

The Visibly Invisible
An Introductory Exploration of the Nuanced
Experiences of Homeless Women in Kelowna
and the Role of Student Activists

Lead Author: Dela Hini
Co-Authors: Florence Belanger-Jones,
Sydney Neumeier, and Nishat Tasnim



Produced In Association With The Pink Backpack Project at UBC Okanagan

Citation Style: APA

Introduction

Readers need not search far to understand that the experiences of women (or gendered and non-binary bodies as a whole) are distinctly different from that of (cis-gendered) men (take for instance, the works of Judith Butler, Candace & Zimmerman, or Joan Acker on how gender is constructed, performed, and experienced). When it comes to homelessness, an individual's body is already viewed as a neutral site- they are all poor, unsheltered, unwanted, and preferably unseen by the public. As such, it follows suite that homelessness is often viewed without respect to gender, race, citizenship or any form of an intersectional lens. A lack of an intersectional understanding of homelessness, however, is no longer satisfactory, as metropolitan cities seek to address their own homeless crisis. To address such a complex issue, one requires a complex understanding of the people who are being affected. Homelessness in itself is often viewed as a gender-neutral problem, despite evidence indicating that homeless women experience challenges which are significantly more aggressive than their male counterparts (Sikich, 2018:148). One such challenge is that of period poverty, which is the inability to sustainably purchase menstrual hygiene products (Kuhlmann, et al, 2019:241), and this issue has garnered increased attention in recent years as a growing human rights and public health concern (Kuhlmann, et at, 2019: 238). In the city of Kelowna, homelessness is a highly visible and growing issue (Seymour, 2020), and as of 2018, women made up 31% of this population (City of Kelowna, Technical Report, 2018:6). Kelowna is a site of interest in this paper, because (1) it has been noted as being one of the most unaffordable housing markets in Canada (Demographia 2015), (2) the top story of 2019 in Kelowna was on homelessness (Seymour, 2020), and (3) the University of British Columbia's

Okanagan Campus's positionality in the heart of a housing insecure market makes it a key stakeholder as a potential change agent in the city's homeless narrative. As a site of interest, there is very little available primary research on the experiences of homeless persons in Kelowna, let alone homeless women. As such, in order to gain a general understanding of the homeless issue, which will then be applied to our analysis of Kelowna and UBCO, we will draw from international sources. This paper aims to introduce readers to the homeless issue in Kelowna, with special interest on the painful realities of female homelessness, and outline how and why UBCO should be a change agent in Kelowna's homeless crisis. In doing so, this paper also wishes to present and challenge the gendered norms in homeless discourse which reproduce the marginalization of homeless women.

Human Rights and The Feminization of Homelessness

In a 2001 study on the reproductive health of homeless adolescent women in Seattle, Washington, Josephine Ensign found that "societies overlook and do not address the basic needs and rights of young women" (Ensign, 2001:134). Through a series of semi-structured interviews, Ensign gathered information on how homeless adolescent women coped with health issues, pregnancy, contraception, and homelessness overall. On the topic of health issues, the participants noted that handling menstruation was especially difficult while homeless (Ensign, 2001:141,147). A 21-year-old participant discussed having to choose between food or tampons (and opting for the tampons) in order to take care of herself; another woman shared that she resorted to using cleaning sponges in place of menstrual hygiene products because of their reusability and affordability; and others shared the necessity of theft in order to make up for the

lack of accessible menstrual hygiene products offered to homeless women (Ensign, 2001:141). For a quarter of the women in Ensign's study, the likelihood of serious infection or other health problems was increased by their lack of access to menstrual hygiene products, and further escalated by their self-treatment when infections did arise (Ensign, 2001:142). In Winkler and Roaf's 2014 article on the need to address menstrual hygiene for the sake of gender equality, it was also found that "a higher incidence of reproductive tract infections" was found among low-income women who experienced "inadequate menstrual hygiene management" (8). However, despite the existing, yet small, evidence that poor menstrual hygiene management negatively impacts a woman's health, there is a "lack of importance given to this issue", and the result is that "homeless women, women living in informal settlements, prisoners, women with disabilities, or sex workers may experience aggravated challenges in meeting their menstrual hygiene needs" (House, Mahon, and Cavill cited by Winkler & Roaf, 2014:8,10).

All of the above issues point to a larger problem within the development sector, which House, Mahon, and Cavill (2012) called a "lack of systematic [research] analysing the impact of menstrual hygiene and resources for sharing best practices" (257). House et al attribute the lack of adequate feminine hygiene products to the fact that "women and girls are often excluded from decision making and management in development and emergency relief programmes" (House et al., 2012:257), and Winkler & Roaf note that "menstrual hygiene continues to receive limited attention in policies, research priorities, programs, and resource allocation" (2014:11). Such a lack of attention to the menstrual hygiene needs of low-income and homeless women follows the

trend of gender-neutral programming and resource management which cater to a broad-base of homeless persons, whilst failing to meet the specific and gendered needs of homeless women.

This trend in excluding menstruation from the conversation around resource management for homeless persons also alludes to the stigma that exists around both menstruation and period poverty. The female form is most palatable to the public when it is sexualized under the male-gaze, and far less enticing when it is a beacon pointing to the need for increased gender equality. As such, issues which are unsexy and female-specific are seldom acknowledged en masse. Winkler & Roaf found that “the status of a menstruating women- as an inherently female characteristic- is linked to her devaluation”, and that “menstruation goes against ‘feminine’ attributes” (2014:4). These attributes are “deeply influenced by gender stereotypes” (Winkler & Roaf, 2014:4), and when faced with the immense pressure to act according to gendered norms, many women internalize the stigma around menstruation, describing that they feel dirty, unclean, and ashamed of their menstruation (Winkler & Roaf, 2014:36). As a result, the stereotypes around femininity and the taboo associated with menstruation create a sense of embarrassment and aversion to discussing menstrual hygiene, thus “hinder[ing] the development of adequate solutions for ensuring good menstrual hygiene practices, [and] giving the issue a low priority among policy-makers” (Winkler & Roaf, 2014:6)

With the growing critique of inadequate gender-sensitive practices in the development sector, the United Nations has finally spoken against the lack of attention to menstrual hygiene concerns. In 2014 the “UN Human Rights Council acknowledged...for the first time, that the lack of menstrual hygiene management and the stigma associated with menstruation have a negative

impact on gender equality” (UN Human Rights Council cited by Winkler & Roaf, 2014:13). This resolution, although long overdue, is revolutionary in the way it will cause policy-makers, practitioners, and even the general public to reconceptualize the importance of menstrual hygiene as a human rights issue, both in the development sector and society overall.

Homelessness and the City of Kelowna

The City of Kelowna is a unique site to observe homelessness, with its perpetually unaffordable housing market and growing homeless crisis. In order to mitigate the homeless issue, the city has created “The Journey Home Strategy” which is a 5-year plan to address homelessness, fitted with actionable items, thorough consultation from key stakeholders and formerly homeless persons, and even a commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous communities (City of Kelowna, Community Report, 2018). The city’s acknowledgement of a homeless crisis via the Journey Home Strategy is a necessary step in creating sustainable and effective change in the quality of life for its homeless population. Likewise, it sets a precedence for other small and mid-sized Canadian cities regarding how and why they should take systematic means to address their own struggles with homelessness. However, following the first year of the Journey Home Strategy’s implementation, the top story of the year in Kelowna printed in *The Daily Courier* was on “homelessness”. The article notes the unmet fentanyl crisis, a lack of drug-intervention programs, and unmet mental health needs as contributing to the spike in the city’s homeless population (Seymour, 2020). Journey Home was critiqued by one of its spokespersons for not paying “enough attention to the needs of those people it was focused on helping”, which alludes to a division in opinion regarding best practices for addressing the cities homeless crisis (Seymour, 2020). Concerns around ineffective strategic planning was further

escalated when on November 26, 2019, law enforcement descended on Leon Ave (an area of downtown Kelowna frequented by homeless persons seeking temporary tent shelters) and relocated the approximate 100 tenters due to their presence presenting a “public safety hazard” (Seymour, 2020). Fortunately, the tenters were relocated to an encampment in Recreation Park where water, public toilets, and other basic needs were provided (Seymour, 2020). Now, as we enter the second year since the launch of the Journey Home Strategy, the question remains: what will the sustainable and effective mitigation of the homeless crisis in Kelowna look like?

The Role of the Student Activist

The Journey Home: Technical report contains a list of many key stakeholders, consisting of organizations and agencies who are potential partners already delivering services to populations who are homeless and at risk of being homeless (City of Kelowna, Technical Report, 2018:64). One such potential partner is UBC-Okanagan. Societal perceptions of menstruation are still at odds with a woman’s recognized human right to manage her menstruation with dignity, and UBC-Okanagan is in a unique position to help in changing that narrative as it applies to Kelowna’s homeless crisis. Currently, a research cluster made up of an interdisciplinary team has been made to research the topic of “homeless”, including impacts of stigma, in order to create innovative solutions. This research cluster, which is one of many on the UBCO campus geared toward creating sustainable change through research excellence, is working closely with Journey Home in order to address the homeless issue. However, this research cluster is notably comprised of professors, from both UBCO and partnering universities, which begs the question: where are the students and how can they support Kelowna’s homeless population?

In the fall of 2018, unaware of the Journey Home Strategy or a budding research cluster on homelessness, the Pink Backpack Project was born. This philanthropic endeavor of the also newly established Arts and Sciences Students association had a simple goal: provide products that are difficult for marginalized women to acquire. In so doing, the Pink Backpack Project creates care packages filled with sanitary products, cosmetics, toiletries, and even used clothing, which are then distributed to at-risk women by Kelowna's H.O.P.E. Outreach. As a student-led initiative, the Pink Backpack Project is unique to Kelowna in that it is not a registered charity, it has no board members, or even an office. Instead, it is an ambitious and strained project, with planning occurring at the kitchen tables of university students, and funding secured not because it is an official campus club, but because it is affiliated with an underdeveloped course union. As a social intervention tool, the Pink Backpack Project succeeds in bringing awareness to the female experience of homelessness, and since its launch, a growing number of students have agreed to volunteer their time to create care packages and lead the project's programming. However, like any new student-led project, the Pink Backpack Project is volatile and in need of stronger administrative support if it is going to succeed in creating a truly effective and sustainable impact on the barriers faced by Kelowna's homeless female population.

The role of the student activist in this capacity is as simple as the goals of the Pink Backpack Project: keep asking questions. Keep asking questions to the City of Kelowna, keep asking questions to the university, and keep asking questions to fellow students about what an ideal Kelowna would look like. For members of the Pink Backpack Project, an ideal Kelowna takes into account the needs of every person and creates programming which can equitably and sustainably address those needs. Regarding the experiences of homeless women, the student

activist can start to create change by changing how they themselves view at-risk populations. In his article on the Kelowna homeless crisis, Seymour states that “the homeless are talked about endlessly, but it's a conversation in which they are often mute” (2020). Within the structure of academia, students and professors are not allowed to talk to at-risk persons for research purposes, due to ethics implications. This ethics mandate excludes at-risk persons from conversations which they have a right to be a part of, for the sake of protecting them from potential exploitation by researchers. The implications of this mandate are beyond the scope of this paper, however, it does allude to an institutional barrier which limits the ways in which at-risk persons, who are the most important stakeholders in any crisis, can and should be included in the conversation. For the less radical student activist, it remains that curiosity and participation in volunteer programs which serve at-risk persons is the best way to help in dismantling systemic issues of oppression.

Conclusion

The Pink Backpack Project, Kelowna’s Journey Home Strategy, and the UBCO research cluster on homeless all have one thing in common: they are striving to address the homeless crisis in Kelowna. The Journey Home Strategy is a necessary step in tackling the homeless crisis, however, it’s recent pitfalls indicate that more work is needed on the part of all stakeholders. As a visibly-invisible population, Kelowna’s homeless women are likely to be overlooked in policy-making, and so initiatives like the Pink Backpack Project and H.O.P.E. Outreach are imperative to mitigating the gendered experiences of homelessness. Once ignored, homelessness and period poverty are growing human rights concerns which no modern city has the luxury of disregarding. The homeless problem in Kelowna is everyone’s problem, because we are all

contributors to this housing market and we are all part of the social consciousness which has produced and reproduced stigmas toward homeless persons in the city. Addressing this problem, and creating gender-sensitive programs, is not a matter of altruism, but of necessity if the City of Kelowna is going to maintain an adequate quality of life for all of its inhabitants.

Citations

City of Kelowna (2018). *Kelowna Journey Home Strategy: Community Report*. Retrieved from:
https://www.kelowna.ca/sites/files/1/docs/community/Journey-Home/journeyhome_communityreport_web.pdf

City of Kelowna (2018). *Kelowna Journey Home Strategy: Technical Report*. Retrieved from:
https://www.kelowna.ca/sites/files/1/docs/journey_home_technical_report.pdf

Ensign, J. “Reproductive Health of Homeless Adolescent Women in Seattle, Washington, USA”.
Women & Health, vol. 31, 2001, p. 133-151.

House, H., Mahon, T., Cavill, S. “Menstrual hygiene matters: a resource for improving menstrual hygiene around the world”. *Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 21, no. 41, 2013, p. 257-259.

Kuhlmann, A. S., Bergquist, E P., Danjoint, D., Wall, L. L. “Unmet menstrual hygiene needs among low-income women”. *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, vol. 133, no. 2, 2019.

Performance Urban Planning (2015) *11th Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey: 2015, Ratings for Metropolitan Markets*. Retrieved from:
<http://www.demographia.com/dhi2015.pdf>

Seymour, Ron (2020). Top Kelowna Story of 2019: Homelessness. *The Daily Courier*. Retrieved

from:

http://www.kelownadailycourier.ca/news/article_8b702c00-2b52-11ea-abb0-97a3cdd3a067.html

Sikich, K. W. "Global female homelessness: A multi-faceted problem". *Gender Issues*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2008, p. 147-156.

Winkler, I., Roaf, V. "Taking the Bloody Linen out of the closet: Menstrual hygiene as a priority for achieving gender equality". *Cardozo Journal of Law & Gender*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2014, p. 1-38. HeinOnline.