



The Right to Sexuality

By **Sari Rantaniemi**, *Project worker, sexual counsellor, NEA - securing housing for women – project the Deaconess Foundation, Finland*

Sexuality is a basic human trait that can sometimes be difficult to define. At its best, sexuality is positive energy, power, and freedom, but it can also include anxiety and fear. Sexuality and sex are two different things. One might think that sexuality is simply what we are, and sex is what we do. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexuality as a central aspect of being human throughout life which encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction.¹ Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors. In a nutshell, sexuality is somehow present in most aspects of our lives.

To be able to enjoy your sexuality, you need your sexual health to be in good condition, you need to be able to express your gender identity safely, and you need your sexual orientation to be accepted in your social environment. Sexual health is closely linked to reproductive health, but its concerns are wide-ranging, encompassing sexual and gender identity, sexual expression, relationships and pleasure. It is not only about negative conditions such as sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies or sexual violence. Especially when people are in challenging life situations, when dealing with the topic, it is often only to deal with the problems they are encountering.

But sexual rights are human rights. Good sexual health is built on the fulfilment of sexual rights. They are universal and fundamental. Sexual rights secure the right to decide about your own sexuality, body, and reproduction and for these decisions to be without fear of discrimination, violence or mistreatment. Decision-making also requires proper knowledge of sexuality issues. People have the right to information throughout their lives. The World Association for Sexual Health (WAS) revised [The Declaration of Sexual Rights in 2014](https://worldsexualhealth.net/resources/declaration-of-sexual-rights/).²

Women's sexuality when experiencing homelessness

Homeless women are one of the most marginalized groups in societies. They face discrimination because of their gender and life situation. In addition, there is a special stigma for homeless mothers. The lives of homeless women are not safe and women who belong to minorities are particularly vulnerable. Homeless women face a wide range of violence. It can be mental, physical, social and sexual, and in most cases a combination of these. Homeless women face more sexual harassment and abuse than other women. Typically, in return for a place to stay overnight, women have to have sex. Sex is not always voluntary and women get raped. Prostitution is also a way to earn some money.

When it comes to the sexual health of women experiencing homelessness, the aspect of enjoyment is often ignored. And that's no wonder, because sexual pleasure was not proclaimed as a sexual right until October 2019. Sexual pleasure is the physical and / or psychological satisfaction and enjoyment derived from shared or solitary erotic experiences, including thoughts, fantasies, dreams, emotions, and feelings. Self-determination, consent, safety, privacy, confidence and the ability to communicate and negotiate sexual relations are the key enabling factors contributing to sexual health and well-being³. The lack of a private space like home creates challenges for these women to be able to enjoy their sexuality. Temporary housing solutions and shelters rarely provide the privacy that is needed to enjoy sex by themselves or with someone. The need for pleasure and intimacy should never be underestimated or ignored. They are basic human needs.

1 https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/sexual_health/sh_definitions/en/

2 <https://worldsexualhealth.net/resources/declaration-of-sexual-rights/>

3 <https://worldsexualhealth.net/resources/declaration-of-sexual-rights/>



LGBTIQ women

When talking about women experiencing homelessness, it is important to think about who people are LGBTIQ. Womanhood is not only built on personal factors but also in relation to culture, religion and society. Understanding gender diversity is also particularly important when you are providing gender-specific work or services. Gender corresponds to various genetic, developmental, hormonal, physiological, psychological, social and cultural characteristics. Therefore gender is not just male and female. A person can be both at the same time, something in between or something else. In some cases, people have no gender at all.

Heteronormativity seems to dominate when it comes to homelessness. However, we have data that shows homelessness, especially among young people, is linked to gender and sexual minorities. The special needs of these people should be recognized in the homelessness sector and special attention should be paid to the fulfilment of their sexual rights. The gender of another person cannot be determined by appearance, name or any other factor. This is often an area where the training needs are not yet clear and some work on collecting this information would allow appropriate training.

“Sexual rights are human rights. Good sexual health is built on the fulfilment of sexual rights. They are universal and fundamental.”

Needs after having experienced homelessness

Women also need support after having experienced homelessness. At home, a woman begins to recover and rebuild a feeling of security. Safety is important as traumatic experiences can only be addressed once basic safety has been established. It is common for survivors to relive their sexual trauma even years later. This may be confusing for the survivor and her case worker. If a woman had previously been a substance user and had stopped using after getting a home of her own, she has to reclaim her sexuality and has to learn to express her sexual needs without substances. Being a sexually active and available woman can be difficult for women who have experienced homelessness. Finding new identities is also important for recovery. Likewise, couples' needs should be recognized, because getting a home of one's own after having experienced homelessness as a couple modifies the dynamics of a relationship.

Many professionals find it difficult to talk about sexuality. These issues may be seen as not belonging to the work of the homelessness sector. However, it is the duty of the professional to face the person holistically. It is the duty of the professional to talk about difficult issues, because women want to be directly asked, for example, about violence. As there are various taboos associated with sexuality, it is good, as a professional, to be aware of the impact of their own life history and values. No woman should be condemned, no matter what she says. A woman's privacy must also be respected if she does not want to share her private issues. Building trust takes time. It is also typical that a professional is frightened of not having enough knowledge about how to handle these matters. The most important thing, however, is the goodwill and the courage to listen and be present.