Exploring Homeless Women's Experiences of Safety Using Their 'Visual Voices'- An Introduction to and Preliminary Findings From Participatory Action Research in 7 European Countries

Dr Méabh Savage, SETU Waterford

Dr Boróka Fehér, BMSZKI

Dalma Fabian, FEANSTA Women

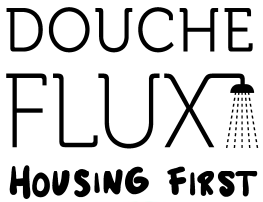
Invisibility in Service Design and Delivery

- Historically and currently women's diverse needs and lived experiences, particularly those relating to safety, have been invisible/or marginal in homelessness policy, service design and delivery (Savage 2016; 2022; 2025; Fehér–Lengyel 2023; Bretherton 2017; Reeve 2018).
- Women's invisibility is exacerbated by patriarchal, malecentric and gendered norms shaping homelessness and related policies and service design and delivery (ibid.).
- For example, gender neutral accommodation can invisibilise women's safety needs and result in a lack of safe spaces for women experiencing multiple inequalities (Bimpson, Green and Reeve 2021; Savage 2022; 2025).
- Women-only services with children can exclude women with multiple and intersectional needs (often arising from unmet support needs owing to DSGBV-related trauma), including mothers unaccompanied by their children and pregnant women (Savage 2022; 2025).
- These gaps in service provision can prolong women's experiences of homelessness and compound the depth of traumas they experience and ultimately their disconnection from support and relationships of care (Mayock et al. 2015; Savage 2022).
- The voices and lived experiences of women experiencing homelessness are marginal and /or frequently invisible from designing the responses they need to enable them to access housing and safety, from where they can begin to recover from the depth of injustices they have experienced.
- A key aim of this project is to address this gap!

Erasmus+ Women's Voices- Safety in Homelessness

- Trans-European Project between 7 countries, 13 NGOs supporting women experiencing homelessness; exploring women's safety/lack of safety in homelessness.
- Using methodology of 'Women's Visual Voices' to co-construct a training tool with women and staff to encourage gender-responsive service provision.
- As you will see from examples of the Women's Visual Voices, emerging Invisibility Of Women And Their Safety Needs across a range of homelessness, health and related services.

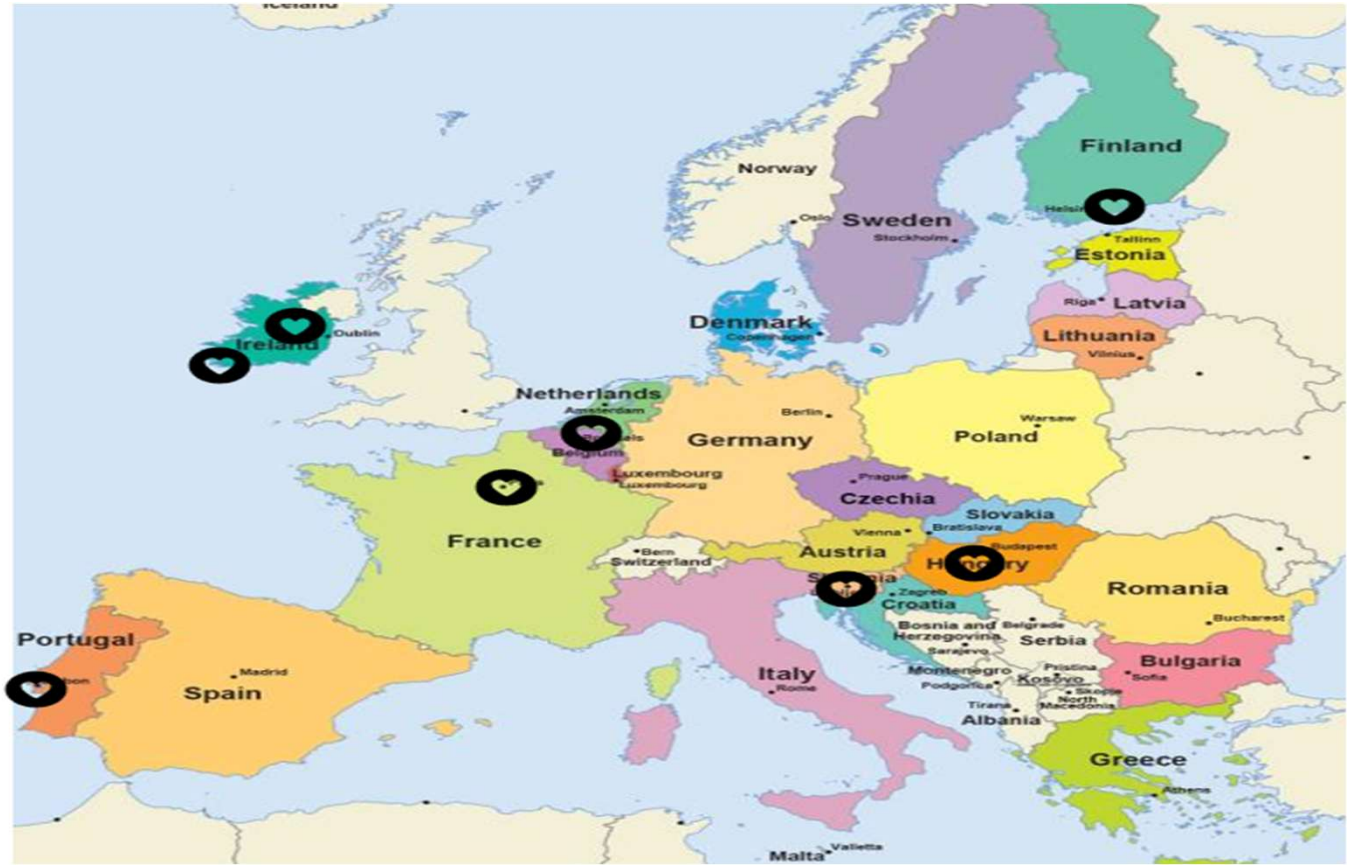
Women's Voices-putting women's voices into homelessness support -Partners and Allies in the project



Erasmus+

Dr Méabh Savage 2025

The countries involved in the project



Women's Visual Voices Design and Methodology

Project aims:

- The aim of the project is to enhance the knowledge base on women's homelessness within Europe, with a particular focus on safety. It also aims to improve safety for women within local homelessness services.
- Several phases to this project, a small part of which constitute research, while others are part of the development of an educational tool, co-creating its content during workshops with staff and women.
- All aspects of the project are considered ethical. Ethical approval was secured from SETU for the project.
- In conducting the project,, we are seeking to understand the following:
- How do women in homelessness define and experience safety or lack of safety in homelessness services? (VV)
- How do staff in homelessness services understand and respond to women's experiences of (lack of) safety (VV)
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of using visual voices methodology as a training tool with lived and living experts and staff for co-producing gender responsive services changes? (Reflective entries and evaluations from facilitator staff).

The anticipated project outcomes are as follows:

For staff: A better understanding of women's service experiences and support needs. Learning of new skills and tools.

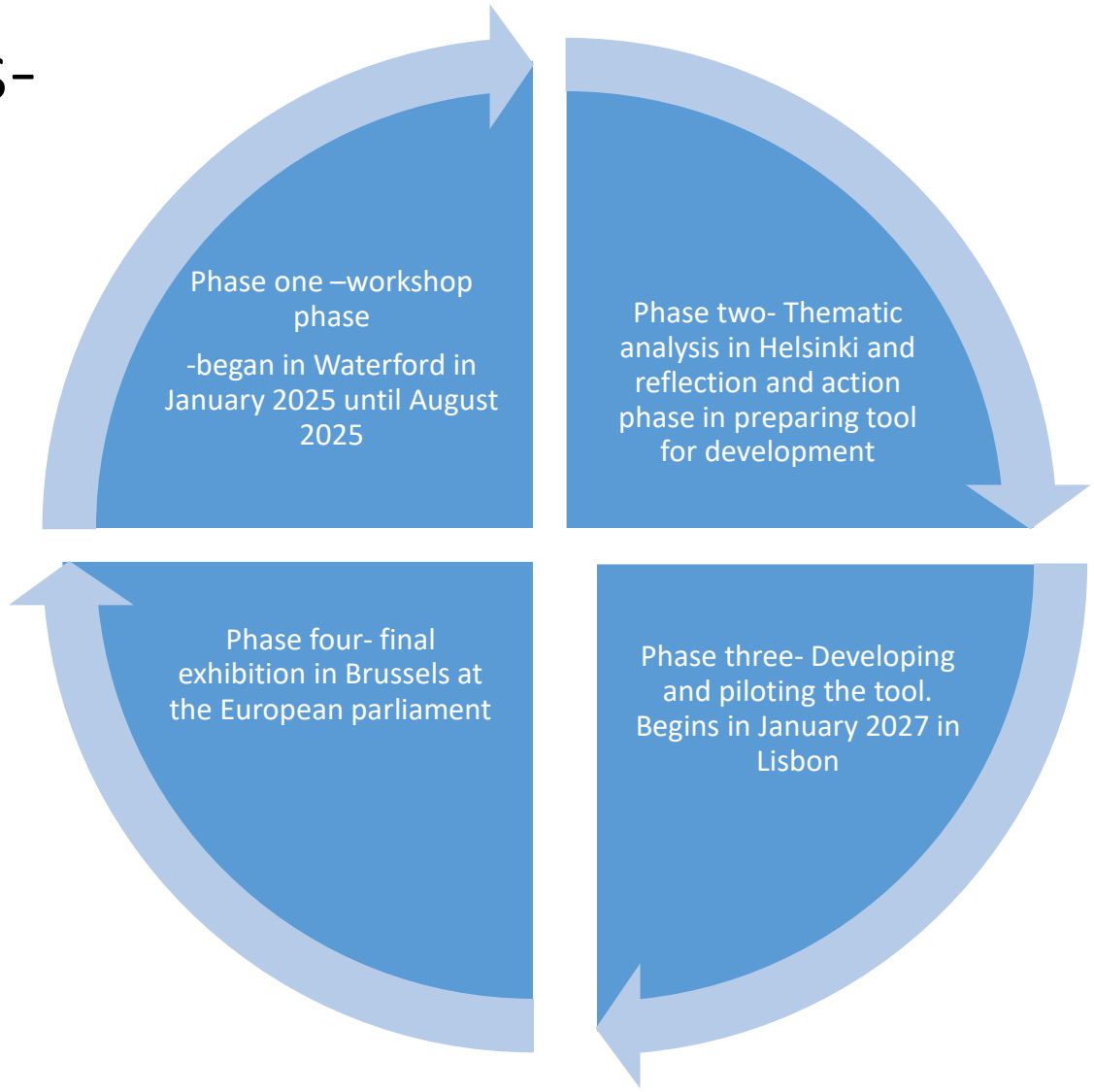
For women in homelessness: Improved services for women, more democratic approach to service development and to developing training tools.

For the wider network: improved understanding of women's homelessness as a result of the training and dissemination of the project outcomes.

Methodology and methods

- Participatory action research methodology involving facilitator staff (project partners) working in homelessness services, women accessing services and staff working.
- Methods of group/individual workshops, photo voice as a community needs assessment tool (Wang and Burris 1997), critical reflection, in workshops with staff and women accessing services.
- Based on feminist principles, critical (Freirean model of) education and community-based photography
- Seeks to centre women's voices and participation in naming the issues of concern to them and as a way to bring about social change.
- For us, we are using this methodology to co-create a curriculum for change- a training tool based on the women's Visual Voices- to learn about ways to create more gender responsive homelessness and related services for women.

Project phases-



How we involved women in the production of data (visual voices) that has a direct influence on their lives- The Workshop Phase

- Facilitator staff (FS) working in services (insider access) so established links.
- Suggested recruitment strategy and supporting documentation as part of the training
- Purposive and snowball sampling through information sessions.
- Creative, flexible and inclusive approach to workshops and methods to create safe spaces
- Diverse groups of women accessing services that are often ‘hidden’.
- Obviously challenges arose but ongoing support provides online to FS.

Phase two- reflection and action

- Helsinki- five days-collective thematic analysis of women's visual voices, reflection and collective learning.
- Activities to promote critical reflection and action during the sessions and following sessions before we meet for the thirst phase in Lisbon. Using reflective journaling is central to this part of the project for FS.

Emerging collective findings from the sessions:

- Safety is a privileged concept that exists on a continuum and also in some ways like two sides of the same coin.
- The physical environment can provide safety but also can be a source of danger and significant anxiety.
- The importance of safe housing/home to enabling safety and from which all other needs can be met.
- Safe spaces-Relationships (peers, men, staff), environments, nature, community.
- Access to income and resources and being enabled/ having the conditions which allow for participation to live in their own home, have privacy and be part of the community.
- See examples overleaf

“A Beautiful Sight”

The picture shows the Parliament and the Danube, seen from the Margaret Bridge. This is one of my routes home from work. When I come here, my thoughts clear, and I feel a sense of peace. I don’t like being confined. I need to be outside, in nature, surrounded by greenery. It has a healing effect on me. Out here, I don’t feel like I’m being terrorized, and my freedom isn’t taken from me. I don’t even feel good in my own room. When I was living with my mother and her partner, she was harsh—she had violent, abusive impulses toward me. She wanted the man she lived with to be with me… forcefully. I try to process and cope with all this through nature. I use healing mantras:

“I’m outdoors. I’m safe. No one can hurt me anymore.”

Co-funded by the European Union

© Vadárvácska/Hungary/

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Tempus Public Foundation. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

“The Space of Unwanted Touches”

The day centre is very crowded, and neither clients nor staff have the freedom or safety of personal space. Sometimes by accident, but often intentionally, our bodies are touched by people with whom we would not want to have such contact.

Co-funded by the European Union

© Déva/Hungary/

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Tempus Public Foundation. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

“Location”

The area where the door is located feels very unsafe. I constantly fear being attacked, beaten, or robbed. I often experience panic attacks at the door, just hoping I can get inside quickly without having to wait outside for too long.

Co-funded by the European Union

© Celine Dion/Ireland/

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Tempus Public Foundation. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

“Safe spaces”

I feel safe when I’m in my room, and the things I’ve brought into it help make me feel comfortable in my own space and give me peace of mind—something I’ve never really had before. The girls around the house also make me feel at ease. It’s a nice place to come back to, to have a chat and a laugh

Co-funded by the European Union

© Josie//Ireland

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Tempus Public Foundation. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

“Safe haven”

A house is a safe haven, a shelter that many people need. When I was living on the streets, I needed a roof, a refuge for the cold days. I found shelter from the rain in an abandoned building. I could hide my shame. I was so ashamed... When I was on the streets, I used to cover my head with blankets. I felt ashamed that someone might recognize me — even strangers.

WOMEN'S VOICES

Erasmus+

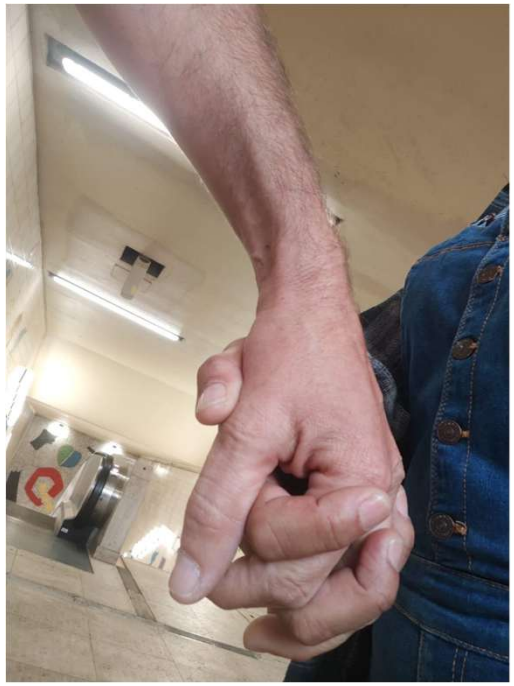
Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Tempus Public Foundation. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

©Macaense/Portugal

“My partner, my protection”

My partner was very important to me when I was living on the street because he gave me a sense of protection and safety that I would never have felt if I were alone. If I had been alone, it would have been much harder. Homeless women face many situations of violence because they have no one to protect them, and if they go to a police station to file a complaint, they’re often told it’s their fault and they’re not taken seriously.



WOMEN'S VOICES

Erasmus+

Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Tempus Public Foundation. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

©Macaense/Portugal

"Shower"

I didn’t know what it was like to use a private bathroom. To have freedom, privacy. To have a bathroom just for myself. To take as much time as I want, with no one waiting or watching. Oh, it’s so good!

When I was on the street, I menstruated without hygiene—I had nowhere to take care of myself, nowhere to bathe or wash. I didn’t have hygiene products. At home, I have all of that now.

Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Tempus Public Foundation. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

©Índia/Portugal

“Tent spot for a woman”

“A spot to set up her tent. “

©Bertille/France

Co-funded by the European Union

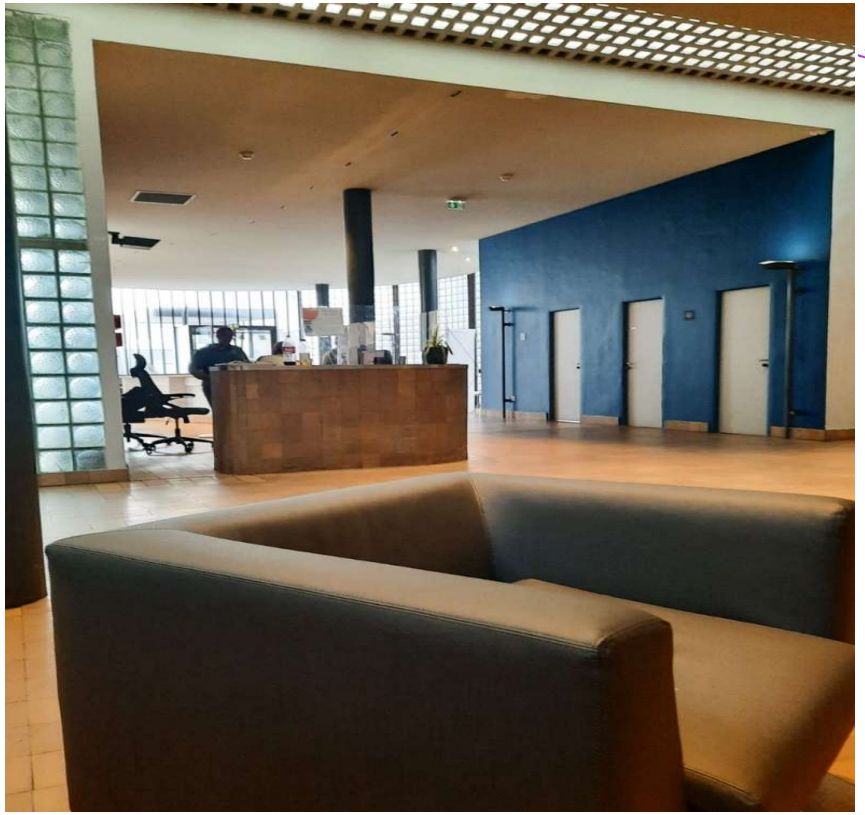
WOMEN'S VOICES

Erasmus+

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Tempus Public Foundation. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

“Protection”

“The reception agents serving the male and female residents at the refuge reception or at Cantagrel are always on the lookout, attentive to the slightest small problem or major event that could disrupt the proper functioning of the reception. “



©Bertille/France

WOMEN'S VOICES

Erasmus+

Co-funded by the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Tempus Public Foundation. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Emerging findings…

- Further examples of the Women's Visual Voices also reveal the reality of a lack of access to services for them and how this impacts on their lives.
- Women highlighted the fundamental importance of accessing housing and support as central to experiencing safety- something many have never experienced throughout their lives.
- They also highlight the stark reality of what happens when it is missing in their lives.
- Accessing gender-responsive support and services are vital to connecting women with the resources they need to access safety, to be human, and to flourish.
- It can also help empower staff to act in solidarity with women to challenge the injustice of homelessness and related inequalities such as DSGBV, which has been a feature of many women's lives.

Keep connected

You can follow this project here and also join Feantsa Women Community of Practice

As the saying goes: Ni neart a cur le cheile.