

Gimme Shelter in 2006

A Personal and Political Account of the Women's Shelter Movement

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Dans cet article, l'auteure fait des remarques respectueuses et émet des opinions sur les maisons d'hébergement en Ontario, basées sur son expérience personnelle et politique après avoir vécu et travaillé dans ces maisons pendant presque 20 ans,

In this article, I will make respectful observations and put forward some opinions about the women's shelter movement in Ontario, and particularly in Toronto. The content is based on my personal and political experience of living and working in women's shelters for almost 20 years. I do not pretend to define or analyze all that is problematic, and I absolutely intend to celebrate and honor what has been accomplished and the women who brought it about, especially those who have experienced violence.

I have tried to differentiate between, and discuss, the core culture of the shelter movement versus the theory and clinical definitions currently imposed upon, and/or embraced by many shelters. I tried not to differentiate between women who use shelters, and those who work in them in terms of contribution and ownership, although it is clear that poverty, agency and control separate the two groups.

I will ask questions—but not necessarily answer them—about the realities of shelter life and what appears to be our evolution (or decline) into privatization. Along with others, I am concerned that profit-based models of enterprise and business efficacy have become the new touchstone in women's services. I fear that it is only a matter of time before shelters are privatized—a road which, once embarked on, travels one way—with few detours.¹

Originally designed to serve as a transition point and place for women escaping male violence in their relationships, the shelter movement was built on, and in solidarity with, the (often battered) backs of those women and their children. It belonged to them, to us, and provided short-term support for women attempting to escape male violence. Today, the women who use shelters and their

children are doubly and triply impacted through racism and poverty. In fact, in reality, in 2006, the main concern of women who enter shelters is their homelessness. But we seem to be a society in denial of homelessness as a female gendered issue. Legal and social definitions of poverty, historical denial of violence against women as epidemic, increased and vicious government cuts to services, are just some of the systemic cause and effect issues we must acknowledge. And that's a lot to take in. It will require more time and thought, maybe some additional education to effect change. Throw in the life-shattering circumstances of fleeing violence as a sole support single mom, and the disconnect between male violence and homelessness as a women's issue widens. The average home owner or tax payer not affected by these circumstances who reads about them is conveniently overwhelmed by what appears to be just too many problems which cannot be contained in sound bites and political rhetoric. Or, they are simply understood as misfortune through bad choices, which the woman has brought upon herself.

For me, for all of us, it is an issue of economic equality through and through—and as it ever was—smeared now by paternalistic ideologies that are legal, medical and social in nature, embedded with racism, torn through by sexism and misogyny. And, as if that were not enough, there is a new piece, another component we must name. Shelter workers themselves and their lack of analyses and understanding of the systemic nature of economic inequality have become part of the problem. A part that we are reluctant even fearful to address—even amongst ourselves.

In 1987 I was a young, Black woman of bi-racial heritage a mother, forced to leave my home to seek safety from my husband's violence in a woman's shelter. I was one of the lucky ones. I was saved by a movement, an escape route not unlike the underground railroad on which my ancestors traveled to freedom. The women who worked in the shelter treated me like the phoenix I was,

and supported me as I rose from the pain and confusion of my life. Their movement asked only one thing of me: that if possible, I give back what had been given to me—information, resources and feminist political thought—that might empower other women who found themselves in circumstances similar to mine. It was a fine bargain.

Today I work in a women's shelter in the city of Toronto. I was hired into my first shelter job because of the recognition that women such as I, with a lived experience of shelter life, a feminist, anti-racist political analysis, and of course a relevant work history and qualifications were best suited for shelter work. A true rendering of the "personal is political" adage, although current hiring practices no longer encourage women of similar backgrounds to apply. Indeed the stigma of a past or current shelter life keeps women from self identifying, although it might allow them a token position on a Board of Directors.

In my first job as a shelter worker, we were a collective of 14 women who worked the front-line and managed the whole organization. I always tell people I was lucky then, too, because a critical component of my job consisted of in-house feminist training or consciousness raising that was ongoing and reflective of change. I was not expected to know it all. I observed, absorbed, and was mentored by women I respected—and with respect. I learned the golden rule that the woman who was the survivor/resident/client knew what was best for her and her family. My job was to assist her in her process. I was not judge, spiritualist, therapist, doctor, or confidante. I was baptized into a climate and culture of social justice that recognized personal growth as a work ethic and did not make distinctions between my work and growth, and that of the women who lived in the shelter. We strived to acknowledge issues of power, privilege, and agency and there was room to fall forward when we erred. I watched and learned as women were empowered. Although I was aware of the inadequacies in the temporary housing they received, I knew that any housing at all was like freedom calling to them. Later I saw some of them return and then saw their children return to us in following years.

The Mike Harris era undid much of what we had accomplished and the doors of our shelter revolved even more as our waiting lists grew. I watched as a lot of the "old guard"—women with integrity and politics, women who had taught me, left—tired and wanting more for themselves, more than the collective structure could give. I saw them replaced by women with talk not walk, and watched collectively run shelters fall. One after the other. We modified our structure to stay current and in compliance with government funding.

Me? I was still happy, I was grateful. I could be an out lesbian, I could afford my kids prescriptions and sometimes their runners, I wasn't forced to wear a suit. I met women from all over the world. I continued to benefit from a work environment that included learning new

skills and training. I knew women who came to us injured and maimed and I saw some of them die. I marched, rallied, lobbied, attended fundraisers, and shelter meetings and I heard the new regulations which did not address the new user's realities. I watched as we were mandated to mediate welfare moms into shitty jobs known as workfare. And we continued to place women and their children into inadequate social housing.

And then one day it hit me, things coalesced. Bang! Right between the ears and in my heart. The contradictions became clear. My shelter and others were function-

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ing as businesses. Big business, major employers, training facilities, a permanent and thriving sector that required women such as myself to experience violence and others to provide them with temporary solutions. I started to ask myself some tough questions.

Shelter life is very hard. It has not been upgraded or shifted much since my days living in one. Except that the hope that I found is not as available. Punitive rules and a misplaced sense of ownership and authority have prevented that from happening. We seem to have willfully forgotten that women who use shelter services are grown-ups, able to function as such, who must suddenly, through no fault of their own, live and deal with strangers, keep curfews, be denied access to simple daily necessities, have all movements monitored, and generally live as dependants in an extremely controlled environment. All of this determined by shelter management now accountable to funders and stakeholders worried and motivated by liability under state mandated regulations.

Well it's 2006 and we need to upgrade. We need to remember where we came from and who benefits when the interests of the women who use our services are trumped by ours, and by those of the institutions that fund us.

In order to perhaps effect a bit of that, there are a number of questions and statements I want to put out. I will attempt to address some of them, but do not pretend to locate myself as holding the answers. That would be folly and premature. To change, to progress, and to upgrade will require a conscious and accountable process that allows us to name current barriers and inadequacies without shame or blame. That could begin by thinking about some of the following. This is by no means a complete list and I invite the reader to add to it and to be mindful that I am not referring to the shelter as a homog-

enous site. Nor to the women who work there as a single group, or feminist, or entity.

The guidelines, terminology, and mandates set out by municipal, provincial and federal governments regarding shelter governance, can be, and are, interpreted differently by different shelters. This has resulted in contradictions in service delivery that might include for example, when and if Children's Protective Services are called in, internal policies regarding curfews, case management, use of the telephone, amounts spent on food, access to offices, wages, job qualifications, and the decisions to engage—or

reflect the culture of women especially First Nations, immigrant, women of colour, and Black women? What about the LGBTQ communities?

I believe that it is in our interest to remain true to models of service design and provision that are woman centered. The current bombshell issue of transgendered politics has the power to bleed us into a gender-neutral model of services that does not work for people who use our agencies. This subject cannot, and will not, be settled well—or at all—in the courts. It is our responsibility, our job, to address it respectfully, with care and in a fully

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not—in public social justice and policy work. Procedures, policies and practices once shared by all shelters seem to be shifting in some agencies to corporate models of decision making, information keeping and regulations that foster competition for already scarce funding. This has resulted in the good shelter /bad shelter dichotomy favouring the business approach that cooperates with and uses government dictates and language versus a feminist social analysis approach that recognizes the specificity of women's poverty. Certainly there are business oriented policies and procedures which benefit the shelter and in which we are wise to invest but not—as has happened—at the expense of feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppression training, analysis and practice.

Who benefits from the unionization of shelters? The practice of forming small member locals under one parent union does not work in the best interests of the burgeoning shelter industry. Where is the power in forming one 18-worker local versus the formation of one or two locals that all shelters can join? When negotiating a collective agreement for instance, five to ten shelters' bargaining under the same local has an impact that a lone agency does not. Sure the parent union might bring out other locals to support them at the time, but that is not consistent. The present approach is scattered and mish-mashed with the advantage held by an adversarial divide and conquer framework that serves no one. The current system of unionization does not address or allow for the retention of high-skilled workers or the hiring of skilled women who represent the user population. Instead they are pitted against each other under the sacred mantra of seniority. And on that topic, where are the provisions for women workers who enter senior years? Where are the pensions? What if they have served the shelter community primarily as relief workers? How does the labour movement itself

informed manner. In addition, we must ask ourselves how genetic men fit in. Should they be in positions of managerial and executive power, especially in the absence of a demonstrated pro-feminist analysis? Certainly healthy role modeling and fundraising are areas in which men can perform well and should be encouraged. The current debates and controversy around these issues are critical. In practice so far they are contributing to a de-gendering of the shelter movement.

Another critical piece is how shelters address and relate to women who work in the sex trades. Possibly it is time that we listen to what those women are telling us as opposed to constantly defining their experience for them.

The internal and external culture of shelters has changed dramatically from the concept of white, middle-class women who stayed for two weeks to set things up and then moved on, to women who are extremely impoverished, immigrants, refugees, and non-English speaking with no where to move. The victim response to violence, with the expectation of assistance based on helplessness due to language barriers or a lack of understanding of how the Canadian systems function, has been replaced by a survivor model of user who is already empowered and not there to make friends, seek therapy, or counseling. They demand and deserve instead, real life practical solutions and economic resolutions to get what they already know they need. Second generation shelter users, of which there are many, are knowledgeable of what is available to them and have high expectations. They often have more knowledge of how to manage within the system than some shelter workers.

Women employed in shelter work need training on the impact of trauma. Current interpretations of feminist concepts of violence do not include the manner in which trauma can manifest itself—emotionally and otherwise.

The physiology of night terrors, insomnia, addiction, and self-mutilation for example is not contained or understood in today's practices of crisis intervention counseling and crisis management.

We must shift our personal lens to focus on the reality that the shelter is not owned by or inhabited by the workers. It is rather the home of the women who use it and we, the workers, are paid to come into that place to share information and provide services. We seem to have lost that concept with the professionalization of our services, which has resulted in an "us versus them" mentality between women living in the shelter and those employed there. Clinical social work approaches have further contributed to what are experienced as paternalistic, medicalized and patronizing work styles and ethics. A 2006 analysis that defines shelter workers as employees with distinct class advantages who are obligated to provide quality services is required. (A business model might describe this as high-level customer skills.) This is not to say that there needn't be boundaries and codes of conduct all around, but surely it is time, we must make the time, to discuss the problems to which we have contributed.

What is the role of governance in a shelter? Shelters are constructed to rely on a Board of Directors composed of women volunteers who share their skills and expertise and are legally responsible for all interactions and transactions within the organization. In 2006 we are no longer mobilized to rely on or expect the good will of volunteers. Perhaps women should be paid for their work-especially in areas of governance where they hold liability.

An environmental scan and social justice models that focus on social and economic global polices which link violence to poverty, immigration, housing, and childcare must be embraced. We seldom see poverty recognized as a main issue when we set out our yearly goals in strategic planning. When an individual woman comes in and we provide her services, how are we impacting on the broader issue of poverty and homelessness? Does providing one bed to a single woman impact on the bigger issue of the feminization of poverty? Does it contribute to it? Originally, anti-violence workers in shelters and rape crisis centers engaged in what was called consciousness-raising. Government cuts, business models, and post-modern analyses saw that sort of ongoing feminist training and practice slowly but surely disappear from day-to-day functioning and interactions between workers and the women who use the shelter. Most managers no longer require a feminist analysis of prospective employees. It is sometimes not necessary to have a demonstrated commitment to anti-racism, or an understanding of lesbophobia and homophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-Islamism, classism, or ableism. And these life-forming and altering topics are not adequately addressed in the curriculum of schools of social work. The challenge now seems to be how to raise consciousness about raising consciousness.

On the ground, social justice work that includes partici-

pation in political demonstrations and strategies, advocacy for individual women as well as larger systemic issues through emails, letter writing, and posterizing hardly exists anymore. What was once considered standard practice to empower and educate women has been all but criminalized. With only a handful of shelters doing such work we have lost ground that we might not be able to reclaim.

Perhaps we must study and expand upon the concept of independent living as we have seen produced in assisted living for people with disabilities or for seniors. In these structures, people have their own apartments within a building with tenant rights, and can utilize additional services as needed. Maybe what shelters refer to as second-stage housing is a close compromise, but they are subject to severe government controls and are constantly under the threat of loss of funding. The minimum four to six months it requires to access housing can result in the institutionalization of women and their children as they wait in the shelter.

Second stage should be first stage.

I end this where I began, without answers or solutions but with questions and hope. Which is not the worst place to be, but we had better start crafting some answers and solutions or privatization will be our next stop. And the true nature and purpose of the women's shelter movement will be a romantic footnote in our collective history.

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¹Privatization in this paper refers to a transfer of funding and services from government to the business and corporate sector. Eyal Kimel, in a recent article entitled, "Labour Relations Practices of Non-profits Acting as For-Profit: An Explainable Dissonance," argues that over the last ten years government has decreased its funding to non-profit organizations such as women's shelters, forcing managers in many of these agencies to seek funding dollars from private businesses and corporations. Part of the stipulation of funding from the private sector is an expectation that non-profits will adopt to what Kimel refers to as "a corporate discourse of efficiency" (13).

References

Kimel, Eyal "Labour Relations Practices of Non-profits Acting as For-Profit: An Explainable Dissonance." *Labour* 8: (Spring 2006): 10-23.