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Female, Homeless, without a Safety Net?

*A Critical Perspective on how the Welfare
State - fails to? - Protect Homeless Women*



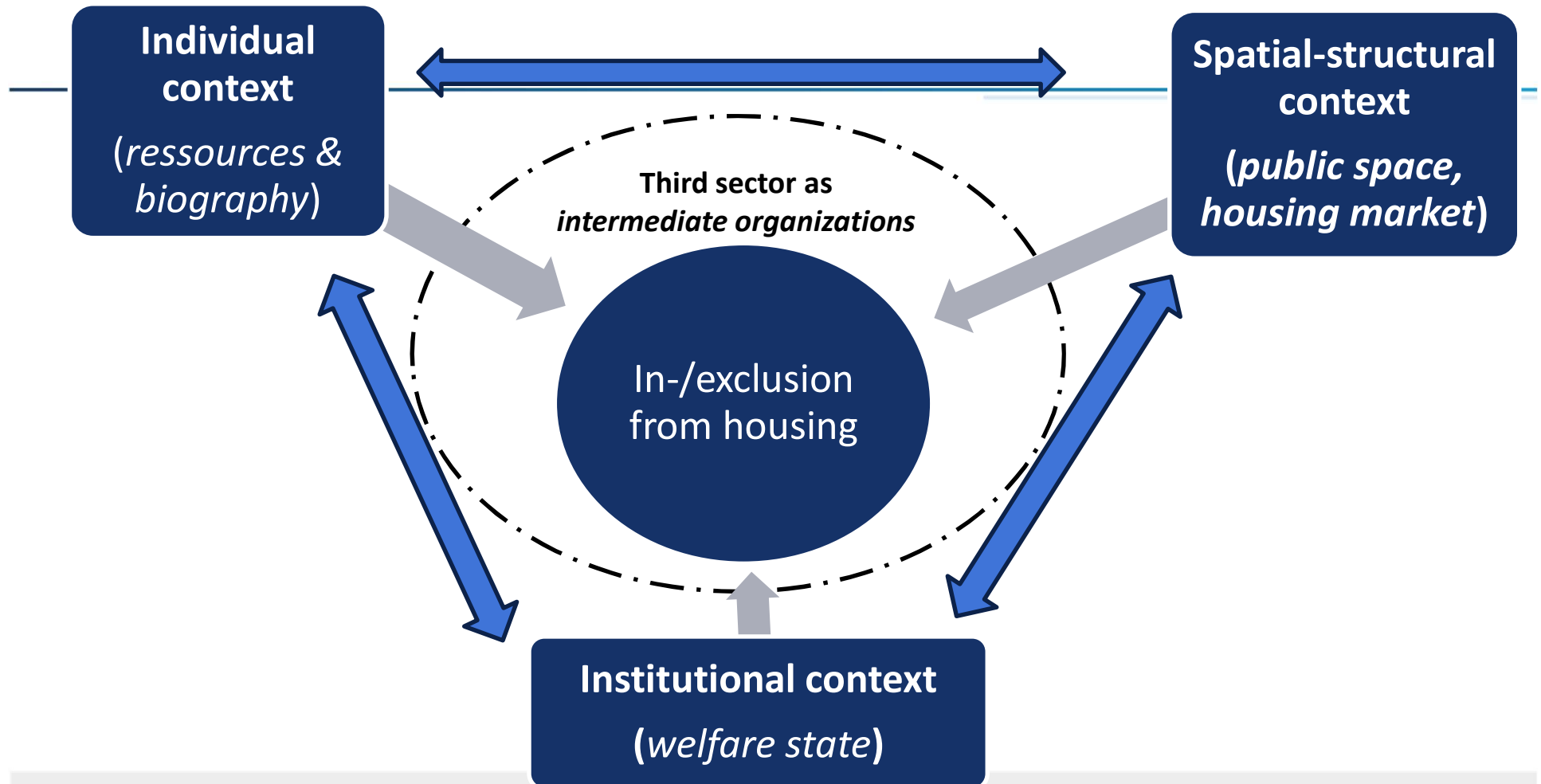
My approach to researching homelessness

Background:

- 3,5-year research project; 90+ interviews
- Small team: doctoral researcher, postdoc (Jan Weckwerth, also here), student assistants

Novel theoretical (sociological) approach:

1. Individual context (resources, biographic experiences)
2. Spatial-structural context (public space, housing market)
3. Institutional context (welfare state)
4. Civil society organizations as “intermediate organizations”



Individual context through a gender lens

Resources	Biography
- Often poor, low-income, debt	- Traumatic life events (PTSD, CPTSD), but also many “small” events that accumulate
- Limited, broken social ties	- (comorbid) mental health issues - Substance use disorders
- (education mixed picture)	- Children - Partners

Spatial-structural context: some key aspects

Housing market	Public space
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rising rental costs• Competition for affordable apartments / discrimination<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students• Single households with stable income• DINKS• Waiting lists for social housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Public space = perception of threat• Little “non-consumption” space• Limited access to basic infrastructure (water, energy, controlled temperature, hygiene)• Public transportation costly

A few examples of interaction effects

- Lower income of women (plus children) & rental prices (family friendly apartments)
- “Double stigma” -> failure as a woman & sexually available -> need to remain hidden while homeless
- Experiences of violence & fear of men/male-dominated spaces
- We corroborate research that the *causes* for homelessness and the *coping strategies* differ, while systematizing why and how!

Bringing the welfare state in: German examples, general lessons

1. The German welfare state codifies various **social rights** and seeks to guarantee a life in **dignity**
2. Social insurance as main pillar (employment based)
3. Social assistance as a minimum income scheme (residual)
4. Federal country → some degree of local discretion
5. Provision of social services often via NGOs

Something is rotten in the state of Germany?

Few countries have such an encompassing welfare state as Germany, and yet Germany has amongst the highest number of unhoused persons (incl. women) in Europe... *Why?*

Of “wobbly pillars” & “empty purses”

- Housing as wobbly pillar
 - No constitutional right to housing
 - No direct provision of housing via state
 - Instead: support via housing benefits to “enable” *market* participation
 - But: tight/competitive housing market, plus low rent-thresholds for housing benefits
 - Women often have lower incomes, dependents (children)
 - Access to benefits on basis of household income (partner’s income)
 - Women may face discrimination
- Empty purse at municipal level
 - Funding via regional gov’ts -> dependency, under-financed (“debt-brake” ruling)
 - “voluntary” services are self-funded by local gov’t
 - Structural gender short-sightedness

Service gaps for homeless women

- No or limited **support services** for women only (often male dominated)
- No or limited **shelters** for homeless women
 - Males on premises
 - Male security services
 - Shared rooms, lack of privacy
 - No rooms for couples
- **Shelter for battered women** not accessible for (at risk of) homeless women
 - No staff to deal with mobility or sensory impaired, mentally ill, acutely traumatized, or substance users
 - No pets allowed
 - Costs only covered if benefit recipient
 - No “battered” (domestic violence)
 - No male children in puberty

Access barriers “by law”

- Social assistance requires a formal application
 - Knowledge/awareness
 - Accessibility of office/respective contact person
 - Various authorities involved (depending on social code)
 - Heavy documentation needed
 - ID
 - Bank statements
 - Last rental contract
 - City registration
 - Birth certificates
 - Income, savings ...
 - No pets allowed

Access barriers “in personam”

- Reading/writing skills
- Language skills
- Smart phone (with Internet, charged battery)
- Ability to print/copy

- Fear, depression, **shame**, feelings of guilt or overwhelm

- **Violent partner** (on rental contract, keeps documents, ...)
- Migrants / residency status -> **dependency on partner**

- Life circumstances with higher priority (securing space to sleep or panhandle, addiction)

Formal exclusions due to gender, age, residential status

- Battered women shelter/homeless shelters only CIS-women
- Under 18 excluded from shelters
- NEET-Migrants without right to various social assistance schemes

Institutional transitions as high-risk situations

- Care-leavers
- Prison
- Clinics / hospitals
- Battered women's shelters

- Gender not necessarily directly relevant, but effects caused by structural discrimination and disadvantages (e.g. service gaps, rental market)

Conclusions 1/2

- The (German) welfare state does not provide a “catch-all safety net”
- Access to social support is highly formalized, bureaucratic and difficult to maneuver
- The special needs of women are not recognized:
 - Service gaps
 - Service inadequacies (forms of “institutional violence”)
 - Male orientation
- Especially the most vulnerable women are excluded due to high hurdles and an expectation that people in need come to the institutions for help

Conclusions 2/2

- The German welfare state is a “**selective integration engine**”
- Runs the more smoothly, the closer the social problems are to the white, heterosexual, cis-gender German **middle-class**
- It begins to sputter, when problems are considered to affect only societal **margins** and are **multi-dimensional**
- Homeless women fail to meet **societal norms** and become outcasts
- **Precarity** increases if “deviations” accrue (color of skin, ethnic attributes, queerness, disability...)