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**Women negotiating  
power and control as  
they 'journey' through  
homelessness**

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# Background

- Paucity of research on women's homelessness throughout Europe (Baptista, 2010; Edgar & Doherty, 2001; Mayock & Bretherton, 2016).
- One third of the total homeless population estimated to be women in several European countries (Löfstrand & Quilgars, 2016). Ireland has recorded the highest representation of women in its homeless population (ranging from 41-48%) over the past five years.
- Current methods and techniques of enumeration almost certainly underestimate the extent of women's homelessness (Bretherton, 2017; Pleace, 2016).
- Little progress in developing a conceptualisation of homelessness that recognises gender (Reeve, 2018).

# A Feminist Poststructural Framework

- For feminist theorists, patriarchy is at the root of social inequalities.
- Watson & Austerberry (1986: 7) sought to explain how “patriarchal social relations, the sexual division of labour and the dominant family model in a capitalist society all serve to marginalise women in the housing sphere”.
- Poststructuralist theory prioritises concepts such as diversity, subjectivity and relativity; it transcends binary oppositions such as male/female, public/private, home/homelessness, highlighting heterogeneity and allowing for resistance and change.
- The operations of power, control and discipline are central to Foucault’s (1975, 1976) work. In order to assert control in modern society, Foucault argues, those who are deemed ‘outside’ the mainstream are closely monitored and scrutinised.
- Another important element of poststructuralism is agency, which is discursively produced through social relations (Weedon, 1996).

## Methods

- Qualitative (biographical) longitudinal study with a strong ethnographic component.
- 60 women interviewed at Phase 1 (baseline): 2009-2010.
- 40 women re-interviewed at Phase 2: 2012-13.
- Reliable information on the whereabouts of an additional 9 women attained at Phase 2.
- Interviews conducted in Dublin, Cork and Galway.
- Ethnographic observation conducted at strategically-chosen sites at Phases 1 and 2 (food centre, short- and longer term accommodation in Dublin).
- Photography project at Phase 1 – aimed at enhancing ethnographic engagement.

## The Study's Women (N=60)

- Ranged from 18 to 62 years; average 34.8 years.
- 43 were of Irish or UK origin; 17 were migrants (11 EU, 6 non-EU).
- 37 were not in a relationship at baseline; 27 had been married and all were separated or divorced.
- Over two-thirds were mothers (n=41) or pregnant (n=4) at Ph1.
  - These women were mothers to a total of 105 children, a majority of them under the age of 18 years.
  - 14 mothers (11 of them migrant women) had their children in their care.
  - The children of 21 mothers lived in State or relative care.
  - The children of 6 mothers were over the age of 18 years.
- Low levels of educational attainment. Only one employed full-time at Ph1.

# The Women's Homeless and Housing Transitions

- o Lengthy homeless histories at Phase 1.

## Duration (Cumulative) of Homelessness at Phase 1

Duration of Homelessness	Number of Women	Percent
More than 10 years	14	23%
6-10 years	7	12%
2-6 years	13	22%
1-2 years	6	10%
Under 1 year	20	33%
Total	60	100%

# The Women's Homeless and Housing Transitions

## The Women's Homeless and Housing Situations at Phase 1 (N=60)

Accommodation Type	Number of Women
Emergency Hostel	28
Transitional Accommodation	12
Private Rented Accommodation	7
Domestic Violence Refuge	4
Long-term Supported Accommodation	4
With Friends or Family Members	3
Sleeping Rough	1
Dilapidated House	1
Total	60

# The Women's Homeless and Housing Transitions

## The Women's Homeless and Housing Situations at Phase 2 (n=49)

Status at Phase 2 Categorised According to ETHOS	Number
Roofless	6
Houseless	12
Insecure Accommodation	9
Inadequate Housing	1
Total	28 (57%)
Stable Housing	21 (43%)



# Women's Homeless 'Journeys'

- A majority of the women reported multiple accommodation transitions between Phases 1 and 2 of the research.
- Women who remained homeless by Phase 2 reported a greater number of moves than those who were housed.
- Women with children in their care and/or those who reported less complex support needs related to substance use and mental health were more likely to be housed by Phase 2.
- Those who reported ongoing patterns of movement between shelters and other emergency accommodation invariably noted the negative impact of these environments on their ability to address substance use and mental health issues and to re-establish/maintain contact with their children.

# Service Experiences

- Women were grateful for shelter and other basic amenities.
- Adapting to hostel life was challenging.

*“I was pretty scared because I didn’t know what environment I was going into, who was going to be in there, what they were like ... Hostels are of people who are full of drugs and they’re violent so I was pretty terrified coming here the first night, especially being pregnant as well ... So I had a lot to take on in the move” (Emily, 22).*

- Domestic violence (DV) services were depicted more positively – as empowering and as providing a more direct route to safe, sustainable housing.
- However, many women who had experienced DV felt that they did not meet the ‘eligibility criteria’ for these services.

# Monitoring and Surveillance within Service Settings

- o The women in this study frequently talked about the intense sense of surveillance they experienced within homeless service settings.

*“They have keys and they can open your room, even if you are not there, and sometimes they do that and it feels a bit creepy, you know” (Delilha, 33).*

*“You come in and you get the feeling that someone else was in there ... It felt like a bit of a prison” (Viv, 38).*

*“You see they [children] were under an awful lot of pressure as well because it was a huge adjustment ... I had lived in [transitional housing] for so long, it was like the ‘Big Brother’ house and then the [domestic violence] refuge before that. But that’s three and a half years. I was constantly thinking, ‘Am I going to get into trouble for that or the kids going to get into trouble for this’? (Bernadette, 37).*

# Experiences of Infantilisation

- Monitoring and surveillance as infantilisation.

*“They [staff] treat you like, God I don’t know. I had a drink on me once and if you come in with drink on you, you have to sit on a bench for a while. Imagine at 36, sittin’ on a bench until they tell you to go over to your quarters? It’s like bein’ in prison. But 36 and being told to sit on a bench – madness” (Dervla, 36).*

- No recognition of their status as mothers.

*“Just being in a hostel, you know that there’s people watching you, looking over you, knowing you can’t do this and can’t do that ... We’re not teenagers, we’re adults in this place ... I’m not stupid, you know what I mean. When we go in it’s like they’re treating us like kids, like they’re talking to us like kids; kids that have kids” (Karen, 26).*

*“She [staff] treated me like as if I was a two-year-old child, do you know, the way you just scold a child sometimes? (Imelda, 34).*

# Women Negotiating the Service Sector

- o Women were not without agency and, aware of the discourses that surrounded them, they actively responded.

- o Narratives of resistance.

*“I know by drinking you can’t come into [hostel 1] and then you end up in [hostel 2] ... I got myself barred twice just to be out of [hostel 1] but I’d be able to get back down to [hostel 2]” (Roisin, 37).*

- o Several women who were active substance users identified instances of feeling ‘punished’.

- o Narratives of conformity and techniques of ‘impression management’


*“We have to just keep at it. Just keep doing what we are supposed to do, just play the game” (Chloe, 29).*

# Women Negotiating the Service Sector

- Also evidence of women seeking to conform to the female ideal and what Passaro (1996: 11) describes as the “dutiful dependent”.
- Women attempted to take control by challenging, resisting or simply managing their situations in strategic ways.
- Women’s actions and behaviours – and their interactions with homelessness service providers and housing officers in local authorities – played a role in their housing outcomes.
- Persistence and perseverance on the part of women – and self-presentation as a mother, as ‘respectable’, with the potential to be a good tenant did yield positive results.

# Conclusion

- “ ... [a] group of housing and gender scholars are slowly nudging forward with efforts to develop gendered conceptualisations of homelessness, producing sporadic evidence and calling existing accounts of homeless into question” (Reeve, 2018: 166).
- The data presented demonstrate the ways in which women’s subjectivities, experiences, responses and actions are constituted through discursive practices.
- Deep-rooted ideological assumptions about gender are exposed, as are women’s responses to them.
- Women had to work hard to demonstrate that they had value; to be respected and to be seen as ‘respectable’ (McCarthy, 2015).
- “Not only do material practices matter - for example, how homeless people are treated – but also how different discourses act to produce certain outcomes” (watson, 2000: 167).
- Complexifying the notions of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’.



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