



Family Homelessness: a gender issue?

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Emerging debates about the role of gender in homelessness and housing (Doherty 2001; Baptista 2010; Mayock and Bretherton 2016; Pleace 2016; Bretherton 2017) have been fuelled by growing evidence that experience of homelessness is differentiated by gender.

Studies on family homelessness across Europe (Baptista et al. 2017; Bretherton, 2017) have often described it as highly gendered, i.e. there is a very disproportionate rate of homelessness experienced by lone women parents and their children compared to lone men parents with children.

The use of definitions and/or data collection frameworks which tend to exclude important dimensions of women's homelessness (e.g. hidden homelessness, family homelessness, concealed forms of rough sleeping) have been noted elsewhere (Busch-Geertsema et al. 2014, Pleace 2016).

The most recent European study on homelessness and housing exclusion in Europe (Baptista & Marlier, 2019) confirms this link between predominant definitions of homelessness and the invisibility of women's (and family) homelessness.

The evidence collected among the 35 countries covered by the study show that women usually represent a minority among the homeless population surveyed, rarely accounting for more than 20-30% of the total. However, whenever the definitions and the enumeration methods used encompass a wider reality than rough sleeping and the use of emergency accommodation services, women appear in larger proportions. Such is the case, for example, in Scotland where women accounted for 45% of the total applicants to the statutory system (2017-2018); in England where, in 2017-18, of those accepted as homeless and owed a main duty, 64% of households were families with children; in Luxembourg where women accounted for 52% of the total people counted as homeless under ETHOS-Light category 3 (homeless hostels, temporary accommodation, transitional supported accommodation and women's shelters), but only 28% of emergency shelter users (2014); and in Ireland, where the most recent homelessness count (week of March 25-31, 2019) recorded a total of 1,733 families of which 59% are single parents with children, i.e. a total of 6,484 adults and 3,821 children (58% of homeless adult men and 42% women).

The underrepresentation of women is also often linked to the paucity of data and research on family

homelessness compared to data on single homelessness among men (Bretherton 2017, Baptista et al. 2017).

In 2017, the European Observatory on Homelessness (EOH/FEANTSA) produced a comparative study on Family Homelessness which also noted the lack of data about the specific situation of homeless families across most of the 14 EU countries covered. Nevertheless, the data collected confirmed the highly gendered nature of family homelessness and that "lone women, with their children, are the bulk of the population who experience family homelessness."

One of the reasons why family homelessness seems to receive comparatively less attention than single homelessness (which is mostly about single homeless men) – and is recorded to a lesser extent – is because family homelessness is often concealed and therefore not visible. The 2017 study highlights – based on the data available – that family homelessness is often hidden homelessness.

Different forms of hidden homelessness are identified. A few countries (e.g. Denmark, UK and Ireland) collect data on hidden homelessness among single mothers. Even in countries which report a lack of data on these more concealed forms of homelessness, national experts acknowledged the existence of a proportion of single mothers with children who resort to informal supports (e.g. staying with family and/or friends) before seeking assistance from the formal support system. Several reasons contribute to women's decision to engage in this "informal support trajectory", namely: the lack of adequate accommodation provision for mothers with children, perceptions around the child protection system's operation regarding child custody, informal network support options and a determined avoidance of rough sleeping "alternatives".

The ESPN study on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (Baptista & Marlier, 2019) also acknowledges this lack of data and evidence on family homelessness across the 35 countries covered by the study. Yet, the available evidence reported by the ESPN national teams confirms the predominance of lone mothers with their children among homeless families (e.g. Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Portugal), but also the growing presence of families with children living on the streets (Romania), of homeless families living in collective centres, temporary dwellings or other forms of inadequate accommodation (Bosnia and Herzegovina), and of large multi-generational families among internally displaced Roma population (Serbia).

"Lone women, with their children, are the bulk of the population who experience family homelessness."



Evidence of the relationship between domestic and gender-based violence and family homelessness has been documented in Europe through research carried out on women's experience of homelessness (Reeve et al, 2006; FEANTSA, 2007; Quilgars & Pleace, 2010; Mayock et al, 2016; Bretherton, 2017).

The 2017 EOH comparative study on family homelessness highlights the presence of such association, alerting to the potential impact of women's use of domestic violence (DV) services – in most countries a sector of service provision totally separate from the homelessness sector – on the above mentioned undercounting of family homelessness both at the Member States level, but also across Europe as a whole.

The presence of domestic violence services is reported as an important form of temporary accommodation support for women with children. However, women and children who have become homeless as a result of domestic violence and who resort to this formal support network are often not defined and reported as being homeless, but rather as "users of domestic violence services" (e.g. refugees, transition houses). These family homelessness situations are, thus, rendered relatively invisible by the presence of domestic violence services.

Nevertheless, despite the paucity of data available and of the presence of these "invisibility mechanisms", domestic violence and relationship breakdown clearly emerge as commonly reported causes of family homelessness across the 14 countries covered by the study.

Domestic violence is a major trigger for family homelessness and it overwhelmingly affects women. More importantly, the relationship between domestic violence and homelessness or housing instability should be understood within the complex interplay between structural, institutional and individual factors which lead to the loss of accommodation and the need for support: "Women and children escaping domestic violence face numerous economic and housing difficulties when they enter – and when they try to move on from – available homelessness or domestic violence services." (Baptista et al, 2017)

Thus there is a clear need for policy and service responses to homelessness and domestic violence that address the need for further cooperation and exchange between the homelessness and the domestic violence sectors, with a view to better responding to the needs of women escaping violence and using homelessness support services, and to improving the housing outcomes of the support provided within the DV sector.

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