

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?
ROLE OF HOUSING IN THE DECISION TO LEAVE ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

By

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ABSTRACT

Should I stay or should I go? Examining the role of affordable housing in the lives of abused women

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This qualitative Action Research explored the role of safe and affordable housing in women's decision to leave an abusive relationship. Six survivors of domestic violence shared the challenges they experienced in searching, obtaining and sustaining alternative accommodation that is safe, permanent and affordable. The research findings indicate many factors may cause women to remain in such a relationship, such as isolation, financial dependency, fear of harm to loved ones and lack of social support. Nonetheless, participants reported unaffordable housing as the primary barrier on their ability to successfully exit the relationship. For many, it was either remaining in the abusive home or forsaking their home to escape abuse which became a critical decision. While women's shelter may provide immediate safety, effective and holistic housing policy, programs, and services are needed to support women to leave abusive relationships. Increased housing allowance for survivors, more affordable housing stock, public education on domestic violence and employment opportunity may increase women's ability to successfully exit abusive relationship.

Key Words: domestic violence; affordable housing, survivor's voices, community collaboration, homelessness, critical feminism and intersectionality.

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DEDICATION

This MRP is dedicated to all survivors of domestic violence. Your voice matters, your life matters, your experience is a strength, your knowledge is valid and validated, you are not alone as we continue to fight for the right to a safe and affordable housing that survivors deserve.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Why did you stay?

Why are you allowing him to treat you this way?

This is not the first time he laid his hands on you and you did not immediately leave?

I cannot believe you left and you decided to return to him after all you went through.

It is disappointing you choose to put your life in danger.

This is your **CHOICE**; I cannot continue to help someone who is not ready to be helped!
These are some questions and comments survivors of domestic violence are asked.

This research seeks to understand the role of affordable housing in the lives of women who have experienced domestic violence. This research particularly explores how the availability or the prospect of safe, affordable alternative housing affects women's decisions to exit abusive situations. It explores the different challenges these women experience in searching, locating, obtaining and sustaining alternative housing that is safe, permanent and affordable.

The United Nations defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (2010, p. 48). In this study, I will be using domestic violence and gender-based violence interchangeably. Gender-based violence is mostly referred to as violence levelled against a person because of his or her gender and the role and expectations ascribed to it by our society (Carpenter, 2006).

Gender-based violence is a broader term that encompasses domestic, family or intimate partner violence; it refers to any form of violence whether it is physical, emotional, economic, financial, sexual, spiritual abuse that is meant to exert power and control over women and keep women in a subordinate status in the home and society (Lawson, 2012).

The term gender-based violence also implies that men and boys may also be victims, particularly of sexual violence. Nonetheless, victims of gender-based violence are disproportionately women and girls, therefore the focus of this research is on women and the term violence against women is emphasized.

Violence against women is a global human rights issue that continues to pose imminent dangers such as homelessness to women worldwide (Chung, Kennedy, O'Brien, & Wendt, 2000; Ellsberg, 2006). The United Nations has recognized gender-based violence as an international human rights issue and has made a declaration to encourage nations to eliminate violence against women. Though countries around the world have enacted different programs and policies aimed at ending or preventing violence against women, it continues to be a significant issue that no nation has been able to eliminate (Critelli, 2012; Johnson, Fisher, & Jaquier, 2015).

Currently, there are no statistics to compare violence against women worldwide (Heise, L., Ellsberg, M., & Gottemoeller, M. 1999). However, researchers estimate over 1,259,390 domestic violence occurrences are still being reported per year globally (Truman, Langton, & Planty, 2013) A National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) conducted by the US Department of Justice demonstrated the prevalence and problematic nature of violence against women in the US. The survey findings claimed that one in every four women has experienced some type of domestic violence and 1.5 million women are estimated to be victims of domestic violence each year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Canada is not exempt from the prevalence of domestic violence. According to the Canadian Women's Foundation (2014), 3,491 women and their 2,724 children sleep in shelters on a given night due to domestic violence and approximately 300 more women are turned away due to lack of shelter space. Also in Canada a woman is killed by her intimate partner approximately every six days and Indigenous women are

2.5 times more likely to be victims of violence than non-Indigenous women and 70% of spousal violence is unreported.

Although any woman can experience, or is at risk of experiencing domestic violence, it was evident in the literature that some women are more vulnerable than others (Brownridge, 2009; Fawole, Asekun-Olarinmoye, & Osungbade, 2013; Johnson, Fisher, & Jaquier, 2015). The findings demonstrated that survivors may experience domestic violence and housing issues differently due to additional factors such as race, social-economic class, immigration status, health and disability. These multiple oppressions and marginalizing factors intersect with domestic violence to exacerbate women's experience of housing instability. Findings confirm that even though women may be equally at risk, that does not imply an equal impact, equal access to services, protection, prevention and an equal ability to leave and to sustain their freedom (Brownridge, 2009; Villalón, 2010).

Looking at the literature that studies domestic violence from the perspective of diverse cultures and social structures, especially studies done on Vietnamese, African-American, lesbian, Japanese, South Asian, Korean-American women, among others, Sokoloff, & Dupont, (2005) challenges the traditional feminist approach to understanding and explaining domestic violence. These authors suggest that phrases (such as violence against women and persons cuts across race, class, nationality and religious) trivializes the experiences of abused women of color Sokoloff & Dupont (2005) emphasize that racialized women are faced with violence and poverty due to unequal access to power, resources, employment opportunities, racism, gender discrimination, social class, and male domination of public and private sphere.

Violence against women continues to pose imminent risks such as homelessness to women worldwide (Zufferey, Chung, Franzway, Wendt, & Moulding, 2016). Without any

security or alternative place to live, women may end up homeless, impoverished and vulnerable. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2014), approximately one-third of the reported homeless population are women fleeing abusive relationships (Thompson, 2007). The U.S.A 2006 Conference of Mayors report states that 44% of cities surveyed quoted domestic violence as the leading cause of homelessness for women. The Coordinated Point-in-Time Count of Homelessness in Canadian Communities Report (2016) alleges that 40% of people experiencing homelessness are women and 25% of those women cited domestic abuse as a factor leading to their homelessness. In summary, the threat of ongoing or escalated violence against women continues to increase because women feel trapped in the relationship due to lack of a safe and affordable place to live, social support, lack of job opportunities, and affordable childcare (Correia, 2001).

My rationale for choosing this research is because I noticed an absence of survivors' voices in the literature I reviewed. There is a wealth of existing literature on domestic violence and housing; nonetheless, the majority of these studies show a lack of collaboration with survivors. By extension, public policies that rely on such research to develop or improve housing policies and programs intended to support survivors remain largely uninformed by survivors themselves, and are, consequently, far less effective than they need to be. This is also deeply unjust when researchers are trying to understand how these systemic factors impact women, while women's voices are often not included in the conversation.

Overall, this project hoped to empower survivors to value their own insights, experience and voices. Participants' collaboration in forwarding findings and recommendations to policymakers can, in turn, help shape a more effective public response to abused women's needs for affordable housing. This study tried to ensure that their voices are heard, so that they may

inform public policy around alternative housing for other abused women. To meet this objective, this research utilized the Community Action Research framework to create a safe and respectful engagement of survivors. In doing so, this action-oriented research aimed to help correct that imbalance by engaging survivors themselves and bringing their stories to light. I share these values deeply because of my lived experience as a member of a marginalized population.

I describe myself as a racialized, heterosexual African descent immigrant woman and a survivor of domestic violence. As I claim my immigrant identity, I am in solidarity with those who have experienced historical and ongoing slavery, colonization, cultural genocide and the marginalization of all Indigenous peoples. As a survivor, I can personally relate to the experiences of those in this research study. I also hold a profound understanding and can attest to the impact of racist, patriarchal, capitalist and oppressive mandates that gives room to domestic violence, as well as the impact of having a safe and affordable place to live after domestic violence. I acknowledge my position of power and privilege to speak of the experiences of survivors of domestic violence in relation to housing. However, I do not take the position of an expert. I am a learner, and a believer that knowledge comes in different forms, in the classroom environment, from those with lived experiences, and in the field with services users and in communities.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines existing scholarly and grey literature that looks at domestic violence in general, including about leaving domestic violence, and how housing impacts women's ability to leave an abusive relationship. The findings demonstrate violence against women is a global crisis. It shows some of the different challenges women face when deciding whether to leave abusive relationships. Most importantly, the findings emphasized the importance of safe and affordable housing in women's ability to leave, heal, and build a life after the abuse. These findings are classified into themes which are: Leaving abusive relationship as a process; and Housing stability, financial dependency and leaving.

Leaving an Abusive Relationship as a Process

Leaving an abusive partner is not a single event but a process that extends over time, involving volatile and preparatory stages or strategies. The literature suggested that a woman may wish to leave her situation but decide to stay because she doesn't feel she has the support and resources she needs, and or she may feel that she doesn't have control over her current circumstances (Velonis, Daoud, Matheson, Woodhall-Melnik, Hamilton-Wright, & O'Campo, 2017). Hendy, Eggen, Gustitus, McLeod & Ng (2003) suggest factors such as fear of physical harm to their loved ones, losing custody of their children, lack of immigration status and economic dependency on the partner play crucial roles in the decision-making process. They also add that a woman may have the necessary resources, such as housing and financial support that could make leaving possible, but may wish to remain in the relationship. Factors such as loneliness, embarrassment, religious beliefs, shame, and the need for children to be with their father may also get women to continue in an abusive relationship. Nonetheless, according to Choose and Lamke (1997) what seems evident and central to both aspects of the decision-

making process are these two fundamental questions: “Will my situation be better?” and “Can I do it? ” (p.294). According to Anderson & Saunders, (2003) the above questions are influenced by a lack of stable, safe and affordable housing and economic resources. Two other studies (Merrit-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Wuest & Merrit-Gray, 1999) also describe leaving as a process of reclaiming the self in four stages: Counteracting abuse; Breaking free; Not going back and Moving on. Their description of the first part of counteracting abuse is, however, partly consistent with descriptions of Choice and Lamke’s (2003) what makes battered women stay, the question of “Will I be better off?” and “Can I do it?”

Housing Stability, Financial Dependency and Freedom

Although shelters for abused women offer immediate safety (Breiding, Chen, Black, 2014) shelters are only a temporary solution that is not always available and do not provide housing stability (Fisher & Stylianou, 2019). Lack of stability is found to be detrimental to women’s ability to live a life free from violence. Andrea, Amy, Sarah, & Emily (2018) argue that survivors of domestic violence need a safe, affordable and long-term housing in order to be able to establish a life free from abuse. While some researchers on the concept of housing stability for women talk about permanency, comfort, safety, affordability and consistency (Ponic, Varcoe, Davies, Ford-Gilboe, Wuest, & Hammerton, 2011) other researchers also understand women’s complex definitions of stability, which distinguish between the house as a physical place that requires material maintenance and the home as a place to which people ascribe emotional meaning (Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2014). Findings also suggest that both aspects of housing stability are critical to women’s ability to recover from past trauma. It also provides the opportunity for women to connect with their community, gain employment, establish a trusting relationship and form a social network (Baker, Billhardt, Warren, Rollins, & Glass, 2010).

Vulnerable and low-income victims of gender-based violence are often not able to afford to rent or own homes without the financial support of their partner. In some cases where women leave the relationship without having adequate alternative housing, they may end up homeless. It is therefore not surprising that 40% of visibly homeless people in Canada are women; and for 25% of those women, domestic abuse is the main factor which leads to their homelessness (Whitzman, 2010). It is evident from the literature that some women sacrifice their daily necessities to pay for rent (Rollins, Glass, Perrin, Billhardt, Clough, Barnes, Bloom, 2012). According to Kane & Bornstein (2016), financial dependency on an abusive partner can increase the risk and severity of violence and/or make it more difficult for abused women to leave a violent relationship.

Similarly, feminist scholars Walby (1990) and Osman (2009) suggest that factors such as patriarchal structure created the environment for female dependencies due to: unpaid domestic labour performed by women; women's exclusion from certain types of work and wage discrimination.

Strengths and Limitations of Existing Knowledge

Research in domestic violence has gained attention from researchers of all disciplines, especially those in social science. Nevertheless, the knowledge gained through such research is hardly attributed to those who were researched but to the researcher. Based on the findings analyzed above, it is evident that though different disciplines and researchers may work on the same or similar research issue, findings can lead to a different understanding of the issue. Contexts such as disciplinary ideology, society norms, culture and researcher epistemic premises impact how ideas such as whose knowledge, research validity and reliability matters.

Since I have chosen literature based on relevance to my topic, there are some similarities and differences in the research methodology, theoretical framework, and the researcher's undeclared values and epistemic aim. This is particularly so because what constitutes knowledge has always been debated and what counts as knowledge is not value-free. According to Cohen et al (2009) "what counts as knowledge is determined by the social and positional power of the advocates of that knowledge" (p. 27).

Many of the research studies I have referred to are from the fields of medicine and law. These studies are done by institutions such as the UN, WHO and Canadian women's foundation. They have taken an expert approach to the issue. There is a vast knowledge that resides within survivors, but such wisdom is hardly made widely available because the duty to create "knowledge" seems to reside only on scholars without recognizing and taking advantage of the knowledge that already exists within survivors of domestic violence. This is evident in the methodology - quantitative approach of inquiry, and methods of data collection. These studies have used surveys and indexes - poverty index marital status, presence of children in the home and whether or not the women had experienced violence. The consequence of such methods are that they may lack context and meaning to what constituents are saying. These studies focus on issues related to individual or interpersonal factors, such as how the women feel about their partner, home, what they think is best for their children, or whether they have a safe place to go. They recognize that gender-based violence cuts across all cultures and socio-economic classes but they focus less on the social and structural factors, such as poverty, sexism, race and disability. Similarly, researchers in the disciplines of psychology and nursing (Ham-Rowbottom, Gordon, Jarvis, & Novaco, 2005) have been more generalist when describing the impact of domestic violence. For example, they argue that, "impaired psychosocial functioning and life

difficulties of these predominantly successful domestic violence survivors highlights the need for specialized shelter intervention and continuity of care in the community"(p.1).

Other researchers in the field of social sciences (Brownridge, 2009; Clough, Draughon, Njie-Carr, Rollins, & Glass, 2014) have focused on examining, understanding, and bringing to light the hidden social structures that impact how women experience domestic violence. The scholars with feminist orientation and intersectional framework (Johnson, Fisher, & Jaquier, 2015; Sokoloff, & Dupont, 2005; Soman, 2009) have been more critical in nature. Their arguments on women's experience of violence and access to affordable housing are made through a political, gender and socio-economic gaze. These scholars have used qualitative approaches and have used small to medium sized samples. Their interviews are mostly conducted with women who have been living in shelters or accessing social services.

The overall strength of the literature with a critical orientation is that it recognizes that race, gender, social class, and traditional and historical policies play a critical role in women's experience of gender-based violence. Those articles emphasize that domestic violence is endemic in our society as a result of gender oppression and societal norms such as the division of labour that is often normalized. They also emphasize gender-based analysis in service provision for women and refuse the traditional claims of gender neutrality on gender-based violence. They are more social justice-oriented and advocate for practical and effective housing policies such as the priority list for those fleeing domestic violence. In comparison, with the mainstream framework, these scholars are more likely to emphasize the importance of the lived experience of survivors.

Addressing Gaps in Existing Knowledge

My response to addressing gaps in existing research is through shifting the paradigm; a shift in the way that we see who a researcher is or should be. My research approach involved

connecting survivors with survivors to share and create knowledge as a community. I also shared relevant and easily accessible information I know and have, with participants in exchange of the experiences they shared with me. I see research as a community endeavor and aimed to move it beyond individual achievement and competition to create opportunities for survivors to generate new knowledge based on collaboration. I also see research as a tool for empowering those being researched. In my opinion, all research should lead to action and all knowledge such as lived experiences should be valued equally on par with explicit knowledge (knowledge acquired through formal or structural training) and tacit knowledge (informal individualized knowledge (Herling 2000; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

In my opinion, limiting our perspective on intimate partner violence to the individual lived experiences and/or interpersonal levels is short-sighted and does not tell a complete story. A combination of perspectives from the individual's lived experiences, as well as academic scholars is needed to advance the existing knowledge.

CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this MRP, I am using a critical feminist theory and intersectionality framework in studying the role of housing in women's decision and ability to exit domestic violence. In this chapter I present these theoretical frameworks.

Critical Feminist Theory

The critical feminist understanding in analyzing survivor's access to safe and affordable housing looks beyond the surface and allows me to watch for the fundamentals and systemic inequality and power relations that create the issue in the first place. It also allows me to recognize the contribution and consequences of factors such as race, class, ethnicity, age, disability, and sexual orientation and how it may impact women differently in relation to finding a safe place to live. It allows me to ask and listen to what survivors are telling us and to recognize and bring to light these women's voices, stories, opinions and recommendations. The critical feminist theory allows me to examine domestic violence and housing instability not only on the basis of individual feelings or experiences but helps recognize the larger historical, economic and social-political environment in which this issue exists.

Critical feminist scholars have made a great contribution to the discourse of domestic violence. They claim that violence against women is a result of patriarchal beliefs. Soman (2009) defines patriarchy as a "social structure where the actions and ideas of men are dominant over those of women" (p. 253). Critical feminist scholars also argue that masculinity and gender-based division of labour, wage discrimination, unpaid domestic labour, and women's exclusion from certain types of work creates

the environment for women's dependency on men (Osman, 2009; Walby, 1990). This perspective demonstrates that women are more likely to take part-time jobs due to family responsibilities as a result; they are financially dependent on the partner's income to maintain a roof over their head. In a situation where women are facing gender-based violence, the possibility for leaving this situation becomes limited. Though this perspective demonstrates the interrelation of patriarchy and violence and advocates for gender equality, this perspective has a limitation, in that it presents a broad stroke of generalization and applies this analysis to all women.

However, the above perspective has been challenged by Mohanty in her book, *Feminism without borders: Under Western Eyes* (2003). Mohanty criticizes the universality of women's experience in western feminist writing. They argue that a "sizable extent" of Western feminist writings on third World women are characterized by "assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality" (p.19). They claim that these discussions present women as a unified group with the same interests and desires, notwithstanding class, ethnic, racial location, or difference, it implies a "homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group" (p22). Mohanty acknowledges that races, classes, sexualities, religions, and disabilities do, in fact, impact women's experiences of oppression. As a result, feminism must envision change and social justice work across these lines of demarcation.

Although any woman can face domestic violence and housing instability, some groups are likely to experience it differently due to their social location. On this note, I believe incorporating key concepts from an intersectionality framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of violence against women, women's decision and ability to leave, or to secure alternative safe and affordable places to live. According to Bograd (1999), "domestic violence is

not a monolithic phenomenon and that intersectionality colors the meaning and nature of domestic violence, how it is experienced by self and responded to by others, how personal and social consequences are represented, and how and whether escape and safety can be obtained” (p. 276).

Intersectionality Perspective

An intersectionality framework also serves as an apparatus that helps understand the complexity of women's identity, and how these identities interact to impact abused women in relation to housing (Zufferey, 2017). Applying this perspective to guide my work allowed me to look at factors such as race, age, gender, class, sexual orientation/identity, immigration status in women's experience of violence and housing to avoid generalized findings that get applied to all women. For example, an intersectionality perspective is used to identify, analyze and understand many factors such as race, gender, class is working together to create the challenges women face when searching, locating, and obtaining a safe place to live (Harris, & Leonardo, 2018).

Critical feminist theory and an intersectionality perspective further help to understand the matrix of domination, the social construction of gender and the workings of power and privilege in our society (Gouws, 2017). This is important because these frameworks focus on individual intersections with social inequalities to understand the impacts of oppressive institutions and structures in the lives of women. In conclusion, these frameworks allow me, as a researcher, to discern how differential social, economic and historical positioning of women in our society situates women in abusive circumstances, and how all of these factors impact women’s decisions and ability to leave an abusive situation.

CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides details of my research design and the methodology I used in this MRP. It describes my approach of inquiry, the sources of information, sampling techniques, data collection, analysis and ethical considerations. This chapter provides context about who the participants are and the importance of using this approach.

Research Framework

The framework that I chose for this MRP is Community Action Research (CAR). According to Ozanne & Anderson (2010) "CAR is an alternative research method that utilizes the community as the unit of analysis. This approach forges research alliances with relevant stakeholders in the community to explore and develop solutions to local problems" (p.123). In the context of this research, community is defined less by geography but by shared experiences (Ozanne & Anderson, 2010). Specifically, in the context of this research, shared experiences constitute survivors of domestic violence who have faced housing challenges. According to Maguire (1996), CAR allows researchers to further examine how "organizations, structures, processes, and practices shape and influence how people of unequal power and privilege are in a relationship with each other" (p. 35).

CAR is appropriate for the study because its design emphasizes the importance of creating mutually, respectful, and collaborative relationships among community members and researcher who may also be a member of the community. CAR recognizes participants as research partners, rather than just as objects of study who are often consulted but not heard. CAR also emphasizes survivor's individual agency, and the fact that together they represent a living body of valuable knowledge and experience that can transform policies. As Prynny (2004) noted,

knowledge generated from collaboration with those who have lived experience can help bridge the critical gap between theory and practice. The overall benefit of using this research framework is that it allows both the participants and the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of how housing plays a role in both the experiences, response, and ability to leave an abusive situation. I chose CAR because I deeply believe that engaging survivors in the research process provides essential and vitally important information to help guide any housing policy or program which aims to help abused women achieve safe, long-term housing stability. Moreover, as a social worker, this framework allowed me to bring an anti-oppressive theory to practice by engaging participants to analyze the systems of power and policies that impact them and created housing instability for them.

Recruitment and Sampling

In order to recruit participants, flyers were placed in community agencies frequented by women, around Ryerson University downtown campus as well as community housing and co-operative housing facilities. Because I was interested in targeting a specific population which was survivors of domestic violence, a purposive sampling technique was used to allow me to meet this targeted group (Creswell, 2013). A total of six participants were recruited, three women who participated in a focus group and three women who participated in individual interviews.

Data Collection

Data was collected through focus group and individual interviews (Creswell, 2013). This particular design strategy involves collecting rich, firsthand data through an interactive focus group to obtain a better understanding of how housing security (or insecurity) affected women's decisions to leave an abusive domestic situation. At the end, participants were asked to list the

two most difficult challenges they faced leaving their relationship as well as in relation to their housing needs. The focus group lasted for about 2 hours.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with three participants who due to time constraints could not participate in the focus group. Each individual interview was 1.5 hours long. Through the experiential discussion and dialogical nature of both interviews, we explored together the kinds of challenges they encountered in searching, locating, obtaining and sustaining alternative housing that is safe, permanent and affordable. Participants were asked a series of questions relating to challenges they faced, the type of support they accessed, the limitations of existing supports and ways in which they addressed/navigated challenges.

Since the focus of action research is to effect change, solve social problems in the community, and create awareness, participants were asked to come up with recommendations to improve housing situation for other women. Participants were also informed of the opportunity as a group to present the compiled recommendations to housing policymakers. The aim was to have these recommendations implemented in order to improve access to affordable housing for survivors of domestic violence. This process was particularly designed to influence policy makers and bring to light survivor's unique experiential knowledge and insights, regarding how challenges related to safe, affordable housing impact abused women.

Data Analysis

My process of analyzing the data involved transcribing the focus group and individual interviews as well additional note that was taken during the focus group and interviews. In the process of transcribing, I familiarized myself with the data content and observed patterns, statement and comments that were recurring.

Once the transcribing was complete, I read and re-read the transcripts to get the essence of participants' narratives and their meaning behind it. The focus at this point was to understand and use participants' narratives and experiences to try and answer if having access to a safe and affordable place to live impacted their decision to leave an abusive relationship.

In this process, I identified patterns which were later turned into themes and these themes were manually coded and analyzed. Once the coding was complete, I engaged in the process of studying, describing, analyzing, and interpreting the data (Creswell, 2013). Findings were organized based on the major themes that were highlighted and were examined through a feminist and intersectionality lens.

Ethical Considerations

Discussing issues relating to gender-based violence is challenging not only due to the bad memories it invokes but also due to shame, embarrassment, guilt and the feeling of vulnerability. With this in mind, the research project was designed to help participants feel safe and comfortable discussing this matter by focusing the discussion not on abuse but the housing and other challenges they faced. Overall, respect and dignity of participants were at the forefront of this project and every effort was made to honour participants.

Before engaging in this project, an application was sent to the Ryerson Ethics Board (REB) for approval. All concerns and considerations from REB were addressed and subsequently approved. After the approval, flyers were distributed and all potential participants received the consent form ahead of time so that they were fully aware of the sensitive nature of the research and made an informed decision. They were also advised of the characteristics of my research questions and how the focus would mainly be on their housing challenges and not on the abuse. Participants were also informed of their right to refuse to answer any questions or to

stop their interview at any given time. For the purpose of privacy and confidentiality, interviews and the focus group were conducted in a private room at a community center and participant's identity was kept strictly confidential. The information gathered by transcribing the audio recordings from the focus group and the interviews was divested of any personally identifying information. Instead, participants were assigned a pseudonym and will be referred that way in the findings section, in order to protect their identity. To safeguard information, all audio recorded and transcribed notes are kept in secure and password protected storage.

Though all effort was made to keep group confidentiality, I also acknowledge that there is a limit to confidentiality. Particularly in the focus group session, no one could guarantee with absolute certainty that someone in the group would not disclose whatever information was shared in the group. To prevent that from happening, all participants were required to read and sign an agreement before participating in the focus group.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

In this chapter I share major findings gathered from my participants. I interviewed six participants living in the Toronto area. All participants came from diverse backgrounds and they self-identified as belonging to Indigenous, second-generation Canadian, Caribbean descent, and a new immigrant of African descent, white and Portuguese descent. All participants were survivors of domestic violence; however, the level of abuse and their housing experiences varied. Three women participated in the focus group and three were interviewed individually. Data collected from the focus group and interviews were merged, and findings presented are chosen based on relevance to the research questions, as well as importance to participants themselves. Quotations from participants are primarily used to illustrate and capture the essence of participants' voices. To protect participants' identities and confidentiality they are assigned pseudonyms in this report. I start the presentation of findings by providing a profile of all participants.

Profile of Participants

Participant 1 (Rose): Focus Group

Rose was married to her ex-husband for seven years. She has two daughters, one with special needs, and they currently live in subsidized housing. Rose left the abusive relationship after Children's Aid initiated a process to remove her children because she was accused of not protecting them from witnessing abuse.

Participant 2 (Rita): Individual Interview

Rita was in a common-law relationship for more than two decades. She left her family home at a young age for a common law relationship with a partner who was in the military. They had three children together. Rita separated from her common-law partner when the abuse became

unbearable and then went to a shelter for assistance. The women's shelter assisted her to find her current place of residence; she considers it to be affordable but poorly maintained.

Participant 3 (Runa): Individual Interview

Runa is a mother of two who was sponsored by her ex-husband. Runa could not leave her relationship for fear of losing her legal immigration status. According to Runa, she felt “isolated” and she did not have any family members to provide support when she ended her relationship with her ex-husband. Runa sought support from a women’s shelter and afterward was able to rent her first basement apartment. Looking back, she said the basement saved her life because, at the time, it was affordable in comparison to the current housing market. Runa stated she was able to go back to school to continue her studies and grow in her career. She currently owns her home.

Participant 4 (Rosin): Focus Group

Rosin moved in with her boyfriend after leaving her rural community, and was not employed at the time. They lived together for 8 years. She could not leave the relationship because she was financially dependent on him. The only option in her town was a homeless shelter and she was not comfortable going to this shelter for several reasons. Rosin moved from her town to a VAW shelter in Toronto and was helped in obtaining a place of her own. Rosin now lives with a roommate in a three-bedroom house, and currently supports herself with two part-time jobs. Rosin is “happy” with her accommodation.

Participant 5 (Rosa): Focus Group

Rosa is currently a housing and homelessness advocate. According to Rosa, she started doing this work due to her experience with homelessness and poverty. Rosa lived in Toronto all her life and never expected a life of homelessness. However, she became homeless due to mental health problems and addiction. According to Rosa, her addiction to drinking was a result of years

of physical and sexual abuse. Rosa has been sober for seven years and she is a strong voice for other survivors. Rosa lives in a rent-geared-to-income apartment in cooperative housing.

Participant 6 (Rachel): Individual Interview

Rachel described herself as having been an independent woman prior to getting involved with her ex-partner, who later became abusive and controlling. This was Rachel's second abusive relationship. She was in the first relationship for more than eight years, and in the second relationship for 12 years. Rachel made several attempts to leave her relationships but always returned due to housing insecurity and unaffordability. She had four children and was finally able to permanently leave after saving enough money to pay her first and last month's rent. Rachel currently lives in a three-bedroom apartment with two of her children from her last relationship, and she considers her current housing to be "moderately affordable".

The presentation of participant profiles and background information serves to provide context for these findings, and enables us to understand how participants' unique identities impacted their experience of domestic violence and housing difficulties. This is important in establishing that women's experiences regarding housing cannot be generalized.

The purpose of this research was to explore how the availability or the prospect of safe, affordable alternative housing affects women's decisions to exit abusive situations as well as to understand the varied housing challenges they faced. Through this research, I aim to showcase the voices of participants so that we can hear and learn discreetly from their lived experiences.

Major Findings

As previously stated, major findings are grouped into three main areas: Barriers to leaving an abusive relationship; Factors considered while leaving an abusive relationship; and

Recommendations. Each of these areas of discussion are further broken down into themes which include:

Area I: Barriers to Leaving Abusive Relationship

- *Unaffordable housing*
- *Ambivalence regarding the shelter system as an alternative*
- *Lack of responsive social services & social stigma*
- *Systemic racism*

Area II: Factors Considered While Leaving Abusive Relationship

- *Personal & children's safety*
- *Being strategic & developing a plan*

Area III: Recommendations

- *More shelters or transitional housing*
- *Changes in the current housing / rental policy for abused women*

Barriers to Leaving Abusive Relationship

Unaffordable Housing

While the area of examination was whether access to affordable housing played a role in their decision to leave an abusive relationship, it would be naive to assume that access to housing alone was the sole determining factor for participants to leave or remain in such a relationship. Each participant described a unique set of complicated factors, and in some cases life altering decision making processes, in deciding to leave their relationships. Participants listed several other factors that influenced their decision to remain as long as they did. For instance, they variously identified fear of harm, anxiety about going to a shelter, financial dependency on their partner, social isolation, the need to keep their family unit intact, lack of information, and losing immigration status as other factors they had to consider, in addition to difficulties in accessing alternative housing. However, being able to find housing they could afford was a major concern. The general sentiment among all participants was that they could not afford to rent a place of their own due to their financial situation. For example, Rosin said:

I considered leaving the relationship many times, but then the first thing that comes to my mind was where can I go? You know. I cannot afford the first and last month down payment. I knew the rent was very high and he has been paying all the rent since I have not been able to get a job after finishing my program. I did not want to go to the shelter at the time so I just concluded that I could not afford to leave him, so I stayed until the last incident.

The challenges of finding a safe and affordable place to live was the greatest concern for all participants when deciding to leave their respective situations. Two participants, Rosa and Rosin, had previously left relationships only to return because they could not afford to rent a place on their own without the support of their partners or family members. According to Rosa:

After searching for a place for like a month without anything I can really afford with the OW money, I went back to him. I knew that was a bad idea but I did not think there was something I could do about it. I felt hopeless and helpless too. I was so mad at myself for going back but what can I do? I did not want to be on the street. My friend was also mad at me but she could not help me for anything so, I did not think I have other choice. Well I could have moved in with my mom but I did not want to be a burden to her. She was care of my other sister's children too. The second time I left, I did not go back because I went to live in women's shelter. Shelter helped me apply for housing I was lucky to have a subsidized housing. When the housing office offered me a place, although it was in a bad neighborhood, it did not matter; I just took it. The place is a bit rundown but I pay the rent, is good. I really want to say though if I did not have this place I may have gone back to him but I am not sure. All I know is having this place really helped me back on my feet. I went back to school and do the things a want to do.

Rosa also shared her story of going back to the abuser after leaving the relationship for the first time; she had the following to say:

My case is similar to yours. For me it was very hard when I left the relationship for the first time. My self-esteem was a wreck. He would tell me I cannot survive without him or I cannot make it without him so I believed it. So, when I moved in with my mom for a couple of months it was not a good feeling. I tried searching for a place but it was hard to find a decent place I could comfortably afford with my minimum wage job. When he came back begging me to come back home, I quickly moved back in with him. After a few months of moving back the abuse started all over again. The second time, I went to a women's shelter so they were able to help find a transitional housing. This place was small but I had to live for two years before I was able to move into this co-op.

Accessing social housing or affordable private market rentals is a big challenge for all women, and even more challenging for survivors of domestic violence. Lacking access to affordable housing increases women's pressure to return to their abusers. For immigrant women, the challenge can be more severe. Runa described the friction among her family when considering leaving her partner for self-preservation and protecting her children's safety. Runa said:

It took me many years to become an independent, free woman, meaning was raised very old fashioned, the culture that you depend on the man. So, leaving him was not something you do. I was also raised as once you're married, you're married for good or bad. Death do us part. When I told my family he was abusive, it was okay, it was like suck it up. Shut up. That's what you chose. So, I'm a rebel in the sense that I left him. And they did not like it. My parents were very upset with me so I was all alone trying all by myself to get out of the mess.

While it was difficult for all participants navigating complicated systems in finding safety and housing security, it was even more complicated for Runa. Immigrant women may stay in an abusive relationship for a longer period not because they are more tolerant to pain, more subservient, or less educated in comparison to the women in the host country, but because they may lack legal immigration status, lack family support, experience isolation, or have a lack of information about services for domestic violence that could assist them. Runa further commented:

I was sponsored by my ex-husband and we lived in Barrie. The rent was not too bad but it was so lonely. It was hard to make new friends or even see members of my community. When he started to beat me, I did not have anyone to tell. Even my family stayed out of it because you don't talk about it. I stayed with him because he was kind of the only person I know in Canada. I was so scared to report him because I did not have a PR. It was during the time when there was this thing with immigration when you must stay in the relationship for two years, if not you will not have your PR. I was kind of stuck for many years. For some reasons, it took like three and a half years to get the full paper. Even after my baby was born he was still very mean to me and my child. When I finally left my ex, I decided to move to Toronto. I had to stay in the shelter for many months because I could find a place to rent. I applied for housing but as you know, the waiting list is so long. The shelter worker said my file is priority but I did not get it so I stay to search for a place by myself. I was not lucky to find the place I really liked. It felt like all landlords were

all against me. They will be so nice on the phone, but the minute they see my face something will change. To be frank, I almost move back to Barrie. I thought I had made a huge mistake by leaving him. I felt guilty that my daughter I was trying to protect is living in a shelter because of me. I did not imagine it was going to be this difficult.

The diversity of our Canadian big cities attracts many marginalized women such as immigrant women. It is not hard to see that many of these women face additional discrimination due to overt and covert racism and sexism which can lead to women's inability to rent a place or even afford it. As another participant, Rita, noted:

When we were together, it was my ex who usually have to deal with the landlord, pay the rent, do any repairs, you know, that kind of stuff. Whenever we had any issue with the landlord he was always the one to speak to him man to man, so, when I was looking for a place and seeing how some landlords were just kind of looking down on me, my fear was that I will not be able to do it on my own.

The above narratives of women show that women's inability to successfully exit violent domestic situations is connected to their economic disadvantage as low-income earners; long waitlists for subsidized housing; exaggerated private market rental rates; lack of information about services for marginalized women; landlord discrimination against female-headed households; racism; and sexism. We can see that the unaffordable housing situation of survivors of domestic violence is deeply rooted in and exacerbated by their social and economic disadvantage, and reflects patriarchal culture.

Ambivalence Regarding the Shelter System as an Alternative

Some participants spoke about the importance of shelters while also acknowledging their challenges. They believe that without the support of shelters or other community agencies, accessing affordable and secure housing such as subsidized housing would have been more challenging. Rosin commented:

It sucks, but to me, the shelter system was pretty much the best option. Because like, like I had a friend, but she can't help me like, you know, I had another friend who

was couch surfing instead of going to shelter and I'm like, it's great you stay with a friend but you're not getting any help finding an apartment. You're not getting help. Shelters sucks but they helped me find my place, but for my friend, she stayed with her friend and she had a problem with her friend at the end. Shelters services are there. Like sometimes the services are there full time. And sometimes they come in like the Ontario Works worker comes in, and the housing worker comes in, sometimes the services are provided by the agency.

Some participants did not believe that shelters provide safety and security due to the temporary nature of the stay, as well as the stigma associated with being there. On one hand housing is unaffordable, and on the other hand shelters as an alternative are not very good either. Rachel expressed challenges in trusting the shelter system as a place of refuge for herself and her children.

If I knew there was some safe place, but there isn't. People would say we have shelters. But then I hear that with shelter people fight with each other and shelters, take things from each other and it always full. They said they can also send people away or report women to children's aid if they don't care for their children. No, I never got to go to the shelter. And then we have kids, two young kids, not only are you taking care of one, what's happening with together, all these strangers from different kind of life and you end up leaving the shelter with other kinds of problems like depression. Another thing that can happen if my time runs out and I don't have a place on my own with the little money they provide, I will be screwed and had to go back to him? I did not go to shelter but Legal Aid gave me all the information. They told me about housing and I did the papers work.

Shelters certainly have benefits, such as providing an immediate safe place, navigating available resources and its bureaucratic processes. It also connects survivors with services such as housing and income support. However, shelters can be challenging in regard to their temporal nature and structure. Participants shared their experiences and opinion about shelters. The findings suggest the likelihood of not having a permanent and affordable alternative at the end of the stay may result in ambivalence and hesitation about going to shelters and leaving the relationship altogether.

Although survivors were allowed to stay until they could find alternative accommodation, it is also essential to recognize the more extended stay in the shelter system may impact women negatively. In addition to housing unaffordability, other factors such as inadequate income support, lack of employment opportunity, and childcare may prompt women to end up in an extended stay, to move from one accommodation to another or worst, to return to their partner. Survivors already bear the harsh reality of abusive relationships and the challenges of exiting. Therefore, when seeking safety in terms of alternative accommodation, they need an assurance that it will be permanent, affordable and sustainable to feel the sense of security and stability wholly.

Lack of Responsive Social Services & Social Stigma

At the same time, other participants described the challenges they had with the social systems aimed at helping women. They described feeling targeted while they navigated trauma and abuse that they and their children were being subjected to. Some participants agreed that their experiences with social services negatively impacted their overall safety. Rose said:

This was about six, seven years ago. And my child was only 4 years old and was diagnosed with autism. We have special needs daycare because he couldn't fit into the program, but when I called to participate in this wraparound housing program with (agency name withheld,) you know, something that would have changed my life forever, but I couldn't go. This so-called wrap-around program will help with college tuition, the apartment is rent geared-to-income and regular childcare, everything social workers, everything's there for you. And but sorry, your child has autism we don't have the services that can support him. Because I have a child who has a special need? And they go, I am sorry that falls on a different category that we do not offer here. Yeah, well, you have the house here, like the subsidized home, you don't think you should be a little bit lenient, because it's hard for parents, especially when you have two children and one with special needs and facing abusive husband. They don't always think about this stuff when they are creating dumb policies. I was really sad.

Rosa described her experience with Children's Aid Services and how the services aimed at assisting can end up hurting you instead. Rosa said:

They will call Children's Aid on you. And then when going into the shelter you're going there to be protected, that somebody is going to be understanding towards you. But they are very punitive there as they call Children's Aid, and you're there to get some assistance. But what kind of assistance are you getting when Children's Aid is now on your back? I know sometimes the help that's out there, people would rather stay in the abuse, because the people who are providing the service, I don't know if they're not trained, they're not trained enough, or they don't have the empathy that they're supposed to have. But some people would rather just stand the abuse because they end up walking into abusive system, the same system that is supposed to protect you.

Rachel also described the stigma of living in subsidized housing:

But there was also a lot of stigma. Like when you get on a bus, people don't like when you live in this neighborhood, there's a little bit of stigma, like even on your resume, like using this address, you know, it's not a little bit so long. Yeah. So that's, like, you know, right, I can afford me know, my resume has this. When you're in the teachers' lounge, and they're having lunch, And sometimes the things that they say about the students in the neighborhood you live in is demoralizing. They put you and your children under a magnifying glass. Yeah. They see children from certain neighborhoods like differently than other children. Like Children's Aid is on you. Your OW worker is on you. If you are not working and your children are in daycare they give you three months at the most to look for a job, and if you don't get a job they are very quick to remove your children from the daycare. When you find a job, you are put back on the waitlist only to lose the job because you have nobody to watch your kids. It is such as circle and you start asking if it was a right decision to leave him.

Social programs and service providers are integral to a survivor's perception of what is possible when deciding to leave. A number of my participants expressed challenges dealing with services such as Children's Aid and Ontario Works. These challenges occurred because the survivor's ambivalence to leaving the relationship was interpreted as a distinct or individual deficiency, without having a deeper understanding of the systemic factors impacting their decision. For example, a survivor who is awaiting immigration approval conditional on the partner's continued financial support and is unemployed due to family responsibility, and lack of

family support shows individual barriers that intersect with more considerable structural obstacles that may prevent her from leaving. Therefore, a more responsive social service that understands both interpersonal and structural factors that are beyond the individual, is needed to understand women's decision and capacity to leave abusive relationships.

Systemic Racism

Participants also described the challenges they faced when searching for affordable or private rental units. Rachel said:

I remember when I was getting my first place. And the list went on and on. That was my first time moving out from my parents' house. And I went to fill out all these applications because I was working at a decent full-time job. But I didn't understand why they were asking questions like do you use curry? Or what the question meant. Now I know all these racial undertone questions and biases but then I didn't. I don't think they still ask all these sorts of questions. This was in the 90s. And I didn't understand what those questions were there for. I understand it now. Because I was so young. But that's a way of finding out your culture, your background. They asked just specific questions. And they determine whether or not they give you the house.

Another participant described her experience in finding a place only to be left in the dark.

Rosa commented:

They still do it. They still do it now because I also remember when I was looking, I spoke to this landlord and he said come and look at it, the place, and may as well bring the down payment. He gives me the address and I got there nobody opened the door. I called the phone and nobody answered. So, there's no discrimination? Yeah, there is. When I got home I had my friend, I am like, can you call and check if the place was still available? So, she called like she just wanted to know if the basement apartment was still available and they said it was. I was surprised but not surprised. How can you explain that?

Although housing discrimination against women who are visible minorities is usually covert, participants described overt racism and racially motivated stereotypes in their housing experiences. This is disturbing not merely because it is overt; instead, it is harmful and can

impact some survivors' feeling of self-worth and confidence in their ability to leave the relationship and to independently manage their rental. Secondly, whether or not the women can find another rental and eventually leave the abusive relationship, the damaging and shameful act of racism has already occurred. This ultimately may leave survivors to question the Canadian agenda of multiculturalism and mutual respect regardless of ethnicity or gender; especially immigrant women who arrive hoping for a better life, expecting in good faith that their rights as women and as human beings will be protected.

Factors Considered While Leaving Abusive Relationships

Personal and children's safety

For all participants, the need for safety and security, for themselves and their children, was at the forefront of their decision-making even when access to housing proved to be challenging. Rose reflected on her experience of contemplating leaving:

I did not have any money except my little savings but then, that wasn't going to pay for my first month rent let alone my last month deposit. When I went to the shelter, the worker helped me to get social assistance but it was not even enough to rent two bedrooms. Not having enough money was challenging but you know, I could not stay any longer this time. It was like he did not care about what happened to the kids and the kids were not happy because he will sometimes beat me in front of them. In the situation I was in, if anybody said if you leave tomorrow, I will give you a place to stay, I would say, why not today? Tomorrow is too far, tomorrow might be too late for me and the kids. The shelter was saving for me even though it had its own challenges but at least I know I was safe.

Children in Canadian society have the right to live in a safe home however, not all children experience the same level of safety due to domestic violence. It was evident based on participants' account that children's safety impacted their decision to leave the relationship. It is also essential to understand survivors may also stay in the situation to protect their children from abuse, for example, when there is a threat to children if the woman attempts to leave or the

woman cannot adequately provide and protect the children from systemic and institutional violence such as homelessness, deportation and abject poverty. Understanding these contradicting factors is critical in policy and service provision. Service providers such as Children's Aid also need to acknowledge this contrast and support parent and children instead of punishing survivors by taking their children away because they could not protect them.

Being strategic & developing a plan

Women noted that their lengthy decision-making process should not be interpreted as an unwillingness or lack of motivation to leave but rather as a process of strategizing a way out that would not lead to homelessness. For instance, Rosin, who participated in the focus group, noted:

You know, every time you try to get out or even think about getting out, you have to think about many things. I don't want to be homeless or end up with mental health issues because, if you don't make a proper plan, like housing plan, you end up putting yourself or family in a very bad situation. Like, when I left the first time, I learnt my lesson not to jump without plan because if you do, your risk become higher and all that effort become almost a waste of time.

Rose, a focus group participant said:

Yeah, like it just doesn't work. You got to take the bull by the horn. Like it might make you stay longer, but you know, when it is well planned your chances of succeed is higher. Like me I have to pretend to be dumb to save some money for my first and last month rent. Listen, I know is dangerous crisis and if you must leave immediately you have to, but if that means going to shelter so be it, but it is always good to have a plan.

Another focus group participant, Rosa elaborated:

Like, I get the apprehension about going to shelters like, like thinking you are homeless and all that. Shelters have their own bad side and their own agenda, but when people cannot get a place to escape violence, you know it is there. So, when you have to leave immediate, that become an option but first you have to plan for it, know the telephone number to call but some people, they don't know who to call to get into a shelter. These are all the things that I have to deal with. If you don't have a shelter to go to or if you can't afford your place while you're dealing with someone abusive, you are kind of trapped.

In my individual interview with Rachel, she spoke at length about her desperation to find a safe place while navigating a tumultuous and complicated relationship with her ex. She said:

OK, so he started drinking heavily, okay, but through the first four years I was with him he rarely hit me but was cursing and controlling. I knew his triggers. I knew what not to say, right? I knew exactly how to work around his anger. When he is a certain mood I just take a walk until he calms down. Okay. I would say, I know how to keep myself safe. But by the end, I got tired of it. I didn't care anymore. And because before, if he is drinking for example, alcohol drinks, he says you'd sit right here. I would have to sit here, have a drink. Even if I wanted or not I would have to, you know. I sit there just to have peace. I know how hard it was to be out there without a place to live so I just put up with him. But when I became so tired I did not care anymore. He will say something or swear at me, I would swear back, then he knew something was going on and the beating was now becoming too serious. He would lock me in the house I couldn't leave. If he had that opportunity, he would kill me, he even said. If I can't have you no one else could, that's where it was like, whoa, wait a minute, if I don't leave now he will kill me. But I did not want shelter. So, what I did was to pretend to be, you know, humble again to limit the beating to be safe. Before I finally left him, I had a job. I was working in a restaurant as a waitress where he was working as a cook. So, he knew exactly what I was being paid or how much money was coming. Also, he didn't exactly know all my tips. I pretend I don't know how to get good tips so I wasn't getting enough tips. But what happened was actually I was saving the money. I opened an account, TD account. And I saved about, I think it was \$4,000 or something. Once I had that, I knew that would be enough for this first and last. Second get Ontario Works. I knew I would not be able to still have the job because it was with my ex-husband, like at the same place. And then once I got all that figured out, I left. He talked to the manager which was his best friend and the manager fired me. And he goes, I think it's time, beautiful you go back to your husband and be a good wife.

It was evident that women face considerable challenges and consider many factors while leaving an abusive relationship. Nonetheless, survivors will do everything they can to ensure their personal and children's safety. Some participants engaged in changing their behaviour until they could afford to move. Some sought shelter support and were connected with available resources; however, few participants were apprehensive about shelter. The doubt was not due to lack of motivation, but because leaving did not guarantee protection if survivors cannot obtain alternative accommodation that is safe, affordable and sustainable when they leave.

Recommendations

More shelters or alternative/transitional housing

Uncertain housing conditions in combination with other institutional and financial challenges played a greater role in participants' decision-making processes. Participants talked about their hope for safety and freedom while leaving their relationship, however, their experience with long waitlists for subsidized housing, and being targeted by social services and Children Aid were big challenges to their sense of freedom. Nonetheless, participants attested that affordable housing/subsidized housing and the shelter system was foundational to their ability to heal and rebuild their lives. One participant expressed the need for more shelter or alternative housing options to help women navigate their leaving process. Rita noted:

I think there should also be more shelter, more money for women to pay rent. Yes, you need shelters, but there also should be more transitional housing, like, temporary like, because the waiting list for this type of housing that's geared-to-income is over 10 years long. And the market rents are so expensive, that a family that's been through trauma, a shelter stay of six months is not enough to get them on their feet. You know what I mean, and so, like, a transitional housing of two or three years.

Based on participants' account, there is great need for more subsidized housing, increased housing allowances and different housing choices that reflect the diverse need of women who need them.

Changes in the current affordable housing policy for abused women

Participants described how affordable housing policies hinder upward mobility for survivors of domestic violence. Rosa said:

The second barrier sometimes is that when you're working, and they want you to pay 30% of your income, irrespective of how many people you're feeding with that money, right. So those two policies can be a hindrance. I don't have a problem with

30% of your income, okay, I think it should be on the net and not the gross. But at the same time, even when it's on the gross, like, you're not always better off. Okay, so like, with each promotion I got my rent went up. And it hurt and especially hurt the last time because the last time was a funny thing, where I went into another tax bracket, and my rent went up. And so, 30% actually became up to 54% of my net. It was just hard on me financially because I did not have any other support. I know it's still a privilege to be able to work but I will say it would be easier on survivors, like when you look at the waiting list, and you look about moving people out of housing, like Toronto's kind of a unique situation, because it's harder now for a down payment in Toronto, it's almost unrealistic for middle-class people, far less poor people. But when you get outside of Toronto, and you talk about rent guaranteed income, that if you were to do it on 30% of net, people would actually have the opportunity to save for a down payment, and move out and give that unit to someone else. Right. And so, I think like, you know, it's a hard thing to complain about when so many people have it much worse. But in terms of the waiting list, and in terms of looking at moving, that I think the small change of moving from gross to net, would actually impact that waiting list. That's my opinion.

Rosin noted:

See, that's a hard one. Because, again, where we live is kind affordable, they take 30% of what you make, which is okay, I understand. But you can't save. You make money, the more you make money, it's always 30%, which means you can't save, and how can you move on?

This participant also described the financial struggles she had balancing her housing allowance, child tax benefit and her basic need to cover her rent only to be targeted by social services. Rita commented:

Again, if you're on Ontario Works, they won't give you money until they know you have a place. But the landlord won't give you a place if you don't have the income. Does that make sense? So, for example, before I moved in here, I had this apartment, it was a two-bedroom apartment. It cost me \$1100 but Ontario Works is \$1000, like everything including basic needs. So, I used baby bonus to cover the rent and buy food. I had to make it work, right? But then Ontario Works worker was not happy with me, she kept suspecting me of doing something like cheating because they're like, we're giving you \$1000 and your rent is thousand, plus you've got utilities, plus, you got food. Where are you getting this money? Which, I said, baby bonus is not for that. Baby bonus is for keeping children well. Am I not using it for the children by putting a roof over their head? But the question was not like, oh, you have this really high rent because you have a large family, let's help you, but no, they want to come do home visit because my rent was high. They go, you

better find something that is cheap and good. But how are you going to find anything cheaper when you are ... a single mom, three kids.

Rita continued:

And then when you go to certain apartments or even living in a house, if you rent in a house, the landlord group landlady they live in the same place, but then they get upset because the kids are making noise. And if you live in an apartment, then they want first and last. And they want to know your employment. And they want to know this and that. But you don't have employment because you got the kids and you are home with an abusive partner who does nothing to support you. So then the worker tells you gotta get subsidized, but just to be subsidized, you need a job. But if you get a job, you can be missing hours, because [child care]. So, it's always something that makes you either lose your job, or subsidy or lose your house. And it never works again.

My findings indicate that many women and their children are forced to make the ultimate sacrifices of abandoning their family home in search of safety and security from an abusive partner. Nonetheless, finding a safe and affordable place to live in a city like Toronto continues to pose a tremendous challenge to women's ability to leave their relationship. Though women may seek support from family members and the shelter system to navigate the different interlocking systems, shelters are also limited in space and do not provide stability or long-term safety. All my research participants indicated that one of the most important factors in their decision to remain in their relationship was housing affordability. Not being able to afford a place of their own was extremely stressful and concerning due to the risk they would need to take, only to possibly return to their partner because they could not afford to pay for a place of their own.

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter discusses the research findings regarding the role of affordable housing in a survivor's decision to leave abusive relationships. This involves analysis through a critical feminist and intersectionality lens, and will explore implications on survivors, social services and affordable housing policy. This is important because it allows us to understand the differences between how housing inequality impacts different people from different social locations, and different categories of identity. Domestic violence continues to pose a threat to women worldwide and women are still often blamed for not leaving the abusive situation, instead of blaming systemic factors which make it hard for women to leave such relationships.

The majority of those impacted by gender-based violence are women. Therefore, it is critical to understand that the overrepresentation of women as victims and on affordable housing waitlists is influenced by several factors that are beyond individual control, such as the overall unaffordability of housing in Toronto. As such, the combined problem of violence against women and housing insecurity needs to be viewed beyond just being an “individual problem”. For instance, perpetrators, discriminatory landlords, and a generally unaffordable housing market are also key aspects of broader patriarchal social dynamics in which survivors continue to face oppressive barriers, often leaving them in abusive situations instead of helping them to move beyond that (Duncan, 1994). Walby (1990) also offers insights into how patriarchy manifests in different domains of our society, including:

- The household (unpaid domestic labor performed by women)
- The labor market (women covert exclusion of certain types of work and wage discrimination)

- The patriarchal state (systematic bias favoring men in the realm of public policies)
- Male violence against women.

Each of these domains also contains added sets of social relations such as gender, class and ethnicity, according to Walby (1994). Such factors all contribute to the social and economic limitations and material advantages for women, which impose severe constraints when they are trying to exit an abusive relationship.

I engaged six participants in Toronto, who are survivors of domestic violence, to examine if the prospect of having a safe and affordable alternative place to live influenced their decisions to leave their respective relationships. The findings were not surprising, for several reasons. Though the sample size of my research was small and focused only on Toronto, it was evident that women's vulnerability to domestic violence, and their difficulty in leaving such violent relationships, involved more than just individual factors. Systemic factors, such as the lack of affordable housing; the comparative economic disadvantage of women in the labour market; and inadequate social support also impacted women in their efforts to leave. As explained by Choice and Lamke (1997) the two fundamental questions women ask themselves when planning to leave an abusive relationship is, "Will my situation be better?", and "Can I do it?" (p. 249). According to Anderson and Saunders (2003), housing was said to be instrumental in these questions. My participants also considered these to be fundamental questions.

The findings of my own research are therefore consistent with existing literature that explores the relationship between affordable housing and survivors of domestic violence. This work reaffirms that access to stable and affordable housing is paramount to women's ability to leave, heal and rebuild their lives after abuse (Ponic et al, 2011).

In addition to fear, shame, lack of family support, financial dependence and the desire to maintain a family unit for the sake of their children, the most common factor among all participants in their decision to leave was their inability to secure safe and affordable alternative housing. All participants agreed that the lack of affordable rental units, and low financial means to sustain market-rate rental payments played a tremendous role in their decision-making process. Without an affordable place to live, their recourse was to remain in their abusive relationship at the cost of the health and safety of their children and themselves.

Another significant barrier to exiting an abusive relationship was the process of searching and obtaining affordable accommodation. Participants described their experiences in searching for apartments or a house to rent as discouraging, frightening, discriminatory and disempowering. Participants who are a visible minority also described their experience of sexism and racism from landlords, as well as systemic discrimination in the housing market. Though all participants currently live in affordable accommodation, they expressed housing-related stresses in their decision-making process, as well as in searching, obtaining and sustaining a place to live after they had made their decision to leave. There are a number of implications that arise from these findings.

Implications

Housing Affordability

The new Toronto housing market analysis report by the Affordable Housing Office which aimed to inform current and future long-term housing programs, found that:

- low-income households are struggling within the current Toronto Housing Market.

- the current housing market is failing to meet the housing needs of Torontonians, especially those within the low-income bracket.
- 87% or 122, 250 households in the private rental market, with annual incomes of \$30,000, spend more than 30% of their earnings on housing. (Toronto Housing Market Analysis, 2019).

Although this is not new information, it is highly significant given that a large number of the low-income population is comprised of female-headed single-parent households who are survivors of domestic violence (Toronto Housing Market Analysis, 2019, p. 16).

It was evident in the literature review, as well as in my participants' accounts, that many survivors are not able to rent a place without any external financial support. The social positioning of women and their relative economic disadvantage in society made it harder for women to rent within the current housing market, and therefore influenced them to opt for subsidized housing along with thousands of other people on waiting lists, who may also be women and other marginalized individuals. As such, a gender-based perspective on women's experiences of housing inequality is vital to improving social services and improving housing policies meant to assist women fleeing domestic violence.

For instance, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) defines housing to be affordable when it costs less than 30% of a household's gross income (CMHC March 31, 2018). Looking at the experiences of survivors, we can say that this definition of affordability is not consistent with their experiences and capacity. A higher income or dual moderate-income household may comfortably afford to spend 30% or more of their income on housing without it negatively impacting their quality of living. However, survivors who become single sole-support parents may not have any income due to childcare responsibilities and therefore may need to

continue depending upon their partner for shelter and basic needs. Additionally, survivors may not be able to maintain fixed employment due to constant moves. They may also lose jobs and accommodation due to partner violence and harassment. In a situation where survivors seek social assistance, the shelter allowance does not cover the entire cost of rent, therefore, leaving women to either use their basic needs funds or settle for smaller or inadequate housing rental. Also, even in situations where survivors may have some form of employment and live in subsidized housing, the 30% gross income policy is applied without any consideration to the number of people that income must support. Such lack of attention to critical details reflects the fundamental question of, "Will I be better off?".

It was evident in the findings that this lack of attention to critical details inhibits women's ability to leave, heal, and develop a healthier partnership in future. It creates a lack of confidence in their ability to survive without their spouse, sometimes causing them to return to their abusive partner. It interferes with women's ability to move beyond survival mode. And in some cases, it may hinder women's ability to participate in society as confident, independent individuals.

Social Services

As previously stated, victims of domestic violence may remain in an abusive situation, not for lack of motivation, but because of a lack of adequate social support. While programs and services such as shelters, transitional housing and income support programs may help survivors after leaving abusive relationships, most survivors may lack awareness of any existing support while they are still living with an abusive partner.

Some participants did seek shelter support and, for them, they said the shelter provided an alternative and immediate safe place to live. But for other participants, the shelter did not

guarantee safety and stability in the long run, due to their temporary nature and due to inadequate social service supports beyond the shelter.

Some participants also described some social service agencies and child protection services to be discriminatory and lacking empathy or understanding of the physical, mental, and economic impacts of domestic violence on women. According to participants, some service providers were only fixated on the fact that emergency shelter was available to take them in, and did not necessarily see the other multiple factors hindering their ability to exit their abusive relationship.

For marginalized women such as immigrants, the situation is even worse. The fear of losing their legal immigration status, lack of awareness of social services, social isolation, and racism also hinders them from leaving abusive situations, and also magnifies their experience of housing unaffordability and instability.

To successfully exit domestic violence, there is a need for practical and holistic responses, as well as a shift in systemic and service provision. For example, the housing market is inflated because our society sees housing as a commodity to be profited from rather than a place of dwelling which is essential for a human being. Unfortunately, survivors are caught within this web and cannot compete due to their economic disadvantage. Social programs designed to provide social safety nets such as income support or subsidized housing are either inadequate or lack gender-based understanding. For immigrant women, they may require additional eligibility requirements such as valid or permanent immigration status for some income support programs. This overlapping barrier increases housing insecurity, isolation and women may feel they will never be able to leave the situation.

While programs and services such as shelters may support survivors, leaving an abusive relationship requires support beyond shelter walls. Adequate support is needed to build women's capacity for their upward mobility. These supports may include employment opportunities, education, childcare, counselling, legal assistance and increased income support. Secondly, there is a need for service providers to engage in advocacy on behalf of survivors and to ensure that programs and services are accessible to all survivors despite their status.

The research shows that effective social programs can significantly benefit women and may impact women's decision and ability to exit abusive relationships, however, their negative experience with such program or service providers can alter their response to the abusive relationship. Factors such as safety planning, counselling, income support programs, newcomer services, job searches, and physically moving out of the home, as well as survivors' confidence in these services, is significantly important. Social services and providers must stop simplifying the act of leaving an abusive relationship by highlighting the psychological or emotional factors and paying less attention to the systemic and practical concerns. When we have the opportunity to support a survivor of domestic violence, whether as policymakers, service providers, counsellors, friends, and family, we need to start asking the right questions; and not why they stayed or are still living in the relationship, but what kind of support they need that will enable them to find a safer, affordable and sustainable place to live.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

Leaving an abusive relationship is a tough decision and an uneasy process for many survivors, especially when they cannot afford a safe, affordable alternative place to live. The aim of this research was to engage participants to explore whether having affordable housing influences a survivor's decision to leave an abusive relationship. As such, this research examined challenges participants faced in searching, obtaining and sustaining affordable housing. The overall goal was to illuminate survivors' voices and, based on participants' experiences, to compile a comprehensive list of recommendations to present to housing policymakers. The objective of the recommendations is to improve housing policies for all survivors of domestic violence who find themselves in the difficult situation of needing to obtain safe, affordable alternative housing.

As a Community Action Research (CAR) project, six survivors of domestic violence were fully engaged in this research process to share their experiences and their valuable knowledge about the lack of safe and affordable housing in Toronto, and how that impacts women's abilities to leave an abusive relationship. In this it was essential to highlight survivors' voices, and directly bring their knowledge to the attention of housing stakeholders and policymakers.

These research findings confirmed that, although women may stay with abusive partners due to factors such as economic dependency, fear, shame, and lack of family or social support, the major concern for women is where and how they can afford a roof over their head if they do leave. Leaving an abusive relationship without any guaranteed safe and permanent housing is stressful and overwhelming for survivors, especially when finances are unstable and precarious in terms of sustaining market rental payments. These and other factors can force women to remain in abusive relationships longer than they would have or should have stayed, and

consequently, create both physical and mental exhaustion for survivors. It was evident that the longer women stayed in their abusive relationships, the harder it became for them to leave, based on their consideration that they might not be better off facing the very real insecurities described.

However, it was also evident in the findings that survivors will do everything possible, and use various strategies, in order to secure alternative housing if their children's physical safety is jeopardized. Some women sought support from a shelter, from friends or family. Nonetheless, the majority of marginalized women faced multiple and overlapping challenges that hindered their ability to exit abusive relationships successfully. Therefore, there remains a need for affordable housing policies and social services that take into consideration the economic insecurity of women in society.

Participants were asked of the changes to policy and social services they wanted to see, based on their experiences. They suggested an increase in the amount of housing allowance for survivors that fully covers a market rental unit. This is especially important given the long waitlists for all types of subsidized housing. Though participants also acknowledged the current provision that allows a priority posting for survivors, adequately housing such priority applicants can still take a minimum of six months. Therefore, with an increase in shelter allowance that covers the entirety of their rent, women would be able to rent within the private market, and that would eliminate the need for extended stays in shelters, while waiting for a vacancy to open up within subsidized housing complexes.

There is also a need for more public education on domestic violence, specifically on how it is not women's fault that they are being abused. This is important, as it may also help to reduce the shame and guilt that such women often face, and empower them to seek help to leave their relationships. Hence, every agency that provides support services for women should be educated

on how to watch out for the signs that an abused woman is in need of particular types of additional supports. Subsequently, such agencies should also emphasize educating such survivors on the range of services available to them, so that such women may make an informed decision without being unfairly limited by immediate bureaucratic constraints. Such information may include the different types of housing support available for women while in abusive relationships, as well as after leaving one. Housing information may include various housing options such as transitional, subsidized, shelter, market rate, or cooperative housing; as well as different types of housing allowances and rooming available. For immigrant and other marginalized women, it is also essential for agencies to openly discuss policies or systemic processes that may create fear, such as those involving deportation, eviction, landlord and tenants' rights, renter responsibilities, and one's right to be safe in their home. This is important because it may dispel misinformation and misconceptions that can prevent healthy, effective action among survivors. Similarly, it is also essential to educate survivors about how family court, and income support systems work.

Most importantly, the policy around housing affordability, such as charging 30% of gross income for subsidized accommodation, needs to be based on individual family size and needs, and not based on a generalized definition of affordability. Housing policymakers therefore need to be more cognizant of the various types of insecurity facing survivors of domestic violence, and make a commitment to develop housing policies and programs that meet the needs of such women, and support them better in leaving abusive relationships, sooner rather than later.

It is also essential to point out some limitations and opportunities from this study. Although all participants have left behind their abusive relationships for at least a year, it was emotionally draining for participants to talk about their experiences of violence. As a result, my questions were solely focused on their experiences of housing, without exploring particulars of

their experience of violence. Secondly, although six participants may be considered a rather small sample size for a major research project, those who participated were very committed to the entire research project. Everyone worked well to come up with recommendations that could potentially improve affordable housing programs for other survivors of abuse. As a survivor of domestic violence myself, this researcher was able to connect with participants in a meaningful way and, as a result, I was able to collect rich and meaningful data to contribute towards further research, my own and others'. Finally, engaging other survivors in this process was also personally empowering for both participants and me.

APPENDIX



FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS AGREEMENT AND CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF THE STUDY:

“Should I Stay or Should I Go? Examining the role of affordable housing in the lives of abused women

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this research. Before you give your consent to be a part of the research, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do, as well as the guidelines that will guide us through this process.

This consent and confirmation agreement form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done, it will describe what you will need to do to participate, as well as any risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating.

INVESTIGATOR

My name is Ms. Juliet Akhadia, I am the sole researcher of this study. This research study is being conducted as part of my graduate studies for the partial completion of Master’s degree in Social Work at Ryerson University, under the supervision of Dr. Purnima George. The main research interest is in helping to understand and improve the housing situations of women escaping domestic abuse.

Should you have any questions, concerns, or need further clarification please feel free to contact research supervisor, Dr. George (contact information below).

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY:

You are invited to participate in a research study to learn more about how a woman’s decision to leave an abusive domestic situation may be influenced by having access to alternative housing that is safe and affordable.

The main focus is to understand in what ways did housing play a role in your own decision to leave an abusive relationship. You will be asked to write down the two most important challenged that you faced. The challenges may include but not limited to finding marker rental, information about the different kinds of housing option etc.

Specifically, I am interested in knowing:

- * What kinds of challenges you experienced
- * How you addressed/navigated those challenges
- * What types of supports you accessed
- * What were the limitations of existing supports & services in relation to your housing needs;

* what your own recommendations for improvement of supports & services in relation to housing. I hope hearing directly from women who have personal, lived experience of facing such housing difficulty, and how you were able to overcome that difficulty will give an in-depth insight to how housing may impact women's ability to leave abusive relationship.

DESCRIPTION AND PROCEDURES:

I will invite 8 to 10 women to participate in a focus group. You will be asked to participate in one of two **focus groups** which will be about 2.5 hours long.

During the focus group, you will be asked a series of questions focusing on your experience of securing a safe, affordable home. The focus group discussion will be audio taped and transcribed; this is to help me ensure, when analyzing the focus group responses, that my data is accurate and complete. Be assured that all information collected during group discussion will be strictly confidential. Your name, address or other identifying information will **NOT** be collected or kept. As a part of this research we may be discussing sensitive, personal matters relating to housing. As such, mutual respect among all participants, and maintaining confidentiality of all information shared with each other, is strictly required so that everyone in the focus group can feel safe and free to share.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Participant's identity will be kept strictly confidential. Whatever is discussed in this group shall not be disclosed to anyone else. As noted above, the information will be gathered by transcribing the audio recordings from the focus group, without using any personally identifying information. Instead, participants will be assigned an pseudonym or number and be referred to that way, in order to protect their confidentiality and privacy.

The only person who will listen to the recording will be me, the researcher. Written results of this research will be stripped of any personally identifying information that will make it possible to identify you. The researcher agrees to keep confidential the identities of every group participant, and to never reveal that to anyone else

LIMIT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Given this is a focus **group**, even though the researcher will diligently follow all protocols and make full efforts to maintain your privacy, no one can guarantee 100% with absolute certainty that someone in the group will not disclose whatever information that was shared in the group. Or someone may not accidentally infer a participant's identity from reading published research results. However, that possibility is extremely small to limit that happening all participant will be required to read and sign this agreement before participating in this focus group.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you will not be paid or financially rewarded for participating in the Study. You can choose whether to be in this study or not. In the focus group, if any question makes you uncomfortable you can choose not to answer. You may also stop participating at any time, and will still receive the TTC reimbursements and other benefits described below. If you choose to stop participating during or after the focus group have stated, your data will not be removed from the study. We respect your choice of whether or not to participate, and your decisions will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University or with the researcher in any way.

AUDIO TAPING:

The focus group discussion will be audio taped, so that I can review later what has been said, and transcribe that information. After I have finished analyzing the material on the recording, the recording and the transcribes will be stored in a locked cabinet in the Social Work Dept. at Ryerson University and I will destroy the tape after the first and second reader of my MRP. This is in accordance with Ryerson University's research ethics policies.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS

I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. However, there may be some risk of potential discomfort (emotionally, psychologically) which could possibly arise during group discussion of the challenges that you have faced finding a safe place to live. As such, it may be possible that the focus group discussion could possibly trigger painful emotions or memories. To mitigate this, I will ensure to focus my questions and group discussion on the challenges around accessing affordable housing and not on the abuse. More also, if at any point you require support, I have put together a list of necessary services such as counselling you may access should you chose to and your convenient time. You are also encouraged to share only what you feel comfortable sharing and can choose not to answer any (or all) questions if you find they cause you distress. So please remember that you are free to share as much or as little of your experiences and ideas as you wish. Your participation at all times remains completely voluntary, and you can withdraw from the study at any time you choose. Another foreseeable risk is in regard to group members themselves breaking confidentiality. As investigator, I will do my utmost to ensure that the atmosphere remains friendly and safe for all participants throughout.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY:

There are no significant direct or indirect benefits to you; however, this study will provide you with:

- * List of resources you may not yet know about, including strategies to dealing with stress, and strategies for self-care.
- * an opportunity to speak about your housing experiences
- * an opportunity to network with other participants with similar experiences and provide mutual support (if you so choose);
- * An opportunity (entirely optional) to meet with a politician in charge of Canada's national housing strategy, and provide them with any list of recommendation will we put together as group.

- * In terms of indirect benefits, the results of this study may contribute to the existing knowledge, and it may inform further research by others

INCENTIVES TO PARTICIPATE:

You will **not** be paid to participate in this study. TTC tokens will be provided to cover your public transportation cost.

Light snacks will also be provided

USE OF THESE RESEARCH FINDINGS:

As part of the dissemination of the research finding, I will be requesting a meeting with a Member of Parliament (MP) who is in charge of the National Housing Strategy to present him with the list of the recommendations we will be together as a group.

This meeting is completely optional. You can choose to participate or decline and it will not impact your participation in the research study. If you want to attend the meeting, you may provide your email so that I can contact you when the exact date, time and location is known.

Below please indicate if you want to participate by check marking the box below.

Do you want to attend the meeting with an MP to present him with our list of recommendations?

Yes

No

If yes, please provide your email Address:

ACCESS TO RESEARCH PUBLICATION:

You can access the results of this research at your convenient once it become available. Below is a link to the Ryerson Digital Repository, MPR are uploaded open completion.

<https://library.ryerson.ca/info/collections-2/digital-commons>

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY:

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you should contact Ms. Juliet Akhadia (primary researcher & focus group facilitator)

Email: jakhadia@ryerson.ca.

OR

Dr. Purnima George, Associate Professor (research supervisor)

Phone: (416) 979-5000, ext. 7146

Ryerson University, School of Social Work

350 Victoria Street,

Toronto, ON, M5B 2K3

Phone: (416) 979-5000, ext. 7146

Email: p3george@ryerson.ca

This study has been reviewed by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board.

If you have further questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study, please contact:

Research Ethics Board

c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation

Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3
Phone: (416) 979-5042
Email: rebchair@ryerson.ca

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked and I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature

Date _____

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview tape-recorded.

Your Signature

Date _____

If you said “yes” to participating in a meeting with the MP, please complete below information.

I consent to participate in the meeting with an MP and my email address shall be used to contact me when the date, time and location of this meeting.

Your Signature

Date _____

FOCUSE GROUP CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT:

Your signature indicates that you agree to be in the study, and will keep confidential the identity and other information about every other group member. You agree not to reveal any information about this group, our group discussions to anyone outside this research. By signing below, you are indicating that you understand the above agreement, and that you will follow all of the specified conditions

Your Signature

Date _____

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time. I have received a copy of this form.

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Date

Name of Investigator (please print)

Signature of Investigator

Date

**VOLUNTEERS PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR A
RESEARCH STUDY TITLED:
“SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO? EXAMINING THE
ROLE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN THE LIVES OF
ABUSED WOMEN”**

ARE YOU:

A self-identified woman?

Have you survived domestic abuse and currently **not** living in any abusive relationship for at least one year?

Did you face (and overcome) housing difficulties when you left the abusive situation?

Did the availability of a safe, affordable alternative housing affect your decision (and ability) to leave?

Is your housing situation now stable and have moved on with your life?

Are you comfortable speaking about your experiences in a group setting?

If you answered yes to the above noted questions you may volunteer in this study

I am looking for 8-10 participants to volunteer in a brief study to examine how access to affordable housing affects women's decisions to leave abusive relationships.

To participate, you must not be currently living with your abusive partner

Your participation would involve a small focus group of (4-5 women and will take 2.5 hours long to confidentially discuss your housing experiences and recommendations.

Participation is completely voluntary without compensation. Discussion will be audiotaped & reviewed later by the researcher only. Any information collected is strictly confidential. There is a risk you may experience discomfort discussing the challenges you have faced. But discussion will be in a woman-only atmosphere that is safe, supportive & confidential for all participants.

This research is being done under the supervision of Dr. Purnima George as part of a requirement toward a partial completion of my M.S.W. degree and has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of Ryerson University, with a file number (REB file 2019-035).

In appreciation of your time you will receive light refreshments during the focus group, as well as TTC tokens for transportation costs.

IF INTERESTED PLEASE CONTACT:

JULIET (M.S.W. student, Ryerson School of Social Work)
PHONE: (416) 979-5000, ext. 7146
EMAIL: jdia@ryerson.ca

Research Study:
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Individual and focus group interview question guide

Questions about the self and a brief history of violence

- Tell me what you want me to know about yourself?
- Can you tell me about your relationship and your experience with domestic violence?
- When and why did you leave at the time that you did?
- what were the reasons that made you stay longer than you would have preferred?
- How have your experience been since living a life without him?
- Can you say your experiences have been different from what you expected? and how?

Housing Experience

- what is your current housing situation?
- Do you consider your current place to be safe?
- Did the prospect of having an affordable place to live influences your decision to leave the relationship?
- did not having a place to live cause you to go back to the relationship at any given time.
- What dose affordability means to you?
- what would you say makes a housing safe and affordable?
- What was your experience searching, finding, and maintaining you first rented dwelling after leaving the relationship?
- Did you ever access any shelter?
- what kinds of housing service did seek?
- how did you find out the service you used?
- Were they helpful? Why or why not?

Challenges

- Did you experience any challenges in the process of finding a new place after the abuse?
- What challenged did you face?
- please write down at least two most difficulty challenges you face after leaving the abusive situation and in relation to housing.
- what other challenges you face or still facing even after having affordable place to live?

Recommendation

- What worked and did not worked for you in terms of the current services out there for abused women

- How could services be improved to help someone who have been in your similar situation?
- What will you like housing policy maker to know about why people choose to remain in abusive situation?
- policy do want change or amend in terms of subsidizes housing
- If there is anything else that you feel is important to share or add to this conversation, you may do so now.

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