



THE RIGHT TO HOUSING

Housing Language, Housing Reality?

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The wording of United Nations Declarations and Covenants are reflections of women's lack of housing rights under the rule of patriarchal institutions.

In 1948, the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states in Article 25 that:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control (emphasis added).

Continuing with a focus on the right to housing, in 1966, the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights was adopted and opened for signatures of supporting countries. Article 11 reads:

The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international co-operation based on free consent (emphasis added).

It has been argued that the gender bias in such rights documents is trivial and that it is only a reflection of language, not social limitations. Yet, as experienced most vividly by the grassroots poor, it is truly a reflection of social limitations. What follows are two recent poems from poor women expressing their lack of housing rights. The first poem is by

Women for Change in Toronto, Canada. The second is from *Shelter for Us* (1987), and was written by community women in Bombay, India.

Poem I

Carol, you were cut down. Our Canada told you what you should be as woman and then cut away all those chances of being that woman. Never called by name, just: Woman your belly must grow from seed to birth but Children's Aid will uproot your young ones, your tender saplings. Woman you must grow into relationship with men but we will let them break and splinter your limbs, your soul. Woman you must cover yourself with the colours of the vibrant forest but the wintry coldness of your welfare cheque will leave you bare and embarrassed. Woman you must be barefoot, pregnant and get into that kitchen but you cannot have a home, such shelter bears little fruit for the landowner.

Poem II

*I had a home
my father's home.
But they told me I would be married
out soon
and couldn't call it my own.
I had another home
my husband's home.
But they told me he possessed it for
he earned
and I couldn't call it my own.
Today I am out on the street
two homes I had stayed in.
Two homes I had cleaned and
nurtured and cared for
but only till chosen so by a man.
Two homes — not mine — I had
stayed in.
Today I am out on the street.
Where
tell me where
is a shelter of my own?*

