Experiencing a Stay in a Shelter in the Context of a Lack of Social Housing

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> **Abstract_** *This article is a response to the concept of shelterization and anchors it in the absence of systemic solutions in responding to homelessness in the Czech Republic. The article also discusses the experience of staying in a shelter in the context of the lack of social housing in the Czech Republic. Data from the research entitled Reintegration of Single Mothers Living in Shelters has been used for the analysis and description of the experience of a stay in a shelter. Views on staying in shelters are presented through three main lenses: Invisibility, Housing, and Empowering. On the basis of the data obtained in the context of the discussion, we have provided recommendations for the practice of social work in shelters.*

> **Keywords_** *shelter, shelterization, social housing, client expectations, housing, empowering, invisibility*

Introduction

Using data obtained from the *Reintegration of Single Mothers from Shelters into Permanent Housing*, this paper builds on the article by Arapoglu *et al*., (2015), Revisiting the Concept of Shelterization: Insights from Athens, Greece. Together with the authors of this article, we support the thesis that shelters form an integral part of an emergency model for managing the loss of housing. The authors state that in 2013, 514 000 persons could be considered to be living in insecure and/or

inadequate housing in Greece. In the Czech Republic, there were 119 000 persons living in insecure and/or inadequate housing in 2015 (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015).

Arapoglu *et al.,* (2015: 140) note that shelterization is conceived of as follows: "a type of institutionalisation specific to homelessness, which refers to the effects of prolonged dependency on institutional regimes that tend to colonize a homeless person's everyday routines in ways that render long(er)-term life paths and objectives impossible even to contemplate." At the same time, the authors state that they perceive shelterization as a "structural condition rather than a personal, subjective state of apathy and resignation" (Arapoglu *et al.,* 2015: 140). This paper also identifies with this perception, in particular, in the absence of legislation in the Czech Republic on social housing. Assistance to persons in need of housing is provided mostly by shelters, run by non-profit organizations. This system can be considered part of the Housing Ready concept, however, continuity of individual degrees of housing may appear problematic (see for example, Kocman and Klepal, 2014).

In relation to the absence of social housing and the frequent lack of continuity in transition from a shelter into permanent housing (see e.g. Kocman and Kelpal, 2014; Glumbíková, 2017), it also becomes a common practice in the Czech Republic that shelters have to continue to "endlessly prepare people for reintegration." As described by Arapoglu *et al.* (2015: 141), "both providers and 'clients,' the servers and the served, unable or unwilling to consider pathways to exiting homelessness other than a gradual trajectory along a continuum of care that aims to build 'housing readiness'."

While homeless shelters in the Czech Republic are included in social prevention services, they are closely tied to addressing visible aspects of homelessness. In the Czech Republic, as, for example, in Greece, there is no systemic tool to address the invisible dimensions of homelessness and thus are only targeted at the population in insecure and inadequate housing. Providers of social services for the homeless have called for system solutions by the Czech legislation to address this issue.

The conditions for the provision of social services are defined and enforced in the Czech Republic in considerable detail, both in terms of the range of activities that homeless shelters can provide to their clients[1] and the qualifications that they can use while providing these services. Many of these conditions also contribute to

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[1]   In Act No. 108/2006 Social services, Section 57 a shelter is described as follows: *"Shelters provide temporary residential services to persons in unfavourable social situations associated with the loss of housing"*. The law on social services for shelters lays down the following basic (mandatory) activities: a) *the provision of food or assistance in catering, b) accommodation, c) assistance in the application of the rights, legitimate interests and in obtaining personal affairs.* "The law on social services (108/2006) further provides that *"the provision of social services in shelters shall be done by payment…"* The stay in a shelter is limited, most often for a period of one year.

raising the threshold of shelters. Long-term below-average wages for social care services workers simultaneously have led social work professionals to relocate to work in other fields with higher salaries and limits the ability of social service providers to employ high-quality professionals. The current legislative setting also leads to "excessively bureaucratic management and monitoring structures" (similarly, see Arapoglu *et al*., 2015: 109).

This research aims to contribute to existing knowledge of homeless shelters by getting the view of shelters from the perspective of their residents.

Methodology of Research

The presented data comes from research on the reintegration of single mothers from shelters into stable housing. This research was carried out in the years 2014-2016 in five shelters in the territory of the city of Ostrava.[2] The research was conducted using a qualitative research strategy, using a participatory research approach. A participatory approach to research was chosen to bring new perspectives through direct work with people from the research environment; it makes it possible to overcome the tension between the *"relevant"* and *"experts"* and it is focused on the specific needs of participants of research. Participatory research, therefore, not only brings knowledge, but insight (Schuman and Abramson, 2000).

Two peer researchers co-operated on the research of mothers taking long term stays in shelters. The main research question was focused on finding barriers and accelerators in the process of reintegration of the single mothers from shelters into stable housing. In the course of the research, 33 interviews were carried out with three groups of research participants, 1) mothers repeatedly alternating stays in shelters (a minimum of three consecutive stays), 2) mothers leaving the shelters (departure is planned within a maximum of 10 days), and 3) research participants reintegrated to stable housing (living in an apartment for at least 18 months outside shelters and hostels and who have signed a tenancy contract there). The research participants were obtained using a deliberate selection through shelter and snow-balling. Six focus groups were also carried out (one of which was with significant other people who have identified as central to the research participant for its reintegration into permanent housing). Peer researchers were involved in all steps of the research, from coming up with questions for the semi-structured interview, through participation in the interviews and focus groups to the analysis of the data.

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2   Ostrava is the third largest city in the Czech Republic. It is an industrial city that is affected by depopulation. Ostrava has been selected because it constitutes a highly dynamic and complex environment as far as the exclusion from housing goes; there are 15 socially excluded localities, 42 hostels and 12 shelters.

The data was analysed using the constructivist grounded theory of Charmaz (see for example Charmaz, 2006). The research emphasis was on three "basic" rules of participatory research: respect for the person, the principle of justice and the principle of benefit (see Kindon *et al.*, 2010).

Analysis

Three lenses of dealing with staying at the shelter

Analysis of the data is presented using three lenses, through which the shelter can be seen from the women's perspectives. The first lens is *Empowerment*, whereby the shelter is seen to help people in housing need to promote active solutions to their current housing situation. The second lens is *Invisibility*; according to this perspective, the cause of and the actual stay in the shelter itself is a form of oppression. In this perspective, the shelter is perceived as a place where homeless people are concentrated, to be separated from the public and the public from problems related to their life situations. The third lens is *Housing*, that is, the prospect of securing accommodation within the meaning of the crisis "*a place to go*". Three themes from the data will be addressed: 1) what is the shelter? , 2) regime of the shelter, and 3) relationship with the social worker. Each theme is addressed using the perspective of the people living in the shelter and the perspective of providers of social services.

What is a shelter?

The research participants themselves emphasised the importance of expectations in relation to the shelter,

> *I think it is also important to know what you want from this asylum… I asked one of the social workers and it was good, because I didn't expect any help then as the other girls here.* (KP11)

> *It seems to me, that one of the girls, especially the new ones are waiting, God knows, what the shelter will do for them, they do not understand that the shelter is there mainly for housing and then they're waiting for help and when they don't get it, so they are insane and think they should get it, they're complaining and so… and they do not understand that the shelter does not work this way. (*PV1)

> *I actually did not expect anything from the shelter than the roof over your head, and that is what I got.* (KPR33)

The first lens, through which we look at the data, is *Housing* in the sense of "a place to go", when it is perceived as a place of shelter crisis. *"I had nowhere else to go… and I'm learning here to save…it's good that there is the sort of things here."* (KP18).

"But it's great that there are shelters, it helps mothers, and they are more favourable than the hostels" (KP11). Most of the women in the shelter who participated in the research had experience with domestic violence. The shelter therefore served as "a place to go" and the possibility "*to take a breath*" after the often very traumatic experiences. The research participants reflect that they perceived this option as a preliminary stage to the future *Empowerment* (the second lens),

> *I don't want to talk about anything at all, I don't want to remember how I ended up here, it just happened, and now I won't dig up of it.* (KP19).

> *I don't want to talk about how I got here, it hurts me all the time for hearts, you know... just it is too much for me now and I don't want to...* (KP18)

> *I endured that for 18 years... I can't even talk about it... I take the pills, I go to a psychologist... I can't.* (KP27)

The third lens is *Invisibility*. The perceived *"imprisonment"* falls in this perspective; it often appeared in the research participants alternating stays in the shelter,

> *You know, I understand, that for moms that are here for the first time, it may be fine, what they are doing here... those cooking classes, hygiene, and then there's the investigation... but for me it makes no sense... I have no spare money and they just prove that to me all the time.* (KP5)

> *I was here for the third time in the shelter, so it really didn't make sense... I couldn't learn anything new or anything... just survived here and there.* (KPR33)

In this perspective falls in the perceived stigma, that is connected with a stay in the shelter,

> *You know, I sometimes think that they are happy that we have closed somewhere and they would like to see us, as far as possible from each other.* (KP25)

> *It is said that there was a large petition composed so that the shelter is not here... so that there wouldn't be a place for moms.* (KPR32).

> KPR29 responds to the previous claim*, 'On the one hand I can understand them, I wouldn't want to have as neighbours some dirty ones... but we're normal people'.*

> *People normally don't know what a shelter is, they think it's for punishment, not to help... also I didn't know something like this is... a lot of people probably don't know, until they don't start living here...*(PV2)

In the context of *Invisibility*, homeless mothers are facing oppression and they are subject to various labels such as *"homeless"*, *"bad mother"*, *"unable to take care of"*, *"sneak thief"*, *"dirt"*, *"gipsy"* or *"the black sheep of the family".* The experience

of homeless women cannot be explained by just one form of oppression, but her intersectionality; mutual crossing of different forms of oppression (see for example, Grillo, 2013; Graham and Schiele, 2010).

Regime of the shelter

From the perspective of the residents of the shelter, the regime of the shelter can be viewed under the *Housing* lens.

> *Well, I understand that there are such rules, but it doesn't make sense this… why do we get paroled, I'm not sick, or somehow defective not to be able to leave the shelter.* (KP5)

> *The visit must be reported, they can go out, sometimes into the kitchen, but not in the room or so… those hours there are limited…it's like visits in the hospital.* (KP15)

The unavailability of social housing makes it impossible for some clients to move to normal housing after a certain stage of adaptation or improvement of the social situation, and therefore the shelter remains in a mode that is designed just to adapt to "*take a breath*", the solution to other problems, not only to provide housing. Many of the residents of shelters, in a situation where anything other than housing needs is necessary, are experiencing the frustration of collective coexistence and its conditions, and the rules that the shelter requires.

The regime of the shelter can also be seen as *Invisibility*,

> *Well, we have to be here to six, we can no longer go out. When we, moms, want to go out at night, so we get paroled into eleven o'clock a week. Well, and if someone comes in and we can't handle it within the hour, they shall be deducted from those paroles. Only when I go on a small purchase, so it is all reported, even couple of minutes. When it's the afternoon lull, so they keep yelling at us to be quiet, and we have to be in the house, or outside it. It's from twelve to three o'clock.* (KP5)

The regime of the shelter can also bring a perceived *Empowerment* of the ability to take care of oneself,

> *You know, I understand, that for moms that are here for the first time, it may be fine, what they're doing here… those cooking classes, hygiene, and then there's the saving…* (KP5)

In this context, the Empowerment can be related to the limited visits and fencing area of the shelter providing the possibility to "take a breath",

> *He kept yelling under the window, still kept standing in front of the door. Perhaps because of the people like him, here it is fenced.* (PV2)

The Relationship with the Social Worker

A social worker is seen as a representative of "*Accommodation*" to the residents of the shelter. His job is to move the residents of the shelter into stable housing. The question, however, is whether he has the tools to do that, and whether there is, in a non-existent system of social housing, somewhere to move the clients,

> *She sends me all the time on pointless meetings, now I had to go to report to shelter, where I didn't want to go at all, but I have to have it cleared at Mrs. social…*(KP8)

> *We're doing this whole session just what she wants, why ever not she asks if I want to discuss something.* (KP5)

> *It seems to me, that it is sometimes too difficult for them… they have to watch you over here, take care and probably the supervisor evaluates them according to some tables around, ain't it?… They must know that the relationship between us is not good and he doesn't know what to do… or the boss should be forcing them to treat us that way* (PV2).

Social workers are also perceived by the residents of the shelter through the lens of *Empowerment*,

> *There are some good social workers in the shelters, like the supervisor here is nice, really cool, it makes you feel that she is really interested in your problems.* (KP17)

> *The good social worker will support you but the bad one not… in the shelters I met the good ones… it seems to me, however, that there are less of them than the others… it's not easy but not everyone can do this kind of job.* (KP24).

In the context of *Invisibility,* the social worker is seen as the guardian of the order of the facility,

> *She's not even trying…to discuss the issue with you… not trying to help… still just gives orders, it's useless… I go see her once a week for an hour and a half… just because I have to.* (PV1)

> *The set of rules here is a nonsense… I wonder if we must do all these things they want us to do… instead of asking you how you are, so they only want to see the receipts of everything you have bought in a month and the reason for that is that you don't have enough money which you will never have and you were to ask them for lentils…* (KP3)

Discussion

The research participants perceive the role of shelters in various ways – *Housing*, *Empowerment* and *Invisibility* so we consider the shelters to be providers of shelters and social work, which may be supportive within the solution to the current life situation. Therefore, in order to fulfil these shelters optics, we consider it important to reflect on the challenges that derive from them. This research indicates a conflict between the mission of a shelter housing service (the provision of emergency housing) and the expectation of "having a home" by the users of the facility.

This expectation should be contextualised in the virtual absence of social housing in the Czech Republic, where homeless people often do nothing else than alternate between shelters because they cannot access stable housing. Many clients, thus, find themselves in conditions that respond to different levels of needs, with a restrictive regime, collective coexistence adapted to the environment of people, some of whom may or may not need to stabilize, to learn certain competences, but do expect to have an accommodation.

The research shows that the shelters are often seen through the lens of *Invisibility*, when it is perceived as a shelter for "*unadaptable people*", raising fear for the homeless person. The research participants in this context also mention fears of stigma and labels *("homeless", "bad mother"…),* which are often associated with a shelter. This illustrates the need for improved understanding of homeless shelters and homeless people, for example, by accentuating the structural causes of homelessness.

The data also indicates that shelters could better accommodate individualized, non-routine provision of needs of the residents in shelters (similarly see Padgett *et al*., 2006; Tischler, 2007; Cooper *et al*., 2009; Walsh *et al*., 2009; Dashora *et al.,* 2012). It is necessary to reflect on the fact that the needs of homeless people are multi-dimensional, complex and heterogeneous. This reflection could take various forms one of which is research in shelter facilities. Participatory action research allows us to gain insight into the situation of the residents of shelters and suggest possible changes in the facility (see for example, Kindon *et al.*, 2010).

In narratives of research participants, it has also been repeatedly pointed out that social workers in shelters have multiple roles (the role of the adviser, the guardian of order, etc.) and the need to divide these roles. From the reflection of the research participants, the social worker in the facility is into the dilemma of helping versus control, both of which are in a certain way institutionalized (similar to for example, McLaughlin, 2005). The research participants also reflect on the burden on social workers in the shelters. They argued that the social worker is *"caught"* in the regime of a particular institution, in which he has to work, and often this work is not posi-

tively evaluated, which is burdensome for him. Ferguson and Lavalette (2004) and Gojová and Glumbíková (2015) describe in this context the powerlessness of the social workers, stemming from a lack of tools provided by social work for the solution of social problems and the inability to participate in the construction of their solutions. Shier and Graham (2014) state that social workers may feel helpless (in the system) and so it is often difficult for them to look at oneself as a professional. Grant and Kinman (2014) describe the increasing work-related stress with social workers, which stems from the standards laid down for social work.

Recommendations can be made as a result of this research: greater reflection on the roles of social workers in shelter; increase the number of social workers in shelters; ensure the education of social workers, for example, in access-oriented trauma or in crisis intervention so that social workers are able to respond to the needs of clients of the service; strengthen their legal security in a meaningful, unambiguous and less "bound" system.

Conclusion

In the Czech Republic, shelters form an integral part of an emergency model for managing housing loss. The shelterization concept is considered, in accordance with the statement of the research participants (and in accordance with Arapoglu *et al.,* 2015), to be a structural phenomenon due to the lack of a systematic solution to homelessness in the Czech Republic. In the absence of the Social Housing Act, the Czech government seems to have shifted responsibilities onto social service providers.

This situation contributes to shelters being adversely perceived by the public as "facilities for the socially maladjusted". People living in the shelter are aware of the impossibility of these facilities to meet their long-term housing expectations or actual relocation of the service users to permanent housing. Nevertheless shelters are often perceived by the clients as a source of empowerment and recovery.

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