

Designed by men for men: The ignored 51% in urban and climate planning

Scenario 1: Meet Alisha (45)

A single mother, who recently moved into an apartment with her six-year-old daughter Jenna. She says, *"finally, I was able to find housing for Jenna and I. Although this is not the best area of town, it is a fifteen-minute walk from a school and a 45-minute transit ride from my work. We needed to find somewhere to live quickly because the last landlord terminated our contract, and it was an awful place to live. The school in the neighbourhood catchment is one of the worst in the city, but it was the only one available within walking distance from the apartment. Our apartment is located in an area with no green spaces/ trees/ parks and is extremely small, right off a highway, and has several problems with the space that I have requested to be fixed. Alisha hopes this home will only be temporary, and that the landlord will address her concerns as soon as possible."*

Every morning Alisha walks Jenna to kindergarten before going to work. Alisha says *"I do not drive anymore as I needed to sell my car to get an apartment in the city, and we needed to be close to downtown. Living along a highway and very busy streets resulted in the air being more polluted and unsafe, but it was the only affordable location with rapid transit to my work. This neighbourhood has limited shade or greenery, making commuting very uncomfortable in the hot months. I didn't expect it to get this hot as early in the year, especially in this neighbourhood."*

When Alisha picks up Jenna from school and walks home in the early evening, the house is sweltering and has no air conditioning, broken ceiling fans, and malfunctioning windows. Even with all the windows propped open the best they can, the air is polluted and dense, making it hard to breathe. Alisha said *"It is way too hot to cook dinner, but I need to feed Jenna and I. I cannot afford to go out for dinner, but it is way too hot in this apartment to prepare a meal. It is only the end of May, and I dread the summer months as it will only continue to get hotter. I am worried I won't be able to cool off the apartment and provide a healthy living environment for Jenna. I have expressed my concerns to the landlord many times about it being unsafe in this home as the windows and fans do not work, making the apartment unbearably hot. The landlord continues to ignore my concerns, and we have lived here for almost a month. I don't know how much longer I can take this. I am extremely worried about what will happen as the weather continues to get more extreme."*

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Scenario 2: Maggie (29)

A single Indigenous woman has been displaced from Northern British Columbia after a devastating wildfire destroyed her home. While there are limited Emergency Support Services available in British Columbia, there is no program within 100km of her current community. Maggie says, *“I want to stay as close to my culture as possible. This community in Northern British Columbia is where I grew up and all I have ever known, but there are limited affordable housing options and supportive services.”* Immediately after the fire, Maggie began living in hotel rooms. However, this soon became unsustainable as the cost per night for a hotel room was extremely expensive. Since the wildfire, Maggie has been experiencing homelessness in various ways. *“I have couch-surfed, slept in my car, stayed on the streets, and spent time at shelters. There is just limited support for single women, and I feel uncomfortable staying in the shelter as they tend to be predominately male.”*

Since Maggie has become homeless, she has experienced frequent incidents of gender-based violence both on the streets and in shelters. She has been sexually, physically, and psychologically assaulted since sleeping in insecure spaces. Living, sleeping outside, and staying in co-ed shelters is Maggie’s only option, leaving her a victim of assault on multiple occasions. As the weather in Northern British Columbia continues to become more extreme, it can be nearly impossible for Maggie to sleep on the street, although that is her preferred choice. These extreme and more frequent climatic events result in the shelters filling up and becoming too much for shelter employees to manage, making them overcrowded and unsafe. Maggie says that *“if there were more options and support for women who have experienced trauma (such as for climate-related disasters), there would be fewer victims of assault in Northern Communities.”* The safety of homeless women is not only affected by gender-based violence but also by climate-related impacts. Unlike many individuals, Maggie is not able to seek secure shelter when major climatic events occur, including but not limited to extreme heat waves, snow storms, or dangerous rainfall events. Indigenous communities and precariously housed individuals are more at risk of experiencing the impacts of extreme weather events than affluent communities. To add, women and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals often live with substandard housing due to discriminatory housing policies and inadequate city planning. During extreme weather events, these populations are less likely to have resources to maintain, rebuild, or relocate in Northern British Columbia.

Maggie fears she will remain unhoused and continue to experience abuse and violence as she cannot secure affordable, long-term housing.

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Scenario 3: Meet Sarah (23)

Is a bartender and university student in a major city. When she moved for university, she decided to sell her car in the hopes of reducing her carbon footprint by using a more sustainable means of transportation. She says, *“We can’t confront the climate crisis without changing how we move through the world. It was my personal goal to live in a city where everything would be accessible by foot, bike or bus. Once I moved, I realised that it was going to be more challenging than I thought. I wish I didn’t sell my car.”*

Everyday, Sarah bikes to her university campus from home, *“I avoid all of the main roads and take an extra 20 minutes to get to campus just so that I feel safe. I have to ride alongside traffic and have been in a couple of near accidents already because vehicles were pushing me off the road or didn’t see me. There is no bike path for me to take and there are often no lights on the side streets. In recent years, the frequent rain and windstorms have made me feel extremely vulnerable on the road and often have to call a friend to give me a lift home.”*

When Sarah goes to work in the evenings at a bar downtown she relies on public transit, which she says *“is often unreliable- either late or doesn’t show up at all, especially during major storm events. I can’t afford to lose my job but I don’t feel safe biking or walking to work. I also often get off work 15 minutes after the last bus, and then I am forced to walk anyways. I always carry my keys between my knuckles. It isn’t a dangerous place to live, but the streets are so empty and dark I have to be able to protect myself.”* When Sarah takes the bus, she finds that there are often no street lights, bus shelters and/ or weather protection. When public transportation is late, she is forced to walk and finds that she often suffers street harassment or violence.

Since starting university and moving to a new city, she has been extremely aware of how important safety and access to transportation are to her. She hopes that proper infrastructure can be built for women so that she doesn’t have to choose between responding to climate change and her safety.