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# Women's Responses to Homelessness: Services Implicated, Implications for Services

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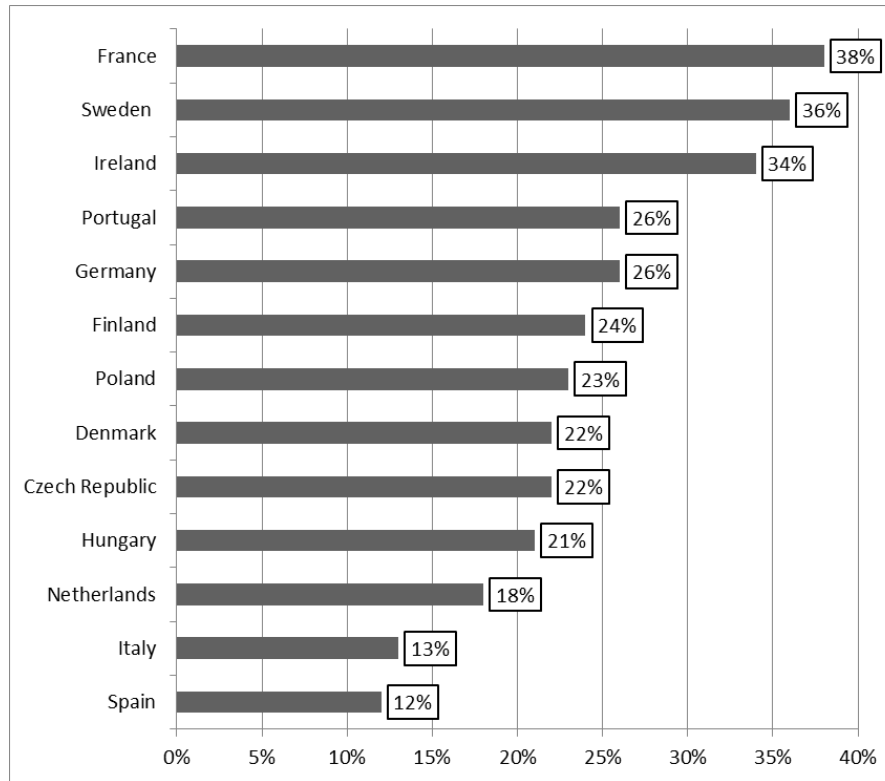
# Women's Homelessness: What we know 1

The available figures in most countries almost certainly underestimate numbers of homeless women. True extent of women's homelessness in Europe is unknown. However from some of the most recent statistics we do know:

- ❑ England – 57% of all households accepted as homeless were headed by lone women (lone women parents and single women). Also a further 22% of homeless households (those within a couple with dependent children) contain a woman. Therefore 79% of statutorily homelessness involves a woman (DCLG, P1E data, 2016).
- ❑ Scotland – 45.2% of all main applicants are female (Scottish Government, HL1, 2016/17).
- ❑ Ireland – 42% of the homeless population nationally are women with the figure rising to 44% for Dublin (Dept of Housing, Planning & Local Government / Central Statistics Office, July 2017).
- ❑ Finland – 24% of all homeless people are women (ARA, 2016).

Whatever dimension of homelessness you observe, women are present. They become even more evident as your definitions start to encompass family homelessness and hidden homelessness.

# Women's Homelessness: What we know 2



**Women's Homelessness as a Proportion of All Homelessness in 13 EU Member States.** Different methodologies and data sets were used in each country, (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014)

# Limited Evidence Base Across Europe 1

- Enumeration techniques across Europe are less well developed than is the case for single homeless men.

Four significant deficiencies:

- ❑ A key aspect of women's homelessness, hidden homelessness, has received limited attention.
- ❑ Family homelessness is less extensively researched and again this is usually the domain of women.
- ❑ When women are found among homeless populations, they are often noted rather than examined in depth.
- ❑ The experience of domestic violence causing homelessness is not sufficiently recorded, recognised or analysed as homelessness – a 'separate' social problem.

# Limited Evidence Base Across Europe 2

- These limitations in data are set against a context of the wider evidence base on European homelessness. Research is skewed to the North West (especially the UK and Ireland) and tends to focus on rough sleepers and those in services.
- While data is improving (Spain, Portugal, Italy, Poland now collecting extensive data) definitions or frames of reference that exclude dimensions of female homelessness remains widespread (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014).
- A key gap in what we know centres on understanding why women respond to homelessness in the way they do. Lots of evidence showing women not engaging with services and employing their own resources (Mayock and Bretherton, 2016; Bretherton, 2017). This not only leads us further into the enumeration quandary but also raises questions as to why women are not accessing homelessness services.

# Gender and Homelessness

Gender involves cultural beliefs

Gender as social and relational practice

Gender - an institutionalised system of social practices

***“ ... gender involves cultural beliefs and distributions of resources at the macro level, patterns of behavior and organizational practices at the interactional level, and selves and identities at the individual level” (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004: 510-11)***

Gender – not simply a category that can be subjected to ‘objective’ (positivistic) analysis

The importance of analysing gender in relation to other power structures

# Cultural Constructions of the 'Unaccommodated Woman'

- Historically, dominant constructions have depicted homeless women as deviant, transgressive and, by implication, as largely unworthy.
- Many early texts on homelessness characterised women (when they included women) as sexually deviant and essentially lacking the ability to live and function 'as women' (O'Sullivan, 2016).
  - In England, "Edna the Inebriate Woman' (Sandford, 1971) – an eccentric, alcoholic, elderly woman who tramped along an institutional circuit of hostels and psychiatric institutions.
  - In the US, Weiner (1984: 181): "women tramps were so deviant their existence was unthinkable to many and their numbers relatively few".
- Today, the language used to describe women who experience homelessness is far more nuanced but there is evidence of continuity in how these women are viewed and their situations understood.

# Cultural Constructions of the 'Unaccommodated Woman'

- Prevailing (contemporary) ideas about home, family and women – demonstrate the persistence of traditional constructions of women's roles as mothers and carers and the continuity of traditional role differentiation within the family (Löfstrand & Quilgars, 2016).
- 'Categories' of homeless women – singles, lone parents, family.
- These categories, and the cultural constructions underpinning them, profoundly influence policy and service responses:

*“Images of women's homelessness and definitions of homelessness – including their underlying assumptions produce particular policy responses and practices (while others are seen as 'unthinkable'), in turn (re)producing discursive categories such as 'the homeless woman'” (Löfstrand & Quilgars, 2016: 42).*



# Institutional Processes

- Historically, ‘fallen’ women were managed, in the main, throughout Europe by institutions run by various religious or evangelical communities, government-funded initiatives and lay philanthropic organisations – all primarily designed to manage women’s perceived deviancy (O’Sullivan, 2016).
  - “These institutions concealed citizens already marginalized by a number of interrelated social phenomena: illegitimacy, sexual abuse, and infanticide” (Smith, 2007: xiii)
- Women classified as something other than homeless and rendered invisible. They were simultaneously ‘othered’.
- Today, the nature of service provision for women who experience homelessness is clearly very different, although the enduring reliance on emergency shelters to house homeless women (and men) in many European countries, represents a significant point of continuity.

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# Homeless Women and Service Systems: Women's Responses

# Homeless Women and Service Provision

- Significant variation throughout Europe in terms of the nature and range of services targeting women who experience homelessness.
- Shelter/hostels and other systems of emergency, short- or medium-term accommodation remain a dominant response in many countries.
  - Continued reliance on institutional responses to women's homelessness.
  - Evidence of women remaining in – or of cycling in and out of – homelessness services for lengthy periods (Mayock *et al.*, 2015a; Reeve *et al.*, 2006) and of long-term homelessness among far greater numbers of women than is routinely recognised (Pleace, 2016).
  - Ireland: Recent introduction of Homeless Family Hubs, which predominantly house single mothers and their children – transitional, congregate, institutional response.
  - Housing First for women under-researched. Little discussion of gender within Housing First discourses.
- 'Disconnect' between homelessness and domestic violence services (Baptista, 2010; Mayock *et al.*, 2016).
- Categories and constructions of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' homeless women influence service responses and service provision – and women's trajectories through homelessness.

# Homeless Women's Service Experiences

- The available research evidence suggests that service provision for women experiencing homelessness lacks gender sensitivity (Edgar & Doherty, 2001; Mayock & Bretherton, 2016).
- There is also evidence that the nature of service provision – which significantly impacts women's service experiences – influences women's decision-making and their *responses to homelessness*.
- These responses, in turn, appear to be drivers of their invisibility.
  - Thörn (2001) – Sweden
  - Reeve *et al.* (2006) – UK
  - Mayock *et al.* (2012; 2015a,b); Mayock & Sheridan (2013) – Ireland
  - Sznajder-Murray and Slesnick (2011) – US
  - Paradis *et al.* (2012) – Canada

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# Research Literature on Women's Interactions with Homelessness Services

## Dominant Themes

Service Avoidance

Diminished Autonomy

Women (Independently) Seeking Solutions

# Service Avoidance

- Women avoiding services at early stages of homelessness and relying on informal networks (Reeve et al., 2006; Thörn, 2001; Mayock et al., 2012).
- Women find many homelessness services challenging places to be because of the stigma of a homeless status and their desire to conceal this status (Reeve et al., 2006; REFS)
- Women frequently avoid homelessness services because of a fear, because they feel threatened, unsafe and insecure (Mayock et al., 2015b; Reeve et al., 2006).
  - Male-dominated services
  - Lack or absence of women-only services and spaces
  - Services tailored primarily to meet the needs of males
- ***Women's service experiences frequently become the single greatest barrier to service use and engagement.***

# Diminished Autonomy

- Experiences of infantilisation/being treated like a child (Mayock *et al.*, 2015b; Paradis *et al.*, 2012).
- Homeless mothers feeling judged for past mistakes and/or because of their substance use (Sznajder-Murray & Slesnick, 2011)
  - The stigma of 'lost' motherhood (Mayock *et al.*, 2015a).
- Women struggle with the rules and regulations dictating their movement, daily routines and their interactions with their children, in many cases (Reeve *et al.*, 2006; Mayock *et al.*, 2015b).
  - Leading to feeling subservient, a lack of control or 'say' in their daily lives and futures.
- Feelings of fear and distrust – acting as a barrier to effective communication between service staff and service users (Reeve *et al.*, 2006; Paradis *et al.*, 2012; Sznajder-Murray & Slesnick, 2011).

# Women (Independently) Seeking Solutions

- Women will frequently only seek accommodation through formal channels (homelessness services) when they have exhausted alternative options (Mayock *et al.*, 2012; Reeve *et al.*, 2006; Thörn, 2001).
- Women effectively “excluding themselves from services, finding that particularly services or were delivered in such a way that they found difficult or unhelpful” (Reeve *et al.* 2006: 64).
- The erosion of motherhood/stigma of ‘spoilt’ motherhood (Mayock *et al.*, 2015a; Sznajder-Murry & Slesnick, 2008).
- Women exiting services independently – without support – to PRS housing and subsequently returning to homelessness services (Mayock *et al.*, 2015a).
- Women seeking ‘ontological security’.



# Conclusions

- Research to date strongly suggests that women's experiences of homelessness services are negative in many cases and frequently perceived by them as exacerbating their marginalisation.
- Research that has incorporated an examination of women's experiences of services points strongly to the importance of seeing gender as social and relational, involving cultural beliefs as well as multiple people, categories and institutions.
- Women's trajectories through homelessness appear to differ significantly to those of men (Bretherton, 2017) and women's services experiences clearly impact these trajectories.
- It is therefore "in the complex realm of women's responses to their situations" (Mayock et al. 2015a: 19) that we might begin to more fully understand the intersection of the gendered structural and relational forces influencing women's homelessness trajectories.

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