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Designating women as a homeless subpopulation in Flanders and the US

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Plan of the presentation

Shaping policies by designating subpopulations

- Specificity of women's homelessness

- Fraser's social justice and target group recognition

Comparison of Flanders and the US

- Presentation of data (Leuven and Philadelphia)

- Barriers to acknowledging gender as a dimension of vulnerability

Concluding remarks

Designating subgroups for evidence-based policies

Variables

- Shelter use: chronic, transitional and episodic homelessness (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998)
- Demographic profile (e.g. age or household composition)
- Past experiences (e.g. leaving an institution)

Women – evidence – group recognition

- Women as a more “hidden” population (?)
- Growing share of women (data collecting methods?)
- Aging of the population (data collecting methods?)

- Disaggregating data by gender
 - Individuals vs. families (single mothers/fathers)
 - Chronic homelessness? Rough sleeping?

- Little recognition of unaccompanied women as a specific group

Selected data on unaccompanied women in the US 1/2

- 26% of unaccompanied persons (DC)
- 27% unsheltered, 52% sheltered (CA)
- 42% chronically homeless (CA)

- minorities overrepresented (Hispanic or Latino in CA, Black in DC)

- 79% over the age of 45 (DC); 55% over 40 (CA)

Selected data on unaccompanied women in the US 2/2

- 26%-49% behavioral health problems (CA-DC)
- 23% problematic substance use (CA)
- 69% one or more disabling condition (DC), 25% severe physical disability (CA)
- 16% release from correctional institution (CA)
- 17%-42% experience of DV (CA-DC)
- 11% DV as a direct cause of homelessness (DC)

Nancy Fraser's concept of social justice

Two-dimensional concept of social justice:

1. Political economy – (re)distribution
2. Cultural order – recognition

Gap between the legal status of women and full gender equality (structures of oppression) – policy reforms mostly benefited women who are white, well-off etc.

Target group recognition

The social construction of target groups (Ingram and Schneider, 1993)

1. (Un)deservingness (distribution of burdens and benefits)
2. Political power (influence on policy)

Legitimization of targeted policies (van Oorschot and Roosma, 2015)

Moral judgments concerning gender roles, motherhood, women's sexuality, substance abuse, violent behaviour etc. – intersection with race/ethnicity

Advocacy – human rights, women's organizations, services, research?

Designating subgroups in Flanders and the US in action plans and legislation/financing

Flanders

- young people
 - (families with) children
 - people experiencing chronic homelessness
- + prevention of evictions

US

- young people
 - families with children
 - people experiencing chronic homelessness
- + veterans

Two research projects

2019-2021 KU Leuven, Flanders – The NAWA scholarship

2021 University of Pennsylvania, US – The Kosciuszko Foundation scholarship

Desk research: legislation, strategic documents, reports

Interviews with experts, policy makers, service providers

Categories used in Leuven's data

overall 26.4% women; staying with family and friends 30%; among young people 32%, in trailer park 51%

- Adults/children
- Children directly involved in a homelessness situation
- Single parent family

Categories used in Philadelphia's data

all people served 41% women; households with adults only 30% women; unsheltered 22% women

- Types of households (only adults, adults and children, only children)
- Chronic homelessness (two groups distinguished – youth and veterans)
- Categories based on a living situation (sheltered, unsheltered), emergency shelter, safe haven, PSH etc.
- Other categories: DV, mental illness, substance use, HIV/AIDS (no overlaps addressed)

Barriers to acknowledging gender as a dimension of vulnerability

Interviews with experts

- Vicious circle: lack of data – no appropriate policies
- Documenting chronic homelessness (gaps in data)
- Sharing (linking) data across DV and homelessness sectors
- Approach to violence (intrafamily violence vs. gender-based violence/violence against women)

Concluding remarks

- Data is there but gender is hardly used as an important variable – gender data gap (Criado-Perez, 2019)
- Numbers and the way they are presented feed policies (constitute target groups) – recognition of intersecting dimensions of vulnerabilities
- Categories used in research in turn essentialize selected dimensions and “constitute subjects” (Bacchi, 2017)
- Few stakeholders who advocate for greater recognition of gender in homelessness policies

Discussion

- Anti-discriminatory policies – gender as a protected category (universal access to shelters)
- Data protection policies – barriers in integrating DV and homelessness responses
- Debate over women-only spaces

- US deep race and class divisions
- BE (VL) more egalitarian society, exclusion of non-citizens and people with migrant background

- Fraser’s recognition: an example of Evanston, IL – “reparations” in form of a housing grants program

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Fault lines in the American welfare state

1. Poverty relief institutions and policies (Cox, 2005)
2. The modern “post-racial” statistics (Muhammad, 2009)
 - notions of black male and black *female* sexual deviance and undeservingness
 - merging of all migrants of European decent into one „white” category
 - language of personal responsibility, especially for Blacks
 - “misguided philanthropy”
3. Motherhood and narrative scripts concerning morality and sexuality – welfare queens (Zuchhino, 1999), and a middle-class ideal of domesticity
 - TANF explicitly disciplining and moralising – obligation to work, to be connected to the biological father of children, discouraging divorce (Mink 2000, Edin 2005)
 - explicitly genderising policy, stigmatization of recipients, does not lift families out of poverty
 - targets only families with children, other situations are not recognized

Philadelphia

- Historical development
- Centralization and coordination of responses
 - Office of Homeless Services
 - Coordinated outreach, coordinated entry
 - Data collection
 - Housing First programs
- DV/IPV not included in HMIS data
- Not enough long-term housing options (i.e. vouchers)

A place for chronically homeless women in Philadelphia

Center City

388 people on the streets (Snapshot 2019-2020)

20% women (Project HOME estimate)

10% Sunday meal, 31% shower appointments
(United Methodist Church data)

Over 40 years old; Black and other minorities;
unaccompanied

Behavioral health problems

Kensington

500 people on the streets (Prevention Point
estimate, encampment resolution pilot project)

40% women (Prevention Point estimate)

In their 20s and 30s; white; in couples, groups

Substance abuse, sex work

*Pathways PA – separate staff teams for the two groups