



Opening Statement for the Neha Virtual Oral Dialogue, June 16, 2025

*On Behalf of the National Indigenous Women's Housing Network
Delivered by Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat, Chair*

The National Indigenous Women's Housing Network (NIWHN) is an Indigenous-led, grassroots network of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples working to address housing inequity and unsheltered homelessness among Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse people across Turtle Island. Our work is grounded in lived experience, community advocacy, and a deep commitment to upholding the human rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The National Indigenous Women's Housing Network originated as the National Indigenous Feminist Housing Working Group. It was established in response to a clear and persistent gap: the lack of leadership and visibility of Indigenous women and gender-diverse individuals in housing policy and decision-making spaces. From the beginning, our focus has been to centre the voices of those most directly impacted by the housing crisis—not only as subjects of research or consultation but as leaders, decision-makers, and knowledge holders.

Many of us within NIWHN are Indigenous women and gender-diverse people who have experienced housing precarity, homelessness, intergenerational trauma, or gender-based violence. We carry lived realities, community stories, and histories of resilience that have long been ignored or excluded in state-led housing responses.

In 2022, NIWHN submitted a formal human rights claim to the Federal Housing Advocate. This claim was co-authored with the Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network, our sister organization, in our shared work toward gender equity in housing. The claim was built through consultations with Indigenous women and gender-diverse people across regions, through storytelling and sharing circles that ensured those most affected by the housing crisis were shaping the narrative.

The claim was written in response to the ongoing and systemic violations of Indigenous Peoples' right to housing, particularly as experienced by Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse people. These are not isolated experiences. They are part of a larger pattern of systemic failure that includes:

- Overcrowded and unsafe housing;
- Discrimination in shelters and services;
- Family separation due to housing inaccessibility;

- Heightened exposure to violence—including the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

Despite Canada's obligations under domestic and international law, Indigenous women and gender-diverse people continue to be disproportionately impacted by homelessness, poverty, and housing discrimination. These conditions are in direct violation of several rights enshrined in the National Housing Strategy Act, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. These rights include the right to adequate housing, the right to safety, the right to live free from discrimination, and the right to cultural connection and self-determination.

The violations outlined in our claim are systemic. They are rooted in colonization and the deliberate dispossession of Indigenous Peoples from our lands and homes. We continue to see the long-term effects of these policies today: residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in state care are all tied to displacement and the denial of housing as a human right. These systems have targeted Indigenous women and gender-diverse people in specific ways, leading to cycles of trauma, family separation, and marginalization that continue across generations.

Today, many of our communities face overcrowding, unsafe and uninhabitable housing conditions, and discriminatory barriers to accessing public housing and shelter systems. Indigenous women are often turned away from shelters, experience violence or harassment in temporary housing, or are forced to choose between safety and homelessness. For gender-diverse people, access to housing can be even more precarious, with few culturally appropriate and inclusive options available.

The 2022 human rights claim submitted by our network outlines these patterns in detail. Among the core violations documented are:

- Widespread housing insecurity and homelessness among Indigenous women and gender-diverse people;
- Systemic discrimination within shelters, housing programs, and services;
- Direct links between inadequate housing and the ongoing crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls;
- Ongoing colonial displacement and the intergenerational impacts of housing systems that continue to exclude Indigenous voices and solutions;
- The lack of Indigenous-led, gender-inclusive, culturally safe housing options that reflect our ways of life, family structures, and community care.

It's important to note that although Indigenous housing is identified as a priority within Canada's National Housing Strategy (2017), Indigenous women and gender-diverse people were not explicitly named as a priority population. Without a gender-based, rights-based, and culturally relevant approach to Indigenous housing, we continue to see the most marginalized people fall through the cracks.

We submitted this claim not only to document these harms but to insist on accountability, transformation, and investment in Indigenous-led solutions. We believe housing is more than a place to live - it is a foundation for safety, healing, cultural survival, and sovereignty. We know that housing rooted in our ways of knowing and being is possible . However, these models remain underfunded, isolated, and unsupported at the federal level.

On March 6th, 2025, our network co-facilitated a sharing circle in Amiskwacîwâskahikan (Edmonton) in collaboration with the Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network and NiGiNan Housing Ventures. This gathering brought together Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, trans, and gender-diverse people to share their experiences of housing and homelessness.

What we heard at that circle echoed what we've heard for years: the need for safe housing is urgent. The need for culturally grounded housing is urgent. And the need for Indigenous women and gender-diverse people to be at the centre of housing decisions is needed.

As we sit here today, Indigenous women and gender-diverse people are still navigating housing systems that were not built for them and often work against them. They are still overrepresented in shelter systems, in the foster care system, and unsheltered homelessness. They are still being forced to choose between staying in violent relationships or living on the street. They are still being silenced, underfunded, and excluded from the housing policies that claim to serve them.

And yet, despite these barriers, our communities continue to lead. We continue to organize, to advocate, and to build solutions from the ground up. We continue to honour our responsibilities to one another. And we continue to assert our rights - not as an act of resistance alone, but as an act of love, care, and vision for our future generations.

Housing is a human right. And this right must be upheld for Indigenous women and gender-diverse people.