

NAC Housing Newsletter

NATIONAL ACTION COMMITTEE ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN
COMITÉ CANADIEN D'ACTION SUR LE STATUT DE LA FEMME

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We hope you enjoy this newsletter. It is the product of the NAC Housing Committee, a small committee of women, based in Toronto, who are concerned about housing issues. Since we are such a small committee and do not have the resources to meet with women across Canada, we decided that our efforts could best be utilized by producing a newsletter which could solicit input nationally and be distributed across Canada.

If you wish to continue to receive the newsletter free of charge, please complete the subscription form on the back and return it to NAC. If you have news of a local or provincial housing issue, or would like to write an article about a national issue, all contributions are welcome — please mail to the NAC office. We also welcome any comments relating to the form or content of the newsletter.

In reporting what women are doing for housing needs and what the key housing issues are across Canada, we hope to provide information and support for local efforts.

Hope to hear from you.

Leslie Robinson
for the NAC Housing Committee

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1987

INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF SHELTER FOR THE HOMELESS

NAC Workshops on Women and Housing

The Canadian Association of Housing and Renewal Officials and the International Council on Social Welfare co-sponsored a Canadian conference to observe the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, in Ottawa, September 13 to 16. NAC accepted the special role of co-ordinating eight workshops on the special needs of women.

The workshops were:

- **How Is Housing a Woman's Issue:** an overview of housing issues for women: women's hidden homelessness, housing status, access and discrimination.

- **The Special Housing Needs of Women Fleeing Violent Relationships:** a workshop dealing with issues of family violence, and the lack of affordable housing for women and children victims.

- **Women and Hostels — the dilemma:** an analysis and discussion of the way in which hostels are being used and the problems they present.

- **Les femmes et les logements:** a francophone workshop about housing issues and their impact upon women.

- **Women, Dislocation & Distress:** a presentation by homeless women from Toronto and Vancouver about the personal traumas inherent in homelessness.

- **Women-developed Solutions:** an overview of Canadian examples of non-profit housing projects developed and controlled by women in Vancouver, Regina, Toronto, Halifax, and Quebec City.

- **Mothers United for Metro Shelter:** a presentation of the advocacy and self-help activities of a grassroots organization of low-income single parents, the MUMS, in Nova Scotia.

- **Programs and Policies:** a focus on the opportunities and constraints presented by various housing programs and policies, and how these affect women needing affordable housing.

The workshops were well received by all participants. They allowed a particular focus on women's housing needs throughout the entire conference.

Brenda Farge
who co-ordinated
the NAC Workshops



The Right to be Housed

Residential landlord lobbyists have been increasingly active and at least moderately successful in promoting the idea that private property rights ought to be entrenched in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. An amendment to the Charter which would constitutionally guarantee private property rights has already been proposed. Such a change would be a sorrowful event for residential tenants.

At the present time, tenants enjoy at least a measure of security of tenure in most jurisdictions. As well, in some urban areas there are laws which control the demolition or renovation of the affordable housing stock. These and other legislative responses to housing problems would be in jeopardy of falling to the constitutional axe for interference with so-called fundamental private property rights.

What about the individual's right to be housed? Surely in a northern climate in an affluent society, the right to obtain decent housing is at least as important as the right to obtain food and decent medical care. In Canada, we do value shelter as a very basic human need.

Perhaps the residential landlord lobby should be met head-on with the challenge that the right to be housed ought to be included in the list of constitutionally guaranteed rights and freedoms. On the other hand, "security of the person" is already constitutionally protected and that notion probably includes at least basic shelter, if not decent housing.

Across Canada, vacant units of decent affordable housing are extremely rare. Decent housing may be available, but too many people are economically barred from obtaining it.

The difficult question which arises is "How affordable?" and some may ask "How decent?" There are undoubtedly many shades of opinion as to what is the acceptable maximum housing cost for, say, a family of four. Is it 25 percent of income? 30 percent? 50 percent?

Whatever the acceptable maximum, one thing is clear: the growing numbers of homeless people and the explosive numbers of hungry people resorting to food banks in Canadian cities is startling and shameful. Countless others are in sub-standard accommodation.

Many of us live in reasonable comfort and never see the hungry or the homeless. Having informed ourselves and reminded ourselves of the magnitude of the housing problem in many areas of the country, we would do well to remind our political representatives that Canadians view the right to decent affordable housing as a fundamental human right.

Sharon Bennett
a lawyer who lives in Heath Street
Housing Co-op and is active in the
tenant movement in Toronto



Special Issue on Shelter

Women & Environments has released its special Fall 1987 issue on Women and Shelter. Articles, reports, book notes and reviews combine to present the multiple facets of women's homelessness and shelter problems.

Copies of the special issue are available for \$4. A year's subscription to this quarterly magazine, which carries a lot of housing material, is \$13 (\$20 for institutions). Write to: *Women & Environments, c/o Centre for Urban and Community Studies, 455 Spadina Ave., Toronto M5S 2G8.*



NAC Past President Appointed Minister of Housing in Ontario

Chaviva Hosek, the past president of NAC, has been appointed Minister of Housing for Ontario. The NAC Housing Committee welcomes Ms. Hosek to this position with great enthusiasm and expectations. NAC has recently endorsed a Women and Housing Manifesto as well as a housing position paper, and the Housing Committee will endeavour to present these documents to Ms. Hosek from her old friends.

Member groups and individual women are encouraged to write to the Minister, and to invite her to speak to their groups; our job with all politicians is to remind them that they are accountable to the people who put them in office.

We look forward to initiatives from Ms. Hosek to consult with women, with low-income groups of tenants; to increase the supply of affordable housing; to protect the housing that already exists; and to ensure that quality affordable housing is accessible to all.

Leslie Robinson
Co-Chair
NAC Housing Committee



ATLANTIC WOMEN AND HOUSING CONFERENCE

The lack of affordable, decent housing is not a new issue for the people of Atlantic Canada—where the economy has been depressed for a long period of time, where the average household income is lower than anywhere else in the country, and where employment opportunities for many are sporadic and unpredictable. With over one in ten of households in Atlantic Canada today paying over 30 per cent of their gross income for shelter and with some of the oldest housing stock in the country, housing can easily be identified as a major cause of stress in the region. This is particularly the case for female-led households. Recent findings from the Rural and Small Town Studies Program in New Brunswick indicate that 55 per cent of female-led one-parent families pay more than 50 per cent of their total income for shelter.

Organizers of the Atlantic Women and Housing Conference, held April 2-5 in Memramcook, NB, believe the issues of women and housing require specific and special initiatives. Increasing shelter costs and a lack of housing alternatives have a far greater effect on female-led households. Among those most affected are single-parent women, unemployed women, minority women, single women, and

women on fixed incomes (such as the elderly). Their incomes simply do not permit them to obtain suitable and affordable housing for themselves and their families.

Frustration with the current situation and the lack of suitable responses was the impetus that brought together the planning group for the Atlantic Women and Housing Conference. The event was sponsored by the Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers and funded through Secretary of State (Women's Program), private donations, and CMHC as an official project for the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless.

Atlantic Women and Housing Conference

The objectives of the conference were to develop a common perspective among participants who were active in these areas, to share information on problems and responses in different communities, and to explore opportunities and joint strategies to bring about change in the present housing circumstances of Atlantic women. It was the first event of its kind in Canada.

The conference shied away from developing specific recommendations in order to involve participants in a process of developing strategies and working on solutions in their home communities. While government was held to be responsible for ensuring that affordable, adequate housing was available, the emphasis was on building networks for change and moving towards expanding women's roles in housing provision and policy development in the region. The technique used was modelled on "search conferencing," a process by which representatives of various interest sectors are brought together to examine issues, constraints, and opportunities for change within an intensive workshop format.

The participants, who were almost exclusively women, mirrored the complexity of the issues that arise for women who need to be housed. They came from tenants' associations, legal aid clinics, community health centres, shelters for battered women, planning and development areas, public housing, housing resource groups, and welfare rights associations. Also in attendance were representatives involved in housing programs from the three levels of government.

Implicit in the process that was used at the conference is the belief that we all have experiences that are valuable and valid to the issue, as well as the vision and ability to develop solutions. Building on these experiences allows groups to identify

directions and actions that will be relevant to their own communities. The end of the conference process was the identification of task groups which would continue to work on the main issues that were identified during the event.

Eight on-going task groups were formed at the conference. Examples of some of the groups are as follows. A Political Action Task Group is organizing four small conferences to provide information and skill development to women interested in entering politics, particularly at the municipal level. A Design and Community Planning Group is currently working on a project to develop a set of design considerations, which can be used by community groups, architects, and planners in order to better meet the needs of women residents.

The Education and Skills Group is working on ways to distribute information on housing programs, financing programs, and community resources, as well as to increase public awareness of the needs of the homeless and problems caused by the lack of suitable, affordable housing. A Network Group has been established to act as a type of clearinghouse for information related to women and housing in the region. It is also developing a directory of groups involved with the issue as a way of consolidating the networking begun at the conference. A Public Housing Tenants Group is looking into organizing public housing tenants and working on the issues of displacement,

lack of security of tenure, and lack of input into management and policy in public housing.

Several interesting themes came up again and again. An integrated approach is necessary to provide an adequate solution for women's housing needs. Shelter alone was not seen as sufficient — child care should be accessible (ideally provided on site); recreational opportunities and safe environments for children were seen as important; employment opportunities should be close; and available housing should be adaptable and varied in order to accommodate the different and changing needs of women. The need for accessible housing for the disabled was also a recurring theme. Residents of public housing felt that having a say in management was important. There was a strong interest in changing public housing legislation to ensure that tenants have the same rights and protections as private tenants.

A variety of housing types are needed to meet the needs of women in the region. There should be one-, two- and three-bedroom units within housing projects so that when one's children grow up, a smaller unit would be available without moving out of the community. It was recognized that in some communities where rental stock was scarce, the only way to achieve tenure security is through some ownership. In these communities, access to financing is critical.



Housing was rarely discussed without mentioning its relation to other factors, such as access to services, income, security, location, resident control, and the importance of neighbourhood integration and the opportunity to participate in building communities rather than just housing. A need for more emergency and transitional shelters for the survivors of family violence, especially in rural and isolated communities, was expressed. Women from Newfoundland told of having to travel, sometimes as far as 400 miles, to get to a safe residence. Native women found that their needs were rarely being met on the reservation and that urban native programs were needed for single-parent native women who were off the reserve.

Although the majority of the participants felt the magnitude of the housing problems for women in Atlantic Canada are hidden from the public eye, the conference and ongoing task groups should serve to focus attention on these problems.



Sharon Chisholm
is the housing co-ordinator
for the City of Dartmouth, NS

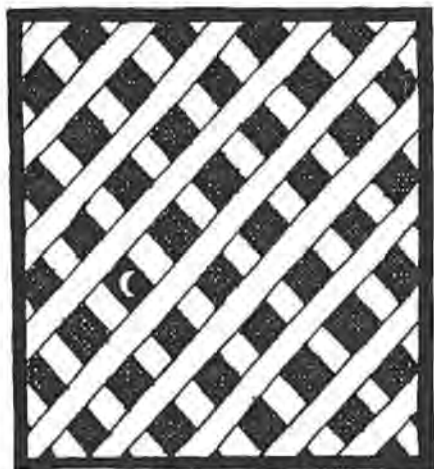
In Support of a Working Class Analysis

To receive a copy of the proceedings of the Atlantic Women and Housing Conference (61 pp., \$6), or a copy of *Architecture and Women* (23 pp., \$4), a graduate project by a participant in the Atlantic Conference, send cheque or money order payable to:

Atlantic Women and Housing Conference, c/o Johanna Oosterveld, 2165 Gottingen St., Halifax NS B3K 3B5.

This is not an "objective" report from the Atlantic Women and Housing Conference, but rather the heart-felt experiences of one participant. Although the Conference did accomplish an extensive examination of the housing crisis, things that I heard over the three days left a bad taste in my mouth.

Finally, upon reflection I must call what I experienced there oppression or, more precisely, double oppression, as it was at the hands of my trusted "sisters". I am speaking here of the attitude exhibited by so many of the women present at this gathering: that, by definition, we as women of the poorer, working class are in need of their education and guidance. This is a patronizing attitude which we find insulting coming from the male dominated social hierarchy, but we find it even more offensive coming from women who profess to be actively searching for alternatives. We question the solutions of the professional middle class. For one thing, housing is a class issue. Decent



Anne Burgess

accommodation is built for those who can afford it. For the rest of us, "affordable" housing all too often comes in detestable form. Most women know this. But it seems what many do not realize is, that needs, defined from a middle class perspective, are not necessarily the needs of the poor woman. For any group to assume that their definitions of a situation reflect the areas of concern for all, tends to allow room for an elitist perspective to creep in.

For the working class women, the solution to most of our needs is very basic: economics. We will never be able to lift the veil of oppression for many women if we continue to circumvent this, and try to problem solve in a symptomatic manner. Its time that interest groups stop defining our problems for us, and start asking us, the economically oppressed, what exactly we want done. In all probability, the answers heard will be very similar and simple.

Poor people are seen as a blight upon the landscape. We have not been recognized as having a culture of our own. Forced down our throats constantly has been a middle class doctrine that presupposes we would all be much happier if only we would encompass an ideology based on someone else's value system. Our battle to change the direction of economic "planning" must incorporate all classes, and any strategies we choose must have a strong feminist framework that empowers all women and respects each of us for our abilities. We all want to participate. We all want to empower ourselves. Poor women have much to contribute to the development of a feminist framework for social transformation. We are a legitimate voice!

Elizabeth Blaney
a housing activist in
Fredericton, NB who was
involved in organizing
the Atlantic Housing Conference



Survey of Women's Housing

It is common knowledge that there is a housing crisis in Metropolitan Toronto. All tenants are affected by an impossibly low vacancy rate and escalating rents. However, single parents receiving government assistance face a particular disadvantage in this tight market.

Opportunity For Advancement, an agency serving sole-support mothers on government assistance, conducted a survey in the Metropolitan Toronto area of the housing situations of the women in their programs. The following statistics from that survey highlight the impact of the housing crisis on low-income sole-support mothers.

Of women living in private or non-subsidized housing:

- the average portion of income spent on rent was 59%
- the average portion of income spent by women not sharing accommodation with other families was 63%
- 29% of the women surveyed spent more than 70% of their incomes on rent
- 11% spent more than 80% of their incomes on rent
- the average amount left per person after rent was paid was \$113.00 per month, \$26.28 per week or \$3.72 per day.

Of women living in publicly subsidized housing:

- an average of 26.83% of income was spent on rent
- the average amount left per person after rent was paid was \$171.54

per month, \$39.89 per week or \$5.64 per day.

When asked to assess their housing situations, 68% of those in public housing gave responses of "okay" to "excellent" and 32% responded "not great" to "horrible." In comparison, 32% of those in private housing felt their accommodation was "okay" to "excellent" while 68% stated that it was "not great" to "horrible."

A second study of women currently enrolled in programs is now underway to provide a comparison to the 1986 survey.

Valerie McDonald
works with Opportunity for
Advancement in Toronto



An Agenda for Action

Ontario has a housing crisis. There are the homeless singles who drift between hostels and rooming houses, or who may end up on the street, the single mothers who line up at food banks because they can't afford both rent and food; low-income families, including recent immigrants, living in cramped bachelor apartments because of near zero vacancy rates and lack of affordable housing. And many of these groups face discrimination in the marketplace as well.

In June, 1986, housing advocates from tenant, co-op and non-profit housing, social planning, legal clinic, academic, church, and social service sectors came together to develop a policy statement and a plan of action to address the need for decent affordable housing in Ontario. Out of that conference came an **Agenda for Action** with nine specific recommendations to the provincial and municipal governments. They are as follows:

- All public funds allocated to supply should be directed to not-for-profit housing projects.

- The government of Ontario should initiate an aggressive program of landbanking of public land and the acquisition of new and appropriately zoned land that can be used immediately for social housing. This land should be made available at cost to producers of non-profit housing.

- The provincial government should initiate steps to require municipalities to include in proposed plans of subdivision the designation of at least 25 per cent of the land for social housing.

- Discriminatory zoning practices which preclude social and special needs housing, or which prevent attempts at residential intensification or the redevelopment of non-residential uses as rental housing projects should be prohibited.

- Rent review legislation should provide strong guarantees on maintenance standards; landlords should be permitted no increase whatsoever if they fail to meet minimum provincial standards; government assistance could be tied to tenant involvement in developing repair schedules.

- Roomers and boarders should be included in the landlord and tenant act.

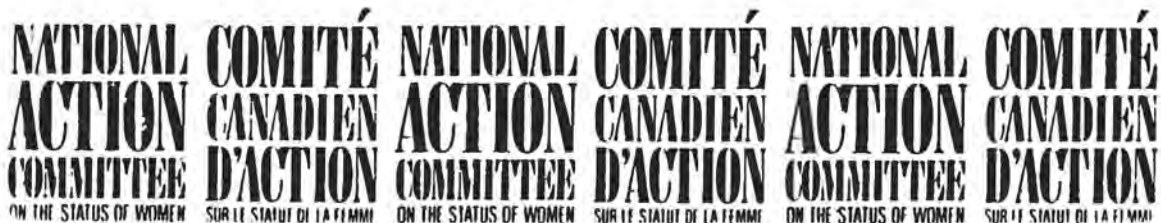
- An unequivocal freeze should be put on demolitions, conversions and luxury renovations while a long-term policy is developed to protect existing units.

- Funding should be made available for the organization and education of people in asserting their rights as tenants; a training program should be initiated for law enforcement officials in relevant aspects of landlord-tenant law.

- Program guidelines for non-profit housing should encourage innovation and allow for flexibility in design and construction.

The **Affordable Housing Action Group** is a coalition of conference participants working towards the implementation of the **Agenda** through broad based support and collective lobbying efforts. Those wishing to participate or wanting further information should contact:

The Affordable Housing Action Group
c/o The Social Planning Council of
Metropolitan Toronto
#1000-950 Yonge Street
Toronto, Ontario
M4W 2J4



The November 1987 issue of the NAC Housing Newsletter was prepared by Leslie Robinson, Sylvia Novac, Judith Kjellberg, Pam Sayne, Valerie McDonald, Kathy Laird. Contributions for the next issue are welcome before February 15, 1988.

This issue of the NAC Housing Newsletter is being sent to as wide a network of people as possible. But if you want to keep on getting it, you must let us know.

Send in your name and address on the form if you want to stay on the list!

And let us know of other people and organizations who may want to receive it.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

Send to: Housing Committee, NAC, #505, 344 Bloor St. West, Toronto M5S 1W9
