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# Women Negotiating Power and Control as they 'Journey' Through Homelessness: A Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective

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➤ **Abstract\_** *While homelessness is increasingly seen as differentiated by gender, dominant narratives only rarely incorporate the experiences of women. Using a feminist poststructuralist framework, this paper examines homeless women's trajectories through and out of homelessness based on data from a qualitative longitudinal study of women's homelessness in Ireland. Sixty women were recruited and interviewed at baseline and 'tracked' over a three-year period alongside the conduct of ethnographic fieldwork at strategically chosen sites throughout the duration of the study. At the time of follow-up, forty women were re-interviewed and reliable information was attained on the whereabouts of an additional nine participants. For the sample as whole, there was strong evidence that the presence or absence of children and the presence or absence of more complex needs impacted women's ability to access housing and exit homelessness. Those women who had transitioned to stable housing by the time of follow-up were more likely to have children in their care and to report lower levels of need related to substance use and/or mental health. A detailed examination of the women's service experiences and interactions reveals the complex way in which they engaged with the discourses embedded in the structures they encountered as they moved through the service system, very often along trajectories of long-term homelessness. The analysis uncovers women's agency, mobilised through acts of 'resistance' and 'conformity', as they navigated a landscape where assumptions about 'deserving' and 'undeserving' women prevailed and also significantly influenced their housing outcomes.*

► **Keywords\_** *women's homelessness; homeless trajectories, homeless exits, feminist poststructuralism, qualitative longitudinal research, ethnography, Ireland*

## Introduction

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There is strong evidence that women's homelessness is a significant global problem. Women constitute up to one-third of the total homeless population in many European countries, including Germany, Italy, Poland and Sweden, with significantly higher rates of female homelessness evident in France, Ireland and the UK (Hansen Löffstrand and Quilgars, 2016; Owen *et al.*, 2019). Likewise, in the US, recent State measurements indicate that women and girls represent 39 per cent of the total homeless population (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2019), while Canadian data show that 27 per cent of those experiencing homelessness are female (Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, 2016). Finally, the most recent annual report on those in receipt of specialist homelessness services in Australia suggests that, of those accessing such services, 60 per cent are female (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019).

Importantly, comparative analysis of the extent of women's homelessness across jurisdictions is significantly hampered by differences in the way in which homelessness is 'counted' (Busch-Geertsema, 2010), with estimates in many countries based on the most *visible* forms of homelessness (Hansen Löffstrand and Quilgars, 2016). Furthermore, definitions of homelessness, as well as dominant techniques of enumeration, operate on a gendered landscape in which women's experiences are marginalised, leading to the under-representation of women within homelessness statistics (Pleace, 2016). It is twenty years since feminist scholar, Sophie Watson, argued that "the conundrum at the heart of analysing women's homelessness" (Watson, 2000, p.161) is linked to the problem of definition and consequent underestimation of the scale of the problem:

If homelessness is defined in terms of men's experiences and practices or men's subjectivities, then women's homelessness becomes invisible. If it is invisible it is not counted and therefore it is underestimated (Watson, 2000 p. 61).

Homelessness research has long since been critiqued for its gender-neutral approach (Watson and Austerberry, 1986; Watson, 2000; Doherty, 2001; Edgar and Doherty, 2001) and the experiences of homeless women have only received sporadic attention in the research literature (Baptista, 2010; Mayock and Bretherton, 2016; Savage, 2016; Bretherton, 2017; Reeve, 2018; Bretherton, 2020). Nonetheless, a growing number of scholars have been "nudging forward" with efforts to produce

gendered understandings of homelessness (Reeve, 2018, p.166). Research has, for example, demonstrated that experiences such as childhood sexual abuse and violence, family adversities (related to poverty and neglect), relationship breakdown, intimate partner violence and maternal trauma push women along a trajectory of housing instability and homelessness (Jones, 1999; Reeve *et al.*, 2006; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012; Mayock *et al.*, 2012; Bretherton, 2020). While these experiences are not unique to women, they are gendered. The role of domestic and other forms of gender-based violence in women (including women experiencing single adult homelessness and women with children in their care) becoming homeless is possibly one of the strongest indicators that gender matters (Mayock *et al.*, 2016). There are of course other reasons, related to economic and housing problems, why women become homeless but, again, there are important gender dimensions to housing stress and instability. Across Europe and in North America, family homelessness is highly gendered, disproportionately experienced by households headed by a single female parent (Shinn *et al.*, 2013; Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2014; Baptista *et al.*, 2017; United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2018; Long *et al.*, 2019; Owen *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, alongside the diversification of the profile of homeless people across Europe, women's susceptibility to housing exclusion has increased (Owen *et al.*, 2019).

Beyond research evidence pointing to the importance of gender in understanding the drivers of homelessness, there is now considerable evidence that women's experiences of – and their responses to – homelessness have distinguishing features. For example, women are more likely than their male counterparts to rely on informal networks, certainly during the early stages of their homelessness (Jones, 1999; Reeve *et al.*, 2007; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012; Mayock *et al.*, 2015; Bowpitt *et al.*, 2011; Johnson *et al.*, 2017; Bretherton, 2020). The tendency for women to live in situations of 'hidden' homelessness is undoubtedly related to the particular stigma attached to the 'unaccommodated woman' (Wardhaugh, 1999). Stigmatising discourses that depict homeless women as transgressing normative assumptions about women's roles as mothers, carers and home-makers are historically rooted (O'Sullivan, 2016). These discourses remain present today (Hansen Löfstrand and Quilgars, 2016) and may push women into spaces where their homelessness is concealed. The same applies to women who experience intimate partner violence and there is evidence that women's reluctance to access domestic violence services can be connected to cultural norms and beliefs (Mayock *et al.*, 2016). Migrant women, for example, may delay leaving an abusive home situation because of cultural prescriptions that prevent them from reporting violence (Mayock *et al.*, 2012). More broadly, for women and children who are impacted by

domestic abuse, their houses are no longer a place where they can exercise and enjoy control, an experience that has been likened to 'homeless at home' (Watson and Austerberry, 1986; Wardhaugh, 1999).

Far less is known about the paths that women take through and out of homelessness. However, there is evidence of women trying to resolve their homelessness independently; leaving the service system, often to take up (temporary) residence with family members or friends (Reeve *et al.*, 2007; Mayock *et al.*, 2015). These routes through homelessness also appear to be related to women's reluctance to remain in homeless hostels because of the inherently stressful nature of these environments (Bretherton, 2020). Again, findings such as these point to women using informal networks as a 'solution' to their homelessness even if these living situations are often not sustainable and lead many back to homeless service settings (Mayock *et al.*, 2015).

A reliance on cross-sectional research designs has significantly hampered understanding of the course of women's homelessness. However, a recent paper, based on data drawn from a large-scale longitudinal evaluation of an employment, education and training programme for homeless adults in six UK locations, examined women's trajectories through homelessness, identifying a number of pathways taken by the forty-seven women interviewed (Bretherton, 2020). This research reported relative success in the move towards housing stability, with thirty-three of the forty-seven homeless women who were 'tracked' over a two-year period describing themselves as "moving away from homelessness and toward mainstream social and economic life" (Bretherton, 2020, p.264). Equally, however, the findings raise important questions about what constitutes an exit from homelessness since many of the women who had 'exited' in fact continued along a path of housing precarity. In other words, while many had transitioned to housing, some did not perceive that they were secure from a return to homelessness. Enduring patterns of housing precarity among women have similarly been documented in the Irish context (Mayock *et al.*, 2015). Bretherton's (2020, p.13) findings draw attention to the possibility that women may need particular kinds of supports in order to exit homelessness and remain housed, even if gender is "unlikely to have a simple, 'binary' effect on homelessness trajectories".

While gender is increasingly recognised as influencing the ways in which homelessness is experienced and possibly resolved, there has been little progress in developing conceptualisations of homelessness that interrogate gender (Reeve, 2018). In particular, very little is known about the processes that support or, alternatively, act as a barrier to women exiting homelessness or about the normative assumptions and practices that influence the paths that women take through homelessness. Using a feminist poststructuralist framework, this paper examines women's

'journeys' through and out of homelessness based on data from a qualitative longitudinal study of women's homelessness in Ireland. Focusing on women's service experiences and interactions, the analysis reveals how subjectivities and individual action and response are constituted through the gendered discourses that surround women. The analysis uncovers women's agency, mobilised through acts of 'resistance' and 'conformity', as they navigated a landscape where assumptions about 'deserving' and 'undeserving' women prevailed and also significantly influenced their housing outcomes.

### **Feminist Poststructuralism**

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Housing theorists Sophie Watson and Helen Austerberry (Austerberry and Watson, 1983; Watson and Austerberry, 1986) were among the first to interrogate women's homelessness and housing exclusion through a feminist lens. Their analysis 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" (Watson and Austerberry, 1986, p.7). Women, they argued, lack power to exert control over their housing – independently from a man – because of the patriarchal assumptions in which housing systems are embedded; patriarchy, they posited, is a key driver of women's homelessness. Their analysis emphasised the centrality of family to housing policy and provision, highlighting the marginalisation of non-family households, and single family households in particular, within housing systems.

Watson and Austerberry's (1986) Marxist feminist perspective drew sharp attention to the wider patriarchal forces that define women's homelessness and to the shortcomings of homelessness and broader policy responses. However, this analysis has been critiqued on a number of grounds. First, it is argued that while patriarchy and gender inequality have their place within debates on homelessness, to single out patriarchy as a single oppressive force over-simplifies the causes of homelessness among women (Neale, 1997). A second critique focuses on the advantages offered to women within housing and broader welfare policy, particularly to women with dependent children, who frequently have enhanced access to crucial services and subsidised housing (Neale, 1997; Fitzpatrick, 2005). Finally, and importantly, homeless women are not a homogenous group nor are they passive victims of circumstance who lack agency (Neale, 1997), as feminist housing theorists appear to imply. Feminist analyses therefore run the risk of overlooking and concealing the diversity of women's situations and of denying women agency and autonomy. This denial of agency may also serve to re-victimise women (Crinall, 1995).

Women, according to Weedon (1987, p.125), are “feeling, thinking subject[s]” who are “capable of resistance and innovations”; women “reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives” and, when making decisions, are “able to choose from the options available”. Poststructuralist feminists acknowledge that women are not a homogenous group (Weedon, 1987) and identify “the need for a multiplicit view of femaleness” (Crinall, 1995, p.43). Drawing heavily on the work of Foucault, feminist poststructuralism incorporates an analysis of power and power relations, focusing on how power works to ensure the maintenance of social hierarchy and adherence to the status quo (Weedon, 1987).

Power is ubiquitous and, in order to assert control Foucault argues, those who are deemed ‘outside’ of the mainstream are closely monitored, scrutinised and compared to normative ‘ideals’. Power and control are diffused and embodied in discourse since “[d]iscourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart” (Foucault, 1990, p.100). Poststructuralist feminists who have taken up Foucault’s notion of discourse (Weedon, 1987; Butler, 1990) explore the ways in which gender governs how individuals think, feel and act. Subjectivity, which is constituted or constructed through language and discourse, refers to “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (Weedon, 1987, p.32). Shaped in interaction with one’s environment through the discourse of others, subjectivity is considered essential to understanding how women navigate and respond to the power structures that surround them.

Another critical element of poststructuralism is agency, which is discursively produced through social relations (Weedon, 1987). Where there is power, as Foucault argues, there is also resistance (Foucault, 1991). Where discourses and systems of power and control are present, individuals have the capacity to resist and contest the structures that surround them. As Watson (1988) observes:

Post-structuralism... allows for the possibility of a recognition of fragmentation. Within this approach individuals are buffeted by conflicting and often unconscious needs and desires and are situated in the midst of discourses not of their own making... Foucault’s contention that no relations of power exist without resistance provides an impetus to perhaps refocus our attention as feminists on women’s opposition to the forms of control they experience within the urban system (Watson, 1988, p.145).

People can thus take control and make changes in their lives, although Foucault does not, by any means, attribute unqualified agency to individuals; rather, he emphasises the possibility of resistance, thereby revealing greater scope for individual action. Poststructuralist theory can therefore expose the complex power

dynamics present in women's lives and the way in which policy and service responses may – inadvertently or not – serve to pathologise, divide and 'problematise' those who are socially excluded or marginalised (Watson, 2000; Parker and Fopp, 2004). Importantly, in a context where homelessness research – when it does include women – tends to merely note their presence and characteristics (Pleace, 2016; Bretherton, 2017), a poststructuralist feminist approach has the potential to capture the multidimensional ways in which homelessness is experienced by women, paying attention to their agency and producing an understanding of how homelessness and housing instability is negotiated (differently) by women.

## Methodology

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The research, which is qualitative and longitudinal, was designed to track the homeless and housing transitions of women over time. Qualitative longitudinal research is concerned with uncovering temporal change across lives (Saldaña, 2003), detailing the intricacies of the journey and allowing for transitions other than those defined by the researcher to emerge (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003). Investigating homelessness over time has the potential to reveal how individuals respond to their situations and can also expose elements of control and agency as people negotiate circumstances of precarity and uncertainty. Unlike cross-sectional studies, which can offer only a point-in-time snapshot (Snow *et al.*, 1994), longitudinal research on homelessness enables the identification of experiences and processes that influence the moves that people make, including their transitions to stable housing as, and if, they transpire over time.

The research was initiated in January 2010<sup>1</sup>. Over a seven-month period, ethnographic observation was carried out in four strategically chosen sites in the Dublin region, including two homeless service settings (one female only and one mixed gender) and two food centres. Ethnographic immersion involved regular (weekly) visits to these sites and constant interaction with women and men who were accessing these services. The conduct of ethnographic observation exposed the researchers to the multiple realities of homelessness and to the everyday interactions of women who occupied these service settings. Ethnographic data in the form of fieldnotes, which recorded the meanings and concerns of the individuals present, provided strong insight into homeless women's social worlds and the social and interactional processes that impacted their everyday lives (Agar, 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> Ethical approval for the conduct of Phase 1 and Phase 2 of this research was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee, School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

Alongside the conduct of ethnographic observation, biographical interviews were conducted with 60 women in Dublin, Cork and Galway at baseline (Phase 1 of the research)<sup>2</sup>. Closely aligned to feminist thought (DeVault, 1999), biographical accounts allow women's voices "to be heard, analysed, and theorised" (Atkinson, 1998, p.19). Biographical interviewing enables participants to exert more control over what is discussed in the interview situation (Roberts, 2002) as they reconstruct the 'plot' of their past, present and future lives and produce a contextualised 'story' (McNaughton, 2006). This approach to interviewing permits the identification of salient themes and patterns of experience as well as respondents' own interpretation and understanding of personally significant life events (Denzin, 1989).

To be eligible to participate in the biographical interview at baseline, women had to be: 1) homeless or have lived in unstable accommodation during the past 6 months; <sup>3</sup> 2) aged 18 years or over; 3) single with no children or a parent living either with, or apart from, her children; and 4) Irish or non-Irish. Recruitment to the study was guided by a purposive sampling strategy that attempted to capture variation in terms of the range of services women were accessing as well as socio-demographic characteristics related to age, ethnicity and migration status. As the fieldwork process unfolded, snowball and 'targeted' sampling techniques were used, guided by aim of achieving diversity in the recruitment of this 'hard-to-reach' population (Watters and Biernacki, 1989). Sampling at baseline was significantly influenced by the learning arising from ongoing ethnographic engagement across the four observational sites.

All interviews commenced with an open invitation to women to tell their 'life story', producing an initial uninterrupted narrative (Gubrium and Holstein, 2004). Following this, several topics were probed for questioning with the women, including their early life experiences, homeless histories and the experiences and circumstances that impacted their movements. The topic of motherhood was explored (where

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<sup>2</sup> The interviewing process was not initiated for a period of two months, following a period of early immersion in the ethnographic field sites. During this time, the researchers also met with managers of numerous homelessness services catering to the needs of women to explain the aims of the research and garner their support, as 'gatekeepers', to recruit women who met the study's eligibility criteria. Engagement with service personnel also enabled us to gather important information on the 'landscape' of women's homelessness, which in turn helped to inform the sampling and recruitment processes.

<sup>3</sup> This eligibility 'marker' was deliberately broad in that it went beyond women residing in emergency accommodation and incorporated all four ETHOS categories: Roofless, Houseless, Insecure and Inadequate. The participants recruited at baseline were primarily 'Roofless' or 'Houseless', either currently or during the previous six months. However, a large number of the women had moved into and through 'Insecure' and/or 'Inadequate' accommodation since the time they first experienced homelessness and repeatedly, in the case of a large number, over the course of the study (see Findings).



relevant), as were experiences of violence or abuse. Family and social supports were discussed and participants were invited to provide information on their physical and mental health, drug and alcohol use and criminal justice system contact. At the core of the interview was a commitment to learning about women's perspectives on their situations, past and present, and their views on their service interactions and experiences.

Phase 2, the follow-up phase of the research, was initiated in November 2012 and extended for a period of one year. Ethnographic observation was again carried out at four service settings in Dublin and the process of tracking study participants was initiated<sup>4</sup>. Re-locating the study's women almost three years subsequent to the conduct of the Phase 1 was predictably challenging. However, the process was supported by the ethnographic arm of the research, which enabled the cultivation of strong positive relationships with staff members and service users over the course of the study. During Phase 2, 40 of the study's 60 women were successfully tracked and re-interviewed. Reliable information on the living situations of an additional nine women was obtained at the time of follow-up<sup>5</sup>, though for various reasons it was not possible to re-interview these women. Three of the women were deceased at Phase 2. The study's retention rate of two-thirds for a face-to-face follow-up interview is satisfactory given the recognised challenges associated with tracking and retaining mobile populations (Conover *et al.*, 1997; Gerlitz *et al.*, 2017)<sup>6</sup>.

A characteristic of qualitative longitudinal research is the immense volume of data generated, which can present analytical challenges. A number of systematic, integrated strategies were therefore used to interrogate the study's ethnographic fieldnotes and the rich narratives garnered from the two phases of data collection. At baseline, a "case profile" (Thomson, 2007; Henderson *et al.*, 2012) was prepared

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<sup>4</sup> As was the case at Phase 1, ethnographic observation was conducted at Phase 2 of the research in order to capture the everyday worlds of women who were accessing these homeless service settings. This process led to meetings with women who did not feature in Phase 1 but also to encounters with a very considerable number who continued to circulate through the homeless service system. Ethnographic engagement during the follow-up phase also facilitated the 'tracking' process in that service providers and service users were frequently able to provide information about the whereabouts of study participants.

<sup>5</sup> Direct telephone contact was established with three of these women and, over a number of phone conversations, they shared details about their lives and the places where they had lived. In the case of six other women, information obtained about them was deemed to be reliable when direct contact was made with them or, alternatively, when information about them was verified by a number of individuals (for example, homelessness service staff and/or two or more other research participants).

<sup>6</sup> At Phase 1, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. All identifying information (names of services, places and people) have been removed from the narrative excerpts presented in this paper to preserve the anonymity of the study's participants.

for each participant and this was updated following the second wave of data collection. This profile focused strongly on recording continuity and change in the lives of the women over the course of the study and summarised issues deemed central to understanding their homeless and housing transitions (for example, their movement between services settings and living places; their personal, social, intimate and family relationships; and their interactions with and perspectives on services and the service system). Alongside the preparation of the 'case profiles', a coding scheme – comprising both conceptual and descriptive categories – was developed to facilitate the labelling, sorting and synthesis of data using the data analysis software package, NVivo. The data were analysed synchronically (across time) and diachronically (through time), thus permitting us to chart individual biographies while also locating them in wider social and spatial contexts (Thompson *et al.*, 2004). This in turn served to illuminate the mechanisms that brought about change, or a perceived lack of change, in the lives of the women. The analysis presented in this paper – which draws on the study's longitudinal biographical and ethnographic data – was sensitive to narrative change, that is, change in the unfolding of individual stories (Vogl *et al.*, 2018) and to participants' interpretation of their experiences over time (Calman *et al.*, 2013).

## The Study's Women

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At baseline, the women ranged from 18 to 62 years, with the average age for the sample being 34.8 years. The largest number (n=26) were between 30 and 39 years, 20 were aged 18-29 years while 14 were over the age of 40. Forty-three of the 60 women were of Irish or UK origin and, of these, six were Irish Travellers<sup>7</sup>. The remaining 17 women were migrants, with 10 having arrived from the Eastern European countries of Poland (n=4), Latvia (n=2), Slovakia (n=2), Estonia (n=1) and Romania (n=1). One woman was from Greece while six were born outside the EU, including in Bangladesh, The Philippines, India, Pakistan, South Africa and Bolivia.

At Phase 1, over two-thirds of the women were either mothers (n=41) or pregnant (n=4). A majority had between one and three children and roughly three-quarters of the children were under the age of 18 years. However, only 14 of the women who were mothers were caring for their children at the time of interview, with just over half (n=21) reporting that at least one of their children had been placed in a State residential or foster care settings or that their child(ren) was being cared for by a relative. The remaining mothers (n=6) had adult children who were living independently.

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<sup>7</sup> Irish Travellers are an indigenous ethnic minority and have been officially recognised as such in the Republic of Ireland since 2017. The total number of Irish travellers enumerated in the last national census was 30987 persons, representing 0.7 per cent of the population (CSO, 2016).

The women's biographical narratives almost always referenced a range of childhood deprivations and adversities, including experiences of poverty, neglect and family conflict and/or violence (Mayock and Sheridan, 2012). Twenty-eight, including five migrant and 23 non-migrant women, reported sexual abuse during childhood and 12 women, all of Irish or UK origin, reported histories of State care. Disruptions to schooling were commonly reported and levels of educational achievement were low for the sample as a whole<sup>8</sup>. A majority had grown up in low income households and a considerable number (n=18) first experienced housing instability or homelessness as teenagers. Only one woman was employed at the time baseline interviews were conducted and the employment situations of the women had not changed at Phase 2. The vast majority therefore depended on social welfare payments. Finally, at baseline, one-third of the women (n=20) reported a drug use or drug dependency problem and a further 10 reported heavy problematic alcohol consumption.

## The Women's Homeless and Housing Transitions

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At Phase 1, almost half of the women (n=28) were living in emergency hostel accommodation. Four were residing in a domestic violence refuge; four in long-term supported accommodation while three women were 'doubling up' in the accommodation of a family member or friends. A further 12 women were residing in transitional homeless accommodation. Seven of the women had recently moved to private rented accommodation following a period of homelessness; one was sleeping rough with her partner and the remaining participant was residing in a house that was unfit for habitation (and considered herself to be homeless)<sup>9</sup>. Of the 60 women interviewed, nine were living in 'wet' homeless service settings, that is, services that permit residents to consume alcohol on the premises.

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<sup>8</sup> Over one-third of the women interviewed at baseline (n=21) had no educational qualification. Fourteen (23 per cent) had reached Junior Certificate level before leaving school and 12 women (20 per cent) had completed their Leaving Certificate. A smaller number (n=8) held a third-level diploma or a third-level degree (n=5). Nine of the 13 who had attained a third-level qualification were migrant women.

<sup>9</sup> Currently in Ireland, the official definition of 'homeless' for the purposes of gathering statistics is defined as those individuals accessing state-funded emergency accommodation arrangements that are overseen by local authorities. Thus, in relation to ETHOS Light, homelessness in Ireland is defined as a combination of 'People in Emergency Accommodation' and 'People Living in Accommodation for the Homeless' (Daly, 2019). The monthly data reports published by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government do not include rough sleeping, hidden homelessness, those in long-term supported accommodation, facilities accommodating migrants seeking asylum or women (with or without children in their care) accessing domestic violence refuges. Thus, the study participants recruited at baseline included women who are not *officially* enumerated as 'homeless' in Ireland.

Even at Phase 1, the reported duration of homelessness was lengthy for the sample as a whole. More than half ( $n=34$ ) had homeless histories of more than two years and 21 of these women had experienced six or more years of homelessness. Thus, a large number had embarked on trajectories of long-term homelessness (Mayock *et al.*, 2015), with approximately half reporting prolonged episodic homelessness, that is, a cycle of exiting and returning to homelessness. These findings confirm that the extent of unresolved homelessness among women is likely to be more commonplace than is routinely recognised (Pleace, 2016), a picture further reinforced by the study's follow-up data which revealed a pattern of ongoing homelessness or housing instability for a large number. The women's living situations at Phase 2 were categorised according to ETHOS and are presented in Table 1<sup>10</sup>.

**Table 1: The Women's Homeless and Housing Situations at Phase 2 (n=49)**

CONCEPTUAL CATEGORY	OPERATIONAL CATEGORY	NUMBER OF WOMEN
<b>Housed</b>	1. Living in a stable place of habitation that satisfies all physical, legal, and social requirements.	21
<b>Insecure</b>	1. People living in insecure accommodation. 2. People living under threat of eviction. 3. People living under threat of violence.	9
<b>Houseless</b>	1. People in homelessness accommodation. 2. People in women's shelters. 3. People due to be released from institutions (i.e. prisons, residential drug/alcohol treatment and residential care). 4. People receiving longer-term support due to homelessness.	12
<b>Roofless</b>	1. People living rough. 2. People staying in emergency accommodation (i.e. night shelters).	6
<b>Inadequate</b>	1. People living in unfit housing. 2. People living in extreme overcrowding.	1

As demonstrated in Table 1, by Phase 2, 21 of the 49 women (43 per cent) had transitioned to stable housing while 28 (57 per cent) either remained homeless (that is, they were 'houseless' or 'roofless') or had entered into a living situation that was 'insecure' or 'inadequate'. This represents a low rate of exiting homelessness, particularly given the three-year time lapse between Phases 1 and 2 of the research. A majority of the women had continued along a path of ongoing homelessness or housing insecurity and many struggled to envision a route to housing stability: "I am

<sup>10</sup> The data presented here are based on the accounts of the 40 women who were re-interviewed at Phase 2 as well as the nine women for whom reliable information on their living situations was available. This practice of including information provided by participants who were not available for interview or by a third party has been used in other qualitative longitudinal studies of homelessness (Williamson *et al.*, 2014).


still in the same situation as I was three years ago. I am still homeless even though they told me there's an apartment there for me. I am waiting for it. But the bottom line is I am still homeless]" (Stephanie, 35).

### Women's 'Journeys' Through Homelessness

Most of the women reported multiple accommodation transitions between Phases 1 and 2 of the research. In other words, their 'journeys' were characterised by high levels of mobility and residential instability. Only five of the women who were successfully 'tracked' continued to live in the same accommodation, with the remaining participants having moved between living places, often on multiple occasions. The average number of accommodation transitions reported between Phases 1 and 2 of the study was 3.4.

Women who remained homeless or were precariously housed by Phase 2 reported a far greater number of transitions between living situations than those who were housed. The chronology of one of the women's living places is presented in Figure 1 for illustrative purposes.

**Figure 1: Carol's Accommodation Transitions between Phases 1 and 2 of the Study**

<b>Phase 1 Living Situation</b>	Intervening period: 2 years, 10 months 								<b>Phase 2 Living Situation</b>
Homeless Hostel	PRS (x3)	Caravan	PRS (x2)	Prison	Homeless Hostel	DV Refuge	Relative of Partner	Prison	Homeless Hostel

Carol (age 42 at Phase 2) had lived in private rented sector (PRS) accommodation on five separate occasions between Phases 1 and 2 of the study. She reported periods of hidden homelessness and had also slept rough sporadically. The private rented accommodation that Carol had secured during this time was almost always substandard. She had received eviction notices on a number of occasions due to the aggressive behaviour of her partner and noise disturbances related to the heavy drinking on the premises. Carol had experienced violence from multiple partners, both prior and subsequent to her Phase I interview and, since Phase I, had been incarcerated on two occasions. Almost three years after her first interview, she was residing in a homeless hostel: "It's mad that I am back here [hostel] again after three years. The years just go faster and faster and so much happens and months go into years... and back here again".

Like Carol, the vast majority who continued on a path of housing precariousness or homelessness had exited the service system on several separate occasions over the course of the study, often to private rented accommodation. However, they were unable to sustain these tenancies for a variety of reasons, including an inability to maintain rental or utility bill payments or because of the substandard condition of the rental property. A large number had lived temporarily in situations of hidden homelessness, meaning that they had moved between visible and invisible homeless spaces, while others had spent time in prison, psychiatric or acute hospitals and/or residential drug treatment centres. Debbie told of her movements through a range of institutional or quasi-institutional settings.

*"I got out of [psychiatric hospital 1] to go to the B&B and I overdosed and ended up in [psychiatric hospital 2]. Then I moved to a B&B and I was there for nine months. And I started shoplifting and then started going into prison... I went to a half-way house from prison but I've never been given any help... this is the places that I get, like here [hostel 1] or [hostel 2], that is all they'll give me" (Debbie, 27).*

This pattern of institutional cycling (DeVerteuile, 2003; Mayock *et al.*, 2015) was distinctive, highlighting a tendency for women to occupy spaces that render them invisible and beyond the reach of official systems of enumeration. At the point of leaving institutional settings such as a prison or psychiatric hospital, women invariably returned to homelessness services.

Significantly, women with children in their care were more likely to have moved to stable housing by Phase 2. Of the 21 women who exited homelessness, 17 were mothers: 13 of these mothers had children living with them, two women had adult children who were living independently while two reported that their children were in the care of relatives. These women had shorter homeless histories and were less likely to report complex support needs related to substance use, mental health and/or criminal justice contact. Overall, there was strong evidence that the presence or absence of children and the presence or absence of more complex needs significantly impacted women's ability to exit homelessness. Women (and men) articulated a strong awareness of the barriers faced by 'single' homeless people who do not have children in their care, as demonstrated in the following researcher interaction with service users in a food centre during Phase 1 of the research.

Her name was Kate. She was in her forties, with long brown hair and brown eyes. She was sitting with two men. One didn't say a word for the time I was there while the other was a very open and keen to have his say. Kate told me that she has three children, aged seventeen, fifteen and thirteen years. At present they move between her mother's and her sister's homes. Her seventeen-year-old recently had a baby so Kate is now a grandmother. Kate's main goal is to get her



own home where she can have her children: “All I want is a home”, she said with more than a hint of melancholy, “that’s all”. Kate and her friend continued to talk about the difficulties they face in trying to access housing. They feel that the Council doesn’t listen to them because they are ‘addicts’. Her friend then said he felt that single male addicts are the most marginalised because “they always house the women with children first” (Ethnographic Fieldnote, Food Centre, Phase 1).

### **Women’s Experiences of Homeless Service Settings**

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Attention now turns to women’s interactions with the service settings they accessed and, in particular, to their perspectives on the marginal spaces they occupied as they ‘journeyed’ through homelessness. As might be expected, the women’s service experiences were diverse and varied according to their expectations and level of familiarity with ‘the system’, even if very many, including those women who were housed, considered themselves to be ‘veterans’ of homelessness services, certainly by Phase 2 of the study.

Women sometimes expressed gratitude for the shelter and other basic amenities that homeless hostels provided: “Well here [hostel] I have a roof over my head, it’s warm, it’s cosy, there’s anything you want” (Maevae, age 43). However, hostel life was more commonly described in sharply negative terms. Women spoke candidly about living in stressful environments where they feared for their safety and many had experienced intimidation, victimisation or violence in hostels and other homelessness services. Rosie recalled her early experiences of accessing homeless hostel accommodation.

*“[Hostels] are horrible, you know, because there are grown women who have kids... and I was only a kid myself, 15, 16 [years old]. And I kind of, you grow up fast, you know. I just coped with it, I just got on with it... just prayed that I won’t be hurt and just kept quiet, you know” (Rosie, 38).*

Negative experiences and interactions with services and service providers were also very present in the women’s accounts, drawing strong attention to what they perceived as a lack of control or ‘say’ in their everyday lives. Permeating these narratives were the themes of surveillance and infantilisation, both closely associated with disciplining practices perceived by women as attempts to ‘order’ their lives, often with significant negative ramifications.

### ***Monitoring and Surveillance***

While we drank tea, Mary listed a number of complaints she had about [drop-in support service for homeless people] and [food centre]. She felt that there is a pressure placed on women to figuratively ‘bow down to the staff’ because they are the charitable ‘givers’ and, so, in a position of power... She said she feels she is ‘being watched’ [while in the food centre] and, as she said this, scanned the room for cameras, which make her feel mistrusted by staff (Ethnographic Fieldnote, Food Centre, Phase 2).

A large number of the women talked about the intense sense of surveillance they experienced within homeless service settings, frequently describing feeling watched, monitored and controlled. Women referred to the presence of close circuit TV cameras, routine room checks and bag searches, as well as to a raft of rules, albeit differing between service settings, that dictated their movements and interactions. Delilah, who had moved with her child to subsidised private rented accommodation by Phase 2, described the lack of privacy in the hostel where she had resided with her daughter for almost two years.

*“They [staff in homeless hostels] 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” (Delilah, 33).*

Viv continued to move between homeless service settings at Phase 2 of the study and described a similar experience.

*“You come in [to the room in the hostel] and you get the feeling that someone else [referring to staff member] was in there... It felt like a bit of a prison” (Viv, 38).*

Viv, like several others, attributed this scrutiny of their lives to a lack of trust on the part of service providers, frequently expressing resentment about what they depicted as overt, unnecessary surveillance techniques. Several framed this experience as denying them power, dignity and respect.

*“We feel we are not being treated properly. Well, we go into places [referring to homelessness services] and they are just giving us the run around... When we go in, it’s like they’re treating us like kids, like they’re talking to us like kids... It’s not nice like. It’s horrible” (Nicole, 28).*

Significantly, a number of women who were housed by Phase 2 of the study talked spontaneously about the effects of having lived – often for lengthy periods – in service environments where they felt their movements and interactions were ‘policed’, often referring to the significant adjustments required after they transi-



tioned to housing. Bernadette's account highlights the enduring impact on her and her children of the institutional regulation of daily life within homeless and domestic violence service settings.

*"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 [after move to local authority house], 'Am I going to get into trouble for that or the kids going to get into trouble for this?'"* (Bernadette, 37).

Freedom from the constraints of living in and managing homeless 'spaces' was frequently articulated as the single greatest benefit that accompanied the transition to stable housing, as demonstrated in Donna's account.

*"Everything is mine and to know that, I can sit here in comfort and it's mine. And nobody can tell me otherwise... nobody knocking at the door, asking for this or asking for that, you know? Nobody. It's just, you know, it's so secure and so safe"* (Donna, 38).

Conversely, women like Eve who remained homeless, continued to feel controlled by the service system.

*"Normal would be having my own place, a secure place, cooking dinners for the kids, [her new partner] coming over at the weekends... I want that back in my life, you know, I want all that back in my life. My own freedom, as such. I am not free. I am definitely not free"* (Eve, 61).

### ***Experiences of Infantilisation***

While a considerable number of the women valued their relationships with their key worker or others who they perceived as supporting them in their efforts to secure housing, there were very many accounts of feeling diminished or demeaned in the context of their daily encounters with service staff. Women who were separated from their children frequently asserted that they were treated like children, with 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).

Reports of infantilising experiences within service environments tended to be linked directly to how women felt treated by staff members. For example, some described being scolded and punished for rule-breaking. These encounters were invariably framed as dehumanising.

*“She [referring to staff member in homelessness service] treated me like as if I was only a two-year-old child, do you know, the way you just scold a child sometimes. I couldn’t get over it and even now I still can’t over it. I am still kind of saying, ‘That can’t be right’. I was shocked” (Imelda, 34).*

Others referred to disciplining practices that served to alienate and humiliate. A number recounted the use of a “bold bench” in one women-only hostel, a seat where they were directed by staff if they were considered to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs when they returned to the hostel. Dervla explained.

*“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 being in prison. But 36 and being told to sit on a bench – madness” (Dervla, 36).*

This practice on the part of service staff of asking women to remove themselves as a response to rule-breaking emerged as a regular topic of discussion between women, as illustrated in the following excerpt from observational fieldnotes.

On my fourth observation visit to [homeless hostel], there were two women in the sitting room. They were both watching *EastEnders* in silence. I knew they were interested in the programme so joined them and we watched the last five minutes of the episode together. After the episode finished Sabrina initiated conversation by asking had I been to [name of women-only hostel] yet. I told her I had and she started to talk about her experiences there. She said that she was placed on a bench for four hours for being drunk and that the staff call it “the bold bench”. I asked if she had to sit there continuously for four hours and she said that the women were allowed to leave the bench for a cigarette break. She said all of the women there have spent time on the bold bench and most of them leave the hostel as soon as they can because of that and the other rules. She disliked many other aspects of the accommodation, including the way the staff search the women’s bags, lights out at 1.30am and cameras everywhere. She then spoke angrily about the staff, who she said had called social workers on mothers who they felt were not fit to be a mother and their children were taken away: “The staff wanted the girls to lose their children” (Ethnographic Fieldnote, Women-only Hostel, Phase 1).

Women were aware of the range of spoken and unspoken rules and conventions which, as they perceived them, attempted to govern their lives: "I can't properly read and I'm not brainy or whatever but like I know what's going on around me, I'm not stupid" (Nicole, 28). Like Nicole, others who were separated from their children expressed resentment about how they were 'labelled' by the homeless service system.

*"I am just down [listed] as a single person. Even though they know that I have three kids. But I am down as a single person"* (Stephanie, 35).

### **Women Negotiating the Homeless Service Sector**

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Women were not without agency and, aware of the assumptions that surrounded them, they actively responded. As documented earlier, most were experienced service users with extensive knowledge about the rules and regimes governing individual service settings. Women who were separated from their children invariably described the negative impact on their lives and mental health resulting from rules that did not permit them to have visitors in the hostel settings where they resided.

*"I can't bring [children] up to the room [in hostel] or anything. If they come and visit I have to walk the streets with them because I have nowhere to go. I have lost out on a lot of time with the kids over it"* (Dervla, 36).

The topic of children was always an emotive one for women who did not have their children with them. The following excerpt from ethnographic fieldnotes was recorded after a visit to a women-only homeless hostel.

After a lull in the conversation, Deirdre and Anna asked more about the research, with Deirdre saying, "So what are you tryin' to do like?" I replied, saying that we are trying to learn about homeless women's lives and experiences. "Well it's a fuckin' hard life let me tell ya", she responded. Anna then interjected saying, "Listen love, I will tell you about my life and I swear to God you won't believe the things I have been through, you actually wouldn't believe it". She went on to say that she was in a relationship years ago, that they were engaged to be married and she had a house; but, before long, one thing after another fell apart. She lost her breath suddenly when speaking as emotion took over: "Now, I'll admit it, I'm no angel, I do drink". Deirdre then began to speak over her, "I have been in hostels for two years now and I'm after losin' me baba. I'm gonna get him back though", she said, and was visibly upset (Ethnographic Fieldnote, Women-only Hostel, Phase 1).

Women responded to rules – for example, in relation to curfews, visitation rights and substance use – and these responses, in turn, influenced their movements. Several who were active substance users identified instances of feeling ‘punished’.

*“It’s like they’re [services] punishing you, you know? And then you go down to them... and they’re like, ‘What do you want? What are you doing down here? What do you want today?’ You know? They don’t welcome you... like, you just felt like they were treating you different to everyone else...”* (Katie, 28).

*“I felt like as if I was – you know, like she [housing officer] degraded me down to like as if I was begging on the street or like as if my life was worth nothing or my children... She thought I was feckin’ doing drugs or drinking, that is the impression that she gave me... I was shocked, I am still reeling over it. It is like, to me, it was like as if someone gave me a good hiding [beating], that is the way I feel inside”* (Imelda, 34).

Roisín, who was a daily drinker, explained that she was sometimes refused entry to hostel settings, describing how she used her knowledge of the system to avoid street homelessness.

*“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]”* (Roisín, 37).

By contesting or resisting rules, women like Roisín demonstrated an awareness that they had earned a ‘bad name’ or reputation with some service providers. At Phase 2, Fionnuala, who had a history of institutional care during childhood and was not a substance user, told that she was perceived by service providers as “dysfunctional” and “needy”; branded as “an awkward customer” because she regularly challenged service providers’ assumptions about her housing and broader support needs.

*“[The service] wanted to kind of take over and I didn’t want that. I didn’t want them telling me what to do. As if I was incapable! I didn’t want people dictating to me... as though I was kind of dysfunctional, needy... people like me are considered just awkward, an awkward customer, a crank...”* (Fionnuala, 61).

Feeling controlled and believing that her personal preferences were not respected, Fionnuala disengaged from this service.

*“I hate being monitored, I hate coming under anyone’s umbrella... I think it’s to do with my institutional past. People controlling me, I don’t care what physical position I am in, or what mental position I am in, I think you have got to let people be free”* (Fionnuala, 61).

Some months after interviewing Fionnuala, during an ethnographic field visit, a staff member who had worked with Fionnuala previously – and was aware of her decision to “boycott” the service – asked about her whereabouts.

The staff member who had worked closely with Fionnuala arrived to the service and immediately approached me. She asked if had I been speaking to Fionnuala lately and seemed concerned for her well-being. I informed her that we had been in email contact since the interview but did not offer any further details. The staff member confirmed what I was already knew: she said that Fionnuala had decided to “boycott” the service, remarking that the staff were “in her bad books”. The worker added that she believed that it was something that she had said that angered Fionnuala but did not elaborate. She then sighed and said, “It’s a shame Fionnuala doesn’t come in, I was very fond of her”. There was a moment of silence before an incoming telephone call brought our conversation to an end (Ethnographic Fieldnote, Food Centre, Phase 2).

Notwithstanding the concern expressed by the staff member in the excerpt above, when interacting with service users during the course of ethnographic fieldwork, there were many instances of women recounting a sense of powerlessness in their dealings with service providers and a number told of their attempts to challenge decisions or actions that negatively impacted their lives. In the following excerpt, Maura described her efforts to contest her eviction from accommodation provided by one homelessness service.

As I was waiting to speak to [staff member], I took a look around and saw that only about twenty per cent of the people eating there [food centre] were women. Sunlight was pouring through the large windows in the roof which created a cheery atmosphere. Maura [a woman who I had met and spoken to previously in the food centre] was sitting at the end of the room opposite another person. When she saw me approach she jumped out of her seat and changed to another table where there was nobody sitting. I sat opposite her but, not wishing to be intrusive, positioned myself half facing her and half facing the room. She instructed me to turn around fully to talk to her. She explained this by saying, “there’s a lot of nosey people in here and I don’t want them hearing my business, I am careful who I talk to”. She then told me of a very negative experience she has had with [homelessness service]. She was residing in accommodation provided by [the service] when she was suddenly given a 28-day notice to vacate her bedsit [which was a supported rather than independent living situation]. She struggled to find alternative accommodation and one day when she was out, the staff went into her living quarters and took all her belongings and threw them out. They left her valuables such as money and jewellery behind but a cleaner subsequently removed these. She went on to explain that she had challenged the homelessness organisation

and threatened to take them to court for illegally evicting her. Smiling to herself, she said, “[Manager] runs a mile now when she sees me” (Ethnographic Fieldnote, Food centre, Phase 2).

Thus, in an attempt to assert and reclaim autonomy, some women responded to the control they felt was exerted over their lives by challenging and resisting. Others, however, adopted an opposing stance, choosing to behave in ways that they felt would be rewarded. These women deliberately displayed passivity and conformity and worked to form positive relationships with service providers in the hope that they could secure a move out of homelessness. Although Chloe remained homeless at Phase 2, she emphasised the need to “play the game”.

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

Some therefore sought to improve their prospects of becoming housed by ‘surrendering’ to service expectations. There was also evidence of some women seeking to conform to the female ideal, often through demonstrations of ‘respectability’. Aisha, a mother with one child who was housed by Phase 2, told that she had consistently emphasised her ‘status’ as a mother in her interactions with homelessness service providers and housing organisations. She also felt that her personal attributes – a non-drinker and a person who was “trying to make a better life” – had earned her favourable treatment by the housing officer in her local authority area.

*“I have been there [to local council office] and the housing officer, she saw me from inside, she was not interviewing me, but she saw me from inside and she saw I am crying and everything, and studying in further education... So, she saw me and she offered me this place [referring to local authority house]... I think she saw me, she found me as this person who was trying to make a better life, I am not a woman who is drinking and had no future...”* (Aisha, 34).

A considerable number of others talked about their efforts to make a good ‘impression’ on landlords, explaining that these strategies had helped them to secure housing. Mother-of-two Alexandra, who had transitioned to private rented accommodation by Phase 2, explained that in her interactions with prospective landlords, she demonstrated competency and dependability in addition to making her mothering role visible.

*“All the houses that I was going to see, all the landlords was very nice to me and they all said to me, ‘I think I want to give you the house because you seem to be, you know, proper, clean’. I don’t smoke, I don’t drink, you know. They saw me with the children, they saw me with the car, so they said, ‘Ok, I think you’re going to be a good tenant’. Three of them offered to give me the house, I chose one”* (Alexandra, 33).

Thus, women were attempting to take control by challenging, resisting or managing their situations through acts of conformity. Some worked their way through the system strategically in order to appear 'worthy'. Those who displayed and conformed to conventional gender roles – as mothers with children in their care and/or by communicating expressions or manifestations of femininity, gratitude and passivity – reported more positive relationships with staff within both homeless and housing service sectors. Those, on the other hand, who did not conform to conventional gender roles – women who were separated from their children, who had substance use and/or mental health problems and/or who were 'outspoken' – were more likely to be 'disciplined'.

## Conclusions

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This paper has examined the women's homeless 'journeys' through the lens of feminist poststructuralism, a framework that privileges personal experience, subjectivity and the contextual meanings of relations of power. Feminist poststructuralism recognises agency and women's responses to the discourses embedded in institutional structures and practices (Weedon, 1987). Thus, while women may be constrained within existing or available discourses, they are actively involved in negotiating and resisting such discourses, albeit in different ways and with different outcomes.

Before discussing the study's findings it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research and to reflect on the extent to which a feminist poststructuralist perspective can inform understanding of women who experience homelessness. As with all qualitative studies, the sample size is relatively small, although efforts were made to build diversity into the sample based on the knowledge accumulated through ongoing ethnographic engagement and close interaction with both homeless individuals and service providers. Importantly, the study's longitudinal approach enabled us to 'track' women's movements over time, revealing both their visibility and invisibility as they 'journeyed' through homelessness. Their biographies and a detailed understanding of the unfolding nature of their homeless (and housing) trajectories were therefore privileged over any claims about generalisability. A key strength of this research approach is its ability to capture complexity and women's roles as "active participants in the experience, negotiation and (re) creation of their personal and social histories" (Tomas and Dittmar, 1995, p.497). An analysis of power and the power relations embedded in discourse – a critical element of feminist poststructuralist thought – exposed the forces that make it likely that some women "will fare worse than others in the housing stakes" (Neale, 1997, p.53). Thus, while there is no single oppressive force (Weedon, 1987), there are structures and 'micro-powers' (Foucault, 1991) that seek to preserve the status

quo. Critically, acknowledgement that women respond differently to the normative assumptions that surround them opened up the 'space' to interrogate difference as well as similarity in how women who experience homelessness are positioned – and position themselves – within dominant discourses. There is, of course, a risk that attention to subjectivity and agency – often with a focus on localised contexts – may obfuscate the power of macro social structures, thereby limiting the practical application of feminist poststructuralist analyses to social policy (Neale, 1997). However, as discussed later in this concluding section, the findings presented in this paper have implications that extend beyond 'the local'; highlighting the gendered discourses embedded in policy and how they serve to delineate and 'divide' women who experience homelessness.

Permanent, stable housing had not become a reality for a majority of the study's women. For a large number, the 'journey' through homelessness was characterised by enduring and extreme instability as they navigated a path that involved ongoing contact with homeless service settings punctuated by periods spent in situations of hidden homelessness, precarious living places and/or institutional settings. For the sample as a whole, exit routes from homelessness were highly constrained and only 21 of the 49 women who were successfully 'tracked' had transitioned to stable housing. Women who remained homeless or precariously housed by Phase 2 of the study reported longer homeless histories and were more likely to report ongoing support needs related to substance use and/or mental ill-health; they were primarily 'single' in the sense that they did not have children in their care, although a large number were mothers with children living elsewhere. Conversely, those women who had moved to independent, stable housing tended to have children who they cared for full time; these women reported lower levels of need in relation to substance use and mental health and most had shorter homeless histories.

Whether housed or homeless at the time of follow-up, women's experiences of homelessness were marked not only by high levels of mobility and residential instability but by surveillance in the homeless spaces they occupied. The rules and regulations that dictated the pace and rhythm of everyday life were perceived by women as controlling, dehumanising and infantilising; communicating powerful messages about their 'position' and whether and to what extent they might be deemed 'worthy' or, alternatively, subjected to (further) techniques of 'discipline'. In Foucauldian terms, the women were subjected to power through normalising 'truths' that shaped their lives and experiences and this power both moulded and delimited the ways in which they are able to conceive of their lives and their futures. As Foucault (1991, p.194) puts it, power "excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors,' it 'abstracts,' it 'masks,' it 'conceals'". The analysis presented in this paper reveals the extent to which women experienced authority and power as they 'journeyed' through homelessness and their exposure to "powerful aspects of the dominant



discourse which asserts that they are to blame for their homelessness” (Parker and Fopp, 2004, p.147).

The study’s women were not passively situated in discourse but rather actively negotiated positions within the discursive constraints that surrounded them (Weedon, 1987). Some resisted the perceived power and control exerted over them – either in subtle or more overt ways – as they moved through the service system, simultaneously aware that these same actions and responses could serve to further marginalise them and reinforce their position as blameworthy and, therefore, ‘undeserving’. While strategies of resistance were evident, so too were acts of conformity, with others performing “the dance of the dutiful dependent” (Passaro, 1996, p.11); intent on demonstrating their ‘worthiness’ and opting to ‘play the game’ of service expectations. For these women, ‘the game’ was a ‘technique’ of conformity which, as they perceived it, could potentially bolster their chances of achieving a route out of homelessness. Importantly, women’s actions and behaviours and their interactions with homelessness and housing service providers did play a role in their housing outcomes. Persistence and perseverance on the part of women – and self-presentation as a mother and ‘respectable’, with the potential to be a good tenant and homemaker – yielded positive results for some. Conversely, dominant discourses were demobilising for those women who could not see themselves within them (Watson, 2000) and were rejected by a considerable number. This does not mean that women who resisted service expectations did not demonstrate agency nor does it imply that those who conformed lacked resistance. Rather, both were versions of agency but the behaviours of those who conformed to normative assumptions around the family and women’s place and role within it were more likely to be rewarded.

Focusing on differences (as well as similarities) between women who experience homelessness, the findings presented in this paper demonstrate the complex and multifaceted nature of gendered homelessness. Women were subjected to ‘dividing practices’ (Foucault, 1982), highlighting the role of social institutions in the construction of the category ‘homeless women’ (Marpsat, 2000). Equally, the findings illuminate women’s awareness of how they were positioned within prevailing discourses. As Watson (2000, p.167) observes, “[n]ot only do material practices matter – for example how homeless people are treated – but also how different discourses act to produce certain outcomes”. One important implication arising from the findings is that to understand women’s homelessness – and, in particular, to understand which women will remain homeless (for longer) and who will exit (more quickly) – it is critical to look to the gender imperatives embedded within policy and service responses. While women who experience homelessness may, in a general sense, be better protected by welfare policies and state provision (Neale, 1997; Fitzpatrick, 2005), these same policies and provisions appear to be

contingent on them fitting into particular 'categories'. In many parts of Europe, homeless women with children are categorised as 'family' and prioritised for accommodation. Thus, "it is the presence of a child or children – not the status of motherhood – which is the main determinant of accessing housing" (Hansen Ljöfstrand and Quilgars, 2016, p.59). Therefore, policy and service responses and practices, at least implicitly, draw a sharp distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' women, a delineation closely connected to the notion of 'worthiness' and, more specifically, to underlying assumptions about, and constructions of, 'worthy' homeless women.

Homelessness policy is only beginning to engage with the notion of gendered homelessness and the prominence of women within policies is highly variable across Europe (Mayock and Bretherton, 2016). However, as Hansen Ljöfstrand and Quilgars (2016, p.42) point out, "[g]endered images and discourses permeating policies and practices... affect women's risk of homelessness and their chances of exiting homelessness". There is an urgent need for a re-appraisal of the situations and experiences of homeless women and for the development of homelessness policies and service responses that respect women's autonomy and eradicate conditionalities of access to service and housing support based on deep-rooted assumptions about 'family', 'femininity' and 'motherhood'.

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