

# Declaration of Principles on Eliminating and Preventing Violence Against Women in Housing Co-ops

Adopted at the FECHIMM's 2018 AGM  
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FÉDÉRATION DES COOPÉRATIVES  
D'HABITATION INTERMUNICIPALE  
DU MONTRÉAL MÉTROPOLITAIN

The main purpose of the Declaration of Principles is to invite the Fédération des coopératives d'habitation intermunicipale du Montréal métropolitain (FECHIMM) to formally take a position on eliminating and preventing violence against women. In so doing, the FECHIMM aims to ensure that housing co-ops are truly safe living environments for everyone, free of harassment, intimidation, sexual and domestic violence.

Many women have personally recounted situations of violence they have experienced in housing cooperatives: lives disrupted by a man spying on her, stalking her, degrading her, humiliating her, manipulating her, threatening her, harassing her, assaulting her, intimidating her, denigrating her, excluding her, knocking on her door and putting undue pressure on her, accosting her in common spaces (e.g.,: courtyard, laundry room, etc.).

Whether verbal, physical, psychological, sexual or economic, or a combination of these, violence takes many forms. It is an abusive exercise of power in which an individual in a position of power seeks to control another person by using various means to keep her/him in a state of inferiority or to compel her/him to behave in accordance with his/her own desires. Violence against women is one of the most systematic and widespread forms of human rights violations and it is rooted in sexist social structures.

Furthermore, as sexual assault centres (known by the French acronym CALACS) point out, it is important to take into account abuses of power committed specifically against women with precarious economic status, such as older women, racialized women, indigenous women, lesbians, trans women, women living with a disability and women with mental health problems.

The term “survivor” will be used in this Declaration, rather than “victim.” In this way, we recognize the strength and incredible courage required to survive an experience of violence. Also, the term “woman” includes any person who identifies herself as a woman.

- Considering that the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms recognizes that the home is inviolable, that every person has the right to security and integrity, to privacy and to peaceful enjoyment, that no one shall harass or discriminate against any person because of his or her origin, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, civil status, age, political or religious beliefs, language, ethnic origin, social condition, physical or mental state (Sections 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10 and 10.1);
- Considering that our Declaration is part of the movement to denounce sexual violence that mainly targets women, e.g., #BeenRapedNeverReported, #MeToo, #AndNow, protests against sexual violence on campus, support movement for missing and murdered Aboriginal women;

- Considering that such violence is part of historically unequal power relations between men and women, the culture of rape and the continuum of violence against women;
- Considering that 1 out of 3 women has been the victim of at least one sexual assault during her life;
- Considering that two thirds of sexual assaults are committed in the private sphere, that they are often invisible, hidden and committed without witnesses, behind closed doors;
- Considering that abusers particularly target isolated, poor, low-status, trans, racialized, indigenous, single-parent and disabled women;
- Considering that housing cooperatives are places where unequal relations exist between tenant members and those to whom certain powers are delegated, such as those responsible for allocating rent subsidies and those who hold the keys to all the units;
- Considering that it is mostly women who live in housing co-ops (2/3 of members), that many single women choose to live in co-ops because they perceive them as safe living environments, and that, paradoxically, many of them have stated that they suffer violence precisely because they are women;
- Considering that numerous testimonies by women have shown that, in housing cooperatives, it is the survivors of violence who are forced to withdraw and even leave their homes to flee the aggressor;
- Considering that the impacts of this violence are detrimental to survivors' full participation in cooperatives and to their power to act on their living environment;
- Considering that assaulting or harassing a woman is not an uncontrollable impulse or a loss of control: it is a power play and a deliberate choice, because everyone is able to keep their opinions to themselves, to control their desires and to manage their behaviour;
- Considering that the individual interests of the abuser must no longer be put above the collective well-being of the cooperative; that an abuser's right to housing should never compromise the integrity of a sexual assault survivor;
- Considering the numerous testimonies, it is clear that the law of silence persists in housing co-ops because, under the threat of reprisals, and, because they are pressured by accusations that they are creating tensions in the living environment, survivors remain silent, and when they speak, members deny their experiences or ignore them, which contributes to their isolation and forces them to endure the unacceptable;
- Considering that the first step in combating violence against women is to take the word of those who have experienced it;

- Considering that survivors of violence currently face a police and judicial system that does not provide them with justice because the burden of proof rests entirely on their shoulders and may call their word into question , thus protecting the abusers rather than those whom they have abused;
- Considering that the founding values and principles of the cooperative movement such as equality, equity and solidarity should lead members to condemn all forms of violence against women and encourage the voices of survivors to be heard;
- Considering that preserving the right of women to live in an environment free of violence is a collective responsibility, which must be assumed by all members of housing cooperatives;
- Considering that, having benefited from the work of those who set up the cooperative network, we, in turn, have the responsibility to bequeath safe environments to future generations;
- Considering that FECHIMM has signed the Declaration against violence experienced by women in their housing, in which it undertook to invite its members to include, in their internal governance rules, recognition of the specific violence suffered by women tenants, and to set up mechanisms to prevent and combat such violence;
- Considering that the FECHIMM, with the *Présence des femmes, pouvoir des femmes* project, aims to support the full participation of women in cooperatives and to remove the systemic barriers experienced by women, such as violence;

**Because we acknowledge these situations, we commit ourselves to take a stand against all forms of violence against women, more specifically those committed in the home, and to ensure that all women, whatever their conditions, have access to a dignified and peaceful life, free from all forms of violence. The FECHIMM, by adopting this Declaration, undertakes to:**

1. Take a stand and combat all forms of violence against women, more specifically those experienced in the housing context (harassment, intimidation, sexual and domestic violence, etc.), ensure that survivors can remain in their homes, and be a leader in the fight to transform the Cooperatives Act so that it is fairer to survivors;
2. Develop tools to support survivors, for example by assigning a worker trained in feminist intervention on violence against women in cooperatives, to document incidents, support survivors, create links with help resources, etc.
3. Train its staff in the feminist analysis and approach to violence against women, and ensure that it is applied in their interventions with housing cooperatives.

**By adhering to this Declaration, FECHIMM invites its members to submit it to their general meetings and undertake to:**

1. Provide a safe living environment for all women, i.e., free of all forms of sexist violence (harassment, intimidation, sexual and conjugal violence, etc.) and ensure egalitarian relations in deliberative and decision-making bodies;
2. Promote egalitarian relationships, free of direct, indirect or systemic discrimination, particularly in decision-making bodies, and support the full participation of these bodies in reflection and decision-making processes.
3. Add the following provision to the member contract and to the internal governance by-law: Any form of harassment or violence, whether sexual, physical, verbal or psychological, in particular against women, is prohibited in the building and will be subject to sanctions that may include suspension.
4. Take a stand and combat all forms of violence against women, more specifically those experienced in the housing context (harassment, intimidation, sexual and domestic violence, etc.) and ensure that survivors can remain in their homes.

# APPENDIX 1

## Some definitions

### **The United Nations' (UN) definition of violence against women**

Violence against women is one of the most systematic and widespread forms of human rights violations. It is rooted in sexist social structures rather than in individual and isolated acts; it affects all women, regardless of age, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, level of education or origin.

### **Definition of sexual assault according to the clalcs (Sexual Assault Centres)**

Sexual assault is the imposition on a person of attitudes, words or gestures of a sexual nature. Sexual assault is a criminal act committed by using intimidation, threats, blackmail and verbal, physical or psychological violence. Women, adolescent girls and children are the main targets of sexual assault, which takes many forms, including rape, touching, incest, harassment, exhibitionism, voyeurism, obscene calls, etc. Sexual assaults have a severe impact on physical integrity, psychological well-being and economic security. Survivors experience shame, guilt, post-traumatic stress and isolation.