

Kate Moss and Paramjitv Singh (2015)

Women Rough Sleepers in Europe: Homelessness and Victims of Domestic Abuse

Bristol: Policy Press, pp.224, £56.00

Despite a proliferation of homelessness research over the past decades, the knowledge base on women's homelessness remains weak in most European countries and policy has only recently begun to engage with the notion that women who experience homelessness have distinct needs that warrant specific attention and service responses. This book – which focuses on the experiences of women rough sleepers in four European countries, including the UK, Hungary, Spain and Sweden – makes a strong case for undertaking research into the characteristics and needs of women who sleep rough, rightly referring to the paucity of research and scholarship on women's homelessness and to a broader lack of engagement with the notion of gendered homelessness. From the outset, the authors highlight the extent of the problem of rough sleeping among women, the significance of abuse in these women's lives and their separation from their children. The book does not simply aim to advance a detailed understanding of women rough sleepers but also promises a theory of women's homelessness.

In the early chapters, the rationale for the study's focus is provided, alongside a review of relevant research literature, focusing in particular on the prevalence and predictors of women's homelessness and the legislative frameworks guiding responses to homelessness in the four participating countries (Chapter 3). The study's methodological orientation and its commitment to grounded theory is presented in Chapter 1 and what is referred to as a qualitative ethnographic approach is further elaborated in Chapter 4. While the reader certainly gains the sense that the women's narratives are placed centre stage, alongside a strong commitment to allowing women to relate their 'stories' in their own way and on their own terms, there is in fact no evidence of ethnographic engagement on the part of interviewers in any of the four countries. There is also inconsistency in how the interviewing approach is presented: on page 10, it is described as "semi-structured", but with reference also to a "life story" approach, while the term "ethnographic interviewing" is used on page 79. The authors explain that the intention was to recruit "a maximum of 27 key informants and 20 women rough sleepers in each country" (p.79), although some

challenges did arise in meeting this target and this is perhaps to be expected. More problematically, it is not clear how many people (women or key informants) were in fact interviewed in the end. Crucially, in relation to the recruitment of women rough sleepers, 'snowball' sampling was used to generate "the sample of women who have been abused and suffered violence" (p.10). It is perhaps unsurprising given the sampling approach adopted – described somewhat confusingly elsewhere in the text as "theoretical" (p.80) when it seems clear that a convenience sampling method was used – that domestic violence/abuse was found to be the leading cause of homelessness among the women interviewed.

In Chapter 2, the authors propose a 'social dysfunction theory' of women's homelessness located within late modernity's 'anomic social change', which they propose has resulted in no "clear ideology of women's roles in society" and enabled women to "become more independent of men in terms of income and property" (p.30). Social dysfunction theory, explain the authors, is founded on 'why', 'what' and 'how' factors or "elements of our theory" (p.31). In answer to the 'why' or *causal mechanisms* of women's homelessness, domestic abuse is posited as the reason that a majority of the study's women became homeless. The 'what' factor, or *experience* on the streets, is claimed to involve (further) abuse, exploitation and violence while the 'how' or *impact* on women is determined by their lack of access to women-only services and a lack of appropriate accommodation more broadly. With domestic abuse advanced as a primary cause of women's homelessness, it is difficult to square this proposition with the conditions of late modernity, which have enabled women to become more independent of men and "thus have the choice to leave an unsatisfactory (and in most cases with the women in our study, abusive) relationship" (p.30). At any rate, this theory is not revisited later in the book nor is there any attempt made by the authors to illustrate, much less support, their theoretical propositions at the points when empirical data are presented and conclusions drawn.

Women rough sleepers' stories are the focus of Chapter 4, which starts by reiterating the study's commitment to a research approach guided by the aim of unravelling and understanding the personal narratives of the study's participating women. What follows, however, is something quite different and resembles an inventory of narrative excerpts that are essentially not analysed and, by and large, devoid of interpretation. Further to the lack of interpretative analysis, the findings are presented on a country-by-country basis, with little attempt made, certainly in Chapter 4, to engage with the lives and situations of the women from a cross-country comparative perspective. A great deal of work is left to the reader, who is charged with making sense of lengthy lists of quotes in the absence of a narrative or 'story line' based on the authors' analysis and interpretation. Further to this, the study's women are rendered rather faceless in the sense that narrative excerpts are presented without any contextual information related, for example, to their age, the

duration of their homelessness, the places where they lived subsequent to first experiencing homelessness, their daily routines and so on. With no 'identifiers' in the form of pseudonyms or codes attached to the quotes, it is not possible to follow or 'link' individual stories through the chapter. These problems with the presentation of data are further aggravated by the analysis presented in Chapter 6, which essentially quantifies segments of the women's stories using quantitative displays of data (pie and bar charts). Apart from the dubiousness of introducing a quasi-statistical account of the women's lives and experiences at this juncture, this attempt at quantification is misleading, particularly given the very small sample of women recruited in each of the participating countries.

The conclusions drawn from the findings presented focus on the existence of partner abuse and mental health issues, the extent of the women's alienation because of their lack of social networks and their separation from their children and their lack of access to appropriate services and supports. The causal link between the women's homelessness and intimate partner violence is repeatedly highlighted, as evidenced, for example, by "the number of women whose homelessness is directly attributable to partner abuse" (p.161) and the "extensive stories of long-term abuse endured within intimate relationships with partners or husband" (p.168). However, with women rough sleepers recruited to the study *because* they had been abused and suffered violence, the credibility of the claim that domestic abuse is the central cause of the women's homelessness is very significantly undermined. The lack of attention to the structural underpinnings of homelessness and rough sleeping among the study's women is conspicuous, particularly given the extent to which they appeared to lack educational qualifications and rely on welfare benefits. There is no attempt to analyse the *intersection* of violence/abuse and homelessness as distinct from noting an association between the two and (apparently) presuming that prevalence implies causation.

Research of the kind undertaken by the authors – involving partner countries and researchers who undertake to recruit a 'hidden' and 'hard to reach' population such as women rough sleepers – is extremely demanding and invariably presents challenges. The methodological commitment of the authors to allowing women rough sleepers to articulate their experiences is commendable. One of the strongest potential contributions of good qualitative analysis is its ability to capture the essence of people's lived realities, their social worlds and how they themselves view and perceive their lives and situations. Equally, however, questionable methodological and analytical choices inevitably weaken the empirical basis upon which robust inferences and conclusions can be drawn.

We are still some distance from understanding the relationship between violence/abuse in women's lives and their subsequent experiences of homelessness or housing instability. The findings presented in this book potentially provide a case for further detailed and nuanced investigation of the violence/homelessness nexus in the case of women, with dedicated attention to the *nature* of the relationship and the *meaning* of violence and abuse in the lives of women who experience homelessness.

Paula Mayock

*School of Social Work and Social Policy,
Trinity College Dublin, Ireland*