



FEANTSA

Guide for developing effective gender-responsive support and solutions for women experiencing homelessness



Gender Lens: A Key Principle for Working with Women

Women's pathways into and experiences of homelessness differ from those of men. Growing international evidence demonstrates that there is a complex, gender-specific dimension to women's homelessness and a gender lens needs to be applied to any strategy that aims to prevent and to end homelessness for women. Gender lens means acknowledging the specific challenges associated with gender and it should be part of any solution to women's homelessness.

Women's Experiences of Hidden Homelessness

Women rough sleepers are hiding to avoid violence and harassment

Current definitions of homelessness exclude significant numbers of homeless women, because women are less likely to sleep rough and more likely to rely on informal arrangements for accommodation than men. Many women do sleep rough but **they are often not seen or counted as they are hiding or moving at night for reasons of physical safety and to avoid harassment and violence.** Women might also conceal their gender by dressing as men¹. Because of factors such as the risk of Gender Based Violence or a fear that their children will be taken away into care of the state, women are more likely to seek alternative accommodation – for instance sofa-surfing or staying with family and friends, also referred to as 'hidden homelessness', and therefore, they access male-dominated homelessness services less often.

It is important that the definition of women's homelessness is as broad as possible

and that it captures the diversity of homelessness and housing exclusion situations that women experience in all ETHOS² categories and to make them visible in research and policy. These should include women sleeping rough and staying in emergency accommodation (rooflessness), women staying in homeless hostels and in temporary accommodation, women using DV shelters (houselessness), and also women who have no or restricted privacy, who may not be safe from harm and abuse, who have no control over their living space, who have no legally enforceable security of tenure, who live in overcrowded or in poor conditions and who depend on informal arrangements like sofa-surfing³ or survival sex⁴ (insecure and inadequate housing).

1. <https://www.mungos.org/app/uploads/2018/10/Women-and-Rough-Sleeping-Report-2018.pdf>

2. <https://www.feantsa.org/download/ethos2484215748748239888.pdf>

3. Pleace, N. Exclusion by definition: The Under-representation of Women in European Homelessness Statistics, Women's Homelessness in Europe, 2016

4. Exchange of sex for a place to stay, food or other basic needs.

Domestic Violence: The Leading Cause of Women's Homelessness



Women who experience domestic violence (DV) are up to four times more likely to face housing instability than women without experience of DV. Homelessness is often the inevitable consequence of women fleeing DV. When leaving a women's shelters or homelessness shelters, women are often unable to access housing due to the lack of affordable housing, poor rental history and, child care responsibilities which allow limited opportunity to build long-term financial stability and for the most marginalised, exclusion from the labour market. As a result, **many women are forced to return to the abusive partner.**

Homelessness exposes women to continuous violence and fear. Therefore, while violence is a major cause of women's homelessness, it is also a consequence. While sleeping rough and staying in other types of unsuitable accommodation, women are stigmatised, verbally and physically assaulted and they are at the risk of violence and sexual abuse.

Intersectionality: Diversity of Women Experiencing Homelessness



Some women avoid homelessness services due to perceived shame and stigma, as well as the fact that **homelessness shelters are often not safe for women and do not understand their specific needs. Women who experience homelessness are not a homogenous group.** We need to ensure that homelessness support meets the needs of the diverse groups of women whom they serve, including women with children, young women, older women, women engaging in survival sex, women who identify as LGBTIQ, women with a migrant background, minority and Roma women, women living with disability. It is important to note that

many women experiencing homelessness might belong to more than one group and face multiple and intersecting forms of structural discrimination. **Adopting an intersectional approach allows for a better understanding of the interconnections between different forms of discrimination and exclusion that overlap creating compounding inequalities.** Intersectionality can serve as a conceptual framework through which more appropriate responses to women's homelessness could be formulated.

Common Themes for Women Experiencing Homelessness

The needs of women may vary across different groups but common themes which are identified and should be addressed by any service working with women include:

- Single parenthood as risk of homelessness
- Poverty
- Heightened stigma and shame
- Adverse childhood experiences which include abuse and childhood spent in state care
- Domestic violence as a pathway into homelessness
- Experience of gender-based violence on the street or in unsuitable accommodation
- Compound trauma
- Poor physical and mental health issues often co-occurring with substance use and often rooted in trauma
- Lack of appropriate and safe specialised women-specific health services including access to sexual and reproductive health rights
- Fear of losing children and trauma of separation from children
- Lack of safety in mixed gender services and avoidance of services where men are present

Human Rights Framework based on Women's Rights and on the Elimination of GBV

Women's homelessness is a violation of human rights.



Women's homelessness is a violation of human rights. **The right to adequate housing is widely recognised in international, regional and national human rights laws.** One of the first international references to this right is in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 25.1). It was codified in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (art. 11.1): "The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing and to the continuous improvement of living conditions." States must take "appropriate steps" to ensure the realization of the right to adequate housing⁷.

Human rights are interdependent, indivisible and interrelated. The right to housing is often referred to as an enabling right, since it is the precondition for the enjoyment of a wide range of human rights, including the rights to work, health, social security, vote, family life, privacy or education.

The norms and principles of gender equality

and non-discrimination are enshrined in all fundamental human rights treaties. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (art. 14.2) also recognises women's equal rights including the right to adequate housing.

European human rights instruments also include the right to housing: the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (arts. 5, 8 and 14); the Revised European Social Charter (art. 31).

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union protects the right to property (art. 17) and also provides for a "right to social and housing assistance so as to ensure a decent existence for all those who lack sufficient resources" (art. 34). The "Race Directive" (Council Directive 2000/43/EC) and the "Gender Directive" (Council Directive 2004/113/EC) implement the principle of equal treatment irrespective of race, ethnic origin or sex in relation to access to public goods and services, including housing⁸.

7. https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/fs21_rev_1_housing_en.pdf

8. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/publications/WomenHousing_HR.PUB.11.2.pdf

Eliminating Gender-based Violence



GBV is the key driver of women's homelessness and it is one of the most prevalent human rights violations. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms. GBV undermines the health, dignity, security and autonomy of women and girls. To prevent and to end women's homelessness and to ensure the full realisation of housing rights for women, women must be protected from GBV and domestic violence (DV). **The European Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and DV**

(Istanbul Convention) contains important provisions pertaining to the obligations of State parties to ensure that victims of violence have access to services (including housing), that shelters are easily accessible and available to victims, and that the authorities have the power to remove a perpetrator from the residence in situations of immediate danger. It is imperative that the provisions of the Convention are extended to women who are at risk of homelessness or experiencing homelessness⁹.

9. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/publications/WomenHousing_HR.PUB.11.2.pdf

Gender Equality & Intersectionality



Women's homelessness is rooted in the structural inequalities women face and in gender-based violence. It is important to examine the impact of gender inequality on housing and how such structural factors such as gendered experience of poverty, labour market access, social security policies, and housing market discrimination contribute to difficulties women face in accessing and maintaining

safe, adequate and affordable housing. **In addition, certain groups of women are more likely to experience housing instability and homelessness. To prevent and to end women's homelessness and to guarantee the fulfilment of women's housing rights actions are required that tackle these intersectional inequalities.**

Key Principles of a Gender-Informed Homelessness Service Response

The keys to developing effective services for women are acknowledging and understanding the realities of women's lives in the social context and addressing and responding to their challenges and strengths. Key principles of a gender-informed homelessness service response^{10 11} are:

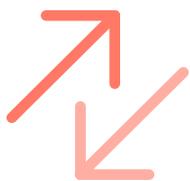
- **Creating safety** by providing **women-only spaces by women for women**
- Establishing **quality relationships** between workers and women based on trust
- **Working from a strengths-based empowerment model** to give women choice and allow them to regain control over their lives
- **Establishing the physical, psychological, and emotional safety of women** and working from a perspective which recognises GBV as cause of women's homelessness and the impact of trauma on women
- Providing **staff training to recognise GBV and effects of trauma**
- Providing **education for women about GBV and trauma** which allows for them to understand their trauma responses and which provides them with coping skills
- **Recognising the diverse situation of women** and offering comprehensive and tailored support across women's full range of circumstances, for instance, the provision of support with grief and loss related to child apprehension, support around motherhood or reconnecting with children, support to reduce harms related to selling sex, to access sexual and reproductive health rights, and support with mental health and substance use issues
- **Providing support** in an accessible, flexible, and non-judgemental way and fighting stigmatisation and stereotyping
- **Valuing the voice of women e.g.** in peer research, encouraging peer support and enabling peer involvement in the design and delivery of services
- **Providing support based on a harm reduction approach**

10. <https://www.feantsa.org/en/project/2018/02/01/pie4shelters-making-shelters-psychologically-and-trauma-informed?bcParent=418>

11. <https://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Mapping-the-Maze-final-report-for-publication.pdf>



Gendered homelessness strategies



Homelessness strategies should be based on a human rights framework and on the wider understanding of gender inequalities and intersecting inequalities based on race, class, sexual orientation, or immigration status. **A comprehensive gendered homelessness strategy aims at ensuring support services meet women's needs, are intersectional,**

and shaped by the expertise of women with lived experience. Furthermore, such a strategy aims at securing continuous funding of women specific services and ensures policy responses are gender-informed.

Housing options for different needs



Accessible, affordable, and safe housing is key in breaking the cycle of violence and homelessness. For all women, housing is the only long-term solution to homelessness. It is important to consider the specific needs and diverse life experience of women, especially regarding experience of GBV and multiple complex needs. **A variety of options need to be given for women to choose from and while the ultimate goal is permanent housing,** some women might need a high level of support in a residential setting for some time in their lives. For instance, accommodation in group homes for young mothers or

women-specific addiction programmes can be effective temporary supports for women before they feel ready to be housed permanently. **Women need to be given the choice and there needs to be flexibility in the degree of support provided depending on the situation women are facing at a particular point in their lives.**

Housing First for Women



Housing First is the philosophy of reintegrating homeless people very quickly into regular self-contained housing and providing the necessary support to them for as long as they need it. It is considered an important best practice in solving homelessness in the past decade. Yet, **there has been a lack of re-**

search into adapting the model for women. We need more evidence on how to tailor Housing First that responds to the gender-specific and interrelated needs of women⁹.

9. Housing First for Women Experiencing VAWG Toolkit focuses on the development and implementation of Housing First for women was produced by Louise Steele, Standing Together. https://www.dahalliance.org.uk/media/10658/12_-_what_housing_first_for_women.pdf

Collaboration across systems

It is important to build gender competence in other sectors



Disconnected support systems can create additional challenges for women to navigate while also coping with the trauma of homelessness. This can **leave women without appropriate and timely support.** The complex needs of women do not necessarily imply a multitude of individual problems but rather reflect single-issue system failures that contribute to women's homelessness. It is important to build gender competence in other sectors, for instance develop gender responsive addiction and mental health services and join up systems and services to work in

partnership. Preventing and ending women's homelessness is not only the responsibility of DV and homelessness sectors, but also that of other systems such as the health system, child protection services, criminal justice system, and social services system and of their collaboration.

Glossary of terms



Creating safety for women often implies the creation of women-only spaces

Gender: Gender shapes the contexts in which women live and therefore, their lives. The social context including gender socialisation, gender roles and expectations, and gender inequality account for the many behavioural differences between men and women.

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.'

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'.

Gender-based violence against women means 'violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately'.

Trauma is the result of extraordinarily stressful events in which one loses the sense of security and control over their lives and feels helpless. Trauma can leave a person struggling with upsetting emotions, memories, and anxiety. 'Survivors feel unsafe in their bodies. Their emotions and their thinking is out of control. Often, they also feel unsafe in relation to other people'. A safe environment needs to be created to heal from trauma. Creating safety for women often implies the creation of women-only spaces.

Compound Trauma means that the person has experienced several or many traumatic experiences without the time, support, or capacity to process each of them or to recover.

Harm Reduction: Harm reduction is defined as an approach, set of strategies, policy or any program designed to reduce substance-related harm without requiring abstinence. Harm reduction interventions are person-driven and ensure that people who use substances are treated with dignity and respect, and as full members of society. This includes using a compassionate, non-judgmental and non-punitive approach when working alongside individuals who are unable or unwilling to stop their substance use.

Women only services: Experience of male violence and abuse led women to avoid services where men are present. Women-only services are run by female staff for women and they are crucial for women on both an emotional and physical level. Women only spaces provide safety and allow women to speak freely about their experiences. (If a service is mixed, it is important to ensure women-only activities and spaces provided by female staff.)

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