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THE THIRD ACT

They had families, worked hard and grew old. Now they face their final years in poverty. Why are we failing older women in Canada?

A growing number of older women, especially those with careers that paid enough to get by but did not offer workplace pensions, live in a precarious financial position that can be brutally isolating.

By **Moira Welsh** Staff Reporter

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JOIN THE CONVERSATION

At the age of 80, after a career in non-profits, a master's degree in linguistics and years spent teaching overseas, Sheilagh Hagens is entering the poverty of old age.

It's a place that is inhabited in many ways by women. After raising children and working lower-paying jobs with no private pensions, women in their senior years have a statistically higher risk of poverty than men. It's all there in [government data](#), even if the details get scant attention.

Hagens lives in a 12-by-18-foot room in the basement of a High Park home. Once a doctor's manse, it is now divided into 16 apartments. Hagens' is the smallest, found in a rush after her previous landlord "took back" her apartment, with two-months' notice.

At one end of Hagens' room is a tiny window with the view of a laneway fence. At the other is her fold-up bed. It takes five steps to walk from the futon to the kitchen sink. Seven to the washroom. Hagens pays \$1,410 a month for these 216 square feet, which is \$410 more than her budget allows.

"I should be grateful, and in fact I am, and yet it is costing me the earth," Hagens says. "And I don't know if I'll be able to keep doing it."

Hagens has no workplace pension. She lives on a partial Canada Pension Plan, Old Age Security and interest from her savings, refusing to touch the capital left from the \$500,000 sale a decade ago of her three-storey Hamilton home near McMaster University where, as a divorced single mother, she raised two sons.

As the daughter of a hardy woman who lived well beyond 100, Hagens is adamant she will not outlast her money, but she's watched nearly a third of her remaining savings vanish during the recent stock market decline.

"I don't let myself really think about the stock market," she says. "If it tanks anymore, I'm probably done. But there's no use solving a problem that I don't have yet."

It doesn't hit everyone, but this modern version of elder destitution — with its reliance on depleted savings or basic government supports — is now exacerbated by rental fees multiplied beyond the capacity to pay and, often, the isolation of women living alone, whether single or widowed.

This is life, writ large, for a growing number of older women, especially those with careers that paid enough to get by but did not offer workplace pensions, or pensions tied to inflation.

There is no doubt that men on fixed incomes are also adversely affected by rising rents, food costs and isolation, but women in their 70s, 80s and 90s grew up in a period when they often stayed at home to manage the household, worked part-time, had low-paying jobs or lost promotions to male colleagues who didn't have the primary responsibility of childcare.

Women in Canada have a higher risk of poverty in their [later years](#) with 21 per cent over the age of 75 living on a low income compared to 13.9 per cent of men, according to the [Government of Ontario's Pay Equity Office](#). Statistics Canada's 2020 low-income definition — before taxes — for a single person living in a city with a population of 500,000 or more was \$22,060.

In Canada, the "gender pension gap" — the difference in retirement income between men and women — for women over the age of 65 is also lower, by nearly 22 per cent, according to a 2021 report by the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#). Its definition of a pension gap includes private and public pensions.

In a time of increasing life expectancy, that leaves many in a precarious state.

"It's huge — and it's invisible," says Dr. Paula Rochon, a geriatrician, founding director of Women's Age Lab at Women's College Hospital and senior scientist at Women's College Research Institute.

"In essence, women are living longer, and they are living longer with less. And that becomes really important when you look at housing in places like Toronto, where it is so incredibly expensive," Rochon says.

Precarity, she says, is incremental. Some women stave off official homelessness by sleeping on the couch of a friend. Others try to hang on to mainstream housing but rent increases mean fewer options for groceries or social outings and, as a result, many suffer from loneliness, a condition that can lead to significant health problems such as heart disease or dementia.

"This is the group that is really at risk," she says. "They are people who maybe had careers, but they don't quite have enough to manage right now."

While some suggest that seniors simply move in with their children, many, like Hagens, want to live independently. Hagens says her sons would help financially but she won't allow it, recognizing the expenses they face with housing and children.

Adult children often do not have the money or housing space to support a parent, says Dr. Samir Sinha, director of geriatrics at Sinai Health and University Health Network.

"I think we continue to put societal judgment on people and saying, 'The solution is just for kids to be pitching in.' Well, what about the kids and their future, too?" Sinha says. "Ideally, family could potentially offer help, but that's no guarantee and that's not the expectation of our social contract either."

Dependency on children isn't always in seniors' best interests, says Pat Armstrong, a sociologist and professor emeritus at York University.

"We know that if you move in with your kids, you may be subject to abuse. They may steal your money. They may beat you up," Armstrong says.

Some adult children want nothing to do with their parents, she notes, recalling a conversation with an emergency-room physician who wanted to shift his career toward teaching. "He said, 'I can deal with the gunshot wounds and the appendicitis attacks but what I can't deal with are the people who leave their mother and say we can't handle her anymore.'"

What is needed, Armstrong says, is an approach to aging that recognizes gender — in terms of income, housing and companionship — because women usually end up alone, given that in traditional relationships among seniors, the man is often older and dies first.

"My daughter once lived in an apartment," Armstrong says, "and the woman down the hall, who she'd never met, came to her and asked if she'd take her to the hospital because she had nobody."

'In a sense, it's like they are going to be buried alive'

Most women are not willing to speak publicly. It's hard to fathom, the confluence of events that led to this unexpected turn. For many, there's a constant worry: "Will my building be sold? Will I get notice to vacate so the unit can be renovated for higher rent?" The stress is depleting.

Some are forced to downsize two or three times. With each move, they disappear, lower and lower, into the basement.

In the most tangible way, it is the worst place to end up, says Sinha.

"I have many women patients who are living in basement apartments and I tell them, once you start encountering frailty and mobility issues, the stairs will become your ultimate enemy," he says.

"It's all they can afford," he says, "but in a sense, it's like they are going to be buried alive because, under the circumstances, they've dug themselves a grave that they can't walk out of."

The big issue, says Sinha, director of health policy research for the National Institute on Ageing (NIA), is the fact that there are currently nine million aging boomers and, as that number grows, a great many face impoverishment with stress and loneliness creating a downward cycle of fragility.

Many older women, Sinha says, will end up in homeless shelters, hospitals or long-term care homes at a much higher cost to the public than the better option of affordable housing in the community. The NIA is pushing for [new housing options](#) to "age in the right place" and, its [national seniors' strategy](#) presses the federal government for better financial options for older Canadians, describing them as "financially vulnerable."

"If we don't get a handle on this," Sinha says, "it will economically further paralyze us as a society, when it is completely avoidable."

Some new ideas are slowly gaining traction. SE Health, a not-for-profit health-care provider, is working with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. to help "mission-driven" organizations [fast-track housing for vulnerable older adults](#) using underutilized land and buildings.

Last summer, the City of Toronto announced a [partnership with the Missanabie Cree First Nation](#) to develop the non-profit [Housing Now](#). Led by an Indigenous organization, the city said it will create 184 new rental homes for Indigenous elders and other seniors. Roughly half will be "affordable."

"I was thinking of 'The Golden Girls'"

On a small scale, a grassroots program called [Senior Women Living Together](#) (SWLT) connects low-income renters, two, three or four at a time.

The program grew, from a 2019 Facebook call for help into a not-for-profit that matches older women with compatible roommates to share rent on an apartment or house. Founder Pat Dunn says the group has helped 43 women find shared homes. She'd like to see the program grow through government or other funding.

Hagens, in High Park, was part of a program group that planned to rent a farmhouse near Peterborough before she decided against moving far from family.

Dunn rents a two-storey home in Peterborough with two women. They share the bills, for cable and internet. They cook dinner, eat and clean up together. Sometimes they shop for groceries as a group but otherwise, their lives are separate, she says.

"Aside from saving money, we all agree that the biggest benefit is having others around to talk to, get help when needed and share stories," Dunn says. "We know that we can count on one another to 'be there.'"

Women connect on the Facebook page but those who are serious pay \$55 for six months access to rental information on the program's website. Anyone living on \$24,000 a year or less doesn't have to pay, says Dunn, a former public health nurse from Hamilton.

"We've had members who are living in their cars," says Dunn. "They are living on a couch, couch-surfing for six months with a sister, six months with a brother."

"It is a very shameful spot to be in life. Especially when many have been very participatory. They've worked hard at whatever jobs they had but, women don't make as much money. And women who are raising children on their own never put away enough money, even if they make oodles. It's just reality," she says.

It usually takes several months before people get to know each other, decide whether they can live with a dog, a smoker or an extrovert and find a place together. "You don't have to be best friends," Dunn says. Landlords connect with the website, seeking older women as tenants.

While some have managed by “shrinking their lives,” Dunn says the extreme rent increases of recent years pushed many past the tipping point.

“They were tightening, tightening, tightening and would stop buying certain types of food and they’d go to the food bank once a month and they managed to keep it all together and keep in their apartment at a reasonable rent, probably too expensive but reasonable enough and then the landlord decides to renovate and you’ve got two months — two months — to get out and find something,” she says.

“And there is nothing — literally nothing — you can afford.”

Dunn’s work with the program comes from a place of empathy — and necessity.

Divorced and remarried, (“we both suffered from post-divorce poverty”) Dunn and her new husband saved for a retirement on a boat in the Caribbean, closer to her daughter who lives on Grand Cayman. Her husband was a management consultant. Dunn worked in public health community development.

When he died in 2014, Dunn was 64 years old. She says she couldn’t afford life on her own and, leaving Mexico, returned to a much different housing climate in Ontario. With \$40,000 from the sale of the boat, she says she bought a trailer that turned out to be uninhabitable for at least six months of the year and the need for temporary housing became an expensive proposition, despite her small pension from 13 years in public health. Sleeping on her sister’s couch in British Columbia, Dunn hit a low point with one outcome: bankruptcy. “I didn’t want to get to that. It was shameful enough.

“I started reading about living in your car safely so I could save money and then I thought, ‘There’s got to be something better.’ I was thinking of ‘The Golden Girls’ (TV show) and I guess it influenced me, because that’s what I came up with. I said to myself, ‘Well, if I can’t afford to rent anything maybe there are some other people like me. Other women like me.’”

She asked the question on Facebook. “I anticipated I’d get 10 answers. I was getting 50 a week.” Dunn says the SWLT website now has 500 members, “in various stages of anxiety about finding a place.”

For boomers, it’s a generational issue

Sandi Petersen joined after the price of her 650-square-foot Ottawa condo rental rose over the years, from \$800 a month to \$1,200.

“With inflation and the cost of living, it was a lot for me,” Petersen says.

After a career as a nurse in Montreal and Ottawa, she earned a master’s degree in education with a focus on technology, left Canada to spend a decade working for the U.S. data company owned by long-ago presidential aspirant Ross Perot and later returned to Ottawa as a consultant.

Petersen has a small annuity from her former U.S. employer but no private pension. She used her RRSP savings to stay afloat while living in the condo and says she now relies on CPP, along with OAS and GIS.

At the age of 73 and no longer working due to joint replacements in her knees and hip from those years of nursing, this is not the retirement Petersen was expecting.

“I would wake up in the middle of the night and say what is the point of life?” Petersen says, of her final months in the condo, made worse by the isolation of COVID.

“I wasn’t suicidal. The loneliness just weighed heavily on my chest. My little cat would come up and hug me. But it was just painful. Utterly painful. It was just like, ‘What is the purpose of this?’ No pill would help.”

Petersen is now in a short-term shared rental outside of Ottawa and plans to move to a new community with two roommates in the early spring, inspired by SWLT.

As a single woman, there was no pushback on her decision to leave the city for a home with roommates but Petersen says she’s watched others struggle, influenced by adult children who don’t want change.

In many ways, she believes, it’s a generational issue. Older women, especially those born before or just after the boomer generation began in 1946 were often raised to placate the people around them, placing the needs of others ahead of their own.

It doesn’t always end well, she says.

“I think that women our age have to stand up, but we’re not of that vintage to be stubborn enough to say, ‘I’m going to do what I want to do.’ And that’s too bad. That’s really too bad.

An approach to aging that recognizes gender

Rachel Savage, a scientist with a PhD in epidemiology, studies the impact of loneliness among older adults at the Women's College Research Institute and Women's Age Lab.

"I find this issue really emotional and heartbreaking, because if you think about the role women and mothers play in people's lives, it's so important," Savage says.

"It is really just incredibly sad that this is sort of where they tend to get relegated at the end of their lives after a full life of service and supporting and nurturing and all that goes into raising children and contributing to society through work and volunteering," Savage says.

"I don't even know if people realize it is happening."

Community-based programs focused on older adults could help significantly, says Savage, citing the opportunities for social connections in [NORCs](#) — Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities. In New York City, [NORCs have on-site programs](#) that offer social connections, exercise and health supports for older adults.

"There's an opportunity to create a sense of community that people are craving," she says.

The Quiet Generation

In High Park, Hagens is focused on staying strong.

She spends each day outside, walking her rescue dog, Keiko, who is part Shiba Inu, a breed known for its aloof nature although at home, his eyes follow her around the room. She doesn't go far. Keiko is attuned to the regular knock on that one window, when Hagens' granddaughter announces her arrival.

Hagens loves the connection with her nearby grandchildren, recognizing that these years are not to be missed. Living close to family, Hagens says, she does not experience the loneliness that others feel. She takes online yoga for mobility and balance with a teacher she followed for years in Hamilton and they reconnected on Zoom, one upside of the pandemic.

She tries to find free community events and plays the saxophone in a seniors' band, which requires a membership fee, but Hagens believes it's worth every cent. "I'm not giving up yoga or my saxophone. It's for my own mental health. I'm telling you, if you ever get depressed, join a band. They are the happiest people!"

Hagens' walks take her to Roncesvalles Avenue, where she once chatted with a woman who, she says, spends her days on the street.

"She was just an old lady like me. And I said, 'Have you got somewhere to go tonight?' and she said, 'Well, I'll go to the shelter but it's really frightening. There are a lot of fights.'"

"You know, there's just this automatic assumption that if you can't afford it, then you probably don't deserve it because you didn't work hard enough, you didn't plan, you probably spent your money. I never spent any money. I had two kids, who spends money when they have two kids?" she says.

"It just seems all broken to me and the fact that it's happening to so many older people is unconscionable," Hagens says. "Canada is a very rich country. These people have worked all their lives. And governments have no way of saying, 'Yes, there are ways that we can make sure that there is housing that you can afford.'"

Years ago, Hagens recognized that she could make more money in the private sector but says at the time, potential employers deemed her skills too soft. Divorced in the late 1980s, she got her master's degree at the age of 60, taught English in Korea, China and later, at the University of Guelph, where she worked with international students.

"So I've been lucky, but I've never had a job with a pension," she says.

She also missed years of payments into the Canada Pension Plan, saying her monthly cheques are two-thirds the full amount. While there is an upper limit, the more you pay, the more you take out, with some credit for limited time spent at home with children or in low paying jobs. In 2023, the maximum monthly amount for new recipients starting the pension at age 65 is \$1,306.57.

"It's just the inevitable result of, I stayed home until my youngest was in kindergarten. I went overseas when my husband got a job overseas. So I had a period of my life, about 15 years, when working was not an option. And I just accepted that I would kind of pay a penalty for that. It just is the way it is. Don't fuss. I'm a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps person."

In Toronto she tried to plan ahead, placing her name on a wait-list for a bachelor rental in a nearby Swansea co-op. When she signed up roughly six years ago, Hagens says she was told most wait a decade to get a rental unit. Every time her name rises high enough to give hope, she says it is pushed lower again by children of existing owners who get first dibs.

She considers herself luckier than some. But sitting in the basement, on her daytime couch, the view feels a bit ... unknowable. What if her current landlord decides to sell? Or, 'take back,' Hagens' home? What happens if nothing else is 'affordable'?

"We are just supposed to leave the city," she says, "but I'm sorry, family, friends, community is as important as a roof. It shouldn't be looked at as a luxury."

Statistics aside, Hagens struggles to see her experience as a women's issue. Nor does she consider late-life impoverishment a surprise.

Born in 1943, she is part of the so-called quiet generation, the demographic that took pride in toughing out life.

From childhood, Hagens says she was taught to value the work of men who traditionally brought money into the home, over the value of women's work and their role in society.

She always expected to grow old and, metaphorically, "eat cold corn out of a can."

And so, she has.



Moira Welsh is a Toronto-based investigative reporter for the Star leading *The Third Act*, a Toronto Star partnership with the National Institute On Ageing that pushes Canada to do better for its older adults. Follow her on Twitter: [@moirawelsh](https://twitter.com/moirawelsh)

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