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# The Significance of the Affective Sphere for Understanding and Responding to Women's Homelessness

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Méabh Savage

South East Technological University, Republic of Ireland

➤ **Abstract** *This paper seeks to explore a number of important themes that are relevant to understanding and responding to women's homelessness, particularly recurrent and long-term homelessness amongst women. It focuses specifically on the significance of the affective sphere to explain the homelessness journeys of four mothers experiencing homelessness unaccompanied by their children. The paper reveals how the intersection of gendered class relations and affective inequalities (in love and care especially, but also solidarity) experienced during childhood and into adulthood can help to explain some women's homelessness journeys. The findings in this article emerged from a qualitative study conducted in the Republic of Ireland. The study used a critical feminist methodology and a structural equality intersectional lens to explore how homeless unaccompanied mothers with multiple needs have been cared for, and experienced care, across the affective sphere. The affective sphere consists of three intersecting sets of affective/caring relations – the intimate or primary sphere; secondary (professional services) field, and tertiary (state-related services) sphere. The study examined principally the way these three intersecting circles of nurturing (or lack of nurturing) interpolate within economic, political, and cultural relations to produce affective and other inequalities across the women's lives. A key finding from the study points to the importance of a relational framework for understanding and responding (caring for) to the multiple needs of mothers experiencing homelessness. A relational framework of care or *doulia* 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. This is particularly the case for mothers experiencing homelessness as they lack access to the requisite capitals needed to support love and care work under Ireland's current market-led approach to welfare relations.*

► **Keywords\_** *Homeless unaccompanied mothers, affective inequalities, inter-generational gendered class injustices, nurturing capital, doulia.*

## Introduction

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There has been a growing awareness in research of the frequency of lone mothers as part of the family homelessness population, and also amongst lone women presenting as homeless (Van den Dries et al., 2016; Baptista et al., 2017; Walsh and Harvey, 2017; Hearne and Murphy, 2020; Bimpson et al., 2020; Focus Ireland, 2021a). There is a prevalence of mothers experiencing homelessness unaccompanied by their children amongst the general homelessness population (Mayock and Sheridan, 2012; Shinn et al., 2015; Bretherton and Mayock, 2021; van den Dries et al., 2016; Savage, 2016; Bimpson et al., 2020). However, owing to the preponderance of women experiencing homelessness amongst the hidden homelessness population, and because research and policy responses tend to define women's homelessness into two distinct populations, family or single women's homelessness, the actual numbers of unaccompanied mothers experiencing homelessness is unclear (Savage, 2016; Baptista, 2019). Consequently, the realities of their lived experiences as mothers and their homelessness journeys are not widely understood (Savage, 2016; Bimpson et al., 2020; 2022).

This paper aims to add to the growing body of research on women's homelessness—particularly for women who experience long-term and recurrent homelessness (Pleace et al., 2016). It does this by discussing the significance of the affective sphere to understanding homelessness amongst unaccompanied mothers with complex needs, in an intersectional and structural context. In doing so, it reveals how homeless motherhood is a site of intersecting injustices including class, gender, and disability compounded by prior and ongoing affective injustices. Without recognition of the relational, intergenerational, and intersectional dimensions to nurturing, including the centrality of housing and support for nurturing, mothers experiencing homelessness can be unfairly blamed for the complex conditions they mother in, which can produce mother-child separations and cause and/or prolong their homelessness journeys (Mayock et al., 2015; Bimpson, 2020; Bretherton and Mayock, 2021).

The article is divided into five main sections. It begins with some background context to this research, including changing welfare relations in Ireland and the UK under neoliberalism, which are shaping the carescape for mothers experiencing homelessness. The next section provides a brief overview of the critical feminist theoretical framework and methodology used for the study. It then presents some

of the key findings from the study. These reveal the intergenerational basis to some women's homelessness, and the disabling effects of class and affective injustices (including domestic abuse) experienced across the life course. The article considers the policy implications of these findings, particularly in terms of enabling the production of nurturing capital, a solidarity resource that supports the work of nurturing. This article concludes by asserting the importance of doulia (Kittay, 1999), a relational framework for understanding and responding to the multiple and intersectional needs of mothers experiencing homelessness.

### **Background Context to this Study**

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Growing trends of women experiencing homelessness are occurring against a backdrop of societal and changing welfare state relations under neoliberalism in Ireland (Barry, 2020; Hearne and Murphy, 2020), the UK (WBG, 2018a; 2018b; Beatty et al., 2019), and across Europe (Aalbers, 2016; Bargawni et al., 2017; Labao et al., 2018; Baptista and Marlier, 2019; Foundation Abbé Pierre/ FEANTSA, 2020; 2021). In Ireland, for example, women accounted for 35% of the total number of single people accessing emergency accommodation in March 2022. Since, 2014, the numbers of lone women accessing emergency homelessness accommodation has increased by 66% in the eight-year period to, 2022. Lone parent families now constitute over half of the families experiencing homelessness (53%) (Dept. of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2022), with 86% of lone parent families headed by a woman (CSO, 2016). Current figures, however, obscure the real extent of women's homelessness owing to anomalies in defining and enumerating women's homelessness in Ireland and across Europe (Bretherton and Pleace, 2018; Fondation Abbé Pierre – FEANTSA, 2020; 2021; Bretherton and Mayock, 2021). Thus pointing to the gravity of this issue.

Of significance to increases in women's homelessness is how changing family structures mean that women's access to housing is increasingly contingent on them being able to independently access resources to support and sustain housing, rather than rely on a male breadwinner (Doherty, 2001; Mostowska and Debska, 2020). Mothers frequently rely on public services owing to their dominant social roles as unpaid caregivers within the home (Coffey, 2020; EIGE, 2021). Yet current policy responses in Ireland (and elsewhere) increasingly place responsibility on individuals to access and 'manage' their housing and homelessness within the private market (Allen et al., 2020), thus negating the structural origins of (women's) homelessness (Watt, 2018; Hearne and Murphy, 2020).

Low income, the commodification of housing and other welfare services, and discrimination have been identified as key contributing factors to lone mother's pathways into homelessness in Ireland and the UK (Vickery, 2012; Walsh and Harvey, 2015; 2017; Hearne and Murphy, 2020; Focus Ireland, 2021a). Changes to social welfare payments for lone parents in Ireland have meant that for most one-parent families (86% of whom are women in Ireland (CSO, 2016)), the 'choice' between caring full-time for their children and working is no longer available once their child reaches a certain age (seven in Ireland). The reality of work activation measures for one-parent families in Ireland means that lone parent women cannot get state support to care full-time after their youngest child reaches the age of seven (Millar and Crosse, 2016; 2018). Such policies fail to recognise single parents as full-time carers for their children (Barnardos, 2017; Daly, 2020). Women's capacity and 'choice' to engage in full-time mothering therefore becomes contingent on economic independence from state support (Dwyer and Wright, 2015). Yet, lone parents face considerable challenges to participation in employment (Johnsen and Blenkinsopp, 2018; Millar and Crosse, 2018; Millar, 2019; Daly, 2020). Care therefore remains an individual responsibility for those without access to economic or other resources (Dodson, 2013; Millar, 2019). Recent research by Focus Ireland (2021a; 2021b) identified how mothers experiencing homelessness (many of whom are lone parents) experience considerable barriers to participation in work. Findings reveal how women's unpaid care-giving responsibilities are invisible under current welfare state relations. This acts as a barrier to their participation in paid work, producing or exacerbating their experiences of homelessness (Focus Ireland, 2021a; 2021b).

There is a commodified system of housing and welfare policy that is being maintained in Ireland (Hearne, 2017; Byrne and Norris, 2019). This is because inequality is being interpreted as an individual and not a collective experience (Mau, 2015; Dabrowski, 2021b). Emphasis "is placed on the potential for individuals to shape and steer their own biography, and success and failure are individualized" (Mau, 2015, p.19). Individualising responsibility to the person disregards the reality of intergenerational class relations and how they can affect the resources needed to provide love and care (Crean, 2018) and access to housing (Walsh and Harvey, 2017; Watt, 2018).

In the context of individual responsibilities, people (mothers) are frequently blamed when they cannot care for their children. They are blamed for not taking enough responsibility for them, or for not sacrificing enough for them (Tronto, 2013), irrespective of the materially deprived conditions in which they are nurturing (Carey and Bell, 2021; Dabrowski, 2021a). This makes mother-child separations a reality for some resource-poor and women experiencing homelessness (Featherstone et al., 2015; 2017; Mayock et al., 2015; Bimpson et al., 2020; Morriss, 2022). Contemporary welfare relations for families therefore render "invisible those who

struggle with and/or need space to reject or rethink maternal identities” (Featherstone, 2006, p.308), compounding the affective inequalities that women experiencing homelessness experience (Lynch, 2007; Savage, 2016).

### **The Affective Sphere, Motherhood, and Nurturing Capital**

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The framework for this study draws from a significant body of feminist and egalitarian literature on care, motherhood, and class. Principally, it recognises the affective domain as consisting of three circles of other-centred relational realities produced through primary (love labour often associated with mothering), secondary (general care), and tertiary (solidarity) care relations (Lynch and Walsh, 2009). These relational realities influence the life chances and well-being of all human beings and animals. This is because emotions, interdependency, and relationality are central to what it means to be human and are, therefore, essential to ensuring human flourishing and agency (Gilligan, 1995; Held, 2006; Kittay, 1999; Fineman, 2004; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012; 2017).

The affective system is especially salient to this study because of the primacy given to mother love across a range of dominant discourses. A mother’s love has been referred to as an innate or essentialist characteristic and a key defining feature of womanhood and femininity (Bowlby, 1953). However, for others a moral imperative to care exists for mothers, it is not necessarily natural. This suggests that mothers embody a maternal practice where they internalise the gendered ideologies of motherhood (O’Brien, 2007). This morally propels them to care regardless of what resources they have available to them to do so (O’Brien, 2009).

The quality of love and care someone gives or receives is dependent on the level of emotional, material, social, and political resources available to support it. Where women are unsupported economically, politically, and socially in the doing of love and care work, they can experience affective inequalities (Lynch et al., 2009). Affective injustices occur in two forms – either as inequalities in the doing of nurturing and solidarity work, where nurturing becomes burdensome when unsupported, or when people are deprived of receiving relations of love, care, and solidarity, where for example, they are separated from their children for various reasons or where they do not receive secondary care or solidarity relations (Lynch et al., 2009). Because responsibility for the provision of love and care relationships has been traditionally assigned to mothers, the gendered moral imperative has significant implications for the status of women in society and their health and wellbeing; particularly for poor, ethnic minority, and single mothers (Dodson, 2013; Elliot et al., 2015; Coffey et al., 2020; Carey and Bell, 2021).

In contrast to current ideologies of motherhood, which position mothers as individually responsible for their children's care (Dabrowski, 2021a; 2021b; Saar and Aavik, 2021), Kittay (1999) expands the dimensions of nurturing beyond the immediate mother-child relationship and the moral imperative to care to recognise that:

It must be the responsibility of the larger social order to provide a structure whereby she (the mother), too, may be treated as a mother's child. Otherwise, she is treated unequally and hindered in meeting her obligation to her charge (child). (Kittay, 1999, p.70)

This connection-based model of equality, or *doulia*, requires that persons within the various sets of nested social relations support mothers to provide care for her child, so that a mother does not become vulnerable as she cares for her child. A *doulia*, therefore, supports a principle of care, which recognises the significance of material and social conditions to the production of love and care relations, and their importance for supporting the mother as she cares for her child. The metaphor of nurturing capital can be used to conceptualise the level and type of support needed for the development of *doulia*.

Nurturing capital refers to the levels of time and resources that people receive from others throughout their lives within and across these relational realities – be it as individuals, from within their communities, or through state activity (Lynch, 2007). Nurturing capital is accumulated individually and intergenerationally through care-rich lives and affects people's ability not only to relate to others at an intimate level through love labouring, but also to flourish and contribute in other spheres of life (Lynch and Walsh, 2009; Spiby et al., 2015; Wiig et al., 2017; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; 2018). In contrast, where someone experiences a lack of emotional resources, time, or energy, or where the burdens and benefits of care work are unequally distributed, they can be described as having care-poor lives or are low in nurturing capital (Lynch and Walsh, 2009). The production of nurturing capital can be disabled individually and intergenerationally in households where there is domestic abuse or other affective injustices because abusive relations negate the production of nurturing capital. Domestic abusive relations can influence the material resources available to produce love and care, as mothers are unsupported emotionally, economically, and socially with their care work (Lapierre, 2010; Kelly et al., 2016; Scott and McManus, 2016). This can negatively affect women's mental health and well-being (Quellet-Morin et al., 2015) and produce homelessness (Safe Ireland, 2016; Mostowska and Debska, 2020; Bimpson et al., 2020; Mayock and Neary, 2021).

## Methodology

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The fieldwork for this study took place in the Republic of Ireland between June 2016 and May 2017. The qualitative research design consisted of two phases – the first involved 12 interviews with seven unaccompanied mothers experiencing homelessness with complex needs and the second involved interviews with 12 professionals working in the homelessness sector. As this paper only relates to findings from phase 1 of the study, it will discuss the design elements of phase 1 only.

Phase 1 was designed around the mapping of care and class relations across three spheres of care relations in the lives of unaccompanied mothers experiencing homelessness. Using concentric circles of care (Lynch, 2007), the study examined women's intimate care relationships as recipients and providers of love and care; their general care relations including wider family relations and professional care relations; and relations of solidarity or 'carelessness' on the part of the State. It examined how these sets of relations have intersected with and influenced the women's experiences of mothering, professional care relations, and homelessness. The intersection of the three spheres of care and class relations were then examined through mapping the key themes to emerge for each woman across all three care spheres (across phases 1 and 2 of the study).

### *Sampling and recruitment*

Marginalised and disenfranchised groups such as women experiencing homelessness are frequently designated as 'hard-to-reach' within a research context. The often-hidden nature of these populations produces several methodological challenges generally not experienced when researching less vulnerable populations (Faugier and Sargeant, 1997). To overcome these challenges, I used purposive and snowball sampling when seeking to recruit a cohort of women from several homelessness services in the Republic of Ireland. The main inclusion criteria for this study was that the women were over 18 years of age, that they have or had children who were/not living with them, and they (women) have experienced homelessness and additional complex needs; including problematic substance use, domestic abuse, and/or mental ill-health. Mothers who had care of their dependent children were omitted. Whilst the inclusion criteria included women with complex needs, if women were acutely unwell or struggling with serious addiction difficulties at the time of the selection process they were excluded from consideration from the study to safeguard their well-being. Furthermore, women who were not actively engaged with some form of homelessness support service were not included, as I could not guarantee a support system for women in these circumstances. See Table 1 below for a profile of the women discussed in this paper.

**Table 1. Profile of four of the women included in the study**

Woman's name:	Age range	Number of children	Mothering status	Employment status	Sources of income	Education status	Health status
Sorcha	25-30	Two children to two different uninvolved fathers.	Single parent. Both children are in relative foster care. Children do not visit Sorcha in the hostel. Has regular access elsewhere.	Never employed.	Disability Allowance.	Junior certificate.	Diagnosed with depression and is in recovery from heroin addiction.
Melanie	40-45	2 children to two different uninvolved fathers. The father of one child died of a drug overdose.	Single parent. Both children are in foster care. One only entering into care recently. Has access to both children.	Currently unemployed. Worked in a few very short-term jobs when much younger.	Lone parents/ Job seekers allowance	Inter certificate.	Problematic substance use.
Annie	30-35	One child. No paternal involvement.	Single mother. 18-year care order. Child living in foster care since just after birth. Has supervised access visits every two weeks for two hours.	Works part-time.	Disability allowance.	Leaving certificate. A student in FE at time of interview.	Post-natal depression. Mental health diagnosis.
Roisin	30-35	One child. Unsure if there is paternal involvement	Single mother. Child is in foster care. Sees her child once every two weeks.	Has never been employed in paid work.	Disability allowance.	Unsure of educational attainment.	Mild intellectual disability Depression. Borderline personality disorder.

\*The findings from interviews with four out of the seven women are used in this article only. This is because all four women spoke specifically about how their mothers engaged in unpaid care work within the home in exploitative conditions. The findings from the three other women will feature in a subsequent article so that an in-depth biographical account can be given for each of the women.

### *The interview process*

Using feminist principles, I engaged with five of the women in two sets of interviews as planned, and another two participated in one interview only for different reasons, totalling 12 interviews altogether. Each interview lasted between 20-104 minutes. The interviews took place across a range of different settings including homelessness services or the women's newly acquired accommodation. The process was aided by photo-elicitation. Each interview began with me asking each woman to select an image or images from 74 photospeak cards that were scattered on the floor or table in the rooms we used. Each woman was asked to select a picture that spoke to her of her care relationships growing up, or at any stage of her life. Once she selected the number of pictures she wanted, I began the interview by asking her to talk about the pictures she had selected. The women then began to tell their stories using the pictures to guide their conversations. The interview schedule and guide were used in a relaxed manner, as the women used the pictures to tell her experiences of care relationships and homelessness. The pictures ensured the centrality of participants' voices to the study and the stories they told (Glaw et al., 2017). The photospeak cards I used were produced by Partners in Faith. They are a compilation of every day images from Irish life.<sup>1</sup> Because of the power of this method to elicit emotional responses, there were ethical implications to using it.

### *Ethical considerations*

Ethics and ethical considerations were central to how this qualitative study was designed and conducted (Lewis, 2003), which is essential when carrying out sensitive research with vulnerable groups, such as women experiencing homelessness (Liamputtong, 2007; Paradis, 2000; Paradis et al., 2012). The exploitative potential of research and the researcher is a reality for vulnerable and marginalised groups (Lynch, 1999; Paradis, 2000). To overcome the exploitative potential of research and to promote the emancipatory possibilities of the study, I intentionally engaged ethically with the women throughout the whole process, beyond the initial ethical approval process. For example, I used photospeak cards and offered process consent instead of informed consent. Also, I offered to develop and use care and distress protocols designed by the women to support them through the research process and to assess their readiness and suitability for participation in the interviews to avoid further risk of upset or distress.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.partnersinfaith.ie/new/index.php/publications/66-photospeak>.

## **The Material and Intergenerational Realities of Nurturing Relations for Homeless Unaccompanied Motherhood**

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This section explores key findings from interviews with four of the seven mothers who participated in the study: Sorcha, Melanie, Annie, and Roisin (all pseudonyms), as narrated by the women using photo-story cards. The findings reveal the (re) production of intersecting gender, class, and affective inequalities that shaped the lives of these four unaccompanied mothers. While there are differences between each woman's experiences, there are also striking similarities, which influence their positioning as homeless unaccompanied mothers, including that all four women's mothers engaged in unpaid care work in the home. By looking at the transmission of capital over time, we can elucidate how we are born into an inherited social position, which influences and limits our access to and attainment of differing levels of capitals. These inherited social positions shape our movements through different social spaces and access to associated identities, including a caring identity (Skeggs, 1997) or good (housed) mother.

Central to the construction of all four women's subjectivities are classed femininities, which they inherited from the exploitative positions occupied by their mothers, who engaged in unpaid care work in the home, in conditions of abuse and/or economic poverty. Their mother's class positions were not simply defined by their economic positions in class terms and/or as unpaid caregivers within the home, but also by virtue of the affective injustices they experienced as they performed the work of care. As the data in the next section shows, the affective losses and abuses their mothers experienced depleted the capitals needed to support love labouring (including emotional, nurturing, and economic resources). This reduced the choices available to the women on exiting the family home and shaped their journeys into homelessness and motherhood.

### **Melanie**

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Melanie, who is in her forties, is a mother of two children, both of whom were living in foster care at the time of interview. One of her children has been living in foster care since shortly after birth, over 14 years ago. Melanie's access with her first child has been inconsistent over the years, influenced by her homelessness journeys and her struggles with addiction. During periods of stability, access visits would go very well, and during other more chaotic times, contact was less frequent. Melanie's second child, who is under five, had just entered foster care because of her most recent re-entry into homelessness. Melanie spoke of struggling profoundly with her

recent separation from her second child, who has lived with her since birth. Melanie hopes to be reunited with her youngest child; however, she feels that her current housing status (single woman experiencing homelessness) is a barrier to this.

Melanie first became homeless as a child fleeing to refugees with her mother and sibling. Since the age of 18, she has lived a transient life for nearly 20 years. She spent significant periods moving among different homelessness spaces, including sofa-surfing, squatting, sleeping on the street, periods in prison, in rehab, as well as moving in and out of different types of homelessness accommodation. Melanie's entries into homelessness were preceded by the breakdown of abusive relationships, including her most recent entry. Melanie has also had some periods of housing stability over the past number of years, with the most recent being approximately five years in total. Melanie, who left school at 16 years, worked in short-term, part-time paid employment for a brief period in her early twenties. Melanie is currently unemployed and has not returned to education since she left following her Junior Certificate. Melanie expresses the desire to return to education and to make herself and her children proud. However, at present Melanie is living in a high support woman's homelessness service and spoke of not being supported to find suitable or affordable housing, which she sees as a barrier to her reunification with her child.

### ***Affective inequalities and Melanie's journey into homelessness***

Melanie spoke of how family life was emotionally destructive as her father "drank all of the money, womanised and then came home and mistreated his family". Melanie chose the image of a building site to reflect her experiences growing up and the centrality of emotions and affective deprivations to understanding her early childhood experiences, which she saw as central to the development of her subjectivity and sense of self:

And I picked up a picture of a building site because again, it's quite symbolic. That's how me life was, with all the mayhem, a building site, living in a building site. Just... not physically, but emotionally, just everything wrecked, destroyed.



**Figure 1: Image of a building site**



© Chris Maguire, 2004

Using the image below (Figure, 2), Melanie discusses how living in domestically abusive relations and poverty effected the emotional resources her mother had to care for her:

I picked up this picture of a woman pushing a pram. It just reminds me of my mother, with a little girl. Going about her business, trying... There's a load of rubble by the side of the road which is quite – what's the word?...Symbolic, that's how my life was, a load of rubble, but yeah, me mother's walking straight on...

**Figure, 2: Woman pushing a pram past some rubble**



© Derek Speirs, 2003

Despite the abuse and the resource-poor conditions she was living in, Melanie spoke of how a range of factors colluded to prevent her mother from leaving her father (Malos and Hague, 1997; Schneebaum, 2014), prolonging the abusive relations throughout her childhood.

But my mother was caught. She... my father was the one that was bringing money in. She did love him. She tried to maintain her marriage. Maybe she prayed that he would come right. And then I wouldn't mind. Every time my mother got rid of him, my dad... We'd cry and say, 'Bring him home.' So she was caught...

Melanie explained the reality and contradictions of living in abusive households, and how they can exist alongside relations of nurturing, as she reflected on how her mother sought to care for her and her sibling during periods of childhood homelessness.

And because my mother and father's relationship was quite destructive, because of alcohol, my mother was always trying to keep it normal, so she'd... I mean, we'd have to stay in hostels, or bed and breakfasts, so she'd always try and keep our lives normal. So she used to bring us down to the pond in [...] and feed the swans and-..." (Melanie).

**Figure 3: Child feeding swan**



© Dave Donnellan

Nurturing practices performed by Melanie's mother reveal insights into how the affective sphere "occupies a discrete space between mother and child in which they perform affective roles and relations intrinsically linked to their desire to exist, belong and feel love and care.... But also, these relations of love and care can exist alongside relations of abuse and neglect" (Crean, 2018, p.3) producing affective injustices. Despite Melanie's mother's desire to protect and care for her children unsupported, the effects of living in the abusive family relations became too much for Melanie. At the age of 16 she moved in with some friends and then progressed into homelessness at 18. Reflecting on her subsequent homelessness journey and entry into problematic substance use, Melanie recalls:

I feel like the reason why I done it is because it was my only way out at the time, or I'd've gone completely insane. But then again, I could have channelled that energy into going to school and saying, 'You know what? I'm not fucking having this.' But when you know no different, you say, 'I just can't cope. I need to do something.'

## Sorcha

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Sorcha, who was in her late twenties at the time of interview, is a mother of two children. Both of Sorcha's children were living in relative foster care, the first child for over five years and the second since birth, which was less than a year. Sorcha maintained a good, regular relationship with both of her children, seeing them weekly outside of the mixed-sex hostel she was living in at that time. Sorcha hoped to be reunified with her youngest child, but needed suitable housing before this could occur. However, Sorcha was unable to access any stable, affordable housing at that time. Sorcha was living in a mixed-sex hostel, which often accommodates people experiencing enduring addiction and mental health issues at the time of interview.

Sorcha has been homeless since her early twenties, for approximately 6-8 years. Her first entry into adult homelessness occurred following a violent relationship break-up not long after she gave birth to her first child and first tried heroin. Sorcha has remained without long-term, stable accommodation of her own since then. During her homelessness journeys, Sorcha returned to the family home or a relative's home for short periods. She then moved through a variety of homelessness spaces including sleeping on the street, in derelict buildings and squats, sofa surfing, in hostels and supported homelessness accommodation, B&Bs, and in rehabilitation centres. During Sorcha's second pregnancy, she spent a period homeless on the streets, with no viable option of accommodation available to her. According to Sorcha, she was separated from her second child as she was homeless following the birth and there was no suitable accommodation available for her and her child:

Now, the minute I get [long-term housing], I'll get the access overnight, back straight away with my [baby]. That's all it is. The only reason the [baby] is gone is no stable accommodation. So they wouldn't let me leave the hospital with [...], with me having to go from B&B to B&B. It's not fair on the child, so young and all that. It's not – what's the word – it's a part of neglect that would be. That's signed down as part of neglect, even though there's no neglect going on there, but hopping from B&B to B&B, there's no stable place.

Although Sorcha first became officially homeless in her early twenties, she was regularly taken from the family home by her mother as a child because of domestic abuse. It was during this time that a close relative abused Sorcha. Therefore, it could be argued that Sorcha, like two of the other women featured in this article first experienced homelessness in childhood (Mayock et al., 2016).

### *Affective inequalities and Sorcha's journey into homelessness*

**Figure 4: Person walking alone on a hill**



© Derek Speirs, 2004

In reflecting on her care experiences across her life, Sorcha selected the image in Figure 4 and reflected:

This picture now caught my eye, because of my many struggles before. It would... See the way he's on his own and he's walking. That would feel like me, being alone.... miserable and lost and lonely...It would be like as if it was me after been gone out of home... And I'm on my own... I have no one.

As she began to talk about her experiences, Sorcha discussed how the exiting of her father from the family home had several significant repercussions both for Sorcha and for her mother. Because nurturing is a form of work, it requires time and resources. Nurturing can be burdensome when unsupported economically, emotionally, physically, and socially; depleting instead of producing emotional and nurturing capitals (O'Brien, 2009; Elliot et al., 2015; Coffey et al., 2020). The material effects of the absence of nurturing capital in childhood were expressed by Sorcha (and the three other women), as she (and others) spoke of taking on care responsibilities within the home, helping financially and in performing other mothering duties for her mainly older siblings:

... I'd hear my mam cry at night and I'd run into her, and all things like this. Even financial ways, my mam would find it hard, buying things and stuff. Say now she wanted a fry-up in the shop, I done it.... I'd take her money and stuff and go off... and I'd rob the fry-up, and I'd bring her back the change... I thought I could help my mam and all, and stop looking at her the way she was, depressed and all that, I would have done anything to cheer her up, anything.

In talking about the ways she took on other examples of 'mothering' responsibilities, Sorcha describes "So I think I was put to be an adult way beyond my years, having mother figure things to do: cooking dinners, washing clothes, making sure that there's stuff there for them, running baths. Down to running a bath." In the absence of any support for Sorcha's mother to care for her children, Sorcha was forced into taking on the role performed previously by her mother.

Sorcha's recollection of her early childhood experiences also reveals how her mother experienced not only economic inequalities, owing to the sexual division of labour within the household. Her household had "a lot of anger as well in my family... like, violence". At times when it was particularly bad, Sorcha's mother would run away with her and her sibling to a close relative's house for safety. Their mother would then leave them there while she returned to the house. It was during the time that Sorcha's mother sought to protect them from the effects of witnessing the domestic abuse that Sorcha was sexually abused over several years. Without access to support to help her to deal with this trauma, Sorcha began to use drugs and entered into a violent relationship from a young age. Reflecting on her journey into homelessness and addiction, Sorcha recalled how:

It was really, I wanted to be gone from [...]I wanted to get out of there after what happened...So I just wanted out of there. It was too much, too much of memories, too much history behind me down there, so I just wanted out of there. And I'd nowhere to go, nowhere. How would I get out of here?"... The drugs. It was a big part of it then, drugs

## **Annie**

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Annie, who was in her early thirties at the time of interview, had been homeless on and off since she was 18 when she left her family home due to abuse within her family. She initially moved to relatives in the UK. This family arrangement broke down a short time after she arrived there. Annie therefore first entered homelessness as an adult in the UK. Annie previously became homeless in Ireland as a child with her mother and siblings fleeing domestically abusive relations. Annie subsequently returned from the UK while pregnant because she was experiencing domestic abuse herself. She re-entered homelessness in Ireland following the birth of her child and a breakdown in family relations, which resulted in her child's subsequent removal into foster care. Annie had regular access with her child and spoke of strong hopes for reunification, even though she was homeless and her child was subject to a long-term care order (until the age of 18).

At the time of interview, Annie was living in a mixed-sex hostel for the past approximately five and a half months. Before this, Annie lived in a night-only emergency hostel, and previously in short-term tenancies. She also lived in hotel homelessness accommodation, as well as probation accommodation. Annie spent some time in prison and lived in aftercare accommodation upon release. Annie is the only participant to have completed her leaving certificate and to be engaged in further education at the time we met. Annie, unlike the three other women in this article, has engaged in paid employment in recent years. Annie experiences enduring mental health issues and spoke of using alcohol and drugs in the past. However, Annie does not currently have any problematic substance use issues.

### ***Affective inequalities and Annie's journey into homelessness***

Annie described life as “tough” being “dragged up” in economic poverty in an area of high disadvantage and of experiencing several moves during her childhood. Annie’s mother was a lone parent and from a young age Annie became a carer to her two younger siblings:

I grew up without a dad. Me ma was... Me ma’s nuts. She has some serious issues. But she’s in denial there’s something wrong with her. We were beaten as we were growing up...

Annie described how she endured roughly four years of sexual abuse from her mother’s partner, who was also domestically abusive towards her mother. Several of Annie’s accounts of her childhood recount the prevalence of physical abuse perpetrated either towards her mother by her stepfather or by her mother against her.

Annie’s experiences in childhood differ from Melanie and Sorcha because Annie’s mother was physically and emotionally abusive toward her. Annie’s narrative reveals several examples of violence and abuse performed by her mother that stand in stark contrast to examples of nurturing performed by Melanie’s mother. Under contemporary gendered welfare relations, a hierarchy of motherhood is engendered, as support for nurturing is made invisible to the needs of the economy (Fraser, 2016; Oksala, 2016). Nurturing is privatised for people who cannot afford to pay for care or for support to care, without regard for whether they have the capacity to perform the work of nurturing. The gendered moral imperative to care creates a further bind for lone mothers who do not have the resources needed to perform care work, so they struggle with love labouring, resorting to violence in the absence of the requisite capitals. This produces negative outcomes for their children, which for Annie led her into homelessness and becoming separated from her child.

## Roisin

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Roisin was in her early thirties and has one child who was living in long-term foster care at the time of interview. Roisin sees her child regularly and spoke of having good relations with her child's foster carers. Unlike the three other women discussed in this article, Roisin spoke of being happy with the present status of her relationship with her child and did not speak of plans for reunification. At the time, she was seeing her child once every fortnight. Owing to her mental health diagnosis and her own childhood experiences, Roisin stated that she is not in a position to look after her child "... I can barely look after myself. I can't even look after a fish".

Roisin became homeless just one month previously, following an admission to a psychiatric hospital because of a "mental breakdown" (Roisin suffers from mental illness and has a mild intellectual disability as well). Roisin left the hospital and entered homelessness, following what had been the culmination of a range of intersecting inequalities that shaped her life. Like Melanie's experiences, Roisin's entry into homelessness was triggered by the actions of an ex-partner. This man was squatting in Roisin's rental accommodation when she was in the hospital, without Roisin's knowledge, and he destroyed it. This led to Roisin's eviction from the property while she was in the hospital. During her time experiencing homelessness, Roisin occupied the category of invisible homelessness, as she was staying with friends and family (FEANTSA, 2007). Roisin's experience of being homeless was a source of stress for her. She described how she was "bothering" people and "felt so alone", feelings she had experienced throughout her childhood. At the time we met, Roisin was waiting to move to a new tenancy offered by the local authority.

Roisin's experiences reveal the deeply traumatic effects that deprivations in love and care have on people. Roisin described her childhood as horrible, growing up in an abusive household where alcohol abuse was prolific. Roisin's family did not experience economic resource inequalities like the other women in this study, yet the affective injustices she experienced in childhood produced material outcomes in adulthood.

### *Affective inequalities and Roisin's journey into homelessness*

Roisin described her life as "horrible" growing up. The picture of a child crying (figure 5 below) takes her back to her childhood:

On the outside, me and my family seemed like the perfect family, but inside, it was a different story. My mother was an alcoholic. My father was an alcoholic. My mother... You'd hear about men abusing.. you know..women, but my mother abused the life out of my father. And if we got in the way, we were attacked.

Figure 5: Child



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Roisin “hated” her life, citing examples of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse that she experienced across her childhood perpetrated by family members. She described how her “... father just went to work, came back. My mother got drunk and bet the crap out of him. He was drinking and fell asleep. It was all drink-related”. It was Roisin’s younger sister “who took the role of mother, being mother” within her family as there was no other wider support available to the family.

Roisin uses the next two pictures, of a young woman looking out a window and a man walking in an alley, to reflect on the intersection of affective deprivations she experienced at that time. Looking at the teenage girl, she reflects on how:

That’s like me growing up. Confused, don’t know what to do. Depressed, life is horrible... it speaks to me as if she’s looking out on life, contemplating is it better than what she is already going through.

**Figure 6: Teenage girl looking out the window**



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The next image of the man walking alone symbolises the powerlessness and aloneness she was experiencing, as there was no external support for her, or no one there to help her: “And it’s like you’re the only one there and no-one is actually there to help you. It’s... so dark and lonely. It’s horrible...”.

**Figure 7: Person walking down a dark alley**



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### ***Motherhood as a site of intersecting gender, class and affective inequalities***

The gendered moral imperative to care and nurture are considered innate to women, as opposed to forms of work, which require resources (Lynch, 2007; Lynch and Lyons, 2008; O'Brien, 2008). Roisin's descriptions of her family environment reveal critical insights into what happens when mothers who are struggling with deep emotional needs, such as alcoholism and anger, are unsupported with care work. Because emotional capital is a relational resource, it can only be activated when support is available (O'Brien, 2007). Lack of support or lack of nurturing capital for caregivers when performing the work of care limits the transfer of emotional capital from mother to child (Reay, 2000; O'Brien, 2007). This was evident from Melanie's, Sorcha's, and Annie's stories, where a combined lack of emotional, nurturing, and economic capital available in childhood reduced the options available to the women to escape from the abusive relations they were living in, thus shaping their journeys into homelessness. Roisin's narrative also provides insights into the dynamic effects that inequalities in these gendered capitals can have on women and girls intergenerationally; as Roisin spoke of struggling to know how to care for herself or her child. While this is also true of men, they are far less likely to be carers, as the moral imperative does not apply to them in the way it does for women.

An important contribution these findings make to understanding women's homelessness journeys relates to the intersectionality of gendered class relations and affective injustices, and their disabling effects on women and girls. Specifically, the findings reveal how consciousness of class inequalities evolve not just through the economic relations that produce their class position, but also through the affective relations that frame their lives (Crean, 2018). Specifically, the data shows how owing to the sexual division of labour and unpaid nature of care work, women occupy a structurally subordinate and exploitative position of power to men (Muller, 2019), often leaving them dependent on men for economic resources. These exploitative conditions are exacerbated for women living in domestically and economically abusive relations (Sharp, 2008), diminishing the emotional, nurturing, and economic capital needed to produce love and care relations. These exploitative and alienating conditions produce affective formations of class injustices, as mothers lack resources, control, or choice over the conditions within which they perform the work of care. Owing to the gendered moral imperative to care and the privatised nature of caregiving under contemporary welfare relations, resource-poor mothers are frequently compelled to care within unequal conditions, regardless of whether they have the resources or the capacity to do so.

The findings therefore reveal how the affective sphere is the primary site through which women experience exploitation. Intersecting with the economic, political, and cultural spheres, the inequalities recur intergenerationally (Skeggs, 1997), preventing the women from accumulating the capitals needed to access alternative positions to the exploited positions occupied by their mothers. This had disabling consequences for them. The affective and gendered class injustices the women experienced in childhood were embodied and experienced as addiction and mental illness. Furthermore, all four of the women experienced abusive relations, mother-child separations, and homelessness in their adult lives – with three of the women experiencing long-term and recurrent homelessness (Pleace et al., 2016).

### **Conclusion – The Significance of the Affective Sphere for Understanding and Responding to Women's Homelessness and the Policy Issues Arising**

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The findings in this article have important implications for current discussions on the gendering of women's homelessness and policy responses to this invidious issue (Bretherton, 2017; 2020). This is especially so because, as Bimpson et al., (2022, p.275) point out, "social policy is inexorably implicated in (re)producing dominant visions of mothers, mothering and home". Contrary to dominant discourses of 'good mothers', which position mothers as individually responsible for nurturing (Hays, 1996; Manne, 2005), the findings here reveal how primary care

relations/mother love is contingent on access to gendered capitals, emotional and nurturing. These are the outcome of love, care, and solidarity relations experienced individually, at a community level, and a societal level (Lynch and Walsh, 2009; O'Brien, 2009). Primary care relations are also highly resource dependent, materially, politically, and socially. When absent, they produce unequal outcomes for resource-poor and mothers experiencing homelessness and their children.

The exclusion of the affective domain from research about mothers experiencing homelessness means that under current welfare relations, in Ireland and the UK, discussions and policy responses to mothers are often framed by professionals and by wider society within the language of 'choice' or individual deficits. This disregards the intersectional structural forces shaping their experiences (Featherstone et al., 2017; Watt, 2018; Bywaters et al., 2019; Morriss, 2022). However, as revealed in this article, individualising problems in mothering to specific women masks the depth of inequalities that many women go through on their journeys into motherhood and homelessness (Veenstra and Keenan, 2017; Bimpson et al., 2020; 2022; Luttrell, 2020). The themes in this article revealed how all four women's subjectivities were formed as classed femininities, which describes the processes through which specific sorts of women are formed (inherited) and gendered (Skeggs, 1997). The pathologising or blaming of homeless and resource-poor mothers (and their children) is therefore exacerbated by a failure to recognise the significance of the affective sphere to understanding human production and well-being (Lynch et al., 2021) and its relation to the economic, political, and cultural spheres. There is a policy failure to recognise the relational, intergenerational, and structural origins of women's homelessness and mother-child separations.

The findings therefore point to the importance of a relational framework for understanding and responding to women's homelessness. This relational care framework is underpinned by a principle of equality, *doulia*. This recognises the importance of supporting the person caring with the work of care, both as a caregiver and as an individual in their own right (Kittay, 1999). The need to incorporate all four spheres of social action – the economic, political, cultural, and affective spheres in frameworks for understanding, defining, and responding to homeless motherhood therefore must be recognised. Doing so can identify policy responses to homeless motherhood which can enable the production of nurturing capital. Nurturing capital is central to supporting the work of nurturing for both women and their children. A relational framework for responding to women's homelessness matters. All generative sources of inequalities need to be made visible under current neoliberal welfare relations to ensure socially just responses, which can prevent homelessness, for resource-poor women and their children.

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