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Women's Homelessness in Europe

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Women's Homelessness in Europe is an edited collection of chapters by leading housing and homelessness scholars across Europe. It emerged from the Women's Homelessness in Europe Network (WHEN), established in 2012 to promote and develop academic scholarship about women's homelessness. Both the network and the book are a response to the pitiful state of academic and policy knowledge about women's homelessness, the resultant ungendered approach to understanding and responding to homelessness, and the ramifications for women's housing situations and experiences.

The book aims to assess the 'state of knowledge' on women's homelessness in Europe. It is based entirely on existing published evidence but the expertise with which this evidence base is synthesised, framed, and critically analysed by each author does extend our knowledge and understanding by some degree.

The collection broadly takes an intersectional approach to understanding women's homelessness. Although not always explicit, intersectionality provides a framework of sorts. The contributors do not, for example, simply represent what is known about the population of homeless women (characteristics, life experiences, trajectories into homelessness and suchlike) although it is here that existing evidence is probably richest. Rather, the authors typically consider how and why women's homelessness (or the specific dimension they are exploring) interacts with, and is informed by gender roles, institutions, power structures and (gendered) forms of disadvantage. It would, perhaps, be better described as a book about *gender* and homelessness, rather than homeless *women* and is all the stronger for it.

The collection is split into two parts: Part I, comprised of three chapters and entitled 'Historical legacies, cultural images and welfare states', provides contextual underpinning for the remainder of the book, while Part II, entitled 'Issues, Challenges and Solutions', comprises six chapters, each focused on a specific dimension of women's homelessness.

The first substantive chapter – Chapter 2 (O’Sullivan) – offers an historical perspective on women’s homelessness and is an excellent contextual opener, introducing the reader to themes that become increasingly familiar as the book progresses. It explores how women’s homelessness has been historically framed by ignorance and normative assumptions about gender roles, providing a fundamental challenge to the notion that women’s homelessness is a relatively new phenomenon. Rather, it is argued that historical constructions of homelessness, and the methods of enumeration arising from these, have allowed such a perspective to prevail. Although drawing on rather limited European evidence, the chapter highlights how dominant approaches to investigating homelessness have rendered women variably invisible or deviant with ramifications for homeless women today. Chapter 3 picks up a theme raised in Chapter 2 and interrogates the way in which cultural images of women impact on homelessness policy and practice. Taking a feminist constructivist approach, Löfstrand and Quilgars consider how women’s socio-economic position, gender expectations, cultural images and the intertwining of categories of home, woman, and family impact on their access to housing in different European countries. Chapter 4 diverges from discussion about constructions of homelessness, but, like the previous two chapters, demonstrates how the absence of gendered understandings of homelessness produces knowledge that does not stand up to scrutiny once analysis of women’s homelessness is incorporated. In this chapter, Bretherton, Benjaminsen and Pleace utilise a version of Esping-Andersen’s typology of welfare regimes and critically assess the argument put forward by some scholars that the extent of homelessness is influenced by welfare state regimes. They argue that this hypothesis ignores gender differentials and that many of the key influences on women’s homelessness may be independent of welfare state regimes.

The first chapter in Part II (Chapter 5, Pleace) explores and critiques approaches to statistical measurement of homelessness in different European states. Echoing a theme in Part I, Pleace argues that the way in which homelessness is defined, measured, and recorded renders women invisible in the homeless population, for example by defining homelessness in ways that inadvertently fail to capture women, or through active decisions not to record gender that are rooted in assumptions about women’s absence from certain forms of homelessness. Chapter 6 represents the first of a series of ‘issue’ based chapters, presenting a nuanced understanding of the relationship between domestic violence and women’s homelessness. It moves beyond recognition of the role of domestic violence as a cause of women’s homelessness and asks more searching questions about the intersection between domestic violence and homelessness. As with many chapters in this collection, the specific theme under discussion is understood and discussed in terms of gendered power relations that impact on women’s housing. Chapter 7 (Wolf, Anderson, van

den Dries and Filipovič-Hrast) considers the relationship between health (physical, mental and substance misuse) and women's homelessness, while Chapter 8 explores the relationship between motherhood and homelessness. Both are relatively descriptive chapters, synthesising European evidence, but are thorough, interesting and well written, providing the reader with an excellent picture of what is known on these important themes. Returning to themes of misconceptions and invisibility, Chapter 9 (Pleace, Bretherton and Mayock) questions the received wisdom that women rarely experience long-term or recurrent homelessness, uncovering and discussing evidence that suggests otherwise. Again, the ways in which homelessness is conceptualised and measured are explanatory factors in this potential misconception about entrenched homelessness. Chapter 10 focuses on a particularly invisible and disadvantaged population – homeless migrant women – and is an excellent example of a chapter that critically examines the multiple layers of disadvantage affecting this group, and the processes and institutions that influence their housing and homelessness situations.

Although each chapter is focused on a distinct issue or population group, the book coheres around a series of recurrent themes, narratives and arguments that emerge in each chapter. For example, the way women are categorised and the implications for access to housing, support, and recognition (i.e. literally being 'counted') is a prominent theme. We see how categorisations have been important historically in developing definitions and conceptualisations of homelessness, for example women as domestic, homemakers etc. and as 'deviants' when failing to adhere to these normative categories (Chapter 2). We see how categorisations – for example as 'immigrant', or as 'family' and 'single' – determine eligibility for or deservedness of support (e.g. Chapters 8 and 10); and how women are rendered invisible through alternative categorisations such as 'victim of domestic violence' rather than 'homeless' (see Chapters 5 and 6). The invisibility of women's homelessness is also highlighted in every chapter. But discussion does not merely note homeless women's absence from research and national statistics, it seeks to explain how and why women remain invisible – e.g. through conceptualisations that foreground spaces and situations in which men predominate; techniques of measurement; and women's own practices and strategies to manage homelessness. And several chapters reveal how current understanding crumbles once a gendered analysis is applied to subjects about which existing evidence is comfortably consensual (e.g. Chapters 4 and 9).

The volume spotlights themes, issues, and sub-groups ignored in homelessness research. The only subject not covered that I felt warranted inclusion was rough sleeping. Like many of the other subjects discussed in the book, rough sleeping is conceptualised without regard for gender differentials. As a result, it is reinforced

as a male phenomenon yet researchers with an interest in women's homelessness know this is not the case. But it is easy to be critical about what is lacking when you are not the one subject to word limits or working with scant evidence.

I concur entirely with the editors when they conclude that '... the contributions in this book provide a comprehensive, contemporary assessment of the current state of knowledge about women's homelessness in Europe' (p.282). This was the stated objective of the book and it is certainly fulfilled. Ideally, I would have liked a more ambitious objective to make inroads into some of those gaps identified. All these scholars do primary research and it was frustrating at times that no new evidence was presented. Similarly, there was much well-argued and interesting critique of the way in which homelessness has been conceptualised, but little offered by way of reconceptualization, other than by implication. But perhaps all that is for a Volume 2. I certainly hope there will be one.

As a whole, the volume successfully highlights the way in which gender expectations intersect with power structures to inform women's vulnerability to and experience of homelessness, producing a convincing and coherent argument as to the gendered nature of homelessness and the urgent need for academics and policy makers to understand it as such. As such, it would be of great value to scholars with an interest in housing, homelessness, or gender.

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