

Seminar 5: Women's Homelessness

Chair: Isabel Baptista, PT

Riitta Granfelt and Saija Turunen, FI: Working with Women Suffering from Psychosocial Burden – Interpretations by Workers in a Community-Based Supported Housing Unit

Riitta Granfelt, PhD is a docent at the University of Helsinki and she currently works as a researcher in the Y-Foundation. She has a long career in the Finnish homelessness research and her main research areas are female homelessness and psycho-social services for socially excluded groups, like female prisoners and released prisoners. Besides, she has been working as a senior lecturer of social work at the University of Helsinki and Turku.

Saija Turunen, PhD is research manager at Y-Foundation, Finland where she has worked since 2017. Saija studied at the University of Bangor, North Wales and worked in the field of social research in the UK for several years. Currently Saija co-leads the research work cluster of the Housing First Europe Hub and her research interests include impact assessment, women's homelessness as well as subjective well-being.

In Finland, Housing First offers two housing options for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. One option is a scattered-site flat and another is a flat in a community-based housing unit in accordance with the Housing First principle. Both housing options come with a permanent rental contract. The focus of our paper is on the content of work with women who are suffering from psychosocial burden and who are living in a community-based housing unit. In particular, we will look at the aspects that burden or promote the well-being of the workers. Our data consists of thematic interviews with three workers of a housing unit and three professionals who work in the organisation providing the support services for the unit. Our study highlights the structural dilemma of providing vital support services based on client-worker relationships with limited resources. The study also illustrates the importance of training for the well-being of workers who are daily supporting women whose housing pathways are characterised by numerous losses and exclusions, and for whom many services still remain out of reach. This study is a part of a larger research project looking into housing pathways of women who have experienced or who have been at risk of homelessness.

Meabh Savage, IE: The Significance of the Affective Sphere to Understanding, Explaining and Responding to Women's Homelessness



Dr Méabh Savage is a social care pracademic; she works as a lecturer in the Dept. of Social Care and Early Childhood Studies in Waterford Institute of Technology and has worked in the area of women's homelessness and domestic abuse. Méabh is passionate about social justice and recognises the importance of care and justice in responses to marginalised and disadvantaged groups. Her research interests include women's homelessness, focusing specifically on the intersectionality of affective injustices (including domestic abuse) and class injustices on motherhood, disability (mental illness) and homelessness, and why a relational framework for social caring matters. Méabh has a keen interest in ethical, emancipatory and critical feminist research methodologies, and in emancipatory education and education for social change.

A critical challenge identified by writers in the field of women's homelessness contemporarily relates to the lack of an adequate theoretical framework within which to analyse and explain women's multiple and diverging experiences of homelessness and housing exclusion (Pleace 2016b), and how they differ to the experiences of homeless men (Pleace 2016a; Mayock and Bretherton 2016; Bretheron 2017; Reeve 2018). Recent studies on women's homelessness have focused primarily on women's responses to their homelessness, seeking to recognise women primarily as active agents in their own homelessness journeys (see Watson 2000;

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Mayock and Sheridan 2012a; Mayock et al. 2015a; 2015c; Sheridan 2017b), and so overcome previous concerns regarding women's lack of agency (Neale 1997). However, a significant challenge posed by recent explanations relates to the dangers of pathologising women's actions; owing to the invisibility of the disabling structures that shape their lives that make women appear 'individually responsible' for their 'choices'. This is where this research attempts to fill the current gap.

This study differs from the existing body of qualitative studies on women's homelessness because it uses an intersectional structural equality framework (Baker et al. 2004) for understanding and explaining unaccompanied mothers' homelessness. The framework supports the analysis of women's homelessness across multiple domains of inequalities, to show how class, gender, care, disability and the affective inequalities all intersect to shape women's lives. Of particular significance to this study is the affective sphere, which produces intersecting relations of love, care and solidarity, or abuse, violence and neglect (Lynch 2007). Because the affective sphere intersects with the political, economic and cultural system it allows for a deep analysis of the experiences of homeless women. It expands the categories of analysis beyond gender alone, to examine the effects of gendered class relations, and their interaction with affective injustices, such as domestic abuse. Furthermore, because the affective system exists as an autonomous sphere (Lynch et al. 2009; Crean 2018), it supports micro-level analysis of actions, while not losing sight of the structural forces and power relations shaping these actions as well.

Central to the contributions this study makes to the field of women's homelessness is recognition of the significance and value of incorporating the affective system into frameworks for analysing women's experiences of homelessness. Including the affective domain as a fourth domain through which home and homelessness can be defined for women can also offer a means through which homeless women's experiences of motherhood, care, domestic abuse, mental illness (disability) and substance misuse can be conceptualised. The framework from this study therefore incorporates a gendered conceptualisation of home beyond the physical, social and legal domains currently agreed within academic circles (FEANTSA 2004; Savage 2016). In doing so, it offers a framework for analysing women's experiences of homelessness and how they can differ between women, and between women and men.

Magdalena Mostowska, PL: Designating Women as a Homeless Subpopulation in Flanders and the US

Magdalena Mostowska is a sociologist, lecturer and researcher at the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies at the University of Warsaw. Previously, she had been studying Polish migrants' homelessness in the EU member states. She is a member of the Women's Homelessness in Europe Network and is currently researching women's experiences of homelessness having completed projects on the theme in Poland, Belgium and the US.



Based on patterns of shelter use, seminal research has made it possible to distinguish chronic, transitional and episodic homelessness. More specialized programs and policies could be designed and implemented to cater for the specific needs of these groups. Subgroups however are also distinguished based on demographic profile (age or household composition) or specific past experiences (leaving an institution). In both Flanders and the US, young people, families with children, and people experiencing chronic homelessness are specifically designated as target groups. Prevention of evictions is another priority area in Flanders. In the US, there's yet another group distinguished by its vulnerabilities and experiences but also status: the veterans.

Evidence suggests that women are experiencing "hidden homelessness" more often than men. Despite that, there is a growing share of women in homeless populations captured in data. Still, gender is usually not recognized as a dimension of vulnerability. In both Flanders and the US, "women" as a category is often conflated with "families", or existing methods are not capturing women's experiences well. Since data is rarely analysed taking a gender perspective into account, little evidence is gathered to understand



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women's experiences of homelessness. Furthermore, policies are not based on evidence alone, but are also entangled in moral assumptions and perceptions of deservingness.

Recently, however, it has been shown that unaccompanied women face specific challenges and “mainstream” homelessness services often fail to recognize their needs. Likewise, American veteran homelessness services are not prepared to meet the needs of women veterans. Extensive research and awareness raising campaigns have led to the recognition of unaccompanied women as a subgroup in some American counties. This may bring more gender-sensitive policies in the future. Designating a target group based on gender, however, may also prove to be problematic.