

HOMELESS WOMEN AND FREEDOM OF CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the issue of freedom of choice as it relates to women who chronically use hostels for single women in Toronto. The paper reviews the systemic and "personal" factors which underlie the homelessness of some women and examines the conditions in which transient women live while a part of the hostel circuit. Finally, the paper discusses the physical and psychological needs which hostels meet for such women even as they limit the range of their patrons' areas of self-determination. It is concluded that any concept of "freedom of choice" for homeless women must be viewed within a context of extreme caution.

INTRODUCTION

Hostels have rapidly become a feature of the social landscape of the 1980s in many, if not all, of the countries of the Western world. An economic decline, its attendant unemployment, cutbacks in social services, and the inflationary costs of housing and food have combined to make the most vulnerable groups among us more visible (McLaughlin, 1987, p. 1). These are the people who, because of a combination of personal and structural factors, are the most easily endangered during periods of economic hardship. With prosperity and sufficient housing, they are, on the whole, capable of independence. Their vulnerability is caused by their lack of control over larger economic forces. These forces determine that precarious balance upon which their dependence or independence hinges (Advisory Committee to the Minister on the International Year for Shelter of the Homeless [IYSH], 1988).

People who remain homeless over a long period of time become "transient." The material and psychological effects of this condition are profound:

[Homeless people] lose personal property that is hard to move and begin to limit their belongings to what they can carry. Their social and familial relationships are strained or broken. They become increasingly dependent on the social service system for food, shelter, social space and personal relationships on a day-to-day basis. Because of their "transience," homeless people experience additional problems not faced by those with adequate housing. They are more vulnerable to rape and other forms of violence, to harassment by police, shopkeepers, children and the general public. They are exposed to special laws (against "vagrancy," loitering, and drinking outside) and prone to abrogation of due legal process. They experience blockages when they at-

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tempt to vote, set up a bank account, get credit, get a job, get general welfare assistance, get medical coverage, take care of health problems, keep clean, mate, and build friendships (Single Displaced Persons' Project, 1983, p. 8).

The homeless women who use the hostel system on a chronic basis, contrary to current myth, do not do so as a personal choice. The only element of choice involved is usually between that and the life-threatening alternative of living on the streets. Most view it as the bottom rung on a ladder from which they fear sliding off altogether. The lack of privacy, the institutional regulation, the inability to establish themselves or to plan for the future, the health hazards inherent in such a transient life-style, and the lack of self-worth that it fosters, all combine to make the life of the homeless woman one of physical and emotional hardship.

Their social, political and economic disenfranchisement is reflected in a personal powerlessness which leads to passivity, apathy and disintegration. As society blames the victim, they begin to blame themselves for their poverty ("I got what I deserve"). . . . Among the poorest in our society, homelessness fosters a downward spiral of isolation, defeatism, and self-destructive behaviour (Single Displaced Persons' Project, 1983, p. 9).

This paper, part of a larger research project (see Farge, in press), will focus on the question of the freedom of transient women to "choose their life-style."

METHODOLOGY

After observing the inquest into the death by exposure of Drina Joubert, a transient woman, in the late winter of 1985-86, I became intensely interested in the conditions of life of homeless women. I took a part-time job as a counsellor from October, 1986, to April, 1987, in one of the hostels in downtown Toronto which serves this population. During this period I kept notes about the routines of the hostel, about particular incidents which occurred, my reactions to and reflections upon them, and about particular residents. I also struggled to articulate to myself my own growing understanding of the politics of the hostel system and its place in the larger scheme of our society. After I left my job at the hostel I spent several months considering and writing about the time I had spent there. From this reflection I determined the next phase of my research. I spent several months visiting the four other hostels for single women in downtown Toronto (as well as the one where I had worked). I was able to interview all of the directors, three or four workers in each hostel, and a total of 66 women residents. At the hostel where I had worked I conducted in-depth interviews with the residents (15 in total, each lasting approximately 45 minutes to one hour). Because we knew one another and because they were used to seeing me around, the women did not mind talking with me about personal and painful matters. At the other hostels, the interviews were necessarily more superficial. I deliberately did not seek personal information from the women whom I did not know. I asked them more general questions about the reasons for their homelessness and their experiences at the hostels. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Statements made in this paper are based upon information given to me by my respondents and by women with whom I worked as a counsellor, or are a result of my own observations and experiences as a worker.

CHOOSING THE "TRANSIENT LIFE-STYLE"

"Freedom of choice," as it is exercised by the women who chronically use hostels for single women, is a thorny question because of its political implications. The crown attorney at Drina Joubert's inquest reflected one strand of society's evaluations of homeless women when she sought by various means to prove that these women chose their own "life-styles." This view was echoed by some of the hostel workers and directors whom I interviewed. It was explicitly spelled out by some workers but was implied by many others. One worker said, for example:

There are a lot of women who find that really hard, to take that step beyond the hostel. . . . Anyone who becomes comfortable in a situation will be hesitant to leave it and I do think that the women become comfortable here.

The underlying theme is that transient women have choices which they are not exercising because they have come to like the hostel "life-style," or because they are too lazy to make changes. If the women are, indeed, "free" to move out of the hostel system, then it surely follows that whatever inconveniences the system occasions for them are their own fault. Moreover, the difficulties of the life in the hostels can be viewed as justifiable barbs, intended to goad women into moving on into circumstances which would be better for them. This view has the double advantage of reducing the worker's pain about the conditions under which the residents must live and of salving her own conscience about the part that she herself plays in their difficulties. Moreover, this view gives to the agencies which serve them, a certain justification for maintaining their *modus operandi* (Farge, 1987a). Their more regulatory and punitive aspects can be viewed as encouragement to homeless women to exercise their options and remove themselves from public assistance.

On the other hand, to take a position that women who use hostels are lacking in freedom robs them of all dignity. It reduces them to a state of helpless victimhood. The implications of these two positions must be examined both for the women who use the hostel system and for the system itself. Obviously there are some areas within which transient women do exercise choice. What must be examined are the factors which restrict their ranges of option. "Choice" is a relative term. For transient women it is the presence or the poverty of options rather than outright coercion that determines the degree of control they can exercise in their lives.

CONDITIONS FOR HOMELESSNESS

There are definite gender factors which contribute to the homelessness of some women. The housing needs of lower-income women stem primarily from their difficulty competing in the tight rental market for the smaller number of units which have been available in the last 10 years. Female heads of households are twice as likely to be tenants, not home owners, than are male heads of households (McClain & Doyle, 1984). Women are vulnerable in this regard for a number of reasons. The average income of women is about 64% that of men. Single-parent families are overwhelmingly likely to be female-led and poor (Klowdowsky & Spector, 1985). The elderly have particular financial constraints

and housing needs. Because women outlive men by an average of seven years, elderly people are much more likely to be female (Statistics Canada, 1984) and to be living alone (Wekerle, 1985).

Generally, more women are now living alone and heading families alone (Evans, 1988, p. 7). An Ontario committee on homelessness recently stated:

Homelessness is not an individual problem. It is linked to a complex combination of social and economic factors. These include: inadequate income and low rates of social assistance; the loss of affordable rental stock through deconversion, demolition and conversion to condominiums; the lack of employment opportunities in an age of industrial transformation; changes to urban land use patterns; and the accelerating cost of land (Advisory Committee to the Minister on IYSH, 1988, p. 28).

The committee concluded that these factors have had a disproportionate impact on women. Women who no longer live in traditional family settings because their partners have left them, suffer particular difficulties. Carley and King (1988) report that of the women with whom they have worked, many are without marketable skills or lack the emotional support needed to survive in today's complex society. They add, "Their situation was often exacerbated by ineligibility for various social assistance programs" (p. 7).

Austerberry and Watson (1983) identify the kinds of resources which make the crucial difference between those women whose vulnerability is so extreme that they end up in hostels and those who do not. These resources included friends and relatives—presumably with sufficient stability and space to be able to take them in—income, know-how, support, and expertise. But these kinds of resources are not equally available to all groups of women. Rather, there is a broader pattern which traces the availability of resources based on factors such as gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Because of this, hostels for single women serve particular groups of women. Of the 66 homeless women interviewed in the present study, only two were white, English-speaking, and from a middle-class background. (The patterns described here are absolutely consistent with the general populations observed at all of the hostels which I visited.) Fifteen women were non-white, 13 of these were immigrants to Canada, and for 12 of them, English was not their first language. Seven others were immigrants for whom English was a second language. Thus 22 women, one third of those with whom I spoke, were non-white and/or immigrants whose first language was not English. The remainder were overwhelmingly from working-class or poor backgrounds. Aside from the two middle-class women mentioned above, only three others had completed high school. The orientation of these women, even those who were quite young, was on more immediate, survival issues. The kinds of skills which some of these women have acquired, for example, in household tasks, are not highly valued in the job market. Most could find only low-paying, service-sector jobs, jobs which can no longer support a single person in Toronto.

The two white, English-speaking, middle-class women with whom I spoke had run out of resources for other reasons. One was a woman in her late 50s who emigrated from England many years ago. She had undergone long periods of mental-health problems and had lost all contact with her family. The other, a woman in her late 40s, had been married to a doctor. She, too, spent periods in mental-health facilities. She was extremely angry with her husband and her family

and had been unable to work because of her disabilities. The other three women who had completed high school also had complicating factors which disallowed their accessing resources. Two were immigrants who did not speak English as a first language. One of these women worked for years in factories until her health collapsed. She was seeking subsidized housing. The second, a woman in her late 40s, taught school in her own country. She was married to a university professor. She left him rather suddenly about a year before our interview (for reasons which she did not explain) and had lived in hostels since. Her health did not permit her to work. The third, a young woman, was an incest survivor who has had considerable difficulty in conquering a drinking problem which stemmed from her teenage years.

I want to particularly underscore this last example. This young woman was thwarted in her efforts to establish herself by a discernibly "personal" problem—that of alcoholism. But few people realize her drinking is a strategy she has used over the years to obliterate a negative self-image resulting from prolonged sexual abuse by her father. Her situation is far from rare. Many of the women whom I came to know while working as a counsellor at one of these hostels told me of experiences of sexual and physical abuse which they had suffered as children. All of the counsellors with whom I spoke confirmed the high numbers of child-abuse survivors. They estimate that from 50 to 85% of the women with whom they deal were abused. Far from being "personal" problems, the ramifications of these experiences for the women who must bear their scars, must be viewed as factors of gender and of age. Child sexual abuse is primarily, though not exclusively, perpetrated upon girls. The discourse of sexuality allows the continued valuation of women as sex objects. The relative powerlessness of young girls makes them the easy and too often hidden targets of sexual abuse.

A recent review of research on the effects of child sexual abuse suggests:

[It is] subsequently related to enduring psychological problems: depression, guilt, poor self-esteem, inter-personal problems, delinquency, substance abuse and, according to recent findings (but noted already by Freud), self-destructiveness (Briere & Runtz, 1986, p. 411).

I asked nine of the residents of the hostel in which I had worked about such issues as child sexual and physical abuse. All of the women were less than 40 years of age; five were less than 25. Of the nine, only one had not experienced abuse as a child. Five had experienced sexual abuse; the other three had been severely beaten as children or as adolescents. Of the five women who experienced sexual abuse, one had a long-term problem with drugs and one with alcohol. The other three had emotional difficulties which blocked their efforts to establish themselves. Of the three women who had been physically abused, one had been addicted to heroin since the age of 14, one had considerable mental-health problems, and the third made several serious suicide attempts.

It is facile to discuss the issue of the "freedom of choice" of women who use the hostel system without taking into account the considerable impact of such factors upon them. Many of the women whom I interviewed were homeless as a result of relationships with men. Some had left homes and marriages because of physical or mental abuse from their partners. In many cases they had neither the skills nor the habit of independence to successfully begin again. Some were too ill

or too confused to do so. The discourse of sexuality has positioned many women in dependent relationships with men. When these relationships end, for whatever reason, many women, particularly older women, are simply not equipped to learn new ways to meet the world. Several of the women with whom I spoke had lost jobs or housing because of sexual harassment by bosses or landlords.

Other women have come from backgrounds of poverty, alcoholic parents, and fragmented families. At least five of the women with whom I spoke spent much of their childhoods in foster homes or institutions. Of the 66 women interviewed, at least 16 were mentally confused. The roots of their confusions, their "mental-health problems" are obscure, probably even to themselves. From my experience with those whom I came to know a bit more closely, at least some of these roots could be traced to the kinds of family and abusive conditions which I have outlined.

When the stories of these women are examined closely, it is difficult to identify the root "causes" of their homelessness. Problems which on the surface can be judged as "personal"—addictions, alcoholism, emotional or mental-health problems, unemployability, and so on—can often be viewed, on closer examination, as the result of complex factors over which the women have had little control. These factors include, in addition to those previously outlined, the economy, employment/education patterns, and housing availability.

THE CULTURE OF THE HOSTEL CIRCUIT

Those who contend that women who chronically live in the hostel system do so as a chosen "life-style" would perhaps alter their perceptions of this issue if they themselves were to spend any length of time in the system. Because of the profound lack of housing options for poorer people in most cities today, there are hundreds of thousands living in Canada who are inadequately sheltered (McKnight, 1985). The so-called "hidden homeless," those who share overcrowded, under-serviced, and over-priced dwellings in Ontario have been conservatively estimated as constituting more than 200,000 households (Advisory Committee to the Minister on IYSH, 1988). Those who use the hostel system for single women on a more or less chronic basis are but the most visible of this group. Because those who are inadequately housed are periodically in desperate need of emergency shelter, the hostels are serving a potentially large group of homeless with a minimum of resources.

There are 300 beds for single women in Toronto. They are used by 4,000 women per year (Advisory Committee to the Minister on IYSH, 1988). The vast majority are one-time users. They quickly move in and out of the system, getting organized, and getting some kind of accommodation. It is with this group that women who have difficulty finding other accommodation must compete for beds. Every hostel denies some requests for beds every day. There is tremendous pressure on the system now, and as the housing crisis deepens, it can only worsen. This pressure is communicated to the women who must use it. They are expected to be continually looking for other housing options. They are constantly made aware that their stay in a particular hostel is temporary and that their beds will soon be forfeited to other women's needs. Many women have told me stories of periods of absolute homelessness, when they could not even find access to a

hostel for shelter. Women have slept in parks, sometimes throughout the entire summer. Some have spent the nights walking the streets because of their fear of falling asleep and becoming vulnerable to attack. Some have sat up all night in doughnut shops or in bus shelters or have slept in the train station or in parked cars. Others have gone to a bar to find a man who would take them home for the night. Because of their transience, the dislocation and stress, the irregularity of meals, rest, and proper care that this entails, homeless women often suffer from poor health (City of Toronto, 1984). Many have had health problems prior to their being homeless. Indeed, medical disabilities constitute one major factor in the loss of housing for some people. Even those who are relatively healthy before entering the system often suffer medical reverses after a time. Homelessness makes people more vulnerable to stress-related illnesses (City of Toronto, 1984). Most of the women staying in the hostels are on some kind of medication. Some are taking five or six different kinds of medication each day for a variety of conditions.

Life in the hostels takes more than a physical toll on the women who use them. A city official involved with the administration of the hostels acknowledged that:

It is an artificial setting. . . . What [the women] find is a problem with the lack of privacy, with a feeling of having hit bottom, to have to live in this place with all of these people, and feelings of loss and aloneness.

One woman said to me,

Hostels depress me because it's such a low key, a low ride. It just gets me down and I can't live like that. I need to be up and going. They hold me back; they depress you mentally. It's somewhat like a jail and a [mental] hospital—like low-keyed.

Another said,

[When staying at a hostel], the feeling you get is like just giving up. You feel like everything is falling on top of you. You don't know where you will be living next week and [you have] the pressure of having no money and not being able to make any plans. And when everyone is in one house and they all feel the same way, it rubs off on everyone else.

There is a significant number of women whose use of the hostel system is primarily related to mental-health problems. Many of these women have been discharged from psychiatric institutions without having access to any support systems whatsoever. Even if they start out in some form of housing (usually boarding houses), many eventually lose this and end up either living on the streets or else in hostels. The pressures of living with so many in such close quarters can be a terrifying experience for some of these troubled women. Their reactions to their fear and confusions can, in turn, increase the level of stress felt by all at the hostel.

In fact the experience of homelessness is extremely stress-producing for all of the women who must endure it, particularly for long periods. At a meeting I attended at one hostel a group of homeless women was asked what homelessness meant to them. Their answers reflect some of these stresses. To them homelessness meant:

Being plain scared: out on the street and being petrified because you don't know what's going to happen to you.

Having no self-worth.

Having no place to go; being on the street ready to collapse.

Great frustration. It makes you feel like you are stupid because there is nothing you can do about it.

Alienation . . . you feel cut off from all your former connections.

Anger toward an uncaring and insensitive society.

Loss of trust—you don't trust others and they don't trust you.

Loss of friends—they don't have the energy to help you because they have their own problems and so before long the people whom you had always counted on as your friends just aren't there anymore.

The homeless lifestyle drains all of your resources and energy to be able to make any changes.

You feel that you have no rights; you try to fight the system and you can't.

Society's attitude toward homeless women is very degrading; people take the attitude that if you are homeless that there is something wrong with you or that you have been bad in some way.

The conditions of the hostel system, together with the stress placed upon women who can find few options for themselves but who are constantly pressured to do so, create circumstances which are far from comfortable. Those who advocate the simple notion that women who are using the hostel system are free to choose to live elsewhere surely beg the question: "Why would so many 'choose' to live under such circumstances?"

"DESIRE" AND HOMELESS WOMEN

To understand some of the complexity of the "freedom of choice" of transient women, one must take into account the intermingling of both coercion and desire in seeking accommodation in a hostel. There are elements of both necessity and freedom involved in this action. Looked at from one perspective it appears that these women have no options but to accept the resources and the regulations of the hostels. Marginalized people are not highly valued in our society. The solutions found to meet their needs tend to reflect this low valuation (Farge, 1987b). They are, in the main, met through the vehicles of welfare and charity. Women who cannot fend for themselves have few choices other than to become subject to agencies like hostels. Looked at from another perspective, however, there are elements of choice. Some women without housing do not go to hostels. They remain on the streets. Some of them (not all) are able to find the woefully inadequate and insecure housing that is available in the downtown core for people on extremely limited incomes.

But while some reject the hostel as a solution, others are enticed by its "pay-off"; a temporary respite from the terrors of the street. Because of their abusive backgrounds, many women are particularly frightened by the prospect of being homeless. They have experienced the violence that can result from such vulnerability. The hostel can represent safety. Moreover, having "a bed," ensures regular meals and temporary stability. But more importantly for many

women, the hostel represents a source of love and approval. For those who are able to be co-operative within the spirit of that agency, to be adaptive, responsive, or in some fashion, appealing, workers will give not only food, clothing, and shelter, but also approval and interest. This is an enormous draw for women who are so entirely vulnerable, so deprived on every level. For some women it can initiate a profoundly tying relationship with the institution itself.

Jacques Lacan describes "desire" as that which is left over when needs are satisfied (Mitchell & Rose, 1982). Desire is the ineffable, that longing which can be attached to particular objects, but never satisfied by them. This longing can be invested in another, one who then becomes what Lacan termed "the Other." Our identities are always unstable, fragmentary and shifting. Yet we long for a sense of unity and wholeness. When we address this longing to another, we are asking them to become the place where we can find both wholeness and truth. The "Other" appears to be able to complete us, to make up for what we are missing. Women who are confused and deprived are especially vulnerable to entering relationships wherein an "Other" can represent for them some modicum of safety and solace. It is conceivable that women who return again and again to the office door of a hostel requesting this and that service, for example, are often really asking for love and acceptance.

Like any other human being, the homeless woman needs to feel that people care for her. If she is willing to fall within the parameters of the regulatory practices as they are laid down in a particular hostel, then she will find a degree of this care—but at a cost. In return, she must distance herself from any feelings or behaviours which could place her in opposition to the aims of the hostel. She must disavow more assertive strivings for greater self-determination. To the women who "choose" to use hostels as a primary vehicle of housing, the pay-offs of safety, secure (if temporary) food and shelter, and the concern of other women for their welfare, outweigh the punitive aspects of hostel life. This fact is less a comment on the value of the hostels themselves than it is a statement about the impoverishment which our society is content to leave at the core of the lives of marginalized women.

HOMELESS WOMEN AND THE LIMITATIONS OF CHOICE

In speaking of "freedom of choice" for homeless women, particularly those who have been homeless for long periods, one must exercise extreme caution. I have been told on a number of occasions about women who for all intents and purposes have "chosen" to live within the hostel system. In every case I have pursued the meaning of this statement. Invariably I have found that the woman's so-called free choice was profoundly determined by factors over which she had but minimal control. One worker, for example, told me of a woman who "refused" to get her own place in a boarding house. When I questioned the worker further, she admitted there were factors involved beyond the simple stubbornness she had at first indicated. About long-term women residents, she said:

They are not happy. They have not said, "This is what I want for myself." They choose not to do something because of fear. I asked the woman I was speaking of why she didn't want her own place. She did a lot of yelling, but

eventually the thing that did come out was that there are a lot of men in places like that and she is afraid of them.

A woman who is frightened is not free. Much of the language of choice is simply a justification for not dealing with marginalized women at the level of their needs. For those who work most closely with homeless women, it usually signifies their own frustrations about the limitations of resources available. But such terminology has the effect of masking the years of damage done to them, damage often at the hands of the men in their lives; fathers, brothers, husbands, landlords, and employers. It masks and justifies the cruelty and discrimination of the systems to which they have been subject. They are not well educated; they are not middle class; they do not have the tools needed to function well in a competitive world. Women like this are knocked over and over again. And in the end it is said of them, "Well, they've made their choices."

Hostels service an undifferentiated mass of the marginalized: the poor, the unemployed and unemployable, those involved in petty crime and/or substance abuse, and those who have recently been designated "the psychiatrically disabled." The common denominator in this groups is its perceived social uselessness. The morality of our society, as revealed in its political and economic decisions, is immutably against those who are unable to contribute in what is considered to be a useful fashion. The fact that people are of no obvious material value to society disqualifies them from receiving all of its advantages. Thus welfare solutions like hostels are the best that are made available to those who are at the fringes of our society. But the notion of welfare is profoundly wedded in public consciousness to moral laxity. It is seen as a public handout to those who cannot provide for themselves. That its receipt has been considered shameful is a reflection of the manner in which most perceive its moral content. Those who rely on hostels must deal with subliminal notions of themselves as the undeserving. The negative connotations of hostels and the consequent moral disenfranchisement of those who use them, allow their inherently unsatisfying conditions to remain, to all intents and purposes, unchallenged. Those who are forced by poverty and/or adverse circumstances into hostels, live under the spectre of a moral condemnation and experience their need as a degradation and a humiliation.

If homeless women are viewed as having freely chosen their own "lifestyles," the destructive aspects of the system can more easily be accepted by both the public at large and by those who work on a daily basis with these women. However, freedom of choice, at best a relative term for any group, can only be viewed with any relevance for marginalized women when the factors which so profoundly limit their range of options are taken into account. On the surface these factors sometimes have the appearance of being of a personal nature. Upon closer examination, however, it can be seen that gender, class, and race/ethnicity play major roles in the positioning of these women. To speak, as some do, of the chosen "lifestyle" of transient women, is to betray an ignorance of these factors at work in their lives. These views have the effect not only of masking the reality of these women's lives, but also of perpetuating the myth that of their own free will, marginalized women could radically alter their own positions. Justice for these women requires policies and initiatives which are based on a realistic assessment of their lives and of the actual limitations upon their discretionary powers.

RESUME

Cet article traite de la liberté de choix des femmes qui utilisent les refuges pour femmes seules à Toronto. On cerne les facteurs systémiques et personnels qui sous-tendent la condition d'itinérantes de certaines femmes; on examine aussi les conditions imposées à ces femmes quand elles vivent dans ces refuges. On discute enfin des besoins physiques et psychologiques auxquels ces refuges répondent en limitant les domaines d'auto-détermination. En conclusion on souligne que le concept de liberté de choix pour les femmes itinérantes doit être utilisé avec beaucoup de prudence.

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