Research Article

Re-establishing Their Lives: Issues Relating to Affordable Housing for Women Escaping Violent Intimate Partner Relationships in Northern Manitoba

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Abstract: Housing affordability is a significant and growing issue across northern Manitoba communities. One population impacted by the lack of safe and affordable housing is women (and their children) leaving violent and abusive relationships. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with fourteen women staying in women's shelters in the cities of Thompson and Winnipeg, Manitoba, this research project focused on exploring the journeys women make as they seek safety and shelter for themselves and their children, and their reasons for making these transitions. The women's interviews revealed: 1) the centrality of the notion of home for women establishing safety for themselves and their children; and 2) the complex transitions and geographic moves that women make in search of the idea of home and safety. The stories of their journeys point to severe issues regarding availability of affordable, safe housing in northern Manitoba, the lack of northern transportation services to access shelters, and the significant absence of formal support on First Nation communities. The research reiterates that there is a need for proactive service responses to violence against women and children. Such a coordinated response needs to begin in the northern communities themselves, with links to regional services and supports when appropriate.

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The availability of affordable housing is a significant and growing issue across northern communities (FemNorthNet, 2012; TEDWG, 2012). Meanwhile, a recent report by Statistics Canada identifies that northern Manitoba has the second-highest rate of violence against young women and girls in northern Canada (Rotenberg, 2019). Each of these issues is a significant problem on its own. Together, the lack of health and social services and the scarcity of affordable housing means that women in northern Manitoba must travel long distances—often on limited-access roads, or by rail or expensive air travel—and make repeated moves and transitions within and between their home communities and larger urban centres (Bonnycastle et al., 2015; Rea et al., 2008; Rude & Thompson, 2001; Wuerch et al., 2019). Such transitions in search of safe housing and supportive services create a further crisis and upheaval in women's lives, often including the involvement of child protective services (Jones & Smith, 2011; Novac, 2007). For Indigenous women, these searches and transitions place them in greater danger and separate them from their families and home communities.

Through in-depth interviews with fourteen women, all of whom were mothers and thirteen of whom were Indigenous, we examined how the current lack of affordable housing and the absence of a coordinated service response in northern Manitoba affect women and their children as they escape violent relationships. The area of Manitoba that is the focus in our research and this article is defined as the region located north of the 53rd parallel, which approximates the boundaries of Treaty 5 and includes forty-two First Nations reserves, thirteen industrial towns, and fifty-six unincorporated communities (Freylejer, 2012).

The current body of literature demonstrates that women who experience violence encounter significant barriers to accessing safe and appropriate housing, especially for those living in northern communities (Bonnycastle et al., 2015; Rea et al., 2008; Rude & Thompson, 2001; Wuerch et al., 2019). Through our research, we explored how these barriers impact women from northern communities, investigating both the geographic moves women make as they seek safety and shelter for themselves and their children, and their reasons for making these transitions. We conclude this section with a brief note on our social location. All of the authors are non-Indigenous and live in Winnipeg. Two of the authors have spent considerable time living, teaching, and doing research in northern Manitoba. Three of the authors have previously done research with the women's shelter in Thompson and the lead author was also on its board for many years.

Literature Review

Though intimate partner violence (IPV) and housing insecurities are independent issues and each worthy of discussion on their own, the two are connected with violence and often play a significant role in women's experiences of homelessness (Drabble & McInnes, 2017). The threat of homelessness can be an ever-present concern in places where access to housing is, in its own right, a challenge. Understanding this complex problem in the Canadian North requires that it be explored in the context of the "unique geographic, economic, political and cultural features" of women's experiences in these communities (Moffitt et al., 2013, p. 2). For example, the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) states that understanding intimate partner violence in the North requires consideration of the "disproportionate burden of housing challenges placed on Indigenous women [due to] the long-lasting impacts of the Indian Act policies and the intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples as a consequence of violent settler colonialism" (NWAC, 2019, p. 3). Rauna Kuokkanen (2015) adds that "there is a pressing need to examine the ways in which gendered violence is explained, addressed, and often sanctioned in Indigenous communities" (p. 272). Further, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls noted that safe housing is an essential part of any plans to address violence against Indigenous women and girls (NIMMIWG, 2019). Such actions would strengthen gender and housing as central cores in the move towards *mitho-pimatisiwin*, a "northern Woodland Cree term that means 'the good life,' in reference to the overall quality of life or well-being that is culturally embedded in a northern way of life" (Beatty & Weber-Beeds, 2013, p. 113).

Domestic Violence in the North

Few studies have explored intimate partner violence in the northern and rural context (Dreaddy, 2002; Peek-Asa et al., 2010; Rotenberg, 2019; Wickham, 2013; Wuerch et al., 2019). In Canada, women in rural and northern locations experience more instances of physical violence, more severe physical violence, and higher rates of psychological abuse, and are at greater risk for intimate partner homicide than women in urban communities (Hampton, 2015; NCCAH, 2009; Peek-Asa et al., 2010; Wuerch et al., 2019). There are several reasons for this increased rate of victimization outlined in the literature, including increased access to firearms, lack of affordable transportation, lack of formal support services, issues with access to shelters and transition houses, lack of employment or educational opportunities, isolation, gender inequalities, the complexity of community and family dynamics, and the unwillingness of communities to view domestic violence as a problem deserving attention (Goudreau, 2011; NCCAH, 2009; Nixon et al., 2015; NWAC, 2019).

Moffitt and Fikowski (2017) describe a culture of "violence and silence" that women in rural and northern communities experience, where violence is "almost expected and accepted" as a part of family life (p. 25–26). Cultural and social beliefs about relationships and family dynamics, non-interference by outside parties in perceived family-matters, and the role of men in relationships and the household are part of a complex system of values that often discourage women from seeking support (RESOLVE, 2015; Wuerch et al., 2019). There are also concerns about confidentiality and the lack of anonymity of support services in small communities. Women may be reluctant to access resources, either because of their own or their abuser's connection to the service provider or because of an abuser's connection to those in positions of power or influence in the community (Goudreau, 2011). In terms of Indigenous women's experiences, secure connection to family and community can be both sustaining as well as constraining in complicated ways (Wendt & Zannettino, 2015), and ongoing colonialism and dispossession are contributing factors in such narratives (Holmes & Hunt, 2017).

Getting to Shelter

Women also face additional geographic barriers to accessing services in rural and northern locations. For example, of the sixty-three distinct First Nations communities in Manitoba, there are only five federally funded, on-reserve women's shelters (Barghout, 2020). Wuerch et al. (2019) highlight some of the critical issues with transportation in northern communities, where the existence of roads can be seasonal, road conditions can depend on weather conditions, and access to public transportation is limited. Communities with limited road access may only have the expensive option of air travel. As such, those who do not have access to a vehicle or the finances needed to purchase other transportation may be unable to leave a community to escape domestic violence (Wuerch et al., 2019). The timeliness of transportation is also a concern as women residing in remote, fly-in communities may need to wait days for transportation, or for service providers such as police and first responders (Shepherd, 2001; Wuerch et al., 2019). There is always a concern for the safety of women when they call for assistance or transportation, and while they wait for it to arrive (Moffitt et al., 2013; Shepherd, 2001).

On-Reserve Housing

Housing is a problem for Indigenous people, both on- and off-reserve, and housing insecurity is an additional challenge that Indigenous women face when leaving abusive relationships (NWAC, 2019; Yerichuk et al., 2016). The "quality, safety and affordability" of on-reserve housing is a particularly pressing issue, as the demand for housing increases faster than construction can meet either the need for renovations or the need for new housing (Gaetz et al., 2014, p. 34). The minimal priority given to First Nations on-reserve housing is clear, evidenced by the lack of plumbing and electricity, poor insulation, mould, substandard construction, and lack of repairs (Belanger et al., 2012). Patrick (2014) connects these issues to financial challenges faced by many Indigenous households, noting that one-third of on-reserve households who were living in unacceptable housing did not have sufficient income to access better options. The combined effects of substandard housing, lack of financial resources, and a general shortage of housing units contribute to overcrowding and families moving off-reserve (Belanger et al., 2012).

Matrimonial Real Property Act

The lack of housing available in most reserve communities also has a gendered dynamic. In the past, women trying to secure their own houses were held back by the lack of federal and provincial legal clarity regarding marital real property on reserve (Canada, 2003). For example, under the federal *Indian Act,* provincial and territorial laws regarding marital property do not apply on reserve land. Moreover, until recently, the *Indian Act* did not have specific provisions of its own on the issue (Joseph, 2018; Kelm & Smith, 2018). Therefore, housing policy was often left to local (often male-dominated) First Nation council decisions—situations that often left women in an unclear position regarding their rights to housing (NWAC, 2007). As Eberts (2017) states:

> A woman leaving an abusive marriage usually could not get her own reserve residence. Unless they could move in with another on-reserve family member, she and her children would have to leave the reserve, another instance of exile and family fragmentation being caused by the *Indian Act*. (p. 84)

The federal *Family Homes on Reserves and Matrimonial Interests or Rights Act*, known as the *Matrimonial Real Property Act* (MRPA), came into effect in December 2014. It replaced archaic parts of the *Indian Act*. The MRPA applies to all common-law or married couples who live on a reserve, where at least one partner is a member of the First Nation (NALMA, 2017; NWAC, 2015). In other words, it refers to a house or land that a couple occupies, or benefits from, when they are or were married or in a common-law relationship. The Act provides rights and protections to individuals living on reserve regarding the family home during a relationship and in the event of a relationship breakdown or death of a spouse

or common-law partner (Fiser & Pendakur, 2018). Under this statute, each First Nation can create their own matrimonial real property law, but until they do, the new federal Act applies.

A key concern here with this new legislation is the lack of accompanying community supports and financial provisions needed to provide women with legal recourse for interim possession of an on-reserve home. For example, a woman may be able to get a restraining order against an abusive partner but she is not able to get exclusive possession of the marital home unless she is already the sole person on the certificate of possession (Patrick, 2014). Such examples led us to include a question regarding the possible effects of the new federal legislation on the lives of the women we interviewed.

It was clear after completing the literature review that there was a strong need to further build on the link between intimate partner violence and housing insecurities in northern Manitoba. It was also clear that this research should focus on the issue through the voices of the women directly affected. The next section briefly states how we went about doing that.

Methodology

To understand women's experiences with housing and their experiences of abuse in northern Manitoba, we conducted a qualitative study that used Cyndy Baskin's medicine wheel (2007) as a conceptual framework to collect and analyze data (see Figure 1). Baskin's original work focused on structural determinants as the causes of homelessness amongst Indigenous youth in Toronto. Following her success, we thought a similar cultural-based methodology could be used as a tool to research experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) and housing insecurity and instability in northern Manitoba. Applying the medicine wheel allowed us to focus our interview questions on the four directions; looking back to the participant's past challenges and barriers in attempts to create and sustain safe housing, and then shifting direction to ask about their present experiences with their partners and their future hopes and dreams for themselves and their children.

We developed an extensive literature review (Groening et al., 2019), completed demographic information, and conducted semi-structured interviews with fourteen women from northern Manitoba communities who were residing in women's shelters in two urban centres—Winnipeg, a large urban city in southern Manitoba with an approximate population of 750,000, and Thompson, an industrial mining town in northern Manitoba with an approximate population of 12,000.

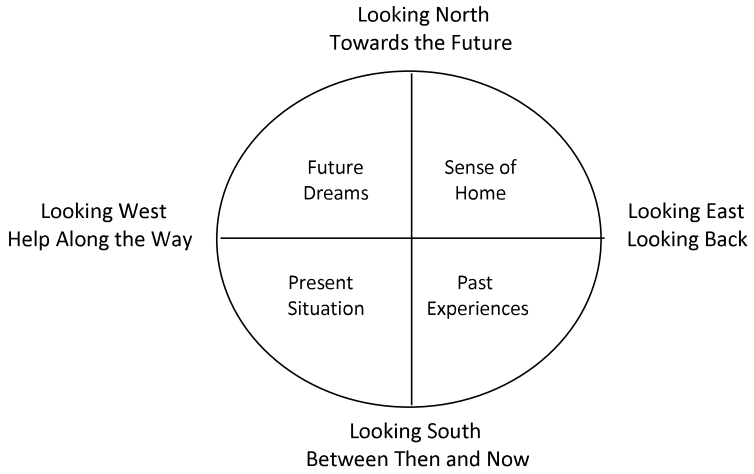

Figure 1. Medicine Wheel research, adapted from Baskin (2007)

A group orientation to the research project was set up at each of the shelters. At those meetings, we discussed with the women the intent of the project, what was required of them, and the informed consent process and honorarium. With the help of agency staff, individual interviews were set up with those women interested in participating further in the study. Child-care services were offered during the interviews. The women were shown the medicine wheel diagram and asked a series of in-depth and open-ended questions relating to areas that followed each of its four directions (Baskin, 2007). This orientation helped to focus the interview on prominent areas of the woman's life: the sense of home, past experiences, present situation, and future dreams. In this way, the medicine wheel methodology served as a structure for analysis.

Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and entered into a qualitative computer analysis program (NVivo 11) by a trained research assistant. The four themes of the interview questions (sense of home, past experiences, current situation, and future dreams) guided the initial coding of the interview content. Additional preliminary codes and categories were identified by reading each of the transcripts (i.e., first-level coding). Data placed into each of these broad codes were then reviewed to identify themes within the large coding categories. The codes and categories were compared continuously and developed through a fluid and circular process whereby incidents were compared to each category and previous incidents (Keddy et al., 1996), thereby further developing relationships and themes in the data. Finally, the broader research team reviewed the coding to identify additional vital codes, themes, and relationships. In order to ensure

anonymity, participant names were replaced with a number and the location of the interview.

Results

The participant demographics are summarized in Table 1. The average age of participants was twenty-eight years, and 93% came from a First Nation community. In addition, the demographics highlight that all participants had children, ranging from one child to eight, with the average number being three. Twenty-three children accompanied their mother to the shelter, and three of the participants were pregnant at the time of the interview, which reaffirms the need to consider children as an integral part of any interventions for women experiencing intimate partner violence in northern Manitoba. We speak more to this relationship below.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participant age	Mean age: 28 years (SD=6.9; Range=40)
Ethnic background	Indigenous: 13 (93%)
Community of origin	10 Northern Manitoba First Nations communities
Children & pregnancy	Participants had 1–8 children (Mean 3; SD=1.9) Children's age: Ranged from < 1 year (4) to 16 years or over (6) Accompanied mothers to shelter: 23 (Mean 1.6; Range 4) Pregnant at the time of interview: 3
Education	Less than a high school diploma: 7 (50%) High school diploma: 3 (21.4%) Some post-secondary: 2 (14.3%) University degree: 2 (14.3%)
Work experience at the time of the interview	Worked in the past: 12 (86%) Less than one-year work experience: 7 (50%) Currently in full-time paid job: 5 (35.7%) Unemployed: 9 (64.3%)
Income in last year	< $ 5,000: 6 (43%) $5,000–$9,999: 3 (21%) $10,000–$14,999: 5 (36%) For comparison, the Market Basket Measure (MBM) threshold for rural Manitoba was $38,185 in 2018
Abusive partner relationship	Common-law husband: 6 Married partner: 2 Ex-boyfriend: 3 Boyfriend: 2 "Other" (casual or dating relationship): 1
Length of time with abusive partner	2 years or less: 1 (7%) 3-4 years: 1 (7%) 5-6 years: 5 (36%) 7-8 years: 2 (14%) 9-10 years: 2 (14%) 11 or more years: 3 (22%)

The following sections focus on the women's stories, each section using one of the four directions of the medicine wheel methodology (Baskin, 2007).

1. Sense of Home

The first set of interview questions asked the women to reflect on what the word "home" meant to them and what communities and experiences are connected to their idea of being home. Four main themes emerged, revealing that participants describe "home" as more than just "four walls and a roof"—it is connected to family, community, culture, and safety.

Home Is Where Family Is

The importance of family connections was found throughout the responses to our first set of interview questions. Two participants spoke of positive childhood memories of home, where they felt safe and cared for by their caregivers. Eleven others connected their idea of home to being with family; as one participant stated: "Home, to me means having your own place with your family. To be safe. Just to have your family around. I guess, to have your own place, your own space" (Thompson 6). Another woman's sense of home was described in terms of what had been lost because of the impacts of domestic violence: "It doesn't really feel like home anymore since I left. It doesn't feel like home because of what I was going through, and my kids too, what they were seeing" (Winnipeg 11). A third participant highlighted that relationships with family and community members were an essential aspect of her meaning of home and were also crucial to her work role.

Community & Culture

Three participants spoke of home in terms of their connection to a particular community. For example, the community where one woman's children were born and raised was home, "because that's where I have my kids, so that was where I felt more at home" (Thompson 2). For two women, their geographic place provides an unchanging meaning of home: "Obviously up north is always home. I grew up there all my life, and it's always going to be home there" (Winnipeg 12). For one woman, culture and language were essential to her meaning of home, and she described the impact that leaving her community had on her sense of identity:

> My values [and] my beliefs are important for my children. Just keeping my ethnicity strong by using my language, I feel like you're more in tune with getting around in the community if you are fluent in your language. Coming to Thompson is different, definitely. (Thompson 3)

Safety

Having a safe place to be with family was a common descriptor of home. As one participant described, "A home is … its safe being there, but at the same time, it's not really that kind of safe to be out there. Because my partner used to come around and just walk in" (Thompson 7). Another woman described her vision of home in contrast to her experiences of abuse:

> [Home] would mean, I guess, loved ones and safety—that you're safe there, that you're not vulnerable, that you're not going to get abused, you're not going to get hurt, that you're not going to get thrown out, that you're not going to get anything—you know, safe. You don't have to worry. You're safe. (Thompson 9)

A third woman spoke of a sense of nostalgia, or loss, for the feeling of home she had, knowing that it was currently not a safe place for her and her children:

> I will always miss my hometown and all, but that's where my ex-boyfriend stays. So, I should say that it's not safe right now, especially for my kids. I thought about going back, giving up, like, leave this place where I'm staying. But, I think back at the times when my ex-boyfriend used to do violence, especially in front of my kids. So, I should say that back home, it is not safe to go back. But, I will miss it and love my hometown, and my family in it. (Thompson 2)

2. Past Experiences

The second set of interview questions asked the participants about their past experiences of housing and abuse using the following prompt: Besides your most recent move here, in the past, have you moved to other communities? Women were asked to list up to three communities, and if Winnipeg was among them, to share the area of the city that they lived in. Their responses relate to five significant themes: multiple moves and housing instability, safety for themselves and their children, housing (un)availability, partner influence, and the need for support and resources.

Multiple Moves and Housing Instability

Most participants described a pattern of moving multiple times. These moves occurred in both childhood and adulthood; within their communities and between communities, from northern communities to urban centres, and in some cases, a return to their home communities. Women moved between the homes of parents, grandparents, partners or former partners and their parents, aunties, uncles, and friends. As an example, one participant stated:

> Cause I had no place to go, had no place to live and I had two young children back then, move back and forth … then you know, just didn't get along with family and you know, then had to move. It would be like a month we'd be at one place. (Thompson 4)

Moves among family members encompassed moves within communities and between communities in southern and northern parts of Manitoba. For some, this pattern of moving dates back to childhood: "My mom was moving everywhere. We always moved into a different place every four years or something" (Thompson 10). Another woman shared that growing up in foster care meant constant moves: I couldn't really know [how many times] because it started when I was six years old with CFS [Child and Family Services]" (Winnipeg 13). Another woman noted that she "had a good home … growing up—when I turned 16 the pattern of moves began, when I met this first guy. He was so abusive" (Thompson 7).

Safety for Themselves and Their Children

Women linked the moves they made as adults to the physical, verbal, and emotional abuse they experienced from their partner or ex-partner, or to conflict with other family members. Participants spoke about having to choose between housing and safety, and how family violence played a significant role in this decision. Three women spoke about partner and family violence as something they felt they had to put up with, as they had nowhere else to live. As one shared: "I had really nowhere else to turn … I just had to put [up] with my partner or stay on his good side as best as I could" (Thompson 1). Often, the impact on children was part of the decision to move. Physical violence, concerns about them witnessing violence, and providing a better quality of life were some of the factors taken into consideration. As one woman explained:

> I looked at my kids and realized that they were more important. I have three sons, and I don't want my sons growing up thinking [violence is] all right. So, I'm just trying to steer them toward a better future. (Winnipeg 14)

For some participants, the decision to leave was not entirely their choice. One participant, in a shelter in Winnipeg, stated that her child welfare worker gave her the ultimatum of leaving the relationship or having her children removed from her care: "If I wanted to be with him, the kids would be taken away. And I didn't want that. So, I made a choice to come here and to leave him" (Winnipeg 11).

Housing Availability

Participants had lived in varied housing situations. Because of housing unavailability, seven women had lived in shared accommodations with their parents, siblings, cousins, and their partner's extended family, which often meant overcrowded living situations. When asked how many people might be living in the house, one woman replied: "Oh, about nine or ten, and it was only three rooms" (Thompson 4). Another woman commented, "Yeah. Our homes in our communities are so crowded. There can be three families or four families living in one house" (Winnipeg 12). Some participants were forced to make the choice to live with family members, though this was perceived as a temporary option. One woman described this arrangement: "[It's] okay for a while, then, you know, just didn't get along with family and then had to move" (Thompson 4). Crowded housing situations often led to frequent moves, which had impacts on both the women and their children. For the children, these frequent moves can often lead to instability in their development and education.

Partner Influence

Two participants spoke about their experiences returning to an abusive relationship. For both women, their partner's promises and the women's hopes for change contributed to the decision, but, in both cases, the violence continued. One woman's partner had been incarcerated, and she returned to the relationship upon his release:

> I thought he would change if he went to jail and thought of it in there. I thought he would think twice before doing it again. But then it got worse. He got worse when he came out. I stayed with him for 7 years and I dealt with his shit all the time. I dealt with it for 7 years, and was so scared every day. (Thompson 5)

The second woman described a similar experience: "he promised things would be different. I believed it, but it just spiralled back to the same situation, the same abuse, and lies" (Thompson 8).

Need for Support and Resources

Almost all of the women (i.e., twelve out of fourteen) spoke about seeking assistance from informal supports, which encompassed a variety of physical, social, and emotional supports from family and friends, including advice on relationships and resources, childcare, and even temporary housing. Unfortunately, not all the women had the support of family or friends, and some women had family members who did not want to become involved in the situation. For some of the women, few (if any) formal services existed in their home communities.

Some reported seeking and receiving formal support in their home community from the RCMP, the nursing station or health care centre, and women's resource centres. Five participants received assistance from a child welfare worker, and despite the fear of their children being apprehended, three felt supported by their workers. One participant's worker drove her to the shelter when she had no other means of transportation. One woman expressed frustration with the lack of support available for women to escape violence when supports are available only *after* episodes of violence:

> There should be some kind of agency for women to leave their partner, and to get them to a safer place. Instead of them getting, like, wait for them to get really beaten up, for the nursing station to send them out here. (Winnipeg 12)

Eight of the Indigenous participants stated that they sought assistance from their First Nation, though for most, this was not a supportive process. One woman reported that her First Nation wanted to hear "both sides of the story" before providing any aid (Winnipeg 12). Three others recalled their experiences with First Nation policies; two described policies that restricted eligibility for housing to married couples. One participant felt this was rooted in Christian religious beliefs held in the community. "You have to get married to have your own home out there. [The First Nation members] do not support living with each other; they won't accept that. Their religion out there is strong" (Winnipeg 12). The second woman described the impact of these policies on her decision to leave her community:

> The only way you can get a house from there is only if you're married. So that's one of the big problems with it, and that's one of the reasons why I left because I don't want to get married or get abused for a lifetime too. Like, what if that continued and we're married, what if that happens and he kills me? … I don't want to get married just to have a home of my own out there. And just live my life like that, I don't want that way. (Winnipeg 02)

The First Nation, or chief and members of council, were seen as gatekeepers to housing, and some women talked about forms of nepotism and favouritism there. For example, when asked about her struggles to get First Nation housing, one participant stated, "I think it's because the relations … you have to know a council member or chief … and you have to have a good relationship with them to be looked at" (Winnipeg 14).

In the absence of services, women often had to leave their home communities in order to seek assistance: "[In my community there is] not even temporary shelters. They've always just wanted to ship us out, you know, not everybody wants to leave" (Thompson 1). Another woman noted that housing in Winnipeg was more available than in her community—"most people are doing that today … Like, [women] need their own space with their kids. Most of them come out [to Winnipeg] too, just to get their own place" (Winnipeg 12).

Public housing was a vital resource used by many of the participants. Six participants were waiting for a unit through Manitoba Housing, and another two hoped that being in a shelter would move them up the wait-list. The constant shortages of such housing led some participants to focus on housing wait-lists as a fundamental problem in their community.

3. Present Situation

The third set of interview questions asked the women about their present situation, including their experience with coming to and being at the shelter. Their responses relate to five significant themes: accessing emergency crisis shelters, lack of affordable and accessible transportation, difficulty accessing housing, and the impacts of leaving their home community.

Accessing Emergency Crisis Shelters

Almost all of the participants (i.e., twelve of fourteen) sought safety at a women's emergency crisis shelter to escape their partner's physical and emotional abuse. Getting into a local shelter was not necessarily a guarantee of safety. Two participants described the steps they took to get into a shelter further from their home community or region. The first spoke of how her ex-partner's ongoing harassment prompted her to seek assistance away from her community:

> I ended up going into a women's shelter in [home community], and then I got transferred down [to Winnipeg] because he started getting the number to my cell phone and I had to change my number many times. And then it started going through Facebook, he started contacting me so I had to block him. And then I had to change my number numerous times. (Winnipeg 14)

A second participant stated, "It's only a three-hour drive from [community name] to Thompson. I'm pretty sure he would just go over there. I wanted to make sure that I was far enough away, to stay away" (Winnipeg 14). Participants reported that, for several reasons, the absence of available housing was not helped by the maximum period of thirty days that they are allowed to stay in a shelter. One woman commented that it was not enough time to both heal from the experience of violence and abuse and find a home. Others felt it was not enough time to take advantage of the support received from both staff and other residents of the shelter: "I don't think that's long enough, that's why I had to go back the last time. They only allowed 30 days, and I ran out of time" (Thompson 4).

Lack of Affordable and Accessible Transportation

The women's journeys to the shelter demonstrate that geographic remoteness is a barrier to accessing domestic violence services. The women who participated in this research were from ten northern Manitoba communities, and each community has different challenges regarding access to urban centres. Some communities are only accessible by air, and therefore the cost and availability of transportation are of particular concern for women residing in these remote, fly-in communities. Three participants noted they had personally paid for their airfare. One of these women reported that although she saved money for travel (which she hid from her abusive partner, it was not enough to cover the fares for her and her children. Two participants were able to obtain assistance for their travel from formal organizations; one woman was flown out of her community by the RCMP for safety reasons, and another by the nursing station to receive medical services. Three participants relied on friends and family to drive them out of their communities. One of these women added, "I don't have a vehicle of my own, and you always have to pay for any ride. You know, people always expect money for a ride. Yeah, I don't really have any support workers to give free rides" (Thompson 1).

Lingering Insecurity of Leaving Their Home Community

During the interviews, participants described currently feeling alone and not knowing what they should do next. Some felt like burdens on families and friends if they asked for a place to live. Some felt unsupported by formal supports (notably chief and council, law enforcement, and the child welfare system). Women felt conflicted about their options and felt they had "nowhere else to go." One participant described this lingering insecurity:

> I felt lost, didn't know what to do. That was one of the reasons I had left before, and I thought I could find what I was looking for in Winnipeg. I had tried living out there, ended up feeling the same out there and went back to [name of community]. And that was just kind of a back and forth thing. But then now I got to actually focus on my kids and I can't keep putting them through that. I want them to have a stable life and home, and I don't want to keep running around with them. (Thompson 8)

Although leaving their home communities to escape violence was a stressful and challenging experience, some participants felt relief after escaping their partner's violence and abuse. One participant stated, "I would say it was the best decision I made. It was hard, but I did it" (Thompson 1). Other participants had mixed feelings about leaving their partners and their communities. One woman felt that life without the control of her partner was confusing. Another participant spoke of feeling lonely, but also that she felt "light," a sense of freedom in having left everything back home (Winnipeg 11). Other women [at the shelter] describe similar feelings of relief, as their partners no longer controlled them. For other participants, entering shelter did not eliminate fear of their partner. One stated that being in shelter put her in relative proximity to her ex-partner's family: "He has a lot of family out here so I just try to stay in and avoid them" (Thompson 8).

4. Future Dreams and Concerns

The final set of interview questions revolved around the future, reflecting on the hopes and concerns the women had for life after leaving the shelter. Their responses relate to three major themes: future concerns, future dreams, and ambivalence of returning to their home community. We begin with their future concerns, with a specific focus on the women who were residing at women shelters in Winnipeg at the time of their interviews.

Future Concerns of Living in Winnipeg

For the four participants residing at a shelter in Winnipeg, safety after leaving the shelter was of primary concern: "Because I know [the future housing] is not going to have a great lock up system like this [the security system in the shelter]. And that's something I'm going to have to get used to" (Winnipeg 14). This was a particular concern for the northern women who planned to reside in Winnipeg upon leaving the shelter. They described the different sorts of violence and risks of living in an urban centre. One participant was fearful about exploitation: "I kind of worry, like, always have thoughts, like what if I lose my kids, like what if they just disappear? Just like that" (Winnipeg 11). Fear of racism was also a concern for women staying in Winnipeg, not just for their safety but also for the impact it would have on their children. One woman stated that "there are more risks to being in the city than there is in the reservation. And, they don't teach you that in the reserve" (Winnipeg 13). Another added her concern about racism and Indigenous women going missing:

> There's a lot of racism going on too lately, with us First Nations … I'm kind of worried about my little guy to witness, as a four-year-old, that he doesn't need to witness that. And especially for the Indigenous ladies that have been going missing too. That's one of the big worries. (Winnipeg 12)

Future Dreams

Having housing, or "a roof over my head" (Thompson 4), was central to the "future dreams" of ten participants. Some had specific hopes for their future accommodations and the area they want to live in. One woman shared: "I'm hoping I'll get a house, like a house out here, not like a townhouse but a house. So, my kids could have a nice place to live in" (Thompson 2). The safe and stable environment they hoped for was connected to their hopes for parenting. For example:

> I want somewhere where my kids will be safe and I want somewhere that I can … Maybe go do stuff with them, like, be a mother. I don't want to be scared all the time. I'm even scared to go out, to take my kids outside. That's how brutal he was to me … I want my own place, and to do stuff with my kids now that I left. (Thompson 5)

Participants talked about the various ways their life decisions would affect their goals and the better life they and their children would have because of it. As one woman explained:

> The townhouse is just the first step. But then after my kids are a little bit older, 'til they could go to daycare or to school, that's where I want to start my goals. I really want to finish my grade 12 diploma, and go to UCN [University College of the North] and finish university too. That's what I really, really want to do for my kids, so that they could look up to me. Like, they could do the same, like what I did. Especially my daughter, since she's growing up older. I really want to set a good example for them. Like, school, that's the key to the future. To better yourself … to be a better

> person so you won't have to worry about stuff like, you know, like, bills and all that. You can do that when you have an education, get a good job. That's what I really want to do. (Thompson 2)

Ambivalence of Returning to Their Home Community

None of the women interviewed had hopes of returning to their home community. Six of the women had no interest in returning, as they referenced overcrowding in existing housing or lack of available housing, the lack of resources, and just not liking it in the community. One woman had a very pragmatic reason for her choice, commenting: "I heard it's faster to get a place in Winnipeg, that's why I'm transferring there. Cause I guess, here they wait like a year, or whatnot, to get a house" (Thompson 4). The desire to look to the future, and to "move on," was the motivation for one woman: "I just really knew I had to start new, start fresh. Like, I don't, I don't feel any need to go back" (Winnipeg 14). Other participants wanted to return home but felt they could not. Lack of housing was one of the main reasons for this. Though many women expressed missing their community, the fact that their partner or former partner still resided in the community raised concerns for their safety if they were to return. As one participant stated:

> I'll always miss my hometown and all, but that's where … my ex-boyfriend stays so I should say that it's not safe right now, especially for my kids … I thought about going back … leave this place where I'm staying. But I think back at the times that when my ex-boyfriend used to do violence, especially in front of my kids. So, I should say that back home, it's not safe to go back. But I'll always miss it and love my hometown, and my family in it. (Thompson 2)

Discussion—The Women's Journeys

The stories of the journeys taken by the fourteen women interviewed are varied and intertwined with their meaning of home, accessibility of supports, services, and resources as well as housing policies. As thirteen of the women came to women's shelters from First Nations reserves and northern communities, their stories are our primary focus here. Some women's stories involved multiple moves within their home community before entering the shelter, often shifting moves back and forth between family members' homes. Other stories included moves to other northern communities before entering the shelter, often the result of moving to their partner's community and, in most cases, into the home of their partner's parents. Some stories involved previous moves to shelters, both in the North and in Winnipeg, before returning home and eventually returning to shelter.

Housing instability started early on in their lives and, therefore, also in their children's lives. Diverse factors, such as the lack of access to independent housing when reaching adulthood, and extended-family dynamics, were intertwined with this finding. Women and their children often had to live with other family members or with their partner's parents. Such circumstances often caused or intensified tensions between the couple as well as with other members of their families. Along with overcrowding, this is a common theme found in northern communities (Belanger et al., 2012; TEDWG, 2012) and may lead to a continuation of the cycle of violence, not only for the women but also their children.

The women's stories also pointed to a common theme regarding the lack of formal supports within small northern communities, which meant that they often had to rely on whatever informal supports may have been available to them. As found in other research, such "help-seeking can be compromised by factors like shame associated with the violence, fear of retaliation, family and cultural pressures to retain the family unit" (Lumby & Farrelly, 2009, p. 1). The women's experiences here confirm the need to increase formal on-reserve and coordinated supports to reduce the vulnerability for women and children exposed to domestic violence in northern Manitoba (Bonnycastle et al., 2015).

It is likely that housing instability and displacement, along with the violence, caused multiple challenges in other areas, including increased difficulty for the women to find jobs, gain an education, make plans, and become empowered to re-establish their lives (their independence). In similar ways, instability and displacement may also impact their children's development concerning family stability, education, and cultural identity. Despite concerns for their safety, such circumstances may lead women to return home because their children are missing their extended family, communities, culture, and own environment.

On the other hand, leaving their home communities does not necessarily resolve the housing instability issue, as associated problems such as the lack of affordable housing are found in the larger centres in Manitoba (i.e., Thompson and Winnipeg). Public housing across the province (including in major centres) is often not available and has long waiting lists. Another impediment is the limited time women are allowed to stay at emergency crisis shelters. Although there is more flexibility in recent years, most shelters work around a thirty-day maximum stay policy. This time restraint can restrict the acquisition of services and the development of life skills for navigating the formal systems in order to access housing, education, employment, and transportation; it can also increase women's vulnerability to future violent experiences.

All of the women shared their hopes for themselves and their children, and housing stability was central to these future dreams. However, unintended circular mobility issues (Christensen, 2012; Kauppi et al., 2017) and lack of stable housing

often had adverse effects, both emotionally and mentally. One result was feelings of diminished likelihood of achieving their goals. On a positive note, the move to a shelter often brought with it a new sense of optimism. Some women, for instance, spoke of their hopes to pursue educational or paid employment opportunities that were not available in their home communities. Whether this optimism continued after they left the shelter is unknown. Though the thirty-day limit has its challenges, the supportive environment enabled the women to begin thinking about their next steps, such as moving to another shelter, moving into a hotel, or moving in with family. In many of the women's circumstances, transitional housing, or second-stage housing, could provide a more long-term option for them (Fotheringham & Walsh, 2013; Hoffart, 2015).

Lastly, it is important to note that all participants in our study are mothers. Throughout the interviews, women shared concerns for their children's well-being and how their children impacted their decisions to leave or return to their partner and/or home community. Almost all of the responses involved statements about their children, revealing their concern and that their children are often at the centre of their decision making. Indeed, our study echoed previous research that reveals women's decisions about leaving, staying, or returning to their abusive partners is centred around what they believe is best for their children (Kelly, 2009; Zink, 2003). Women also spoke about the impact of housing insecurity and instability on their children, including the frequent moves and relocation outside of their home communities (away from family, friends, and school). The stories shared by our participants reveal their role as mothers and that caring for children is inextricably tied to any decision they make.

Implications for Practice and Policy

There is a definite need in the North for increased investment in social, rent-geared-to-income housing to ensure housing security for the lowest-income households. Faced with the impossible task of finding affordable housing, some women may accede to the appeals of their abusive partner and return to the relationship. Others may find themselves "couch surfing" with friends or relatives (Scott, 2008). Until recently, a Manitoba Housing priority policy was in place to help speed up the housing process for women coming out of a shelter. One stated reason for altering this policy was the concern that women may be entering shelters as a shortcut to getting Manitoba Housing (MHA personal communication, 2018). A point system is now in place, whereby several housing circumstances are taken into consideration. Such circumstances can include homelessness, regaining custody of children, disability, as well as domestic violence (Manitoba Housing, 2020). One criticism is that this point system gives minimal emphasis (points) for women leaving domestic shelters. Therefore, it may be reinforcing long waiting lists for women leaving shelters, a trend seen throughout Canada. Reported by the Canadian Network of Women's Shelters and Transition Houses (CNWSTH, 2016), "of the shelters Canada-wide who [sic] do have access to housing programs, 96% reported a waiting period of over one month, 68% reported a waiting period of over three months, and 36% reported a waiting period of over six months" (p. 3). Again, the federal National Housing Strategy (NHS) may help with this problem as one of its priority areas is vulnerable Canadians, which include women and children fleeing domestic violence (CMHC, 2020). It is unknown how much of the strategy's funds will be spent in northern Manitoba over the next number of years. Though northern housing is stated to be another priority area of the NHS, previous federal and provincial social housing policies in Canada have disproportionately focused on large urban settings (Suttor, 2016).

A critical topic discussed in northern Manitoba for many years is the need for safe houses, shelters, and secondary and transitional housing with supports. Fotheringham and Walsh (2013) support this discussion by illustrating that a move directly from homelessness to permanent housing may not be sufficient for all homeless women and that transitional housing, especially for violence survivors, remains part of the solution. One reason for this, especially for Indigenous women, is that "education and employment conditions in many rural Aboriginal communities continue to create disadvantages for migrants to cities" (Peters, 2011, p. 8). We heard similar issues in the narratives of the northern Manitoba women we interviewed, not only in the disadvantages for migration to cities, but also in those associated with staying in their northern homes. For example, we heard in their stories the need for community services and supports to go along with safe and affordable housing. Many of the women reported having limited formal education, minimal work experience, and little if any experience in living on their own. As one participant stated:

> I didn't finish school. I've never worked. I've always been isolated, away from everybody, couldn't really do anything. I just stayed home and looked after my kids. And, that's not the kind of future I want for my kids. I want to be able to get off welfare and get a job and work for them. I want to teach them to be independent and not have to rely on anybody and working hard for a living. So, I want to get back to school. (Thompson 8)

Transitional and supported housing programs set up in the North could help with such needs, providing both effective programming and social supports to women

and their children (ACWS, 2017; Klassen, 2018). Making such programs family-focused and culturally appropriate for Indigenous families would not only increase their usefulness, but create a more inclusive environment (Waegemakers Schiff, 2007; Wendt & Baker, 2013).

Along with such programs, there is a need to develop housing networks and systemic planning in the communities to tackle the policy shortcomings and needs being touched on here (Doberstein, 2016), including child welfare, criminal justice, health and education systems, employment, and, of course, affordable housing. Following a social determinants of health lens, which draws our attention to social and economic conditions such as poverty, poor housing, and income inequality in northern Manitoba, may help with this (Fernandez et al., 2015). To conclude, it is essential to remember that the need for resources does not only apply to shelters and formal resources, as the absence of housing, in general, contributes to women's challenges in seeking services. Having access to stable housing is a preventative and proactive way to ensure that women feel safe, and it can facilitate leaving an abusive relationship rather than being something provided after leaving that relationship (Ponic et al., 2011).

Lastly, any policy or practice interventions that are aimed at assisting abused women living in the North must attend to women's experiences as mothers. As noted earlier, all of the women who participated in our study were mothers and all expressed how their children's interests and well-being were at the centre of any decision they made around leaving or returning to their abusive partner and/or home community. It is unlikely that interventions that do not attend to women's needs as mothers will be effective. Clearly, services that are aimed at women must also take into account the well-being and interests of their children (and vice versa).

Limitations

Our study has limitations; one limitation is that it was a cross-sectional study with a small number of women participants staying at two shelter locations, who were interviewed at one point in time. Therefore, we do not know if the experiences documented in this article reflect the lived experiences of all women in northern communities. We also do not know what happened to the fourteen women we interviewed once they left the shelter. Were they successful in finding safe and affordable housing for themselves and their children? Was it in their home community or a regional centre? Was their only option to return to the situation they originally left due to violence? Future longitudinal-based research to explore women's pathways, trajectories, and journeys are needed.

A second limitation is that we recruited participants through shelters and, therefore, our study does not include the voices and experiences of women who have not accessed shelters. It is unclear how their particular experiences differ from the women who participated in our study. Lastly, a limitation is that our focus was on women, which included their experiences as mothers. Although we did not interview the children themselves to learn about their experiences with living in a violent home and housing instability and insecurity, this was not the focus of our research. Instead, our focus was on how women experience intimate partner violence and housing insecurity and instability in northern Manitoba, which inextricably included their experiences as mothers.

Conclusion

This study adds to the literature by exploring affordable housing and the needs of women and their children escaping violent relations in northern Manitoba. The purpose of this research project was to focus on examining how the current lack of affordable housing and the absence of a coordinated service response affect women and their children as they escape violent relationships. Through our research, we explored both the geographic moves women make as they seek safety and shelter for themselves and their children, and their reasons for making these transitions. The research found that there is a need for proactive service responses to violence against women and children in northern Manitoba. Such a coordinated response needs to begin in the northern communities themselves, with links to regional services and supports when appropriate.

One clear and needed recommendation is that the federal government assure that the need for adequate, reliable, and secure housing on First Nations will be met. This recommendation follows the recognition under the federal National Housing Strategy that, besides housing being a human right, Indigenous and northern housing is an urgent concern.

A second recommendation is that the federal government increase dedicated-funding supports for on-reserve community initiatives, as reflected in the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (NIMMIWG) Calls for Justice—dpecifically for Indigenous-centred and community-based anti-violence initiatives that help build up healthy local communities through relevant social, spiritual, and economic development. Such mechanisms of empowerment could strengthen community social well-being (the good life) while reducing the vulnerabilities for women and children living there. One place this could begin is with funding formal supports and emergency shelters on reserves and providing access to safe and affordable travel throughout the Provincial North.

The third recommendation is for increased investment in social, rent-geared-to-income housing, and transitional and supportive housing in the regional centres of the Provincial North. In the future, the circular migration, back and forth between home and regional centres, will likely continue. When needed, we should be prepared to help women and their families escaping violence, so they can make that transition as efficiently as possible.

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