



WOMEN'S NATIONAL HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS NETWORK

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

On Behalf of the Women's National Housing & Homelessness Network

Delivered by Arlene Hache, Co-Chair

Good afternoon and thank you to the members of the Neha Review Panel for inviting us to participate in the first virtual oral dialogue.

I join you today from Yellowknife, on Chief Drygeese territory, the traditional land of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. I pay deep respect to the original stewards of this land—past and present.

My name is Arlene Hache, and I am speaking on behalf of the Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network as its Co-Chair.

The Network is a pan-Canadian coalition led by women and gender-diverse people with lived experience, researchers, advocates, and service and housing providers.

We are grounded in the belief that safe, adequate, accessible, and affordable housing is not only a human right, but an essential foundation for life, safety, dignity, and self-determination.

When the federal government finally recognized housing as a human right in 2019 through the National Housing Strategy Act, a group of us—women and gender-diverse advocates, researchers, lived experts, service and housing providers—were already coming together with a shared goal: to make sure the unique and often invisible experiences of gendered homelessness weren't left out of the conversation.

In 2020, we launched the Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network. We released the first-ever national report on the state of women's homelessness in Canada. It was—and still is—the most comprehensive research out there on how housing precarity impacts women, girls, and gender-diverse people.

Since then, we've built on that work with a gender-based analysis of the National Housing Strategy, the largest national survey on housing and homelessness from a gender lens, and a series of reports showing how gender, violence, poverty, racism, and colonization are deeply connected to housing need. Each report has come up with clear, evidence-based recommendations for change.

And then we took things further.

In 2021, we brought together a Human Rights Task Force made up of women and gender-diverse people from across the country—spanning different regions, backgrounds, professions, and lived experiences. Lived expertise is the foundation of everything we do.

With guidance from this Task Force and our Steering Committee, we decided: to use the right to housing framework to plainly state—what women and gender-diverse people are experiencing in this country is a human rights crisis.

And it's not accidental—it is manufactured. It's the result of policy choices—choices that can and must be changed.

Between January and June 2022, we met every few weeks to develop our Human Rights Claim. We reviewed research, debated priorities, studied international human rights standards, and drafted recommendations—sometimes over Zoom, sometimes over the phone, and sometimes scribbled on napkins in crowded parks or local coffee shops.

Every step of the way, the work was shaped by the leadership and insight of those who've lived through housing precarity firsthand. And what came out of that process was a clear, detailed, and urgent Human Rights Claim that we submitted to the Federal Housing Advocate.

This Claim complements a parallel submission from our sister organization, the National Indigenous Women's Housing Network—whose leadership and analysis have been critical in exposing the colonial roots of Canada's housing crisis.

Women, Two-Spirit, trans, and gender-diverse people across Canada face an invisible housing crisis—one shaped by violence, colonization, racism, poverty, and patriarchy. Their homelessness is hidden, undercounted, and deeply misunderstood.

The right to housing has long been out of reach for those pushed to the margins—especially those surviving violence, navigating child welfare systems, fleeing forced

displacement, or denied safety because of their gender identity, sexuality, disability, or immigration status.

As we stated in our 2022 Human Rights Claim, *the Crisis Ends With Us*: *we reject a definition of homelessness that hides gendered violence, that assumes choice where there is coercion, and that normalizes systems that punish poverty rather than address its root causes.*

To truly realize the right to housing for women and gender-diverse people, we must look squarely at how systems have failed—and commit to building new ones rooted in rights, care, justice, and culture.

The evidence is clear:

- 21% of single mothers raise their children in poverty.
- Amongst women leaving domestic violence shelters, about 1 in 5 return to live with their abuser.
- Indigenous women are 12 times more likely to be murdered or missing—often after being made homeless by colonial systems that strip away land, housing, and safety.
- Less than 13% of shelter spaces in Canada are available to women exclusively—and even fewer serve trans and non-binary people safely. Co-ed shelters are avoided by women and gender-diverse people due to safety issues.
- Housing unaffordability and income precarity are pushing people into exploitative relationships, unsafe accommodations, and violent situations.

And yet, these realities remain largely invisible in Canada’s housing system—because women and gender-diverse homelessness is often hidden: Couch surfing, staying in unsafe homes, trading sex for shelter, or avoiding the shelter system altogether out of fear.

Despite the promise of the National Housing Strategy Act, federal government policies continue to fall short—as we outlined in our written submission to the Neha panel, *Housing Justice Starts with Us*:

- There is no consistently applied definition of affordable housing at the federal level.
- The current definition of chronic homelessness that is used to set targets in federal programs **does not** reflect gendered experiences of housing need and homelessness, including hidden homelessness and homelessness amongst

Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse people.

- Parliamentary budget reports have found a net decline in funding for low-income households. Under investment in funding low-income households means under investment in housing stability and well-being for women and gender-diverse people, particularly those who are Indigenous, living with disabilities, single parents, 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, refugees, and migrants.
- Silos between homelessness shelters and VAW shelters serving women fleeing violence create challenges for women trying to access housing supports.
- Transitional housing, mandated to serve women, gender-diverse people, and their children fleeing violence, is chronically underfunded in Canada. This means that even those who meet the eligibility requirements are at risk of being turned away if the facility is at capacity.

Our systems are not broken—they are working as designed: to prioritize profit over people, and to keep power in the hands of those least affected by housing precarity.

Our engagement with the National Housing Strategy Act since 2019 has been rooted in deep community organizing and collective movement-building. And we've been urgently working to mobilize communities and ensure that those most affected by housing precarity are heard and centered.

To support widespread participation in this review panel process, we launched a right to housing toolkit and our Community Champion program. The idea was simple: equip people with the tools they need to share their stories in a way that aligns with this process—and make sure they weren't doing it alone.

Over four months, we trained over 50 women, Two-Spirit, trans, and gender-diverse people with lived experience of homelessness or housing precarity. They came from all over the country, bringing diverse skills, perspectives, and strength to the table.

We also presented at events, held webinars, and hosted in-person community engagement sessions across the country to support written submissions but also make sure that people know that the right to housing exists—and they are, in fact, rights holders.

Thanks to the work of our two Networks, our allies, and Community Champions, nearly 200 people with lived experience were engaged and participated in the written submission stage of this review.

And what we heard—again and again—is that we're out of time. Lives have been lost. Ground has been lost. Not just since 2022, but over decades of colonial, racist, and patriarchal violence that have gone largely unaddressed in this country.

The right to housing is not abstract. It is the right to live without fear. To choose safety over survival. To recover from violence. To stay rooted in culture, kin, and community.

This Review Panel has a rare opportunity: to lay the groundwork for transformative, systemic change to address gender-based housing inequality, and hold the government accountable.

Today, we honour the courage of every woman, Two-Spirit, trans, and gender-diverse person who has survived homelessness—and hold space for those who have not.

Thank you.