



Addressing gender-based violence in Saskatchewan through second-stage housing: an overview of research and setting new directions

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ABSTRACT

Saskatchewan, Canada, has some of the highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) in Canada, with statistics double the national average. The government of Saskatchewan does not substantively fund second-stage housing – a key mitigating solution to GBV. Nor does the province have a related action plan to reduce this violence and enhance the safety of women, gender non-conforming people, and children who are disproportionately targeted by GBV. This article demonstrates the outcomes of a knowledge synthesis on the intersection of GBV and second-stage housing across Canada. This research used an intersectional feminist approach to guide a literature review and NVivo analysis. This article's results section demonstrates the importance of second-stage housing as it relates to the mitigation of GBV. The discussion section offers various recommendations collected across Canada that can be used in Saskatchewan to bolster the existing non-profit sector that supports victims and survivors of GBV through enhanced public funding and related supports from the provincial and federal governments. The article concludes by identifying three viable and urgent areas for future research: first, investigate the potential correlation between GBV rates and second-stage housing to examine whether support for second-stage funding impacts GBV rates. Second, identify and develop alternative assessment and evaluation metrics that shift quantitative reporting standards to qualitative understandings of success. Third, examine the interconnection between settler colonization and GBV that disproportionality targets Indigenous women through strengths-based, decolonial, Indigenous-led frameworks that are culturally appropriate and responsive.

Key Words Gender-based violence; second-stage housing; transition housing; women's shelters; intimate partner violence; domestic violence; Saskatchewan; National Action Plan.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection between gender-based violence (GBV) and stable and secure housing resources is clear: GBV leads to housing insecurity, and housing insecurity can foster unsafe living arrangements for survivors. However, second-stage housing – one factor that provides enhanced safety when escaping situations of violence – is not universally publicly funded in Canada. In Saskatchewan, which has some of the highest rates of GBV in the country, the first provincial funding announcement for related dollars was only made in Spring 2023. This lack of funding signals an apparent lack of political will and public institutional support to mitigate the rates of GBV in the province.

In Saskatchewan, several non-profit community organizations have mandates to address gendered violence. This article stems from a collaborative project between the University of Regina and two such organizations: the Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan (PATHS) and SOFIA House. PATHS is the member association for women's shelters, second-stage shelters, and counselling centres that provide support to survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV). SOFIA House was the first second-stage housing facility in Saskatchewan, opening in October 1988. Both organizations advocate for a wide range of essential programs that support women and children fleeing violence.

This article reports on a knowledge synthesis project on the intersection of GBV and second-stage shelters in Canada,

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with a particular focus on Saskatchewan. Using an intersectional feminist approach to review the extant literature and NVivo analysis, we aimed to identify, collate, and synthesize the existing research to examine support for second-stage shelters as a critical response to GBV. The knowledge synthesis aimed to address one key question: What kind of support for second-stage housing exists across Canada, including legislation, policy, and provincial/territorial budgets? This article assesses the state of GBV and second-stage housing, identifies recommendations for mitigating GBV through second-stage housing, and makes suggestions for future and ongoing research.

Scope of the Issue in Saskatchewan

GBV includes all forms of violence that disproportionately impact women and gender-diverse people, including Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and sexual violence. In Saskatchewan, GBV rates are the highest among the Canadian provinces and more than double the national rate (Statistics Canada, 2021). Rates are higher in Canada's territories, but the northern regions of Saskatchewan have the highest rates of IPV in all of Canada, including the territories (Rotenberg, 2019). GBV rates in Saskatchewan increased throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (James, 2021) while access to resources was simultaneously restricted.

GBV is one of the leading factors resulting in women's homelessness (Maki, 2021). Adequate and appropriate housing supports are the most significant GBV interventions to ensure women do not return to unsafe living arrangements (Allary et al., 2023; Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021; Ponic et al., 2012). GBV is also a significant cost to society, which is evidenced through a gender-based analysis plus (GBA+) policy lens. For example, in Canada, the total economic impact of spousal violence was calculated to cost approximately \$7.4 billion annually in 2009 (Zhang et al., 2012), which is equivalent to \$10.2 billion in 2023. Mitigating these sorts of impacts of GBV would significantly improve the lives of survivors of GBV and their children, greatly improve survivors' ability to successfully leave situations of GBV, mitigate the intergenerational perpetuation of violence, and have a significant impact on the public purse in terms of reduced spending on the justice system and healthcare, as well as broader economic benefits through the contributions of wage labour.

Since the 1970s, civil domestic violence legislation in Saskatchewan has emerged, informed by national and international contexts, in an effort to improve the safety of potential victims and survivors of GBV (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019; Wieggers & Douglas, 2007). Regardless of these legal changes, rates of GBV in Saskatchewan have increased. While GBV was exacerbated in Canada by the pandemic, there is evidence in Saskatchewan that this violence is rooted in the violence of the settler colonial state-making (Beattie, 2005; Carter, 1993; Milhorean, 2005; Razack, 2002). This is based on how settler colonialism disproportionately targets women, specifically Indigenous women and girls (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019), through sexual violence and its related structures of hetero-patriarchy (Bourgeois, 2017; Eberts, 2017; Snyder, 2018), which results in the disproportionate rates of Indigenous women who face GBV in Saskatchewan (Arriagada, 2016; Giesbrecht et al., 2022).

Second-stage shelter housing is an integral resource for GBV survivors – women, gender non-conforming individuals, and children – to leave situations of domestic violence successfully. Stable second-stage housing can support the transition from emergency shelters to independent living and ensure survivors retain/access employment, have consistent access to childcare and schools for children, access healthcare or substance use services, and live in a household free from abuse in a safer community.

Experts have long argued that the excessive rates of GBV in Saskatchewan are due to the limited provincial government resources earmarked to reduce or eradicate GBV and to support survivors (Umereweneza et al., 2020; Wieggers & Douglas, 2007). For example, Saskatchewan is one of two Canadian sub-national jurisdictions (provinces and territories) that does not have an action plan on GBV (Women's Shelters Canada, 2019). Also, until 2023, Saskatchewan was one of two provinces in Canada that did not provide provincial funding for second-stage shelters (Latimer, 2020), though the government did announce limited funding for second-stage shelters in April 2023. This funding commitment includes \$876,000 over 3 years provided to five second-stage shelters (Government of Saskatchewan, 2023).

Despite insufficient public funding, several non-profit community organizations throughout Saskatchewan have mandates to address GBV. These non-profit community organizations rely on funding models that might be characterized as unsustainable, often bolstered by fundraising and grant-based funding. Shelters routinely have long wait lists – a situation exacerbated during the pandemic – that limit accessibility for those seeking safety from an abuser; in such situations, some victims of IPV may have no option but to remain living with the abuser (James, 2021). These GBV-related shelters and accompanying resources struggle to maintain provisional services due to insufficient funding (Maki, 2020). As increases in food, utilities, and transportation costs accompany budgetary restrictions that lead to low wages, it can be challenging to attract and retain staff for difficult labour, such as shelter work (Latimer, 2020). Providing adequate financial support would mitigate some of these ongoing deficiencies in the resources available to survivors of domestic violence, which could contribute to women's ability to return to or remain in the wage economy.

METHODS

This project used an intersectional feminist approach to knowledge synthesis. Following principles of data feminism (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020) – which uses data to identify and acknowledge unequal power distribution – the knowledge synthesis project employed an intersectional lens to analyze the GBV crisis in Saskatchewan. An intersectional feminist approach asserts that the experience of intersecting oppression cannot be understood through single-axis thinking (Crenshaw, 1989) but instead takes up gender alongside "race," class, or other relations of power and oppression. A literature review was used, first, to scope available research on second-stage housing in Canada, including legislation, policy, and budgets, and second, to scope the corresponding rates of GBV. In addition to government reports and communication, the scoping exercise included peer-reviewed

scholarship, industry-related reports, and media documentation. The search criteria for all documents included “GBV” / “IPV” / “domestic violence” + “housing” / “second stage housing” / “transition housing” / “shelter” / “wrap-around services”. This resulting pool of documents was reviewed and annotated bibliographies were produced, noting any intersectional dimensions (e.g., Indigenous women; disability). From these annotated bibliographies, themes were identified, and the research was organized according to these themes. In addition to the literature review, a total of 45 official provincial reports were analyzed using NVivo 12 software. NVivo queries identified 46 mentions of second-stage housing/shelters in 14 policy documents. All mentions of second-stage or transitional housing were analyzed inductively to identify themes.

RESULTS

The Multidimensional Impacts of GBV on Women and Children

The impacts of GBV on women and children are broad-based and long-lasting, and second-stage shelters play an integral role in mitigating further multidimensional impacts. Physiological and mental health impacts can affect women and children (Lagdon et al., 2014; Stewart et al., 2013). Housing and financial insecurity are related issues that can lead to homelessness in the wake of leaving violence (Maki, 2020; Tutty et al., 2009). Financial instability and poverty often result from GBV (Tutty et al., 2009), some of which are work-related matters such as loss of or reduced hours (Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021; Wathen et al., 2014).

The Need for Housing Support across Canada

Leaving the living situation where they were subjected to IPV does not ensure that the individuals or their children are free from further violence (Groening et al., 2019; Maki, 2020; Ponc et al., 2012); ongoing security concerns will continue to manifest related to this violence and general safety (Hoffart, 2015). There is a profound lack of safe, affordable, and secure housing for survivors – women, children, and gender-diverse people – in communities across Canada (Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021; Schwann et al., 2020), which can lead to housing insecurity (Schwan et al., 2020).

While emergency shelters and transition houses provide short-term safety and accommodation to survivors of GBV and their children, second-stage shelters differ. Second-stage shelters offer longer stay situations (typically 6 months to 2 years), and they often bridge a woman’s living situation from a shelter to permanent placement (Hoffart, 2015; PATHS, n.d.(a)). Several programs will be offered, including counseling and practical support, such as assistance securing housing or employment (Allary et al., 2023; Vecchio, 2019). Due to the multidimensional impacts of GBV, access to trauma- and violence-informed crisis/counseling during this time is critical (Sexual Assault Services of Saskatchewan, 2019).

The Current State of Housing Support and GBV across Canada

Assessing the state of emergency housing and GBV in Canada has limitations. Resource agencies face capacity restrictions that limit accurate data collection (Maki, 2020). Because

housing insecurity is often cast as a gender-neutral issue, the available data obscure and ignore the differing ways that women experience homelessness, particularly regarding GBV (Canadian Centre for Housing Rights, 2023). Additionally, the available data often do not capture the many individuals fleeing violence who encounter full shelters with long waitlists and are turned away (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019) or those who remain in dangerous, unsafe, and exploitative living situations (Maki, 2020; Schwan et al., 2020).

The existing data do illustrate an insufficient existing network of support (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019). For example, women’s shelters across Canada are chronically underfunded (Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021; Vecchio, 2019). As such, transition housing organizations are understaffed and limited in the quality, quantity, and timeliness of the programs that they can provide (Maki, 2020; Vecchio, 2019). Just over one-third of the shelters in Canada serve small populations and rural areas (Maki, 2019), with 4% of these shelters serving population areas of <1000 people (Beattie & Hutchins, 2015; Maki, 2019). Ten shelters are located in fly-in communities, which are remote with limited access (Maki, 2019). Only 30 shelters are located on reserves (Moreau, 2019), and 3 of these reserve locations are unfunded second-stage shelters (Allary et al., 2023). While no shelters are located in reserve communities in Saskatchewan specifically, various shelters are operated by tribal councils: Wichihik Iskwewak Safe House (Regina), Ts’ekwi K’oni Koe (Black Lake), Piwapan Wellness Centre (La Ronge), Waskoosis Safe Shelter (Meadow Lake), Yorkton Tribal Council Safe Haven (Yorkton), Qu’Appelle Haven Safe Shelter (Fort Qu’Appelle) (PATHS, n.d.(b)), and Yellow Quill First Nation’s Safe House (located near Yellow Quill First Nation in east-central Saskatchewan) (Yellow Quill Child & Family Prevention Services, n.d.). Shelter access in northern Canada is acutely minimal (Moffitt & Fikowski, 2017; Moffitt et al., 2022). Less than half of these shelters and transition homes in small and rural communities have access to public transportation in their community, and most in these smaller communities report a lower rate of access to mental health services and victim support for children than those in larger urban centres (Maki, 2019).

DISCUSSION

The results support the importance of second-stage shelter services for women leaving violent situations; however, such supports remain underfunded across Canada and particularly in Saskatchewan. The current knowledge synthesis has produced several recommendations for decision-makers at multiple levels.

First, at the federal level, we recommend both national standards and dedicated funding for GBV prevention and response. Federal operational funding for second-stage shelters can ensure consistency and sustainability of services nationwide. This should include funding transportation for women and their children living in urban, rural, remote, and northern communities without safe shelter services (Vecchio, 2019). Funding associated with the National Action Plan to End Gender-based Violence (NAP) (2022) should support second-stage housing as a model for sustained safety (Canada,

2022). Implementation of the NAP must identify the existing “best practices” in second-stage funding across Canadian jurisdictions and work toward equity and consistency.

We recommend a national action plan specifically related to shelter operations. The federal government could use the NAP (Canada, 2022) and the *National Housing Strategy* (Canada, 2018) to create a national action plan focused specifically on the connection between GBV and housing issues (Allary et al., 2023; Maki, 2020; Vecchio, 2019). Creating a national observatory to synthesize definitions and data collection on GBV would provide a more consistent, fulsome understanding of GBV rates and shelter needs across jurisdictions. Federally regulated industries could set the stage for normative workplace leaves and accommodations for workers experiencing GBV (Canadian Labour Congress, 2021; Giesbrecht, 2020).

An array of policies, many of them rooted in colonial and hetero-patriarchal systems, disproportionately dislocate Indigenous women and gender-diverse people as owners of property and create barriers to escaping violence or abuse (Allary et al., 2023; Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021). There is a real need for increased access to resources related to second-stage housing throughout Indigenous communities (Maki, 2020; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019). On May 8, 2023, Ottawa announced \$103 million for Indigenous women’s shelters to address the recommendations by the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (NI-MMIWG) to provide for long-term sustainable funding shelters. While this funding will support 22 projects in 21 communities nationwide, more is needed (Stefanovich, 2023) – especially to fully implement NI-MMIWG Call to Justice #4.7 as related to transitional housing. Since Indigenous women and children in Canada face a higher risk of GBV (Heidinger, 2021), programs ought to include specific authentic Indigenous-led and partnered cultural practices – not pan-Indigenous – including ceremonial space and access to knowledge keepers (Allary et al., 2023; Giesbrecht et al., 2022; Vecchio, 2019).

At the provincial level, the NVivo analysis revealed a lack of clear, specific information about government funding for GBV, particularly regarding funding for second-stage shelters, in provincial plans and reports. Specific funding amounts allocated to second-stage shelters were difficult to find, which poses challenges for comparative funding analysis across jurisdictions. Enhanced transparency of government funding would be beneficial for future analyses and for the identification of any correlations between GBV funding and GBV rates by province or territory. Furthermore, it is not always clear whether funding commitments precede provincial action plans or whether funding commitments are expected to follow provincial plans. More transparent reporting in this area is needed. Considering the disproportionate rates of GBV in Saskatchewan, a provincial action plan on GBV and sustained funding for second-stage funding in the province are recommended.

CONCLUSIONS

This project has used intersectional feminism to frame a knowledge synthesis on second-stage housing in Canada,

with attention to the disproportionate rates of GBV in Saskatchewan. This article has provided evidence of intersectional dimensions of GBV in Canada, reviewed the current state of research to produce several recommendations for decision-makers, and identified knowledge gaps for future research.

This knowledge synthesis project recognizes various avenues for future research that are guided by an intersectional or GBA+ approach, which recognizes intersecting forms of power and inequity that ultimately shape both the rates and experience of GBV in Canada. Three specific research priorities result from this project:

First, there is a need to better understand the potential correlation between GBV rates and second-stage housing to examine whether support for second-stage funding impacts GBV rates. Additional socio-jurisdictional indicators such as geographic characteristics, cultural distinctions, post-secondary education, economic wealth, access to better public services on a jurisdictional basis, and urban and rural divides must be considered as variables.

Second, women’s shelters face challenges in collecting data to demonstrate the effectiveness of their operations. Commonly, granting applications and funding reports will require quantitative data collection; this may shift the non-profits’ organizational focus from service delivery to data collection. Furthermore, numeric data do not easily illustrate successes for women concerning situations of GBV. For example, all second-stage shelters will have lower numbers of clients than crisis shelters: a crisis shelter may serve 350 different people in a year, while a second-stage shelter serves the same 30 people over a 1-year time span. Essentially, the higher numbers of clients do not illustrate or equate to the higher need for housing services. Future research should identify and develop alternative assessment and evaluation metrics that shift quantitative reporting standards to qualitative understandings of success. To develop this knowledge, governments ought to support the research capacity within this sector, including staff researchers and research infrastructure access.

Third, it is crucial to better understand the interconnection between settler colonization and GBV that disproportionately targets Indigenous women. While it was clear from the literature review that Indigenous women are disproportionately victimized by IPV, and GBV more broadly, at the same time, official data sources often do not provide data specific to Indigenous women, and there is little available research or discussion regarding culturally appropriate and culturally responsive supports for Indigenous survivors of GBV. This knowledge synthesis report concludes that more research needs to be undertaken that will centre Indigenous women and the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism through strengths-based, decolonial, Indigenous-led frameworks that are culturally appropriate and responsive.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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