

# Women experiencing violence and homelessness: interlinked and unaddressed gender specific needs

## Introduction

Violence against women is a brutal manifestation of gender inequality and a serious violation of human rights. One in three women (33 %) in the EU has experienced physical and/or sexual violence since she was 15 years old. Increasing attention is paid both at national and European level to violence against women. A growing number of Member States has ratified the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe. If the rights therein are thoroughly implemented by governments across Europe, the Convention has the potential to effectively contribute to preventing and combating violence against women and supporting victims. It is important that women who are homeless and are survivors of violence are also considered in policy and in practice and that protection from violence and support for victims reaches also women who are homeless, very often hidden and overlooked by services for victims of gender-based violence.

Violence against women is clearly a complex problem, tackling it needs political commitment, and the effective involvement of a range of sectors providing protection from violence and support for victims. This paper will look at how violence against women is both a cause and consequence of homelessness and will also examine the gender specific needs of women who are homeless often linked to experiences of violence and trauma.

## Domestic Violence: pathway into homelessness

Violence from an intimate male partner in the domestic context is frequently cited as one of the strongest contributors to women's homelessness. Research findings in a number of countries indicate that the proportion of homeless women who have experienced domestic violence ranges from 40 per cent in the UK and Ireland to 50 per cent in Portugal and Hungary with extremely high rates of partner abuse of 100 and 93 in Spain and Sweden.<sup>1</sup> While clearly domestic violence plays a very important and contributing role in women's homelessness, it is important to note that homelessness and housing exclusion is a process and a result of a complex interplay between structural, systemic and individual factors. In the case of women's homelessness, gender-based violence intersects with broader processes of inequalities, social exclusion and marginalization.

It is concern for safety that drives women to leave the abusive partners when violence intensifies and often only when the safety of their children is at risk. Once they leave their home, they are homeless according to FEANTSA's ETHOS typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion. They might be staying for a short period at a women's refuge or women's shelters. These are specific services providing shelter, advocacy and support for women who are victims of violence and their children. Women fleeing domestic violence also often stay in homeless shelters or in insecure accommodation temporarily at friends or family or sleep rough on the streets. Women make up 29 percent of people who accessed homelessness services in 2016 across the UK<sup>2</sup> and this number is similar in other countries. According to the latest statistics in France, 38 per cent of homeless people are women.<sup>3</sup> The true number, however, is very likely to be higher than this as many more women

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<sup>1</sup> <http://womenroughsleepers.eu/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mungos.org/publication/women-at-st-mungos-a-three-year-strategy/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1281324#titre-bloc-3>

are 'hidden homeless' living outside mainstream support services. The invisibility of homeless women results in their lack of access to housing and related support and a barrier to break out of the cycle of violence.

### **Continuing violence while experiencing homelessness**

The question often asked is why women should choose between abuse and homelessness referring to the only choice between staying in their home with the violent partner or becoming homeless. But reality is that once women escape domestic violence, homelessness exposes women to continuing violence and fear. Therefore, while violence is a major cause of women's homelessness, it is also a consequence.

It is well documented that there are not enough women's refuge spaces, especially not for women with complex needs. Beside fleeing domestic violence, often women have additional issues. Homeless women with complex issues such as substance use or mental health issues are often refused because women's refuges are not equipped to deal with their complex needs.<sup>4</sup> In London alone, there is only one dedicated complex needs refuge with just ten spaces for women in the entire city.<sup>5</sup>

Not finding a place in a women's refuge, women fleeing domestic violence might be accessing homelessness services that are not equipped to respond to gender-based violence related needs and are occupied predominantly by men. The key needs of safety, security and privacy for women fleeing DV are most often not ensured in homelessness services.

As a result, women who experience homelessness and violence are left without support. While the needs of homeless women and women fleeing violence are often interlinked, the sectors supporting them are often not working together and women are falling in between services without support. A growing number of young women sleeping rough has been reported in Britain and in France.<sup>6</sup> In London alone, 1,175 women were found sleeping rough by outreach teams last year.<sup>7</sup> These women are especially vulnerable to continuing violence while they are homeless.

### **Complex needs related to violence and trauma**

Many homeless women's lives are marked by violence and abuse often starts from childhood. Of the women who participated in a research in Ireland, 92% of the women participating in the study reported that they have experienced some form of violence throughout their life and 55% experienced violence as children and during adulthood. 67% had experienced intimate partner violence, while 20% from more than one partner. 46% had experienced sexual abuse during childhood.<sup>8</sup> There is a gender specific dimension to these experiences with high levels of childhood trauma, violence and sexual violence.

The impact of trauma resulting from violence and abuse can be long-lasting. The negative mental health consequences of trauma are well documented with a high risk of depression and suicide. If not provided with adequate support tailored to their needs, women turn to drugs and alcohol in order to self-medicate and often as a coping mechanism to deal with mental health problems and trauma. Over half of female rough sleepers have problematic drug or/and alcohol use.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Focus-Ireland-National-Womens-Strategy-Submission.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/10/matter-life-or-death-why-refuges-are-turning-domestic-abuse-survivors-away>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mungos.org/publication/women-at-st-mungos-a-three-year-strategy/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.mungos.org/celebrating-st-mungos-women/>

<sup>8</sup> Mayock, P. Parker, S. & Sheridan, S. (2015) Women, Homelessness and Service Provision.

<sup>9</sup> <http://womenroughsleepers.eu/>

Women and men tend to have different patterns of substance use. Women are less likely to use alcohol, but much more likely to use drugs. There are very few integrated approaches that tackle both trauma and addiction. There is a need for women-only drug treatment services where women feel safe and where services not only address problematic drug use but also the underlying trauma. Often substance abuse leads to women becoming involved in prostitution.

Homeless women face extreme physical, emotional and psychological challenges and are in active states of crisis. As described above, they often have histories that include traumatic and adverse life experience such as childhood abuse or domestic violence. They may have experienced additional trauma associated with poverty and the loss of home and safety or trauma resulting from separation from their children. Homelessness itself can be traumatic.<sup>10</sup> Homelessness adds another layer of vulnerability and risk for continued exposure for different forms of violence.

Homelessness services may provide women who are homeless with supportive services, but often do not have the tools or resources to respond to the needs related to recent or past traumatic stress. In fact, some shelter conditions may unwittingly create environments that can in themselves be

traumatic experiences or trigger past trauma. It is very important for homelessness services to recognize that they may serve trauma survivors and be equipped to address their specific needs. Traumatized women who are homeless have a unique set of needs and require tailored and gender-specific services. Understanding gender-based violence and its impact is essential to providing quality care.

### **Implications for policy and practice**

The experience of homelessness can carry different implications across the gender spectrum. It is therefore indispensable that homelessness strategies explicitly consider women's homelessness. There is evidence on the gender perspectives on homelessness, but there is need for longitudinal studies highlighting the nature and dynamics of women's homelessness that can critically influence policy and help to ensure that services work appropriately and effectively to meet the needs of homeless women. Gender considerations should be integrated into policies and practices addressing homelessness.

Most studies highlight the complex nature of women's homelessness and the interconnectedness of the needs of women's homelessness and other support needs, for example, mental health issues, domestic violence, drug use, trauma. These needs cannot be addressed efficiently separately, and women are extremely vulnerable to fall through the gaps in policy and service. This intersection between homelessness and other support needs highlights the importance of coordinated and gender-sensitive responses to homelessness across sectors. We need to challenge existing responses to gender-based violence and women's homelessness and work across sectors including women's refuge, homelessness services, mental health and addiction services. Collaboration across sectors could bring together their expertise to address gaps in provision.

While it is crucial to recognize gender-based violence and the gendered experiences of trauma as a root cause of women's homelessness, it is equally important to look at it as a wider societal problem intersecting with broader socio-economic and structural barriers, such as poverty, the lack of affordable housing and other structural factors.

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<sup>10</sup> Homelessness as psychological trauma. Broadening perspectives.

## Glossary

**Violence against women** is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and 'shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life'.

**Domestic violence** means 'all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit or between former or current spouses or partners, whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim'.

**Gender-based violence** against women means 'violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately'.  
(Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, Council of Europe, 2011)