

WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS IN MONTREAL

Seeing What Is Hidden



*Conseil des
Montréalaises*

Montréal 

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This opinion paper does not claim to address all of the concerns of those encountered during these consultations. Moreover, we recognize that when it comes to the status of women, different women's viewpoints are essential if we are to develop policies and services on a human scale that are fair, effective and egalitarian.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY	3
1 THE CONSEIL DES MONTRÉALAISES AND WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS	4
1.1 THE CONSEIL DES MONTRÉALAISES	4
1.2 HOW THE CONSEIL DES MONTRÉALAISES FUNCTIONS	4
1.3 THE OPINION PAPER FOLLOW-UP COMMITTEE PROCESS	6
2 THE CITY OF MONTREAL AND HOMELESSNESS	8
2.1 TAKING DETERMINED ACTION AGAINST HOMELESSNESS	8
2.2 BECAUSE THE STREET IS A DEAD END	9
2.3 HOUSING AND SHELTERS	9
3 WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS IN MONTREAL: A REALITY THAT DARES NOT SHOW ITSELF	10
3.1 COUNTING WHAT IS HIDDEN	11
3.1.1 The 2015 census	11
Indigenous women and homelessness: the scars of colonization	12
3.1.2 Not seeing the forest for the trees	14
Women from immigrant backgrounds and homelessness: putting down roots in the street	15
3.2 IN THE FIELD	16
3.2.1 Organizations and women running on empty	16
3.2.2 What the women who are directly concerned have to say	19
Feminist Interventions with Women Who Are Homeless	20
4 RECOMMENDATIONS	22
5 CONCLUSION	26
BIBLIOGRAPHY	28
APPENDIX I: CHRONOLOGY	31
APPENDIX II: DEFINITION OF GBA+	32

SUMMARY

This opinion paper is the result of consultations held in 2016 by the Conseil des Montréalaises (CM) with organizations and individuals engaged in the fight against women's homelessness. Echoing the concerns of workers in the field, as well as women who have actually experienced life on the street, the purpose of this paper is to help municipal stakeholders recognize the situation of women whose precarious existence makes them invisible. In a context where women's homelessness is increasing and worsening, this opinion paper emphasizes the importance of political and social action at the municipal level, developed using gender-based analysis (GBA+ – see Appendix II). This report presents 10 key recommendations for improving living conditions for women who are homeless.

1

THE CONSEIL DES MONTRÉALAISES AND WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

1.1 THE CONSEIL DES MONTRÉALAISES

The Conseil des Montréalaises, made up of 15 volunteers chosen with reference to their feminist engagement, was created in 2004 to provide perspective on policies developed by the municipal council and the executive committee on issues affecting women. The role of this advisory board is to encourage municipal policies to support improvements in living conditions for women, and the attainment of equality between women and men as well as among women of various backgrounds and social status. The Conseil des Montréalaises wishes to reflect this diversity within its organization by encouraging the involvement of women from diverse professional and cultural backgrounds.

1.2 HOW THE CONSEIL DES MONTRÉALAISES FUNCTIONS

In creating the Conseil des Montréalaises, the City of Montreal established a consultative body to help it be vigilant with respect to the inclusion of women in the various areas affected by municipal policies, so that women can participate fully in democratic bodies and have a say about issues that directly involve them. Wishing to represent the concerns of all Montreal women, the Conseil pays special attention to the voices of women whose conditions are made “invisible” by exclusion and discrimination.

This opinion paper is part of a process undertaken by the Conseil des Montréalaises to better understand homelessness as experienced by women in order to fulfil its role as a conduit between women in the field and the municipal council. Since 2011, the Conseil has been working in partnership with the

regional and local development committee of the Table des groupes de femmes de Montréal (TGFM) on homelessness. This involvement led to the Conseil's participation in organizing the *Mieux voir pour mieux agir: Non à l'itinérance des femmes* [See better to act better: No to women's homelessness] forum in 2012, along with many other initiatives:

- > a workshop at the Femmes du monde centre in Côte-des-Neiges (2014);
- > a survey on sharing knowledge and best practices with regard to women's homelessness in the Montreal area (*L'itinérance des femmes, vers un meilleur partage des connaissances et des pratiques: Résultats du sondage auprès de groupes de femmes et de groupes communautaires travaillant auprès des femmes en situation d'itinérance où à risque de le devenir dans la région montréalaise*) [Women's homelessness: towards better sharing of knowledge and practices: Results of a survey of women's groups and community groups working with women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the Montreal area] (2015);
- > the day-long forum *L'itinérance des femmes, construire une voix pour contrer l'invisibilité* [Women's homelessness: build a voice to counter invisibility] (2015);
- > the third general assembly on homelessness in Quebec (2015) as well as many other forums and conferences;
- > development of a *feminist declaration on women's homelessness* (2016).

After the municipal council announced plans for a census of homeless people in 2015, the Conseil des Montréalaises determined that it was time to update certain observations about women's homelessness reported in the public study from 2008 *L'itinérance : des visages multiples, des responsabilités partagées* [Homelessness: many faces, shared responsibilities]. Presented to the municipal council's standing committee on cultural development and quality of life, this public study provided an opportunity for the Conseil to prepare the brief *Un toit pour toutes : une réponse à adapter!* [A roof for every woman: an answer to be adapted]. Detailing the tight links between homelessness and access to housing, the brief stressed the notable absence of gender-based data on the subject and recommended that the 2007-2012 intersectoral homelessness action plan take into account the gender-based needs of women. This plan, which formalized the commitment of the provincial and municipal administrations to work

alongside community groups on homelessness, set out ambitious objectives within an increasingly complex context. The Conseil des Montréalaises urged the City of Montreal to ensure that the plan would take into account the gender-based needs of women and provide adequate responses. So far, however, the City has not yet managed to set up a mechanism to ensure gender-based analysis (GBA)¹ is used during the development of each policy and measure.

GBA is essential for promoting gender equality: it makes it possible to attack the systemic discrimination experienced by women and the invisibility of their concerns and situations. Recently, the Conseil des Montréalaises felt it was time to update the definition of GBA by adding an intersectional component (see Appendix II). The purpose of this new definition is to uncover the existence of forms of discrimination based on the intersection of gender and other factors, such as cultural background or disability.

¹ According to the Secrétariat à la condition féminine, gender-based analysis (GBA) is an analytical process aimed at achieving equality between women and men through the orientations and actions of society's decision-making bodies at the local, regional and national levels. GBA preventively discerns the different effects that the adoption of a program for citizens could have on women and men, based on the gender-based realities and needs of women and men. GBA comes into play during the various stages of the program: development, implementation, evaluation, follow up.

1.3 THE OPINION PAPER FOLLOW-UP COMMITTEE PROCESS


AT A GLANCE

- > Conseil des Montréalaises brief, *Un toit pour toutes : une réponse à adapter!* [A roof for every woman: an answer to be adapted!] (2008)
- > Creation of the Opinion Paper Follow-up Committee to monitor the progress of dossiers (2015)
- > Start of consultation in June 2015
- > Meeting with the Montreal housing department and the social diversity and sports service
- > Consulting with the directors of various shelter and housing resources for women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
- > Meeting with the Montreal police department (SPVM)
- > Consulting with workers in women's centres for women who are at risk
- > Consulting with women who have experienced an episode of homelessness and leveraging their expertise
- > Production of the opinion paper *Voir L'invisible [Seeing What is Hidden]* and submission to the municipal council in preparation for Montreal's next homelessness action plan.

In 2015, the Conseil des Montréalaises set up the Opinion Paper Follow-up Committee to monitor the progress of dossiers on which they have expressed an opinion. Eight years after the brief *Un toit pour toutes : une réponse à adapter!* was prepared, the Conseil wanted to measure how much ground had been covered with respect to its recommendations and to understand the current reality of women who are homeless² in Montreal. After meeting with Mon-

tréal's social diversity and sports service and housing department, the committee members began a consultation process with groups and individuals working with women who were homeless or at risk of homelessness. In December 2015, the committee consulted directors of shelter and housing resources for women at risk. The Conseil used focus groups to gather these women's points of view on the current state of homelessness among women and how

² This opinion paper gives preference to the expression *women who are homeless* rather than *homeless women* so as not to attribute an identity to the women. "Where I am is not who I am."



readily they could access services intended for them. Next, the Conseil des Montréalaises canvassed the police department (SPVM), and committee members were able to go on a ride-along in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve area. In the spring of 2016, workers from five women's centres were consulted, including one who provides assistance to Indigenous³ women living in extremely precarious conditions. A little later, the Conseil consulted staff at a facility that receives many women from immigrant backgrounds who are homeless, including several with children. Believing in the importance of reporting the viewpoints of those most directly affected by homelessness, the members of the follow-up committee met with residents of social housing developed by an organization that provides assistance to women who are homeless.

³ The term *Indigenous* refers to members of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities.

2

THE CITY OF MONTREAL AND HOMELESSNESS

AT A GLANCE

- > City of Montreal public consultation on homelessness and brief tabled in the National Assembly (2008)
- > Creation of the SPVM homeless mobile referral and intervention team (ÉMRII) (2009)
- > Adoption of the *Plan d'action interministériel en itinérance 2010-2013* [2010-2013 Interdepartmental Action Plan on Homelessness]
- > City of Montreal adopts its first action plan targeting homelessness (2010): no specific measures for women at risk
- > City of Montreal implements structural measures: social programs at the municipal court, investments in drop-in centres, support for research, etc.
- > Launch of a homelessness policy by Quebec's provincial government (2014)
- > City of Montreal adopts its second action plan for homelessness (2014-2017): creation of a "protector of the homeless" position and targeted measures for Indigenous people who are homeless. Just one measure aimed at women, for Indigenous women
- > City of Montreal actions related to homelessness: 1,900 social housing units for people who are homeless, built in 20 years
- > Member of the executive committee of the Comité directeur intersectoriel en itinérance de la région de Montréal [Intersectoral Steering Committee on Homelessness in the Montreal Area] and a number of working committees, including the emergency housing services committee

2.1 TAKING DETERMINED ACTION AGAINST HOMELESSNESS

In 2008, the City of Montreal organized an extensive public consultation on the subject of homelessness. This exercise resulted in a brief that was tabled in the National Assembly that same year, while a similar consultation was taking place at the provincial level. In 2009, the Quebec government announced the adoption of the *Plan d'action interministériel en itinérance 2010-2013* while Montreal adopted its first action plan targeting homelessness: *Agir résolument pour contrer l'itinérance* [Taking Determined Action Against Homelessness]. This plan had two main thrusts: on one hand, meet the basic needs of

people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and on the other, work to improve sharing of public space while reinforcing the exercise of citizenship. Eleven measures were set out to achieve the plan's objectives, from the development of social housing units with community support to the improvement of judicial diversion programs for homeless people. Just one measure dealt with the particular needs of women, aimed at Inuit women who are homeless. As previously mentioned, this plan did not incorporate gender-based analysis (GBA) of homelessness.



2.2 BECAUSE THE STREET IS A DEAD END

In September 2014, the City released its second action plan, *Parce que la rue est une impasse* [Because the Street Is a Dead End], echoing the Quebec government's first national policy on homelessness, *Ensemble pour éviter la rue et en sortir* [Together to avoid the street and find a way out], released somewhat earlier. While the 2014-2017 plan essentially repeats the guiding principles of its predecessor, it also introduced a "knowledge sharing" orientation that would be expressed through a homeless census in Montreal and training for municipal employees and managers working with people who are homeless. Another highlight, the new version of the action plan called for the creation of a "protector of the homeless" position to support the objective of exercising citizenship. This promise was fulfilled in 2016. The plan also reaffirmed a commitment to support supervised injection sites (SIS). At the same time, the city announced an extra million dollars in funding to stem the tide of homelessness. While the plan is ambitious and includes actions targeted to people with immigrant and Indigenous backgrounds, it still doesn't set out concrete measures to meet the specific needs of women, even though women are designated as a "priority population."

2.3 HOUSING AND SHELTERS

The City of Montreal is a partner in a number of housing projects backed by women's groups and intended for women; it participates financially, with the support of the Montreal Metropolitan Community (MMC), in Quebec programs that subsidize the development of these projects. With the support of technical resource groups (TRG), many organizations have launched initiatives for social housing with community support and for transitional housing. In the past 20 years, the province's AccèsLogis

program (Part 3) has made it possible to develop more than 1,900 housing units for people in extremely vulnerable situations, despite the scarcity of available land and the difficult conditions. Other subsidy programs at the federal level, such as the Homeless Partnering Strategy⁴(HPS) for example, and at the municipal level have fostered the financial networking necessary for the completion of a myriad of housing projects for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Montreal's 2014-2017 action plan includes a commitment to support the development of a thousand housing units, comprising 600 social housing units with community support and 400 units and rooms developed with partners. According to the City of Montreal housing department⁵, projects developed specifically for women in this context represent 117 units and rooms, or 24% of the units built (or started) since 2014. This is an increase in projects for women. During the previous period (2002-2014), women-specific projects and units represented just under 20% of the total number, or slightly less than the percentage of women within the overall homeless population.

In terms of emergency shelters, the City provides financial support for about ten organizations for their intervention programs, more specifically intake, follow-up, referrals and counselling. It has a mandate to compile the data required to monitor service usage trends so that services can be adjusted to reflect actual needs. In 2015, the City was involved in setting up a warming centre in a downtown drop-in centre. Finally, it plays an active role on the executive committee of the Comité directeur intersectoriel en itinérance de la région de Montréal.

⁴ More than \$120 million was invested in Montreal under this subsidy program.

⁵ Figures as at October 1, 2016, from the Direction de l'habitation de la Ville de Montréal.

3

WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS IN MONTREAL: A REALITY THAT DARES NOT SHOW ITSELF

WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS IS...

- > Less visible, often referred to as “hidden”
- > Women's reticence to reveal their vulnerable situation and be open about being homeless
- > Survival strategies such as sex work, couch surfing, shoplifting
- > Greater exposure to violence on and off the street
- > A past and present marked by various forms of violence and abuse, including sexual violence and abuse
- > A higher percentage of women from Indigenous and immigrant backgrounds

As with many social issues, women and men experience homelessness differently. Because women's homelessness is much less visible in the public sphere (Amistani, 2005), it is less of an issue for current policy-makers, who mainly react to the problematic occupation of public space. Thus, some people talk about “veiled” or “hidden” homelessness and associate it with survival strategies such as couch surfing⁶ and sex work. Because of these survival strategies, homelessness among women seems more difficult to delimit and measure. As well, women often try to keep quiet about their homelessness through fear of exposing themselves to more violence (Laberge, Morin et Roy, 2000). The saying “A woman living on the street is not necessarily a woman on the street⁷” illustrates the situation well.

To recognize the situations particular to women, we first need intervention and analysis methods suited to their lived experience, often marked by various

forms of systemic violence: domestic, institutional, colonial, economic, etc. For many of them, the types of violence are cumulative: for example, Indigenous women who are homeless often live at the “intersection” of many types of discrimination and struggle to find services that meet their specific needs. While their particularly critical situation is receiving greater acknowledgement from the City of Montreal and the Quebec government, among others, services to help them are slow to materialize and are sometimes ill suited to Indigenous women's own priorities.

But while women who are homeless suffer many injustices, the consultations held by the Conseil des Montréalaises proved that they show great determination to survive in extremely precarious conditions. In many respects, their resilience is inspiring. It is essential to listen to them, consult them, acknowledge their experiences and take that experience into account.

⁶ Sleeping on the couch of a friend, family member or client for lack of a home of one's own.

⁷ Translation of “Une femme à la rue n'est pas nécessairement une femme dans la rue,” taken from *La spirale de l'itinérance au féminin : Pour une meilleure compréhension des conditions de vie des femmes en situation d'itinérance de la région de Québec* [The spiral into homelessness for women: For a greater understanding of the living conditions of women who are homeless in the Quebec City area], the Regroupement de l'aide aux itinérants et itinérantes de Québec and the Regroupement des groupes de femmes de la région 03, 2008.

3.1 COUNTING WHAT IS HIDDEN

3.1.1 The 2015 census

On March 24, 2015, the Douglas Mental Health University Institute and the YMCA carried out a census, commissioned by the City of Montreal, of people who were homeless on that date (the first of two parts). With no data available since 1998 (Fournier *et al.*, 2001), the new municipal administration felt that it was imperative to conduct a study to get a more accurate picture of the number of homeless people so as to be able to adjust the services provided for them. The census had two related goals: to count the people on the street and to take an inventory of shelter and housing resources. That day, the volunteers for the initiative known as *Je compte Montréal* [I Count Montreal] counted a total of 3,016 people⁸. Of these, 24% were women, i.e., almost one-quarter of those counted. The number of women varied significantly depending on the location surveyed by the census: 54% of the people counted in transitional housing were women versus 7% on the street. Apart from these results, the census revealed that the female homeless population is generally younger than the male homeless population: in particular, the count included many young women aged 30 and under. Thus, homelessness does not affect women “equally.” At the other end of the spectrum, women who are Indigenous or of immigrant backgrounds are also over-represented⁹ and the latter

are the most likely to have their children with them on the street or in shelters¹⁰. In the summer of 2015, a complementary survey was launched to collect more accurate information about the various homeless populations, and women in particular. Among other things, this survey showed that women are more likely than men to say that their homelessness is due to financial problems, and that women are more frequently treated for mental health problems. As well, the study highlighted the over-representation of members of the LGBTQIA communities¹¹ in the homeless population.

⁸ 429 on the street; 1,066 in shelters; 1,041 in transitional housing; 480 in other places.

⁹ They make up 39% of immigrants who are homeless.

¹⁰ As a percentage: 22%.

¹¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual.

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS: THE SCARS OF COLONIZATION

Having increased dramatically across Canada for a number of years, “Indigenous homelessness” must be analyzed within the context of the past and present impact of colonization on Inuit and First Nations communities. This colonization took the form of various assimilation strategies that profoundly disrupted the social fabric of communities, including the residential schools and the current over-representation of Indigenous children within the child protection system (Menzies, 2006). In terms of social exclusion, Indigenous women are the most vulnerable group of people in the country according to Amnesty International, with the risk of being homicide victims seven times higher than for non-Indigenous women.

Many Canadian studies, including Montreal’s 2015 census, show that Indigenous people are significantly over-represented within the homeless population¹². While the 2015 census established that women make up 25% of the Indigenous population who are homeless, other Canadian studies mention even larger percentages (Ruttan *et al.*, 2008; Baskin, 2007; Novac *et al.*, 2002) The situation is especially critical for Inuit women, who outnumber their First Nations

sisters living on the street. Moreover, Indigenous women are more likely to sleep right on the street, exposed to a higher risk of violence (Whitzman, 2006, *in* Patrick, 2014). As well, the periods of homelessness of Indigenous women, and especially Inuit women, tend to be much longer than those of men (Kishigami, 2008).

The TGF survey (2013) of workers in the field also revealed that Indigenous women appear to rarely access resources that are not specifically aimed at them. Incidentally, 51% of the workers interviewed for the survey felt that they were not well equipped to intervene with this specific population. Thus, many bridges still need to be built in this area.

¹² As an indication, while Indigenous people represent only 0.6% of Montreal’s general population, they account for 10% of the sample collected during the census.

What are indigenous women asking for?

The Réseau urbain de stratégie autochtone (NETWORK) is made up of several volunteer committees working on social issues that are important to Indigenous people. NETWORK is a central coordinating body for the Indigenous communities of Montreal who want to study and act on the issues that directly concern them. The individuals consulted by the CM stressed the lack of services for Indigenous people – both women and men – and the need to inject sufficient and ongoing funding for intervention and coordination. The portrait of the situation for Indigenous women who use community resources is alarming. Many have had their children taken away without being offered alternatives suited to their culture and their parenting abilities. As well, some Indigenous women have their children with them in emergency shelters in Montreal: there is a call for permanent housing specifically for this particular population.

Furthermore, the community is asking for appropriate measures at all levels of intervention, including police services. They would like police officers to receive better training for interactions with Indigenous women and local service to be provided by an officer (male or female) from an Indigenous background. According to those interviewed, Indigenous women who are homeless will be less resistant to approaching an Indigenous police officer for help. As well, there is hope that Cabot Square¹³, in the Sud-Ouest borough (Ville-Marie borough), will increasingly become a place where Indigenous culture is promoted and where there is an attempt to include even more people who are homeless. One proposal is to hire a long-term person to facilitate community activities in the evenings in Cabot Square, a downtown park that is already popular with many Indigenous people.

¹³ Cabot Square has been frequented by First Nations and Inuit people for many years. It is also one of the few green spaces downtown and is located near community resources that serve them.

3.1.2 Not seeing the forest for the trees

However, the *Je compte Montréal* initiative has not generated consensus among many of the people consulted by the Conseil des Montréalaises, who believe that the census underestimates the number of women in need, along with the actual number of people who are homeless. For example, in the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood, while community organizations and the SPVM report a growing increase in the number of people who are homeless, the homeless census only counted six people (RAPSIM, 2016).

Furthermore, the census does not take into account people who are at risk of homelessness, such as women living in poverty or those with substance-abuse problems who are staying with someone they know. Nor does it account for women who are victims of domestic violence, forced to leave their homes and stay temporarily at a shelter. How can we count the people who try to remain hidden? How can we account for women with no fixed address who spend their days in shopping malls and libraries, or who perform sex work in secret places? If, as maintained by Echenberg and Jensen (2008), a majority of homeless people are not experiencing “absolute”

homelessness, i.e., living on the street as such, the Conseil des Montréalaises believes that the municipal administration needs to be extremely careful when extrapolating the figures obtained to guide the allocation of funding for services. The 2015 census must not become a tool for systemic discrimination against women who are homeless. To the extent that these women are not very visible, resources must be allocated according to the needs expressed by the organizations in the field and the women involved.



Photo - Christine Bourcier

WOMEN FROM IMMIGRANT BACKGROUNDS AND HOMELESSNESS: PUTTING DOWN ROOTS IN THE STREET

The results of Montreal's homeless census released last year confirmed what many people already suspected: along with indigenous women, women from immigrant backgrounds are proportionally more numerous among the general homeless population than women born in Quebec. They represent 39% of immigrants who are homeless, who themselves account for 16% of the general homeless population. Moreover, the census revealed that they are generally younger and more likely to have their children with them. As well, domestic violence and other forms of assault are often among the leading factors that drive these women onto the street, factors accentuated by the women's isolation and lack of familiarity with the immigration, health and social services systems.

In the field, the community workers consulted spoke of a huge influx of women from immigrant backgrounds, especially in Côte-des-Neiges, an area with a large population of newly arrived immigrants. Although they want to help, the workers do not always have the time or the tools they need to adequately support these women, who may not have legal status, and

may be refugees or waiting to become permanent residents, struggling to navigate a complex system, often without speaking either French or English. For the workers we met, welcoming these women in their own language is essential: good communication is fundamental to building a relationship of trust. For this, the workers need training and access to more funding for things such as interpretation services.

With a very small – or even non-existent – social network in their new land, immigrant women who are homeless can quickly find themselves in a crisis situation. This is why staff at facilities are calling for coordinated initiatives to provide a rapid response to their needs. They also urge that monitoring be established to ensure that the newcomers – Syrian refugees, for example – do not end up in an extremely precarious situation. New funding must be allocated quickly so that these women can be supported. We want them to put down new roots, but not in the street!

3.2 IN THE FIELD

3.2.1 Organizations and women running on empty

AT A GLANCE

- > Women who are homeless are increasingly presenting with serious mental health problems
- > System incapable of providing psychological or psychiatric care for women who are at risk: increased pressure on resources
- > Overburdened workers feel they are not being heard by governments
- > Workers increasingly suffering from job-related mental health problems
- > Poverty and social assistance: a major factor for women who end up on the street, especially older women
- > Overcrowding at facilities due to the lack of social housing

To get a sense of what is happening in the field, the Conseil des Montréalaises met with individuals who work with women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. During informal discussions, workers from women's centres and aid organizations involved depicted a community that lacks both recognition and financial support, and is sustained solely by overburdened community workers who are tired of sounding the alarm. In fact, in the past 10 years, women's shelters have frequently been overflowing¹⁴ and are faced with a homeless situation that is becoming more complex and entrenched. In 2013, a survey by the Table des groupes de femmes de Montréal revealed that 93.3% of organizations had been forced to turn women away due to a lack of space. As well, 76% of respondents noted an increase in the number of women with mental health issues in their respective facilities, while 64% noted that older women were making more use of their services.

It seems that neo-liberal policies and the fraying of the social safety net have gotten the better of many women living in poverty who were previously able to maintain a minimum standard of living: they are now turning to shelters along with other women abandoned by the system who are dealing with mental health or addiction problems. In this regard, the community workers report situations that are more serious today than in the past, notably due to the nature of the street drugs, which are now stronger and more harmful to women's physical and mental health. In some situations involving women in crisis with serious mental health issues, workers may be forced to ban access to shelters due to a fear of violence, or to call on UPS-Justice¹⁵ to avoid legal prosecution. The workers believe that the services provided by the health system and social services must be substantially improved to meet women's pressing needs in the area of mental and psychological health.

¹⁴ As one example, according to Le Chainon, in 2015, they were able to accommodate only 2.5% of the requests for shelter that they received.

¹⁵ The organization describes itself as a professional advisory service that helps the Court with clinical and legal orientation for people who have been accused of a crime where a mental health problem is suspected.

The worsening conditions experienced by women who are at risk also echo in women's centres, which have to deal with the new participants: an increasing number of women arrive hungry, want to wash themselves, sleep, and have other basic needs to be met. For example, at one centre the hard cookies usually served to women had to be replaced with soft bars because the newcomers often have bad teeth. Another centre installed a box for used needles, to keep everyone safe. Some women's centres in core sectors are becoming respite centres for at-risk women, whom they serve to the best of their ability, even though this is not part of their mission. They do not receive any additional resources for doing this.

The workers deplore the ever-increasing influx of poor older women, some of whom find themselves on the street after a hospitalization, or the death of a spouse. For too many women, regardless of age, social assistance or social solidarity benefits are no longer enough to pay rent and buy food. Keep in mind that a woman with no restrictions on employment receives a social assistance cheque of \$623 a month. The inability of women to access decent, healthy and safe housing is described by workers as a factor that drives many onto the street or prevents them from leaving it. Rising rents, bed bugs, and sexual assault by the owner are a just few of the problems faced by women. While social housing with community support is a sustainable solution, spaces are extremely limited. It is urgent that this

situation be corrected. Too often, women in shelters or transition houses are unable to find permanent social housing because there are too few such units. This contributes to the overcrowding at facilities that struggle to accommodate women who have recently become homeless. As well, workers stress the importance of community support for women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, noting that such support is a prerequisite for housing stability. According to outreach workers, many women will always need community support to ensure a stable housing situation; the government has to stop viewing community support as primarily "temporary."

Moreover, many women who frequent these organizations are mothers who do or do not have custody of their children. This implies that their relationship with the child protection agency (Direction de la protection de la jeunesse – DPJ) is somewhat difficult and requires support focused on developing the woman's, the mother's, agency. Moreover, few resources are available for woman-led families who are homeless, and their crisis situations are intensified by the fear of losing custody of their children. Women from immigrant backgrounds are especially vulnerable in this regard because they do not have the advantage of an extended social network.

According to workers, the women who use the facilities tend not to think of themselves as homeless, even though they have no fixed address. Their survival strategies often play out away from view and off the street: workers report that couch surfing or the exchange of sexual services for a place to sleep are common practice, and even increasing.

While community workers welcome the introduction of a downtown warming centre to provide shelter from extreme cold, they are critical of the fact that the City's 311 service is unable to tell them whether that space is open or not. As well, workers stress that such facilities are not very safe for women, and that women often don't use them to avoid the risk of violence by intoxicated men.

All year, and especially in winter, the number of shelter spaces is insufficient. Some facilities put mattresses on the floor so they can accommodate more women. Knowing that women who are at risk have a greater need for privacy than men do, we can assume that some of them, after being rejected a number of times due to lack of space, resort to less safe alternatives. Moreover, it would be worthwhile for the donors who support organizations working with women who are homeless to keep track not only of the occupation rate of a given facility, but also of the rejection rate¹⁶. When a women in need is turned away from five facilities in a row, it is very possible that these rejections will have an impact on her trajectory.

The individuals we talked to are not only worried about the women living on the street. Staff at the facilities are burning out and increasingly suffer from work-related mental health problems. Like the women who are homeless, the workers feel as if their activities are invisible to governments. While they are provided with training to understand homelessness, what they are asking for instead is clinical support for their practice.

So there are still huge challenges for those providing help to women at risk. Even though the City of Montreal only has partial authority with respect to homelessness, the women we met hope that the City will continue to be an ally, relaying the community's demands to the provincial and federal levels. Moreover, the workers hope that the City will take action on the things it can control and what it can change: for example, they are calling for social pricing to facilitate the use of public transit by low-income people, including women and men who are at risk and, above all, a strategy for mandatory inclusion of affordable housing in new residential projects, allowing for the creation of a great deal more social housing.

¹⁶ Although the number of rejections is not an indicator that can be used in isolation, since the same woman could be counted a number of times by different resources, it is still important to be aware of it.

3.2.2 What the women who are directly concerned have to say

AT A GLANCE

- > The expertise of women who are homeless: absolutely necessary, yet not taken into account in the formulation of programs and policies to address their situation
- > Living conditions of women who are homeless: extremely hard, with frequent violence
- > Women need to be received “as we are” and organizations providing assistance or shelter need to be more flexible in their requirements
- > It is difficult to work as a sex worker while staying at a centre
- > Some women are unaware of the resources available to them
- > Victims of discrimination, harassment and abuse by the police

The individuals we met during our research painted a very harsh picture of the realities of life on the street. The Conseil des Montréalaises considered it essential to dig deeper into the experience and expertise of women who have been or are homeless. Our investigations showed that the experiences of such women share a common thread: violence. Domestic violence before or on the street, the violence of a system that creates inequality and offers few ways for women to get off the street, the violence that women sometimes seek to escape by using drugs or that results in mental illness. The women we met with spoke of how important it is for them to be received “just the way we are,” with their capabilities, addictions and survival strategies, by aid organizations. For some of them, the strict requirements of some centres are proof of the excessive expectations of the system with regard to women who are homeless, expectations that make it harder to get off the street. It’s tough to reconcile being a sex worker and living in a shelter with its own codes, and this is an important issue for women in highly precarious situations. Generally speaking, the women did not seem very aware of the resources available to them.

Their stories are also punctuated by incidents of abuse by police, namely harassment that leads to involvement with the legal system. Women said that they had been given tickets for “spitting on the ground,” “dropping ashes on the ground,” “crossing on the diagonal in an alleyway,” among other things. Some said their purses had been searched

and money taken, or their crack pipes broken. In every neighbourhood, they are victims of taunts and gibes by police and the general population. “Do you do 2 for 1?” one police officer recently asked a sex worker we interviewed.

These women shared with CM some ideas they have for improving the condition of women who are homeless. We have written up their suggestions and integrated them into the general recommendations at the end of this report.

The women interviewed who are or have been homeless want the City of Montreal to do the following:

- > develop and provide better training for police officers of both sexes, to encourage openness and reduce the repression of women who are homeless, including sex workers;
- > recognize the need for a drop-in centre for women who are at risk of becoming homeless or who are homeless in the East End of Montreal;
- > promote hygiene by making safe, women-only showers available to women, along with public toilets in the parks;
- > facilitate access to public transit for women who are very poor, by encouraging the Société de transport de Montréal (STM) to offer free tickets to organizations who work with people at risk;
- > facilitate access to cultural events for low-income women and organize free or very low-cost cultural activities.

A publication of the newspaper committee in one of the homes in the Réseau habitation femmes



Photo : Christine Bourcier

FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS WITH WOMEN WHO ARE HOMELESS

For decades, the many Montreal organizations who work with women who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless have primarily adopted a feminist intervention strategy. According to these organizations, this approach is tailored to the needs of women contending with multiple exclusions, and makes it possible to address marginality in all its complexity. Generally speaking, a feminist intervention questions the power relations within an intervention, foregrounding an egalitarian relationship in which the person providing assistance focuses on the aspect she shares with the recipient of the assistance: her status and experience as a woman. This type of intervention was developed by workers dealing with domestic abuse: all the women's shelters in Quebec take this approach, tailoring it to their own needs. The practice of feminist intervention is based on four principles (Corbeil and Marchand, 2007):

- > recognizing the influence of social structures and institutions in the lives of women, or "the personal is political"¹⁷;
- > focusing on the potential of each woman and acknowledging the value of her experience;
- > promoting a relationship of equality between the worker and the woman;
- > committing to being a driver of social change.

For the past 15 years, feminist interventions with marginalized women have developed around the concept of intersectionality, which takes into account the different forms of oppression a woman may experience based on determining categories such as racialized identity, gender, class, etc. An "intersectional" feminist intervention gives marginalized women the possibility of discerning the oppressions they experience, whereas more "traditional" feminism is criticized for its tendency to put oppressions into a hierarchy, which makes it hard to include alternative narratives. For example, an intersectional feminist intervention can be an effective method for allowing immigrant women to express, for themselves, the violence and discrimination they experience, making it possible to then work with them to develop appropriate strategies for recovery and social action.

¹⁷ The "personal is political" means that power relations of domination and subordination in the domestic sphere reflect power relations in the public sphere; and indeed, that the domestic sphere is the primary site for the expression of a system of domination that subordinates women.



4

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Conseil des Montréalaises (CM) is making a number of recommendations to the City of Montreal and the Protector of the Homeless on major issues that affect the lives of women who are homeless or at risk. While respecting the City Administration's areas of expertise, the CM believes that the City Administration can adopt guidelines and structural measures to develop concrete and realistic solutions in the fight against homelessness and poverty, and support the women who find themselves on the street, as well as the organizations that assist them.

GENDER-BASED ANALYSIS

- 1** That the City of Montreal systematically integrate a gender-based analysis plus (GBA+), also incorporating intersectional analysis, with respect to homelessness.
- 1.1** That the City of Montreal adopt guidelines and measures that take GBA+ into account in its next Homelessness Action Plan, in cooperation with partners and in keeping with regional projects already underway (implementation of an action plan on homelessness and women as part of the 2015-2020 intersectoral action plan on homelessness (*Plan d'action intersectoriel en itinérance 2015-2020*), research by Quebec's Secrétariat à la condition féminine, etc.)

The CM recommends to the City of Montreal and to its Protector of the Homeless:

- 1.2** Strengthen the GBA+ abilities of those involved in the fight against homelessness.
 - 1.2.1** Develop and provide training to introduce GBA+ to community organizations serving a mixed clientele¹⁸.
 - 1.2.2** Develop training for employees of the City of Montreal (police, blue collar workers, etc.) as well as elected municipal officials.
- 1.3** Consider the reservations expressed during the census by organizations that assist women who are at risk or homeless and ensure that hidden homelessness is taken into account in public responses to the fight against homelessness and in resource allocation decisions.

THE FIGHT AGAINST FEMALE POVERTY

- 2** That the City of Montreal take every step necessary to promote access to a decent income for women so that they can meet their own basic needs (shelter, food, health care, transportation, etc.). To do so, the City of Montreal should play a role as an active representative in this matter to the government of Québec.

¹⁸ By a mixed clientele, we mean organizations who work with both women and men.

Social housing with community support ensures safe, decent and affordable shelter



HOUSING

- 3** Improve access to housing for women who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.
- 3.1** That the City of Montreal take the necessary steps to increase the number of social housing units with community support.
 - 3.1.1** Recommendation from the 2008 Opinion
 - That the City of Montreal ensure that the units built meet women's needs:
 - 1** that the units be a reasonable size (minimum 450 square feet), of the type 2^{1/2} and 3^{1/2} rooms;
 - 2** that the units be secure and priority be given to non-mixed units;
 - 3** that the units be located close to essential services and to public transit;
 - 4** that the units be furnished and that women have access to a "start-up kit" to meet their basic needs (dishes, towels, personal items for the children who accompany them, etc.);
 - 5** that the units be permanently assigned to women, to encourage stable housing for women.
 - 3.1.2** That the City of Montreal play a leadership role with the federal and provincial governments, promoting a range of housing solutions, both temporary and permanent, without confining its actions solely to the "housing first" approach.
 - 3.1.3** That the City of Montreal continue lobbying to ensure the consolidation and continuity of funding for community support in social housing.
 - 3.1.4** That the City of Montreal make it mandatory for real estate developers to include social or affordable housing in all new housing projects of more than 100 units.
 - 3.1.4.1** That the City of Montreal take the steps necessary to ensure that developers cannot get around the inclusion strategy by:
 - 1** decreasing the minimum number of units required in the housing projects, to prevent the splitting up of projects;
 - 2** refusing to allow developers to "monetize" the inclusion strategy, for instance by depositing money in a fund for that purpose, in order to ensure social mixing in all districts of Montreal.
 - 3.1.4.2** Until such inclusion becomes mandatory, that the City of Montreal continue to encourage districts to apply the inclusion strategy to projects in their territory.
 - 3.1.5** That the City of Montreal develop a reserve of vacant lots and vacant buildings so that organizations can develop community housing and shelter projects.

- 3.2** That the City of Montreal promote the protection of women who rent housing in the private market, especially women who are at risk, particularly with respect to harassment and sexual assault.
- 3.2.1** That the City of Montreal support efforts to introduce a lease registry in order to counter excessive rent increases in the private market and protect women who rent, especially low-income women.
- 3.2.2** That the City of Montreal pressure for better tenant access to the Régie du logement in cases where conditions are unsanitary, particularly when children are concerned.
- 3.2.3** That the City of Montreal improve its response times for inspection to assess health and cleanliness, that owners be required to take action within specified time frames, and that the fines provided in the *2014-2017 Action Plan to Combat Unsanitary Housing* be systematically applied.

FUNDING

- 4** That the City of Montreal actively demand an adequate share of funding for social programs and budgets aimed at preventing homelessness from the Quebec and federal governments.
- 4.1** That the City of Montreal support increases to funding and recurring funding to ensure organizations that provide shelter and housing, as well as women's centres and drop-in centres, can fulfill their missions and provide services to women who are at risk of becoming or are homeless. To this end, that the City play an active role in this matter with the government of Quebec.
- 4.2** That the City of Montreal diversify its funding programs to support a variety of projects to combat women's homelessness.

IMPROVING LIVING CONDITIONS

- 5** That the City of Montreal improve access to safe, women-only facilities for women who are at risk of becoming or who are homeless, and that it promote their mobility.
- 5.1** That the City of Montreal build free public toilets in the parks.
- 5.2** That the City of Montreal fund the purchase, by organizations, of clothes washers and dryers, personal hygiene supplies and the building of showers.
- 5.3** That the City of Montreal continue its involvement in the implementation of supervised injection sites (SIS).
- 5.4** That the City of Montreal improve all of the emergency winter shelters by ensuring the addition of supplementary shelter spaces over the long term and better communication of the services and resources available (through the 311 service), particularly with respect to the opening of warming centres during cold snaps.
- 5.5** That the City of Montreal and the Société de transport de Montréal (STM) facilitate the mobility of women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness by introducing transit passes that are discounted based on women's income. While awaiting the implementation of the discounted rates, that the STM donate transit passes to organizations assisting women who are at risk of homelessness or are homeless.
- 5.6** that the STM make all its security agents aware of the realities of the experiences of women who are on the street, namely the greater threats to their safety.

Gardening workshop with young women, at Passages



Photo : Christine Bouquier

LEGAL PROSECUTION

- 6** That the City of Montreal, with the support of the Protector of the Homeless, bring an end to the legal prosecution of women who are homeless; that the City provide them with better access to justice through existing programs, promote the use of such programs and provide the necessary community support.
- 6.1** That the STM undertake to reduce legal proceedings against homeless people within its facilities.

SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN

- 7** That the City of Montreal and the SPVM improve their relations with members of First Nations and with the Inuit.
- 7.1** That the SPVM create a position of Indigenous Advisor in Community Development.
- 7.2** That the SPVM promote the intervention of Indigenous police officers with Indigenous women who are homeless.

SAFETY OF SEX WORKERS

- 8** That the City of Montreal renew the *2014-2016 Action Plan on Prostitution and Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation* of the SPVM , taking into account the special situation of women who are homeless and providing for an action plan to improve the relationship between police and sex workers, while encouraging cohabitation in the neighbourhoods where they work.
- 8.1** Improve police training with respect to the practices adopted with regard to women who are homeless and sex workers; make the police aware of the alternatives to repression and legal proceedings, such as harm reduction and accompanying them to services.
- 8.2** Consolidate local drug addiction services aimed at assisting sex workers, including those who work on the street, in the neighbourhoods where they work.
- 8.3** Promote social cohesion in the neighbourhoods where sex workers work, by supporting citizen initiatives to create a real ability to live together and break down prejudices.
- 8.4** To ensure safer conditions for sex workers, institute a formal complaint processing system, facilitate the identification of violent clients, and provide community accompaniment in the process of denouncing abuse, whether perpetrated by clients or by the police.
- 8.5** Promote the funding of community organizations that work with sex workers and women who work in prostitution.

5

CONCLUSION

The Conseil des Montréalaises, like other advisory bodies, seeks to follow through on the issues it has made recommendations on in the past to elected City of Montreal officials. Having submitted an Opinion in 2008, the CM wanted to assess any progress and the obstacles still facing women who are at risk of becoming or who are homeless, as well as the organizations that seek to help them. The organized approach and interviews conducted since 2015 have given voice to the concerns and realities of women who have been homeless, as well as workers in service organizations. Their stories and analyses have provided input into the reflections and analyses of CM members, and made it possible to view the homelessness of women in Montreal from a feminist, and highly practical, viewpoint. CM members hope that this opinion will shed light on aspects of women's homelessness that often remain in the shadows. Given that the City of Montreal is starting to work on its future action plan to counter homelessness, the CM is submitting a set of recommendations and is inviting the City to implement structural measures that will truly support women and the organizations that seek to help them.



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APPENDIX I: CHRONOLOGY

- 2004** Creation of the Conseil des Montréalaises
- 2008** Public consultation by the City of Montreal on the issue of homelessness and submission of a brief titled *Un toit pour toutes: une réponse à adapter!* by the Conseil des Montréalaises
- 2008** Presentation of *L'itinérance: des visages multiples, des responsabilités partagées* report to the Montreal municipal council standing committee on cultural development and quality of life
- 2008** Consultation on homelessness conducted by the Commission des affaires sociales; City of Montreal submits a brief on the Québec government's leadership role in the fight against homelessness: *Le leadership du gouvernement du Québec dans la lutte contre l'itinérance: une nécessité*
- 2009** Québec government adopts its interministerial homelessness action plan: *Plan d'action interministériel en itinérance 2010-2013: Pour leur redonner un avenir*
- 2010** City of Montreal launches its first homelessness action plan: *Plan d'action ciblé en itinérance 2010-2013: Agir résolument pour contrer l'itinérance*
- 2011** Start of partnership collaboration between the Conseil des Montréalaises and the Table des groupes de femmes de Montréal (TGFM) on the issue of homelessness
- 2012** *Mieux voir pour mieux agir: non à l'itinérance des femmes*, conference organized by the TGFM
- 2014** Quebec government adopts its homelessness policy: *Ensemble pour éviter la rue et en sortir*
- 2014** City of Montreal launches its second Montreal action plan on homelessness: *Plan d'action montréalais en itinérance 2014-2017: Parce que la rue est une impasse*
- 2014** Publication of interministerial action plan on homelessness: *Plan d'action interministériel en itinérance 2015-2020: Mobilisés et engagés pour prévenir et réduire l'itinérance*
- 2014** Publication of the Québec government's first provincial report on homelessness
- 2015** Launch of intersectoral action plan on homelessness in Montreal: *Plan d'action intersectoriel (2015-2020) en itinérance de la région de Montréal: Agir ensemble, créer des solutions durables*
- 2015** *I Count MTL: Count and Survey of Montreal's Homeless Population* (on March 24, 2015) and complementary survey (August 24, 2015)
- 2015** Third general assembly on homelessness in Quebec
- 2015** Creation of a committee tasked with doing follow-up on the recommendations of the Conseil des Montréalaises
- 2015** Montreal hosts the annual convention of the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness
- 2016** Federal government announces a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women
- 2016** The TGFM and its partners publish a feminist statement on women and homelessness: *Déclaration féministe sur l'itinérance des femmes (2016-2017)*
- 2017** Submission of a new opinion paper by the Conseil des Montréalaises: *L'itinérance des femmes à Montréal: Voir l'invisible*. (Women and Homelessness in Montreal: Seeing What is Hidden)

Upcoming:

In-depth study by the Quebec Secrétariat à la condition féminine on women and homelessness: *Mieux connaître le parcours des femmes en situation d'itinérance pour mieux agir (2017)*

APPENDIX II: DEFINITION OF GBA+

INTERSECTIONAL AND GENDER-BASED ANALYSIS

Since 2012, the Conseil des Montréalaises has been committed to using intersectional and gender-based analyses that take into account the multiple discriminations experienced by women of diverse origins and conditions.

Intersectional and gender-based analysis (GBA+) is an approach to the development of analytical and governance tools that will provide a clear view of the needs of women and men from diverse groups. GBA+ seeks to shed light on the interactions between gender and other social differences or identity markers such as socio-economic status, disability, Indigenous status or ethnicity. It rejects the premise that gender is the sole type of discrimination and acknowledges the complexity of female and male identity and status. The goal is to uncover forms of discrimination based on the intersection of gender with other characteristics (multiple discriminations), without assuming either the presence or absence of such discriminations. GBA+ is a tool that can be used to help promote equality among people of diverse backgrounds by influencing the guidelines and actions of decision-making bodies at the local, regional and national levels. Its aim is to identify, in the interests of preventive action, the particular ways that the adoption of a project that will affect all citizens may have differing impacts on women and men of different status, origins and conditions. The analysis is performed during project design, implementation and follow-up. In some situations, GBA+ will result in the modification of services being offered to women and men in order to mitigate inequalities. Its ultimate goal is to achieve equality in practice. Equality is when people of diverse backgrounds and conditions have equal opportunity to fully exercise their rights, fulfil their potential and contribute to political, economic, social and cultural progress, while also benefiting from the ensuing changes.¹⁹

¹⁹ This definition of GBA+ adopted by the Conseil des Montréalaises is based on proposed definitions of GBA by the Quebec government's Secrétariat à la condition féminine, the practices of feminist movements and definitions of gender-based analysis (GBA+) by Status of Women Canada [<http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/gba-acsc/index-en.html>] [<http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/gba-acsc/index-fr.html>]



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