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19th European Research Conference on Homelessness

From Residential Spaces to Safe Housing: An Analysis of Low-Threshold Accommodation Models for Women in Situations of Social Exclusion

Alba García-Cid, Itziar Gandarias & Paula Torres

18th and 19th of September, 2025

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General Objective

- How housing services in a community-based, **high-intensity**, **low-threshold** model
- Respond to women’s needs for safety and protection
- In the context of social exclusion and gender-based violence

What defines a high-intensity, low-threshold intervention?

Close, frequent, and personalized support.

Continuous, proactive assistance tailored to the changing needs of women.

The access to the service is not conditioned on meeting certain prerequisites.

Respecting each woman's pace, decisions, and life circumstances, without imposing requirements that could exclude the most vulnerable.

What does it take for a woman to feel truly safe—and not just sheltered?

METHODOLOGY

Procedure

In-depth interviews with **women** beneficiaries of housing services **(N=19)**

- Once we had the **contextualization** of the settings, collection of basic information
- **Adapting** the interviews to each woman's life context

Promoting a **safe** and **respectful space**

Procedure

The fieldwork took place from March to June 2025

Carried out by the three UD researchers involved in the project

Participants were informed about the study’s purpose and the reasons for their involvement

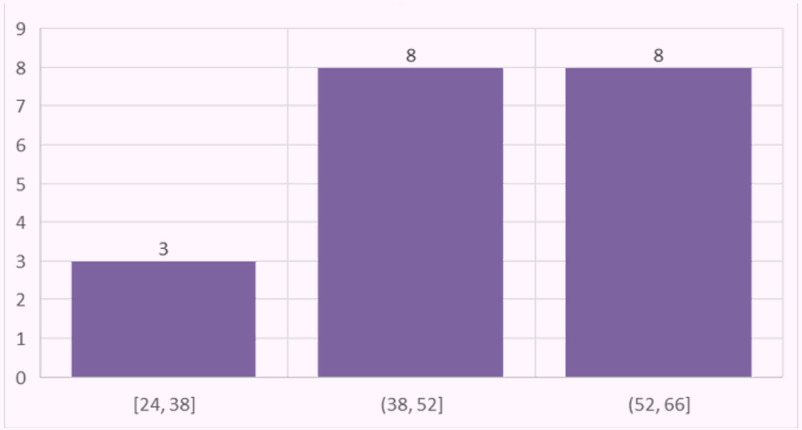
Their explicit consent was requested for the recording, with confidentiality and anonymity of the data guaranteed at all times

28 interviews and 4 focus groups were conducted, evaluating 5 pilot experiences

Participants

Age

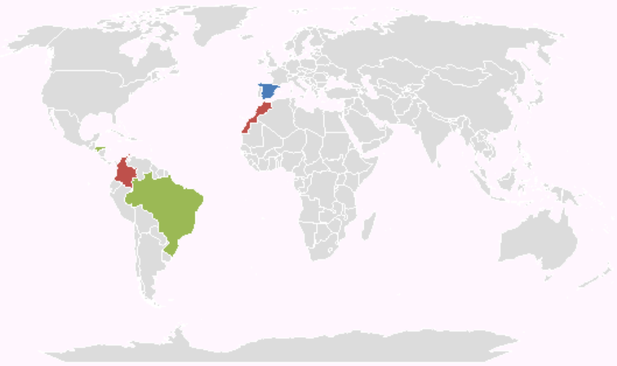
M= 47,83 years



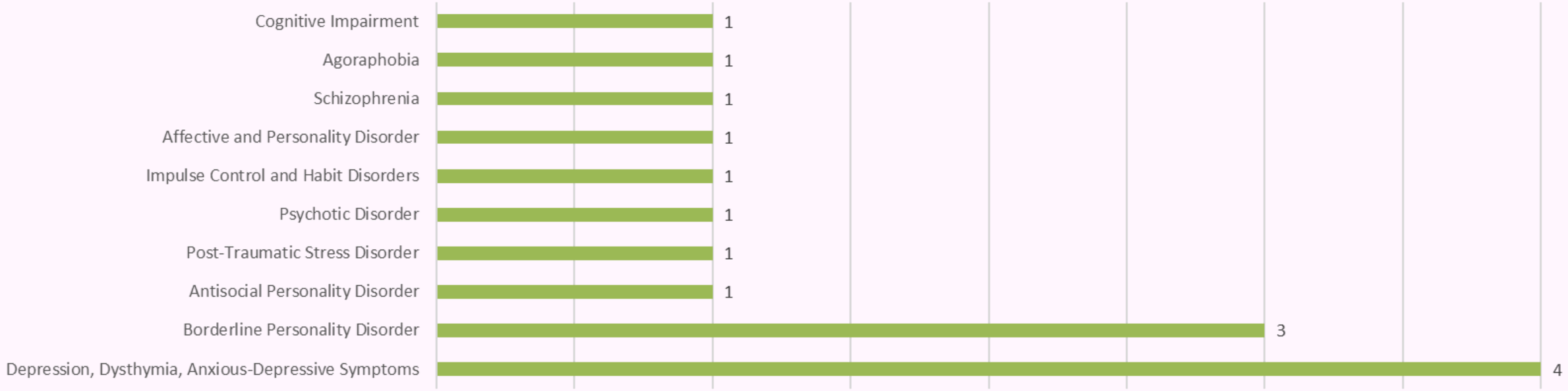
Children

42%

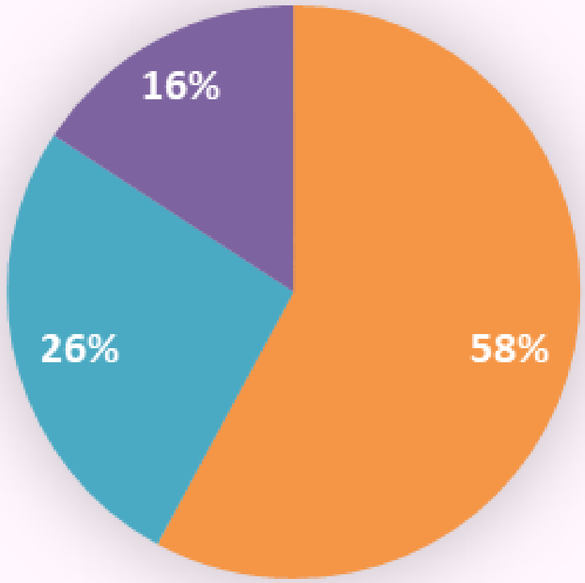
Country of birth



Health disorders



Addictions



- Current use or addiction (speed, cocaine, THC, benzodiazepines, alcohol, gambling, shopping)
- Abstinent (past use)
- No addiction reported

What does it take for a woman to feel truly safe—and not just sheltered?

Emotional, Relational and Symbolic Foundations

Structural and Environmental Conditions

Dimension	Key Elements
Emotional Safety	Feeling emotionally sustained, kind treatment, space to rest, no judgment, ability to return
Relational Safety	Trust-based relationships, female-only staff, presence at night, gender perspective training
Symbolic Aspects	Women set the rules, no justification to stay, not being policed, feeling of ownership

Emotional Safety

Feeling emotionally sustained, kind treatment, space to rest, no judgment, ability to return

*They made me feel cared for. Not like a user, but like a **person who matters**.*

*Here, **no one judged** me for crying or not being able to get up. They just sat next to me.*

*[...] A place **to come back** to when you're not okay.*

*Sometimes, all I needed was for someone to **ask** how I slept. And they did.*

*I felt like I could finally breathe. Like I could **lower my guard.***

*We come here people who are really broken, who truly need help and understanding. We need **empathy**. We need **time**. And we don't need someone pressuring us from day one: "Come on, get it together, get it together."*

Relational Safety

Trust-based relationships, presence at night, gender perspective training

*Because in that apparment, the educators **help you even** when you're not doing well—they don't judge you. You can come here drunk.*

*We need that they **support** us, give us affection, and let us feel at ease.*

*Sometimes I have felt very discriminated against [...]. But they didn’t make me feel that way. They made me feel like **family**.*

*Yes, because I think one of the things that breaks us the most is, almost more than anything, the family—the lack of it. Not having a childhood, not having anything. And then arriving somewhere and having someone love you, feeling that you are loved unconditionally and that they are always there for you—that is something I truly would not trade. **I wouldn’t trade that feeling of being loved for anything**.*

Relational Safety

Female-only staff

That it be a team of women. Yes, especially if the whole team is made up of women—that helps me a lot. I think that's what I was missing before. I think it's good for me to have my support workers and everything handled by women. ***I trust more that way****.*

So, to avoid going through those problems—for me, it's a problem—I prefer to be surrounded by women. So having this service mostly run by women, I love it. That's what helps me. It gives me ***peace*** *of mind. You don't judge me, I can talk to you about anything,* ***I don't have to put on a face****. There's not going to be any sexual issue between us. So I don't have to hide things, and, more than anything, I can be myself.*

Symbolic aspects

Women set the rules, no justification to stay, not being policed, feeling of ownership

*It’s about feeling that I am a person. Feeling that I am an independent woman. That I am myself. And that **it’s okay to be me**. That we have our place in society, even if I have a **strong case of BPD**.*

*It wasn’t just a place to stay. It was the first place where I **felt seen**.*

*It’s the only place I would come back to. The only one that felt like **home**.*

Dimension	Key Elements
Physical Conditions	**Women-only space,** individual rooms, small number of residents, secret location, cozy and beautiful environment
Location, control & accessibility	Outside city center, accessible to women living in marginal conditions, **control the space**
Rules & Routines	Flexible schedules, **no expulsion policy**, freedom of movement
Support & Coordination	Support during crises, **nights**, and new arrivals, **coordination** with health and social services

Physical Conditions

Women-only space, Individual rooms, small number of residents, secret location, cozy and beautiful environment

*Living only with women makes all the difference. I **wouldn't have stayed** otherwise.*

*Yes, especially at night—that's when it's worse. For example, I could be here sleeping, and someone from downstairs, who's in a really bad state starts yelling and stuff, and then comes upstairs having a psychotic episode. They come up here and go into your room. If you're asleep... what do you do? If you're awake, fine—you can defend yourself. But **if you're asleep, what do you do**?*

*Because with women you nourish yourself—there's no violence. Well, there can be, but it's a different kind of violence. There's no sexual violence, above all, which is what all of us women on the street suffer from every day—**we're sexualized a thousand times over**. So we feel really good when we're here, precisely because that's not there.*

*Having my own room gave me back my **dignity**.*

*The facility was clean and well-equipped. It didn't feel like a shelter, **but like a home.***

*My bedroom was a beautiful place. That made me feel **I deserved something good**.*

Location, control & accessibility

Outside city center, accessible to women living in marginal conditions, control the space

I feel safe because I know who's there and I keep an eye on things*—because I like to control everything. People too. To watch them, to know what they're about in case something of mine goes missing or something could happen to me. That comes from the street, and I can't help it. So I control everything—who goes, who comes in, who's visiting, why…*

Yes, because here ***no one is going to come in my room*** *while I'm here.*

Rules & Routines

Flexible schedules, no expulsion policy, freedom of movement

*Yes, a punishment is fine, but **not being thrown out onto the street**. My God, what would I do out there? I'd get raped or something would happen to me. I'd end up with a neighbor... or sleeping in an ATM booth.*

Support & Coordination

Support during crises, nights, and new arrivals, coordination with health and social services

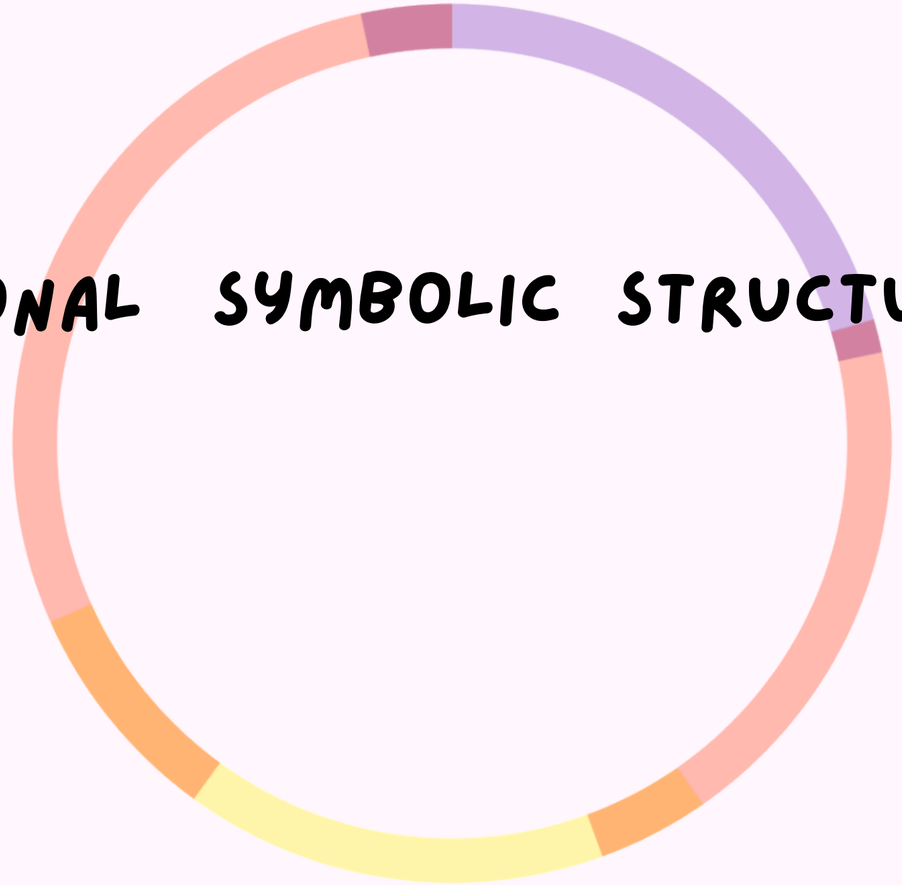
*Of course, it was great because we had the support workers there with us, always helping with whatever needs we had. We also felt safer having someone there at **night**—because at night there are a lot of people around outside. For example, before, I never slept with my door closed, but **now I do sleep with my door closed**.*

*I understand that, because there are times when they don't adjust your medication properly, or they lower the dose. And if we are people with mental health issues and disabilities, **our medication has to be well-adjusted** — because if a wire comes loose, so to speak (even if it sounds harsh), you're going to be unwell, both with yourself and with those around you.*

What does it take for a woman to feel truly safe—and not just sheltered?

Safety is not simply about providing a **roof**

EMOTIONAL RELATIONAL SYMBOLIC STRUCTURAL ENVIRONMENTAL



#HOUSING ALONE DOES NOT GUARANTEE SOCIAL INCLUSION, BUT IT IS A KEY CATALYST FOR SECURING, BEYOND SHELTER, MANY OTHER FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS SUCH AS PRIVACY, RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING, SELF-ESTEEM, SAFETY, OR ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT.

#HOUSING AS A STARTING POINT, NOT AS THE FINAL GOAL OF THE RECOVERY PROCESS.

#THEY DON'T FEEL WATCHED OR JUDGED, WHERE THEY CAN REST WITHOUT BEING IN A CONSTANT STATE OF ALERT, AND WHERE THEY FEEL PROTECTED EVEN IF THEIR BEHAVIOR IS NOT LINEAR.

#RESPECTFUL ACCOMPANIMENT, WITHOUT RIGID EXPECTATIONS, ALLOWS WOMEN TO BUILD CONNECTIONS FROM A PLACE OF SAFETY.

#THE BOND IS BUILT THROUGH AFFECTION, NON-PRESSURED PRESENCE, TRUST, AND NON-JUDGMENT. IT'S NOT ABOUT CONFRONTING OR PUNISHING, BUT ABOUT PROVIDING FLEXIBLE SUPPORT ACCORDING TO EACH WOMAN'S LIFE MOMENT.

#WELCOMING PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT: A BEAUTIFUL, CLEAN, AND COMFORTABLE PLACE.
IDEALLY LOCATED OUTSIDE THE URBAN CENTER AND IN A DISCREET AREA.
AWAY FROM CONFLICTIVE URBAN ZONES AND CONFIDENTIALITY ARE HIGHLY VALUED TO PREVENT ENCOUNTERS WITH AGGRESSORS OR VIOLENT ENVIRONMENTS.

#WOMEN-ONLY ENVIRONMENTS ARE PERCEIVED AS NON-NEGOTIABLE FOR AVOIDING REVICTIMIZATION AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE.

#OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL OVER THE SPACE EMPOWER WOMEN AND REBUILD AUTONOMY.

#STAFF APPROACH AND GENDER PERSPECTIVE ARE CRITICAL.

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Thank you!

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