Executive Summary

Faith-Centered Shelter Models and Muslim Women's Pathways to Housing Justice in Canada: The Case of Nisa Homes (prepared for joint use with the Women's National Housing & Homelessness Network)

This executive summary highlights key insights from *Faith-Centered Shelter Models and Muslim Women's Pathways to Housing Justice in Canada: The Case of Nisa Homes*, a mixed-methods evaluation of Nisa Homes' culturally and spiritually grounded transitional housing model for women and children. In Canada, women's homelessness is frequently "hidden" (couch surfing, staying with an abusive partner, unsafe temporary arrangements), and Muslim women can face compounded barriers related to gender-based violence, Islamophobia, and immigration precarity. The report documents how culturally responsive, trauma-informed shelter models can improve safety and well-being while also showing how limited affordable housing, unstable funding, and gaps in systems responses continue to undermine long-term stability.

Partnership and purpose

This research was completed through a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Engage Grant in collaboration with Nisa Homes, the Women's National Housing & Homelessness Network (WNHHN), the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (DI), and Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU). The project assessed what distinguishes Nisa Homes' faith-centered, culturally situated model of care within Canada's shelter and social welfare ecosystem, with particular attention to women navigating gender-based violence and housing precarity alongside racialization and immigration-related vulnerability.

How the research was conducted

The study used a mixed-methods design, focused on Nisa Homes' Mississauga and Scarborough locations in southern Ontario, and complemented by national practitioner learning through WNHHN.

- **Client survey (n=50):** demographics, experiences of violence and housing insecurity, service evaluation, and post-shelter outcomesl
- **In-depth interviews:** 19 client interviews; 11 staff interviews; plus a staff focus group.
- **Internal document review:** organizational materials and impact reports (2015–2023).
- **Community of Practice (CoP):** four national sessions with approximately 25 practitioners per session to validate findings and co-develop best practices for culturally and spiritually responsive care.

Nisa Homes' model at a glance

Nisa Homes is a transitional shelter network that provides safety, practical supports, and culturally responsive, faith-informed care for women and children navigating domestic violence, homelessness, forced displacement, and related crises. While grounded in Muslim values (e.g., justice, dignity, compassion, community), the program is not exclusive to Muslim clients and aims to provide an identity-affirming environment for all who enter.

Impact at a glance (from internal reporting referenced in the study): Since 2015, Nisa Homes expanded from one home to a national network with sites across multiple provinces. Internal metrics cited in the report note that, as of December 31, 2023, the number of women and children residing in transitional shelters had increased by 147% since 2021 **(to 2,098 residents),** while remote support services expanded by **400% (to 16,865 clients served).** The organization also reported triaging **80,000+ calls for help (2023),** delivering **546 mental health sessions (2023),** and engaging **3,666 participants through workshops.**

Key findings

The findings point to a clear conclusion: women's safety improves when services are designed around real-world barriers (violence, stigma, poverty, racism, and immigration status) and when care is both trauma-informed and culturally safe.

- **Gender-based violence is a primary pathway into housing precarity.** In the survey, 68% of participants reported experiencing intimate partner violence, including high rates of emotional abuse (66%) and financial control (60%).
- **Help-seeking is delayed by fear, stigma, and dependency.** Many respondents cited fear for safety (72%) and lack of financial resources (72%) as major reasons for hesitation. Lack of family/social support (58%) and concerns for children's well-being (36%) were also common.
- **Immigration precarity prolongs homelessness and narrows options.** The study documents how sponsorship breakdowns, uncertain or temporary status, delayed refugee hearings, and limited eligibility for benefits can trap women in unsafe situations and extend time without stable housing.
- **Mainstream shelters can feel unsafe and culturally mismatched.** Of the 50 survey participants, 23 (46%) reported feeling very or somewhat unsafe in previous shelter environments. Participants described concerns about privacy, dignity, culturally appropriate food, prayer space, and discrimination.
- **Cultural and spiritual safety are not "extras"; they are drivers of access and outcomes.** In the survey, 72% of respondents chose Nisa Homes because it aligned with religious/spiritual values, and 60% pointed to responsiveness to cultural/religious needs (e.g., halal food, prayer space).
- **Clients report strong outcomes during shelter stays, especially when casework is robust.** Overall experience was rated "Good" or "Excellent" by 80% of surveyed clients. Many reported improved well-being after accessing Nisa Homes, and casework was consistently highlighted as a cornerstone support.

- **Leaving shelter does not guarantee stability.** The survey and interviews highlight persistent barriers after exit, especially financial instability (60%) and lack of affordable housing (56%). A significant share of former clients reported it took more than six months to secure housing, and some were still searching at the time of the survey.

Why these findings matter

For donors and the public, this report offers evidence that culturally responsive approaches save time, reduce harm, and strengthen outcomes. When women feel safe, both physically and socially, they are more likely to disclose abuse, engage with services, and take steps toward stability for themselves and their children. The research also shows that "safety" must be understood broadly: not only security measures, but privacy, dignity, identity affirmation, and freedom from racism and religious discrimination.

The study also makes clear that even strong shelter programs are constrained by structural forces—especially a severe affordable housing shortage, limited childcare options, and complex immigration pathways. Targeted philanthropic investment can fill urgent gaps (like trauma recovery, legal navigation, and post-shelter support) while also helping to build the systems capacity needed for sustainable impact (better outcome tracking, staff training, and cross-sector partnerships).

Recommendations and priorities for investment

The report offers recommendations for Nisa Homes, mainstream service providers, and policymakers. The priorities below translate those recommendations into concrete, donor-relevant investments and partnership opportunities.

- **Strengthen post-shelter stability (12 months, not 3).** Expand follow-up case management, housing navigation, and practical supports beyond the typical short window after exit, especially for women facing ongoing legal proceedings, precarious status, or complex trauma.

- **Scale access to culturally responsive trauma recovery.** Invest in faith-informed and culturally responsive mental health services (including individual and group supports), led by licensed clinicians, with flexible options for language and remote access.
- **Invest in prevention and community education.** Expand prevention-focused education and skill-building (e.g., financial literacy, healthy relationships, stigma reduction) to reduce violence upstream and increase earlier help-seeking.
- **Build survivor-informed practice and accountability.** Support survivor leadership structures (e.g., a Survivors Advisory Council) to ensure services, training, and messaging reflect lived experience and reduce unintended harm.
- **Strengthen data and learning systems.** Invest in unified, privacy-protecting data systems and evaluation capacity to track longer-term outcomes (housing stability, well-being, immigration/legal milestones), while minimizing burden on clients and frontline staff.
- **Mobilize best practices across the sector.** Support training, partnerships, and knowledge mobilization so that mainstream providers can embed cultural and spiritual responsiveness as a standard of care, not an "accommodation."

Call to action

This research, developed in partnership with WNHHN, underscores that culturally and spiritually responsive shelter models are an evidence-informed response to violence and housing precarity. The Nisa Homes model demonstrates that when supports are designed around dignity, identity safety, and practical pathways to stability, women and children can move from crisis toward independence and recovery.

Donor and community support can help sustain safe spaces for women and children today, while strengthening the longer-term conditions that prevent returns to homelessness tomorrow through trauma recovery, legal and housing navigation, child supports, and the expansion of best practices across the housing and homelessness sector.