

COMMENTARY

Women, Gender and Potable Water

by Margaret Haworth-Brockman

The availability of potable water – water of sufficient quality for drinking – is a critical factor for the health of all people. In Canada, there is no standard measure of household access to potable water.^[1] While numerous laws are in place to protect the public and to safeguard groundwater supplies,^[2] geography, weather, politics and other factors affect how and whether guidelines are followed, and how quickly water sources are restored after contamination. Rural, remote and northern communities are more likely to be adversely affected by water supplies that are contaminated by flooding and these regions are also less likely to have adequate water treatment facilities.^[1]

As of March 31, 2008 there were 1766 provincial boil-water advisories in place across Canada, not including those in First Nations communities.^[3] The poor quality of the drinking water for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis populations is especially critical, particularly on-reserve. Of the close to 100 boil water advisories in effect for First Nations communities across Canada in January 2008, 85 of these were deemed high risk.^[4,5] Often contaminations are not dealt with promptly,^[6,7] with some First Nations communities having to deal with long-standing advisories that have lasted over a decade.^[5,7] It is difficult to gain an accurate picture of how many Aboriginal communities are affected by poor water quality, because most of the recent data focuses mainly on First Nations communities.

Considering that an advisory requires water to be boiled before it is used for infant formulas, cooking, ice, washing produce and brushing teeth, the availability of potable water is clearly a gender-based issue, as women continue to be primarily responsible for these household tasks. Women are also the main care providers for those populations considered most at risk should they be exposed to contaminated water; namely infants, children under two years of age, pregnant women, the elderly and individuals with already compromised immune systems.^[1,4] The added time and energy it takes to ensure contaminated water is fit for consumption adds considerable work and stress to women's already busy lives. Furthermore, it is important to consider the severe socio-economic consequences of long-term water advisories as, in some cases, residents in already impoverished communities may have to buy bottled water to ensure a reliable supply of clean, safe water. While the health of all community members living without access to potable water is compromised, the responsibility of managing the daily implications of unsafe water falls primarily on women.

situation. They had never before had to search for housing or contend with the many aspects of running the household finances. The study's authors found that there were both systemic and individual factors at play in how women came to be homeless (after fleeing violence) and then found new housing. Uncertainty about their future housing was in fact more critical for these women than absolute homelessness.

Recent studies of the particular housing needs of Aboriginal populations in prairie cities confirm that getting and retaining good housing is especially difficult for Aboriginal populations.^[21, 22] CMHC noted that Aboriginal people (the information is not disaggregated by sex) in Winnipeg are typically younger than the general population and have lower incomes and less education and thus experience higher rates of poverty.^[21] Survey respondents and key informants pointed to the compounding effects of unstable employment (due to lack of skills) and low wages making it very difficult to afford decent housing. This lack of stable income for some households, in turn, contributes to a lack of established histories with banks and with landlords.

The CMHC study also notes that many Aboriginal families' homes are overcrowded. There are few housing units with 3 or more bedrooms available, which is problematic for large and extended families.^[23] In particular, Aboriginal women have reported that they regularly are asked to accommodate visitors from remote and rural communities. These realities leave some Aboriginal households vulnerable to homelessness. CMHC further notes that as the urban Aboriginal population grows, there will be a much greater need for affordable housing.

Aboriginal renters were most likely to live in older, unsafe (due to crime) neighbourhoods. Aboriginal homeowners, in contrast, had adequate space, felt safe in their neighbourhoods and were generally satisfied with their housing. Rent-subsidized units were, on average, more recently built than either private market rentals or houses owned by Aboriginal respondents.^[20]

Policy Implications

So What Does This Sex- and Gender-based Analysis Mean and How Can the Information Be Used?

The housing situation in Manitoba has been “critical” for more than 20 years. This case study illustrates not only “what” (that there is a crisis in housing) and “who” (women and others with low income), but also “how” it affects their lives. The sex- and gender-based analysis illuminates where in the population attention might be most needed. Given that housing has been researched in Winnipeg and at the broader provincial level for some time, policy makers and planners can turn to the research and the communities behind the research across the province for solutions that address localized needs and concerns.

For example, early in 2008, the provincial government announced initiatives to reduce crime in public housing neighbourhoods by evicting anyone convicted of a criminal offence.^[24] The Manitoba plan does not include a proposal to study whether or not women will be inequitably affected by this security measure. It seems likely that the plan will affect those women in public housing who turn to survival sex trade work or other illegal acts, or women who live with other adults or minors who are in trouble with the law. More research – and a sex- and gender-based analysis – is clearly called for before the government proceeds with its plan.

Similarly, a tri-level agreement between Canada, Manitoba and Winnipeg, signed in 2002, has brought some improvement through new programs to encourage semi-public and private groups to invest in repairing or building new houses for low-income families. The Feminist Alliance for International Action has noted that the federal government’s 2001 framework for federal-provincial affordable housing initiatives and agreements does not stipulate a requirement of funds to reduce core housing need; nor are there provisions to ensure that women do not face discrimination in applying for housing they need.^[19]

References

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