

# Reception of Homeless, Migrant Women from an Intersectional Perspective. The case of the Sisters' House

Naïké Garny - KULeuven - Centre for Sociological Research

## Rationale

The **Sisters' House (SH)**, a grassroots accommodation facility in Brussels that emerged from volunteers' willingness and commitment, offers a **gender sensitive and non-mix emergency shelter** where women can break the cycle of violence and trauma, characteristic of their migration journeys. While the mainstream theoretical and practical approaches to reception remain general and generic, the SH is a **unique** project that addresses the needs of **homeless migrant women** through the implementation of **specific practices**. This study looks at the SH project through critical literatures about gender, race, migration and resistance to propose an innovative operationalization of the concept of reception. It does so by employing a specific **qualitative mixed-methods design** and leveraging principles inherent to the Homelessness field and Black Feminist theories. Connecting the concepts of "**Housing first**" and "**Safe space**", this research argues that the operationalization of reception through an **intersectional perspective** contributes to the paradigm shift towards a **dignified and inclusive hospitality**. This approach aims to be applied more broadly to the Belgian context and critically address the dehumanizing and criminalizing practices of the European migration policies in which it is nested.

## Method

### Methodological and ethical frameworks:

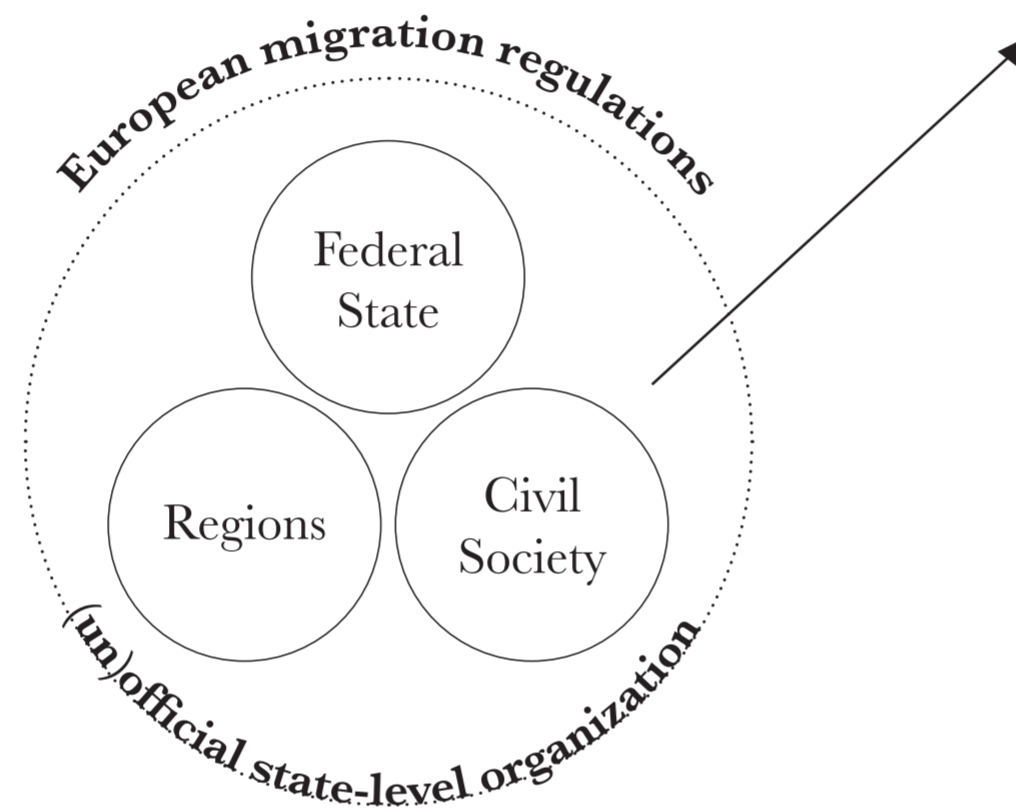
- Institutional Ethnography (Smith, 1987, 2022)
- Ethical Framework of Research (Garny, 2023)

### Co-creative and participative methods:

- Creative Cartography (Mekdjian, 2016)
- Collaborative Podcasting (Day et al., 2017)
- Participant observation and interviews
- Content analysis: **SH data base & legal, policy, administration documents** linked to reception, homelessness and migration in Belgium and beyond.

## Belgian context

Complex people management and transfer of competences: Reception of asylum seekers is dealt with at the Federal State, while others (illegalized, undocumented or 'stranded' migrants) receive no material assistance. They then fall into the **homelessness sector** (Regional and local level) and are supported by various Regional administrations which, in some cases, transfer reception management to other local organizations or NGOs.



### Humanitarian action led by civil society (official organizations & grassroots movements) since 2015:

- Day services (Hub, outreach)
- Night services / accommodation (hosting at home, collective houses, centres...)



### An example of accommodation: The SH

- Facility organizing holistic and specific reception to accommodate, inform and accompany homeless migrant women by creating new practices and adapted services.
- Created in 2018 by volunteers, receiving financial support since mid 2021.

## Intersectional perspective

### Housing first (FEANTSA, 2022)

- Shelter is a prerequisite to break the cycle of violence
- Holistic response to basic and intersectional needs.
- Eliminating the silos of services to allow integrated, gender-sensitive support.
- Combined with gender- and trauma-informed approaches.
- Women only services.

### Safe space (Hill Collins, 2000)

- Originally by and for black women to empower and increase their capacity to participate in social justice projects.
- Non-mix place enabling feelings of safety by building trust, confidentiality, and strong commitments to one another.
- Collective place of encounter, where information can be exchanged and where people learn from each other's life expertise.
- Where women's voices can be heard, and needs attended to.

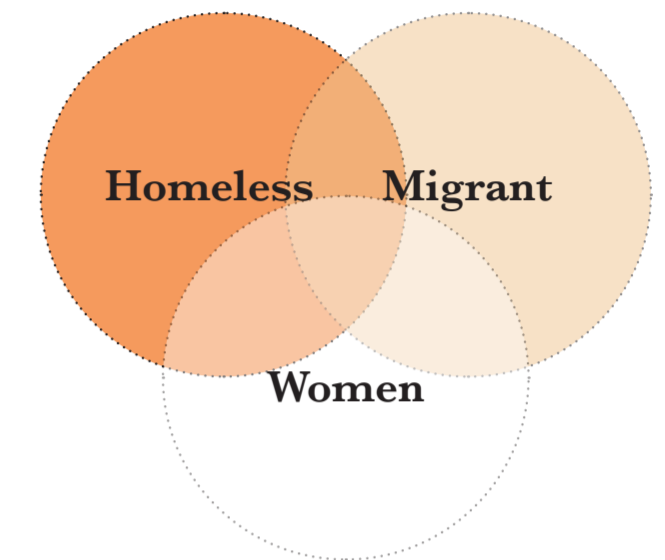
### Key concepts

**Housing is a human right**  
**Choice and control**  
**Separation of housing and treatment**  
**Recovery orientation**  
**Harm reduction**  
**Active engagement without coercion**  
**Person-centred planning**  
**Flexible support for as long as required**

### Key concepts

**Self-definition**  
**Self-esteem and respect**  
**Autonomy and independence**  
**Collective empowerment**

## Research objectives



### Main objectives:

- Investigate the imbrication of homelessness, migration and gender.
- Understand the effects of the management of these three elements by the different levels of power and the impact this has on migrant women's everyday experiences.

### Specific objectives:

- Understand the impact of incomplete, inappropriate or ineffective care in specific and multidimensional cases.
- Analyze the effects of gender, race and class sensitive approaches developed by the SH's social workers.
- Produce results on the imbrication of homelessness, migration and gender that will be useful for reception actors, at all levels, in order to respond to the intertwined needs of the women they meet.

## References

DAY ET AL. 2017. The Expanding Digital Media Landscape of Qualitative and Decolonizing Research: Examining Collaborative Podcasting as a Research Method. *MediaTropes Journal*, 7(1), 203–228 • FEANTSA. 2022. Housing First and Women. Case Studies from Across Europe • GARNY. 2023. Ethical Framework of Research: a proposition of feminist and postcolonial research paradigm shift while working with migrant women, Conference: *Migration in Belgium Epistemological issues, History, Public action and Mobilisations*. Brussels • HILL COLLINS. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought*. Routledge. New York & London • MEKDJIAN. 2016. Les récits migratoires sont-ils encore possibles dans le domaine des Refugee Studies ? Analyse critique et expérimentation de cartographies créatives. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 15(1), 150-186 • MAYOCK & BRETHERTON. 2016. *Women's Homelessness in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan UK • SMITH. 2022. *Simply Institutional Ethnography. Creating a Sociology for People*. Toronto University Press.