Policy Brief 3:

Immigration Status as a Housing Barrier (Legal Precarity = Prolonged Homelessness)

Core message: Women's homelessness is being prolonged by legal and administrative precarity. When immigration status is unstable, housing pathways collapse: women face restricted eligibility for income supports, limited legal protection, and delays that extend homelessness and increase exposure to violence.

Issue

For many immigrant, refugee claimant, temporary status, and non-status women, fleeing violence can trigger immediate housing loss alongside loss of legal, financial, and social protections. Sponsorship breakdowns, unrecognized marriages, delayed hearings, and lack of work authorization leave women unable to secure housing—even after doing "everything right."

Evidence from the Nisa Homes report

- Survey findings show significant legal and financial precarity: 58% of clients lacked permanent residence or stable income (as summarized in the report's key findings).
- Qualitative interviews identify migration precarity as a strong predictor of prolonged homelessness, especially where women are legally tethered to abusive spouses/in-laws or stuck in multi-year immigration processes.
- Case examples describe women blocked from child benefits, subsidized education, or stable employment because of status, while repeated hearing postponements and sponsorship withholding keep families in limbo.
- Service providers observed that women often prioritize status regularization first, because eligibility for other supports and pathways to housing frequently depend on it.

Policy blind spot

Housing and homelessness systems frequently treat immigration issues as "out of scope," while immigration systems often do not treat housing instability and GBV as urgent stabilization issues. This siloing leaves women navigating life-threatening gaps between mandates, eligibility rules, and timelines.

Policy recommendations

1. Fund specialized immigration and family-law supports embedded in shelters (and available post-exit), including interpretation and culturally safe legal navigation.
2. Create a cross-ministerial "GBV + status precarity" pathway so women can access emergency income supports, health care, and housing assistance regardless of status while safety cases are underway.
3. Expedite immigration processing for survivors experiencing sponsorship breakdowns and GBV, with clear guidance to frontline workers on available humanitarian and compassionate pathways.
4. Make eligibility rules transparent and survivable: ensure women can access basic benefits, transitional housing, and rent supports without needing to disclose repeatedly or relive trauma across agencies.

Implementation considerations

- Design for confidentiality and safety, especially where abusers use immigration control and community surveillance to maintain power.
- Co-locate services where possible (legal clinics, settlement supports, mental health), reducing the need for multiple intakes.
- Train housing and GBV staff on immigration coercion and the practical implications of different status categories for benefits, work authorization, and housing options.

Success metrics

- Reduced average length of homelessness for women with precarious status.
- Increased access to legal representation and successful navigation outcomes (e.g., status regularization milestones).
- Improved housing outcomes for refugee claimants/temporary status clients at 6/12 months.
- Reduced repeat retelling and reduced service drop-off between systems.

- *Based on research developed in collaboration with Nisa Homes, the Women's National Housing & Homelessness Network, the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, and Wilfrid Laurier University.*

- *Source: Faith-Centered Shelter Models and Muslim Women's Pathways to Housing Justice in Canada: The Case of Nisa Homes. Read the full research report."*