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# 'Where was I to go after divorce?': Gendered Family Housing Pathways and Women's Homelessness in Poland

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Magdalena Mostowska and Katarzyna Dębska

University of Warsaw, Poland

- **Abstract\_** *In this paper, we introduce the concept of Family Housing Pathways to analyse the dynamics of a housing situation within the family context. It is an attempt to overcome some shortcomings of previous studies, to identify how housing resources are managed between households within families, and to recognise the gendered and temporal dimensions of individual transitions through these housing resources. We use life story narratives collected from older women living in shelters in Poland. We analyse their Individual Housing Pathways in order to identify structural and individual homelessness risk factors. Their biographies mirror the gendered history of the Polish socio-economic transformation since 1990. Many of them have had ill health, disabilities, and low education; earlier they were combining low-skilled factory work with farm and care work. Many have had experience with family violence. Family breakup was the major cause that made most of them destitute and alone at old age. In the analysis of their Family Housing Pathways, we notice an intricate set of family relations that impact the managing of property. Our interviewees were the first to be excluded from extended family's housing resources, as priority was given to their (ex-) husbands, brothers, and sons.*
- **Keywords\_** *Women's homelessness, housing pathways, family relations, gender*

## Introduction

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Homelessness, social systems, and institutions (social support, health care, family) work in a gender-selective way (Connell, 2009). Studies show that women experiencing homelessness report a higher proportion of mental illnesses, more chronic health problems and sexual or physical abuse than men (Tomas and Dittmar, 1995; Grenier *et al.*, 2016). One of these “systems” that has not been explored enough is management of family housing resources. We analyse this by looking at the life and housing narratives of our interviewees – older women in homeless shelters in Podkarpackie province in Poland. We introduce the concept of Family Housing Pathways as a way to analyse the dynamics of women’s housing situations within their families’ context. We build upon the housing pathways approach and feminist perspectives on homelessness (Watson and Austerberry, 1986; Neale, 1997; Mayock and Bretherton, 2016), and attempt to overcome some of the shortcomings of previous research (Clapham, 2003; Clapham, 2005).

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, we analyse the pathways approach to housing and homelessness. We look at its gender dimension, as well as the household/family aspect that is missing in most analyses. We scrutinise also the question of graphic representations of housing pathways. Secondly, the context of our project, the background of Podkarpackie province and the state of knowledge of women’s homelessness in Poland are introduced. The main part of the text is divided in two segments: first we introduce the general housing situation of our respondents and then we present Individual and Family Housing Pathways of two women in detail to explain our method of illustrating the new approach of studying gender- and family-sensitive housing biographies and what could be revealed by this method. We conclude with some possibilities for future uses of the Family Housing Pathways concept.

## New Orthodoxy and Pathways in Homelessness Research

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The individual vs. structural dichotomy has prevailed in homelessness research for decades. In the 1990s a new concept of homelessness causation referred to as “new orthodoxy” emerged (Fitzpatrick, 2005; Pleace, 2016). In this approach, homelessness is “a negative assemblage of structural and individual disadvantages” (Pleace, 2016, p.21), a multifaceted and complex set of risks and triggers that result in homelessness. Individual stories are influenced by personal capacities, as well as access to formal and informal support, that compensate for one another or reinforce each other. For instance, structural vulnerabilities such as unemployment can be resisted by individual competences or informal support. On the other hand, individual problems such as mental health issues can be exacer-

bated by lack of institutional support. As Pleace (2016) notices, new orthodoxy is very imprecise in showing how the interplay of factors in an individual case causes homelessness. Also, seeking patterns and distinguishing subgroups within this approach portray people who experience homelessness as victims deprived of agency. The pathways approach is an attempt to include more than just structural, institutional, and individual factors in the analysis.

“Housing pathway”, both in the academic and in lay language, describes transitions between different housing situations. In research, “homelessness pathways” are often not clearly defined or theorised. For instance, Anderson and Tulloch (2000) present a typology of “most frequented” pathways into and out of homelessness as parts of “trajectories”, such as work trajectory, income trajectory, and housing trajectory. Similarly, MacKenzie and Chamberlain (2003) identify three homelessness pathways: housing crisis career, family breakdown, and transition from youth to adult homelessness. Casey (2002) classifies chronic, long-term, and situational homelessness and distinguishes different pathways into and out of homelessness for each group. Some other researchers have used similar concepts and metaphors, but have not used the term “pathways” (Fopp, 2009; Mostowska, 2020).

An analytical framework of housing pathways was proposed by David Clapham (2002; 2003; 2005). He has been building upon, among others, the concept of a “housing career”, which focuses on the price, physical space, location, and quality of a dwelling. Housing career signifies especially changes in tenure, spatial, and upward mobility of households. Clapham extends the analysis to include a social constructionist perspective, focusing on meanings that people attach to their housing experiences. Clapham sets his concept in the context of the postmodern world of globalization, alienation, and risk, where lifestyle choices and search for identity play a crucial role. He points both to the importance of personal agency as well as structural constraints. He begins with Giddens’ structuration theory, where the structure is (re)produced by interactions and social practices. Also, the pathways approach takes into account the ways in which society constructs norms and expectations about housing choices, transitions, and qualities (Clapham, 2005).

For Clapham thus pathways are “defined as patterns of interactions (practices) concerning house and home, over time and space” (Clapham, 2002, p.63). Housing pathway is foremost a metaphor (Fopp, 2009) and it is neither a definite theory nor a concrete research methodology. The proposed “analytical framework” still has to be tested in empirical studies, to see to what extent it improves the understanding of the housing field (Bengtsson, 2002). Clapham himself (2005) focused on meanings and discourses, for instance, those concerning family, work, finances, home, and neighbourhoods but on a global or national level. Still, he postulates the use of ethnographic and biographical methods (2005, p.239), as biographies have

the potential to “provide insight into the perceptive world” of an individual which influences the construction of their identity and their behaviour (Clapham, 2003, p.123). These would enable, for instance, the study of the interactions between landlords and tenants, allow definition of “rules of the game” and discourses of “proper behaviour”.

Upward mobility, for instance, becoming a homeowner or climbing the career ladder, is relatively better studied than downward mobility (Gulbrandsen and Langsether, 2003; Grundy, 2005; Mulder and Smits, 2013). However, homelessness pathways may also be viewed as parts of housing pathways (Clapham, 2003). In cases of homelessness, though, choice is severely constrained. The importance of housing becomes perhaps even greater when an individual or household have no capacity to make choices, as they are excluded from lifestyle choices available to others (Clapham, 2005, p.17). In looking at homelessness parts of housing pathways, Clapham (2003) stresses the importance of analysing the structural elements, biographies, and public policy interventions. This has been done earlier, for instance by Fitzpatrick (1997), who emphasised the significance of the dynamics of the situation of young people experiencing homelessness. She also showed the importance of family members. Fitzpatrick based her six distinctive pathways on variables such as status (official or unofficial support), stability of housing episodes, and location (city centre or wider). For example, the first pathway among her respondents is the one where young people rely most on family members and friends. They frequently return to the parental home, stay there for days or months, then leave again, couch surf at other family member’s (usually older siblings) or in “junkies houses” (1997, pp.103-104). In another study, authors looked at in whose housing women were living, as abusive situations were among the most common reason for leaving accommodation. Women relied on parents, social services, and male partners – everywhere a situation of subjugation (Tomas and Dittmar, 1995). Unfortunately, it was not further explored exactly why these young women could not stay or move to other family members’ homes; perhaps it was taken for granted that it had been a matter of limited family resources and conflicts.

## **Graphic Representations of Housing Pathways**

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Surprisingly, few researchers were inspired by the pathways approach to graphically represent sequences of individual housing transitions in time (for exceptions see: Reeve *et al.*, 2007; Robinson *et al.*, 2007). It seems that diagrams were not Clapham’s intention, as he emphasised that the pathways approach is focused on meaning (Clapham 2005, p.239). However, the pathways metaphor is so powerful that the graphic illustration seems a clear way to represent the dynamics of events in time and the interplay of life events, contacts with services, and informal support.

There are two other areas that, in our view, have not been sufficiently developed in pathways studies on homelessness. First, despite the feminist critique of homelessness studies (Neale, 1997; Mayock and Bretherton, 2016; Bretherton, 2017), the gender dimension of housing pathways has not been explored much. Women's housing pathways are not only influenced by domestic violence, services and welfare support for children (that affect women disproportionately and differently than men), but also for various reasons, women make different personal choices and utilise different strategies (see e.g. Mayock *et al.*, 2015).

Second, pathways are usually limited to personal, individual stories. Clapham acknowledges the need to study households and that households cannot be treated as black boxes: "people consume housing as households" (Clapham, 2005, p.37). Even though Clapham writes about households being made, unmade, and remade (Clapham, 2005, p.52), he analyses the dynamics only within a stable household. He underlines the need to look at the internal household dynamics, the way decisions are negotiated between household's members, how responsibilities and tasks are divided, how planning is undertaken (Clapham, 2005, pp.53-55). There should thus be a "twin focus" both on individuals and on households (Clapham, 2005, p.26). Still, the allocation of housing resources between households within the same extended family is not considered, even if, as mentioned above, informal support is an important part of studying housing exclusion.

Life-course perspective has been applied in a study of housing transactions in Norwegian families (Gulbrandsen and Langsether, 2003). Authors show how along the life-course family's wealth, debt, needs, and owner-occupancy change and how individuals and families depend on and have obligations towards family members: for instance, parents towards young people in education who live with them or adult children towards their ageing parents. Authors distinguish housing transactions such as inter vivos transfers and inheritance, but also other types of support: gifts, loans, co-residence, renting on preferable terms, sale on the "commercial family market", and other financial assistance not directly related to housing situation. Authors pose many important questions concerning changes in welfare state, urbanisation, class habituses, attitudes, needs, and emotional relations that influence family housing transactions. They focus on vertical family ties mostly (children – parents), thus not entirely acknowledging the process of forming new households, where the roles of partners may become unequal (parents versus parents-in-law). Expansion of welfare states, urbanisation, and higher mobility have diminished the importance of family transfers and caused a decline in intergenerational co-residence (Grundy, 2005), even though resources and class differences are crucial here. These studies, however, have been based on quantitative data: the British Retirement and Retirement Plans Survey from 1988/89 (Grundy,

2005) and Norwegian data from 1973 and 2001 (Gulbrandsen and Langsether, 2003). To our knowledge, no study has addressed gender and family dimensions of housing pathways on micro level, yet.

In the article, we address the weaknesses of previous studies and combine the two postulates to include both gender and extended family perspective to pathways approach. We expect that management of family housing resources is also highly gendered. Gender dimension of housing has been studied on a macro level in relation to housing policy, allocation of social housing, and affordability (Watson and Austerberry, 1986; Watson, 2000; Savage, 2016). There is also quantitative data on how extended families manage their housing resources in terms of intergenerational transfers, providing shelter and care for older or sick members of the family, inheriting housing, exchanging housing, splitting houses, supporting buying or mortgage payments (Mulder and Smits, 2013). For instance, it appears that apart from other factors, children are “rewarded” with financial transfers and support in buying a home also for “merit” (such as education or marriage). This happens regardless of children’s gender, but even in very egalitarian societies such as the Dutch, it appears that women are more supervised by parents when leaving the parental home and that conflicts at home (for instance parental divorce) affect them more than men (Blaauboer and Mulder, 2010). In general, however, it is mostly the resources and family structure that affects leaving the parental home. Owning a house is the main asset of European families. A large part of homeowners acquires housing not by buying but through non-financial transfers, gifts and inheritance (in 2016 in Poland, respectively 15% and 11% of owners) (NBP, 2017). These transfers of ownership, occupancy, and funds should also be considered when studying individual housing pathways. Individual resources are not limited to informal support that an individual can count on (for instance, relying on a family member to take in to live in a spare room), but also a place in a family’s hierarchy in terms of access to family’s housing resources (for instance, which child – eldest/male – inherits parents’ house).

Patterns of inheritance, allodial titles, patri- and matrilocality, and housing allocation have a long history in classical anthropological studies (Lévi-Strauss, 1963; 1971). They have also been critically analysed from a gender perspective (Irigaray, 1977). In contemporary Western societies, these patterns of managing family housing resources are probably much more varied and dependent on a social and spatial context. In cases of limited material resources however, the hierarchy of values and the order of family members emerge. For instance, Cox (2015) writes about teenage women in a Detroit shelter that had to leave home when their mothers found new partners; also teenage or young women who became pregnant had to leave overcrowded apartments of their mothers and siblings in London in time of “austerity urbanism” (Watt, 2018).

Clapham's idea of housing pathways was criticised for focussing too much on the "postmodern" lifestyle choice and identity, whereas housing choices are usually structurally far more constrained (Bengtsson, 2002). We pay our attention to a variety of modes of functioning of individual and family housing pathways. Housing career implies upward movement and gradual improving one's housing standard. However, as we try to highlight, it is crucial to observe both individual agency of participants of our study and these moments when they are subjected to actions of others (e.g. welfare office workers, shelter managers, members of their families, etc.). In some cases, the latter is experienced as oppression, sometimes – albeit very rarely – as a positive change in one's life if there is somebody willing to help. Also, because we deal with people in very difficult situations, we would like to think about housing/homelessness pathways as emanation of their habitus rather than a lifestyle choice. Thus, apart from reconstructing Individual Housing Pathways of our respondents, we attempted to include the housing resources that were in the possession of the closest family (also friends, if they could rely on staying there) and all housing situations where our respondents were staying. The article has thus a twofold aim of introducing the concept of a Family Housing Pathway and its graphic representation, as well as analysing the gendered nature of managing family housing resources. We present this on data concerning older women in homelessness services in Podkarpackie province in Poland.

## **Women's Homelessness in Poland**

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The latest released numbers on homelessness in Poland are from a national homeless one-night count that was conducted in February 2017. About 15% of people counted were women. Relatively highest rates of women were found in crisis centres (most of the inhabitants there are persons fleeing domestic violence) and single mother homes. About 2500 women were counted in homeless shelters and emergency night shelters. Women in these services are probably older, single, and without dependent children (MPiPS, 2017).

There were about 1100 homeless people identified in Podkarpackie province in 2017 (MPiPS, 2017), a very similar number to the previous counts. In 2015, only 10% of those counted in Podkarpackie were women, much below the national average. In a small survey conducted in 2014, 42 women experiencing homelessness in Podkarpackie were questioned, 29 of them were above the age of 50, the average period of homelessness was 5.4 years (a year less than for men) (ROPS, 2014). In our view, these numbers reflect services available to women in that province rather than the scale of homelessness among women there (Mostowska, 2020). In the 2003-2013 period, Rzeszów's welfare centre information on homelessness recorded only a handful women, clearly depending on the social work conducted

rather than actual cases of homelessness (for instance, in 2007, 2009, and 2011 no women in the city were recorded) (Szluz, 2016, pp.137-138). Much more reliable data from another province (Pomorskie), gathered in a time series across the whole region, shows the aging of the homeless population, including women: from an average of 40 in 2003 to almost 50 years of age in 2013 (Dębski, 2014). From this study, we learn also that on average women were relatively in better health than men, and more often than men received financial benefits. Still, surprisingly many women were living in allotment gardens; in 2007 in Pomorskie, 30% of homeless women lived sometime during the previous year there (Dębski, 2008). This data is supported by other studies; a high share of women in the national count is visible in vacant buildings and allotment gardens (18.3%) (MPIPS, 2017). Robust research on women's homelessness in Poland is still lacking; we also do not have much information about the specificity of the Podkarpackie region. Szluz (2010) studied women in shelters in the province but her work hardly refers to the local context.

## **Podkarpackie Context**

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The region has traditionally been one of the poorest and least urbanised with a large share of national minorities. Industrialization was planned for the North-western part of the province before WWII, but the socialist urbanization and industrialization came only in socialist Poland (Długosz, 2007). Aviation and mechanical factories were set up in larger cities along with housing and educational opportunities. The postwar boomer generation was the first one to have an opportunity to migrate to cities (or see their towns industrialise and urbanise). Many became farmer-factory workers combining factory work with running a small family farm.

Negative consequences of transformation to free-market economy concentrated in Podkarpackie. State-owned enterprises became a burden on the economy; many of them were privatised and/or shut down. Farmer-workers were left with no work in the industry and small inefficient farms that could not support families. Unemployment rose to more than 20% in 2002. Many households relied on retirement pensions of older family members that were the sole source of income (Długosz, 2007, pp.67-68). High emigration abroad aggravated the processes of poverty trapped in remote, local communities with a large proportion of older inhabitants. For many of the province's inhabitants, the early transformation was a time of constant uncertainty and disillusion. Długosz (2007, pp.76-82) considers this period a collective trauma that leads to passive, fatalistic and sometimes authoritarian attitudes, lack of security and nostalgia for good old days. In the last decade, however, Poland experienced rapid economic growth. It contributes to the uneven development of the province. The transformation from heavy industry to the service and knowledge economy is apparent especially in the regional capital. Still,

there are large pockets of very high unemployment (especially among young people) and low labour market participation (especially among young and older women) in the province (Walawender, 2016, p.104). Many farms are too small to sustain families or to compete with their products on the market; there is limited access to education and healthcare in the rural areas. Podkarpackie is also standing out as one of the most conservative regions in Poland, with the highest church attendance and lowest divorce rate.

## About the project

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This paper is based on a larger project on women's homelessness in Poland. Since the project concerned only women, no men were interviewed. Clearly this data does not allow us to make any comparisons or draw more general conclusions about gender as an independent variable. While aware of the limitations of the study, we find it important to present the concept of Family Housing Pathways and to point to the area of gendered management of family housing resources. These processes of exclusion from housing resources on the family level could be explored further in the future on a larger sample of men and women using the Family Housing Pathways concept.

Fieldwork was conducted in the Podkarpackie region in 2018. There are four women's shelters run by a Catholic non-governmental organisation, two single mothers homes run by nuns, and one women's shelter run by a Catholic church organisation. There are also four crisis centres, which are a part of the national system of support for "victims of family violence", where many single women with children find temporary accommodation. In total, for the population of about 2.5 million, the province offers around 200 beds for women in homelessness, most of them in homelessness services. One of the shelters is in a small village of about 5 000 inhabitants. There are two in towns of 40-50 000 inhabitants and one is located outside the regional capital. With the exception of one of them, they are all small facilities for about 40 inhabitants. The largest shelter is for both men and women and counts about 120 beds.

Shelters offer places for single women without dependent children, which means that most of their inhabitants are older women with chronic health problems and disabilities. Many find themselves there because of lack of beds in nursing homes. Nursing homes provide medical care, but are also much more expensive for municipalities. Some women are sent to homeless shelters from other municipalities (even faraway ones) if these have no women's facilities, which is a situation in many Polish municipalities.

Twenty-five women were interviewed in four shelters during fieldwork in February and May 2018. Some interviews were too incomplete to include in the analysis, some were conducted with younger women, whose housing pathways were obviously shorter and were not keeping with the parameters of this study. After careful consideration we also excluded material gathered in one of the shelters due to ethical problems, which will be described below.

Interviews were conducted either in private rooms of inhabitants or in a common room that was made available to us for the purpose. Some interviews were audio recorded. If participants did not agree to record, one of the researchers was leading the conversation as the other took shorthand notes. Interviews lasted anywhere from 20 minutes to 70 minutes. Interview protocol was based on a life story narrative interview where participants were asked to tell something about themselves, whatever they found important. This was carried further by researchers asking about childhood, adolescence, adulthood and current situation. Finally, additional questions were asked about housing situations and transitions, which also helped to clarify the sequence of life events and fill in the gaps in the story.

We ensured all our interviewees about anonymity and confidentiality of data they would share with us – both in future publications and in contacts with the staff of the facility. We use code names and anonymise names and some details from participants' narratives. We did our best to create an atmosphere of openness and privacy in which they could feel comfortable to talk about their concerns and express complaints: about their own situation, their families, and the shelter. Our interviewees had varying capacities and capabilities to tell their story. Some of them have mental disorders. For some of them, storytelling was not an easy task. Still, most of them probably rarely have an opportunity to be listened to without being judged. This is why we needed to use the method of an autobiographical narrative interview more elastically than it is often presented in methodological literature (see Schütze, 1983 or Peta *et al.*, 2018).

We analysed the interviews by coding themes that are considered in research as causal factors leading to homelessness (precarious employment, family relations, victimization, support networks). We graphed them reconstructing Individual Housing Pathways, especially to capture spatial-temporal dimension of housing entangled in individual biography. Our participants entered homelessness for the first time at older age, only one of them clearly had an addiction problem. We thus funnelled our analysis on the codes relating to housing and family resources to understand if this could be one of the factors contributing to their current situation, which finally lead to developing Family Housing Pathways.

## **“Ethical turbulence”**

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Working with vulnerable participants, people experiencing homelessness in particular, involves much “ethical turbulence” (Cloke *et al.*, 2000). Conducting research in homelessness services is also specific. Shelter managers act as gatekeepers – access to inhabitants of such institutions is only possible through them and staff may inadvertently place pressure on individuals (COH, 2016). The relation between the manager and inhabitants is very unequal. Especially in larger shelters the distance between the manager and inhabitants seems bigger and their relations are more formal. In each shelter, we only could approach inhabitants who were asked if they wanted to participate by the manager first. Some refused right away, before talking to us. Some did not agree when we explained our study to them directly. When they agreed to an interview, we explained that they can withdraw at any moment, or do not have to answer questions that they rather not answer. None of our interviewees terminated an interview early, but some expressed that they were tired and wished to finish soon, which we did.

In one of the shelters the manager directed inhabitants individually to the library, where we were conducting interviews. Inhabitants might have felt pressured to talk to us. Hence some of them were reluctant to talk about their lives at first. After we explained our purpose for being there and the aims of our study some talked to us openly. Others were very brief and did not say much. If any of the women refused to talk to us, we respected it fully. We do not feel that we had taken advantage of the situation or caused any harm to participants (both those who talked to us and those who did not). Even if some of them expressed resignation and doubts if their participation can change anything, others spoke about being glad that they could talk to us (for positive aspects of being interviewed see for instance Finch, 1984). It gave them an opportunity to talk about themselves; it was also a possibility for them to complain about drawbacks of the shelter. However, given the context of this situation, material from this shelter was excluded from the analysis

## **Life Stories within the Regional and Historical Context**

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Life stories of our respondents reflect gendered social history of the region and the Polish transformation after 1989. Most participants of our study are from a generation that experienced rapid modernization of the country during the communist times. They were usually raised on a family farm, where their parents kept livestock and cultivated some land. Sometimes the father had an extra job in town. In the 1960s, many aviation factories opened in the Podkarpackie region, where our respondents performed low-skilled work, working as dispatchers, spraying paint, testing rubber tires, and managing tools storage. Only one woman had a job as a clerk in the factory,

dealing with driver's licenses and the like. Some of them moved to bigger towns and multi-family housing when they started work and/or got married. The end of their professional careers coincided with rapid deindustrialization and transformation to a free market economy at the beginning of the 1990s. Often they prematurely lost their jobs due to the privatization of factories, and as an effect have very low pensions now. The generation of their children, on the other hand, took advantage of the opening of the borders and many of them emigrated to work in the EU, others moved to larger cities in Poland, like Kraków, Warszawa, and Poznań.

Poverty is an underlying background for the life stories of our respondents. Even if they did not consider themselves and their families poor, their situation severely deteriorated when they (or their partners) lost their jobs, when a partner died or left, or when they had to live off a low pension. Many women come from rural areas of the province and they had experienced severe housing deprivation at their countryside or small town homes. The scale of deprivation is apparent in the stories when women talk about warmth and food in the shelter ("shelter is warm", "nice and warm", "it's warm in the shelter"). Heating problems appear in many stories, for instance when an older woman is left alone in a dilapidated home and she can no longer manage with a wood-heated stove, domestic animals, collapsed roof, no running water, etc. Many homes of our respondents were old wooden structures, some of them burnt down, homes of two women had to be vacated because of risk of collapse.

Most women in our group worked outside of home. It was usually manual labour, often in factories with hazardous health conditions (spraying paint, etc.). They also performed domestic work on their own and work on the farmstead belonging to the household. All in all, their health quickly deteriorated, they had no possibility to earn extra money, and their pensions are very low now. Some, who did not work professionally, do not receive a pension, only a social benefit, which is about 600 złotych per month (140 euro, and is about a half of the minimal pension).

On the meso-level of institutions and social policy, homelessness pathways of our respondents illustrate that women's homelessness is not apparent in mainstream policy responses. For instance, welfare centres routinely offer a homeless shelter as an ultimate solution for older women. Some of them could still be independent if support was offered in their home, or if they could be offered a comfortable dwelling instead of a run-down house with no amenities. It seems that the condition of some of our respondents is serious enough, and they should be provided with medical care (psychiatric and/or physical). Nursing homes, however, are expensive and overcrowded.

Family violence appeared in less than half life stories, the perpetrators were usually husbands or partners, but also a father, son or stepmother. In most cases, interviewees' intimate relationships broke down because of the death of husband or

separation from husband (due to violence, addictions, sickness). Relations with children and siblings are usually also strained. Participants of our study were often not aware that – probably – they were legally entitled to some financial family resources (for example, part of the property) or alimony from children neglecting their duty to support parents living in destitution.

## Individual and Family Housing Pathways

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In the following section we present the stories of two of our interviewees in detail and explain the narratives of their housing pathways graphically. Individual Housing Pathways (IHP) illustrate the transitions of the respondent through different dwellings. We owe this concept to Reeve *et al.* (2007) who graphically represented women's "homelessness journeys" through "homelessness landscapes" in England. In the figures presented below, subsequent living situations are placed along the vertical time axis. There are also life events and forms of support in neighbouring columns, and links between them that represent the navigation of an individual through these conditions, dealing with favourable and adverse events, formal and informal support (or lack of thereof). Vertical arrows represent the temporal sequence of houses and arrows connecting boxes from other columns represent causation or influence (Figures 1 and 3).

While analysing and illustrating IHPs, we found out that some crucial information is missing from these diagrams. The Family Housing Pathway (FHP) adds another dimension to the IHP. A horizontal location axis is added, perpendicular to the vertical time axis. Dwellings used by an individual are placed along this horizontal axis. An individual's transitions in time and between dwellings are represented by the black arrow. Other persons' transitions are represented by dashed arrows. In our case, those are siblings, husbands, parents, etc. of our informants. Dwellings are represented by boxes, and height corresponds to the time when family members resided in the dwelling (or it was available to our informant); captions add information on how it entered the family and how it was lost (Figures 2 and 4).

We thus sketch not only individual transitions between different housing arrangements (Figures 1 and 3), but also look at all housing resources that were available in our interviewees' families. In some stories, an unequal and gendered distribution of extended family's housing resources is very apparent. This gendered distribution of family's housing is illustrated by the two housing pathways reconstructed from women's narratives.

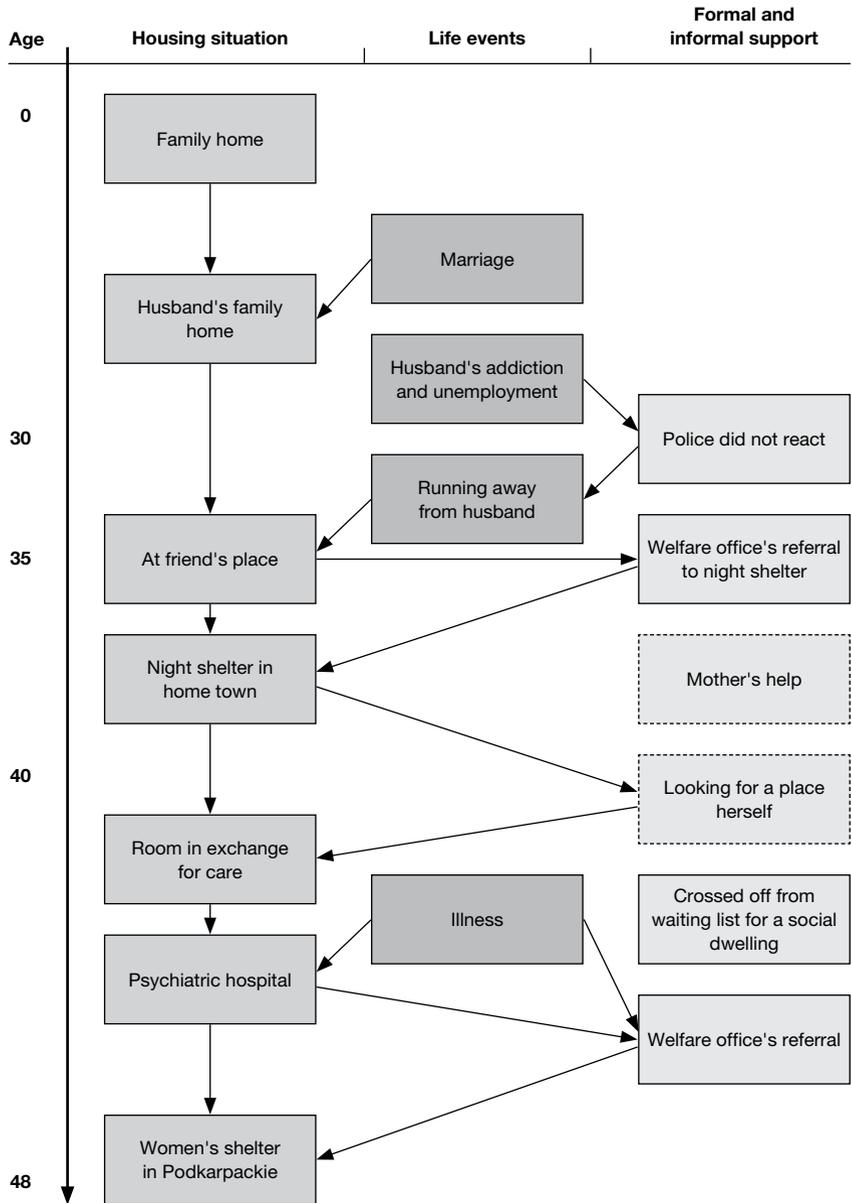
## *Eugenia*

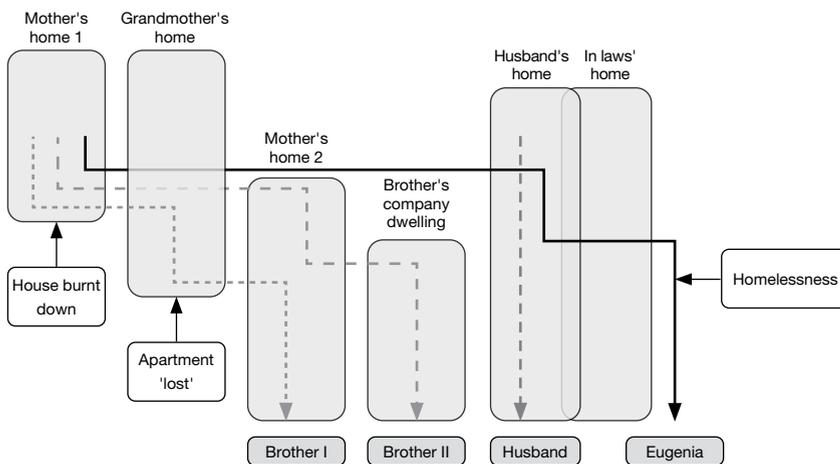
Eugenia lives in a shelter for homeless women. She willingly agreed to an interview. Her life story exemplifies the too often neglected dimension of inequality in families of origin. Eugenia was brought up in a family with two brothers. As shown in Figure 2, after marriage Eugenia left her family home and moved to her husband's home, which was located next to her parents-in-law's house farmyard. Her brothers were living with their families in their mother's home. When Eugenia's mother's house burnt down, one of them moved in with their grandmother and the other went on to live in her mother's new place. When her grandmother's apartment "was lost" after her death (it had probably been a council flat), luckily the other brother got a dwelling from his employer and moved out from her mother's apartment. Then the brother from her grandmother's place could take over her mother's apartment. After running away from her husband's violence and leaving his house, Eugenia had no return to her parental family's housing resources as one of her brothers lived at their mother's flat, the only family housing resource that was left, after grandmother's death.

During divorce Eugenia did not receive legal help, therefore she did not know that she could have claimed a part of her husband's home. After separation, Eugenia's ex-husband literally locked the door and did not let Eugenia take her belongings from there. She had to leave the house and she became homeless. She spent a night at her friend's and later she was referred by the welfare centre to the night shelter. In the meantime, she looked for another place to live as she experienced lots of stress at the shelter. Eugenia started experiencing symptoms of schizophrenia and spent about six months at a psychiatric hospital. She tried to manage on her own living with an older lady in exchange for care, but her illness made it impossible to go on like this.

Subsequently, she was referred to a women's shelter in Podkarpackie (ca. 500 km from Eugenia's home town). She feels safe here. She is on medication, and her health has improved. The illness was a direct trigger for leaving the night shelter. It was, however, Eugenia's doctor, who refused to release her from the hospital back to the night shelter. As Luhrmann (2012) points out, schizophrenia clinicians recognise that having a decent place to live is sometimes more important than medication. Eugenia talks about her experience of losing home as harm, however, she does not direct any complaints towards any particular actors (people, institutions, etc.). She seems to be reconciled with her present situation and its reasons. Leaving home after divorce seems obvious to her. Eugenia said of a fellow shelter inhabitant: "She's also divorced. She had nowhere to go, she's here". Shelter appears to her as an obvious consequence of divorce. At the same time, her brothers have their housing needs met: the first one lives in a company flat and another one at their mother's house.

**Figure 1. Eugenia's Individual Housing Pathway**



**Figure 2. Eugenia's Family Housing Pathway**

Eugenia's IHP is influenced by poverty, lack of family housing resources, family violence, subordinate position of a woman in a patriarchal family, lack of institutional support, and mental problems. Surprisingly, in the end, her illness enabled Eugenia to find a place where she feels safe and well taken care of.

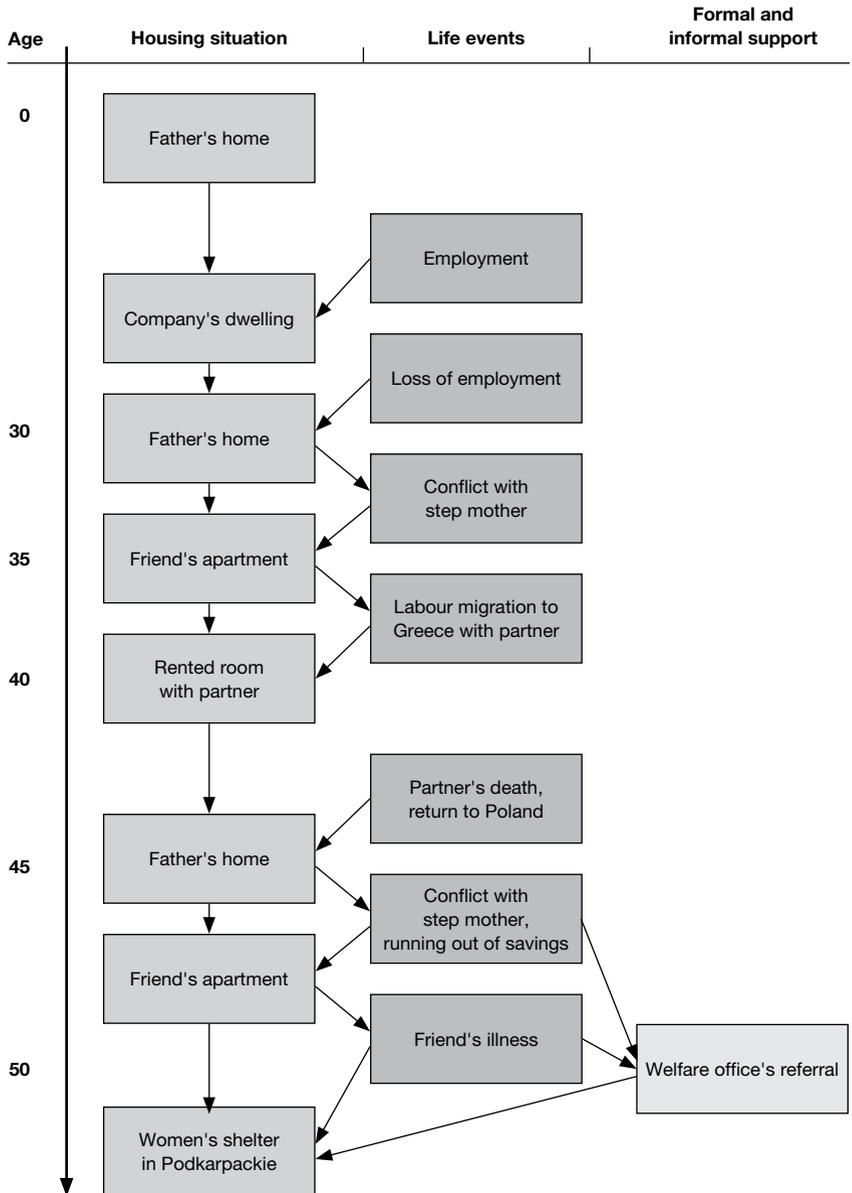
### *Emilia*

Being in her sixties, Emilia recalls her childhood and youth as good times until her mother's death. Emilia's mother's death created a free place for another woman in the family. Her father married again quickly and Emilia was thrown out of home because of conflict with her stepmother. Emilia, being her late mother's child, lost her place in the house. She obtained a dwelling from the factory, where she was working. In the mid-1990s when factories were shutting down, she briefly lived at a friend's house and then emigrated with her boyfriend to Greece. After 11 years there, her partner died and she decided to return to Poland. As a single person, Emilia was unable to afford accommodation on her own.

Her father let her live with him and his new wife only as long as she had the money she brought from abroad. Then she got kicked out again. Figure 4 presents the stability of housing conditions of her father and his wife compared with the complications of Emilia's pathway. After a short period of couch surfing at her friend's home, she needed to leave as her friend was ill and it was not possible to live with her anymore. Emilia's sister-in-law found out about the shelter and Emilia moved there. After being admitted to the shelter, Emilia had a stroke, which negatively

affected her health and lowered the level of her physical ability. Emilia has never acquired her own housing or secured a tenancy. She lived in her father's home, in a company dwelling, at a friend's and in a rented room with her partner abroad.

**Figure 3. Emilia's Individual Housing Pathway**



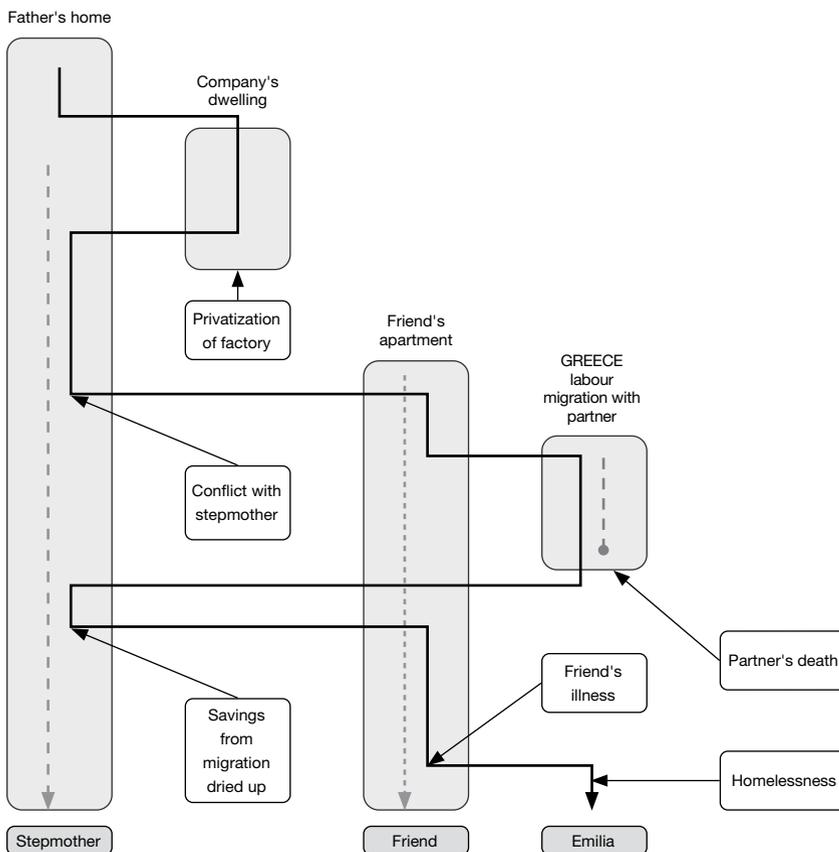
**Figure 4. Emilia's Family Housing Pathway**

Figure 4 shows that Emilia has never managed to gain autonomy and a secure housing situation. She was subjected to forces beyond her control, some she could not have anticipated (e.g. her mother's death or political transformation resulting in privatisation of state factories).

### **Conclusion: the Gender Dimension of Family Housing Pathways**

It has been shown elsewhere that some women in homelessness have never had permanent, stable and independent living arrangements. Their pathways into homelessness were "a switch from relying on their personal support systems to relying on the welfare system" (Tomas and Dittmar, 1995). Residential instability has been the main feature also of most of our respondents' housing pathways. It seems that this instability was partly caused by a gendered way of managing housing

resources between related households. It should further be explored whether women in fact moved more often into their husband's place than vice versa, and whether brothers had precedence over sisters to live in the parental home.

In the cases that we studied, the structural factors behind our respondents' pathways made it impossible for them to accumulate housing or financial resources. Also, our interviewees come from communities with a traditional social structure, where traditionally a married woman leaves her family home and moves into her husband's (family) home. If these patterns are still relevant today, they could present a greater risk of homelessness for women than for men. For instance, brothers with their wives and children take the place emptied by sisters. In that case, when women would leave their husbands' place (because of divorce, family violence, deterioration of housing, etc.), they would not be able to go back to their parental home. Our interviewees usually have been employed as low-skilled and low-paid workers. Most of them have only primary education, which made it impossible to improve their professional situation. Another gendered part of our informants' pathways was that the intervention of the formal support system came usually very late to support women experiencing domestic violence. There was little or no institutional support that could prevent or ease the consequences of being subjected to violence at home: psychiatric care, a place in a nursing home or a refuge for survivors of domestic violence for a woman at a later age (with no dependent children). In terms of accommodation, the system did not offer our interviewees anything apart from a homeless shelter. In the case of these women, when they stopped depending on their partners (fathers, sons), they seem to have transgressed the social norm and fell outside the role of a dutiful wife, mother or grandmother. They were excluded from family resources, but also not acknowledged in policy responses.

In traditional communities, family issues (family violence being one of them) are often deemed private and should not be revealed to outsiders. As the welfare system is obliged to react especially when a child's safety is neglected or endangered, single women or women whose children are grown up, are in a particularly difficult situation as they no longer perform the social role of a mother. As we argued elsewhere (Mostowska and Dębska, 2020), older childless women, and those with adult children, who lose their homes because of family violence are not provided with support for domestic violence survivors (e.g. access to a lawyer, psychological help), but are referred to "homeless" shelters (see also Halicka *et al.*, 2018).

One of the limitations of our study, as mentioned before, is that we have only interviewed women. As we demonstrated, the social and historical background of Podkarpackie province makes it conceivable that in those communities women are especially disadvantaged when it comes to access to family housing resources.

Nevertheless, similar interviews would have to be conducted with men, whose homelessness may also be a result of exclusion from their families. Unfortunately, no existing data can support either hypothesis at this point. Homelessness counts in Poland consistently show that women comprise 10-20% of the population. It is not possible to disentangle whether that is a cause of women's better protection against homelessness (by the state or families) or rather a limited access to services and hence a more "hidden" nature of women's homelessness (e.g. living in abusive relationships). The common variable in these studies, the "cause" of homelessness (sometimes reported by services rather than the person in question), recurrently show that "family conflict" is on the top of the list (25-30% in various studies). If reports break that variable by gender it's roughly the same for both men and women (MPiPS, 2017; Dębski, 2014). "Family conflict", however, is such a broad category that it demands more research to understand the role of family relations in the causation of homelessness.

### **Further Possibilities for the Family Housing Pathways Concept and its Limitations**

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The concept of FHP made it possible for us to better understand the management of scarce housing resources in families of our respondents. It helped to illustrate an answer to the question of why they were always living at someone else's home, and why they could not use other houses that were used by family and friends. Given the exploratory nature of this study and an initial stage of the FHPs concept development, our analysis was limited so far to a few cases. This approach could further be developed to create FHPs typologies, to comprehensively explore the impact of relationships within and between the households and thus to formulate more informed conclusions regarding the gender dimension of homelessness.

The concept of FHP has also its limitations. In our case a graphical representation of FHPs is centred around one individual, otherwise, the figure would appear very hard to read. Since the concept of FHP has been developed on the basis of empirical data collected during fieldwork, we could not predict what sort of data would be crucial for the analysis. Some of our interview material was incomplete and could not be used for drawing up a FHP.

The FHP concept makes it possible to graph also other aspects of temporal/spatial transitions of people and resources. FHPs concept could be used in a number of ways to illustrate various housing phenomena. Further research could lead to defining the variety of types of FHP. The concept of FHP could be extended, and used for other aspects of management of family (housing) resources. It could

contain tenure, location, size or quality of the dwellings; location (Robinson *et al.*, 2007) or distance between dwellings; composition of households and their changes, the nature of relations between family members along the pathway and many more.

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