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The Links between Violence against Women and Homelessness



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Background

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 was after the age of 15.¹ Increasing attention is paid both at national and European level to violence against women. It is certainly an issue that is not only on the political agenda, but is also being tackled through legislative means: important European legislation has been introduced in recent years. By laying down clear legal obligations for governments, the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe, if ratified and implemented by governments across Europe, has the potential to contribute effectively to preventing and combating violence against women and supporting victims.² It is important that the needs and views of women who are homeless and are survivors of violence be taken into account in the drawing up of policy and in practice and to ensure that protection from violence and support for victims also reaches women who are homeless and are often living hidden from public view.

Definitions

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'.³

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'.⁴

Violence against women is clearly a complex problem. Tackling it needs political commitment, and the effective involvement of a range of sectors, including the homelessness sector. This paper will look at how violence against women, including domestic violence, leads to homelessness, and will examine the particular needs of women who are homeless and look at how this can inform policy and practice.

Domestic Violence: A Pathway into Homelessness

There are many different reasons why a person becomes homeless. Most (male) homeless people become homeless through a combination of personal problems, social protection gaps and service delivery deficiencies. But for women, the single most common reason for becoming homeless is violence.

¹ <http://fra.europa.eu/fr/publication/2014/violence-femmes-enquete-ue-resultats-en-bref>

² Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence

³ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence

⁴ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence



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It is concern for safety that drives women to leave 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 women's refuge or shelter. 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 with friends or family or, less often, sleep rough on the streets. Women make up 26 percent of people who accessed homelessness services in 2013 across the UK⁵ and this number is similar in other countries. The true number, however, is very likely to be higher than this as many more women are experiencing 'hidden homeless' - living outside mainstream support services. It is safe to say that women make up at least fourth quarter of the homeless population.

Specific Needs of Women who are Homeless, Linked to their Experience of Violence, Trauma and Stigma

Violence Throughout Life

Many homeless women's lives are marked by violence and abuse often starts from childhood. Of the women who participated in research by the Simon Communities of Ireland, 92% had experienced some form of violence throughout their life and 55% had experienced violence as children and during adulthood. 67% had experienced intimate partner violence, 20% of whom by more than one partner. 46% had experienced sexual abuse during childhood.⁶

We can see clearly that the complex needs of women who are homeless are rooted in histories of violence and abuse starting often from childhood. Violence and resulting trauma erodes resilience and the ability to cope with later challenges and therefore makes women more vulnerable to homelessness. The impact of trauma caused by violence is long-lasting and recurrent in the lives' of homeless women.

What is evident is that in the case of women who are homeless, there is a gender-specific dimension to their experiences with high levels of childhood trauma, violence and sexual violence. If they had had past and present experiences of violence and abuse, women who are homeless often find it easier to access women-only support and spaces.

Motherhood

Almost half of the women who participated in the research are mothers. They are experiencing motherhood as difficult and distressing due to their homelessness. 80 percent of them had their children taken into care or put up for adoption. Many women are traumatised by the loss of their children. The loss of or the separation from their children can be devastating for the women and yet, services are often ill-equipped to understand and response to this kind of trauma. Women often internalise shame and guilt about 'failing' as a mother, which can be a very significant barrier against recovery from homelessness.

⁵ St Mungos research: <http://rebuildingshatteredlives.org/>

⁶ Research results to be published soon



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Complex Health Issues

Substance use

The impact of trauma resulting from violence and abuse can be long-lasting. If not provided with adequate support tailored to their needs, women may turn to drugs and alcohol in order to self-medicate or 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.⁷ 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 is extensive research on how trauma (especially childhood trauma) and drug dependence is interrelated, but 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.

Mental Health

Among the general population, women are more likely to have poor mental health than men. 70 percent of the women who accessed St Mungo's Broadway services in England have mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders. Experiences of violence and trauma also create specific mental health needs.

Trauma and its Impact

Trauma is not merely the experience of a stressful event, but rather consists of experiencing and perceiving an event as life threatening and overwhelming; trauma compromises ordinary adaption by rendering the individual helpless and powerless.⁸ The term 'complex trauma' is used to describe the experience of multiple and/or chronic and prolonged traumatic events. 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 trauma associated with poverty and the loss of home and safety. In itself, the very state of homelessness can be traumatic.⁹ It is certain that homelessness adds another layer of vulnerability and risk for continued exposure for different forms of violence. The lack of trauma-informed care for homeless women compounds their vulnerability.

After entering into a homelessness setting, a sustained condition of emotional and physical vulnerability can disrupt or sabotage attempts at independence. Homelessness services may provide women who are homeless with supportive services, but often do not have the tools or resources to deal directly with recent or past traumatic stress. In fact, some shelter conditions may unwittingly create environments that can in themselves be traumatic experiences. It is very important for homelessness services to recognize that they may serve trauma survivors and be equipped to address their specific needs. Trauma-informed service delivery is conscious of the effects that trauma can have on the targeted population and is committed to providing services in a manner that is sensitive to trauma survivors.¹⁰ Traumatized women who are homeless have a unique set of needs and require tailored services. Understanding

⁷ Women Rough Sleepers project

⁸ Betru, yodit K., "Supporting transitionally homeless women in rural regions: the need for trauma-informed case management" (2013). Doctorate in Social Work (DSW) Dissertations. Paper 42.

⁹ L. Goodman: Homelessness as psychological trauma. Broadening perspectives.

¹⁰ 'Envisioning a trauma-informed service system: a vital paradigm shift', Harris & Fallot, 2001



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trauma and its impact is essential to providing quality care. Being “trauma informed” requires that service providers tailor their services to meet the unique needs of trauma survivors and avoid additional harm.

Multiple Exclusion and Stigma

Homeless women are amongst the most stigmatised groups in society. The day-to-day manifestations of stigma and labels harm and undermine the self-esteem women who are homeless, and as a result, they become isolated and demoralised. When social stigma becomes internalised, so-called ‘self-stigma’ has a profound impact on the ability of the person to recover from homelessness. Women who are homeless carry multiple stigma and labels (‘bad mother’, ‘prostitute’ etc.) which make it difficult to ask for help. The fear of being judged and not living up to the expectations society places on women is often a reason why women do not want to seek help in homelessness services and choose to live outside the service system.¹¹

Implications for Policy and Practice

Women who are homeless have a number of severe, interrelated and exceptionally complex problems which contribute to their homelessness and make recovery a challenge. The experience of homelessness can carry different implications across the gender spectrum. This is why homelessness strategies must explicitly make room for women’s homelessness. There is already a considerable body of existing evidence around gender perspectives on homelessness and how they can critically influence policy and help to ensure that services work appropriately and effectively to meet the needs of homeless women.

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 and patterns of (re)victimisation. These needs cannot be addressed efficiently if they are addressed separately and women are extremely vulnerable to falling through the gaps in policy and service provision. This intersection between homelessness and other support needs highlights the importance of providing coordinated responses to homelessness that are sensitive to gender differences associated with the process of becoming homeless and the experience of homelessness itself.

¹¹ <http://rebuildingshatteredlives.org/>



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For further information please consult: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/easi>

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