

## Seminar 11: Women's Homelessness II (Room: TBD) - Chair: Masa Filipovic Hrast, SI

**Freya Marshall Payne, UK:** Homelessness in Women's Life Histories: Lessons about Cultural Silences, Trauma and Support from the Testimonies of Women with Lived Experience

This paper presents findings from a qualitative research study on self-identifying women's experiences of homelessness throughout their life course<sup>1</sup>. It examines the ways in which women recall, narrate, historicise and make meaning from their experiences of homelessness. The research employs a novel methodology to build up a corpus of women's personal testimonies of homelessness, bringing together: original qualitative interviews with women who have exited homelessness (comprising in-depth life history interviews and biographical walking interviews); autobiographies, both self-published and traditionally published; and archival materials which include women's personal writings about their homelessness. The geographic range is England and the focus is on the self-knowledge of women with lived experience and the claims they have made - in the past and today - about the nature of women's homelessness, the issues that need to be resolved and how this might be done. This approach to data collection has two key benefits. Firstly, it facilitates a longer historical view of women's homelessness over changing policy contexts (c.1960s-present) so that we can see continuities and shared themes across interviews and in this wider data set. Secondly, it visibilises the often-forgotten knowledge produced by grassroots campaigning and research groups in the past as well as in the present. In this way, the research provides a new empirical focus on a particularly marginalised group and advances theoretical work on gender and homelessness. In this paper, I discuss in greater depth the patterns and shared obstacles we see repeated in these sources across time: chiefly, the deep stigma and cultural silence about women's homelessness, the prevalence of complex trauma,

and the experience of falling between services. I then turn to consider: How can women take possession of their own stories and write into cultural and political gaps and silences, and how can listening improve policy and provision? Wider cultural narratives have shaped women's personal testimonies and the ways they make sense of their experiences, even as they seek to create their own frameworks and theories, either as individuals or collectively. A subset of the narratives are shaped by charities and the increasing valorisation of expertise by experience; this provides a valuable and robust framework for self-articulation but can, I find, reinforce a focus on the individual over vernacular theorisations of collective gendered experiences, which I find in other recent autobiographical texts and interviews. Ultimately, the paper highlights the need for person-centred trauma-informed services that can see a woman's whole life holistically; a good practice example is offered as the Liisankoti Housing First project for women in Helsinki, Finland.



*Freya Marshall Payne (she/her) is a doctoral candidate at the University of Oxford researching women's experiences of homelessness. She is an interdisciplinary social scientist and historian of contemporary Britain especially interested in gender, social justice and education. She won the 2023 Orwell Prize for Reporting Homelessness.*

**Heather Williams, UK:** Inverting normative ideas of 'home': Multiple Exclusion Homelessness (MEH) women, in the UK, choosing the visibility of the street as their safe spaces

Normative ideas locate women, domesticity, safety, security and privacy within the home (Moore, 1994; Young, 1997). This paper examines the lived reality of being 'without a home' for marginalised women experiencing Multiple Exclusion Homelessness, in their everyday lives and in relation to their experiences of home in childhood. Homelessness is a highly gendered phenomenon and studies of homelessness identify homeless women as needing to hide their visibility by occupying elusive and precarious spaces to manage gendered risks and to conceal their homeless identities (Bretherton, 2023; Mayock et al., 2015). As a small subset of the homeless population, MEH women engage in street culture activities: begging, street drinking, and socialising with the MEH social network, in

public spaces which heightens their visibility. MEH women have multiple and complex needs, experience repeated incidences of homelessness and endure forms of deep social exclusion. They struggle to engage with health and social services, and are thus unavailable to scholars of homelessness who recruit study participants through these agencies (Bretherton, 2020; Mayock et al., 2015). Less is known, therefore, about MEH women's everyday lives and histories. Following a 12-month ethnographic immersion, this paper uses life-history interviews and a mapping activity to explore MEH women's embodied experiences of childhood homes, stigma, invisibility and harm, which informs their ontologies and epistemologies on the street. Theoretically, Iris Marion Young's normative values of a home of 'safety', 'individuation', 'privacy' and 'preservation', as the minimal ideals against which a society should be judged (2005: 151-154) offer a starting position for framing the analysis of the experiences and understandings of home for MEH women. This paper argues that, contrary to normative understandings of homes, MEH women seek and occupy public spaces to claim a sense of safety and visibility as they cannot achieve this in homes



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