

## **Pay the Rent or Feed the Kids? Tough Choices**

Roselle Miko and Shirley Thompson

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If you had to choose between paying the rent or feeding the kids, what would you choose? For Louise and Charmaine, two Aboriginal women living in poverty and poor housing in Winnipeg, Manitoba, these are their daily life choices (names, locations, and personal identifying information have been removed to protect the identities of the women.). Both women ranked affordable housing as their main priority, closely followed by food for their children. For these women, everything, including access to services such as affordable food and transportation, community, and maintaining some control over their lives revolves around affordable housing. Their stories are those of many Aboriginal women throughout Canada and especially in Manitoba.

### **Poverty and Housing**

In Canada, poverty is often viewed as gender neutral. Consequently, policies do not reflect “the feminization of poverty.” Statistics Canada indicates that 17.56% of Canadian women as opposed to 13.27% of Canadian men are impoverished. Canadian women work more and receive less, undertaking the majority of unpaid work, including caring for children and people who are sick, averaging only 63% of Canadian men’s wages.

Aboriginal families led by single mothers fare the worst. The income of female, one-parent, no-earner families on government assistance fell from \$15,408 in 1993 to \$13,373 in 1997 with the deterioration of the “social safety net.” Manitoba has the highest female poverty rates in Canada, with 40% of the general female population experiencing poverty. The link between poverty, gender and being Aboriginal is worrying. Aboriginal women are more likely to live in poverty than non-Aboriginal women or Aboriginal men. Statistics Canada figures from 1995 indicate that 43% of Aboriginal women lived in poverty compared to 35% of Aboriginal men, 27% of non-Aboriginal women and 16% of non-Aboriginal men.

Aboriginal families and their children tend to be over-represented among the poor. Winnipeg has the largest proportion of Aboriginal people of any urban centre in Canada. In 1991, 35% of Winnipeg’s Aboriginal households with children lived in poverty. Winnipeg’s housing situation is critical. Currently, Manitoba Housing Authority has more than 3,000 people on waiting lists for its 8,000 rent subsidized housing units. Where are the poor to go for housing?

### **Louise’s Story**

Moving three times in the last year, Louise and her three small children have been unable to find stable, safe, and affordable housing. Before being homeless for two weeks, Louise was living in a house that was eventually condemned, a place that lacked heat and was full of rodents. *“Even the toilet bowl in our place had ice frozen over it... and I was getting sick of living like that...being cold and running*

away from mice...” For this house, lacking in basic sanitation and heat, Louise paid \$500 per month, \$70 over her rent budget, with the extra money extracted from her food money. *“I was living on \$225 [for food] with 3 kids and 2 adults.”* When the Public Health Authority condemned this privately owned house, Louise was terrified because she had to leave immediately: *“I was so scared, I was crying to my worker...where the hell am I supposed to go? It was stressful. I wouldn’t wish that on anybody, especially with children.”* Thus began two long weeks of living in a shelter. Louise spent the days at her casual job and her evenings searching in Winnipeg’s subzero February weather for accommodations that fit her 430 dollars a month housing allowance. *“When I was homeless, my worker wanted me to take anything. I’d rather be homeless than to live over there [north end]. I fear for myself to step out the door and for my children, mostly for my son.”*

In her current home of six months, Louise looks back on the effects unstable housing had on her children, *“often the children ask me, ‘mommy is this our home?’ I think it is traumatizing for them because they don’t know where they are going to wake up.”* Louise looks out over the tiny front yard of her home and wishes there were playgrounds nearby. Even though this house is no dream house, she says, *“I like it compared to the other houses. We have a private entrance....”*

### **Charmaine’s Story**

Charmaine has also moved several times during the past year, including moving out of a housing co-op. They would not renew her term because she is Indian. She felt uncomfortable living in the co-op because of the discrimination she faced and the lack of other low-income earners. Her next move was to a less desirable situation where she stayed only a short time, *“that was awful... unsafe...I wouldn’t wish anybody to live there.... Some people tried to kick our door in. I didn’t want my son walking to school.”* It was also infested with mice and was too small for four children and two adults.

Escaping from an abusive relationship, Charmaine had to relocate again, saying that while Manitoba Housing kept her next home well maintained, it was in *“a bad area...lots of noise, people that are drunk,...and someone tried to crawl through my living room window...”* For a woman overcoming a history of alcohol and physical abuse, the situation was unbearable and she was quickly relocated because of her abusive ex-partner.

Both Charmaine and Louise agree that finding affordable housing in Winnipeg is a struggle, particularly when you have large families. According to Louise, *“There is not enough housing, especially for big families. There are no 4 or 5-bedroom houses. When there are 4 or 5-bedrooms, it’s in the roughest neighbourhood. I wouldn’t even dream of living there.”*

### **The Hard Truth**

Housing costs are a large portion of household budgets and housing is a factor that influences health. Maximum allowable rent rates, as set by Manitoba Family Services, are as follows:

Household	Basic Rent	Rent including Utilities
2 people	\$285	\$387
3 people	\$310	\$430
4 people	\$351	\$471

According to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation’s October 2003 figures, the average cost of a 2-bedroom apartment in Winnipeg was \$645. When compared to the set allowances above, rents are unaffordable for all families on assistance. These high rents cause instability. Families are always

searching for cheaper housing and have to pay for moving. Children have to switch schools often - sometimes in mid-year. This hurts their social and academic development. The children and their families lose their community support systems when they move too far from their networks. While the “new” accommodation may be cheaper, it may also be more crowded or less safe in more run down neighbourhoods. Cheaper housing is often further from services such as laundromats and grocery stores. This increases transportation costs. The constant moving and searching for cheaper housing is emotionally draining and stressful. Together, these impacts are a result of the lack of affordable, healthy housing and contribute to the deterioration in women and children’s health.

Households in core need of social housing are households who pay more than 30% of their household income for shelter and utilities. In Manitoba, approximately 32% or 36,000 households spend more than 30% on housing and utilities. According to the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, on average, these households are using 42.3% of their incomes on housing. As more Manitoba families fall into poverty, the need for adequate, affordable housing will increase. The long-term costs of not providing enough, affordable housing will reflect itself in higher health care usage and more demands on all social services. Therefore, the provincial and federal governments need to get back into building alternative housing such as co-op housing, and investing to renovate and revitalize neighbourhoods.

Louise and Chairmaine's lives clearly show the close relation between poor housing and low incomes. In turn research has clearly established the close correlation between low income and poor health. Thus Aboriginal women, living in poor housing - which in itself carries certain health risks (inadequate heat, drafts, humidity, molds, potentially hazardous construction defects) - and being low income earners puts them at risk of TB, diabetes, obesity. This increases the amount of health services required by themselves and their children.

Safe and affordable housing is a basic human right. Why isn't Manitoba and Canada giving poor women, particularly Aboriginal women, and the country's children a chance for a secure and healthy life?

**For more information:**

Prairie Women’s Centre of Excellence, <http://www.pwhce.ca/>.

and The Winnipeg Housing and Homelessness Initiative <http://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/housing/wghi.html>

Roselle would like to thank Louise and Charmaine for telling her their stories and letting her share them with a wider audience.

**Bios:**

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