.g. lack of transit fare if it is not provided).
- Because of the reliance on volunteer leaders to organize groups, it may be difficult to keep activities running, especially if group members are experiencing crisis or need to focus on daily survival.
- Groups need clear boundaries, mutual respect, agreed-upon conflict resolution processes, and the assurance of confidentiality in order to be safe spaces for women to share their concerns.
- Even within self-help groups there are issues of power and dominance on the basis of race, gender, class, education, ability, age and other factors. Groups need guidelines about how they will confront these issues and ensure safe space.

Where to learn more

Self-Help Resource Centre http://www.selfhelp.on.ca/ compiles a wide range of information and resources about self-help, including listings of self-help groups, and guides for starting and maintaining them.

4. Harm reduction / Peer health education

What is it?

- Harm reduction is an approach to working with substance users in which the harms related to substance use (e.g., risk of infection from contaminated needles, risk of overdose, etc.) are addressed without requiring a commitment to abstinence from drugs/alcohol.

- Harm reduction is non-judgmental of substance use and substance users.

- Ongoing substance use is not considered a barrier to accessing services and supports. (such as shelters where residents are permitted to be under the influence of substances).

- Harm reduction includes a respectful recognition of people's reasons for using (e.g. to cope with painful feelings, to have fun), as well as the harms they experience from using.

- It works with people to identify and support changes they wish to make in order to reduce the harms of their substance use.

- Peer Health Education is a health promotion model in which people with lived experience (for example, of drug use, sex trade work, living with HIV), or members of a specific community (e.g., youth, immigrant mothers) are trained to educate and provide health and harm reduction resources (e.g., condoms, safe injection kits) to others with similar experiences and / or other members of their own communities.

Who has done it and how has it been done?

- Harm reduction and peer health education both came out of the AIDS movement and health promotion / HIV prevention.

- Sex workers' self-advocacy organizations developed safer sex peer health education programs very early in the AIDS epidemic, pioneering some of the earliest methods such as comic books and zines to share information, and outreach condom distribution by and for sex workers, on the streets and in clubs. For example, Stella, a Montreal sex workers' organization, does peer outreach work along with a range of other self-advocacy and support activities. http://www.chezstella.org/

- The drug users' self-advocacy movement has been successful in winning access to harm reduction programs and safe injection sites in Canada. For example, VANDU (Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users) held meetings with drug users in the downtown eastside, developed a model based on the needs users identified, opened its own informal safe injection facility, and pushed for the creation of Canada's first formal safe injection facility, Insite. The history of VANDU is recounted in the book Raise Shit: Social Action Saving Lives by Susan Boyd, Donald MacPherson, and Bud Osborne, published in 2009 by Fernwood Publishing. http://www.vandu.org/

How has it been, or could it be, adapted to work with women facing homelessness?

- Maxxine Wright Centre, Surrey, BC: This shelter and health centre for young mothers at risk provides a place to stay and health care for pregnant women, new mothers and babies. An attached childcare centre offers childcare for the mothers accessing the program as well as for the surrounding community of Surrey, and 24 independent transitional housing units are also under construction. All of these services are provided from a harm reduction perspective where it is recognized that active substance use does not mean a woman is not capable of being a good mother. http://www.atira.bc.ca/maxxine-wright-community-health-centre

What are the advantages and challenges when implementing it in this context?

Advantages

- Women are able to maintain access to needed services and supports even if they are using substances.

- Women trained as peer health educators gain new skills and take on a leadership role.

- Women can use the knowledge they have gained through their own experiences to help each other.

Challenges

- Some staff and women might be uncomfortable or feel unsafe in an environment where some women are using, or might have negative judgements and stereotypes about drug users.

- Thorough training is necessary so that peer health educators can distinguish medically validated information from "urban myths" that may not be accurate.

Where to learn more

Learning from each other: Enhancing community-based harm reduction programs and practices in Canada. This community-based research project by Canadian AIDS Society and Canadian Harm Reduction Network documented harm reduction practices across Canada. More information about the project and the final report can be found at: http://www.cdnaids.ca/learningfromeachotherenhancingcommu

A Guide to Growing POSSE is a comprehensive manual on starting a youth-driven Peer Outreach Support Services and Education project. Simply replace the word "youth" with the phrase "women and families facing homelessness" as you read, and most of its insights can be applied directly to developing similar projects by, with and for women. It was developed by the POSSE Project, a youth peer health education project in Halton Region, Ontario. The report is at the POSSE website - http://www.posseproject.ca/index.php/about/
 - click on the report link at the bottom of the page.

5. Social enterprise & micro-business

What is it?

- Social enterprise is a business that does not aim to make a profit – all surplus funds are invested back into the enterprise or given to support a social cause. It's different from a non-profit in that its activities can be more like those of a business (e.g., selling goods or services) than a social service or a charity (which usually provides services).

- Social purpose enterprise is a business with the purpose of providing training and employment for people who face barriers in the mainstream labour market.

- Micro-business is a small business that requires only a small investment to sustain it, and generates a basic level of income, usually for one person or a small co-operative of people.

- Traditionally, business enterprises are focused on profit and growth. In order to achieve growing profits they try to keep their costs low – which often means paying workers less. By contrast, social enterprises and micro-businesses are focused on meeting the needs of the people who work within them.

Who has done it and how has it been done?

- The psychiatric survivor / consumer movement has led the way in developing social purpose enterprises that provide flexible and dignified working conditions and decent incomes for psychiatric survivors and people with mental health disabilities. The Ontario Council of Alternative Businesses http://www.ocab.ca/ represents five such businesses, and supports others in starting up.

- Like the Huairou Commission's programs, the concepts of micro-businesses and micro-lending come from poor communities in the global South. Micro-lending was pioneered by the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, which provided collateral-free small loans to assist women in starting small businesses.

How has it been, or could it be, adapted to work with women facing homelessness?

- As seen in Section I, the micro-business model is very familiar to many women facing homelessness, who earn incomes through small informal enterprises including salvage, crafting, and bartering (trading goods and services).

- The social enterprise model has also been widely taken up by many organizations working with women facing homelessness.

- VANDU Empowerment (Vancouver, BC) is the social enterprise arm of the drug users' activist organization VANDU. It provides cleaning services and bedbug treatment on a contract basis to a number of Vancouver housing providers. The enterprise offers casual employment on a day-labour basis to members of VANDU, and proceeds, after wages are paid, help to fund the organization's self-advocacy activities. http://www.vandu.org/

- Sistering (Toronto, ON) is a drop-in that has offered training and employment opportunities through social enterprise for many years. These include a women's art studio called Inspirations, an industrial sewing program called On The Path, and a new textile studio. http://www.sistering.org/programsandservices/employmentandincome.php

- My Sister's Place (London, ON) is a women's day centre that includes a micro-enterprise studio where women create new jewellery using donated and found jewellery, as well as beads purchased through a partnership with a women's cooperative in Sudan. http://www.wotch.org/womens-resources/index.php

- Red Willow Womyn's Centre (Duncan, BC) is a social enterprise store and women's centre on a main street of this Vancouver Island community. Sales of hand-made soap products cover the rental costs for the storefront, which in turn provides a gathering space where women share resources, support each other, and take action against homelessness, poverty, violence and racism.

What are the advantages and challenges when implementing it in this context?

Advantages

- Social enterprises provide employment for women who face barriers in the labour market.

- They offer income-generating opportunities for low-income women.

- Often social enterprises provide flexible work hours that women can tailor to their schedules and abilities. This is especially important for single mothers, women with physical and mental health disabilities, and women with other part-time employment.

Challenges

- Micro-businesses and social enterprises may not offer enough work hours to meet women's needs, so women may also have to rely on other forms of income.

- Wages or other compensation from these types of work may be clawed back from women's social assistance or disability benefits, or may even make women ineligible for these benefits.

Where to learn more

The Department of Adult Education at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, hosts the Social Economy Centre, which provides workshops, courses, and reports on all aspects of developing and maintaining social enterprises. http://sec.oise.utoronto.ca/english/index.php

Good Practices in Organizations

This section describes practices that organizations in the homelessness sector can use to ensure that women are directly involved and democratically represented. These kinds of practices are important because they give women ownership of the agencies they participate in, build upon women's strengths, and help agencies work towards ending homelessness.

1. Inclusion in service planning

There are many factors that guide organizations' decisions about what services to provide, and how to provide them, including the agency's purpose, the skills and interests of its staff, and the funding available. The needs, interests, and suggestions of service users are also considered in every agency we looked at – but the active engagement of women using the services in the decision making process varied widely from one agency to another.

In our focus groups with women and families, we heard loud and clear that women want a voice in planning services. As one focus group participant put it,

"I hope that there's some way for you to impart to people who might read this report that there are plenty of women out there with good ideas from all walks of life in this city who are very capable of formulating their own programs if they get the guidance. And not just have lip service to women's rights but real women's rights."

Services are more relevant and work better when they are planned with the input of the women and families who use them. As the comment above points out, women are capable of planning programs but may need assistance; including women in program planning builds on their capabilities and skills. It also builds the capacity of the whole community – staff, management, volunteers and service users – to work together collaboratively. As well, including women in service planning allows the whole community to better understand the inner workings of the agency. Transparency about how the agency operates can help prevent conflicts arising from misunderstandings about issues such as staff roles (what they

can and cannot do), available resources, and externally-imposed limitations on agency activities (such as laws that prohibit charitable organizations from doing political advocacy). In spite of these advantages, many organizations lack practices for including women. For example, Toronto's Quality Assurance Review of City-funded shelters found that only 20% of shelters were able to demonstrate how residents were included in program planning, development and evaluation.

From a framework of alliance, we can identify further reasons women should have an active role in service planning. Poverty and homelessness rob women and families of control in so many areas of life, even basic choices such as what to eat each day. This makes it all the more important for services to restore women's power and control in every possible way, including through having a say in how services are offered. Also, women facing homelessness are often wrongly portrayed as passive victims who are incapable of providing for ourselves. If women's role in an agency is limited to passively receiving the services offered, this image gets reinforced in the minds of the public, the staff, and even women ourselves. Finally, even when funding is tight, agencies usually have access to a wide array of resources, including space, staff time, food, money, technology, community networks, and relationships with funders. Since homelessness and poverty are caused by an unjust and inequitable distribution of resources in society as a whole, agencies can help challenge this injustice by sharing control over the resources within their own community. Including women in service planning is one important way to share this control.

In reading about organizations and speaking with service providers and service users, we have learned about a range of ways in which women participate in service planning. These fall along a continuum from the lowest to highest level of engagement:

- Staff consideration of individual client needs and recommendations
- Individual input: suggestion boxes, exit interviews, surveys
- Open door policy for service users to speak to managers
- Resident / member meetings
- Participatory program evaluation and planning

Staff consideration of client needs and recommendations

A feature of client-centred practice is letting clients lead the counselling process by closely paying attention to the needs they express. Many agencies serving women facing homelessness employ a client-centred practice model (such a model is mandated by Toronto's Shelter Standards), and "include" women's perspectives in service planning indirectly, through the input of front-line staff such as counsellors and case managers. For example, counsellors at a drop-in noticed that more and more of the women accessing their services were looking for supports around substance use, and so they proposed a new harm reduction program to meet those needs.

When direct service staff who know women well and care about their well-being are able to have input in this way, the services developed might reflect that caring. The disadvantage, though, is that women are not giving direct input. It is possible that decisions could reflect a misunderstanding of women's needs, or even conflict with women's viewpoints. Even front-line workers and counsellors who have regular contact with women might not know much about them, based on the impressions they gather in the very specific context of providing a service. This limited perspective is not likely to take into account the full range of women's skills, backgrounds, and knowledge. Finally, while this approach may help to create a caring environment, it does not contribute to women's sense of empowerment within the agency, or to their actual power to influence decisions.

While it is vital for women's priorities to be considered in discussions among staff, this should never be the only way in which women can have input into services. Women in our project reject the idea that services make decisions "for their own good" – instead, services should heed the Dis/Ability Rights movement slogan, "Nothing about us, without us!"

Individual input: suggestion boxes, surveys, exit interviews

Suggestion box

Toronto shelters are required by Shelter Standards to provide a box where women can leave a written complaint. While all agree that the anonymity of complaints boxes is important, both staff and women expressed doubts about their effectiveness. For staff, receiving a complaint in written form can make it difficult to resolve it well, since they cannot ask for more details about the context or for input into how to deal with it, and it is impossible to follow up. Women noted that often, boxes are either hidden away, or in plain view of staff, making it awkward to access them. A written complaint limits the amount of information that can be conveyed, and obviously, this method is also inaccessible to women learning English and to those with limited literacy skills. In some shelters, especially those where conditions are generally poor, women question whether, and how often, the complaints will be read, and whether anything will be done about them. Finally, both workers and women commented on the adversarial nature of a complaints box. One focus group participant said,

"We know where to make a complaint – but where can we give a compliment?"

One method that has proven successful is to provide a box for suggestions, questions, compliments, and complaints, near a bulletin board where recent contributions can be posted alongside a response (with the writer's permission, of course). Another practice we heard about was that comments from the box are brought to regular residents' meetings to allow for group discussion. Either way, we recommend that agencies ensure that women have easy access to comment forms—for example, distribute them to women when they first arrive. Allow for comments to be anonymous OR for women to provide their names to allow staff to follow up. And ensure that comments are read and addressed quickly. With these practices, women's written contributions become part of a more open community dialogue.

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Surveys

Some organizations conduct surveys to evaluate services and plan for new ones. Because funders value statistics, results of such surveys can be very useful in seeking funding. If surveys are conducted on a regular basis, they can provide an agency with feedback on positive changes, and areas that need improvement. However, like complaints boxes, the brief and anonymous nature of a survey makes it difficult to follow up on. Surveys work best if they are incorporated into community dialogue, for example, if the results of the survey are presented and discussed with the whole community.

One youth-serving agency has an ongoing, brief, online survey. The survey is the homepage for all the agency computers, so that youth have the opportunity to provide comments any time they log on.

Because they are simple to design and conduct, surveys are also a great tool for self-advocacy organizations to gather information about women's needs and hopes, and to invite women to get involved. For example, in preparation for a report to a United Nations committee, one self-advocacy group developed a brief survey that members conducted face-to-face during visits to 20 drop-ins and other organizations. They spoke with more than 80 women, whose input was incorporated into the UN report. Not only did the group broaden its network of women and receive important input, but the women felt empowered knowing that their words would be heard at the UN.

Exit interviews

Finally, some organizations use exit interviews to get feedback from former residents after they have moved on. In this project and others, women emphasized the importance of receiving follow-up contact and support after leaving a shelter. A brief interview can be easily included in the first follow-up contact, and in addition to inviting women's feedback on their shelter stay, it can open up discussion of what supports women might need now. Exit interviews can be especially revealing because women might feel safe being more honest once they are no longer relying on the agency for daily survival for themselves and their children.

One counsellor recounted how an exit interview made her see her agency differently. When asked, "What's the most stressful thing that's happened to you since you left the residence?" the former resident responded, "I haven't had any stress since I left the residence."
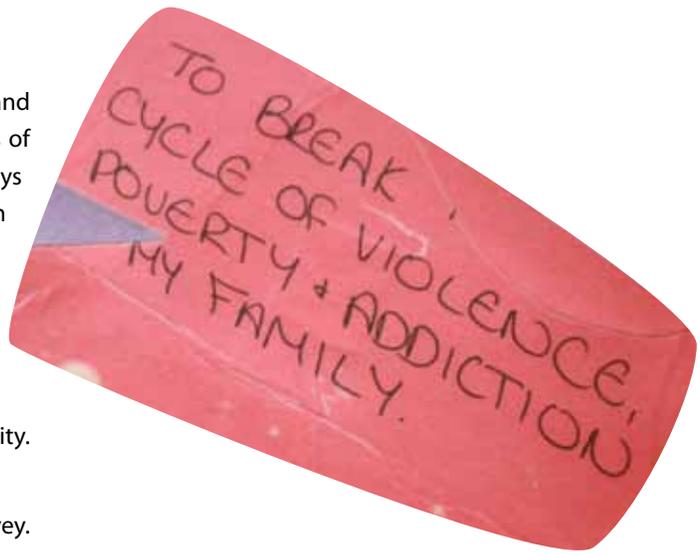
To encourage honest feedback, exit interviews are best conducted after a woman has moved into her own place, by a staff member who was not directly involved in working with the woman being interviewed. Make sure that it is clear that a woman is welcome to participate in any follow-up activities and services (such as community meals or housing support) regardless of how she responds to the exit interview questions. An innovative idea for inclusion is for other former service users to conduct these interviews – perhaps as the first contact in an ongoing peer mentorship program.

Open-door policy & conflict resolution process

A few organizations we spoke with said they have an "open-door policy," in which women are free to approach management at any time with a concern or comment. This conveys respect for women and the idea that the whole space of the agency "belongs" to women, even the director's office. The physical layout of an organization says a lot about the power structure there. Open spaces, design and décor selected by participants, and comfortable furniture all convey a "women-friendly space," while staff behind counters, plexiglass windows, and closed offices convey an environment of one-sided staff control.

If they are used to more traditional settings where women do not have direct access to managers, it can take time and education for both service users and service providers to get used to an open-door environment. However, the rewards are an atmosphere of reciprocity, prompt problem-solving and decreased stress. This policy also builds upon women's good practice of taking concerns up the chain of command, as identified in Section 1.

It is important for the open-door policy to be offered consistently to avoid the impression that only certain "favourites" have access and influence with management. Also helpful is to have a consistent set of expectations and conflict resolution steps that apply equally to staff and women.

One manager explains,

"If a participant and a staff are having an issue they are encouraged to sort it out. I will offer to mediate if they can't. Staff have to be able to admit they're wrong, and we support them in doing so – "You screwed up, you have to make amends." Women are always told, you can speak to the director or manager."

She also notes that staff and managers must be prepared to receive women's anger and to understand that women may need to vent their fury and frustration at the everyday stresses and humiliations they are forced to endure. However, there is a line between legitimate venting and verbal abuse, which both service users and staff recognize and will enforce.

Women often reported that when approaching staff or management with a concern, they are met with a response of defensiveness or dismissal. These reactions prevent resolution and waste an important learning opportunity. Instead, staff can learn to reframe these encounters as dialogues in which women are taking their time and energy to share valuable knowledge. One team member shared,

"I was once in a five-star shelter – one of the main things was that at the end of every discussion or meeting, the worker would say 'Thank you for coming and talking to me about this, I learned about this and this, I never realized that ...' etcetera. This went along with an overall environment of dignity."

A focus group participant described how this type of process is good for the service user, the service provider, and the agency:

"When I had a concern about a worker I was listened to by her supervisor, it went to the next step, and the three of us got together and worked something out, and the behaviour changed! I felt important, that somebody believed me, and hopefully the worker learned for her future when she goes into the field. You never know, you may make that person a better worker!"

Resident / town hall meetings

Regular meetings of residents or service users can build a sense of community, collective responsibility, and ownership within an organization. These opportunities for group dialogue can do even more to promote a democratic and participatory organization than the opportunities for individual input described above.

In many services, residents' meetings are the only forum for women's collective input. But as pointed out by women and staff we spoke to, just the fact of holding these meetings is not enough. Staff raised concerns about meetings that few people attend and that seem to accomplish little. Often, only a few people contribute to the discussion, the same issues are brought up repeatedly with no resolution, or the content of the meeting does not reflect the most important issues.

Dynamics like these usually reflect low morale, low commitment, and little sense of ownership among group members. Safety, control, and trust are the keys to building group cohesion and productivity – and indeed, women identified these as their main concerns when discussing residents' meetings.

For example, we heard about one shelter whose residents' meetings were conducted in a hallway right outside the staff offices; a resident commented, *"You don't want to open your mouth because it's going to come back at you."*

The women-led agenda of our focus groups and women's meetings was in stark contrast with some participants' experiences of residents' meetings:

"You think the residents' meeting is going to be like this, but it's run, controlled, and minutes taken by staff. The staff give their complaints first and then they ask if we want to add anything."

Staff meetings, meanwhile, are seen as exclusive spaces in which important decisions are made without women's input, and women are gossiped about by staff:

"The one thing I really dislike is every week the staff and counsellors have a meeting and discuss every client together. So the whole staff knows my personal business and it makes me not trust my counsellor."

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In short, women want opportunities to have input and get their real concerns addressed, but they expect meetings to be safe, to have shared control between staff and service users, to be productive, and to be confidential. If these criteria are not met, women will not participate.

Some organizations have tried to address poor attendance by making meetings mandatory, or by offering a reward for participation, usually drawn from the agency donations. Making meetings mandatory is not likely to improve the quality of meetings unless the underlying problems with trust, safety and control are addressed. As for offering a reward for participation, women are divided on this issue. On the one hand, it acknowledges the effort women put in to participation; as many women point out, staff are being paid to attend the meeting, so why should their time not be valued in the same way? On the other hand, some point out that items are donated for the women, not to help the agency improve attendance at its programs:

"The donations are used for gift packs to give you for going to a program – they withhold the donations. They say 'once you finish the program, you can have this.' But it's not yours to give!"

Agencies' experience shows that the best way to improve participation in residents' meetings is to make sure they happen regularly, offer opportunities for meaningful input, and include people with the power to address women's concerns. Service providers we spoke with suggested a number of strategies for accomplishing these goals:

"We have three floors, so three residents' meetings every week. Every other month we do a joint meeting so women get to know people on other floors."

"Our residents' meetings have improved over the years. More and more residents come, a couple of staff regularly attend and all staff are welcome. The meetings used to be just venting, but now there is active problem solving so women know action is being taken. There is an agenda prepared beforehand with women's input. For example if there are food issues, or concern about not seeing the counsellor enough, the food coordinator or counsellor will come in and hear about it, and talk about solutions."

"After a workshop or meeting participants complete an evaluation, and we incorporate feedback into subsequent meetings."

Whereas residents' meetings at shelters are usually limited to women currently living there, drop-ins serve communities that are much larger and more scattered. Some drop-ins use Town Hall Meetings to bring together the community for input and discussion. These meetings should happen regularly, be advertised well in advance, and focus on a specific issue or allow members to propose items for the agenda. Providing language interpretation, food, and transit fare will make these meetings more accessible. A drop-in manager commented,

"[Agencies should hold] regular town halls with participants and they'll get lots of ideas."

Small residents' meetings and large town-hall meetings require different types of facilitation, but in either case, strong facilitation skills are necessary. For small or large meetings, it helps to have consistent guidelines that are developed by the group and displayed at each meeting. For example, for our women's meetings and focus groups, facilitators would begin by inviting women to discuss the basic guidelines of respect, confidentiality, and sharing space. After discussing what each of these meant for them, members of the group would discuss any further guidelines they wanted to add. The flipchart with the group's guidelines written on it would be put up at every meeting, with new ones added as women decided on them.

Facilitators must pay attention to both the content and the process of the meeting. Besides watching the time, following the agenda and keeping discussion on track (content), facilitators also need to be aware of the mood in the meeting, respond to oppressive statements or dynamics (such as racist comments, or the exclusion of specific groups of women from the discussion), and ensure that all voices have space to be heard (process). Even within communities facing marginalization, there are different levels of privilege, and meetings can often be dominated by those whose race, gender, ability, language, education, citizenship or class background makes them feel entitled to speak out; facilitators must actively intervene to ensure equitable participation. It is usually best to have a pair of facilitators who can share tasks related to the meeting's content and process. Some organizations provide training and compensation for service users to take on facilitation duties – this builds women's leadership capacity and reflects shared ownership of the meetings, keeping them relevant to women's concerns.

Participatory program planning and evaluation

Whole organizations have grown out of planning processes in which women facing homelessness have been involved from

the beginning. Centres like the Aboriginal Mothers' Centre in Vancouver, BC and My Sister's Place in London, ON have used what some call "kitchen table" planning: informal meetings at which women facing homelessness, front-line workers, advocates and others come together, often in participants' homes, to imagine a new space for women.

Aboriginal Mothers' Centre
Vancouver, BC

In less than a decade, the Aboriginal Mothers' Centre has gone from a collective vision, to a small storefront drop-in, to a large multiservice agency incorporating a mother and child drop-in, childcare, a social enterprise, and social housing. Founder Penny Irons described the process of developing this organization as "kitchen table planning," where she held informal planning sessions with dozens of women. These meetings usually took place around kitchen tables, with food cooking, children running around, phones ringing, and all the normal activities of everyday life unfolding. These settings helped the women imagine the environment they wanted to create, similar to a kitchen, where all were equal, all had something to share, and people of all ages were welcomed and valued.

To learn more:
http://aboriginalmothercentre.ca/home

Sometimes this has led to the development of an entirely new service model, like the Aboriginal Mothers' Centre, in which all women attending the Centre are seen not as "clients" but as volunteers who support and assist each other.

But even when it leads to the creation of a service where the roles of "staff" and "client" follow more traditional lines, the direct involvement of women from the beginning lays the foundation for reciprocity and respect. If the women who were involved in planning remain active in the agency once it opens, they can serve as vital role models to staff and service users – breaking down the limiting roles of "staff" and "client," and challenging the image of women as passive victims.

Many organizations have also found ways to involve women in the ongoing planning and evaluation of programs. Existing forums such as residents' meetings provide an excellent

opportunity for this – and those regular meetings become more meaningful and productive when they are used for such important consultation. Here's an example from one shelter:

"To try to get residents involved in running the program, we bring new stuff—like protocols, programs, and groups—to residents' meetings and get women's feedback. We always do this during the pilot period of new programs."

When programs are planned and carried out by service users, it builds a sense of community and improves morale throughout the agency. In several of the organizations we looked at, women take the lead in planning holiday celebrations. Women, especially those with children, expressed how important it is to plan and celebrate holidays. Homelessness, substandard housing, poverty, and crisis often make it difficult or impossible for women to carry out traditional celebrations, and these times of year can be the most difficult reminders of how much has been lost. Services are a "home away from home" where these traditions can be observed.

Holiday celebrations also provide an opportunity to honour the diverse cultures that make up the community, and to promote leadership by women who face racism. For example, in one drop-in, older Chinese women are a growing group of members, and this has been met with some exclusionary and racist attitudes from other members of the community. A turning point came when the agency invited Chinese participants to plan celebrations for Lunar New Year: since then, this is one of the drop-in's most-anticipated holidays of the year.

Women's groups or committees can plan other programs as well. One drop-in, for example, hosts a number of women's groups representing different cultures or interests within the community (for example, a group for Spanish-speaking women, and another for women interested in participating in social action). Each group is given a modest budget to be used for its own programming, and is supported by a designated staff member who helps organize meetings, carry out activities, and communicate between the group and the organization. As with holiday celebrations, such groups can also offer an opportunity for engaging and empowering women who may face exclusion within the broader agency community on the basis of their language, race, ability, place of birth, or other factors. At the same time, such groups can also be dominated by the members who feel most confident of their right to contribute, and also by staff who may impose their own ideas without even realizing it. Group guidelines should address this and the group should regularly assess whether participation is equitable, and if not, take action to correct this.

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My Sister's Place

London, ON

My Sister's Place is a day centre serving women facing homelessness, located in a beautifully renovated grand old house close to harm reduction services, subsidized housing, and other supports. Planning for this service began when women accessing shelters pointed out that they needed a safe place to go during the day. Service providers from a wide range of women's services came together to make this dream a reality. The planning committee held regular consultations with women facing homelessness at every stage. Once the old house had been donated, design sessions were conducted with women, who used a doll house to plan the layout, furniture, and colours. Now open, My Sister's Place continues to ensure the active involvement of women in planning and delivering its programs.

To learn more:

http://www.wotch.org/womens-resources/index.php

Summary: Promising Practices for Including Women in Service Planning

General Principles

- Nothing about us without us – ensure that women have opportunities for direct, meaningful influence on service planning and evaluation.
- Respect women's opinions and value women's input.
- Provide a range of ways for women to give input – anonymous suggestion forms, confidential individual input with follow-up, and collective forums like residents meetings and women's committees.
- Give all women information about how to have input.
- Act promptly on feedback and inform women of what actions have been taken.
- Open your mind to ideas that challenge established ways of operating.
- Question policies that stand in the way of women's visions or needlessly complicate their simple suggestions.

Individual Input

- Put suggestion boxes and forms where they are easily accessible.
- Post written suggestions with responses, or bring them to a community meeting.
- Do exit interviews to get feedback from women who have moved on from the service.
- Have these interviews conducted by staff not directly involved with the woman.
- Conduct regular surveys to allow for comparisons of issues over time.
- Use surveys as a starting point for further discussion.
- Establish an open door policy so women can bring concerns to management.
- Apply rules and conflict resolution protocols consistently with all staff and service users.
- Make it safe for staff to admit mistakes and make amends.
- Be prepared to receive women's anger and frustration, but set limits on verbal abuse.

Collective Input

- Hold residents' meetings regularly.
- Develop group guidelines together and review them at each meeting.
- Include guidelines that challenge expressions of racism and other forms of discrimination, and promote equitable participation of all women.
- Base meeting agendas on women's input.
- Ensure that staff directly involved with women's areas of concern attend.
- Ask women to evaluate the meetings to ensure that they consider them relevant and worthwhile.
- Provide training and compensation for women to facilitate meetings.
- Publicize town hall meetings far in advance.
- Provide language interpretation, food and transit fare for community meetings.
- Invite women to plan and carry out holiday celebrations from their cultural traditions.
- Develop women's committees with designated budget and staff support to plan and carry out their own activities.
- Have women facing homelessness at the table when planning new services.
- Have formal evaluation processes (surveys, exit interviews, etc.) facilitated by a neutral outside individual or organization.

2. Inclusion in service delivery

Another way in which organizations can meaningfully involve women is through inclusion in service delivery. Like inclusion in planning, having women involved in delivering services can build a sense of community and shared ownership within a service agency. Women who take active roles may feel more empowered to speak up for changes within the organization. When women facing homelessness are on the staff and volunteer teams, this breaks down the rigid roles of "professional" and "client." Staff and volunteers with lived experience of homelessness can act as mentors and role models for current service users, demonstrating that there can be life and hope after homelessness. They can also sensitize others on the staff team to the realities of poverty and homelessness, and act as advocates for the perspectives and priorities of women within the organization. When organizations commit to reflecting lived experience on their staff team, the team is also more likely to reflect diversity in terms of race, Aboriginal identity, physical and mental ability, social class, age, language and place of birth.

Finally, hiring and paying women directly addresses one of the key causes of homelessness - inadequate incomes. Since homelessness and poverty are the result of an unfair division of resources within society, organizations make a direct contribution to ending homelessness and poverty when they dedicate resources to creating meaningful, adequately-paid employment for women facing homelessness, rather than promoting dependence.

Agencies include women in three main ways:
- Volunteer roles
- Participant employment
- Hiring staff with lived experience

Volunteer roles

Most non-profit organizations engage volunteers in their services. For many, this is crucial to maintaining funding, because funders require that organizations demonstrate that they are supported by the community through volunteerism and donations. This also allows them to offer programs within limited budgets. Agencies we spoke with varied widely in their approaches to involving women using their services as volunteers. Some organizations have no experience with this.

Some require a waiting period ranging from three months to two years before they will allow a former service user to volunteer, while others have no such guidelines. And some actively encourage women facing homelessness to take on volunteer roles.

Women also varied in their opinions about volunteering. Some see it as a chance to do work they genuinely care about, to give back, and to make a difference in the lives of other women. Some suggested it is more rewarding than paid work:

"When I was gainfully employed I used to wonder how people find time to volunteer. Now I find all kinds of time to volunteer."

Some women, however, express concern that volunteering does not lead to employment but instead becomes a trap. Focus group participants and research team members spoke about the dangers of becoming pigeonholed as a volunteer. Because "volunteering" has become a workfare requirement in Ontario[6], women sometimes regard volunteer programs in front-line agencies with suspicion. Some pointed out the enormous amount of volunteer work done by low-income women, and questioned whether this could be considered exploitation. One woman said:

"I call it fake employment. It's good for a few [transit] tokens but it's never going to get you anywhere."

These comments, along with the approaches we learned from organizations with thriving volunteer programs, point to a number of promising practices. First, it's important that volunteering be truly voluntary, and that it offer women opportunities for meaningful involvement that builds on their skills. Volunteer programs should be supported by a designated staff member who can provide training and emotional support, and volunteers should be recognized and celebrated by the organization. Volunteers should have opportunities to advance, ideally to paid positions within the organization. In order for volunteering to be accessible to women facing homelessness, it must also be financially supported. Wherever possible, volunteers should receive financial compensation (honoraria), or at the very least, should be compensated by providing for immediate material needs such as food, transit, and childcare. Finally, it is important to recruit volunteers from diverse communities, and to offer a range of roles accessible to women of varying abilities, ages, and languages.

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6. Ontario's social assistance program requires recipients to do volunteer work or other forms of "community participation" (such as training or unpaid work placements in businesses.)

Participant employment

Some organizations have developed participant employment programs, in which women accessing the service have the opportunity to receive a wage on a casual basis for doing some of the tasks normally done by staff or volunteers, such as working in the kitchen or organizing the donation room. These programs provide flexible, accessible employment for women who face barriers in the traditional labour market. They also enable women to supplement their extremely low incomes.

There are some challenges to these types of programs. The first is to ensure that wages do not interfere with women's access and eligibility for social assistance. Knowing the rules for additional income can help organizations avoid unintentionally making participant employees' lives more difficult. For example, in Ontario, recipients of the provincial disability support plan are permitted to earn honoraria (compensation) up to an annual total, and only amounts exceeding this total will be clawed back from recipients' cheques. Accordingly, many organizations reward participant employees' work with honoraria rather than a payroll cheque. In other cases, such as Ontario's welfare

program, 50% of any earnings are clawed back. Some women said they prefer to be "paid" in grocery cards or other non-monetary payment for this reason.

Distributing employment opportunities fairly and equitably was another challenge mentioned by agencies with these programs. Service providers noted that conflicts can arise between women when there is a perception of unfairness, or when a woman feels that a specific task belongs to her. Open dialogue, and transparency in the distribution of participant employment opportunities, can help to address this.

Hiring staff with lived experience

Women facing homelessness were clear that they preferred staff who could relate to their experiences. One, for example, asked,

"What's better than life experience for working with other women who are going through it?"

Many believe that the system needs to become more open to women with lived experience, not only as front-line workers but also as managers:

"When I sit here and listen to my sister speak, I hear how intelligent she is, and wonder who would recommend such a person to be a manager of the shelter. How can we identify such brilliant women and bring them to the managerial level? Because they have the experience and the knowledge."

When we asked staff and managers whether lived experience was considered an asset for their agency's staff, most said that it was – but only in very few cases was lived experience taken into account in the organization's hiring process, staff training, or ongoing supervision.

While both service providers and women recognize the advantages of life experience for staff, they also point out the complexities. Both groups raised the issues of triggers and boundaries as particularly challenging for staff who have faced homelessness. One focus group participant shared her own experiences with these challenges:

"When I got in university I thought, 'I know all about it! Just give me my diploma! I've been through it!' But what I realized was that I was being triggered left, right and centre in all my placements. I didn't realize what was going on. You need theory to back up life experience."

Staff who have experienced homelessness might also feel like outsiders on the staff team. This feeling was clearly expressed by one participant:

"When I sit around this table I know I belong here. I don't always feel that way in a work situation, without women who have been there, done that."

On the other hand, women who have faced homelessness and go on to become workers might feel exiled from their original social circle as well. One service provider suggested that some service users might see friends of theirs who become staff as "moles" for the organization. Both staff and service users might also resent "peer" staff, with service users wondering "why does she have this job if she has the same issues as me?" while other staff might question the fairness of someone with fewer formal qualifications earning the same salary.

Some organizations have concluded that these challenges are greater than the benefits of hiring staff with lived experience, while others have responded by restricting eligibility to women who have never directly used the agency, and / or to those who have been stably housed or "clean and sober" for a long period of time.

Women facing homelessness, though, recommend a more flexible approach. In particular, several questioned the validity of restrictions based on the amount of time since applicants have been clients of the agency. Some also suggested that education requirements pose an unnecessary barrier:

"The only problem is, you have to have the schooling. I don't care how intelligent and empathic you are, how many hours you're willing to work in a day – the system wants a degree. The person with a degree is recommended by another person with a degree."

The literature in this area agrees with women's recommendations. In a review of literature on Consumer-Delivered[7] Services (CDS) in the mental health sector, CDS are described as a best practice with a number of benefits (Salzer, 2002). Consumers accessing these services benefit from a trusting relationship with a role model; consumers providing services come to see value in their own experiences, take on an empowered role, and gain employment skills; and the service organizations offering CDS enrich their staff teams with the unique knowledge that only direct experience provides. Based on the literature and on their own extensive work with CDS, the article's authors recommend a flexible approach to issues of dual relationships[8] between staff with lived experience and the employing agency and / or people accessing the agency's services. Other recommendations for best practices in CDS include:

- Training for both "consumer" and "non-consumer" staff, to improve their understanding of the value of CDS, the "consumer-provider" role, and the mission and protocols of the agency;
- Flexibility in education requirements;
- Supervision for both "consumer" and "non-consumer" staff, to address issues of boundaries, triggers, and role conflicts.

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7. "Consumer" refers to users of mental health services.
8. In counselling and social services, "dual relationship" refers to a service provider who is in more than one role in relationship to a service user – for example, both counsellor and friend. Dual relationships can make providing services more complicated (what a friend would do might not be appropriate for a service provider to do, for example) and so require careful negotiation and consideration. Some traditional services forbid staff from being in dual relationships with "clients" – but this is not realistic in many contexts including small communities and peer service models.

Atira Women's Resource Society
Vancouver, BC

Atira is a large, multi-service agency operating services for women throughout the Greater Vancouver area, including shelters, health services, and single-room-occupancy housing. Years ago Atira eliminated the post-secondary education requirement from its hiring policy, and replaced it with a requirement that applicants bring lived experience with the issues faced by women accessing Atira's services. Now staff throughout the agency, including the director, share the lived experiences of the women they serve, including homelessness, poverty, violence, struggles with mental health and substance use, and involvement in the sex trade. Staff are challenged and supported to honour the knowledge they bring from these experiences. Atira also aims to ensure its staff represent the communities it serves by ensuring significant proportions of its employees are Aboriginal, of colour, immigrants and refugees, lesbian, bisexual, and two-spirited.

To learn more:
http://www.atira.bc.ca/

Summary: Promising Practices for Including Women in Service Provision

General Principles
- Integrate an understanding of the value of lived experience throughout the organization, from an anti-oppression perspective.
- Recruit a team of volunteers, staff and management that reflects the diversity of the community served in terms of race, Aboriginal identity, social class, ability, age, language, place of birth, sexual orientation and gender identity.

Volunteers
- Create meaningful volunteer roles.
- Invite women using the service to participate as volunteers.
- Provide training, food, childcare and transit fare to make volunteering accessible.
- Designate a staff position as volunteer coordinator; this role includes supervision and coordination, but also emotional and material support for volunteers to enable them to sustain their work.

- Choose volunteers from the broader community who have positive attitudes towards volunteers with lived experience.
- Train all staff and volunteers to acknowledge, respect, and work effectively alongside volunteers who also use the service.
- If a woman has been performing a volunteer role consistently, find a way to hire her.
- If an organization relies on specific volunteer roles for its basic function, consider making these roles into staff positions.
- Critically assess whether the organization is contributing to women's underemployment (e.g. benefiting from having overqualified women in volunteer roles) and take steps to address this.
- Hold volunteer recognition events.
- Recognize volunteers' contributions through a gift or honorarium.

Participant Employment
- Designate part of the agency's budget to employ participants on a casual, day-by-day basis for tasks such as meal preparation.
- Learn the social assistance rules regarding casual income, and try to pay participant wages in a form that does not interfere with social benefits (e.g. cash, honoraria, gift cards, a limited amount each month).
- Distribute opportunities for participant employment fairly and transparently.

Hiring Staff with Lived Experience
- Explicitly state on job postings that lived experience is considered an asset, and invite applicants to self-identify as women with experiences of homelessness.
- Ask interview questions that recognize the value of life experience as well as education and work experience.
- Value the knowledge that comes from lived experience in staff training, meetings, and evaluations.
- Ensure that staff with lived experience hold equal power to others in the same position, and are treated with equal respect.
- Provide "clinical" supervision for all staff, with and without lived experience, so that they have a safe space to address any concerns or conflicts that arise in their work.
- For staff without lived experience, use supervision as an opportunity to address any concerns about boundaries or stereotypes relating to their colleagues with lived experience.
- For staff with lived experience, use supervision as an opportunity to address concerns about boundaries, triggers, and relationships with co-workers.
- Make the whole agency a safe space where expressions of oppression, such as homophobia and racism, are directly challenged.

3. Inclusion in governance and evaluation

Inclusion in service planning and delivery allows women to influence an agency's daily activities, while inclusion in governance (such as the Board of Directors and other decision-making bodies) gives women a role in broader agency decisions. It can represent an important shift from an agency operating "for" women, to one whose work is done "by and with" women. Front line workers and managers have everyday opportunities to learn from women about their priorities, perspectives and concerns; this is not always the case for Boards, which often aim to recruit as their members influential professionals who can promote the agency's mission to the broader community and to policy makers. When women are included in agency governance, their priorities can be better reflected in the organization's decisions and activities, and other Board members have the opportunity to learn directly from women's perspectives.

Large-scale evaluations of services conducted by funders are also important sites for women's meaningful participation. When evaluations look at outcomes and measures of "efficiency," they oversimplify the complex work of organizations. They may miss the most important benefits agencies provide, and at the same time, they may also overlook the concerns of service users. In order for services and funders to be accountable to the women they serve, women's perspectives should be involved throughout the evaluation process, including the design of evaluation tools and data analysis.

Organizations include women in governance and evaluation through a number of methods:

- Designated seats on Board and committees for current or former users of the service
- Service user membership and advisory committees
- Participation in funder evaluations

Designated Board and committee seats

Several of the agencies we learned about include at least one seat on their Board of Directors for a woman who uses, or has used, the organization's services. A number of others plan to do this, while some have attempted it and then abandoned it. Women who participated in our focus groups were also aware of a number of agencies with designated seats on the Board.

Women and service providers agree that there are varying degrees of actual power associated with service user seats on

Boards. One manager pointed out that the positions must be **"not just tokens,"** while a woman facing homelessness stated that women's access to Board positions in a particular agency **"doesn't mean jack."**

Agencies must make sure that these positions offer women meaningful opportunities for input into governance decisions. Training is a key to this goal. Women facing homelessness may need training on the role and function of Boards, decision-making processes, budgets and funding, staff roles and union agreements, and other issues relating to the "big picture" of governance. Board members without experience of homelessness, on the other hand, may require anti-oppression training in order to recognize and make space for women's contributions. It is also important that the same expectations apply to all Board members in terms of attendance, tasks, committee work, and accountability. In order to meet these expectations, women may require material supports including transit fare, childcare, financial compensation and meals to make Board meetings accessible. One service provider recommends connecting women with past service user Board members who can provide mentorship.

Power dynamics are also important to consider. If there is only one designated Board position, the perspective of service users may be marginalized, or the opinions of a single person may be given too much weight as the representative of all women facing homelessness. Multiple seats for current and former service users can even out power and authority on the Board. Some agencies with a strong empowerment framework have designated a minimum of 50% of Board positions for service users: women in our focus groups strongly agree with this practice. Organizations should also ensure that the whole Board, not only service user members, reflects the community it serves in terms of race, gender, class, age, ability and other factors.

Some agencies, in addition to designating seats for service users on the Board, have established a committee made up entirely of women who access the service, who meet regularly and make recommendations to the Board. Such committees provide an important space in which women can develop a collective analysis of their needs and concerns, and might feel more comfortable being honest and making strong demands of the agency. However, these advantages are lost if the committee's recommendations are consistently ignored at the Board level.

For women, there are challenges as well as benefits associated with Board membership. First, due to regulations banning Board members from benefitting financially from their association with an organization, taking on a Board position may mean a woman is disqualified from receiving honoraria or wages from participant employment. Secondly, service user Board members are likely to have a different type of investment in an organization and different reasons for joining the Board than other members. While for professionals, joining a Board is a way to give back to the community and enhance their resumés, service users are likely to see Board membership as an important opportunity to make change from within, and a position of direct responsibility and accountability to other women accessing the organization. This difference in perspective can leave women feeling alienated. Finally, Board membership can be stressful if the agency is in crisis, if the other members are not welcoming of women's input, or if there are strong differences of opinion resulting from members' different investments in or understandings of the organization. For women whose well-being is already compromised by poverty, homelessness, violence, and other struggles, the stresses of Board membership may be too much to handle. As one focus group participant put it,

"I was on a board but it was toxic for my recovery issues so I had to leave."

In order to ensure that women have meaningful access to seats on the Board of Directors, agencies must take these challenges into consideration, and develop strategies to address them, with women's input. Here again, training and ongoing negotiation make an important difference.

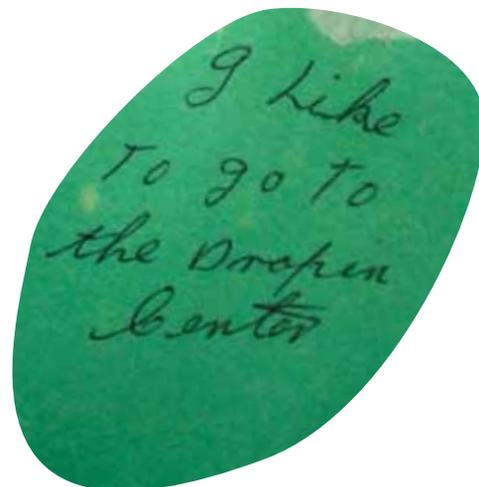## Service user membership and advisory committees

Most non-profit organizations need members, in part to show funders that they have the support of the community. Normally members meet once a year at the Annual General Meeting (AGM), to elect new Directors to the Board and approve reports on the year's activities. Members may also provide a base for organizations' fundraising activities, and annual membership fees also provide some funds. Members might also serve on committees or help with specific events throughout the year.

Some organizations include women using their services among the membership – either by giving membership to all women accessing the service, or by inviting women to sign up. When service users make up a large proportion of an organization's

members, this can represent an important shift in "ownership" of the agency. Of course, it helps to waive membership fees altogether or set a minimal fee for user-members. If membership has been an important source of funding for the agency, increasing service user membership may require seeking other sources of funding.

Agencies can cultivate an active and engaged membership by hosting more frequent events – not just the AGM. They must also ensure that all events are accessible, both by providing childcare, a meal, and transit fare, and by making events and the AGM "woman-friendly spaces." Some strategies for this include involving women in planning the AGM, holding the AGM at the agency, focusing the event on creative celebration rather than dry reports, and making the event reflect the culture of the everyday life of the agency rather than a bureaucratic culture alien or even hostile to women's lived experience.

Some services, rather than being corporations with a formal structure and board, operate as programs within the structure of a larger agency. Such services may still wish to make themselves accountable to a membership and have their decisions guided by a group. We learned about various groups these programs rely upon for guidance, including Advisory Committees, Reference Groups, and what one project refers to as a Collaborative. The same recommendations for inclusion apply to these groups as to Boards.

We're not Asking, We're Telling Project Advisory Committee

Our project was guided by a Project Advisory Committee that met with the research team five times over the course of the study. In putting together the committee, the Research Team was careful to balance numbers of service providers and women facing homelessness, with attention to diversity and specific populations we wanted to address. The committee—which included a shelter manager, a front-line drop-in worker, a peer researcher, a professor, a past research participant, and representatives of three self-advocacy organizations of women facing homelessness—was also diverse in terms of race, Aboriginal identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, age and life stage, family status (having children or not) and immigration status. This diversity, along with a shared commitment to principles of alliance and anti-oppression, allowed for challenging and honest dialogue across different positions and experiences. Our meetings became a mini "laboratory" for the kinds of discussions we hoped to support between service providers and women facing homelessness through the project. As one committee member commented,

"This whole process is the research."

Equitable participation among all members was supported in a number of ways. Because professionals on the committee were paid by their organizations to attend the meetings, the project provided compensation of an equivalent amount to the members facing homelessness. Transit fare was covered, and food and refreshments were provided at each meeting. Most women facing homelessness were representing self-advocacy organizations, which placed them on an equal footing with the professionals who were there to represent their own organizations. At the same time, all members were also invited to contribute insights from their own personal experience and position, whether that of worker, manager, and / or service user.

Participation in funder evaluations

Sometimes women using services have an opportunity to provide input into evaluations of agencies conducted by funders. This input may be unstructured, such as input provided through complaints processes, or it may be a planned part of a larger evaluation process.

Toronto is one of the only cities in Canada that has codified Shelter Standards that all city-funded homelessness services must meet. The City's Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SHSA) conducts a Quality Assurance Review (QAR), including inspections of member agencies to ensure that standards are met. Service users can access the full text of the Shelter Standards online and on paper, and a Rights and Responsibilities document must be posted in every shelter, along with a number to call to make complaints. A designated staff person within SHSA receives complaints and works to resolve them.

To some extent, the QAR itself is an example of the inclusion of service users in program evaluation. Current and former residents of shelters contributed to the development of Shelter Standards through focus groups, and a Client Reference Group was included in the review of three policy areas that received consistently low scores in the first phase of assessment: admissions and discharge (policies and practices relating to entering and leaving the shelter), service restrictions (such as banning someone from a shelter), and complaints management.

However, opinions on QAR are mixed. While it is recognized as necessary, the QAR is seen by some service providers as top-heavy, bureaucratic, and overly focused on minor details (one shelter provider reported that marks were deducted because the lid was off the kitchen garbage pail at the time of the inspection). The process happens over the heads of most staff and residents; in order to have a meaningful impact on the day-to-day conditions in a shelter, quality assurance reviews must be brought into a more down to earth community dialogue.

Perhaps one way in which the QAR can support such dialogues is by providing QAR findings that back up women's opinions about needed improvements. For example, women in this and other studies often point out a need for improved staff training, and the QAR reveals that this is one area in which scores were consistently low.

Another area that is of great concern to women is the surveillance and documentation of their activities. One mother at a focus group explained,

"Every time you come in & out, every person at the front desk has to write something about you. Your counsellor can bring it up on her computer. 'Went for 2 smoke breaks. Came in at 7pm.'"

The QAR showed that indeed, only one-third of shelters had a written policy on the collection, use and sharing of residents' information. Certainly all shelters should develop such a policy and train staff on how to put it into action correctly; but this example also demonstrates that service providers and service users might have very different perspectives on the same issue. Where staff might consider the collection of information to be necessary for safety or other reasons, they might not consider how it feels to have your every move watched and documented. This is a clear and specific example of why it is important for women to be included in policy development and evaluation. Ideally, formal review processes like the QAR can provide an opportunity for organizations to open up these discussions in an inclusive way.

Summary: Promising Practices for Including Women in Governance and Evaluation

Board and Committees

- Designate positions on the Board of Directors for current and / or past users of the service.
- Ensure significant representation of women facing homelessness, with a target of 50% of Board members.
- Recruit a Board that reflects the community the agency serves in terms of gender, race, class, ability, language, age and other factors.
- Provide training for all members on Board functioning, communication, anti-oppression, and how to recognize and draw upon the strengths and insights of members who use the service.
- Compensate members' costs for attendance at meetings and committees by providing honoraria, transit fare, meals, and childcare.
- Pair women on the Board with former service user Board members for mentorship.

- Recognize the financial and emotional challenges of Board membership for women, and negotiate solutions.
- Create an Advisory Committee made up entirely of women facing homelessness, and empower it to make recommendations directly to the Board.
- Ensure that the Committee's recommendations strongly influence Board decisions.
- In programs and services that operate within a larger organization, create an inclusive Advisory Committee, Reference Group or Collaborative to guide the work of the program.

Membership and Annual General Meeting

- Develop a membership-based organization with service users making up the majority of members.
- Hold regular events to engage an active membership.
- Make the Annual General Meeting accessible to all members by hosting it at the agency and providing a meal, transit fare, and childcare.
- Create a "women-friendly space" at the AGM by involving women in planning the event, focusing the meeting on celebration, and ensuring that the AGM reflects the everyday culture of the organization, not a bureaucratic culture.

Evaluation

- Develop mechanisms to enable women to communicate directly with agency funders.
- Include service users in the design and analysis of large-scale evaluation processes, as well as gathering evaluation information from them (for instance, involve them in designing a survey and analyzing the results as well as filling it out).
- Compare the results of these large-scale assessments with women's individual feedback and with the results of smaller, qualitative studies (such as interviews with service users), to identify areas of focus for improvement.
- Bring the results of these evaluations back to the users of the service and take this as an opportunity to open a collective dialogue about needed changes.
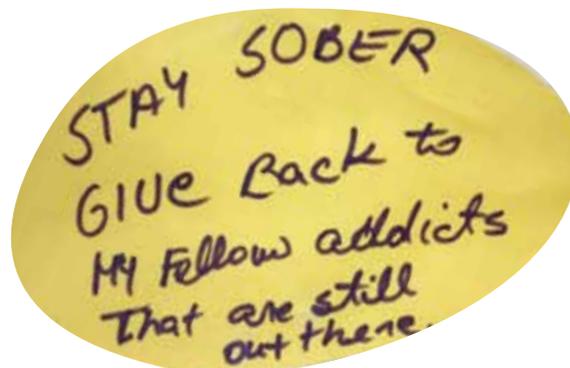
4. Peer service models

The above practices for including women in service planning, delivery and governance map out ways in which organizations can make their services more responsive and accountable to women and families facing homelessness. Peer service models certainly overlap with some aspects of including women in service delivery, but they offer the added benefit of promoting and building upon women's own strengths, skills, and practices. Literature on peer service models points out that the key advantage of these models is that they are based on principles of interdependence, empowerment and reciprocity. Peer service models affirm that women are able to meet their own and each other's needs outside of formal service contexts. At their best, peer practices overcome the "provider-client" hierarchy, and suggest the possibility of transforming social services into collective initiatives for systemic change.

We found numerous examples of peer service programs, operated both by formal service agencies and by grassroots self-advocacy groups. The growing popularity of peer practices makes us optimistic that the "homelessness sector" is catching on to some of the inspiring models we presented in Section II of this report.

Peer programs fall into three main categories:

- Mentorship
- One-on-one peer education and support
- Self-help and mutual aid groups

Mentorship

The concept of "mentorship" suggests that one person who is farther ahead on a journey returns to accompany another traveller along her path. Because she has been this way before, the mentor can offer insights that make the trip easier. She also acts as a role model, reinforcing the traveller's optimism that she, too, can get through the most challenging stretches of the road.

Women who have survived homelessness and regained stability in their lives can be powerful mentors for women facing homelessness. In addition to "knowing the ropes" of welfare, social housing, employment, shelters, and the immigration and child protection systems, survivors of homelessness understand its emotional and spiritual impacts, and can share the inner strengths that enabled them to get through it. This is not only beneficial for the woman being mentored (sometimes referred to as the "mentee"). For the mentor, coming full circle

to support another person can be a healing journey that brings meaning and closure to a profoundly traumatic experience.

Women facing homelessness recognize this. When asked, "What are the hopes and dreams that get you through the hard times?" numerous focus group participants shared their determination to draw on their experiences to help others in the same situation:

"Finish school and become a community service worker to help women just like your doing here!"

"Stay Sober and give back to my fellow addicts that are still out there."

Service providers we spoke with also recognize the benefits of bringing past service users back to the agency to mentor women currently using the service. One mentioned that her shelter has brought back former residents, including one who ran for City Council, to present to current residents, and that these presentations are always very well-received. Service providers also recommended bringing in former service users who can address specific areas of concern that women face: for example, women who have achieved permanent resident status can come back to speak with women who are currently living with precarious immigration status. These types of presentations can raise women's spirits and inspire optimism at a time when many women are feeling despair.

Some organizations also offer informal opportunities for current and past service users to connect with each other, for example through regular community suppers that are open to all. They note that these types of programs, though important, can be misperceived as "gravy" and fall victim to budget cuts:

"We used to have a supper club, but it got so successful that it was too expensive and it got cut."

This is unfortunate, because losing contact with past service users deprives an organization of opportunities to appreciate the long-term results of its work. It also prevents the organization from learning from the knowledge, skills and strengths of women who have first-hand experience with the service. Some organizations have recognized the importance of this source of knowledge, and have created formal mentorship programs, through which past service users receive training and financial compensation to provide support, information, and accompaniment to current service users.

HOMES Project, West Central Women's Resource Centre

Winnipeg, MN

The HOMES Project (Housing Options, Mentorship and Economic Security) gives women support and mentorship when dealing with problems or concerns around housing or income security. Women from the community who have faced homelessness and poverty receive training and employment experience as Peer Mentors. They provide one-on-one support and accompaniment for women through letter writing, court appearances, and appointments with landlords, welfare, and other services. Monthly discussion group meetings and regular workshops provide all women in the program with the opportunity to come together, share mutual support and learn about resources.

To learn more:

http://www.wcwrc.ca/node/137

Formal mentorship programs should provide in-depth training to equip mentors with skills and credentials that can lead to future employment. Training should recognize and build upon mentors' own strategies and practices for navigating the system, while also providing new information and developing new skills. For example, one mentor shared that early in her work with the program, she would become intimidated in meetings with welfare workers. It took time for her to learn to be assertive and stand up for the woman she was accompanying. Mentors need ongoing support to fully take on their new role of advocate. Mentorship programs should also offer opportunities for mentors to debrief with each other and with supervisors, in order to address triggers and share strategies for managing boundary issues.

Service providers point out that formal and informal mentorship programs also benefit former service users by offering an opportunity to stay connected with the agency. Leaving a shelter and moving into housing is a milestone of success, but many women also feel lonely and abandoned in this transition. As one provider put it,

"The reward of success is, you lose your supports."

Many note, though, that women may not want to go back to an agency, preferring to close that chapter and move on with their lives. This reflects the stigma of homelessness, both for women who have experienced it in the past, and for women currently surviving it. Informal and formal mentorship programs de-stigmatize homelessness, reframing it as a source of knowledge and expertise that can be shared with others. These programs provide a way for women to remain part of a community while also moving forward. They allow for the development of long-term relationships, and promote a holistic community that includes women at many stages of the journey through homelessness.

Homeless Prenatal Program

San Francisco, California, USA

Founded in 1989 as a demonstration project to provide comprehensive perinatal care to homeless women, Homeless Prenatal Program recognized pregnancy as a moment of possibility for women on the streets. Building upon the motivation and inspiration to improve their own and their children's lives that pregnancy sometimes brings, and based on a principle of empowerment, HPP worked with women to stabilize their lives and create good conditions for childbirth and raising a child. An essential part of this was training women in the HPP program as Community Health Outreach Workers, who provide support and information to other pregnant women facing homelessness. Today HPP is a large organization serving thousands of families; over half of its staff are former program participants who became Community Health Outreach Workers.

To learn more:

http://www.homelessprenatal.org/

One-on-one peer outreach, education and support

Peer outreach, education and support share similar benefits and goals with mentorship; however, peer helpers need not be at a different stage of the journey than the women they assist. Peer programs build upon, formalize and support the sharing of resources and information that is already taking place among women facing homelessness.

As noted above, women often feel more comfortable receiving support and information from others in the same situation. At the same time, as with hiring staff with lived experience, some service users and staff might question whether peer service providers have the stability and qualifications to provide adequate supports. Peer outreach workers often report being treated as "less than" other workers, by staff and management at the agencies they visit. Stereotypes of women as incompetent or dishonest must be firmly challenged when developing and carrying out peer programs. If hiring staff with lived experience requires education and training within the organization, then peer outreach programs present the additional challenge of educating workers in a wide variety of other settings such as hospitals, shelters, and other places where outreach work takes place. Peer workers, too, need opportunities to discuss and resolve incidents in which they have been treated disrespectfully.

INNOVATIONS:

POSSE – Peer Outreach Support Services and Education

Halton Region, ON

POSSE is a youth-directed project hosted by the AIDS Committee of Guelph and Wellington County, and overseen by a Collaborative composed of youth, along with a number of local health and youth-serving agencies. Through POSSE, youth receive training and mentorship to conduct outreach with other youth. The aims of the project are to inform youth about safer sex and safer drug use, distribute materials needed for harm reduction (such as clean needles and condoms), provide informal support, refer youth to appropriate services within the community, and educate local agencies on how to offer "youth-friendly" services. POSSE is based on principles of youth leadership, empowerment, anti-oppression and harm reduction.

To learn more:

http://www.posseproject.ca/

In addition to drawing upon the knowledge and skills that come from experience, peers are also fluent in communicating respectfully and appropriately within the communities they are part of. This makes peer programs especially effective for providing services and information in communities that have been stigmatized, marginalized, or isolated, such as drug users, sex workers, women in prison, youth subcultures, LGBTQ communities, and specific language or ethno-racial communities.

Peer programs may be formal or informal, using structured training and established policies, or using an emergent model in which training and guidelines are put in place as the need arises. Either way, like mentors, peer workers need access to mutual support and debriefing (sharing and helping each other to cope with their outreach experiences).

Peer programs pose different challenges for different types of organizations. Peer programs developed by grassroots organizations might face difficulties in proving their legitimacy to funders, partner organizations, and agencies they reach out to. In order to secure funding or participate in partnerships, they may be required to adopt policies that are bureaucratic and culturally inappropriate. Grassroots peer programs may need allies within more formal settings who can act as interpreters and advocates for the program. At the same time, formal organizations that fund, partner with, or receive the services of, grassroots peer programs should be aware of the value of the unique peer-based perspective of grassroots organizations.

Peer programs within formal service-providing agencies need the full support of staff and management or they run the risk of becoming marginalized within the agency. Peer workers face many of the same concerns outlined above for staff with lived experience. At the same time, there is also the risk that the agency will select "peers" who don't really share service users' experience. As one worker noted,

"The peer mentors preferred by management were the ones who showed up for the interview in mini-vans. I wanted to see real peer mentors who had lived it. The ones who have 'made it' sometimes come in with an 'I'll show them how I did it' attitude."

Finally, some women working as "peers" noted that there is a risk of getting stuck in that role. Since peer positions often provide less job security, lower salaries, and less recognition than their professional colleagues, this can be a pressing concern. Some women we spoke with wondered how many years' experience it takes before a "peer researcher" or "peer outreach worker" is simply recognized as a researcher or outreach worker.

Self-help and mutual aid groups

One-on-one mentorship and peer support still reflect the "provider-client" hierarchy to some extent, with one person seen as providing support while the other is seen as needing it. Self-help and mutual aid groups leave behind this hierarchy altogether, recognizing that everyone facing an issue has something to give and something to gain by sharing support and resources.

As outlined in Section II, self-help is empowering because it builds on women's strengths and skills, while providing a setting in which these can be shared.

However, self-help also presents challenges. Because our society values professional "expertise," self-help participants may doubt their own capacity to support each other. Groups also require resources such as space, which may be difficult to find, particularly for women facing poverty and homelessness. As well, in spite of the non-hierarchical ideals of self-help groups, most

accept that specific group members must take on leadership functions such as organizing meetings, maintaining contact with members, and facilitating discussion. Group members may need access to training and resources in order to take on these roles. Members might also feel overwhelmed when trying to manage the conflicts that inevitably arise in groups. Self-help groups also require consistent participation, which can be very difficult to achieve for women facing crises on a daily basis.

In spite of these challenges, women in this project expressed a strong desire for access to self-help groups. A common comment during the focus groups and peer knowledge exchange meetings we conducted was,

"We need more groups like this!"

Our project adopted a modified self-help / peer knowledge exchange model as part of our methodology, and encountered first-hand many of the benefits and challenges of using this model in the context of homelessness. Meetings were held every other week in four different neighbourhood libraries across the city. A series of six to eight meetings was held at each library. Members of the project team reached out to organizations serving women in the neighbourhoods surrounding each meeting location. We spoke with staff and service users, and distributed colourful flyers announcing "Women Supporting Women through Poverty and Homelessness … Come as you are!" All locations were wheelchair accessible, children were welcome, and transit fare and food were provided. Meeting times were chosen with attention to the schedules of the nearby agencies; for example, a meeting near a family shelter was scheduled for mid-day, between school drop-off and pick-up times; while a meeting near a women's day program was scheduled after lunch, when the program would be closing. Meetings were facilitated by pairs of researchers, all of whom had faced homelessness, with each meeting's agenda based on topics suggested by participants. A Mandarin-English interpreter joined the facilitators at two of the locations.

We found these meetings very challenging. An enormous amount of work went into the outreach, preparation, and facilitation of each meeting, with the result that the meetings consumed much of the project staff's time for several months. Each location's group was unique: one, in an isolated location, drew hardly any participants throughout the series, in spite of intensive outreach; two had varying attendance, with a small core group of "regulars" and unpredictable numbers of other women who came to only one meeting; and one was attended regularly by a very large and well-organized group. The facilitators used different facilitation strategies based on personal style and the needs of each group. In some locations, participants requested

topic-based workshops, and facilitators arranged these, inviting speakers and gathering information to distribute.

Though women evaluated the meetings very positively in later focus groups, the facilitators noticed that the original intent of the meetings—to initiate an open, informal space for women to share support, knowledge, and information, and take action together on homelessness—never quite took root. Unless there was a planned activity or workshop, participants mainly stuck together with others they already knew in pairs or small groups. At the evaluation focus groups, many women stated that they would prefer to have each meeting divided between mutual support and a planned activity or presentation.

Our objective for the peer knowledge exchange meetings was to "work ourselves out of a job," by starting a regular gathering, arranging ongoing access to space with the neighbourhood libraries, and offering mentorship and resources to support the groups in continuing to meet on their own after our planned series of meetings. In the end, all of the groups stated a strong preference for continuing to have the meetings organized by outside facilitators, and only one group met with members of the research team to explore options for continuing to meet once the series ended. Though women in the project strongly expressed the need and importance of such spaces, we realized that women needed much longer than six meetings to acquire the resources, confidence, group cohesion and internal leadership necessary to sustain an ongoing mutual support group.

Summary: Promising Practices for Peer Service Models

Mentorship & Peer Outreach, Support and Education
- Invite former service users to return for agency events and to give presentations on their accomplishments.
- Provide informal opportunities for ex-residents and former service users to maintain a connection to the agency, for instance, through community suppers.
- Develop a formal mentorship program through which women who have faced homelessness are paired with women who are currently homeless, to provide information, accompaniment and advocacy.
- Develop a peer outreach, support and education program through which women currently facing homelessness provide information, resources, and support to others who share their experiences.
- Offer extensive training for peers and mentors, with a certificate of completion, in order to enhance their employment skills and credentials.
- Recognize the value of women's own knowledge and skills throughout the organization.

- Provide training for all staff on the unique characteristics and benefits of peer support practices.
- Ensure that "peers" are offered opportunities to advance beyond "peer" positions when they have gained enough work experience.
- Offer supervision and mutual support where peers and mentors can debrief and address concerns with triggers, boundaries, and role conflicts.
- For grassroots organizations: Build on the wisdom of your members, but be prepared to face barriers and defend your legitimacy when starting peer programs with institutional partners. Seek institutional allies who can act as interpreters and advocates for your vision.
- For formal service provision agencies: Be prepared to take risks and be flexible when partnering with grassroots organizations.

Self-Help
- Hold self-help group meetings at an accessible time and location. Provide food, childcare, transit fare and interpretation if possible.
- Conduct in-person outreach to tell women about the group.
- Negotiate facilitation styles, agendas, and activities with all group members.
- Plan group meetings to allow for both informal mutual support and structured activities in every session.
- For groups initiated by a program: be prepared to offer long-term assistance with organizing and sustaining a group until members are fully ready to assume leadership tasks. Support members in gaining the resources and skills to lead.

5. Promoting women's leadership

Our project's mutual support groups demonstrated that women facing homelessness need opportunities to develop skills in leadership, facilitation, communication, organizing, and self-advocacy. With these skills, women can strongly influence agencies to implement all the other good practices outlined in this report. Leadership skills also enable women to start projects of our own that provide for our needs, and take collective action to end homelessness.

Some of the organizations we learned about are already providing opportunities for women to gain these skills. We gathered information on two main types of programs:

- Leadership training
- Speakers bureaus

Leadership training

Some service providers we talked to believe that civic engagement should be regarded as a core activity of agencies working with people facing homelessness, alongside the more commonly-recognized core services such as food, shelter, counselling, housing search support, and referrals to other services. From an individual case management perspective, civic engagement can be seen as an activity of daily living - similar to other activities such as grocery shopping or searching for a job—that agencies should support service users in learning. From a community development perspective, it can be considered an important capacity to build among community members.

Homelessness is profoundly disempowering in multiple ways. Women facing homelessness are often forced to depend on institutions in which there is little room for self-determination. Leadership training and civic engagement offer women an opportunity to rebuild self-esteem and self-advocacy. These activities also build upon women's informal good practices of standing up for our rights. As described in Section One, women who participated in our focus groups described a range of strategies for asserting individual and collective rights. Many also expressed the need for women to organize together to overcome homelessness. One, for example, declared,

"I would like us to unite and fight for our rights together because we haven't been able to do it alone."

Leadership training responds to the needs identified by workers and women in our study. In the leadership training programs

we learned about, training is usually offered as a structured, facilitated program that runs over a fixed number of sessions. Sessions may be organized around topics, and generally include a combination of learning about social issues, discussing personal and collective experiences, and developing specific skills such as communication and facilitation. Programs are often based on the feminist movement's model of consciousness-raising, and on the techniques of Popular Education first developed by Paulo Freire (1970). In both of these models, members of oppressed groups come together to share their personal experiences, critically analyze the social causes of these experiences, and plan collective actions for change.

Like volunteer programs, leadership training programs must provide for participants' basic needs in order to be accessible to women on low incomes. Transit fare, food, childcare, interpretation and compensation should be provided to address some of the barriers to participation. It is also important to ensure that the program is offered in a space that is physically and culturally accessible, where women can enter with ease and feel free to be themselves. Ongoing programs will work best with a consistent group so that members can build trust and support with each other.

Facilitators should have experience working with women of diverse backgrounds, who may be survivors of violence, and may face challenges with mental or emotional well-being and substance use. The content and process of the program should be planned with these factors in mind, so that there is enough time and space for women to express themselves and learn at their own pace. As with mutual support groups, anti-oppression principles and democratically-developed group guidelines will help create a safe space in which women feel able to participate. Programs should balance learning, mutual support, fun, and relaxation, in order to meet participants' needs and sustain the group's energy and commitment.
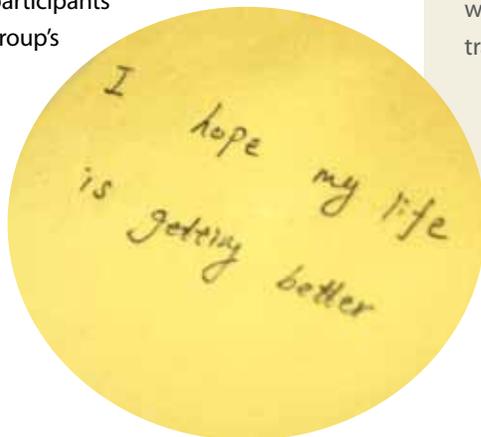
Knowledge is Power, Parkdale Activities and Recreation Centre, and Toronto Drop-In Network
Toronto, ON

This 14-week leadership training course was developed in consultation with members of the Parkdale Activities and Recreation Centre, a drop-in serving Parkdale residents facing poverty, homelessness, and mental health issues. Toronto Drop-In Network then secured funding to offer it at four drop-ins. Ten participants are selected at each drop-in location, after they complete an application and take part in an interview. Groups are selected with attention to diversity. In order to maintain the program as a safe space for discussing services, meetings are led by an outside facilitator, and drop-in staff are not permitted to attend, though program participants can seek support from a designated staff "mentor" to discuss any concerns they have with regards to the program. Each three-hour weekly meeting covers a different topic: Making Agreements, Communicating Well, Naming Oppression and Privilege, Understanding Power, Social Justice, Power Sharing, Human Rights, Behaviour in Groups, Communicating Across Difference, Conflict at the Drop-in, Solving Problems, Understanding Ourselves, Building up Our Groups, Evaluation and Next Steps. The program is based upon learning through dialogue – the facilitator introduces questions related to the topic, and group members share and learn from each other's experiences. A meal is served at each meeting, and members receive a bursary of $30 per week to support their costs of attendance, such as transportation.

To learn more, contact Toronto Drop-In Network:
http://www.tdin.ca/ or PARC http://parc.on.ca/
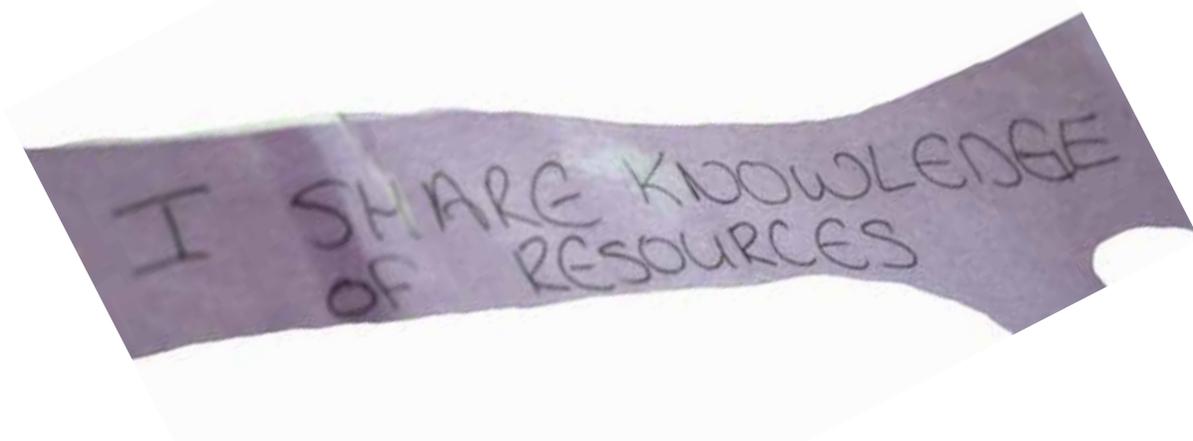
Speakers' bureaus

A second model for women's civic engagement is that of the speakers' bureau. These projects also usually involve a structured training program, in which participants learn writing and public speaking skills, as well as gain an understanding of policy issues relating to homelessness. Through the program, participants document their personal stories of homelessness, develop their stories into speeches, and deliver these to various audiences, from classrooms to professional associations to protest demonstrations. Once they graduate from the training program, members of speakers' bureaus continue to speak publicly about their experiences, and also sit on committees and working groups addressing issues of poverty and homelessness.

Speakers' bureaus build upon the conviction shared by many women that if more people heard the real stories of poverty and homelessness, there would be a stronger will to end these oppressions. They build women's capacity to speak up in settings where the voice of experience is not often heard—and in doing so, they also build the capacity of those settings to develop more effective responses to homelessness.

These programs require the same attention to accessibility as leadership programs, in order to meet participants' material, emotional, and safety needs, and address barriers to participation. Many provide a stipend to members during the training period: if this is framed as a "bursary," it may not be clawed back from social assistance. Some speakers' bureaus charge a fee, or suggest an honorarium amount, to be paid to members for speaking engagements. One challenge that can arise is equitable opportunity for members: as with "peer" workers, speakers' bureau members develop expertise that must be recognized as equal to that of others. Organizations should plan for sustainable opportunities through which "graduates" are appropriately paid for their work. As one workshop participant pointed out,

"If we are hired as consultants, then pay us as consultants!"

As women develop leadership skills, it is likely that they will choose to exercise these close to home – including in the organization where the program is situated! Agencies offering these programs should prepare to receive the direct challenges and critiques that women express, and to welcome program participants into leadership roles.

Puppetry vs. Respectful Engagement

BY **Cheryl Smith** member, We're Not Asking We're Telling Project Advisory Committee, and founder, Peacock Poverty, an online magazine showcasing the creativity of people living in poverty

http://www.peacockpoverty.org/

PUPPETRY

- having speeches altered by agency to better suit agency agenda
- having words put in our mouths and thoughts put in our head
- being consequenced / silenced for challenging agency agenda
- unpaid labor, skills and artistry
- agency has final authority in all matters
- agency owning everything we do to do with as they wish
- being "social worked" in political engagement meetings and never meeting without agency staff present and guiding the discussion, wielding the only vote that counts. (What role should 'agency' play in people's lives? Where are the boundaries?)
- class divide and distinctions i.e. being "used" to speak agency words to fundraisers but not being able to sit down and eat with them
- being "made" palatable, with word or appearance or opinion, as if we were not okay the way we are
- having our ideas being used by the agency without recognition as such. No due credit. Everything belongs to the agency.
- being bullied, humiliated or challenged in public by staff for speaking out.
- being made to feel less than
- personal and prolonged attacks by agency staff for speaking out
- threats to be banned from services agency provides. Disrespect and contempt from staff when using the services
- breaches of confidentiality
- pitting us against each other
- direct attacks against grassroots initiatives by agency staff as a consequence of speaking out.
- inadequate compensation, this should be the first place the money drops, not the last.

RESPECTFUL ENGAGEMENT

- equitable, negotiable compensation for all agency use of speeches or other political engagement/skill that benefits the agency created or brought forward by "activists, speakers, lived experience" (eg. contributing quotes for fundraising projects, artwork, etc…)
- the ability to withdraw such when it is perceived by the creator to be being used for a purpose other than what was created for. In other words, no sole ownership by agency of speech, written word, art, or other creation of 'peer-partner',
- and that the agency provide a copy of such material to creator at no cost to the creator (they're poor!)
- the ability to have a clear voice outside of the agency that may at times be critical of agency policy without facing persecution or the heavy handed authority of agency.
- the ability to form 'peer groups' to determine common denominators in our community for ourselves and to have the agency support and accommodate these 'peer meetings' which would then inform agency
- significant- not token but up to 50% - representation on boards drawn from community members outside of agency as well as inside.
- freedom of conscience; the ability to choose "political" engagement rather than as a direction or requirement of engagement with agency
- freedom to be guided by conscience in our speeches and not to be forced or coerced to mouth the words of agency, i.e. being silenced for non-compliance
- hiring us whenever and wherever possible, making this a priority of funding disbursements rather than the endless months and years of volunteer work that "agency-ies" presently are supported by.
- supporting "peer initiatives" in a spirit of co-operation in all ways including funding and resources
- the right to respect when using the services of an agency at all times regardless of disagreements with agency policy or platform
- the ability to direct political agenda equal to that of agency or to refrain without consequence from any "required" activity based on individual conscience.

As seen in this text, some women raise concerns about leadership, civic engagement, participatory research and public speaking projects within service-providing organizations and academic institutions. Women warn that, unless the organization is committed to social change, participants may be put on display and used to enhance the organization's reputation. Some also raise concerns about the ownership and use of stories, photographs, and quotes that women produce in the course of participating in these projects. Organizations and researchers undertaking such projects must be accountable to participants, abide by principles of respectful engagement, and ensure that the benefits of women's efforts return to women themselves, as individuals and as a community.
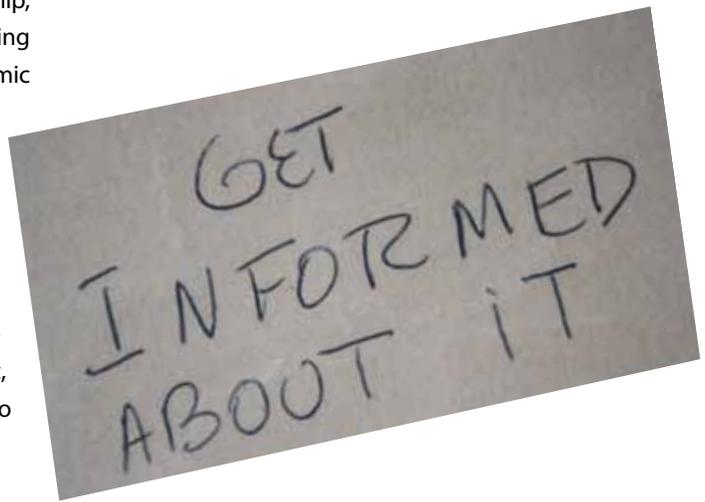
Summary: Promising Practices for Promoting Women's Leadership

General Principles

- Empowerment is a basic need, like food and shelter – so promoting women's leadership should be considered a core activity of all agencies serving women facing homelessness.
- The knowledge and voice of experience is necessary for developing effective responses to homelessness; women may need training and support in order to contribute their voices and knowledge in different settings.
- Organizations that offer programs to promote women's leadership should be prepared to welcome that leadership and to receive women's challenges.

Leadership Programs

- Provide food, transit fare, interpretation, childcare and financial compensation to address barriers to participation.
- Create group guidelines incorporating anti-oppression principles.
- Courses should be held in comfortable, accessible, culturally-appropriate settings where participants feel free to be who they are.
- Facilitators should bring experience and awareness of diversity, homelessness, mental and physical health concerns, substance use, and other factors that may influence women's participation.
- The process and content of training sessions should be adapted to ensure enough time and space for women to express themselves and learn at their own pace.
- Balance learning activities with emotional support, fun, and relaxation so that programs meet a range of needs.

Speakers Bureaus

- As above, provide resources to address barriers to participation.
- Be aware of how honoraria or other payment might affect women's other sources of income.
- Participants must retain ownership of any stories, speeches, artwork, etc. they create during involvement with the speakers' bureau.

Conclusion

The root causes of homelessness—unaffordable housing, insufficient incomes, inaccessible services, discrimination, and violence—can seem unaffected by our efforts to change them. But while we continue to advocate for changes at the systemic level, women facing homelessness and service providers can also work towards changes closer to "home": in our organizations, in our relationships with each other, and even in our own attitudes and actions.

As this inventory demonstrates, these changes are already taking place among women and organizations all across Canada. The promising practices described here are at once visionary and practical, inspirational and instructive, infinitely adaptable and locally-specific. We hope that readers will take freely from these ideas and try them out.

One of the most powerful learnings of this project, however, cannot be captured in these pages: the dialogues we witnessed and participated in between women facing homelessness and service providers, across lines of power and difference, and among people of diverse genders, racial identities, classes, ages, abilities and life experiences. These dialogues reaffirm the incredible possibilities that are unleashed when we take time to listen to each other guided by principles of Love, Humility, Honesty, Courage, Wisdom, Generosity and Respect.

And so in closing, we invite you to bring forward whatever has inspired you in these pages, in dialogues within your own community. By doing so, you will sustain and evolve the work of change documented here.

Trees of Strength and Knowledge
About the Illustrations

The photos that illustrate this report are taken from a popular education activity called "Tree of Strength" that we conducted in our focus groups with women and families facing homelessness.

Participants and facilitators used shapes cut out of different colours of construction paper to create a large mural of a tree, reflecting our strengths and knowledge. The tree was created from the roots up, with each section representing a different theme. For each piece of the tree, women were invited to write or draw a brief response to a question, or just think about a response they wished to share with the group:

Roots: What is a strength that comes from your "roots" – your culture, your family, or the place where you grew up?

Trunk: What is something you do to stand up for your rights?

Branches: In what ways do you reach out to help others?

Leaves (in the tree): What is something you do now, that you did not do before?

Leaves (on the ground): What is something you used to do, that you no longer do?

Fruit: What are the hopes and dreams that get you through the hard times?

Each participant glued her pieces to the mural – creating the beautiful trees you see here.

This exercise can be adapted for many different situations by changing the questions, and is great for creating a sense of common purpose in a group. We learned about it from a popular education resource website called Pop Ed News www.popednews.org.

An inventory of practices promoting the dignity, autonomy, and self-determination of women and families facing homelessness

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