



JANUARY 2023

RESEARCH BRIEF

Housing Need & Homelessness Amongst Gender-Diverse People in Canada

A Preliminary Portrait

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Commissioned by:
The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate,
Canadian Human Rights Commission

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Land Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge and recognize that Canada is a settler colonial state on Turtle Island, which for generations has been governed and inhabited by Indigenous Peoples practicing traditional ways of doing, knowing, and being. This report acknowledges that the current homelessness crisis, disproportionately impacting Indigenous Peoples, is a direct result of colonial and patriarchal policies that have dispossessed Indigenous Peoples of their lands and homes, and commodified land and housing as profitable assets leading to the concentration of wealth with a privileged few.

This project is led by the [Women's National Housing & Homelessness Network](#), which is situated in Tkaronto (Toronto, ON), the traditional and unceded territory of many First Nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Hodinöhsö:ni', and the Huron-Wendat. Tkaronto is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples. We also acknowledge that Tkaronto is located within the lands protected by the Dish With One Spoon wampum agreement, and is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands.

Acknowledgement

First, we would like to thank all of the lived experts who participated in this project and shared their insights, expertise, and analysis. Their priorities and wisdom has guided this work, and this work is dedicated to all Two-Spirit, trans, non-binary, and gender-diverse people across the country who do not have access to adequate housing. We would specifically like to thank Nat Pace, Charlotte Hunter, and Jodi Gray and for their contributions to this report and our understandings of complex issues facing Two-Spirit, trans, non-binary, and gender-diverse people.

We would also like to thank the team at the Office of the Federal Housing for commissioning and supporting this work, and for your commitment to advancing the right to housing for gender-diverse communities.

INTRODUCTION

While available research indicates that gender-diverse persons experience intersecting challenges to accessing adequate housing in Canada, there has been limited human rights analysis of this group's experiences. Available research indicates that trans and gender-diverse persons experience significant, intersecting human rights violations in the area of housing, including: gender-based discrimination in the rental housing market, disproportionate housing accessibility and adequacy issues, gender-based violence that undermines housing stability, unique barriers to security of tenure, and socio-economic marginalization that erodes access to affordable, safe, and permanent housing. In addition, available research and expert testimony indicates gender-diverse and trans persons face significant barriers to accessing emergency shelters (which are organized in relation to the gender binary) and are more likely to experience hidden homelessness.

Canada hosts a vibrant and impressive group of researchers and advocates working to dismantle the systems of oppression and violence that 2SLGBTQIA+ and gender-diverse people disproportionately face. Unfortunately, their research often remains siloed within queer spaces and communities, rather than receiving mainstream acknowledgement and visibility. In conversations about gender and the right to adequate housing, the experiences of cisgender women tend to be centred; specific data and reporting about the lived realities of gender-diverse people is often lacking. Nonetheless, available research indicates that Two-Spirit, transgender, genderqueer, nonbinary, and other gender-diverse people are being badly failed by the current housing system, along all points of the housing continuum. This failure intersects with and is compounded by exclusion, discrimination, exploitation, and violence pertaining to other identities, social locations, and experiences. Ultimately, the pervasive and system-wide gaps that gender-diverse people face push Two-Spirit, trans, genderqueer, and nonbinary people into increasingly marginalized situations – including into spaces where they face deeper forms of exploitation and violence, and profound isolation.

In the wake of this human rights crisis, this Research Brief seeks to provide a preliminary portrait of housing need and homelessness amongst gender-diverse people in Canada. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from the [The Pan-Canadian Women's Housing and Homelessness Survey](#), this Research Brief compiles key statistics and lived expert insights into the unique housing needs and experiences of gender-diverse persons, including with respect to: poverty, housing conditions, discrimination in housing, evictions, public system failures, experiences of homelessness, pathways into homelessness, and other unique barriers to housing. This Research Brief attempts to lay the groundwork for a deeper, rights-based analysis of available research literature. The summary presented here reflects a non-exhaustive

snapshot of the necessary considerations to realizing the right to housing for gender-diverse people in Canada and beyond.

A note on language

Throughout this document we use the term “gender-diverse” as a shorthand umbrella term to refer to a wide array of different gender identities, expressions, and experiences. A [2021 Toolkit on Trans Liberation](#) produced by rights defenders from The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association defines “gender-diverse” this way: “‘gender-diverse’ refers to people who identify themselves at different positions of the gender spectrum. This includes non-binary and gender-nonconforming people, as well as Indigenous people from different parts of the world, with gender identities specific to their native sociocultural traditions.”¹

We recognize that using one term to describe myriad identities may not accurately reflect the particular experiences of all communities. Queered experiences of gender are far from monolithic, and we want to acknowledge that within and across communities whose experiences fall outside of a traditional gender binary, housing challenges may be more distinct and complex. For all Two-Spirit, transgender, genderqueer, nonbinary, and other gender-diverse people, a more nuanced approach to gender in policy and programmatic responses to housing rights violations would change the frame through which decisions about their lives and communities are produced. Though all gender-diverse experiences of housing insecurity require deeper consideration in policy and decision-making contexts, some experiences, such as those of binary-gendered trans people, have benefitted from increasing research attention. More research is needed into the experiences across the spectrum of gender diversity. A robust and community-informed understanding of how diverse experiences of gender impact pathways through the housing system is urgently needed.

Positioning Ourselves

As a research team, we begin our work on topics of housing, queered and gendered violence, and systemic failures through our own lived experiences. Some of our individual experiences share similarities with others on this research team, with the gender-diverse people whose experiences of right to housing violations are outlined here, and with the people who may read and engage with this Research Brief. Other experiences that have brought us to this table might not be shared by others. We are writing this Research Brief as individuals embedded within a deeply violent system, with

¹ For this and a brief but impactful glossary of other relevant human rights concepts, documents, language, and gender terms, please see ILGA World; Weerawardhana, C., López, T., & Pai, S. (2021). [Towards Trans Liberation: Advocacy for Legal Gender Recognition](#). IGLA. For a deeper glossary of 2SLGBTQ+-relevant terms, please see: Toronto Shelter Network. (2020). [Transforming the Emergency Homelessness System: Two Spirited, Trans, Nonbinary and gender-diverse Safety in Shelters Project](#). Toronto Shelter Network.

full recognition that this summary only begins to expose the surface of harm and exploitation that shapes gender-diverse peoples' experiences within the housing system. We are tired. We are angry. And still, we have immense privilege to be situated as researchers putting together this Brief, and we hope to continue to work with communities we belong to as well as those we act in solidarity with. We write this Brief with the knowledge that talking about the issues gender-diverse people face has, for a long time, supplanted action and meaningful change.

Alex is a white settler nonbinary person, of Ukrainian, Irish, and Scottish heritage. Alex grew up experiencing family poverty in southern Alberta, which led to persistent visible and hidden homelessness as a young person and as an adult, and being apprehended into the child welfare system. They have survived violence in many forms, and live with chronic disabilities – some that are, in complex ways, linked to these experiences of violence. Alex is a PhD Candidate at Western University, and lives in London, Ontario on lands connected with Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak, and Chonnonton Nations.

Jayne is a white settler, of French, Scottish, and Cree ancestry, from Kapuskasing, Ontario. They are a queer, gender non-conforming person with lived experience of homelessness and housing precarity. They enter this work as someone with different experiences of barriers and access in housing, (mental) healthcare, and education systems across so-called Canada, as well as gendered experiences of violence. They currently work as a researcher and educator at McGill University.

Kaitlin is a cisgender, heterosexual, and white settler of Irish and German heritage. Kaitlin comes from a middle-class background without experiences of homelessness. She has experienced sexual violence and began working on issues of gendered violence and homelessness in direct response to her sister's experiences. Kaitlin has her PhD in Social Work and is the Executive Director of the Women's National Housing & Homelessness Network. She resides on the traditional and unceded territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation of the Anishinaabek Peoples, governed by the Between the Lakes Treaty No. 3, in the city colonially known as Guelph, ON.

We share these experiences as a way of mapping our multiple and varied relationships to this work. Each of us cares deeply about doing justice with our words and our actions, and we want it to be known that our histories, experiences, and identities impact how we undertake our work. We have made these experiences legible here because this Brief also contains the experiences of others – the authors we cite, and the words of gender-diverse people who have been surveyed and interviewed. We are not innocent from the dynamics of violent structures – we are implicated. It is important that

our intentions and identities are (at least partially) known; as we weave our own thoughts and reflections into this work, we shape the potential future outcomes this work could hold.



METHODOLOGY

This research brief primarily draws on the data from [The Pan-Canadian Women's Housing and Homelessness Survey](#) ("WNHHN Survey").² The Survey was undertaken by the [Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network](#) (WNHHN) in collaboration with the [This is Not Home](#) (TiNH)³ research project, and collected quantitative and qualitative data to better understand the unique experiences of women and gender-diverse people navigating housing precarity and homelessness in Canada. The survey tool was developed in alignment with participatory and community-based methodologies, and informed by lived experience and practitioner knowledge. Data collection aimed to reach diverse participants who are often excluded from traditional methodologies used to measure homelessness, including in Northern, Francophone, and Eastern Canada. 500 participants, from each province and territory except Nunavut, received \$20 for participation in the survey. Respondents were supported through community partner organizations to participate in the study. This Research Brief focuses on the WNHHN Survey data related to the experiences of gender-diverse participants.

In addition to the WNHHN Survey, this document presents findings from a brief and targeted [literature review](#). This review of the literature focuses on a preliminary scan of articles and grey literature on Two-Spirit, trans, genderqueer, and nonbinary housing experiences that had been collected over time and shared with the authors.⁴ This small-scale review of the literature included a scan of domestic and international reports on gender and human rights: from an initial review of these documents, a summary list of recommendations and suggestions for future inquiry have been compiled at the end of this research brief. This Research Brief should be read alongside our more robust [Literature Review](#).

Finally, the WNHHN Survey and selected literature are presented in conversation with preliminary analysis of data from the [This is Not Home](#) study, with a focus on interviews speaking to issues impacting gender-diverse and trans peoples with lived expertise of the homelessness sector. The *This is Not Home* study also used participatory and community-based methodologies, focusing specifically on the use of low-barrier services and gender-specific organizations and shelters. Data collection occurred in

² Schwan, K., Vaccaro, M., Reid, L., Ali, N., & Baig, K. (2021). [The Pan-Canadian Women's Housing & Homelessness Survey](#). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.

³ Rampersad, M., Mallon, A., Gold, M. Armstrong, A., Blair, J. Vaccaro, M., Schwan, K., Allan, K. & Paradis, E. (2021). [This is Not Home](#). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. The *This is Not Home* Study is based in 6 low-barrier drop-ins serving multiply marginalized women and trans, Two-Spirit, and non-binary persons across Canada, led by Aoife Mallon and Sistering (Toronto, ON) and Dr. Emily Paradis.

⁴ The authors would like to thank Dr. Emily Paradis for collecting and sharing many insightful and important sources with us for this project.

collaboration with lived experts, program managers, and member researchers.⁵ This data provides important insight into the experiences of Two-Spirit, trans, and gender-diverse people with acute housing need who are utilizing low-barrier services and shelters.

⁵ Rampersad et al., 2021.

PRELIMINARY PORTRAIT OF HOUSING NEED & HOUSING BARRIERS AMONGST GENDER-DIVERSE PERSONS

Gender-diverse, Two-Spirit, trans, and non-binary people in Canada face unique barriers to housing related to intersecting forms of exclusion and oppression. In this section we explore available data and research in 5 key areas that impact the realization of the right to housing for these groups: poverty, violence, and trauma; inadequate housing conditions; discrimination and exclusion in housing systems; public systems failures; and security of tenure issues.

A significant proportion of this section analyzes results from [The Pan-Canadian Women's Housing and Homelessness Survey](#), which included 61 gender-diverse participants from across Canada experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity.⁶ These participants were aged 10 to 64, and a majority were residing in Ontario (54%), with additional participants from 9 other provinces and territories. A little over a third of gender-diverse participants identified as Indigenous (35%), 15% identified as racialized, and 50% identified as white. A majority of gender-diverse participants identified as 2SLGBTQIA+ (67%), with 33% identifying as heterosexual/straight. Given the small sample size of the Survey, these findings should be understood as evidencing a preliminary portrait on the unique barriers to housing experienced by gender-diverse people in Canada. Further research, particularly at the intersections of gender and other social locations, is needed.

1. Poverty, Violence, & Trauma over the Lifecourse

Key Statistics from the WNHHN Survey

- 84% of gender-diverse participants identified as being a survivor of trauma and abuse
- 21% of gender-diverse participants identified as having experienced sex trafficking
- 84% of gender-diverse participants didn't have full-time or part-time employment
- In order to make ends meet in their most recent housing situation, 41% of gender-diverse people had cut back on necessities and 39% had borrowed money or went into debt.

⁶ Variables gender-diverse participants were invited to use to self-identify within the WNHHN Pan-Canadian Survey included: Two-Spirit, transwoman, transman, non-binary, and/or were invited to self-describe a gender identity they prefer to use.

Results from the WNHHN Survey indicate that many gender-diverse persons have experienced significant violence and trauma throughout their lives – before, during, and after experiences of housing precarity or homelessness. A majority of gender-diverse participants identified as being a survivor of trauma and abuse (84%), and 21% identified as having been involved in sex trafficking (double that of cisgender women (10%)).

Compared to their cisgender counterparts, gender-diverse participants in the WNHHN Survey were also less likely to be in full-time or part-time employment, and were significantly more likely to be receiving money through casual employment or informal means (e.g., bottle returns). For example, 18% of gender-diverse persons reported receiving income through informal means, compared to 6% of cisgender participants. Gender-diverse persons were also more likely to rely on friends or family for money compared to cisgender women, and were more likely to report no income at all.

Qualitative and quantitative data from the WNHHN Survey also indicated many gender-diverse participants struggled with debt, and the cost of housing impacted their access to education (and vice versa). In their most recent housing, 39% of gender-diverse people borrowed money or went into debt each month in order to make ends meet.

These findings suggest that even amongst highly marginalized groups, gender-diverse persons are experiencing some of the deepest forms of income insecurity and poverty, and that the forms of income they do receive are often unpredictable and highly context-dependent. This appears to have a direct bearing on housing accessibility and affordability. Gender-diverse people were more likely to indicate they were unable to find or keep housing due to affordability issues (69% vs. 59% for cisgender women), and to report that being unable to afford moving costs or a damage deposit was a significant barrier to accessing housing (59% vs. 44% of cisgender women).⁷

"I work 3 jobs and cannot afford a place of my own, and neither can my adult children. It will be worse for them, if nothing is done NOW."

- Gender-diverse participant, WNHHN Pan-Canadian Survey

⁷ Tests of significance were used to compare rates of specific experiences between gender-diverse and cisgender groups. Reported findings were confirmed to be statistically significant.

2. Inadequate Housing Conditions

Key Statistics from the WNHHN Survey

- 44% of gender-diverse participants reported having to move out of their housing due to problems with the condition of the housing (e.g., bedbugs, no heat, etc.)
- 69% of gender-diverse people reported being unable to find or maintain housing due to affordability issues
- 41% reported feeling unsafe in their place or their neighbourhood

On average, gender-diverse people reported having histories of poorer housing conditions – and more housing problems – than their cisgender counterparts. This was particularly pronounced with respect to treatment from one’s landlord, with gender-diverse people reporting worse treatment on *every single variable* (e.g., unlawful entry into unit, not making repairs, unlawful rent increases, sexual harassment, threatening children, etc.) compared to cisgender women. Almost a quarter of gender-diverse people reported their landlord had entered their unit without permission (23%), and 28% reported their landlord had not made needed repairs. Over a third of gender-diverse participants also reported three or more safety and security issues in their most recent housing (34%). Discrimination, threats, and assaults from community members were also common for gender-diverse people, with 25% of gender-diverse people reporting this experience.

These experiences stand in stark contrast to gender-diverse participants’ description of what “home” means to them. Three participants responded:

- “Home means Autonomy and Privacy Home means regency Home means creative and artistic expression Home means warmth Home means hospitality”
- “Honestly just somewhere I can sleep, cook and hang out free from harassment and abuse that i feel safe and comfortable.”
- “Someplace that I have the freedom to come and go. I could have a partner that I could bring home with me and we could have freedom to start building a future with.”

3. Discrimination and Exclusion within Housing Systems

Key Statistics from the WNHHN Survey

- 26% of gender-diverse people have lost their housing due to discrimination and/or harassment
- 43% reported experiencing discrimination from landlords and/or property managers on the basis of gender

- 41% reported having experiences of discrimination and/or judgment from staff at homeless shelters and/or drop-ins

Research indicates that discrimination and discriminatory treatment infuses the experiences of Two-Spirit, transgender, nonbinary, queer, and gender-diverse people in navigating the housing system.⁸ Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality"⁹ resonates deeply for many gender-diverse people: discrimination for Two Spirit, transgender, nonbinary, genderqueer, and other gender-diverse people is both compounded by, and inextricably linked to, one's other identities and social locations, such as race, Indigenous identity, disability, age, or immigration status.¹⁰ It is impossible to disentangle experiences of trans- and queer-phobic discrimination from discrimination along other axes of identity.

Reports demonstrate that discrimination takes both "overt" and "covert" forms: while overt discrimination is a common occurrence for gender-diverse people, covert discrimination is a ubiquitous experience.¹¹ Covert discrimination, including facing pressure to "educate" peers and colleagues about trans experiences, is normalized for both gender-diverse people facing housing precarity and the gender-diverse staff of housing-related organizations.¹²

With respect to the WNHHN Survey, data analysis indicated that on *every single category of discrimination* (e.g., race, income, pets, religion), gender-diverse persons were more likely to report experiencing discrimination by a landlord and/or property manager than cisgender women. Almost half of the gender-diverse participants reported experiencing discrimination from landlords or property managers on the basis of gender (43%). This group also reported higher rates of discrimination on the basis of income (59% vs. 42%), age (30% vs. 20%), and sexual orientation (21% vs. 5%). When asked what would have prevented their homelessness, two participants responded: "more regulations for landlords" and "Not to be discriminated against because of my sexual orientation." Data from the *This is Not Home* study reinforces findings from the WNHHN Survey, suggesting that Two-Spirit, trans, and gender-diverse participants faced overt discrimination when attempting to access a variety of housing, from rental market housing to shelters and housing programs.

⁸ James, J., Bauer, G., Peck, R., Brennan, D., & Nussbaum, N. (2018). [*Transforming Justice: Legal Problems Facing Trans People in Ontario*](#). Toronto, ON: HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario (HALCO).

⁹ For more on intersectionality see Crenshaw, C. (2014). *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings*. New York: The New Press.

¹⁰ See James et al., 2018; van Berkum, A., & Oudshoorn, A. (2015). [*Best practice guideline for ending women's and girl's homelessness*](#). London, ON: All Our Sisters.

¹¹ See James et al., 2018.

¹² Toronto Shelter Network, 2020.

Experiences of discrimination were also common within one's building and/or community, with gender-diverse people reporting a higher number of safety and security issues related to discrimination. Almost a quarter of gender-diverse participants reported experiencing discrimination, threats, and assaults from members of their community. When asked what could have prevented their homelessness or housing instability, many gender-diverse participants reported discrimination and exclusion as key contributing factors to homelessness in their lives. Importantly, in many cases intersecting forms of discrimination were described, many of which were co-occurring across multiple public systems, within housing, and within one's personal life.

4. Public System Failures

Key Statistics from the WNHHN Survey

- 19% of gender-diverse people were more likely to indicate **the healthcare system** contributed to their housing and homelessness
- Almost a third of gender-diverse people indicated **the education system** contributed to their housing instability and homelessness (28%), almost three times more than cisgender women (10%)
- A third of gender-diverse people indicated **the criminal justice system** contributed to their housing instability and homelessness (33%), almost double that of cisgender women (18%)
- Gender-diverse participants were significantly more likely to have **child welfare system** involvement as a child (43%) compared to cisgender women (26%)
- 56% of gender-diverse participants reported encounters with the **criminal justice system**

Research demonstrates that gender-diverse people experience multiple, compounding public systems failures within the legal, education, child welfare, immigration, and healthcare systems, all of which intersect to exclude and demean gender-diverse people in a variety of ways.¹³ More data is needed to understand the violence and exclusion gender-diverse people face within public systems, but as the [TRANSforming Justice Study](#) reports, many gender-diverse people withdraw from public systems as a result of pervasive discrimination:

“Participants spoke about not approaching any institution for support, and those who did seek formal assistance discussed additional experiences of discrimination, refusals for support from service providers, and being blamed for the discrimination they experienced. Individuals often responded to discrimination

¹³ James et al., 2018.

through self-protection methods, the most common of which was extreme social isolation.”¹⁴

These public system failures intersect with – and amplify – failures within the housing system, contributing to poorer housing outcomes, increased risk of homelessness, and other negative housing outcomes for gender-diverse people. For example, the WNHHN Survey revealed that gender-diverse participants were significantly more likely to have child welfare involvement as a child (43%) compared to cisgender women (26%). The WNHHN Survey also indicated gender-diverse participants had more encounters with the criminal justice system (56%) than their cisgender counterparts (38%).

Importantly, this population experiences significant access to justice issues when seeking to redress these failures. For example, when one WNHHN Survey participant tried to access legal support to keep their housing, they experienced poor and discriminatory treatment from the lawyer who was supposed to offer help. They explained:

“I went to see a lawyer for help when my son was 18 months old. And she told me that I was a terrible mother for doing that, and that I was trying to poison my son against his father. I had no one to babysit and no help and could not control the appointment time. I left feeling humiliated and dejected and shamed and was not able to escape for another ten years after that.” When asked what happened when they were unable to access legal help to remedy their housing situation, another gender-diverse respondent said, “Usually homelessness and discrimination. Not necessarily in that order or both at once.”

The fear of discrimination against trans and gender-diverse people in the context of healthcare has serious consequences as well. In a 2020 [TransPULSE Canada Report](#), 12% of survey respondents reported avoiding going to the emergency room when they needed healthcare.¹⁵ This was mirrored in WNHHN data as well. One WNHHN Survey respondent noted, “Improper treatment and medical discrimination adversely affect my health and ability to function fully”. Another respondent shared, “I have not been able to access [...] mental health support for 10 years.” These experiences demonstrate some of the shocking gaps in access to healthcare faced by gender-diverse people.

¹⁴ James et al., 2018, p. 9.

¹⁵ The Trans PULSE Canada Team. (2020). [Health and health care access for trans and non-binary people in Canada](#). Canada: Trans PULSE.

“My aggressor was removed from the home but I lost my housing as a result and became homeless.”

- Gender-diverse participant, WNHHN Pan-Canadian Survey

5. Security of Tenure Issues

Key Statistics from the WNHHN Pan-Canadian Survey

- 46% of gender-diverse people lost their most recent housing due to a breakup
- 43% of gender-diverse people lost their most recent housing because they were told to leave by someone they live with
- Gender-diverse people were twice as likely to report being unable to access legal support with regards to their housing situation (51%) compared to cisgender women (24%)

The WNHHN Survey identified several important findings with regards to eviction and security of tenure issues for gender-diverse people experiencing homelessness or housing precarity. While all people experiencing housing precarity or homelessness commonly face significant barriers to security of tenure, a number of data points in the WNHHN Survey suggest that these challenges are significantly heightened for gender-diverse people.

When asked about accommodations over the last year, gender-diverse people were more likely to stay at another person’s place than cisgender women (64% vs. 52%). **Almost half of gender-diverse respondents also reported they lost their most recent housing due to a breakup (46%) — the top reason reported for housing loss for this group. These findings suggest gender-diverse peoples’ housing is often dependent upon maintaining intimate or sexual relationships, and that relationship dissolution is a key pathway into homelessness.**¹⁶

Importantly, however, gender-diverse people were much more likely to lose their most recent housing because they were told to leave by someone they live with (43% vs. 18% for cisgender women) or due to problems with other co-inhabitants (46% vs. 32%). This group is also twice as likely to lose their housing because it was taken over by other people (23% vs. 11%). In comparison to cisgender women, the actions of

¹⁶ This mirrors WNHHN data on cisgender women’s most recent housing loss (46% similarly reported housing loss due to a breakup).

cohabitants was also a greater barrier to accessing housing for gender-diverse persons. For example, 30% of gender-diverse participants said that their partner or the people they live with cause problems for getting or keeping a place, compared to 15% of women. These findings reflect the onus on gender-diverse people to depend overwhelmingly on relational supports in order to secure housing, often leading to situations that are unsafe or unsustainable, and reflect severe security of tenure issues for this population.

More broadly, gender-diverse people reported histories of eviction (41%), as well as significant problems with landlords (41%). Despite this, a majority of gender-diverse people were unable to access legal support with regards to their housing situation (51%). When gender-diverse participants were unable to access legal support the consequences were often severe. When asked what happened, participants reported:

- “I just stayed thru abuse”
- “I wasn’t able to get my house that I own back”
- “I just stayed thru abuse”
- “Usually homelessness and discrimination Not necessarily in that order or both at once”
- “I wasn’t able to get my house that I own back”

EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS

Key Statistics from the WNHHN Survey

- 43% of gender-diverse participants experienced homelessness before the age of 16 (more than double cisgender women)
- Gender-diverse people were significantly more likely to be unable to access a shelter bed when they needed one (56%) than cisgendered women (34%)
- Gender-diverse participants were more likely to sleep in a public place (e.g. vehicle, transit station, abandoned building etc.) than cisgender women experiencing homelessness (43% vs. 26%), and almost a third reporting residing in a tent, encampment, or self-built shelter in the last year (31%).
- Over half of gender-diverse respondents had spend more than 6 months homeless in the last year (51%)

Research indicates that Two-Spirit, nonbinary, and gender-diverse people face a myriad of barriers to accessing housing supports and are underserved within social systems broadly. Experiences reported suggest a high level of discrimination and exclusion within the homeless shelter system in Canada as well.¹⁷ While services appear to be changing, often with an increase in organization policies mentioning a commitment to trans inclusion, serving any “women identifying” people, or, less often, a recognition of the unique needs of non-binary or Two-Spirit community members, this may not be reflected in the experiences of those using services or in concrete changes to practice to facilitate that inclusion. As of now, more robust and system-wide practice and policy-based changes are required to ensure that Two-Spirit, trans, and nonbinary people are able to access necessary supports within shelters and the homelessness sector.¹⁸

A particular point of exclusion lies in the binary organization of the homelessness sector, where services often aim to serve narrow definitions of men or women. In data from the [*This is Not Home*](#) study, participants and staff¹⁹ shared that shelters for women remain inadequate to serve the needs of trans women, but believed that non-binary participants and trans men faced additional barriers to accessing shelter spaces that were safe and appropriate. Further, staff argued that while there was an increasing awareness and verbal dedication to serving gender-diverse people within the homelessness sector, shelters and other services may not make this explicit, so trans, nonbinary and Two-Spirit people may not see them as inclusive or feel welcome.

¹⁷ See Abramovich, A. (2017). Understanding how policy and culture create oppressive conditions for LGBTQ2S youth in the shelter system. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64(11), 1484-1501; Toronto Shelter Network, 2020.

¹⁸ Toronto Shelter Network, 2020.

¹⁹ In analyzing anonymized *This is Not Home* data, it was not always apparent to the authors if respondents were staff members or participants.

Alternatively, organizations stating that they are trans-inclusive may not carry this principle into their practice, and cause further harm to Two-Spirit, nonbinary, and trans people who trust that they will receive appropriate and supportive services.

Importantly, experiences of trauma and homelessness began early in life for gender-diverse participants, according to the WNHHN Survey. Almost half of gender-diverse participants became homeless before the age of 16, and at a younger age than cisgender women who became homeless before 16. The conflict, violence, and harassment some trans people face when homeless often begins upon coming out to their families, prompting their entry into homelessness.²⁰ This violence can often carry through experiences in the homelessness sector, and shelters in particular.²¹ Shelters can be physically violent spaces, as well as emotionally, culturally, and symbolically violent, where the experiences and needs of Two-Spirit, trans, and gender-diverse people are absent from considerations of service and safety. As noted in a 2020 report on transforming the Toronto shelter system for Two-Spirit, trans, and gender-diverse service users:

“...while the phrase two spirit or ‘2S’ is frequently added to the LGBTQ+ acronym, Indigenous gender-diverse inclusion and cultural sensitivity continues to be lacking. Black and otherwise racialized clients noted experiencing racism which presented as being met with suspicion or viewed as inherently dangerous, being closely watched by staff, having the police called more frequently over non-violent situations.”²²

As a result, shelters can become spaces of “normalized oppression,”²³ where violence in many forms is an everyday experience. Gender-diverse people experience violence not only from other residents or participants in shelters and programming, but also from staff and other professionals they encounter. These may include experiences of transphobia (overt or covert), expectations of narrow gender expression, coercive feminization, and transmisogyny.

Responses to the WNHHN Survey illustrated this dynamic. When accessing shelter or drop-in spaces, gender-diverse respondents were significantly more likely to report being excluded due to explicit policies and practices, including being barred or having service restrictions (33% for gender-diverse people compared to 16% for cisgender

²⁰ Abramovich, A. (2013). No Fixed Address: Young, Queer, and Restless. In Gaetz, S., O’Grady, B., Bucciari, K., Karabanow, J., & Marsolais, A. (Eds.), *Youth Homelessness in Canada: Implications for Policy and Practice*. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.

²¹ Abramovich, 2017.

²² Toronto Shelter Network, 2020, p. 14.

²³ Abramovich, 2017, p. 2.

respondents) and being turned away due to capacity issues (46% vs 27%). Gender-diverse people were also more likely to report feeling unsafe in shelters compared to cisgender women (38% vs 25%). Within many people's experiences, violence ranging from exclusion from services to threats to their life are common. These experiences of violence are heightened for racialized trans service users.

This exclusion and violence are also present in the organization of services for those facing interpersonal violence. Services that address the needs of those facing interpersonal violence and experiences of housing precarity, which may fall under services understood as the "violence against women" sector, are often trans exclusive, and further marginalize and misgender Two-Spirit, trans, and non-binary people in the midst of violence.²⁴

In a 2018 legal needs assessment by researchers at [TRANSforming Justice](#),²⁵ trans people reported an absence of safe shelter spaces, and that they were likely to become street involved as a result. Isolation during homelessness may mirror experiences of isolation across the housing trajectory of trans peoples' lives, and respondents shared that having one's transness revealed, or being outed, at work or home often resulted in overt and insidious discrimination. This may even lead gender-diverse people to forego important repairs to needed to ensure safe and adequate housing for fear of being discovered as trans. This tension – between accessing necessary services and the risks posed by being discovered as trans – also follows gender-diverse people as they navigate the homelessness sector. As evidenced in a 2019 [Report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health](#), isolation for trans people experiencing homelessness is also linked to a lack of access to safe public spaces. [Pflag](#), a well-known organization whose chapters provide peer-based support and safe spaces to 2SLGBTQIA+ people across Canada, consistently operates above capacity.²⁶

Safe public spaces are crucial for gender-diverse people, who may experience violence or threatening treatment inside their homes, buildings, or neighbourhoods. In the WNHHN Survey data, gender-diverse people were more likely to report leaving their more recent housing due to treatment from a third party who was not their landlord. One in five gender-diverse respondents had been told to leave by others who lived in their home (21% vs 12% for cisgender women), and 17% of gender-diverse respondents left their housing due to problems with other residents (vs 5% for cisgender women). Similarly, 17% of gender-diverse respondents reported leaving their housing due to problems with neighbours (vs 10% for cisgender women). For many, sleeping rough or

²⁴ Toronto Shelter Network, 2020

²⁵ James et al., 2018.

²⁶ Casey, B. (2019). *The Health Of LGBTQIA2 Communities In Canada: Report of the Standing Committee on Health*. Ottawa, ON: House of Commons. [The Health of LGBTQIA2 Communities in Canada \(ourcommons.ca\)](#).

finding spaces outside was perceived as less hostile than other housing options available, and chosen or street families were a response to being unwelcome in other contexts. While the development of relationships can be an important source of support, sleeping outdoors can put trans people at a substantially greater risk of other kinds of harm, including disproportionate criminalization.

In the absence of street families, research indicates isolation can be extremely damaging, and Two-Spirit, trans, and non-binary people often experience extreme isolation and alienation when navigating public systems and attempting to access mainstream services.²⁷ Isolation, in the face of services and shelters that may put trans and gender-diverse services users at risk, can also be a form of self-protection, though it may simultaneously lead to worse outcomes, including aggravating mental health struggles. In responses to the WNHHN Survey, gender-diverse people expressed a deep longing for affirming, safe housing where they could build ties with communities of their choice. Some respondents expressed frustration with the lack of low-barrier housing options that are not congregate, or a general dissatisfaction with the lack of control they can exercise over the people they find themselves surrounded by. For many, this was tied to feelings of discomfort with being surrounded by those with whom they had not established trusting relationships. Overwhelmingly, when asked “what does home mean to you?” gender-diverse people said, “somewhere safe.”

While instances of inadequate services or harmful responses can be found across the experiences of Two-Spirit, trans, and gender-diverse people in situations of homelessness, it is also important to understand the unique experiences of members of this community. The men’s shelter sector can be a deeply unsafe place, but especially vulnerable populations of men.²⁸ Trans men are often unsafe in men’s shelters, unwelcome in women’s shelters, and have their choices narrowly determined for them, rather than having their ability to make agentic decisions about their housing, safety, and wellbeing respected.²⁹

In the context of the WNHHN Survey, respondents reported feeling as though their gender and sexuality were not respected, compounded by interpersonal issues and oppressive treatment from staff and other participants. Issues of discrimination and judgement at the hands of staff were reported at a much higher rate by gender-diverse people (41% vs 21%), as well as by other program participants (39% vs 26%). As outlined in a deeply impactful report on the experiences of trans-masculine experiences

²⁷ James et al., 2018.

²⁸ Dénomme-Welch, S., Pyne, J., & Scanlon, K. (2008). *Invisible Men: FTMs and Homelessness in Toronto*. Toronto, ON: The Wellesley Institute.

²⁹ Dénomme-Welch et al., 2008.

of homelessness in Toronto, poignantly named “[Invisible Men](#),”³⁰ the seeming invisibility of particular groups may be a barrier to implementing inclusive programming. For example, shelters may assume that trans men do not require services to support experiences of homelessness because they are often absent or completely invisible in shelter spaces. As a result, staff may incorrectly assume that trans men are not present in the homelessness community or do not require support to access housing. Similar to barriers captured in the *This is Not Home* study, acknowledging and respecting trans men and their unique experiences does not necessarily lead to concrete measures to enable them to access existing men’s services.

Importantly, more than one in three respondents in the WNHHN Survey reported being unable to access shelter when they needed it because they did not qualify for the organization’s services (34% vs 15% for gender-diverse respondents). For example, one participant stated:

“Because I was male presenting and fleeing abuse with a baby and a dog and you can't bring all of them with you/only one family shelter for women allows pets and I felt that because I present more masculine and don't identify exactly as a woman it would cause issues or i would t be welcome or safe there either.”

Trans-masculine people also face barriers in trying to access services and shelter in the men’s housing sector. Trans-masculine and “female to male” (FTM) transgender participants in the 2008 “Invisible Men” study were unlikely to access men’s shelters, with only 11% reporting having done so.³¹ The *Invisible Men* study uncovers numerous reasons for the underuse of men’s services by trans-masculine clients – but the unsafety of these spaces for trans people emerged as a predominant concern: “The spectres of sexual and physical assault were ever-present as FTMs described the dangers in being identified as transgender in an all-male space.”³²

Intersectionality is also important to understanding Two-Spirit, trans, and non-binary experiences of homelessness. In the *This is Not Home* data, trans people, particularly those with intersecting experiences of anti-Black or anti-Indigenous racism, or those engaging in sex work, were more likely to be barred or face restrictions to accessing services, and more likely to face discrimination in housing and other social systems. This data also suggests that additional work is needed to understand and meet the unique needs of Two-Spirit people, both as participants and in the retention of Two-Spirit staff (a key point for ensuring that Two-Spirit people feel seen and represented in

³⁰ Dénommmé-Welch et al., 2008.

³¹ Dénommmé-Welch et al., 2008.

³² Dénommmé-Welch et al., 2008, p. 24.

services and shelters). While many organizations include Two-Spirit people in moves to trans inclusivity, this data suggests that in practice Two-Spirit people are amongst the most marginalized within the homelessness sector, and are very unlikely to feel comfortable, safe, and supported within organizations. Participants believed this may be linked to a lack of Indigenous knowledge and cultural sensitivity within non-Indigenous organizations which were more inclusive of trans needs, as well as a lack of education about Two-Spirit terminology and realities in Indigenous-led organizations. Intersecting experiences of discrimination often increased the violence that community members face and multiple barriers to receiving appropriate and effective housing supports.

SUMMARY OF KEY HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES & OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE INQUIRY

“The right to housing affords everyone a safe and secure home in which to live in security, peace and dignity, meeting standards of adequacy, including standards relating to legal security of tenure, affordability, habitability, availability of services, accessibility, location and culture”

- The National Housing Strategy Act (2019)

Canada’s 2019 [National Housing Strategy Act](#) (NHTSA) provides a pathway for advancing the right to adequate housing for rights-claimant communities, and mechanisms for inquiry, meaningful engagement, and delivering justice that are fundamental to the process of progressively realizing the right to housing.³³ While Canada’s [National Housing Strategy](#) has been critiqued for the way it fails to account for the diversity of experiences of cisgender women living in precarious housing situations or homelessness,³⁴ even further consideration is needed with regard to the experiences of gender-diverse people.

In order to determine what changes need to be made to policy, programs, and investments under the *National Housing Strategy*, meaningful engagement should take place with gender-diverse people experiencing housing need and homelessness. Without question, research and decision-making should be informed by the robust, deliberate, and ongoing engagement of gender-diverse people with lived expertise. The *National Housing Strategy Act*, in accordance with international human rights guidance, necessitates the participation of people with lived expertise as rights-claimants.³⁵ Human rights standards require that all work done on gender-diverse housing experiences should be undertaken with leadership by researchers, advocates, and, most significantly, persons with lived expertise who are part of this community. Meaningful participation by those most impacted is a core component of human rights-based policy frameworks, and this is of utmost importance in the context of work with trans and gender-diverse people, whose lives and voices are frequently pushed to the margins.

³³ Government of Canada. (2019, June 21). [National Housing Strategy Act](#). Ottawa, ON.

³⁴ Schwan, K., & Ali, N. (2021). [A Rights-Based, GBA+ Analysis of the National Housing Strategy](#). Toronto, ON: WNHHN.

³⁵ Government of Canada, 2019.

Parallel to the NHTS, Canada has also ratified several international covenants that give guidance on realizing the right to housing, including the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms Of Racism](#) (CERD), the [International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR), the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), the [Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women](#) (CEDAW), and the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC).³⁶ In the next stages of this work, we will more closely examine available literature on the human rights of people who are marginalized as a result of gender identity, sexual orientation, and sex characteristics, and link these recommendations with reports and findings regarding gender-diverse people and realizing their right to housing in Canada.

Future Areas for Rights-Focused Research

Paradoxically, while gender-diverse communities remain an over-researched population, large gaps in research and data continue to exist with respect to housing need and homelessness amongst Two-Spirit, trans, non-binary, and gender-diverse people. This is due in part to the fact gender-diverse people have often been the *subjects* of research, rather than in positions to *lead* research about their communities. Gender-diverse lived experiences have not always fundamentally shaped research questions or priorities, which means that not all the existing literature offers the kinds of robust, community-informed contributions that will help realize the rights of gender-diverse people. Given this, it is critical that gender-diverse people are in charge of setting the research agenda and articulating future areas of inquiry in rights-focused research. With this in mind, we have briefly summarized here a few key areas where future research could be undertaken to advance the rights of gender-diverse people:

Housing Need

The social and economic inclusion of gender-diverse people is a core human rights matter requiring deeper investigation. Instances of chronic homelessness, core housing need, or poverty disproportionately experienced by gender-diverse communities represent a denial of their right to housing, and an exploration of effective remedies to these rights violations is urgently needed.

Two-Spirit and Indigenous Gender-Diverse People

Changes to the housing system are immediately needed to decolonize the non-Indigenous shelter system, in line with Canada's human rights obligations under the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (UNDRIP), in order to reduce the harm Indigenous Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people face across the

³⁶ For a deeper exploration of what each of these international conventions means for the right to housing, please see Biss, M., Porter, B., Raza, S., & Desbaillets, D. (2021). [Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Housing: A Literature Review](#). The National Right to Housing Network.

housing spectrum. There is a critical need to explore *how* best to decolonize the housing and shelter systems. Massive gaps exist in policies, programs, and practice in the context of Two-Spirit and Indigenous gender-diverse people, and significant work is required to uphold the housing rights on Indigenous homelands.³⁷ Future research should support the goals of the [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ People National Action Plan](#), including supporting the development of the National Indigenous Human Rights Accountability Mechanism.³⁸ Additional research can support the need to urgently prioritize all available means to end homelessness and realize the right to housing for Indigenous Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people.

Poverty

Gender-diverse households experience core housing need, chronic homelessness, and poverty at rates greater than their cisgender counterparts. Underlying this reality are myriad factors that require greater research attention and reflection. Future areas of inquiry may include: the specific barriers trans and gender-diverse people face when seeking and keeping employment; the impact of the financialization of housing on gender-diverse households and individuals; and pathways to ease the burden of trans and gender-diverse people who rely on multiple subsistence strategies to stay housed and survive.

Inadequate Housing Conditions

The right to adequate housing hinges on seven core components: “legal security of tenure, affordability, habitability, availability of services, accessibility, location and culture.”³⁹ Gender-diverse people face steep challenges in accessing housing that meets their needs across all of these metrics, suggesting that when it comes to living in adequate housing, this community is more likely to face some form of denial of their right to housing. Measuring the scope and scale of housing adequacy issues faced by gender-diverse people is a key area for future inquiry. For trans and gender-diverse people whose rights are being violated, ensuring they have access to justice to address these violations is paramount. More research is needed to understand what resources gender-diverse rights-claimants may need to utilize access to justice mechanisms (such as the Office of the Federal Housing Advocate’s [human rights claim submission process](#), and the subsequent National Housing Council review panels).

³⁷ National Indigenous Feminist Housing Working Group. (2022). [Homeless on Homelands: Upholding Housing as Human Right for Indigenous Women, Girls, Two-Spirit, and Gender-Diverse People](#). Toronto, ON: WNHHN.

³⁸ National Family and Survivors Circle, Core Working Group. (2022). [2022 Progress Report on the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ People National Action Plan](#). Ottawa, ON: Crown–Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada.

³⁹ Government of Canada, 2019.

Under the [*Canadian Human Rights Act*](#), gender identity and expression are prohibited grounds of discrimination. The freedom to live openly and safely in one's sexual orientation, gender, and sex is essential to the human dignity of gender-diverse people, and should be considered a fundamental aspect of housing adequacy. Further direction may be taken from international human rights legal standards such as the [*Yogyakarta Principles +10*](#)⁴⁰ (providing human rights guidance on matters of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics), and [*reports of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression*](#), Irene Khan, where she has suggested her mandate could be one entry point into legislative protections for sexual orientation and gender expression.⁴¹ Any potential pathway to progressively realizing the right to housing for trans, and gender-diverse people should be researched and implemented swiftly.

Discrimination & Exclusion from the Housing System

The WNHHN Survey finding that gender-diverse people reported deeper and more frequent experiences of discrimination within housing in every domain is indicative of the urgent human rights violations experienced by this population.

The disproportionate depth and complexity of housing need and homelessness in specific communities of gender-diverse people requires particular attention and further research. Research should focus on the experiences of Two-Spirit and Indigenous gender-diverse people; Black gender-diverse people; gender-diverse people who are refugees or newcomers; gender-diverse people who use drugs; gender-diverse seniors and youth; gender-diverse people who are HIV positive; gender-diverse people with disabilities; gender-diverse survivors of D/IPV; gender-diverse parents and caregivers; gender-diverse people who are street-involved or live in encampments; and gender-diverse people who engage in sex work.

Public Systems

Research suggests that public systems failures are a near-universal aspect of trans and gender-diverse experiences in housing insecurity. Public systems – such as the healthcare system, the child welfare system, the criminal justice system – are organized within inherent expectations of adherence to cis-normative standards, and often end up being spaces that reinforce and magnify the oppression and violence gender-diverse people face.

⁴⁰ Yogyakarta Principles Drafting Committee. (2017). [*The Yogyakarta Principles Plus 10*](#). Yogyakarta Principles.

⁴¹ Khan, I. (2021). A/76/150. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan*. United Nations General Assembly. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/212/16/PDF/N2121216.pdf?OpenElement>.

Research is needed in order to bring public systems that contribute to experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity into line with human rights-based practice. Public institutions are in need of structural reworking to better meet the needs of gender-diverse people, and research for this Brief indicates strongly that public officials and employees in these systems should undergo specific and community-informed trans and gender-diverse awareness training. Research and action in this area is critical.

One area that should be particularly considered is the role of the criminal justice system in violating the rights of gender-diverse people who are unhoused or precariously housed. Research should be done into practices that over-police and disproportionately criminalize the most marginalized groups of trans and gender-diverse people. This could include pathways to fully decriminalize all aspects of sex work in order to allow trans and gender-diverse sex workers to establish safer workplaces; ending encampment evictions, street sweeps, and stop and search practices; and exploring community-held justice initiatives as an alternative to police interaction with racialized and marginalized trans and gender-diverse people.

Eviction

Further research is needed into the experiences of gender-diverse people facing eviction. Our preliminary scan of the literature and WNHHN Survey data indicates that evictions related to transphobic discrimination are a common experience, but more research is needed to be able to address the violence, harassment, and discrimination gender-diverse people experience from neighbours, other residents, and landlords.

Identifying resources and practices for eviction prevention for gender-diverse people is an immediate area of research need, as well as investigation into the scope and scale of informal and discriminatory evictions faced by this community as a result of their gender, sex, and sexual orientation. As evidenced by the [TRANSforming Justice](#) study, housing is a key area of legal need for trans and gender-diverse people.⁴² The ICESCR, ratified by Canada in 1976, includes protection from forced eviction and eviction into homelessness. Access to justice in cases of discriminatory and illegal eviction is a necessity, as well as reforming provincial and territorial landlord/tenant systems to uphold the rights of gender-diverse tenants.⁴³

Experiences of Homelessness

A definition of both affordability and homelessness that is responsive to trans and gender-diverse experiences would aid in efforts to advocate for policy changes that would reduce homelessness, poverty, and core housing need of this population.

⁴² James et al., 2018.

⁴³ Biss et al., 2021.

Future research should explore how rights-based standards, policies, and protocols could be adopted within the homelessness system that are responsive to the unique rights and needs of gender-diverse people (such as the [Toronto Shelter Standards](#)⁴⁴). Advancing the right to housing for trans and gender-diverse people navigating the homelessness sector will also require reflecting on other, interdependent rights. For example, access to appropriate, private, or safe bathrooms and showers in the shelter system is foundational to trans and gender-diverse people's human right to water and/or sanitation.⁴⁵ In future research, attention could be paid to practices within the shelter system that force or coerce gender-diverse people to modify their gender presentation in order to access or qualify for services.

⁴⁴ City of Toronto. (2018). [Toronto Shelter Standards](#). Toronto, ON: City of Toronto.

⁴⁵ Heller, L. (2020). [Gender Identity and the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation](#). The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.