



Homelessness and Domestic Violence

Tailoring services to meet the needs of women who are homeless and fleeing domestic violence.

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Introduction

The problem of domestic violence is a serious and far-reaching one, which affects society as a whole. It both arises from, and is a reflection of, power-structures and how they order society and the place of women within it. Domestic violence is a problem that cuts across all backgrounds and socio-economic groups. Violence against women is a major obstacle to equality, development and peace and nullifies or impairs the full enjoyment of human rights by women. The reduction and elimination of all forms of violence against women is the focus of ongoing international campaigns of action by human rights bodies such as the UN, Amnesty International and the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe's "Campaign to Combat Violence Against Women Including Domestic Violence" arises out of the Recommendation R(2002)5 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Protection of Women against Violence¹, which is also an interesting background to the current paper, as it lays down the responsibilities of member states of the Council of Europe towards women experiencing, or threatened by, domestic violence.

Nor should the scale of the problem be underestimated. Although data collection in this area is still developing in many countries, the statistics that are available paint a frightening picture. The following information is taken from the 2006 stocktaking study of the Council of Europe, entitled: "Combating Violence against Women":

"An overview suggests that across countries, one-fifth to one-quarter of all women have experienced physical violence at least once during their adult lives, and more than one-tenth have suffered sexual violence involving the use of force.

Significant numbers of women suffer domestic abuse, defined as a pattern of repeated physical, emotional and sexual abuse that risks or causes fear, distress, and very often health damage. Secondary data analyses now under way in several countries support an estimate that about 12% to 15% of all women have been in a relationship of domestic abuse after the age of 16. Rates of physical and sexual violence by former partners after separation are substantially higher, indicating that the protection of women is not secured when they end an abusive relationship."²

It is clear, even from these brief introductory lines, that domestic violence is a complex problem. Tackling it implicates a range of actors and requires political support and commitment, in order to develop an effective approach that can have a real impact on reducing and eliminating violence and supporting those who have been victims of it. Nonetheless, the homeless sector certainly has an important role to play in relation to women fleeing domestic violence, as part of an overall strategy. While structures and approaches to meeting the needs of women fleeing domestic violence differ across Europe, it is clear that such services must be carefully tailored in order to be supportive and effective. This paper will seek to outline some of the findings that have emerged in relation developing services to meet the needs of women fleeing domestic violence and to supporting them to move on and out of a life overshadowed by the constant threat of violence.

¹ Recommendation No R (2002)5 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the Protection of Women against Violence, available online at: [http://www.coe.int/T/E/Human_Rights/Equality/PDF_Rec\(2002\)5_E.pdf](http://www.coe.int/T/E/Human_Rights/Equality/PDF_Rec(2002)5_E.pdf)

² "Combating violence against Women: Stocktaking Study on the measures and actions taken in Council of Europe member states": [http://www.coe.int/T/E/Human_Rights/Equality/PDF_CDEG\(2006\)3_E.pdf](http://www.coe.int/T/E/Human_Rights/Equality/PDF_CDEG(2006)3_E.pdf)

FEANTSA recognises that men, children and older people may also be victims of domestic violence at the hands of partners or family members. Equally, perpetrators of violence may be at risk of homelessness. However, the focus of the present statement is on the situation and needs of women fleeing domestic violence.

Domestic violence: A possible pathway into homelessness

Victims of domestic violence may live with it for a long time before finally managing to flee the perpetrator and seek help. Once they leave their home, they are homeless according to FEANTSA's ETHOS typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion³ and are considered legally homeless in many EU countries. In some countries there is a specific NGO-led or public system of women's refuges and services for women in this situation; while in others, the NGO providers who work with people who are homeless also run services for women fleeing domestic violence. However, these services are inadequate and patchy in many countries and there is a real need to use the experience and learning that has been gathered on this issue to improve services across the EU. What is more, this need has been clearly recognised at international level.

The Recommendation from the Council of Europe, cited previously, also emphasises the responsibility that states have to develop services for women fleeing domestic violence and for facilitating the actors who provide them to reach a better standard. It emphasises the importance of "encouraging at all levels the work of NGOs involved in combating violence against women and establishing active co-operation with these NGOs, including appropriate logistic and financial support". It also sets out that the services to be provided should:

"ensure that victims, without any discrimination, receive immediate and comprehensive assistance provided by a co-ordinated, multidisciplinary and professional effort, whether or not they lodge a complaint, including medical and forensic medical examination and treatment, together with post-traumatic psychological and social support as well as legal assistance; this should be provided on a confidential basis, free of charge and be available around the clock."

When considering how to improve services, it is also vital to bear in mind that women who are fleeing domestic violence are in a highly vulnerable state. The 2006 Council of Europe stocktaking study on combating violence against women⁴ describes the impact of domestic violence on women as follows:

"Significant numbers of women suffer domestic abuse, defined as a pattern of repeated physical, emotional and sexual abuse that risks or causes fear, distress, and very often health damage [...] The health consequences of violence are serious and reach far beyond the immediate injuries, such as bruises and welts, fractures, lacerations and abrasions, and reduced physical functioning. Common health consequences include: psychosomatic problems such as chronic pain syndromes, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, phobias and panic disorders, depression and anxiety. Women who have been physically, sexually or emotionally abused are at significantly higher risk for the excessive use of nicotine, alcohol, and

³ For more information on the ETHOS typology see: <http://feantsa.horus.be/code/EN/pg.asp?Page=484>

⁴ "Combating Violence Against Women : Stocktaking Study on the Measures and Actions taken in Council of Europe Member States", available online at [http://www.coe.int/T/E/Human_Rights/Equality/PDF_CDEG\(2006\)3_E.pdf](http://www.coe.int/T/E/Human_Rights/Equality/PDF_CDEG(2006)3_E.pdf)

psychopharmacological medication. They also need psychiatric care four to five times more often than others, and have attempted suicide five times more often, etc. Their sexual and reproductive health is affected as well: women suffer an increased risk of unwanted pregnancy, foetal injuries, and complications during pregnancy and miscarriage, a higher risk of sexually transmitted infections, and other gynaecological disorders, infertility, and sexual dysfunction.”⁵

With this in mind, it is useful to give consideration to some of the principles that have emerged in relation to developing services to better meet the needs of women who have been victims of domestic violence.

Developing and improving services for women fleeing domestic violence:

The principles outlined in this section are drawn from several studies carried out in services for homeless women and women fleeing domestic violence in the Netherlands, Vienna and Germany. The sources are outlined below.⁶ These common findings show that some basic elements can ensure that services better meet the needs of women who have experienced domestic violence:

- Possibility of accessing Services just for women and with female professionals on the staff

Different approaches have been developed in different countries to developing and improving services for women fleeing domestic violence. The thinking in some countries is that services should aim to create a safe space for women and so it is preferable to have unmixed services. This is a way of protecting women from any possible harassment and violence from men and creating a privileged space where they can assess their situation. The creation of a safe space for women aims to empower them and support them to communicate about their experiences. It can be an additional source of support and help unrestricted communication to have such services staffed by female professionals.

In other countries, the approach is different. The thinking is that it can be important to have positive male role models and relationships within the services for both women and children. Unmixed services also have a place, but more in an initial phase or for particularly vulnerable groups, such as ethnic minorities.

- Practical Help and Support

Women using such services have identified what they most need as support with practical issues such as finding housing, accessing benefits and employment and getting their administrative situation in order. This kind of practical help is vital for them to be able to make a new start. Equally, language help and training for migrant women can be an important element for integration.

⁵ Ibid, pg 10

⁶ **Sources Used :**

Enders-Dragässer, U. : « Women, exclusion and homelessness in Germany » from Women and Homelessness in Europe, Edgar, B. and Doherty, J. 2001, Policy Press

J. Wolf, I. Jonker, S. Nicholas, V. Meertens, S.: “Maat en baat van de vrouwenopvang. Onderzoek naar vraag en aanbod”, Amsterdam 2006.

CATCH – The Needs of Homeless Women, Report from the Catch Project, available at <http://www.catch-eu.org/about.php>

- *Trauma and mental health support services*

As was made very clear in the Council of Europe description of the health situation of women fleeing domestic violence cited above, women in this situation are often severely traumatised by violence and abuse and it is vital that they receive the help that they need to deal with this. Trauma and mental health support services need to be readily available and geared towards the needs of victims of violence. Such services should be part of an integrated service offer available to women in this situation and the necessary cross-sectoral working to facilitate this should be developed.

- *Working with children and creating a stable environment for them*

Women fleeing domestic violence may be accompanied by their children and it is fundamental to the wellbeing of mother and children that services be able to accommodate them properly. Children in this situation are distressed and vulnerable and feel the loss of stability. It is important that mothers accompanied by children still have the space to look after them and have some family life with them, so that they can establish a sense of security. It is also very important to check the health and wellbeing of the children and stabilise their school situation quickly.

- *Supporting the building of social networks*

Many women consider that rebuilding social networks and creating new social contacts is a very important part of moving on from their situation and welcome the opportunities to do so that services offer them. Help and support in this area is seen as vital. Again, language training can help migrant women who do not speak the language to develop social contacts and break out of isolation.

- *Follow-up to continue to support women after they leave services*

There is a need for continued support for women after they leave services, when they may find it very hard to cope with the new environment and the efforts they are making to ensure a fresh start. It is crucial that they be helped in an ongoing way, or there is a significant risk that health problems could resurface and they may end up in a vulnerable situation again.

- *Need for services to work with the perpetrators of domestic violence*

While this paper deals mainly with the needs of women fleeing domestic violence, it is also important that there be services to work with the perpetrators of domestic violence. There is also a need for programmes and services that take account of their situation and work with them.

Women fleeing domestic violence: some particularly vulnerable groups

- *Migrant Women*

The Council of Europe Recommendation particularly emphasises that women must receive services without discrimination and that States must “in particular, ensure that all services and legal remedies available for victims of domestic violence are provided to immigrant women upon their request.” This stipulation arises directly from the fact that in many European countries, migrant women find it much harder to access the services that they need than their national counterparts. Research from several different European countries highlights the particularly difficult situation of migrant women fleeing domestic violence. The situation of undocumented migrant women is particularly problematic and they may be turned away by services they urgently need. What is more, undocumented women migrants

may be the victims of trafficking and exploitation. It clearly needs to be a fundamental operating principle of services for women in this situation that they are available to all women without discrimination on any grounds.

- *Women in mainstream homeless services who have experienced domestic violence*

Women who have become homeless through domestic violence may also end up being received in mainstream homelessness services. Experience of street homelessness and other possible factors like substance abuse or mental ill-health may lead them to access services not specifically geared towards women who have experienced domestic violence. Mainstream low-threshold homeless services tend in fact to be geared towards men and may need to be critically reassessed from a gender perspective to ensure that they also meet the needs of the women who use them. Women may be vulnerable to violence and abuse in a male dominated environment and it is important that they have the option of a safe, separate place to sleep. It is important to have good cooperative links with services for women fleeing domestic violence. Links with police and forensic services may need to be developed also. The specific needs that they may have in the areas of mental and physical health must also be taken into account. It is important that staff working in these services be trained to recognise the needs of these women and how best to support and orient them towards the services that they need.

Prevention: Supporting women threatened by violence and the loss of their home

It is very important to develop services that work to prevent women being driven into homelessness by domestic violence. It is very useful to offer resources and support before women reach the crisis point of having to flee their homes. Where there is a problem of work balance in households, this can be a contributing factor to domestic violence and policies in this area may have a positive effect. There is a role for employers and trade unions in prevention. There is also an important role for readily accessible counselling and support services that can help women to assess their options and help them with practical issues such as being rehoused, finding employment, helping to ensure that their children can change schools smoothly if need be etc. As part of a preventative approach, it is also necessary to assess the legal framework and the options that it provides for women – it is important that the legal possibility exist for women to remain in their own homes while the perpetrators of violence should leave them.

Conclusions:

- Providing good quality, accessible services to women fleeing domestic violence is a vital part of an overall strategy to reduce and eliminate violence against women.
- Women in this situation have specific needs and problems and services must be tailored to meet them. Services must take account of the vulnerable, distressed and often very unhealthy state of the women who use them.
- Common elements that have emerged in different EU states as vital to meet the needs of women fleeing domestic violence include the following: services that are readily accessible; unisex services staffed by women; services that provide much needed care and medical support, including trauma and mental health support services; services that provide good help and support in relation to practical issues such as housing, employment, benefits etc.; and services that support and provide opportunities for building up social contacts.

- In many countries services for women fleeing domestic violence are much harder to access for migrant women who need them. This urgently needs to be addressed.
- Women using mainstream homeless services may also often have experienced domestic violence and abuse. There is need to bring a gender perspective to bear on these services, which tend to more oriented towards men, to ensure that they meet the needs of the women who use them.
- There is an important role for counselling and support services to help prevent domestic violence or the threat of it leading to a crisis and to homelessness. Timely support to be rehoused and build towards a fresh start can help to avoid homelessness through domestic violence.
- It is vital that there should be a clear legal framework on domestic violence, which safeguards the rights and entitlements of women fleeing domestic violence and that information about these should be clear and accessible.