When the Roof Falls In was an exploratory research project identifying the intersections of gender-based violence and housing insecurity across a variety of supportive housing programs and among diverse clientele.

The project was funded by the Standing Together grant through a government-led initiative intended to support organizations in learning and developing best practices in preventing domestic violence, supporting survivors and victims, and disrupting harmful cycles of violence for girls and women living in Nova Scotia.

The project embraced feminist and community-based research practices through a collaborative partnership model established by the Home for Good project. When the Roof Falls In collaborated with four partnership organizations, Alice House, Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia, The Marguerite Centre, and The YWCA Halifax to explore how violence is presently impacting the housing stability of women and gender expansive folks in Nova Scotia. Through partnership focus groups, in-depth interviews with eleven frontline workers, and a meaning making session with participants and stakeholders, the project identified four dominant themes related to housing insecurity for women experiencing violence.

From these sessions, When the Roof Falls In developed recommendations to programs and interventions that disrupt cycles of violence and housing destabilization, improve organizational support for victims and survivors of violence, and shift systemic policies to better respond to the needs of women, address barriers to services, and promote gender equality in Nova Scotia.

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Recommendations

The findings from the When the Roof Falls In project identified barriers to support for women experiencing violence and housing insecurity on individual, community, and systems levels.

Programming and Interventions

- **Financial and employment support -** Short-term financial support allows women to pay down debts and build their credit in order to maintain housing; Portable housing subsidies empower women to more readily leave violence and unsafe housing situations; Employment and skills development programming fosters financial independence and housing security.
- **Low-barrier, trauma-informed, and harm-reduction models of care -** Essential to providing supportive services that meet the diverse needs of women experiencing violence and housing insecurity; Childcare support, choice and collaboration in housing options, and flexible substance-use policies increase women's access to safety and housing security.
- **Peer-support programming models -** Centering women as the experts in their experience and programming tailored to specific cultural or community needs

Community and Organizations

- **Transitional and Third Stage Housing -** Transitional housing for women struggling with mental health, addictions, and criminalization provide women with a safe space to heal from trauma; Third stage housing for women experiencing violence empowers women to regain their independence, while maintaining connection to supports and services; Location and safety considerations are important in determining housing options.
- **Race and Culture Specific Supportive and Emergency Housing -** Supportive and emergency housing for BIPOC and gender-expansive communities encourage those experiencing violence to seek safety while incorporating trauma-informed principles in addressing housing instability.
- **Community-Based Responses to Violence -** Community-based responses to violence that do not involve the police supports women experiencing violence without involving agencies they do not trust, reducing share and stigma within the community, while providing holistic and collaborative support services.
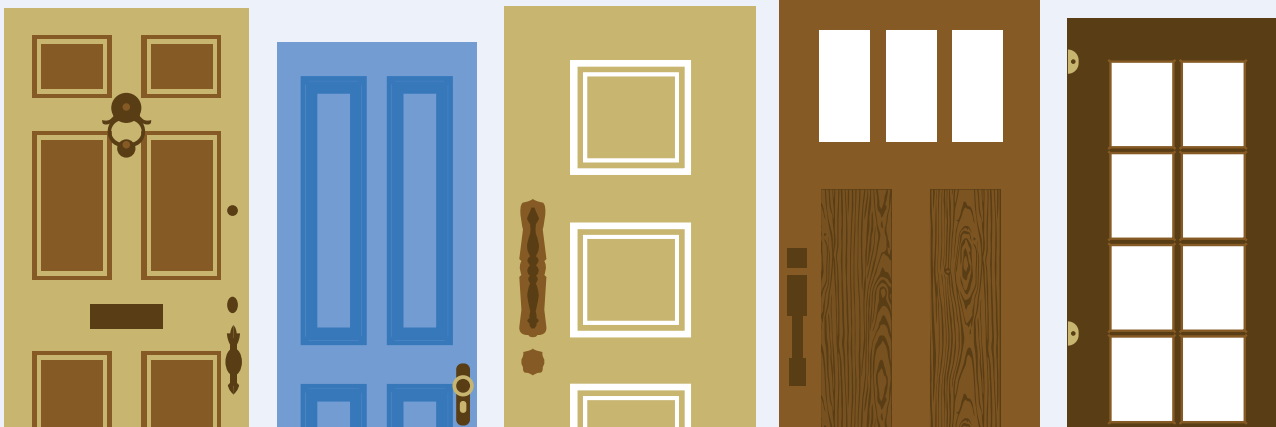
System Actors

- **Economic Stability -** Housing instability for women experiencing violence is inextricably linked to poverty; wIthout a livable wage and employment opportunities that foster independence and improved quality of life, women remain vulnerable to the perpetual cycle of poverty, experiences of violence, and housing destabilization.
- **Mental Health Support Beyond Systems Involvement -** Mental health support for women living in poverty are necessary; counselling extending beyond systems involvement is necessary in order to provide women with continuity of care.
- **Collaborative Models of Care -** Developing relationships among all of the different agencies supportive women experiencing violence and housing insecurity could reduce the number of barriers women face in accessing support; Collaborative-care models reduce the siloed and fragmented nature of our systems of care and support, creating holistic services that meet the varying needs of women experiencing violence and housing instability.

Overview of Findings

The When the Roof Falls In project identified four dominant themes related to housing destabilization due to women's experiences of violence:

Poverty

- **Negative impacts on employment performance, security, and income -** Women living in poverty are not afforded time off of work to heal
- **Arrears, debts, and bad credit -** As a result of financial abuse, many women experience difficulties applying for essential utilities and apartments
- **Safety and Location -** Affordable housing located in unsafe neighbourhoods increase women's risk of future housing destabilization
- **Increased risk of exploitation -** Women may be forced into unsafe and exploitative living arrangements with acquaintances or by landlords

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Violence and Trauma

- **Barriers to mental health support -** Trauma and violence have a profound impact on everyday life; Violence and trauma contribute to the development and exacerbation of mental health concerns
- **Substance use and survival -** The interconnected nature of trauma and addictions increases the risk of housing destabilization
- **Complicated history with the police and criminal justice system -** Lack of trust creates barriers to support, resources, and safety
- **Heightened sense of risk and interpretation of safety -** Minimizing triggers and fostering security are paramount in enabling housing security for women experiencing violence

Gender, Racial, and Ability Diversity

- **Institutional violence against BIPOC communities -** Racial profiling and stereotyping by agency and institutional actors impact women's ability to seek and receive support
- **Lack of diversity -** Limited staff diversity within agencies and culture-specific supportive resources
- **Language and cultural barriers -** newcomer women face additional barriers when accessing supportive housing programs

- **Limited gender-expansive services -** services may not support the unique experiences, support needs, and safety requirements
- **Few physically accessible housing units -** limited accessible housing units severely limit womens options to leave violence

Systemic Trauma

- **Criminalization and institutionalization -** limited transitional housing creates barriers to safe transitions out of institutions and increases women's vulnerability to violence
- **Child Welfare involvement -** fear of disclosing experiences of violence and punitive agency actions
- **Children and youth in care -** lack of support of skills to live independently create additional vulnerabilities for housing insecurity and exploitation

To access the full research report visit
https://www.ywcahalifax.com/advocacy/our-research/

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