

Exploring secondary affective (professional) care relations with homeless unaccompanied mothers with complex needs- the perspectives of homelessness workers

**The Affective Sphere As A Site For
The Transformation Or The
Reproduction Of Inequalities
Shaping The Lives Of
Unaccompanied Mothers**



Research Aim

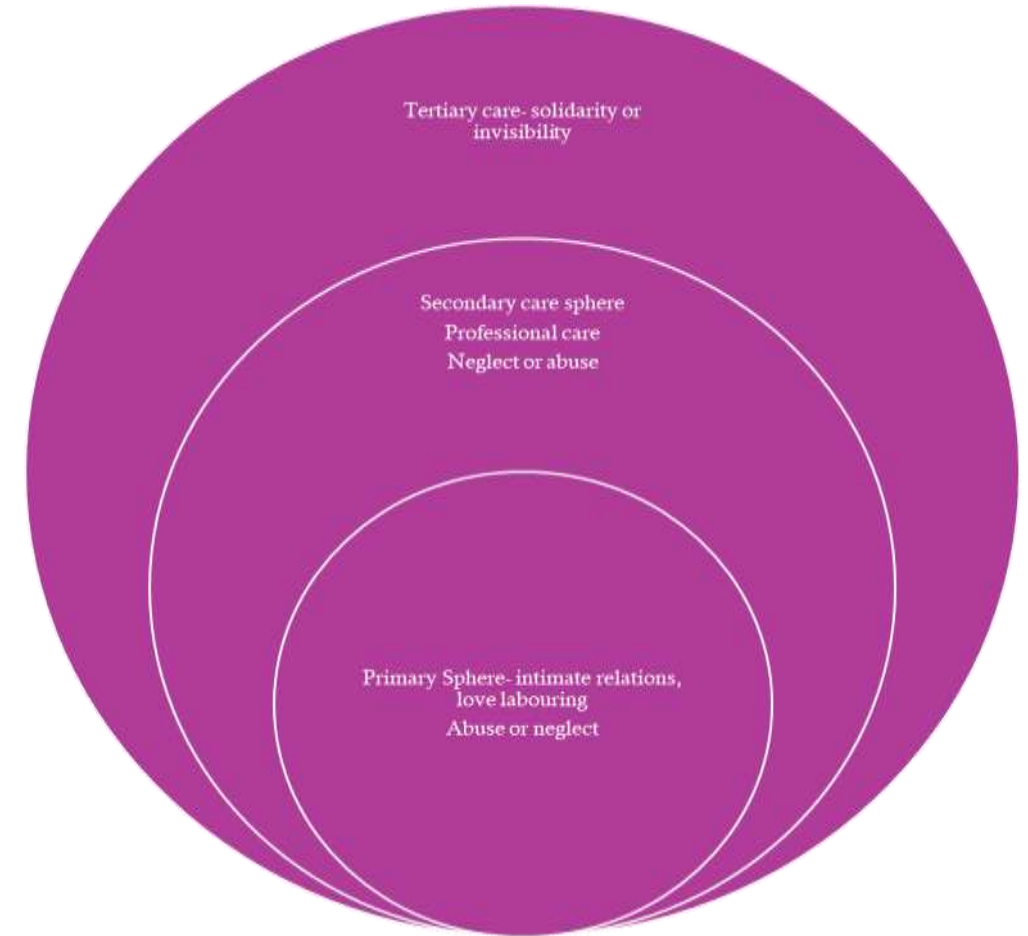
To explore how professional care workers have responded to the affective, economic and related needs of homeless unaccompanied mothers and how homeless mothers have experienced the caring of these professional care workers. In particular, it aimed to investigate whether or not professional care workers have taken due account of affective (in) equality (inequalities) in the conditions of the lives of unaccompanied mothers.

The Research Problem

- Homeless unaccompanied mothers experience a range of intersecting inequalities, including gender, class and affective injustices, which influence mother-child separations in the context of their homelessness journeys (see Savage 2022). Mothers are often blamed when they cannot take care of their children (Bimpson 2020; 2022). Yet their homelessness and separations occur against a backdrop of changing welfare state relations.
- Because professional care workers can act as a bridge to accessing the resources women need to exit homelessness and reunify with their children, it is essential to gain an insight into the range of factors influencing the nature of relations between mothers and professionals contemporarily.
- This can reveal valuable insights into the multiple and intersecting inequalities that shape the lives of this group of mothers, including the wider structural forces shaping how professional care work is performed contemporarily.

Framework Underpinning The Research

- **Intersectional structural equality framework-affective**, economic, political and socio-cultural spheres
- **Affective sphere** -primary (intimate), secondary (professional care), tertiary (state-led).
- **Nurturing capital** refers to the levels of time and resources that people receive from others throughout their lives; be it as individuals, from within their communities or through state activity (Lynch 2007).





Affective Inequalities Occur

- Where people are deprived of access to **nurturing capital**, or intimate loving relations and bonds of love, care & solidarity and instead experience abuse, violence or inequality, at any stage across the life course (Lynch et al. 2009).
- Affective inequalities also occur when love and care work, carried out by people is not acknowledged politically, socially or economically (Lynch 2010, p.2).
- This is because:
 - The world of care is not an isolated and autonomous sphere. It is deeply interwoven with economic, political and cultural relations, and inequalities in the latter can undermine the capacities and resources to do love, care and solidarity work (Baker et al. as cited in Lynch and Walsh 2009, p.41)

Qualitative Research Design

The field work for both phases took place between June 2016-Feb 2018

The study consisted of two phases-

Phase one involved twelve in-depth interviews with seven homeless unaccompanied mothers with complex needs about their experiences of care across three spheres of affective relations (primary/motherhood), secondary (professional), tertiary (stated-led) (Lynch 2007).

Us

Phase two involved one-to-one semi-structured interviews with twelve professionals working in the homelessness sector in Ireland.

Using aspects of the women's narratives to engage in critical conversations about professionals have cared for this group of mothers.

A central objective was to critically analyse the extent to which relations of institutional and practitioner power or solidarity frame the character of the professional relationship with this group of mothers.

Service	Type of service	Role in service	Sex/gender
1	Women-only service Accommodates single women and women with children	Manager (M1) Project worker PW2	Female Female
2	Women-only service. Provides high and low-support accommodation, emergency housing for families and long-term housing.	Manager (M2) Project worker (PW2)	Female Female
3	Women-only service providing emergency/short-term residential accommodation for single woman and women accompanied by their children.	Manager (M3) Project Worker (PW3)	Female Female
4	Mixed-sex homelessness service. Provides transitional and long-term accommodation to different groups of homelessness people.	Manager (M4) Project Worker (PW4)	Male Male
	Mixed-sex homelessness service. Provides a range of homelessness services including outreach, case management, housing first.	Manager (M5) Project Worker (PW5) Team leader (TLa) Team leader (TLb)	Male Female Male Female

Key-working and Advocacy In Five Homelessness Services In Ireland

Role as key worker being like a:

- **“sign-post...we almost act as a sign-post or a bridge between us and them and try to link them with other services who can provide special support for them...”.**
- Values of solidarity expressed as: **“supporting [people] to get to that place where their rights are upheld, where they know what their rights are” (Manager 5) .**

The centrality of advocacy to the work performed by keyworkers:

- **“hard”, “strongly”, “pushing” and a “process”.**
- As a process, advocacy is imbued with power struggles between different professions and sectors, where **“whoever is strongest wins” (Manager 3).**

Affective Relations And Emotions Central to Key Working Relationships

- Workers spoke of **“building relationships”**; of being **“non-directive”, “empowering”** and **“non-judgemental”**.
- Negative implications of the directive approach:
 - **“Unless a person is in agreement with that...it alienates the key-working relationship...It’s important to be seen as supportive regardless of where a person is at or what decisions they want to make”** (Project Worker 5).
- For Manager 3, being non-directive is the most important part for her:
 - **Because once you start trying to tell somebody what they have to do, you start losing them at that stage. They’re all capable of making their own decisions in time, but it’s giving them the information and the advice and letting them decide when they are ready to follow that...**
- KW relationship as an intimate relationship, **“or that’s the aim is for it to be an intimate relationship, and an open and trusting relationship”** (Project Worker 3).
- This worker discussed the centrality of the emotional dimension to the work, practised by way of **“active listening and reflective discussions”, instead of giving “opinions or judgement or being directive”** (Project Worker 3);

Exclusion Of Unaccompanied Mothers And Invisibility Of Their Intersecting Needs

- Several of the women-only accommodation options provided by homelessness services are not suited to the specific needs of unaccompanied mothers (n=5).
Unaccompanied mothers often present to homelessness services with more complex needs, which some women-only services are not designed or resourced to support (n=7).
- For instance, one participant described how:
 - **It's like having two completely different groups in the same building, that all the families here and they have their children, and they're functioning quite well. Because for a woman to be able to hold onto her children, it means her life is fairly stable. Whereas we have the [nearly 20] single women (unaccompanied mothers), and the behavioural issues that we deal with there are completely different than those for the family. Because the women...there has been some dysfunction along the way. And that's what we see then in their behaviour. It's like having two completely different groups in the same building. (Manager 1)**

A common theme or value expressed by workers relates to “**meeting women where they are at**” and recognising that “**each person is an individual**”.

These values are at odds with some of the “**behavioural management**” and drug and alcohol policies expressed by services where women and children are accommodated.

Unaccompanied mothers with complex needs are frequently **evicted or barred** from services and so either return to homelessness or move into mixed-sex hostels (Team Leader 1)

According to one manager:

- **There’s such a demand on our beds here now, that the very chaotic women can’t hold onto their beds here. And then if they are asked to leave, because they’ve gone into a spiral of addiction which might only last a short period of time, they find it difficult to get back in. Because somebody else has taken their bed who can hold onto it. There’s just such a demand. I think we have seven or eight single women on the waiting list for beds here in [the service].**
- The challenges of trying to meet the needs of the two different groups were expressed by one worker as “**trying to be all things to people**” and where children are present their needs take precedence.
- Women-only services aim to offer women “**emergency accommodation**”, and a place of safety that is “**so basic and essential**” (Manager 1), unaccompanied mothers experience barriers to accessing such support.

Women's Relational Care Identity was to Key-Working

- Working with someone with children **“affects every single aspect of the care plan”** (Project Worker 5). Whilst aspects of care plans, such as accessing training and education, can be paused during chaotic times, she remarks how

“you can’t park being a mother. It’s constantly there...It’s a whole different identity...I don’t think there are any words that would quantify what it must be like” (Project Worker 5).
- Some mothers do not talk about their maternal identity straight away, sometimes leaving it until the end of conversations (Manager 3); some do not talk at all pretending **“rather than having to deal with it”** (Manager 3). While for others, they talk about it all the time (Project Worker 3).
- Either way, as one worker stated;
 - **it’s always there whether it is positive or negative** (Project Worker 5).

Lack of Recognition & Resources to Meaningfully Support Unaccompanied Mothers Relational Needs

- There is a **lack of “referral pathways”** from where women can access support relating to their maternal grief.
- While the manager of another women-only service (Manager 1) spoke of how, on one night she counted eighteen “single women” staying there with **“thirty-three children between them in the care of Tusla... And that is not unusual”**.
- Lack of resources to meaningfully support unaccompanied mothers (Manager 1):
 - **And he [the counsellor] would see the need for more and more supports to be put into this...into these women. Because he himself has said that these are women who don't normally engage in services, but while they're in [the service], they're in, and he's there, and they're more likely to engage.**

Managing And Monitoring Women's Needs As Opposed To Meeting their Emotional Needs

- Both workers spoke of how they “**manage and monitor**” **emotional situations** that may arise for unaccompanied mothers, with mothers and their children.

Other challenges experienced by unaccompanied mothers identified by several participants (n=6) include:

- the intense emotional loss associated with special occasions, such as Christmas, birthdays and other seasonal events (Hutchinson et al. 2014).
- Remembering and supporting women to save for these occasions' forms part of the work that women-related services do with women (n=4).
- Of the five homelessness services who participated in this study, **only one women-only service** said that they could offer support to mothers and children during **access visits**.
- One other service in one geographical area offers four possible tenancies to women (or men) seeking reunification with their children, where the mothers are “**monitored**” by staff on a daily basis with their children there, and by social workers once a week or month as part of a support plan (Manager 4).

Barriers To Reunifying Mothers And Children- Lack Of Suitable Accommodation And Housing

Two of the women-only services facilitate mother-child reunifications. However, reunification is not immediate or inevitable.

When mothers are exiting services, the family status of mothers, as a single woman or family, can influence reunification

M3: Sometimes... what they're advised and what they're told – they have to go out as a single person and get a unit on their own. And they're told then that their situation will be looked at in regard to having the children. That's not straightforward though...Because if they get a HAP one-bed property, you have to have that property for two years... they can't break that HAP agreement. They could be off the list for eighteen months from getting another HAP...You can't naturally or automatically transfer...You'd have to go back with a good case before the two years are up as to why you want to transfer. You're penalised. (Manager 3)

“Nothing To Nurture You As A Parent” In Homelessness Accommodation

Residents in this hostel are there because

- **“for the most part...it’s because no other services can ‘manage’ them or ‘handle’ them...they’re barred from other services, or other services said, ‘You’re not ready yet.’” Many of the people who stay in this hostel have “been discharged from psychiatric ward and there’s no other options. And they come to [this service]” (Project Worker 5).**

Mothers “find it hard to marry their situation in the hostel or their injecting drug use. It’s very hard to marry that with being a mother” (Project Worker 5).

Consequently, they develop what is like a **“double identity”** where they are trying to:

- **cling onto: I’m a mam, I’ve kids, but the kids aren’t there. They’re separated from them, so this other identity is pulling them this way...it’s constant conflict, internal conflict all the time, because nothing in the hostel, which is where I work with people most, *there’s nothing there that would nurture you as a parent*, nothing at all. Even as professionals working in there, that chaos and that feeling you get, it just...it doesn’t marry up with being a mother.** (Project Worker 5)

Almost forgetting my daughter....

- I remember one woman, not who I key work, but just who I encountered on room checks one day. Just like that, giving out about the noise and the person next door, and this is bullshit and that is bullshit. And next thing, just started bawling crying, and showed me a picture of her and her daughter. And it was just all of this bullshit was masking what was really going on. And we had a chat and she was like, 'I wake up every day and it's the same shit. And I ...' She said, 'I'm almost forgetting my daughter because I'm so distracted, but I can't stop myself being distracted, because it's all right here on the coalface.'
(Project Worker 5)
- None of the services, where the women were living, offered any specific peer-support group or space where unaccompanied mothers could talk collectively about their experiences of motherhood and separation from their children.

HOSTILE HOSTEL ENVIRONMENT FOR NEW MOTHERS

- Having access to accommodation **“makes or breaks it when it comes to pregnancy. If you’re in the hostel, you’re not coming home with your baby and that’s it”** (Project Worker 5). Even where a mother is presenting free from substances and is **“doing all of the right things, if there is not appropriate housing, the baby is being taken off you three days after you give birth, and it’s as simple as that.”** (Project Worker 5).

Workers Are Limited In Their Capacity To Meet The Multiple Intersecting Inequalities Experienced By Mothers Under Changing Welfare State Relations.

- Project Worker 3, and others spoke of how they feel they are also **“filling in for a service that doesn’t exist”**, and how this impacts on the time they have to care for women, leading to a reduced service and level of support for the women need.

Normative Order Of Care Reinforcing Representations Of 'Good' Bad' Mother And Reproducing Affective Injustices

- The invisibility of their relational needs (re)produces hierarchies of 'good' and 'bad mothers, which is embodied by the women as feelings of shame and blame:
 - The bad mother is imagined, to ignore, trivialise, or reject her child's need for love, caring, and nurturance both as an intellectual understanding and as a lived practice. She is regarded as unloving and uncaring....the bad mother is the absent mother-absent emotionally or absent physically from her children...Given these ways of thinking about mothering, a woman who lives apart from her children would seem to be the epitome of the bad mother-an unnatural, aberrant woman. (Gustafson 2005, p.28)

Affective Relations Do Not Occur In A Vacuum, But Are Shaped By Economic, Political And Cultural Relations

(Baker et al. 2004).

- Alden (2015) in his study on the effects of welfare reform on practices of homelessness workers in England described practices of 'unlawful gate-keeping', which included limiting eligibility to services because of individual or situational characteristics. This 'inevitably involves making decisions about who is most worthy of receiving limited resources' (p.370).
- In a context of reduced resources, the role of advocacy is increasingly managed within careful boundaries (Crowley 2012), thus suggesting a loss of power for professionals in challenging the orthodoxy of changing welfare relations.

Policy And Practice Implications- A Relational Conception Of Care-*Doulia*

- A relational conception of care appreciates that the caregiver has care needs that must be recognised and supported because there is nothing inevitable about the contexts within which caring takes place. Those who are mothers need care for themselves as persons and to be carers of their children (Kittay 1999).



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