



WE NEED TO DO THIS: A HISTORY OF THE WOMEN'S SHELTER MOVEMENT IN ALBERTA AND THE ALBERTA COUNCIL OF WOMEN'S SHELTERS

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The background is a purple-tinted photograph of a room, likely a shelter, with several beds and a person sitting on the floor. The text is overlaid on this image.

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Foreword

“History is written by the victors,” the saying goes, and it rings true when it comes to Canada.

Most of our old textbooks and history books were written by those with the power, the time, the will, and the means to write things down, thus forever reflecting and preserving events according to their perspective.

Right up until the twenty-first century, that perspective reflected and glorified the White man’s world view, one that believed ‘civilization’ and ‘progress’ marched hand-in-hand with the colonizers.

Women, Indigenous peoples, and people of colour remain, at best, minor players in these narratives.

It’s the first reason why I believe Alexandra Zabjek’s book, *We Need To Do This*, is important.

Because the shelter movement is essentially a women’s story.

Many good men funded and supported and helped build these institutions, but it was the passion, drive, and sheer hard work of women that got them off the ground and ultimately woven into the fabric of our social safety net.

It’s a piece of our recent past that needs to be put on the record—for history’s sake, for our children’s sake—and shared.

Zabjek has done a masterful job of recording the voices and perspectives of the women of Alberta who founded these safe spaces for women and children.

The second reason *We Need To Do This* is important is because it gives voice to Indigenous and immigrant women’s experiences within Alberta’s shelter system.

When the Canadian shelter movement started to take off in the early 1970s, a significant number of Indigenous women took refuge in them, particularly in the West.

Yet their experiences and their cultures were often deeply misunderstood, or even ignored.

Ruth Scalp Lock remembers her early days working in a Calgary shelter. “I was the only Native counsellor there,” she tells Zabjek. “They didn’t know how to work with our women, especially to fulfill their spiritual needs. There were no workshops, and Elders did not come to work with the women. In our life, if you don’t have that spirituality, you’re just like a shell. There’s nothing in there.”

Scalp Lock also held a radically different viewpoint when it came to treatment and healing. At the time, second-wave feminists urged politicians to treat the abuse of women as a criminal offence, and non-Indigenous experts in domestic violence were calling on the justice system to criminalize abusive behaviour. Don’t treat it as a private family matter, they implored police or judges who, for decades, had opted to stay out of peoples’ marriages and let them somehow work it out themselves—often with tragic results.

But to someone like Scalp Lock, far too many Indigenous men were already in prison.

“All my brothers were survivors of residential school. Where are they today? They’re six feet under. They never had the opportunity to deal with the sexual abuse they experienced at the residential school,” she told Zabjek. “These issues are so deep-rooted. And where do men go to talk about these issues?”

To Scalp Lock, violence in the home was the result of generations of trauma, a toxic mix of racism, colonialism, and poverty. She and other Indigenous leaders sought a different, more holistic approach.

Scalp Lock would go on to help found Alberta’s first off-reserve shelter for Indigenous women in 1993, now known as the Awo Taan Healing Lodge, in Calgary. Along with the women of the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters (ACWS), Indigenous shelter workers in Alberta ultimately developed innovative, cutting-edge programs aimed at men as well as women embroiled in domestic violence.

That innovation brings us to the third reason this book is important: it debunks the tired stereotype of Alberta as a redneck bastion of oil workers and cowboys. Alberta has always attracted and nurtured interesting, creative social justice pioneers like Jan Reimer, Edmonton’s first female mayor and long-time executive director of ACWS. (When Reimer suggested in 2006 that Edmonton host a conference for the continent’s shelter workers, her board responded by asking, “Why just the Americas? Let’s do a world conference.” So of course, they did.)

Zabjek gently reminds us that her province is full of contradictions. Albertans still revere former Premier Peter Lougheed, she writes, “a conservative who created a human rights commission and happily pumped money into the arts.” She points out that former premier Ralph Klein, a pugnacious right-winger who fought against federal same-sex marriage legislation, was also a quiet and solid supporter of women’s shelters.

Edmonton’s beautiful river valley proudly commemorates its Famous Five feminists of the 1920s with a string of five parks named after Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Irene Parlby, and Louise McKinney.

And just guess where the Toronto-based powerhouse editor of *Chatelaine* magazine of the 1960s and 70s, feisty feminist Doris Anderson, came from? Why, Medicine Hat, Alberta.

Clearly, in a history book centred on efforts to protect and shelter families from domestic violence, there is no ‘victor.’

But *We Need To Do This* records an important piece of local history and is a thoughtful collection of stories and perspectives that need to be shared.

Alberta’s shelter network—providing sanctuary and healing for generations of families—is a living testament to the perseverance, drive, and compassion of its women.

—Margo Goodhand is the former editor of the *Edmonton Journal* and author of *Runaway Wives and Rogue Feminists: The Origins of the Women’s Shelter Movement in Canada*.

A Note on Terminology

Over the years, the language used to describe violence against women has changed as society and the sheltering movement have changed: wife battering, wife assault, abuse, domestic violence, violence against women, and intimate partner violence are all terms that have been used at different times. In this book, “domestic violence” will be used to include all forms of violence and abuse (not just physical violence) that happen within familial or intimate partner relationships. In addition, it should be noted that survivors may also experience abuse from parents, step-parents, siblings, grandparents, their children, extended family members, and other people who may be part of the household. Whatever terminology is used, the problem remains.

Domestic violence is a form of gender-based violence because women, girls, and gender-diverse people are at greater risk of experiencing it in their lifetimes. Gender-based violence is an issue faced by people all over the world; its prevalence is largely due to systemic gender inequality that disempowers those who identify as women, girls, and other gender minorities, stifles their voices so that their stories are not heard, takes away their dignity, safety, and human rights, and even normalizes these forms of violence.