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The Only Thing You Really Got is this Minute: Homeless Women Re-visioning the Future

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Introduction
As we enter the millennium, growing numbers of women and children join the ranks of the homeless around the globe. Common factors contributing to homelessness include the feminization of poverty, a shortage of affordable low-income housing and welfare policies focused on short-term relief. Unique factors include wars and political upheaval that produce a mobile population of refugees who are homeless.

In thinking about the coming millennium, feminists are challenged to envision a future where the economics and politics of gender do not inevitably produce poverty and homelessness. Homelessness in women’s lives is both a symptom and an outcome of their economic dependence within the private household and the wage-labour market. Women become homeless when relationships end and economic support is withdrawn, labour does not generate a “living wage,” illness drains the family resources, or other factors intersect to make them vulnerable. In addition, homelessness often occurs in the aftermath of natural disasters, such as floods, earthquakes and hurricanes, and man-made disasters such as wars. Women and children are the most visible among the displaced; in Central America 90 percent of the families living in refugee camps are headed by women.

While collective homelessness (i.e., when an entire village is displaced) is a vastly different social phenomenon than individual or family homelessness, where particular groups (i.e., single poor women heading families) are overrepresented, the experience of displacement or homelessness for women is tied to the disruption of caregiving roles within the family. Therefore, regardless of the contributing factors, the core experience of homelessness for women is the loss of a physical context in which social relationships are sustained and nurtured, bodies and souls are fed.

Women’s relationship to housing and human settlements, as Caroline Moser demonstrates, is an outgrowth of both economics and gender. Women are, for the most part, outside of the planning process...
produces housing options for low-income families. Moser explains that the reality of women’s lives does not inform or guide the planning process:

“Policy-makers, planners, architects, and designers both within government and international agencies, all perceive themselves as planning for people. But regardless of the reality of the particular planning context there is an almost universal tendency to make two assumptions: first, that the household consists of a nuclear family of husband, wife, and two or three children and, second, that within the family there is a clear sexual division of labour in which the man of the family as the ‘breadwinner’ is primarily involved in productive work outside the home, while the woman, as housewife and ‘homemaker,’ takes overall responsibility for the reproductive and domestic work involved in the organization of the household.”

While women may be excluded from formal policy/planning arenas, they certainly are not absent from political and social activism addressing issues of housing and homelessness. For example, Montserrat Sagot, in her research on Costa Rica’s women-led housing movement, found that women “in their role as main providers for their families and as developers and sustainers of the networks of human relations inside the community are potentially the primary builders of social movements that struggle for issues of daily subsistence and collective consumption.” Further, these social movements serve to politicize the private domain of women, transforming them into “conscious political actors.” In Costa Rica this resulted in planned new communities where housing was the primary focus. At the same time, the organization of communal life addressed so-called women’s issues such as child care and domestic violence, which were defined, not as private matters, but as community concerns.

Our goal is to introduce the perspectives of homeless women into our visions of the future. We are interested in how homeless women view their circumstances and in what they feel needs to happen for change to occur. By pivoting the centre so that homeless women are integrally engaged in the analysis and critique, we hope to discover pathways to the future that might not be readily apparent to those who have been protected from immediate experience with homelessness and poverty. As the feminist political scientist Rhadha Jhappan points out in her
exploration of identity politics in feminist discourse, "our material situations, life opportunities, social positionality, and dominant discourses do profoundly mould our experiences and understanding of the world and our places in it."6

The Roofless Women’s Action Research Mobilization (RWARM) in Boston, Massachusetts, is one example of a grass-roots effort to organize research and social action around the experiences of women who have been "roofless," or homeless. This group uses participatory research to organize and mobilize homeless women in combatting homelessness. Their goal is to understand the causes of homelessness, and to move "away from a dependency model of providing services to materially poor people toward an interdependency model based on human dignity and a sense of connectedness and community."7

In a similar vein, we advocate, not just the inclusion of poor and homeless women in our consideration of life in the millennium, but also the centrality of their perspective as critical to building a future where connectedness and community replace dependency as a policy model. Homeless women should inform our understanding of homelessness as it is currently constructed, as well as our vision of a future without homelessness for women and children.

**Envisioning the Future**

How do we begin the process of envisioning the future? We start with the stories of individuals, their accounts of their lived experiences. Individual experiences reveal truths about social structures and ideologies, and it is at this level that real and creative change can occur. In her novel *By the Light of My Father’s Smile*, Alice Walker explores the significance of story as a medium of communication and expression in the culture of the Mundo, where stories are seen as having "more room in them than ideas." As Manuelito, a member of the Mundo culture, explains, "it is as if ideas are made of blocks. Rigid and hard. And stories are made of a gauze that is elastic. You can almost see through it, so what is beyond is tantalizing."8

Stories tie people to one another and to the culture in which they live. It is through stories that we have an identity, a set of circumstances and personal truths. It is also through stories that collective experiences and truths are captured and conveyed. Kathleen Hirsch demonstrates that homeless stories can be used to develop a holistic approach to the
problem that includes rehabilitating communities and neighbourhoods.\(^9\)
The power of homeless women’s stories to explain the causes and consequences of their situation is illustrated in Elliot Liebow’s work *Tell Them Who I Am*.\(^10\) Meredith Ralston uses the stories of drug- and/or alcohol-addicted homeless women to move beyond an individual-level explanation for homelessness to a critique of non-feminist theories of the welfare state.\(^11\) And Marjorie Bard relates how storytelling and narrative serve as the springboard for women’s organizations that are designed to redefine individual problems as collective concerns (i.e., Women Organized Against Homelessness).\(^12\) Our goal is to construct a set of collective stories about homelessness that will allow us to see beyond and through to a future for women who are homeless in the present.

Stories are the starting point for what the peace activist and sociologist Elise Boulding calls “imaging the future.” She uses this term in her workshops, which are designed “to encourage people to dare to imagine best-case scenarios for the future and invent creative strategies to realize them, rather than becoming trapped in fashionable worst-case scenarios with their military focus.”\(^13\) Boulding observed that she was empowered as an activist by her ability to imagine the way things could be. Therefore, imaging is the first step to empowered activism, which is where significant social change can occur.

In this article, we are guided by Boulding’s ideas about how to responsibly “image” the future.\(^14\) First, we present, in response to Boulding’s call for in-depth knowledge of the past, the reflections of homeless women on the causes and consequences of homelessness in the United States. The women’s critique of the system and advice to decision-makers provide insight that is often overlooked and devalued: “The bag lady ... is not viewed by well-dressed and working community members as capable of articulating legitimate personal, social, and political concerns — and positing solutions.”\(^15\) We challenge this view by giving precedence to the concerns of homeless women about social, political and economic inequality, and to the very direct effects of this inequality on their lives. We end this section with a description of three different community projects organized by women to create alternative opportunities for poor and homeless women in the United States.

Second, we present stories of women who are homeless in Central America in response to Boulding’s concern that imaging the future has excluded non-Northern populations. She calls for the North to “develop more inclusive imagery, more inclusive identities, and to learn from the
countries of the South about history, cultures, lifeways and traditions of community and problem solving not based on high-tech lifestyles.”

Our hope is that such cross-cultural visioning will help to create the structures and spaces from which alternative futures can be imagined and constructed.

The feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s notion of the politics of location provides further support for acknowledging and including individual experience, especially the experiences of the “colonized,” or in our case, the homeless. Their location, according to Mohanty, “forces and enables specific modes of reading and knowing the dominant.” Therefore, by drawing on the perspectives and understandings of homeless women — who are deeply embedded in, yet located outside of, the dominant systems (where a future is being constructed for them in the form of social and economic policies) — we propose to shift the discourse to the level of personal experience and knowledge.

Gathering Women’s Stories
The perspectives presented are derived from two sources: (1) a decade-long study of homeless women and children in the Midwestern United States (1988-98); and (2) observations, interviews and published stories gathered in El Salvador during the rebuilding of communities in 1993 at the end of a civil war. These two sources provide a method of imaging the future that is based on Boulding’s work. While we are not claiming a systematic comparative analysis, we do believe that weaving our observations from different cultures broadens the future of possibilities for women across time and space.

HOMELESS WOMEN IN THE NORTH AMERICAN MIDWEST
Today, women’s homelessness in this particular region of the United States is based on the dependency of women on men, poor countries on rich countries, and hierarchical systems of oppression linking race, class, nationality, sexuality, ability and so on. Like the communities they call home, homeless women in the Midwest have seen their lives shaped by deindustrialization, declining levels of public-welfare support and an increasing stigmatization of the poor.

Our research involved indepth interviews with several hundred women living in homeless shelters, battered women’s shelters and transitional
housing during the study period. The interviews included accounts of the women's lives, the events leading up to and producing their homelessness, their survival strategies, their dreams and hopes for the future, and the advice they had for people making the economic and political decisions in the country and their communities. In short, we asked them to tell us their stories using a before-during-afterwards framework, with their current homeless experience as the pivotal point.

True to feminist methods, the research was designed for women, to "serve the interests of the poor, exploited and oppressed."\(^{18}\) The sheltered women (the "subjects" of the research) were approached in the spirit of a teaching relationship — they had something to teach the researchers about the experience of living through homelessness. In establishing the relationship, it became clear that the issue was often one of power and resources: sheltered women would agree to be interviewed because they saw the interviewer as someone who could get them something they could not get on their own. For example, shelters often have a "time out" policy, which requires all residents to be out of the shelter for several hours during the day. During the coldest months, it was never difficult to find women to interview, since shelter staff allowed them to stay inside. On several projects we were able to get funding to pay a stipend for the interview. We often had sheltered women calling us to set up interviews once word got around that there was payment for their stories. Ultimately, we did not have what they most needed, however. One sheltered woman, approached about an interview, asked, "Do you have a home for me?" When she was told no, she said, "Then I got nothing for you."

The issue of power and privilege was one the research team has addressed continually in this decade-long project. While that issue has never been resolved, the process has helped us identify expectations and biases that we take into the field with us. This is one way feminist methods have been used to test and retest what the researcher knows versus what the researcher comes to learn from the interviews and the stories told.

In addition to the homeless women, we interviewed social-service providers and community organizers about their experiences with homelessness, the response to homelessness in their communities, and their visions for a future without homelessness (and what it would take to get there). Focus-group discussions were conducted with representatives
from community organizations and industries, including churches and synagogues, social-action and community groups, planning agencies, women's entrepreneurial and business support organizations, and financial institutions. These discussions focused on perceptions, attitudes and beliefs about homelessness, and the community's response to it.

HOMELESS WOMEN IN EL SALVADOR
We also present the voices of women from El Salvador as they reflect on their experiences during a civil war that lasted from 1980 to 1992 and left more than 70,000 people dead. The United States helped to finance El Salvador's military and government action against the rebellion of the poor, who were demanding a just distribution of land for farming, and basic civil rights. The war destroyed whole villages and forced thousands into homelessness and "countrylessness" as they became refugees in neighbouring nations.

In order to more fully understand the past, we read women's accounts of the war and then, in July 1993, visited repatriated villages and talked with women who had been refugees. We were identified as members of a delegation from the United States, and continually had to acknowledge the role U.S. military support had played in destroying the villages and the lives of the people we met. We heard countless women tell us how the war had taken the lives of their children, as well as describing the torture they endured and the hardship they experienced living as refugees. Then we were told of the role we were now asked to take: to know their experiences and to monitor what went on in their country. They wanted us to understand their past and move with them in imaging a different future. The tension between our understanding of the part the United States had played in fuelling the war and the power we had as U.S. citizens to make demands for the people of El Salvador allowed us to see our stories as interrelated. Further, it became painfully clear that U.S. citizens play a role in reproducing the inequalities that exist throughout the world.

To gain knowledge of the past, we must hear about, and learn from, the lived experience of homeless women. Engaging in cross-cultural imaging involves shifting the perspective from a culturally situated homelessness to an understanding of how the local and global context shapes women's choices, as well as the way they respond to their individual and shared circumstances. From there, we can envision and move toward
futures that encompass the perspectives and actions of women around
the globe.

Knowledge of the Past: The United States

PATHWAYS INTO HOMELESSNESS
Women residing in shelters and transitional housing share common
paths to homelessness. The events leading them to the shelter system
include individual-level factors — such as relationship disruption, the
breakdown of social networks, domestic violence, drug or alcohol
addiction and mental-health problems — and structural-level factors,
such as the loss of employment or underemployment, lack of subsidized
or low-income housing options, disruption or cuts in welfare benefits,
and dependence on short-term emergency social services. These factors
are interrelated, making it difficult to identify a single root cause of
homelessness in a particular woman’s life. For most of the women,
homelessness resulted from a combination of economic and personal
crises, as these stories illustrate:

“I ended up here because [public housing] put me on a list. They
couldn’t find a place for me, so I waited and waited and I stayed
with friends. They my friends and family couldn’t afford to have
me anymore.”

“To make a long story short, I hurt my knee and I was unable to
work. [My husband] deserted me and the kids, and I was unable
to pay the rent and I got evicted. All of my clothes and belongings
were set out.”

“When I was in the hospital having my baby, my apartment was
robbed and they took everything. They broke the windows and I
was afraid to stay there, so I moved in with my sister. She didn’t
really have enough room for me, so I moved in with my other sister.
Section 8 [the Public Housing Authority] called her [threatening
to evict her for having more occupants than her lease allowed],
so I had to leave and I ended up here.”
The homeless women, almost without exception, turned first to family and friends, members of their social support network, when they found themselves in need of shelter. For most, the formal shelter system was a last resort, in large part because of the stigma attached to being a shelter resident ("People look at you in the category of being a bagwoman, or you are a runaway, or you are a drug addict"). Rebecca Koch, Mary T. Lewis and Wendy Quinones describe the strategies used by homeless mothers to avoid shelters as "resistance for survival ... resistance to the demeaning label of 'homeless.'"19

The women enter the shelter as "resistance for equality," making a claim, in other words, that they and their children "are deserving of available community resources."20 Once in the shelter, the women expressed both relief and frustration. One woman, describing the positive side of the shelter, said, "They provided me with clothing and with food. We have group sessions where they make you feel like you are somebody, like what has happened to you doesn't make you any less of a person." On the other hand, the shelter was a temporary, short-term, limited option for people who have complicated and complex factors operating in their lives. Another woman explained:

"You are in a situation [where] you have a place to stay today, but everyone here knows there is an end date. What if you are not together by then? You don't have a permanent place. You know you could do something wrong and, hey, you are gone. You have no security and it is always on your mind. The more it is on your mind the more it wears you down. The time you need to be together is the time you are the weakest. It is like a vicious circle. Because the only thing you really got when you don't have a home is this minute. You can work towards it and you can try. But after you go to all of the agencies, after you do so much, and after you do everything you can do, you still haven't got an answer."

INSIDE THE SHELTER SYSTEM
As the woman quoted above observed, the social-service system, which is made up of various agencies, including shelters, does not provide an answer to homelessness. Barbara Arrighi points out in her work on homeless families that the shelter system is set up as temporary because of the assumptions that family crisis is short-lived and derived from
individual circumstances (i.e., job loss or divorce). She argues that systemic factors, "such as a shortage of full-time jobs, increased part-time and temporary service work, declining wages, a decrease in affordable housing, and cuts in federal and state assistance for families, have contributed to a crisis-based way of life for increasing numbers." The crisis-based nature of the response to homelessness means that the symptoms are treated (i.e., homeless women have a place to sleep), while the root causes are unchallenged and unchanged. When we asked homeless women to reflect on their circumstances and to share their perspectives, they focused, not on their unique problems, but on their shared position and what they needed collectively to move out of homelessness: "We're all homeless and need a home, attention, jobs, low-income housing, because we can't afford to pay the skyrocketing rent landlords are demanding. Even though we are from different races, we all in the same boat," said one woman. In addition to sharing a need for housing, they also share a desire to belong: "We have nowhere to go, but we all want to have a place to raise our children. We want to belong, you know, not just to the homeless, but to society and to ourselves."

The social-service response to homelessness transfers private family life to the public realm. In the United States this is not about taking public responsibility for changing the conditions producing homelessness. Rather, it is about processing and monitoring homeless individuals and families in the agencies and organizations that have developed in the wake of the situation. One shelter provider explained her job this way:

"I think that what happens is that we are so concerned with the quantity of our work. You know, Do we have x amount of clients on our case load? Are all of our forms correctly done? Do we need any more forms? It is like quality assurance through professionalism rather than quality assurance through care of the client. So, sometimes the system takes its eye off the real goal, the individual, and places it on the organization or statistics."

As this provider indicates, the "clients" in the system are treated as "cases" and success is measured solely by how many shelter residents are moved into "permanent" housing (public or private market) and how many find employment. Funding is tied to performance criteria that
include decreased dependence on public assistance (i.e., moving “clients” off the welfare rolls).

The homeless women report that the way the system operates is a detriment to their efforts to succeed. As one woman, a recovering drug addict, said, “I would really like to see if I couldn’t make something of myself. Do something before I die. But the system just beats you into the ground.” Another, referring to the intensive demands for resident participation of the transitional housing program, said:

“Sometimes I struggle with ... having other people suggest and tell me what to do. I don’t need to be told I have low self-esteem every week. It knocks me down as a person, makes me feel less of a person. Somebody from the program comes to my house once a week and you really do get bombarded, like what else do I have to tell you that I haven’t told you already?”

The structure of the programs brings together women from two classes: the homeless and the providers. Some of the providers clearly saw their shared circumstances of gender and sometimes class and race. “I never realized how true it was until I came to work here, [but] you know the only thing between us and being homeless is one paycheque,” said one woman. Another, expressing a spiritual connection to the women she serves, explained: “You know this woman that walks in the door could be any of us and really a part of us is linked to her. There is a little of me in her and a little of each one of these homeless people reflected in ourselves too.”

For their part, the homeless women often perceived the providers “not as helpers but as agents of an oppressive system that distrusts and maligns those who are living in poverty.”23 They expressed ambivalent feelings about providers as gatekeepers of the resources and as agents of control, even over very basic day-to-day decisions like bedtime and child discipline. As one mother complained: “It is like [the staff] is the mom and I am the child.” In fact, many of the women talked about the parent role adopted by staff, and about the “tough love” strategies used to make women comply with shelter and housing rules and regulations. The perception that the providers did not see the commonalities between themselves and the homeless women was expressed by a resident in the following way:
"The one common denominator we all have in this program, whether we work for it or live in it, is that we are all women. We are capable of having babies or adopting them. We are all capable of working. The difference is that people who are working in the program do not see it that way. It is kind of like that question of how hard do women have to work to prove everything that they can — that is an age-old question. That has been going on for hundreds of years. [The staff] has got to stop looking at women in this program from an outside view."

THE VIEW FROM INSIDE

As asked to give advice and direction to decision-makers and leaders in government, the homeless women wanted to communicate several main points. First, they want those making the decisions to use humanity and empathy as guiding principles. They want decision-makers to subjectively understand their circumstances as they allocate resources:

"It is not that we are not as good as everybody else as far as being on welfare and all of that. We love and care for our kids as much as they do theirs. We want a home for them just the same as they want a home for their kids. A lot of these decisions I don’t understand. They read the paper and they know how much it costs to rent a two-bedroom apartment. I would tell them to live what I have lived and then tell me that you would make the same decisions. Everybody was not born with a silver spoon in their mouth. I don’t expect you to give me anything. I expect you to give me a chance. That is what I expect you to give me — a chance."

The women also stressed that being given a chance should include more than being offered a temporary housing program. The issues confronting women, especially single mothers, need to be addressed in a permanent, comprehensive way, as this mother from the transitional housing program explains:

"There are so many issues that women as a whole need to be addressed, and they are just not being addressed. You just cannot take women and kids and throw them into a program and say this is it. And then when our time is up, a lot of us will be going right back to [project] housing. Then all of a sudden we will be hit with
the changes in [welfare]. All of a sudden [welfare] is going to be cut off. The system is just not geared or organized to help single women [who] have kids.”

The women not only asked for understanding, they also expressed anger at a political system where militarism and capitalism set national priorities:

“If they can spend millions of dollars on the defence budget when the country’s not at war, then they could do something for the homeless. It’s just a situation where they are not [apportioning] money in the right places. Economics have affected a lot of people — like when the plants closed. They don’t want to look at the blue-collar workers [who] have worked to keep this country alive. Then when their jobs fold up, they have nowhere to go. This is supposed to be the land of plenty and people are [living] in the streets. They wonder why women are turning to prostitution and stuff, where are we going to get the extra money from?”

“They spend billions of dollars … on the weapons that just sit there. They’re never gonna use them, unless they plan on blowing up the world. Can you imagine how many women and children that [money] could help? You know in Canada their medical expenses are paid by their government. Why can’t America look at that and say we can do that too? We got enough weapons sitting around to blow the world up. How about putting some of that money into human beings, the people that are out here starving, instead of [for] those rich people that sit there with their millions of dollars and the Republicans [who] look down [on us]?”

Ultimately, the enormity of the obstacles to moving women out of poverty in our current economic system and political climate contributes to feelings of hopelessness and a sense that change is not possible:

“The more you look around every day somebody becomes homeless. It really happens and with the children. I think with all of the money that is in our government and these empty buildings that they have around here in almost every city that you go to … in the projects it is so bad. I mean, there are rats running on babies
while they are sleeping. There are drug addicts everywhere. People just don't care. You know what? I believe times are going to get worse. I cannot see really any improvement. Maybe I am just pessimistic. I just don't really see any change in the future, because the rich just want to keep getting [richer]."

These views, critical as they are of structures that do not support communities of people, represent a "vision of transformation" that is defined by Koch and colleagues as "the ability to think and act in ways that change reality for oneself and for one's society." While some of the homeless women we talked with expressed this type of vision, most were engaged in the daily struggle for survival and were not in a position to work for change beyond their own circumstances. To explore transformation in practice, we turn to three community organizations in the United States where women have come together to create alternative futures. These organizations reflect the possibility of transcending current systems to create opportunities for women and their children. These examples are presented as models to spark our imaging as we move into the millennium.

WOMEN TRANSFORMING THE FUTURE
The Community Housing Coalition of Cincinnati is one example of an alternative program that bridges differences to improve the lives of women. The coalition was formed to address the issue of housing in women's lives. The group separated its mission from the public response to homelessness, which founder Maureen Wood described as "having the potential for creating permanent dependency by focusing on temporary shelter over permanent housing."

The first effort of the group was an international conference held in the late 1980s. Women who were architects, builders, developers, social-service providers and low-income earners came together to reconceptualize housing to fit the needs of women. Together, they designed and developed blueprints of model homes. After the conference, 25 participants from Cincinnati formed a development enterprise to build housing for women. Housing was envisioned as community-based and included 24-hour childcare, cafeteria services and shared meeting space, in addition to apartments for women of all ages, with and without dependent children.
In addition to planning, fundraising, and imaging the future of housing, the coalition conducted home-repair training for women who had their own homes, bringing those who attended the sessions into the coalition. As a result, the coalition came to include women who were city planners, council women, professional women, low-income women, women of colour and lesbian/bisexual women. While the diversity of the group often proved to be a challenge, members were committed to staying with the process and saw themselves as benefitting from their differences. As Wood said, “We don’t miss the details.”

Rowan Homes in Philadelphia is a second example of an alternative program that brings the resources of women with class privilege together with the needs of disadvantaged women. Rena Rowan, a one-time homeless refugee in Siberia and a single immigrant mother, established Rowan Homes as a foundation for the homeless. The group’s projects include a transitional shelter for homeless women and children and a 75-unit complex that will provide long-term housing for women and children (with nearby or on-site support services such as health and daycare and after-school programs). Rowan explains, “We want every Rowan Homes family to know ... they will have a community behind them who will support their efforts.”

The Women’s Economic Agenda Project (WEAP) in Oakland, California, is a third example of women coming together to share their stories — in this instance, their perspective on the ways that the needs of women of colour and poor women had been neglected by the women’s movement in the United States. “WEAP’s primary agenda is to fight for economic justice for poor women and their families and for basic human rights, such as decent and safe housing, food, education, and health care.” The goal is to empower women to organize themselves against economic injustice, with projects that include national summits for low-income women, a speakers’ bureau, and the Women and Family Center, which offers education, business development and skills training for women. The group has been active against welfare-reform legislation in the United States and has worked with organizations responsible for funnelling federal money into communities. Accordingly, WEAP addresses how structural changes in the economy and in policy making “affect low-income women and women of color, and, at the turn of the millennium, [the organization is] committed to empowering these women to fight for their rights.”
Broadening the base of the movement to centre the experiences and perspectives of women of colour and low-income women also requires moving beyond the borders of the United States. We turn now to the South to cross-culturally vision the future for homeless women.

**Cross-Cultural Visioning: El Salvador**

Boulding encourages us to engage in dialogue across cultures to better understand the history, traditions and problem-solving techniques of people living in areas different from our home countries. She calls specifically for peoples in Northern countries to try to understand the experiences of people who live in Southern countries and to use such knowledge to imagine a future different from the one that is limited by the Northern dominant ideology. This process, which Boulding refers to as “cross-cultural imaging,” encourages us to learn from the stories of women in other countries and combine them with a deeper understanding of our own cultures of homelessness and poverty as we work toward a different future.

**WAR AND HOMELESSNESS IN EL SALVADOR**

The openness and willingness of women in El Salvador to share their experiences with people in North America provides an opportunity to engage in cross-cultural imaging. Their stories take place in a very different context than do the stories of women in the United States. Their most recent memories are of war, a 12-year civil war between the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), who called for basic human rights for the country’s poor citizens, and the U.S.-supported Salvadoran military. Yet war and extreme inequality between the poor and the rich are not new realities in this small country. El Salvador has been a site of unrest since the 1880s, when the ruling elite bought up land and created large plantations for export crops such as sugar and coffee. This created widespread poverty, as *campesinos* (peasants/farm workers) were displaced from their communally owned land and left without a place to grow their own food. They were subsequently forced to work for substandard wages on large plantations, farming sugar and coffee for export, living only where the landowner allowed.

In 1932 Farabundo Marti led a rebellion of rural peasants against the government. This resulted in what is referred to as *la mantanza* (the
massacre), wherein 30,000 civilians were killed by members of the country’s military. Those who did not own land were pushed farther into the isolated hillsides, forming small villages on land that was not claimed by landowners because it was unfarmable. There, people attempted to grow corn and other staples on the steep hillsides. There was no electricity and their only source of water was from nearby streams or rivers. The poor also crowded around the capital city of San Salvador, living in shanties on land owned by the government or private landholders.

In the 1970s people again began to protest economic inequality and unsafe living conditions. This led to the creation of the FMLN, and from 1980 until 1992 a bloody civil war ensued between the nation’s military and the FMLN. Although a number of women participated in the FMLN, the force was made up primarily of men, drawing more men out of cities and small villages, and away from their families. The war was heavily financed by the United States, which provided training, equipment and even some personnel to help the government fight individuals they labelled communists. Countless human-rights violations committed by members of the military were documented by various groups both within and outside the country. One of their most common activities was to “disappear” people and to kidnap young boys to conscript them into the army. Women, besides joining the FMLN and various political groups, also created some of the most visible protests against the actions of the Salvadoran military and government, defying the subordinate status of “woman” and claiming a power that grew out of the truth of their suffering.

WOMEN AS ACTIVISTS AND COMMUNITY-BUILDERS
The materially poor women in El Salvador were realizing the depth of the injustices they faced, “because on top of suffering at the hands of the rich oligarchy, we also suffer as women. That’s why we call it double oppression, and that is why we struggle.” Carmen Virginia Martinez said, in a speech she delivered at the International Women’s Day Forum about the legal structure of El Salvador:

“[It is] a structure rendered by tradition into civil code that conceives of women as dependent, submissive, and passive beings, and thus reveals the basic sexist design of this society ... The majority of women are employed in service or secondary, marginal
activities that do not produce capital, so that consequently they have little clout as a labor force. We have also dealt with women's role in domestic labor — labor which provides for the reproduction and sustenance of the workforce but which is given no economic value.”

During the war, women played an active role in protesting the injustice they saw in their country and helping to rebuild their communities. In the larger cities, women who lived primarily in shanties on the outskirts became political activists, protesting in the streets and making demands on government and church officials. In 1977 they formed the group COMADRES, which captured public attention by staging demonstrations and vigils, calling for the release of political prisoners, for knowledge about those who had been disappeared and for the prosecution of death squads who had murdered thousands of Salvadorans. A member of COMADRES, who lost 14 members of her family to the war, said of her role in the struggle for justice, “I'm fighting for my suffering people, and this is the struggle of all the mothers in my country. And so we go out into the streets without fear ... We won't be silenced. And we know that one day we will win and the situation will change.”

While the women of San Salvador were visible in political protests in the capital city, women living in the countryside became key players in the refugee camps. The camps became necessary when the Salvadoran military moved into the remote villages, massacring those they claimed were members of the FMLN. As a result, more than a million people, mostly women and children, fled their villages, and were forced to live in refugee camps in Honduras and Guatemala. Some stayed for more than 10 years, isolated on barren land and reliant on international relief agencies for food, water and other goods. Although dependent on others, the refugees began to develop a sense of community and to plan for their return to El Salvador. Community councils were formed, and training, literacy and other learning opportunities were provided.

Beth Cagan, a professor of social work, and Steve Cagan, a photographer, are two Northerners who spent a significant amount of time with a refugee community in Honduras. On their return to El Salvador, the community members built a new city — Segundo Montes. The Northerners wrote about their experiences learning from the people of this community in their book, *This Promised Land, El Salvador*. The city
of Segundo Montes, with a population of more than 8,000, has been
touted as one of the most successful of the repatriated communities.
When they arrived at the camp in Honduras in the early 1980s, 85
percent of the refugees were illiterate; when they left nine years later,
fewer than 20 percent were. During their time in the camps, the
refugees established community-based systems of government, created
architectural plans, provided educational opportunities, and rationed
resources so as to meet the needs of each individual in the camp.
Women became active leaders, empowered by the unjustness of their
oppression. They became skilled in technical crafts such as construction
and weaving, as well as in health care, education, dentistry, nutrition and
sanitation, and they formed democratic governments and teaching
cooperatives. Finally, in 1989, a woman led the first group of refugees
back to their homeland, in defiance of the Salvadoran and Honduran
governments (which had not given permission for the move).

When a group of us from the United States visited Segundo Montes
and other repatriated communities in 1993, many of them were just
beginning. Most of the repatriated Salvadorans had chosen to return to
the site of their former villages, which were usually in complete ruin as
a result of the war. Despite the harsh conditions and lack of resources,
people worked collectively to rebuild their communities. Women were
major leaders, not only serving on leadership boards and councils, but
also working in jobs that previously had been considered appropriate
only for men. And the structure of daily life changed significantly.
Women no longer worked alone, spending most of their time preparing
their family’s food and caring for their own children. Under their
leadership, activities such as tortilla production and child care became
cooperative ventures. A collective kitchen and several daycare centres
were constructed, effectively moving family life to the heart of community
life.\(^{33}\)

Similar activities were occurring in other parts of El Salvador. In the
small village of Santa Marta, the four women and three men of the
community council told us of the priorities of the community: first, they
hoped to build a church, then a bakery, a health clinic and 42 one-
room houses for single women with children. Meanwhile, the children
were collecting pieces of the bombs they had found lying throughout
their community to build the Bells of Life, which would signal the people
of the village to come together. They held school sessions, in open-air
classrooms, taught by the most educated members of the village:
typically 12- and 13-year-old children. No community member, no matter what age or physical ability, would be left behind.

They dreamed of obtaining electricity for the whole village, and were developing radio contact with other villages to minimize their isolation. They asked us to go back to the United States and tell others of their plans, their hopes, their dreams. The women asked us to take their stories back to the people of North America because “so many North Americans don’t realize what is happening in our country, they don’t see us as human beings with the same aspirations that they have. They want peace, justice, well-being, schools, education, work, health, and religious freedom. Well, these are the same things our people want.” 34 And to achieve all this, they needed resources: medical equipment, building supplies, more training in health care, books and pencils for the schools. The community would gratefully accept contributions, according to the members of the community council, but would not allow their development planning to be influenced by external sources of aid and support. The vision was theirs.

The repatriated people of El Salvador took the skills they had learned in the refugee camps and the empowerment they felt as a community to create for themselves what their government refused to provide. Although they had seen death and experienced the fear and destruction that come with war, they had hope for a better future and vowed to work together to make that happen. They struggled to maintain the democratic structures they had established in the refugee camps and to make sure that the needs of all were provided for — regardless of their abilities. All contributed, in some way, to the vision of the community, and all felt responsible for its success.

The greatest lessons we learned in engaging in cross-cultural imaging with the people of El Salvador were of the power of hope and community. We witnessed a people who had nothing, but who, by coming together, were able to develop a community — a community where access to food, shelter and health care was not dependent on family or marital status, educational achievement or class position. In this place, if one was homeless, all were homeless, and if one was housed, all would be housed. Each villager we spoke with talked about his or her role in relation to other members of the community. It was evident that, while resources continued to be limited, no individual would be denied the assistance of the community. And although the journey has been difficult, and women still struggle to maintain their
independence and face continued obstacles from their government, the stories of the past are fresh and the vision for the future is strong.

**Women in Community Creating the Future**

Despite very different histories and circumstances, homeless women in both Central America and the United States experience extraordinary barriers to moving forward in hope. The women of El Salvador lived with political unrest and the constant threat of danger. They experienced homelessness as a community displaced by the horrors of war. They had little support from their government and relied on international groups for resources and protection. They struggled every day to maintain the sense of solidarity, community and vision that was born in the refugee camps.

The women from the United States, meanwhile, faced the daily struggle of living in poverty in a land of many resources. They were blamed as individuals for their poverty and were not seen as part of a larger community, nor were they encouraged to form alliances with others. Instead, they were dependent on a social-service system that does not guarantee assistance and encourages individual success at the expense of the community, as well as on a low-wage labour market that does not allow them to move their families out of poverty.

Despite these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, women have been able to move forward in hope by critiquing the political and economic structures that keep them poor. By understanding the shared experiences of women through story, and not allowing ourselves to be limited by the ideas of others, we can form policies and programs that are different from those prescribed by the dominant system — policies and programs that recognize women’s multiple roles as caretakers, community-builders and underpaid workers.

Poverty and homelessness are inevitable when women are dependent within the family and underpaid in the wage market. The dependency inherent in the roles of wife and mother places women at risk. As Esther Ngan-ling Chow and Catherine White Berheide demonstrate in their feminist analysis of policy, gender inequality that is embedded in family structures and political economies produces disadvantage for women around the globe. ³⁵ Basically, women’s labour, waged and unwaged, is controlled under patriarchal family and political systems. Women around the globe are burdened with, and disadvantaged by, their “triple
role" as mothers and caretakers within the household, workers in the wage-labour market, and participants in their communities and neighbourhoods.\textsuperscript{36}

The exclusion of women from policy-making and planning means that their experiences are peripheral in the state-level response to the housing side of the homeless problem. However, there is much to be learned from women's ways of organizing and taking action. Feminists are challenged to envision a future where "women-centred" policies are developed out of women's experiences and perspectives.\textsuperscript{37} The goal is to move into a future, not where the homeless are sheltered, but where homelessness for women and children is a rare event.

A dominant theme expressed by both the people in El Salvador and the women's groups in the United States is the importance of community over the individual in responding to the problems of homelessness and poverty. These women have rejected the dominant ideology that encourages individual achievement and family success above the good of the community, and they have become political actors and visionaries working for their communities. Said a 19-year-old woman who grew up in a camp of Salvadoran refugees, "Most of us were very little when we went into the refuge, and we hadn't yet accepted the values of capitalism, individualism, selfishness; they hadn't yet entered our consciousness ... We've come back into a capitalist system, the same one our parents lived in, but we've had the experience of being in an autonomous community, of deciding for ourselves what our values are."\textsuperscript{38} The challenge for women becomes how to maintain this vision for the future while fighting for its realization in the moment. Women's own stories of homelessness should be guiding the vision; however, it is up to those of us who are privileged in the dominant system to help clear a protective place so that change can occur.

ENDNOTES

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3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 13.


20. Ibid., p. 73.


22. Ibid., p. 65.

23. Ibid., p. 48.


27. Ibid.

28. "Disappeared" refers to a common practice of El Salvador's military, where people were kidnapped either because more men were needed to serve in the army or because they were considered dangerous because of their assumed political connections to the FMLN or human-rights organizations. The bodies of the disappeared were often found in mass graves or
dumped throughout the country; many have never been found at all. Women were at the forefront in demanding that the government reveal the whereabouts of the disappeared. Many were subsequently jailed and tortured because of their activism. For more information on this practice and on the work of women in El Salvador, see: Lynn Stephens (ed. & trans.), *Hear My Testimony: Maria Teresa Tula, Human Rights Activist of El Salvador* (Boston: South End, 1994).


31. COMADRES Testimony, in ibid., p. 59.


33. Ibid.


