



FEANTSA

REVIEW

WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

European Evidence Review

Joanne Bretherton

Paula Mayock

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Summary

- ▶ Across Europe, homelessness amongst women has tended to be categorised as a relatively minor social problem, a subcategory of homelessness, which is disproportionately experienced by lone adult men. This interpretation of the nature of homelessness in Europe is founded on a misconception.
- ▶ There are three core errors in how women's homelessness has been defined and enumerated in Europe. They can be defined as intersecting errors centred on spatial, administrative and methodological flaws.
- ▶ Three variables in relation to women's experience of living rough have yet to be fully addressed in current methodologies for enumeration: Evidence that women avoid emergency shelters designed for people sleeping rough; women experiencing living rough make serious efforts to conceal their gender and their location; women may be more likely to rely on informal arrangements, staying with friends, relatives and acquaintances, making their homelessness less likely to be visible.
- ▶ Systemic and endemic sexism manifests itself in relation to women's homelessness, creating potentially *greater* protections in certain circumstances, but in ways that also distort the nature and extent of women's homelessness in Europe.
- ▶ Recognition of women's homelessness and responses to women's homelessness do not exist outside cultural, historical, mass and social media and political narratives that frame a wider picture of gender inequalities.
- ▶ Changes in measurement techniques, the influence of ETHOS and wider recognition of hidden forms of homelessness are changing the debates about the extent of women's homelessness in Europe but a consistent comparable definition and data collection is still some way off.
- ▶ The evidence on the causation of women's homelessness remains partial at European level but there is strong, consistent evidence of a mutually reinforcing relationship between women's homelessness and experience of domestic abuse. There is a heightened risk of abuse while homeless, especially when living in situations of 'hidden' homelessness with friends, relatives and acquaintances and there exists associations between repeated homelessness and domestic abuse.
- ▶ Evidence shows that poverty, sustained precarity in terms of housing and economic and social position, fails to prevent an entry into homelessness and impedes women from exiting homelessness.
- ▶ The idea that European countries with extensive social protection would have less women's homelessness on the basis that there was less overall homelessness, is difficult to clearly demonstrate due to an extensive evidence gap. The most extensive European welfare systems tend to be the ones that collect systematic data on homelessness.
- ▶ Narratives around women's homelessness are skewed towards scenarios in which something happens to someone who cannot control the consequences. The causation of women's homelessness is more complex than that and, as the experience of homelessness happens to them, it cannot be assumed that women are either powerless to react or that any actions that they take have no effect.

- ▶ The gender dynamics of youth homelessness are under-researched. Associations with mental illness might mean that, in a wider context in which women are more likely to be diagnosed with mental illness than men that young women may be at greater risk of homelessness when a mental health problem occurs. Risks around sexual abuse exist for both genders but may be present at a greater rate and to a greater degree for young women.
- ▶ There are evidence gaps around women parents with dependent children who become homeless and comparatively little research overall on family homelessness, compared to the very large amount of research on lone adult men and in some EU Member states, family homelessness has been increasing.
- ▶ For women experiencing homelessness on a long-term and recurrent basis their needs are often high and complex and can often exceed those of men in a similar position. The effects of widespread experience of gender-based violence are combined with severe mental illness, addiction, contact with the criminal justice system and, often, forced separation from children.
- ▶ Women only seek accommodation through the formal channels of homelessness services when they have exhausted all alternative informal options.
- ▶ Explanations for service avoidance among women frequently draw attention to women's awareness of male-dominated spaces as well a fear of victimisation within services that are oriented primarily towards men but there are also other, possibly more complex, reasons why women avoid seeking help or accommodation such as stigma and shame.
- ▶ Studies have documented the lack of control experienced by women within homelessness services, highlighting ways in which prevailing practices within services produce feelings of objectification and a sense of powerlessness and loss. Negative perspectives held by women on the homelessness services they access also appear to be closely associated with experiences of infantilisation.
- ▶ Available research evidence provides a compelling argument for models of service provision that are informed by women's own perceptions and experiences of the service systems they navigate. This requires acknowledgement of women's agency; of their knowledge and resources and their capacity to articulate their experiences and needs.
- ▶ Homelessness services remain focused on responding to the most urgent and basic needs of women through the provision of shelter or short- to medium-term accommodation. There is no reliable information available on the extent to which women-only homelessness services are available in countries throughout Europe. There is a clear need for research that examines the extent to which the types of services available to women who experience homelessness reflect and respond to their needs.
- ▶ Domestic violence and homelessness are frequently classified and understood as discrete processes and historically, across most European countries, service responses to domestic violence and to homelessness have been separate in their organisation, structure and aims.
- ▶ Housing First services for women experiencing homelessness can reduce the concerns that barriers to services that are designed for men, on the false assumption that almost all homelessness involves lone men, should fall away because this is a service model that gives a woman her own, ordinary, home. Research has shown that a service built by women and run by women could achieve high rates of success in sustained rehousing for women with very high and complex needs.
- ▶ The evidence base on women's homelessness has improved and the nature of the debates in policy and research has changed. However, all the different dimensions of women's homelessness still remain under-researched across Europe.

1

The Nature and Extent of Women's Homelessness

RECOGNISING WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS IN EUROPE

Homelessness is often defined in terms of place. To be 'homeless' means occupying or not occupying specific types of space, the most commonly understood definition being people without any residential space at all, who are 'street homeless' or 'living rough'. Someone living in services or spaces that are designated as places for people experiencing homelessness also tend to be automatically classified as 'homeless'. Common European definitions of homelessness encompass people in shelters, hostels and temporary supported housing.¹ Definitions are also administrative, so for example, people experiencing homelessness who are placed in hotels or other temporary accommodation because they are classified by administrative systems as 'homeless' also tend to be included within counts of the homeless population.

The idea that homelessness could occur in domestic space is not a recent one. The original UK homelessness legislation dating back to 1977², rather than focusing on people living rough or

experiencing homelessness in emergency shelters or temporary supported housing, instead opted for a definition centred on lacking any housing that it was *reasonable* to occupy.

ETHOS, the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion³ developed in 2005, follows this same broad logic; that there are situations in which someone who has housing should be regarded as being homeless. ETHOS defines homelessness as including a situation in which someone lacks private space over which they exercise control, while also lacking legal security of tenure. Homelessness and housing exclusion are defined as having a legal domain (ownership, a tenancy providing legal protection), a physical domain (adequate housing) and a social domain (private and safe space for social relationships).⁴ ETHOS categorises extremes of overcrowding (e.g. two or more households in space designed for one) and housing that is physically unfit to occupy as including situations of housing exclusion and homelessness:

- ▶ Defined as unfit for habitation by national legislation or building regulations

1 Busch-Geertsema, V.; Benjaminsen, L.; Filipovič Hrast, M. and Pleace, N. (2014) [The Extent and Profile of Homelessness in European Member States: A Statistical Update](#) Brussels: FEANTSA.

2 Lowe, S. (1997) Homelessness and the Law in Burrows, R.; Pleace, N. and Quilgars, D. *Homelessness and Social Policy* London: Routledge, pp.19-34.

3 <https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion>

4 <https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion>

ETHOS has been criticised as not regarding unfit housing on its own as 'homelessness'⁵, unlike some other definitions, which do regard housing in breach of standards of fitness or overcrowding as representing a state of homelessness. For example, an attempt at developing a global framework for enumerating homelessness, includes the following within a broader definition of homelessness:⁶

- ▶ People living in conventional housing that is unfit for human habitation
- ▶ People living in extremely overcrowded conditions

ETHOS also adopted the concept of legal insecurity as sometimes constituting a situation in which someone was effectively in a state of homelessness, including:

- ▶ People living under threat of eviction
- ▶ Occupation of dwelling with no legal tenancy illegal occupation of a dwelling
- ▶ Occupation of land with no legal rights

One criticism of ETHOS has been that, while it is best described as an attempt to promote a 'common language' of homelessness across Europe, it encapsulates *potential* homelessness that might not actually occur.⁷ Nevertheless, several definitions of homelessness, including those used in Denmark, Finland and two European countries outside the EU, Norway and the UK, also encompass people under threat of eviction.⁸

The final dimension of homelessness encompassed by ETHOS is people in situations of what is sometimes referred to as 'hidden homelessness', sleeping on floors, on sofas or in other precarious arrangements, accommodating themselves by relying on friends, family and acquaintances. Research in Ireland has suggested that there are groups of women caught in longstanding states of hidden homelessness, wholly reliant on favours from other people, lacking the physical safety, legal security and privacy of a home.⁹ A modification of ETHOS, ETHOS Light¹⁰, which was designed specifically for the enumeration of homelessness, defined homelessness as including:

- ▶ Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing)

To be a home, housing also has to offer at least relative safety. ETHOS also encompasses people experiencing domestic abuse as homeless or in situations of housing exclusion. Several definitions of homelessness include anyone who is unsafe in their existing home because of domestic abuse or who has been made homeless as a result of domestic abuse. Again, one attempt at developing a global framework for enumerating homelessness, identifies two subcategories within a broader definition of homelessness:¹¹

- ▶ Women and children living in refuges for those fleeing domestic violence
- ▶ People living under threat of violence

5 Amore, K.; Baker, M. and Howden-Chapman, P. (2011) [The ETHOS Definition and Classification of Homelessness: An Analysis](#) *European Journal of Homelessness* 5(2), pp. 19-37.

6 Busch-Geertsema, V., Culhane, D. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2016) [Developing a global framework for conceptualising and measuring homelessness](#) *Habitat International*, 55, pp.124-132.

7 Amore, K.; Baker, M. and Howden-Chapman, P. (2011) [The ETHOS Definition and Classification of Homelessness: An Analysis](#) *European Journal of Homelessness* 5(2), pp. 19-37.

8 Busch-Geertsema, V.; Benjaminsen, L.; Filipovi Hrast, M. and Pleace, N. (2014) [The Extent and Profile of Homelessness in European Member States: A Statistical Update](#) Brussels: FEANTSA.

9 Mayock, P.; Sheridan, S. and Parker, S. (2015b) ['It's just like we're going around in circles and going back to the same thing ...': The Dynamics of Women's Unresolved Homelessness](#), *Housing Studies*, 30(6), 877-900.

10 <https://www.feantsa.org/download/fea-002-18-update-ethos-light-0032417441788687419154.pdf>

11 Busch-Geertsema, V., Culhane, D. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2016) [Developing a global framework for conceptualising and measuring homelessness](#) *Habitat International*, 55, pp.124-132.

Across Europe, women's homelessness has tended to be categorised as a relatively minor social problem, a subcategory like youth homelessness or LGBTQI homelessness, which is disproportionately experienced by lone adult men.¹² This interpretation of the nature of homelessness in Europe is founded on a misconception.

In relation to women, the core errors in how homelessness has been defined and enumerated in Europe are threefold. They can be defined as intersecting errors centred on spatial, administrative and methodological flaws. These issues have recently been critically explored by the COST Action CA15218 - *Measuring homelessness in Europe*¹³ reported in Volume 14.3 of the European Journal of Homelessness.¹⁴

The *spatial* error lies in operational definitions of homelessness that are artificially narrow, reflecting cultural, historical and mass media constructions of what 'homelessness' is, i.e. as only encompassing people living rough and people experiencing homelessness in emergency shelters and other temporary, homelessness services. The political right tends to define homelessness in these terms, because it is able to highlight what is suggested by the methodological error, enabling as Teresa Gowan¹⁵ argues, homelessness to be presented as being caused by 'sin' (negative life choices, i.e. crime and addiction) and 'sickness' (disability, limiting illness and particularly mental illness). This draws attention away from systemic and policy failures, such as not enough affordable housing supply, inadequate mental health services or mass economic marginalisation and poverty in society, or what Gowan¹⁶ calls 'system' causation of homelessness.

Writing about Germany in 2016, Nadine Marquardt refers to a longstanding reluctance to even try to measure homelessness in a broader sense, because, as she argues, this meant challenging a core political narrative that diverted attention from the possibility that homelessness had significant structural causes:

*An element of 'strategic' or 'manufactured' ignorance clearly is at work in the repeated refusals of the German national government to bring about the required legislative framework for a homeless statistic. This refusal is justified by the government's claim that homelessness is caused first and foremost by psychological problems.*¹⁷

Interestingly, debates have moved on in Germany and systematic attempts at national enumeration are underway at the time of writing. In the UK, by contrast, Anderson's 1993 conclusion has, broadly speaking, remained the case:

*... the British government effectively redefined homelessness as absolute rooflessness, implying that only those without any kind of shelter were actually homeless. The corollary of this is that single people living in temporary accommodation, including hostels, bed and breakfast hotels, squats and tenuous sharing arrangements; and indeed single people leading a transitory lifestyle of moving from one temporary arrangement to another, were not deemed to be homeless as defined by the state.*¹⁸

12 Pleace, N. (2016) Exclusion by Definition: The Under-Representation of Women in European Homelessness Statistics in Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. *Women's Homelessness in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 105-126.

13 <https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA15218/#tabs|Name:overview>

14 <https://www.feantsaresearch.org/en/publications/european-journal-of-homelessness?journalYear=2020>

15 Gowan, T. (2009) *Hobos, Hustlers and Backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco* University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.

16 Gowan, T. (2009) *Hobos, Hustlers and Backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco* University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis.

17 Marquardt, N. (2016) *Counting the Countless: Statistics on Homelessness and the Spatial Ontology of Political Numbers*, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34(2) p. 311.

18 Anderson, I. (1993) *Housing policy and street homelessness in Britain*. *Housing Studies*, 8(1), p.26.

The spatial error is important because women are much more strongly represented among people experiencing homelessness once the definition shifts *beyond* people sleeping rough and in homelessness services. As soon as women living in situations of hidden or concealed homelessness, staying in hotels, temporary accommodation - indeed anywhere that is not an emergency shelter or the street - are excluded from the definition of homelessness, their homelessness effectively disappears.¹⁹

The *administrative* error centres on only recording women's homelessness under certain circumstances and within certain systems. Baptista, writing in 2010, noted that there was a European evidence gap around the intersections of domestic abuse and women's homelessness:

*In most European countries domestic violence and homelessness services are developed and funded separately, which may explain the persistence of this research gap, and specifically the invisibility of domestic violence data within homelessness statistics.*²⁰

There is a broad European tendency to classify anyone entering domestic abuse services as experiencing 'domestic abuse' rather than being seen as (also) homeless. Importantly, the experience is still one of homelessness. For example, a woman loses her home, stays in emergency accommodation, quite often a refuge that is designed to provide safe temporary accommodation, until either with support, through her own resources or some combination of the two, she is able to find another home. The homelessness is combined with the trauma, fear and, frequently, the physical danger

of domestic abuse that caused it and effective rehousing must place great emphasis on ensuring she remains safe once homelessness ends.²¹

Women's homelessness is also missed for another administrative reason. Women experiencing homelessness with dependent children, with a partner, or more often in the European context, as lone parents are classified as homeless families²² or processed by social work services as cases in which families with a dependent child face destitution.

In some countries, such as the former EU member state the UK, homelessness services specifically designed for homeless families make them relatively visible, at least when they contact those services. Administrative data also record household composition, which enables the UK to know that most homeless families are lone women parents with dependent children, and the direct cause of homelessness, which is often recorded as domestic abuse. Research in the mid 2000s reported that 41% of parents had experienced domestic violence and that 38% said relationship breakdown was the cause of their homelessness, which in 57% of cases was described as violent.²³ Within the EU, Ireland's policy responses to rapidly rising family homelessness also have a degree of administrative separation, again drawing attention to the numbers of families who are becoming homeless.²⁴

Elsewhere in Europe, child protection and social work systems are the main response when a child is facing destitution due to actual or potential homelessness. One effect here is likely to be that the presence of children 'protects' at least some

19 Bretherton, J. (2017) *Reconsidering Gender in Homelessness* *European Journal of Homelessness* 11 (1), pp. 1-21.

20 Baptista, I. (2010) Women and homelessness in Europe, in E. O'Sullivan, V. Busch-Geertsema, D. Quilgars and N. Pleace (eds.) *Homelessness Research in Europe*, Brussels: FEANTSA, 163-86. p. 179.

21 Mayock, P.; Bretherton, J. and Baptista, I. (2016) Women's Homelessness and Domestic Violence: (In)visible Interactions in Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. *Women's Homelessness in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 127-154.

22 Baptista, I.; Benjaminsen, L.; Busch-Geertsema, V. and Pleace, N. (2017) *Family Homelessness in Europe* Brussels: FEANTSA.

23 Pleace, N.; Fitzpatrick, S. et al. (2008) *Statutory Homelessness in England: The experience of families and 16-17 year olds* London: DCLG.

24 https://www.feantsa.org/public/user/Resources/magazine/2019/Autumn/4_Homelessness_in_Dublin_Sarah_Sheridan_and_Daniel_Hoey.pdf

women from becoming homeless or provides a route out of homelessness once it has occurred.²⁵ This would assume that settled housing is either maintained or quickly provided, whereas the reality may often be more complex, with stays in temporary accommodation or temporary supported housing facilitated by social work services when a settled home cannot be quickly found. Again, homelessness may be experienced, but not recorded as homelessness because the administrative systems involved are social work, not homelessness services. Here, the administrative error may be doubled, as both homelessness and women parent's experience of domestic abuse may be recorded by social work systems as child destitution or child protection issue, reflecting the focus of child social work services.²⁶

Some research on long-term and repeated homelessness among lone women indicates that many are parents, but that they have lost contact with children who they placed with relatives when homelessness threatened, or because child protection services took them into care.²⁷ This may be indirect evidence that social work services do have a protective effect for lone women parents with dependent children facing homelessness at European level, but more research is needed.

The *methodological error* centres on the ways in which enumeration of homelessness has been handled by many researchers over the last 50 years. This intersects with the spatial error, i.e. only counting people in situations of living rough or in emergency shelters as being homeless for cultural, historical and political reasons, but the specific issue here centres on how data are often collected. Nearly a quarter of a century ago, American

researchers realised that the picture of who people experiencing homelessness, at least in terms of people using emergency shelters, was deeply flawed.²⁸ The image had been one of Gowan's previously cited 'sin' and 'sickness', with very high rates of severe mental illness, very often combined with addiction, being widely reported.

In reality, data were being collected for only short periods by cross-sectional (snapshot) survey methods, which meant that people stuck in long-term or repeated homelessness, who tended to be a high cost, high risk population were the ones who were most likely to be recorded. When the pattern of shelter use was looked at longitudinally, it was found that the bulk of emergency shelter users did not have these characteristics and did not stay for long. People experiencing long-term homelessness accounted for only 10% of people entering shelters in a given year, but represented 50% of the people in shelters on any given day, the picture of who people experiencing homelessness were was based on this 50%, not on a much bigger population who had lower support needs and who were typically exiting shelters in less than a month.²⁹ Importantly, very similar patterns were reported among homeless families using emergency shelters; most self-exited shelters within a quite short period, while those with more complex needs stayed in family homelessness shelters for longer, interpreted as indicating that the right systems were not in place to support all families in sustainably exiting shelters.³⁰

The methodological error is significant in relation to women's homelessness in two respects. First, the distortion of who people experiencing homelessness are has another important dimension,

25 Baptista, I. (2010) Women and homelessness in Europe, in E. O'Sullivan, V. Busch-Geertsema, D. Quilgars and N. Pleace (eds.) *Homelessness Research in Europe*, Brussels: FEANTSA, pp. 163–86. p. 179.

26 Baptista, I.; Benjaminsen, L.; Busch-Geertsema, V. and Pleace, N. (2017) *Family Homelessness in Europe* Brussels: FEANTSA.

27 Bretherton, J. (2017) *Reconsidering Gender in Homelessness* *European Journal of Homelessness* 11 (1), pp. 1-21.

28 Kuhn, R. and Culhane, D. P. (1998). Applying Cluster Analysis to Test a Typology of Homelessness by Pattern of Shelter Utilization: Results from the Analysis of Administrative Data. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 26(2), pp. 207-232. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/spp_papers/96

29 Culhane, D.P. (2018) *Chronic Homelessness* Center for Evidence Based Solutions for Homelessness.

30 Culhane, D. P.; Metraux, S.; Park, J., Schretzman, M., and Valente, J. (2007) Testing a Typology of Family Homelessness Based on Patterns of Public Shelter Utilization in Four U.S. Jurisdictions: Implications for Policy and Program Planning. *Housing Policy Debate* 18(1) Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/spp_papers/67

because alongside generating an image of 'sin' and 'sickness' as the major drivers of homelessness, it also projects a picture of homelessness as a social problem experienced by lone, adult *men*. This again links back to the spatial error, in the sense that the surveys were collecting artificially limited data by only looking at the streets and shelters, missing significant populations of women experiencing hidden forms of homelessness within housing, including women with high and complex needs.³¹ However, while the specific issue here is under-representation of women experiencing the extremes of homelessness, there is mounting evidence that women avoid emergency shelters and temporary supported housing that is designed on the *assumption* that the great bulk of the population living rough is male. Alongside this, while living rough, there is evidence that women actively conceal their gender and hide themselves away³², reflecting broader evidence that people sleeping rough are subject to physical abuse, most typically when encountered by groups of intoxicated young men.³³ Cross-sectional surveys, conducted over short periods, may be less likely to find women on this basis.

Enumeration of people sleeping rough using street counts is inherently limited in several ways. Methodologies have improved³⁴, but the limitations around only covering an at least partially restricted area for a restricted amount of time are inherent. Administrative data drawn from who is using homelessness services can give a better picture, because it is longitudinal³⁵, while following Danish practice and combining both methodologies is

more effective still.³⁶ However, three variables in relation to women's experience of living rough have yet to be fully addressed in current methodologies for enumeration:

- ▶ Evidence that women avoid emergency shelters designed for people sleeping rough, as these services are designed on the assumption that the population is largely or almost entirely male and are typically occupied by men.
- ▶ Research indicating the unsurprising finding that women experiencing living rough make serious efforts to conceal their gender and their location, because of the direct physical dangers associated with living rough.
- ▶ Women may be more likely to rely on informal arrangements, staying with friends, relatives and acquaintances, making their homelessness less likely to be visible, including situations in which it is associated with high and complex needs, which in men is associated with living rough and using emergency shelters.³⁷

ESTIMATING NUMBERS

The challenge in producing statistics on women's homelessness reflect the same challenges in producing an accurate number of people experiencing homelessness across Europe. Definitions of who should be regarded as homeless are variable and the spatial, administrative and methodological errors reported above create the same problems when there is reliance on short-term street and

31 Bretherton, J. (2020) *Women's Experiences of Homelessness: A Longitudinal Study* *Social Policy and Society* 19(2), pp. 255–270.

32 Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. (2018) *Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology* London: St Mungo's.

33 <https://www.crisis.org.uk/about-us/latest-news/new-research-reveals-the-scale-of-violence-against-rough-sleepers/>

34 Drilling, M.; Dittmann, J.; Ondrušová, D.; Teller, N. and Mondelaers, N. (2020) *Measuring Homelessness by City Counts – Experiences from European Cities* *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(4), pp. 87-112.

35 Culhane, D.P. (2016) *The potential of linked administrative data for advancing homelessness research and policy* *European Journal of Homelessness* 10(3) pp.109-126.

36 Benjaminsen, L. and Andrade, S.B. (2015) *Testing a Typology of Homelessness across Welfare Regimes: Shelter Use in Denmark and the USA* *Housing Studies* 30(6) pp.858-876.

37 Mayock, P. and Sheridan, S. (2012) *Women's 'Journeys' to Homelessness: Key Findings from a Biographical Study of Homeless Women in Ireland*, *Women and Homelessness in Ireland, Research Paper 1*, Dublin: School of Social Work and Social Policy and Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin.

shelter counts as the sole means of estimating homelessness, i.e. they are likely to miss *any* people experiencing homelessness not living rough or in emergency shelter.³⁸

Women are more likely to experience homelessness as 'hidden' or 'concealed' homelessness³⁹ and systems for recording whether someone is homeless, i.e. they are living with an acquaintance, friend or relative because they have nowhere else to go, are variable across Europe. Sometimes these forms of homelessness are recorded and sometimes not, depending on what definitions of homelessness are used, what services are in place and what requirements there are for data collection. Whether or not women's homelessness is recorded also depends on what systems and administrative practices are in place. For example, if there are systems that are designed specifically to help women experiencing homelessness and for lone parent women experiencing homelessness with dependent children, which record data on women using those services, that administrative data will also provide information on the scale of women's homelessness.⁴⁰

Hidden or concealed homelessness has long been recognised in some EU Member States and attempts have been made to record it. Perhaps the earliest manifestation, while it was still a Member State, was the UK, which recognised a state of being in housing that it was not reasonable for someone to occupy, because of intolerable conditions, abuse or danger. At EU level, the development of the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) also incorporated the concept of concealed or hidden homelessness and housing exclusion. It has been argued in a recent paper, reviewing the state of knowledge and data on these aspects of homelessness that the term 'hidden' homelessness should be abol-

ished, as for example, a woman with no privacy, no physical control over her own living space, no legal right to her housing who is living day to day through the goodwill or possibly exploitation by others, no more has an actual *home* than someone living rough, albeit that they have a roof over their head.

The term 'hidden homelessness' needs to be made redundant. There is no consensus about what 'hidden homelessness' is, but the inherently vagueness is less of a problem than a term that suggests that there are different 'levels' of homelessness, some of which are less serious than others. Rough sleeping might be the extreme, but all homelessness is very destructive for every human being who experiences it and for the European societies in which it occurs. There are risks in using definitions that might be misread, or deliberately employed, as indicating two levels of homelessness, i.e. 'real' homelessness that is people living rough and in emergency shelters and, be it implicitly or explicitly presented as such, the less serious form of 'hidden' homelessness. The political right has successfully deployed a tactic of equating homelessness with rough sleeping for decades, setting and shrinking the narrative to successfully hide the true scale and socially destructive effects of what is often a much more widespread social problem.⁴¹

'Hidden' homelessness is counted in the annual statistics collected by ARA, Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland.⁴² Finnish statistics are a longstanding data collection exercise that enables tracking of progress in reducing homelessness to be tracked back over decades, with the important note that some quite significant changes in data collection have been made in recent years, meaning that data going back over

38 Pleace, N. (2016) Exclusion by Definition: The Under-Representation of Women in European Homelessness Statistics in Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. *Women's Homelessness in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 105-126.

39 Bretherton, J. (2017) *Reconsidering Gender in Homelessness* *European Journal of Homelessness* 11 (1), pp. 1-21.

40 Pleace, N. and Hermans, K (2020) *Enumerating all Homelessness in Europe* *European Journal of Homelessness* 14 (3), pp. 35-62.

41 Pleace, N. and Hermans, K (2020) *Enumerating all Homelessness in Europe* *European Journal of Homelessness* 14 (3), pp. 52-53.

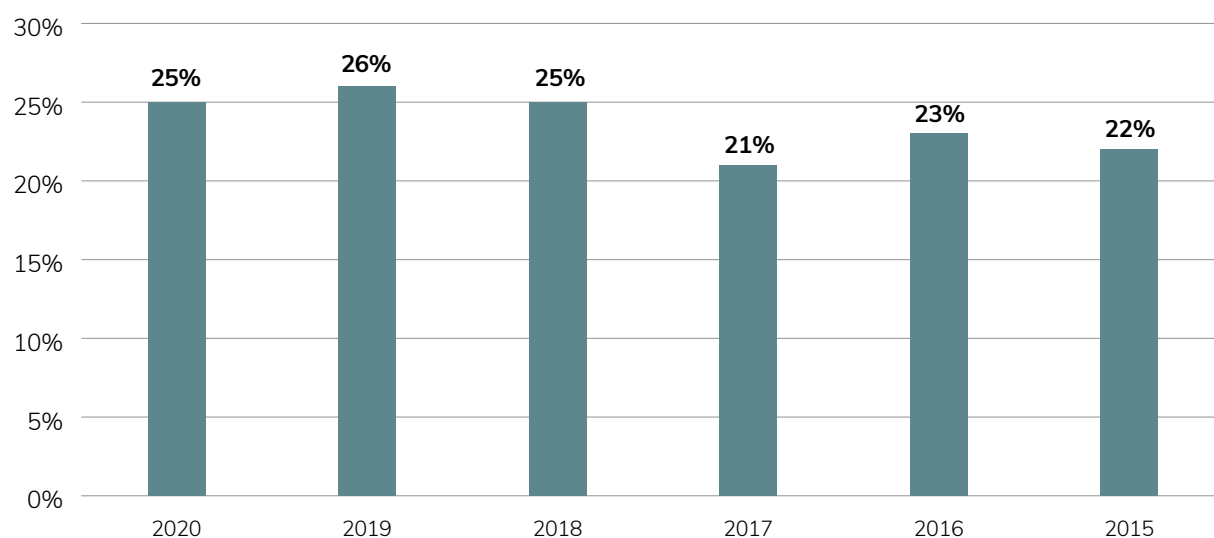
42 https://www.ara.fi/en-US/Materials/Homelessness_reports

several years are not directly comparable. Allowing for this, Finnish estimations of total homelessness, including people in situations of living 'temporarily with friends or relatives' (because there is nowhere else to go) report that around one quarter of total homelessness involves women (Figure 1).

Two points are worth noting here. First, the Finnish data are an annual exercise that has some limitations, particularly in relation to some data being estimated⁴³ and second, Finland is atypical in European terms, because its absolute and, particularly its *relative* level of homelessness are extremely low compared to other Member States. The data in Figure 1 referred to a *national* total of 1,554 women in 2016 and 1,065 in 2020, with only 4,341 people in total being recorded as homeless in Finland in that year.

Ireland records administrative data on systems providing temporary accommodation and other support to people experiencing homelessness. This system is not a survey, unlike that conducted in Finland; instead, these are administrative data based on recorded use of homelessness services and temporary accommodation by people experiencing homelessness, which is distinct from a count of people experiencing homelessness because it only records people using services, omitting anyone who does not. One caveat, based on what is known about women's experiences and trajectories through homelessness is that some Irish women who are homeless will not be recorded by these systems, because they do not always use services.⁴⁴

FIGURE 1: Women as a Proportion of Total Homelessness in Finland



Source: [ARA](#).

Focus Ireland has run some analysis on these administrative data⁴⁵, which is drawn upon here. Figure 2 is reproduced from the Focus Ireland analysis. This shows a gender breakdown among

adults who are using temporary accommodation in Ireland, starting in April 2014 and extending to December 2020.

43 Benjaminsen, L.; Dhalmann, H.; Dyb, E.; Knutagård, M. and Lindén, J. (2020) [Measurement of Homelessness in the Nordic Countries](#) European Journal of Homelessness 14(3), pp. 159-180.

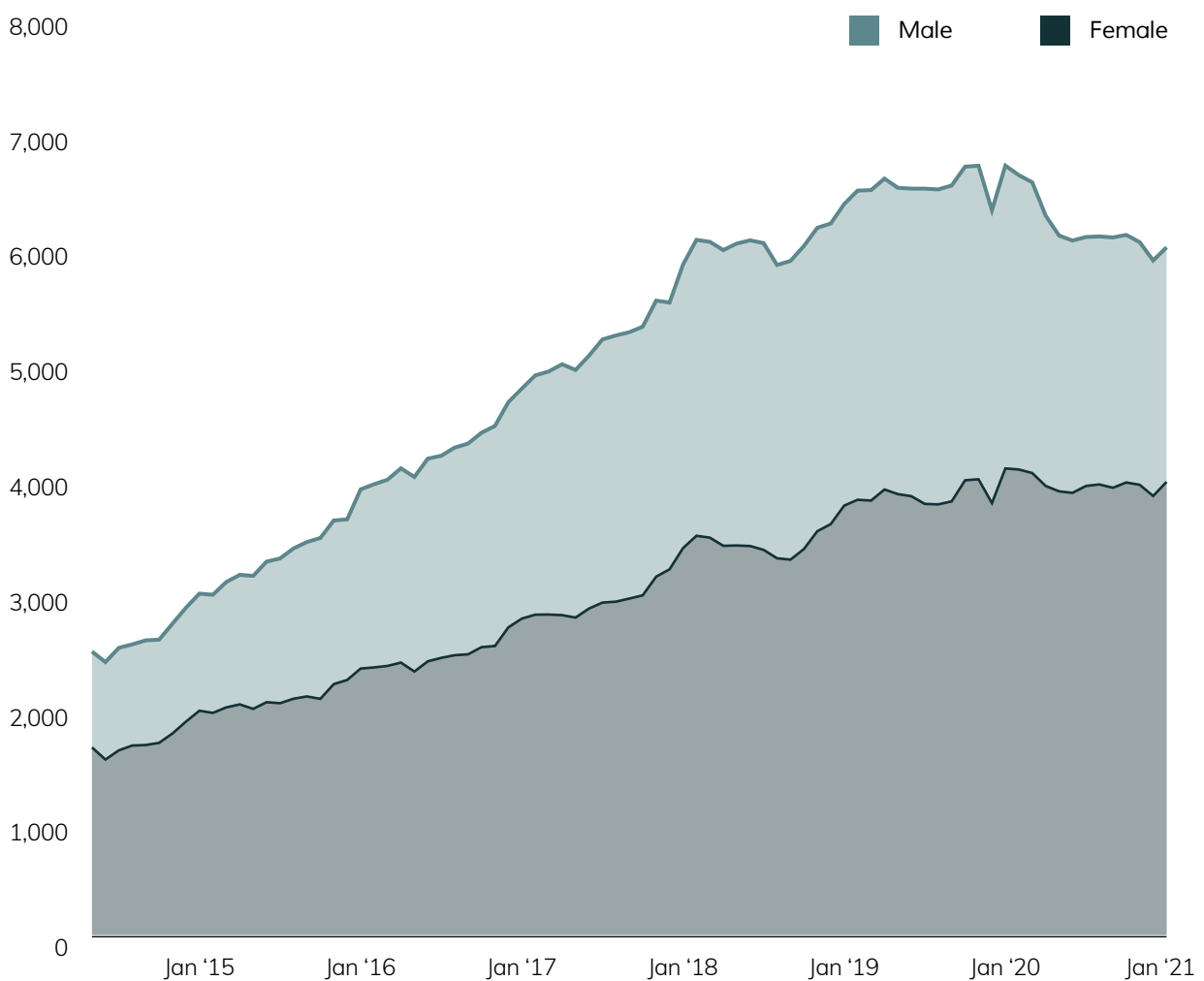
44 Mayock, P. and Sheridan, S. (2012) [Women's 'Journeys' to Homelessness: Key Findings from a Biographical Study of Homeless Women in Ireland](#), *Women and Homelessness in Ireland, Research Paper 1*, Dublin: School of Social Work and Social Policy and Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin.

45 <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/>

The Irish administrative data suggest a higher proportion of women experiencing homelessness, although there are important contextual differences beyond the different basis on which homelessness is being measured compared to Finland. Homelessness in Ireland is relatively higher than is the case in Finland and numbers have until recently been increasing.

In April 2014, 34% of the adults using emergency accommodation in Ireland were women, 1,644 out of a total of 2,477. At the most recent peak in numbers which was January 2020, 39% of adults using emergency accommodation were women, 2,630 out of 6,697, with the proportion dropping slightly again by December 2020, to 35% out of a lower total of 5,873 adults.⁴⁶

FIGURE 2: Women and Men using Emergency Accommodation in Ireland



Sources: Chart: [Focus Ireland](https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/) Source: Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government

46 <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/>

Outside the Scandinavian countries, data collection tends to be more limited or infrequent, with variations according to how homelessness is defined, whether or not data are recorded and what systems, both in terms of services and administrative data collection on those services, are in place. FEANTSA produces an annual review on housing exclusion and homelessness in Europe in association with Fondation Abbé Pierre.⁴⁷ This review brings together diverse sources of information on homelessness which include data on women's experiences. Combining these data into a single table or graph would be very problematic, as they are collected and defined in ways that are so diverse that any direct comparison would be extremely difficult and give a distorted picture. These data do tell us that women's homelessness is widespread in Europe and there is evidence – variable evidence but evidence nevertheless – across every member state that records data on homelessness. In the *Fifth Overview of Housing Exclusion In Europe: 2020*⁴⁸ data from Sweden in 2017 are noted, which reported that 38% of homeless adults were women, using a definition that includes hidden homelessness. By comparison, the same report notes data recording that 22% of people using emergency shelters in Brussels were women. The 2019 report in the same series notes data indicating that 19% of people using Czech emergency shelters were women, with figures from German homelessness services showing 27% of people using them were women, alongside data from a major Italian homelessness service provider reporting that 30% of people using their services were women.⁴⁹

Changes in measurement techniques, the influence of ETHOS and wider recognition of hidden forms of homelessness are changing the debates about the extent of women's homelessness in Europe. However, arriving at a European consensus on how to define homelessness, comparable data collection techniques and, particularly, widespread use of survey and other data on the nature and extent of homelessness being experienced by people

living with friends, relatives or acquaintances in precarious situations is still some way off. The indications are, however, that women's homelessness is clear, present and, by some measures, may be increasing over time.⁵⁰

ADDRESSING COUNTERNARRATIVES AROUND WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

Assumptions about the nature of homelessness, in terms of where it is experienced, how it is experienced and assumptions across mass and social media, mainstream politics and, arguably, in the cultural construction of homelessness as something largely experienced by lone men have distorted debates about the nature of European homelessness. The spatial error reflects a tendency to look in spaces and places where homeless women are less likely to be present; the administrative error, which we might also call a category error, conceals women's homelessness by labelling and processing in ways that underplay its nature and extent; and the methodological error is twofold, distorting the picture of homelessness as a whole, and not considering whether or not existing methods are likely to find women experiencing the extremes of homelessness.

The criticism of these arguments tends to centre on the assertion that all these factors are also something that should be taken into account when exploring men's experience of homelessness. The often repeated and often loudly exclaimed point that men can also experience domestic abuse and that this abuse can trigger homelessness is, arguably, sometimes used to downplay the true extent of the associations between male abuse of women and the homelessness experienced by women and women with their children.

47 https://www.feantsa.org/public/user/Resources/resources/Rapport_Europe_2020_GB.pdf

48 https://www.feantsa.org/public/user/Resources/resources/Rapport_Europe_2020_GB.pdf

49 https://www.feantsa.org/download/oheeu_2019_eng_web5120646087993915253.pdf

50 https://www.feantsa.org/public/user/Resources/resources/Rapport_Europe_2020_GB.pdf

The reality of domestic abuse is that, while it is the case it is also experienced by men – usually involving a male perpetrator – it is a European⁵¹ and global⁵² social problem that disproportionately involves male perpetrators committing abuse and violence against women. Ultimately, however, the fact that male experience of domestic abuse is also a driver of homelessness that also needs to be counted makes no difference whatsoever to the argument that better recording and better understanding of – what all the available evidence suggests – are mutually reinforcing associations and intersections between domestic abuse experienced and women's homelessness, is urgently needed.

Similar objections are raised in relation to other aspects of women's homelessness. For example, the point will be made that men sleeping rough will also conceal themselves and may also avoid emergency shelters for what are essentially very similar reasons as those for women. Again, this pattern in no way negates the points about potential, indeed likely, underrepresentation of women, it just means there may also be underrepresentation of men. The women experiencing extremes of homelessness whose needs are not being fully understood are still there, regardless of what may or may not be also happening to men.

Arguments against the reality of women's homelessness, as a wider and more significant European problem than has hitherto been recognised all seem to centre on this same argument, that because something may also happen to men, it somehow negates female experience and apparently means that evidence that more women are homeless than used to be recognised should be downplayed or dismissed. These sorts of assertions draw directly from Neoreactionary/alt-right narratives, which question any fact by calling it 'fake', or as here, attempt negation by generalisation. By extension, it does not matter that women

experience homelessness caused by domestic abuse *because men do as well*, so that homeless women are therefore not special, do not require specific attention, and those asserting they exist at all, let alone in significant numbers, should not be listened to. In a wider ideological sense, negating women's homelessness in this way allows a wider narrative to be maintained. Systemic and endemic sexism, alongside misogyny, can be presented as not being a significant force in European societies and economies, women are not inherently disadvantaged relative to men, they are not, for example forced into homelessness as a direct consequence of widespread male domestic abuse in significant numbers.

Systemic and endemic sexism manifests itself in other ways in relation to women's homelessness, creating potentially *greater* protections in certain circumstances, but in ways that also distort the nature and extent of women's homelessness in Europe. In mainstream society and culture women are expected to occupy specific roles in society, expected to function primarily as mothers and carers at the core of nuclear families.

There is some European research evidence that women experiencing homelessness on their own, outside these core roles⁵³, existing not only as a homeless person, but as a woman outside her expected place at the core of domesticity, is responded to with a deeper level of hostility, as a personal moral failure, than is the case for a lone homeless man. One manifestation of this is a tendency to equate lone women's homelessness as inextricably linked to sex work, an expectation that survival sex will be a part of day to day existence when a woman is homeless on her own, with both men and sometimes formal homelessness services, tending to assume this will be the case, prompting anger and frustration among women confronting a false stereotype.⁵⁴ Again, this is not meant in any way to deny an issue exists, trauma from sexual

51 <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2019/violence>

52 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

53 Löfstrand, C. and Thörn, C. (2004) The Construction of Gender and Homelessness in Sweden, *Open House International Journal* 29(2) pp.6-13.

54 Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. (2018) *Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology* London: St Mungo's.

abuse as an experience leading to homelessness and while experiencing homelessness for women is real⁵⁵, but a widespread cultural expectation that a homeless woman, existing outside the domestic sphere, will be morally 'deviant' in other respects is a different matter.

Equally, however, women experiencing homelessness or at risk of it who are trying to maintain a domestic sphere, i.e. maintaining their motherhood of dependent children, tend to have assistance available, at least in theory, at pan-European level.⁵⁶ A few decades ago, child protection systems were more likely to react to child homelessness by taking the children into care, without necessarily making provision for any parent or parents who were also homeless. Across the world, social work systems are now more orientated towards keeping a parent or parents and children together, unless there are specific risks. A lone woman parent with her children will therefore often be protected by these social work systems, but on the provision that she signals she is a 'good mother', which may often include regulation and surveillance of her behaviour, which tends to centre on expected social norms. The expectation that parents will work, within a wider pan-European tendency to design welfare systems that pursue labour market activation, will often mean that while a lone woman parent will be expected to demonstrate parental commitment, she may also be expected to work, at least part time. In Scandinavian countries, suffi-

cient affordable or free childcare will theoretically enable a lone woman parent to work full time. The combination of being a good mother, because her children are with her and a good citizen, because she is working, can, across Europe, bring about relatively extensive protections to both prevent homelessness and provide a sustainable route out of homelessness.⁵⁷

Recognition of women's homelessness and responses to women's homelessness do not exist outside cultural, historical, mass and social media and political narratives that frame a wider picture of gender inequalities. While the EU, collectively, ranks relatively highly in global comparisons of gender equality, women are still likely to be poor, earn less, in less secure employment and be under-represented in leadership roles across the EU and in other European countries like the UK.⁵⁸ Differential experiences linked to gender inequality are present across all discussion, debate and analysis of women's homelessness in Europe, as Hansen-Löfstrand and Quilgars note:

... images of family, women (and men), homelessness and home have shaped the development of policies and practices aimed at assisting women who experience homelessness. In some cases, these images and discourses have led to greater access to housing for women but, in others, the marginalization of women's experiences has served to reinforce an already hidden problem.⁵⁹

55 Harding, R. and Hamilton, P. (2009) Working girls: Abuse or choice in street-level sex work? A study of homeless women in Nottingham. *British Journal of Social Work*, 39(6), pp.1118-1137.

56 Baptista, I.; Benjaminsen, L.; Busch-Geertsema, V. and Pleace, N. (2017) [Family Homelessness in Europe](#) Brussels: FEANTSA.

57 Baptista, I.; Benjaminsen, L.; Busch-Geertsema, V. and Pleace, N. (2017) [Family Homelessness in Europe](#) Brussels: FEANTSA.

58 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152&from=EN>

59 Hansen-Löfstrand, C. and Quilgars, D. (2016) Cultural Images and Definitions of Homeless Women: Implications for Policy and Practice at the European Level in Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. *Women's Homelessness in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 41-73.

2

The Dimensions of Women's Homelessness

UNDERSTANDING CAUSATION

Patterns of causation

The evidence on the causation of women's homelessness remains partial at European level. There are relatively few studies compared to the analysis that has been devoted to the experience and trajectories of homeless men.⁶⁰ Much of the work that has been done within Europe and beyond tends to focus on the aftermath of homelessness, exploring what happens to women and women lone parents as they try to access whatever shelters, refuges and other services are available. A recent global evidence synthesis, led by Anne Andermann in Canada, concludes that:

Much of the evidence on interventions to better support women experiencing homelessness focusses on those accessing domestic violence or family shelters. Since many more women are experiencing or at risk of hidden homelessness, population-based strategies are also needed to reduce gender inequity and exposure to violence, which are among the main structural drivers of homelessness among women.⁶¹

These narratives tend towards the presentation of women's homelessness as a 'sudden shock' event. Women's homelessness is triggered by a relationship collapse and a woman, or a woman and her child or children are left with housing they cannot sustain, because most or a significant part of household income left with a departing partner. When a woman or a woman with her children experience levels of abuse that lead them to leave the family home, while the domestic abuse will often have been sustained or repeated, the cause of homelessness is a single, sudden 'trigger' event, the point at which the decision is made to access a refuge. Reflecting similar research on lone men, lone women's homelessness causation can also be portrayed as following Gowan's aforementioned description of culturally and politically reinforced 'sin' and 'sickness', experiences of mental health problems, other serious illness or addiction, causing a fall into homelessness that is another narrative of reaching a point of sudden, catastrophic, collapse.⁶²

60 Bretherton, J. (2020) [Women's Experiences of Homelessness: A Longitudinal Study](#) *Social Policy and Society* 19(2), pp. 255–270.

61 Andermann, A., Mott, S., Mathew, C.M., Kendall, C., Mendonca, O., McLellan, A., Riddle, A., Saad, A., Iqbal, W., Magwood, O. and Pottie, K. (2021). [Evidence synthesis-Evidence-informed interventions and best practices for supporting women experiencing or at risk of homelessness: a scoping review with gender and equity analysis.](#) *Health promotion and chronic disease prevention in Canada: research, policy and practice*, 41(1), pp.1-13.

62 Bretherton, J. (2017) [Reconsidering Gender in Homelessness](#) *European Journal of Homelessness* 11 (1), pp. 1-21.

Evidence for all these scenarios exists and another Canadian review supported by the Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network⁶³ identifies the following patterns in women's homelessness, which, on current evidence, also appear to exist at various levels across Europe⁶⁴:

- ▶ Simple lack of any adequate, affordable housing options
- ▶ Overcrowding and otherwise inadequate housing
- ▶ Poverty, including after-housing cost poverty
- ▶ Physical, emotional and sexual abuse
- ▶ Human trafficking

Interactions with domestic abuse

There is strong, consistent evidence of a mutually reinforcing relationship between women's homelessness and experience of domestic abuse. Among women who experience long-term and repeated homelessness, experience of abuse and violence both before and during homelessness, leads to a need for trauma-informed services.⁶⁵ Family homelessness seems to be most commonly triggered by relationship breakdown, both involving and not involving domestic abuse, across Europe. Youth homelessness experienced by women is also associated with domestic abuse. These patterns are found across Europe and internationally. The recent global evidence synthesis, led by Anne Andermann in Canada notes:

It has been shown that women have different pathways into homelessness, as well as different support needs, than Women are more likely to experience homelessness due to domestic violence and a lack of social support. Leaving a violent relationship can be considerably more difficult if a victim shares children, a home and resources with their partner. On average, one woman in Canada is killed by her intimate partner every 5 days.⁶⁶

The intersections of domestic abuse and women's homelessness are complex. Women's homelessness is caused by many different experiences and events, as well as by systemic disadvantage, including poverty and social marginalisation, yet almost all European and international analysis of women's homelessness consistently finds evidence of domestic abuse and experience of gender-based violence and abuse as a major cause of homelessness. Domestic abuse is not the only cause, nor does it 'predict' women's homelessness, because experience of domestic abuse occurs on a far greater scale than all forms of homelessness. Nevertheless, the associations are much stronger than is the case for men's homelessness.⁶⁷ As Méabh Savage has noted in relation to Ireland, domestic abuse has, in most EU Member States, tended to be processed as a separate social problem from homelessness, reflecting a broader tendency to oversimplify domestic abuse as wholly (rather than largely) experienced by women and homelessness as (almost) exclusively experienced by lone men:

63 <http://womenshomelessness.ca>

64 Schwan, K., Versteegh, A., Perri, M., Caplan, R., Baig, K., Dej, E., Jenkinson, J., Brais, H., Eiboff, F., & Pahlevan Chaleshtari, T. (2020) *The State of Women's Housing Need & Homelessness in Canada: Executive Summary* Hache, A., Nelson, A., Kratochvil, E., & Malenfant, J. (Eds). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

65 Jones, A. (1999) *Out of Sight, Out of Mind?: The Experiences of Homeless Women* London: Crisis.

66 Andermann, A., Mott, S., Mathew, C.M., Kendall, C., Mendonca, O., McLellan, A., Riddle, A., Saad, A., Iqbal, W., Magwood, O. and Pottie, K. (2021). [Evidence synthesis-Evidence-informed interventions and best practices for supporting women experiencing or at risk of homelessness: a scoping review with gender and equity analysis](#). *Health promotion and chronic disease prevention in Canada: research, policy and practice*, 41(1), pp. 1-13.

67 Baptista, I. (2010) Women and homelessness in Europe, in E. O'Sullivan, V. Busch-Geertsema, D. Quilgars and N. Pleace (eds.) [Homelessness Research in Europe](#), Brussels: FEANTSA, pp. 163–86.

*Recognition of the complex, gender-specific dimensions to homelessness, such as women's relationship to mothering, domestic abuse and homelessness, are virtually absent in homeless policy documents.*⁶⁸

While it falls across the experience of causation and trajectories through homelessness, another important aspect of abuse and violence as they relate to women's homelessness is the heightened risk of abuse *while* homeless, i.e. when living in situations of 'hidden' homelessness with friends, relatives and acquaintances. There are also associations between repeated homelessness and domestic abuse, where a woman may sometimes experience an initial period of homelessness and then, exiting and establishing a relationship with a new partner, experience domestic abuse that triggers further homelessness. Recent research on women's homelessness in Spain noted:

*Accordingly, homeless women sometimes overcome homelessness by going to live with family or friends, establishing a relationship with a new partner, finding employment that provides accommodation, e.g. domestic service, gaining access to temporary income that allows them to pay for temporary accommodation, etc. However, in many cases, problems in their relationships with their relatives or friends, suffering from intimate partner violence or the breakdown of the relationship, the loss of employment or the loss of temporary income can make these women homeless once again.*⁶⁹

Women's homelessness and poverty

UK research tends to highlight relationship breakdown, in a context where women lack the financial resources, formal and informal support to prevent

an entry into homelessness and are impeded from exiting homelessness. There is no one route into homelessness and various factors, including the decisions and actions of women, influence their trajectories through homelessness. As with Irish research⁷⁰, there is broader evidence showing women who were in precarious positions, financially, in terms of social and practical supports, who experience tipping points into homelessness from housing situations that were never characterised by stability and security. Sudden falls can and do occur, a woman suddenly and abruptly leaving mainstream housing, social and economic life because of a life changing event, such as the onset of severe mental illness.⁷¹ However, European women's homelessness, as with homelessness in general, is not an equal risk⁷², it *not* equally likely to happen to any woman, regardless of her socioeconomic position; it is women who are in positions of socioeconomic disadvantage who are at greatest risk and simple poverty is a driver in the causation of women's homelessness.

The work of Shinn and her colleagues analysis of family homelessness causation, centred on American experience has been influential in developing greater understanding of the nature of women's homelessness. Looking at families entering emergency shelters – disproportionately headed by lone women parents – in the 1990s and beyond, Shinn found that uniformly poor families were entering services only after 'informal' options had been exhausted, i.e. any possibilities of staying with relatives, friends or acquaintances had come to an end or were no longer available and it was at that point, and not before, that women with children resorted to the emergency shelter. Family homelessness was generally not occurring as a sudden descent from a secure, affluent, socioeconomic and housing position. Crucially, looking at families

68 Savage, M. (2016) *Gendering women's homelessness*. *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*, 16(2), p.167.

69 Vázquez, J.J., Panadero, S. and Pascual, I. (2019) *The particularly vulnerable situation of women living homeless in Madrid (Spain)*. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 22, e52, p6.

70 Mayock, P. and Sheridan, S. (2012) *Women's 'Journeys' to Homelessness: Key Findings from a Biographical Study of Homeless Women in Ireland*. *Women and Homelessness in Ireland, Research Paper 1*, Dublin: School of Social Work and Social Policy and Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin.

71 Bretherton, J. (2020) *Women's Experiences of Homelessness: A Longitudinal Study*. *Social Policy and Society* 19(2), pp. 255–270.

72 Bramley, G. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2018) Homelessness in the UK: who is most at risk? *Housing Studies* 33(1), pp.96–116.

using emergency shelters over time, using longitudinal methods, it was found that most self-exited homelessness within five years.⁷³ This work had three implications for understanding the causation of women's homelessness in Europe:

- ▶ Rather than a sudden event, women's homelessness could occur as a process, in which women, exercising agency and taking decisions, took a series of informal actions to try to stop actual homelessness from occurring.
- ▶ Homelessness associated with a general, *sustained*, position of precarity, often occurred from insecure housing that was difficult to reliably afford, taking a pathway from that housing to 'hidden' homelessness and, if those arrangements eventually broke down, into emergency shelters.
- ▶ Women's patterns and trajectories through homelessness – at least in terms of lone women parent families – *concealed* their homelessness in two senses: the first was because they used invisible, informal supports rather than resorting to the formal services and administrative systems that would record their presence and the second, because significant numbers of them also appeared to also self-exit from homelessness, rather than using services.

In their recent research on the trajectories of homeless women in Poland, Mostowska and Dębska highlight this pattern of sustained economic marginalisation and housing insecurity, but add another dimension, namely that women can have few resources in any sense, but can also lack control over whatever housing may be available. Poverty and economic marginalisation becomes a function of (some) male behaviour, extending into the financial control that can be a part of domestic abuse:

It has been shown elsewhere that some women in homelessness have never had permanent, stable and independent living arrangements. Their pathways into homelessness were "a switch from relying on their personal support systems to relying on the welfare system". Residential instability has been the main feature also of most of our respondents' housing pathways. It seems that this instability was partly caused by a gendered way of managing housing resources between related households. It should further be explored whether women in fact moved more often into their husband's place than vice versa, and whether brothers had precedence over sisters to live in the parental home.⁷⁴

British research has reported something very similar, families using the statutory homelessness system in England, again mainly women lone parents, had often exhausted informal options before resorting to seeking help from a local authority, they were also from socioeconomically marginalised backgrounds. Poor lone women parents and children were disproportionately experiencing family homelessness from which they sought to self-exit using their own resources, often only reaching for homelessness services when their other options were exhausted.⁷⁵ At European level, there was also broader evidence of the associations between sustained precarity in terms of housing and economic and social position, it was poor Europeans, women and men both, whose housing was not secure to begin with, who were at heightened risk of homelessness.⁷⁶

73 Shinn, M., Weitzman, B.C., Stojanovic, D., Knickman, J.R., Jimenez, L., Duchon, L., James, S. and Krantz, D.H. (1998) [Predictors of homelessness among families in New York City: from shelter request to housing stability](#). *American Journal of Public Health*, 88(11), pp.1651-1657.

74 Mostowska, M. and Dębska (2020) ['Where was I to go after divorce?': Gendered Family Housing Pathways and Women's Homelessness in Poland](#) *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(2) pp. 66-67.

75 Fitzpatrick, S. and Pleace, N. (2012) The statutory homelessness system in England: a fair and effective rights-based model? *Housing Studies*, 27(2), pp.232-251.

76 Meert, H. and Bourgeois, M. (2005) Between rural and urban slums: A geography of pathways through homelessness. *Housing Studies*, 20(1), pp.107-125.

Women's homelessness and welfare systems

Researchers also began to detect patterns of homelessness that appeared to change with the nature and extent of welfare, i.e. social protection and social housing systems. In Scandinavian countries, which with the exception of Sweden, retain extensive, broadly social democratic welfare systems, homelessness looked oddly like the stereotypical image, there were women, but they were a minority among what were relatively speaking, tiny populations of lone adults with high and complex needs.⁷⁷ Elsewhere, however, patterns of homelessness looked much more like what had been reported in the USA, a smaller group of lone adults with high and complex needs, including some women, with high and complex needs experiencing long-term and repeated homelessness, and a seemingly much bigger, poor, population for whom sustained economic disadvantage was a major driver, if not always the immediate trigger, of their homelessness.⁷⁸

When it comes to women's homelessness however, any idea that European countries with extensive social protection would have less women's homelessness on the basis that there was less overall homelessness, is difficult to clearly demonstrate. One issue here is a yawning evidence gap, which persists at the time of writing. The most extensive European welfare systems tend to be the ones that collect systematic data on homelessness. There are exceptions to this rule, the national Italian and Spanish homelessness surveys, which, like the French national survey, are periodic and cross-sectional are in countries with more limited welfare systems and until recently, Germany, with extensive welfare systems, did not collect that much data on homelessness. In essence, however, Denmark can be pretty precise about how many people are

experiencing homelessness while Greece, with relatively limited social protection, cannot.

Women do not engage with homelessness services, or welfare services that might stop or prevent homelessness, in necessarily consistent or predictable ways. This was in the context of mounting global and European evidence that, faced with homelessness, many women's first reactions would be to draw on their own informal resources to try to find a way out. It cannot be assumed that women's homelessness is automatically less frequent, more often prevented or more quickly resolved in more extensive European welfare systems.⁷⁹ As one of the authors and her colleagues concluded in 2016:

There is enough evidence to at least sustain the development of a hypothesis, which must of course be tested, that women's experience of homelessness is often different, that this may influence their engagement with welfare states and homelessness services and that these differences, centred on the gendered nature of homelessness, may transcend the effects of different types of welfare states on women's experience of homelessness. The fact that someone experiencing homelessness is a woman may—at least in some cases—be a bigger determinant of her trajectory than the type of welfare state in which she is experiencing homelessness.⁸⁰

Women's need for social protection, welfare and public health systems may, on some evidence, be typically greater than that of men. More evidence is needed here, but while it is not possible to be certain whether the range and extent of these services influences the extent of women's homelessness overall, when women are homeless, including in contexts where welfare and public health systems are extensive, they can both need these services

77 Benjaminsen, L. (2015). Homelessness in a Scandinavian welfare state: The risk of shelter use in the Danish adult population. *Urban Studies*. doi: 0042098015587818. Benjaminsen, L. and Andrade, S. B. (2015). Testing a typology of homelessness across welfare regimes: Shelter use in Denmark and the USA. *Housing Studies*, 30(6), 858–876.

78 Busch-Geertsema, V.; Edgar, W.; O'Sullivan, E. and Pleace, N. (2010) [Homelessness and Homeless Policies in Europe: Lessons from Research](#), Brussels: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.

79 Bretherton, J.; Benjaminsen, L. and Pleace, N. (2016) Women's Homelessness and Welfare States in Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. *Women's Homelessness in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 75-99.

80 Bretherton, J.; Benjaminsen, L. and Pleace, N. (2016) Women's Homelessness and Welfare States in Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. *Women's Homelessness in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 98.

more and face barriers to reaching them. De Vet and her colleagues, exploring women's homelessness in the Netherlands reported:

Women were younger, more likely to have children, and less likely to be educated (socio-demographics). Women were more likely to be unemployed and to have been victimised (living conditions). They more often had minor children with them (social embeddedness). Women had used more types of services (societal embeddedness) and were less satisfied with their health and empowerment, had lower self-esteem, and experienced more psychological distress, but were less likely than men to have used alcohol excessively or cannabis (self-regulation). These gender differences mostly disadvantage the women and support the premise that women who reside in homeless shelters are particularly vulnerable.⁸¹

Homeless women's actions and choices

Recent evidence reinforces the idea that trajectories of causation, alongside trajectories through homelessness by women, should not be interpreted as a list of events that happen to women over which they have no control, or which they cannot at least influence.⁸² Narratives around homelessness in general – and around women's experience of homelessness in particular – are skewed towards narratives in which *something happens* to someone who *cannot control the consequences*.⁸³ In reality, in work dating back to the 1990s, the causation of women's homelessness is more complex than that

and, as the experience of homelessness happens to them, it cannot be assumed that women are either powerless to react or that any actions that they take have no effect.

Where these narratives of helplessness become potentially most misleading is in the associations between domestic abuse and women's homelessness. The association is real, present and significant and, as discussed above, while male experience of domestic abuse can also lead to homelessness, women are far more likely to experience homelessness that has been triggered by or is associated with domestic abuse. The trauma and support needs that can be associated with domestic abuse can mean that women with sustained and repeated experience of homelessness may have support needs that are even more acute than those found among men.⁸⁴

One risk around these narratives is the potential for stigmatising women who experience homelessness in the sense of reducing their main characteristic to that of victimhood. Of course, if any significant support can be accessed, the evidence is that women experiencing domestic abuse can avoid homelessness. Sanctuary schemes that deal with the perpetrator and make the home safe for the person subject to domestic abuse have proven effective in preventing homelessness.⁸⁵ Innovative practice, such as the UK's Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA)⁸⁶ Accreditation system for housing providers, can create effective systems for early detection and prevention of domestic abuse and prevent potential homelessness.

81 de Vet, R., Beijersbergen, M.D., Lako, D.A., van Hemert, A.M., Herman, D.B. and Wolf, J.R. (2019) [Differences between homeless women and men before and after the transition from shelter to community living: A longitudinal analysis](#) *Health and Social Care in the Community* 27(5), p. 1,198.

82 Bretherton, J. (2017) [Reconsidering Gender in Homelessness](#) *European Journal of Homelessness* 11 (1), pp. 1-21; Mayock, P. and Sheridan, S. (2020) [Women Negotiating Power and Control as they 'Journey' Through Homelessness: A Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective](#). *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(2), pp. 17-41.

83 Pleace, N. (2016) [Researching Homelessness in Europe: Theoretical Perspectives](#) *European Journal of Homelessness* 10(3), pp. 19-44.

84 Pleace, N.; Bretherton, J. and Mayock, P. (2016) Long-term and Recurrent Homelessness Among Women in Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. *Women's Homelessness in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 209-234.

85 Mayock, P.; Bretherton, J. and Baptista, I. (2016) Women's Homelessness and Domestic Violence: (In)visible Interactions in Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. *Women's Homelessness in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 127-154.

86 <https://www.dahalliance.org.uk>

However, perhaps the main point here is that women whose homelessness is triggered by domestic abuse trend towards the wider pattern that European and global research is showing: women often react to homelessness by using their own, informal resources to find a way out of it and are not passive victims of their circumstances. Within the wider political and cultural narratives and practices that systematically disadvantage women in general, the idea of a homeless woman as definable primarily in terms of 'domestic abuse victim' potentially compounds and extends the images of women as inherently powerless. This means that the design, delivery and management of services for homeless women can be processed as helping helpless victims, for whom decisions about what support they should receive and what trajectories their lives should take, must be made on their behalf. Counteracting these narratives is important in building innovative women-focused homelessness services which emerging evidence suggests, are most effective when built, led and delivered co-productively with women.⁸⁷

The other element here is that the domestic abuse narrative, which it is important to note is a widespread but by *no means* universal factor in the causation of homelessness, can be used to eclipse the wider social problems associated with women's homelessness in Europe. When women cannot self-exit from homelessness it is because they have no money, face barriers to getting any or at least enough to afford their own housing, cannot get the support they need or the subsidised or social housing that would provide a stable pathway out of homelessness; it is a systemic failure, their continued homelessness is not explainable in terms of what originally caused it. As Kesia Reeve notes:

Financially independent women with savings, property, well paid employment, and affordable childcare can avoid or escape homelessness in this situation. It is the fact that women are more likely to be the primary carers, the part-time and low-paid workers, unable to afford their own family home without assistance that is the 'cause' of their homelessness, although domestic violence may well be the trigger.⁸⁸

UNDERSTANDING NEED

Young women

FEANTSA has defined youth homelessness as follows:

Youth homelessness occurs where an individual between the ages of 13 and 26 is experiencing rooflessness or houselessness or is living in insecure or inadequate housing without a parent, family member or other legal guardian.⁸⁹

Youth homelessness in general is associated with disruption to family life during childhood. Homelessness is not 'inherited' in the sense that a homeless parent is much more likely to produce a homeless child. However, a young woman who has experienced disruption in education, to parental and other family relationships in a context of growing up in relative poverty, appears to be at heightened risk of becoming homeless as a young person, a broad pattern that applies across EU Member States, within other European countries like the UK and across OECD countries.⁹⁰

87 Quilgars, D. and Pleace, N. (2017) [The Threshold Housing First Pilot for Women with an Offending History: The First Two Years: Report of the University of York Evaluation](#) University of York

88 Reeve, K. (2018) [Women and homelessness: putting gender back on the agenda](#) *People, Place and Policy Online*, 11 (3), p. 167.

89 FEANTSA [European Framework for Defining Youth Homelessness](https://www.feantsa.org/download/framework-for-defining-youth-homelessness_final_pdf3614092469143708469.pdf) https://www.feantsa.org/download/framework-for-defining-youth-homelessness_final_pdf3614092469143708469.pdf

90 Schwan, K., French, D., Gaetz, S., Ward, A., Akerman, J., Redman, M. and Stirling, T. (2018) [Preventing youth homelessness: An international review of evidence](#). The Wales Centre for Public Policy.

Alongside disruption to family life in early childhood, youth homelessness appears to become more likely when two other experiences are also present. One is mental illness, which may be associated with the disruptions in earlier childhood, which is in turn associated with another factor, contact with child protection/social work systems while in childhood and early adolescence. Over-representation of young women who have been looked after/fostered or placed in care by child protection systems among young people experiencing homelessness is very pronounced across European Member States.⁹¹ Repeated attempts have been made to manage the process of leaving care so that the risk of youth homelessness is reduced, with some recent efforts focusing on co-production, building systems that are collaborations with young people leaving care to reduce the risk of homelessness and other negative outcomes.⁹²

The gender dynamics of youth homelessness are under-researched. Young women and men share multiple vulnerabilities and share what can often be common experiences during childhood, but there is evidence that their trajectories through homelessness can be variable and it cannot be assumed that their needs are the same.⁹³ Systematic Danish analysis of young people experiencing homelessness did not suggest variations along gender lines, instead highlighting sustained experience of socio-economic marginalisation and, as a distinct effect,

the experience of severe mental illness among young people from diverse situations.⁹⁴

Associations with mental illness might mean that, in a wider context in which women are more likely to be diagnosed with mental illness than men⁹⁵, that young women may be at greater risk of homelessness when a mental health problem occurs. A complicating factor here is that the key term is *diagnosis*, rather than prevalence, with longstanding concerns about gender bias in diagnosis meaning that homeless young women are more likely to be *classified* as mentally ill, without necessarily experiencing mental illness at a higher rate than young men.⁹⁶ Canadian evidence has also suggested that, along with LGBTQI young people, young women may be at heightened risk compared to young men, taking other variables into account.⁹⁷ It is unclear whether these patterns might also exist within or across EU Member States. More research is needed to clarify the nature and extent to which the gender dynamics of youth homeless may or may not have associations with possible variations in mental health morbidity between genders.

Risks around sexual abuse exist for both genders, but may be present at a greater rate and to a greater degree for young women. Again, it is very important to not make any automatic association between homelessness among young women and sex work, nevertheless, risks can exist for young

- 91 Quilgars, D. (2010) Youth Homelessness in O'Sullivan, E.; Busch-Geertsema, V.; Quilgars, D. and Pleace, N. (eds) *Homelessness Research in Europe: Festschrift for Bill Edgar and Joe Doherty* Brussels: FEANTSA; Mayock, P. and Parker, S. (2017) *Living in Limbo: Homeless Young People's Paths to Housing*. Dublin: Focus Ireland. Available at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Mayock-and-Parker-2017-Living-in-Limbo-Homeless-Young-Peoples-Paths-to-Housing-FINAL-BOOK.pdf>
- 92 Dixon, J., Ward, J. and Blower, S. (2019) "They sat and actually listened to what we think about the care system": the use of participation, consultation, peer research and co-production to raise the voices of young people in and leaving care in England. *Child Care in Practice*, 25(1), pp.6-21.
- 93 O'Grady, B.I.L.L. and Gaetz, S. (2009) *Street survival: A gendered analysis of youth homelessness in Toronto. Finding home: Policy options for addressing homelessness in Canada* Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.
- 94 Benjaminsen, L. (2016) The variation in family background amongst young homeless shelter users in Denmark. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19(1), pp.55-73.
- 95 Piccinelli, M. and Wilkinson, G. (2000) Gender differences in depression: Critical review. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 177(6), pp.486-492.
- 96 Hartung, C.M. and Widiger, T.A. (1998) Gender differences in the diagnosis of mental disorders: Conclusions and controversies of the DSM-IV. *Psychological Bulletin*, 123(3), p.260.
- 97 Kidd, S.A., Gaetz, S. and O'Grady, B. (2017) The 2015 national Canadian homeless youth survey: Mental health and addiction findings. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 62(7), pp.493-500.

women, as they can for young men, especially if homelessness becomes sustained or repeated.⁹⁸ More evidence is needed on this area.

Some older evidence indicates that pathways through youth homelessness may diverge around (broadly) gendered lines, as marginalised young women experiencing youth homelessness may also become parents quite early in life, which means that child protection/social work systems can be more likely to intervene, housing the young woman and their child. However, recent policy interventions in several countries have seen teenage pregnancy rates fall significantly⁹⁹, meaning this pattern may no longer be in place, or at least does not exist in a consistent form across Europe. This goes to a wider point which is discussed below, which is that in responding to family homelessness, policy is often responding to youth homelessness, with parents – including women lone parents – in their early 20s with very young children.¹⁰⁰

LGBTIQ

A recent review led by FEANTSA¹⁰¹ has concluded that:

LGBTIQ youth homelessness remains hidden in Europe. We lack the data and the research to fully understand the scale of the problem. This year the Fundamental Rights Agency released a survey that estimates that 1 in 5 members of the LGBTIQ community experiences homelessness, rising to 1 in 3 for trans people and nearly 40% for intersex people.

Evidence in this area is lacking. There is anecdotal evidence that broadly associates youth homelessness with identifying as LGBTIQ, but while the narrative of, for example, someone who is biolog-

ically classified as female at birth facing intolerance and, in consequence, homelessness because they are trans, feels logical, but it is not clear how widespread this, or young women being thrown out of the parental home because they are lesbian, actually is.¹⁰² What evidence there is suggests that someone who does not identify as CIS gender might face heightened risk of homelessness. However, as with experience of domestic abuse, whether homelessness results may also depend on what personal, informal and formal resources a young person can access, the cause of homelessness, in the sense of the trigger event, does not explain in itself why homelessness occurs or is sustained, as other factors like economic marginalisation/poverty also come into play, as does the quality of services a person can access.

As the FEANTSA review concluded, this is an area of homelessness about which we need to know more. The possible associations with youth homelessness need to be better understood and the experience of LGBTIQ people in later life in relation to homelessness and housing exclusion also needs to be much better understood.

Women parents

There are three levels to the evidence gaps around women parents with dependent children who become homeless. The first evidence gap is that there is comparatively little research on family homelessness, compared to the very large amount of research on lone adult men in situations of living rough or who are resident in emergency shelters.

The second evidence gap is that, while a majority of homeless families appear to be lone women parents with dependent children across most EU Member States, data on family homeless-

98 Harding, R. and Hamilton, P. (2009) Working girls: Abuse or choice in street-level sex work? A study of homeless women in Nottingham. *British Journal of Social Work*, 39(6), pp.1118-1137.

99 Baxter, M.A.J., Dundas, M.R., Popham, F. and Craig, P. (2021) How effective was England's teenage pregnancy strategy? A comparative analysis of high-income countries. *Social Science and Medicine*, 270, p.113685.

100 Baptista, I.; Benjaminsen, L.; Busch-Geertsema, V. and Pleace, N. (2017) [Family Homelessness in Europe](#) Brussels: FEANTSA.

101 Shelton, J., Stakelum, R., and Dodd, S.J. (2020) [LGBTIQ Youth Homelessness in Europe: Findings from a Survey of FEANTSA Membership Organisations](#). FEANTSA, True Colors United, and the Silberman Center for Sexuality and Gender at Hunter College.

102 Quilgars, D. et al. (2008) [Review of Youth Homelessness in the UK](#), York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

ness are less common. One reason for this is that households at risk of homelessness containing a dependent child are quite often handled by social services or child protection/social work systems, which, returning to the *administrative error* that creates challenges around recognising and measuring women's homelessness, means their homelessness may not be recorded as such. The same issue arises where a woman and one or more dependent children are supported by domestic abuse services, when this means their homelessness is not recorded.

The third level to the evidence gap on homeless women parents is that when homeless families are researched, the specific experience of women does not receive separate, detailed scrutiny, as the issue being examined is 'families' rather than 'women'.¹⁰³

More systematic American work has, as noted, drawn distinctions between US family homelessness, again predominantly involving lone women parents, with social and economic causation and family homelessness associated with significant parental and child support needs. At European level, the sense is that the bulk of family homelessness probably falls into the low need category, reflecting the patterns reported in the US¹⁰⁴, based on what is known, but this risks discounting the associations with domestic abuse, which may mean there is a higher need for trauma-informed services than has yet been recognised.

There are not enough data on family homelessness. In some EU Member states, most notably Ireland, levels have been increasing. In terms of some of the possible aftermaths of the COVID-19 pandemic, family homelessness may increase when various temporary measures, such as widespread use of

eviction bans by Member States, are removed, and while these effects may be variable there could be spikes in levels, at least in some areas of the EU. Beyond this, there is not enough research – indeed almost none – looking at the experience of homeless women with dependent children in Europe, specifically at women's experiences and their perspectives, a striking omission in an area of research in which the bulk of homeless families are headed by women.

Migrant women

Migration issues around women's homelessness are threefold¹⁰⁵:

- ▶ Undocumented migrants joining rough sleeping and squatting populations, as well as living in encampments.
- ▶ Homeless women who are EU citizens, economic migrants in another country, e.g. people from Southern and Eastern Europe who have headed to the relatively prosperous North West.¹⁰⁶
- ▶ Racism and cultural intolerance directed at migrants and the descendants of migrants who are citizens of EU member states.

Some data on these issues are relatively clear. There is a consensus that levels of migrant homelessness have been rising steadily.

Analyses of populations living rough, particularly in Europe's globally connected cities, such as Berlin, Dublin or Paris and the major cities of Italy and Spain, report large numbers of undocumented migrants and EU economic migrants who are citizens of other member states. Women are present in these populations but may be less likely

103 Baptista, I.; Benjaminsen, L.; Busch-Geertsema, V. and Pleace, N. (2017) *Family Homelessness in Europe* Brussels: FEANTSA.

104 Culhane, D. P.; Metraux, S.; Park, J., Schretzman, M., and Valente, J. (2007) Testing a Typology of Family Homelessness Based on Patterns of Public Shelter Utilization in Four U.S. Jurisdictions: Implications for Policy and Program Planning. *Housing Policy Debate* 18(1) Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/spp_papers/67

105 Mostowska, M. and Sheridan, S. (2016) Migrant Women and Homelessness Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. *Women's Homelessness in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 235-264.

106 Mostowska, M. (2013) Migration and homelessness: the social networks of homeless Poles in Oslo. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39(7), pp.1125-1140; Mostowska, M. (2014) 'We Shouldn't but We Do...': Framing the Strategies for Helping Homeless EU migrants in Copenhagen and Dublin. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 44(suppl_1), pp.i18-i34.

to live rough or in encampments and more likely to conceal themselves when they do.

Equally, there is a broad association between Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups and socio-economic disadvantage and housing exclusion. Muslim populations, for example, tend to live in worse housing than is the case for White European populations across the EU Member States. There are complexities around whether Traveller or Roma populations should be regarded as migrants, but strong evidence of systemic disadvantage in access to adequate, affordable homes at pan-European level.¹⁰⁷

Migration flows are not static and can be subject to extremely rapid change, they are also an area of EU policy that still lies broadly within the competency of each member state, witness the huge variations in policy responses to the influx of refugees from the Syrian war.¹⁰⁸ This makes arriving at definite or consistent statements about how migrant women experience homelessness difficult, in the sense that the nature of the associations between homelessness and migration across Europe is not fixed.

Some research shows that it is important to understand how migrant women's homelessness can be associated with gender-based violence. A particular issue here can be that, while women's homelessness associated with domestic abuse can mean that a woman loses all her support systems, both formal and informal, if she has to leave all the places she is familiar with, when a migrant woman enters homelessness to escape domestic abuse, she can be left utterly on her own, perhaps unable to communicate and cut off from any community support. These problems are compounded if a woman is undocumented, which across most of

the EU, effectively blocks access to social protection, housing and homelessness services.¹⁰⁹

This is another area where there are some significant evidence gaps. The experience of migrant women has not been as well researched as some other aspects of migrant homelessness.

Older women

This is an area that is under-researched in Europe. Australian researchers have begun reporting evidence that older women without a partner are increasingly vulnerable to housing stress, insecurity and homelessness. The effect is linked to pension provision and the ways in which social protection systems work. In the Australian case, women who have worked and paid their (private) rents for many years while living independently find themselves with insufficient income in later life, i.e. their housing costs are beyond what can be afforded on their retirement incomes.¹¹⁰

From some European perspectives, the risk is theoretical, in that social protection systems are often sufficient to mean that an older woman living alone is not likely to become homeless, although the possibility of her experiencing after-housing cost poverty and associated fuel poverty and food insecurity does exist. As women are more likely to work in the gig economy, be involved in temporary, short-term and part-time work, reflecting the global trends towards casualisation in the labour market, the possibility of homelessness increasing among lone older women needs to be considered, at least in some Member States. Again, the effects of the pandemic on economic growth and the labour market may prove important here.

107 Pleace, N. (2010). Immigration and homelessness. In E. O'Sullivan, V. Busch-Geertsema, D. Quilgars, & N. Pleace (Eds.), *Homelessness Research in Europe: Festschrift for Bill Edgar and Joe Doherty* Brussels: FEANTSA, pp. 143–162.

108 Baptista, I.; Benjaminsen, L.; Busch-Geertsema, V.; Striano, M. and Pleace, N. (2016) *Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Homelessness: The Humanitarian Crisis and the Homelessness Sector in Europe* Brussels: FEANTSA.

109 Mayock, P.; Sheridan, S. and Parker, S. (2012) *Migrant Women and Homelessness: The Role of Gender-based Violence* *European Journal of Homelessness* 6(1), pp. 59-82.

110 <https://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/news/reports-and-submissions/ending-and-preventing-older-womens-experiences-homelessness-australia>

Long term and recurrent homelessness

Data and research on long-term and recurrent homelessness are abundant in Europe, particularly in the North West, although some research on people making long-term use of emergency shelters and experiencing or recurrent rough sleeping are available across a majority of Member States. The limitations of this evidence base are those highlighted above in the discussion of the *spatial error* and the *methodological error* in much homelessness research, i.e. this research often focuses on specific 'homeless places', i.e. the streets and shelters, and because it is cross-sectional, tends to oversample people with high and complex needs experiencing long-term and repeated homelessness. Data on people experiencing these forms of homelessness are often limited in the respect that they do not look, for example, at 'hidden' forms of homelessness, which immediately restricts data collection on homeless women and because, while these studies encompass women living rough and in emergency shelters, it is often in small numbers that are not examined in particular detail. It is something of an oversimplification, but not much of an exaggeration, to describe a lot of this literature as making comments such as '13% of respondents were female', but not taking the analysis any further than that.

What is known about lone women experiencing homelessness on a long-term and recurrent basis is that, like men, they often have high and complex

needs. There is however, some evidence to suggest that their needs can often exceed those of men in a similar position. The effects of widespread experience of domestic abuse/gender-based violence can be combined with severe mental illness, addiction, contact with the criminal justice system and, often, forced separation from children who have been taken into care by child protection or placed with relatives to ensure they remain housed.¹¹¹

The scope of existing studies is often small, based on qualitative data collection that explores the needs of women who have experienced long-term and repeated homelessness. In general, this research demonstrates a need for service environments that understand trauma, alongside an ability to deal with combinations of addiction and mental and physical ill-health. There is some evidence that Housing First services can provide sustainable exits from long-term and repeated homelessness for women with high and complex needs (see below).

As noted, the specific experience of women in situations of long-term and repeated homelessness, while recorded by many studies at least in the sense of showing that women are present in these populations, is under researched. While some work has been done¹¹², there is a need for greater understanding of the factors that cause women to remain homeless for long periods or to return to homelessness episodically and also of the dynamics driving these patterns of service use.

111 Pleace, N.; Bretherton, J. and Mayock, P. (2016) Long-term and Recurrent Homelessness Among Women in Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. *Women's Homelessness in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 209-234.

112 Bretherton, J. (2020) *Women's Experiences of Homelessness: A Longitudinal Study* *Social Policy and Society* 19(2), pp. 255-270.

3

The Service Experiences of Homeless Women

WOMEN'S TRAJECTORIES INTO HOMELESSNESS SERVICES

Prior to accessing homelessness services, most women will have spent (sometimes lengthy) periods living in situations of hidden homelessness and larger numbers than are frequently recognised will also have endured episodes of rough sleeping.¹¹³ Women tend to enter homelessness and other support services at a later stage than their male counterparts¹¹⁴ and, at the point when they do engage with services, many will be dealing with the effects of trauma, not only associated with the

absence of stable housing, but also with past and/or recent experiences of victimisation and violence.

High rates of lifetime exposure to victimisation are consistently found in samples of homeless women and large numbers report experiences of physical and sexual abuse, often spanning from childhood.¹¹⁵ As discussed earlier, in many European countries and in North America and Australia, domestic violence is considered to be a major contributor to women's homelessness.¹¹⁶ Women who experience homelessness also report mental health problems and substance use disorders at far higher rates than in the general population. Women

113 Bowpitt, G., Dwyer, P., Sundin, E. & Weinstein, M. (2011) Comparing men's and women's experiences of multiple exclusion homelessness. *Social Policy and Society*, 10(4), 537–546; May, J. et al. (2007) Alternative cartographies of homelessness: Rendering visible British women's experiences of 'visible' homelessness. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 14(2), 121-140; Moss, K. & Singh, P. (2015) *Women Rough Sleepers in Europe: Homelessness and Victims of Domestic Abuse* Bristol: Policy Press; Reeve, K., Casey, R. and Goudie, R. (2006) *Homeless Women: Still being Failed yet Striving to Survive*. London: Crisis.

114 Hutchinson, S., Page, A. and Sample, E. (2014) *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*. London: St Mungos.

115 Huey, L., Broll, R., Hryniewicz, D. and Fthenos, G. (2014) "They just asked me why I became homeless": "Failure to ask" as a barrier to homeless women's ability to access services post-victimization. *Violence and Victims*, 29(6), 952-966.; Lewinson, T., Thomas, M. and White, S. (2014) Traumatic transitions: Homeless women's narratives of abuse, loss, and fear. *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 29(2), 192-205.; Mayock, P.; Sheridan, S. and Parker, S. (2015) 'It's just like we're going around in circles and going back to the same thing ...': The Dynamics of Women's Unresolved Homelessness. *Housing Studies*, 30(6), 877-900; Padgett, D. K., Hawkins, R. L., Abrams, C. and Davis, A. (2006) In their own words: Trauma and substance abuse in the lives of formerly homeless women with serious mental illness. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76(4), 461-467; Schmidt, R., Hrenchuk, C., Bopp, J. and Poole, N. (2015) Trajectories of women's homelessness in Canada's 3 northern territories. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 74, 29778. doi:10.3402/ijch.v74.29778

116 Jasinski, J., Wesely, J., Wright, J. and Mustaine, E. (2010) *Hard Lives, Mean Streets: Violence in the Lives of Homeless Women* Hanover, MA: Northeastern University Press; Mayock, P., Bretherton, J. and Baptista, I. (2016) Women's Homelessness and Domestic Violence – (In)visible Interaction. In: P. Mayock and J. Bretherton (Eds.) *Women's Homelessness in Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 127-154; Pleace, N., Baptista, I., Benjaminsen, L. & Busch-Geertsema, V. (2018) *Homelessness Services in Europe*. Brussels: FEANTSA. Available at: [https://www.feantsaresearch.org/public/user/Observatory/Feantsa-Studies_08_v02\[1\].pdf](https://www.feantsaresearch.org/public/user/Observatory/Feantsa-Studies_08_v02[1].pdf)

– particularly 'single' women who are accessing homelessness services alone without accompanying children – frequently have multiple complex support needs even if most researchers emphasise that women's paths or journeys into and through homelessness involve a complex intersection of individual situations and wider structural forces.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, several scholars caution strongly against a portrayal of women as victims who lack agency¹¹⁸, in some cases arguing that "the 'pathological homeless woman' is a construct linked" to women's experiences with a service system "that frequently fails them".¹¹⁹

Understanding women's service experiences is clearly important if homelessness systems of intervention are to deliver services that respond to women's needs and *their perspectives on what they need*. This section looks at women's experiences of homelessness and wider social care services, highlighting ways in which service interactions can shape women's homelessness trajectories as they navigate systems of intervention frequently perceived by them as unable to meet their needs.

Over the past decade in particular, research on women's experiences of homelessness and other support services has expanded, reflecting growing acknowledgement of the need for analyses that

interrogate gendered aspects of homelessness, including the possibility that service experiences may have important gender dimensions. Nonetheless, the research base on women's service experiences remains relatively under-developed: a majority of studies are small-scale and qualitative in nature and almost all rely on cross-sectional research designs, which have limited ability capture women's service interactions *over time*.¹²⁰

Much of the research is North American and, while research on women's homelessness in Europe often incorporates discussion of women's service experiences and interactions, this issue has tended not to be the primary focus of most published studies. Nonetheless, the available literature provides considerable insight into women's experiences of and perspectives on the services they access. It seems clear, for example, that women are often grateful for the shelter and amenities that homelessness shelters or hostels provide and that – where they exist – women value the positive relationships they establish with service professionals in these settings.¹²¹ Some women also consider that shelter rules provide an element of structure as well as safety and protection from the insecurity and dangers posed by unsafe living situations.¹²²

More broadly, however, women's experiences of homelessness services are negative, with studies

- 117 Mayock, P. and Sheridan, S. (2012) [Women's 'Journeys' to Homelessness: Key Findings from a Biographical Study of Homeless Women in Ireland](#), *Women and Homelessness in Ireland, Research Paper 1*, Dublin: School of Social Work and Social Policy and Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin.
- 118 Mayock, P. and Sheridan, S. (2020) [Women Negotiating Power and Control as they 'Journey' Through Homelessness: A Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective](#). *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(2), pp. 17-41.; Tomas, A. and Dittmar, H. (1995) The experience of homeless women: An exploration of housing histories and the meaning of home. *Housing Studies*, 10(4), 493-515; McNaughton-Nicholls, C. M. (2009) Agency, transgression and the causation of homelessness: a contextualized rational action analysis. *European Journal of Housing Policy*, 9 (1), 69-84.; Neale, J. (1997) Homelessness and theory reconsidered *Housing Studies*, 12(1), 47-61.
- 119 Huey, L., Fthenos, G. and Hryniewicz, D. (2012) I need help and I know I need help. Why won't nobody listen to Me? *Society and Mental Health*, 2(2), 120-134, p.120.
- 120 Andermann, A., Mott, S., Mathew, C.M., Kendall, C., Mendonca, O., McLellan, A., Riddle, A., Saad, A., Iqbal, W., Magwood, O. and Pottie, K. (2021). [Evidence synthesis-Evidence-informed interventions and best practices for supporting women experiencing or at risk of homelessness: a scoping review with gender and equity analysis](#). *Health promotion and chronic disease prevention in Canada: research, policy and practice*, 41(1), pp.1-13.
- 121 Biederman, D.J. and Nichols, T.R. (2014) Homeless women's experiences of service provider encounters. *Journal of Community Health Nursing*, 1, 34-48.; Hoffman, L. and Coffey, B. (2008) Dignity and indignation: How people experiencing homelessness view services and providers. *The Social Science Journal*, 45, 207-222; Mayock, P., Parker, S. and Sheridan, S. (2015) *Women, Homelessness and Service Provision. Dublin: Simon Communities in Ireland*. Available at: <http://womenshomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Women-Homelessness-and-Service-Provision.pdf>
- 122 Mostowska, M. and Dębska (2020) 'Where was I to go after divorce?': Gendered Family Housing Pathways and Women's Homelessness in Poland *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(2) pp. 66-67.

consistently documenting experiences that serve to reinforce women's sense of marginalisation¹²³, often because women perceive that they are treated in ways that undermine their capabilities and their ability to move forward with their lives. Three major themes permeate the findings documented in this literature: *service avoidance*; *lack of autonomy and control within services settings*; and *women seeking solutions to their homelessness independently*.

Service Avoidance

As discussed earlier, there is long-standing recognition that men are more 'visibly' homeless than their female counterparts, who are more likely to engage in strategies that serve to conceal their homelessness.¹²⁴ Very often, women only seek accommodation through the formal channels of homelessness services when they have exhausted all alternative options, including living temporarily in the homes of family members, friends, a romantic partner or the family home of a romantic partner. Reeve and her colleagues' UK-based research found that 40% of the women (n=144) they surveyed did not seek formal help or assistance when they first became homeless or realised they were at risk of

homelessness.¹²⁵ For many in this study, the male dominated environment of emergency accommodation provision and other support services such as day centres acted as a strong deterrent to service access, particularly among women with a history of sexual abuse or other forms of gender-based violence. There is also evidence of women remaining in or delaying leaving volatile or abusive home situations because leaving becomes a path to homelessness.¹²⁶ Cultural expectations, coupled with a lack of social support, may also act as a barrier to help-seeking and hamper women's ability to envision or plan a path out of abusive relationships.¹²⁷

Explanations for service avoidance among women frequently draw attention to women's awareness of male-dominated spaces as well as a fear of victimisation within services that are oriented primarily towards men. While experiences of intimidation within homeless hostels or shelters are by no means unique to women¹²⁸ and not all women avoid services where men are present¹²⁹, there is evidence that at least some women feel vulnerable in support services where men are in the majority, particularly if they feel that adequate protections are not provided in these settings.¹³⁰ That said,

- 123 Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. (Eds.) (2016) *Women's Homelessness in Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillian; Phipps, M., Dalton, L., Maxwell, H. and Cleary, M. (2019) Women and homelessness, a complex multidimensional issue: Findings from a scoping review. *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless*, 28(1), 1-13.
- 124 Edgar, B. and Doherty, J. (2001) *Women and Homelessness in Europe: Pathways, services and Experiences* Bristol: The Policy Press; Wardhaugh, J. (1999) The unaccommodated woman: Home, homelessness and identity. *The Sociological Review*, 47(1), 91-109; Watson, S. (1999) A home is where the heart is: Engendering notions of homelessness. In: P. Kennet and A. Marsh (Eds) *Homelessness: Exploring the New Terrain*. Bristol: Policy Press. pp. 81-100.
- 125 Reeve, K., Casey, R. and Goudie, R. (2006) *Homeless Women: Still being Failed yet Striving to Survive*. London: Crisis.
- 126 Mayock, P., Parker, S. and Sheridan, S. (2015) *Women, Homelessness and Service Provision*. Dublin: *Simon Communities in Ireland*. Available at: <http://womenshomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Women-Homelessness-and-Service-Provision.pdf>; Tutty, L. M., Ogden, C., Giurgiu, B. and Weaver-Dunlop, G. (2013) I built my house of hope: Abused women and pathways into homelessness. *Violence Against Women*, 19(12), 1498-1517.
- 127 Mayock, P.; Sheridan, S. and Parker, S. (2012) *Migrant Women and Homelessness: The Role of Gender-based Violence* *European Journal of Homelessness* 6(1), pp. 59-82.
- 128 Bowpitt, G., Dwyer, P., Sundin, E. and Weinstein, M. (2011) Comparing men's and women's experiences of multiple exclusion homelessness. *Social Policy and Society*, 10(4), 537-546.
- 129 Bretherton, J. (2020) *Women's Experiences of Homelessness: A Longitudinal Study* *Social Policy and Society* 19(2), pp. 255-270.
- 130 Enders-Dragässer, U. (2001) Women, exclusion and homelessness in Germany. In: B. Edgar & J. Doherty (Eds) *Women and Homelessness in Europe: Pathways, Services and Experiences*. Bristol: The Policy Press. pp. 207 - 219; Enders-Dragässer, U. (2010) *Women and homelessness in Germany*. *Homeless in Europe—The Magazine of FEANTSA*, Gender Perspectives on Homelessness, p.12-14.

the research evidence on women's preferences for single- versus mixed-gender service environments is varied: some research suggests that women favour mixed settings¹³¹ while other studies have found that women opt for women-only services where they are available.¹³² Research in Ireland has noted that women's perspectives vary, with some expressing a strong preference for women-only provision, often because of their experiences of intimidation and harassment within services dominated by men, and others stating that they prefer services that accommodate both men and women.¹³³

There is evidence that the organisation and structure of homelessness services influences women's service use patterns and their willingness to access services but there are other, possibly more complex, reasons why women avoid seeking help or accommodation. Women generally, and those with children in particular, frequently seek to conceal their unstable living situations because of the perceived stigma and shame associated with the condition of homelessness.¹³⁴ Many women struggle, both emotionally and psychologically, with their status as homeless, sometimes expressing a preference for engagement with non-homelessness spaces because they are not overtly or publicly identified as 'homeless' in these contexts. As Wardhaugh¹³⁵ argues, the 'home' has been ideologically constructed as "an essential foundation of social order" and so "to be homeless brings with it an awareness of absence, a consciousness of difference, of deviation from the norm". From this

perspective, the 'homeless woman' is one who has "rejected, or been rejected by, traditional family and domestic structures" in a largely patriarchal society. Consequently, women may feel that they have not 'met' the expectations and demands of society and experience a sense of guilt and shame because they are labelled as 'victims' or 'fallen women'.

Women frequently express ambivalence about and may even reject the label 'homeless' and the characteristics often associated with homelessness – such as 'un-cleanliness' and 'an un-documented existence' – can affect women's self-esteem and personhood, leading to collective experiences of devaluation and stigmatisation. In Sweden, Thörn's¹³⁶ qualitative study of women experiencing homelessness found that participants expressed "an ongoing struggle" with negative characterisations of homeless women, leading the author to argue that "in opposition to the notion that women conceal their homelessness out of shame of their behaviour ... concealment should be seen as a deliberate strategy designed to avoid the stigma of homelessness".

Women's reliance on informal support networks for accommodation and other material resources might be viewed as an effective coping strategy but it is also problematic, not least because these living situations cannot provide a lasting resolution to their homelessness. Periods of hidden homelessness can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and place women in situations that pose a risk to

131 Jones, A. (1999) *Out of Sight, Out of Mind?: The Experiences of Homeless Women* London: Crisis.

132 Reeve, K., Casey, R. and Goudie, R. (2006) *Homeless Women: Still being Failed yet Striving to Survive*. London: Crisis.

133 Mayock, P., Parker, S. and Sheridan, S. (2015) *Women, Homelessness and Service Provision*. Dublin: Simon Communities in Ireland. Available at: <http://womenshomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Women-Homelessness-and-Service-Provision.pdf>

134 Aldridge, R. (2001) Women and homelessness in the United Kingdom. In: B. Edgar and J. Doherty (Eds) *Women and Homelessness in Europe: Pathways, Services and Experiences*. Bristol: The Policy Press. pp. 91-102.; Sahlin, I. and Thörn, C. (2000) *Women, Exclusion and Homelessness: National Report from Sweden - 1999*. Sweden: European Observatory on Homelessness; Thörn, C. (2001) (In)visibility and shame: The stigma of being a woman and homeless in Sweden. In: B. Edgar and J. Doherty (Eds) *Women and Homelessness in Europe: Pathways, Services and Experiences*. Bristol: The Policy Press. pp. 219-230.

135 Wardhaugh, J. (1999) The unaccommodated woman: Home, homelessness and identity. *The Sociological Review*, 47(1), 91-109.

136 Thörn, C. (2001) (In)visibility and shame: The stigma of being a woman and homeless in Sweden. In: B. Edgar and J. Doherty (Eds) *Women and Homelessness in Europe: Pathways, Services and Experiences*. Bristol: The Policy Press. pp. 219-230.

their physical and psychological health. There are further risks associated with service avoidance, including the risk of women returning to abusive home situations because of the stigma of homelessness or because they want to escape the pressures of shelter life.¹³⁷ Women's resourcefulness in seeking and finding ways to 'manage' their homelessness ought to be viewed as strength¹³⁸ but, equally, over-reliance on informal support networks can obscure underlying vulnerabilities and may ultimately delay or impede women's ability to find a sustainable route to stable housing.

Lack of Autonomy and Control within Service Settings

Emergency overnight and short- or medium-stay shelters – which provide low intensity non-housing support and basic needs – are the first accommodation services accessed by large numbers of individuals experiencing homelessness in many European countries.¹³⁹ While the nature, purpose and physical design of shelters differ both within and between countries, as congregate settings, they come with the expectation of cohabitation with strangers.¹⁴⁰ For men and women alike, shelter life is challenging because of the lack of privacy and strict rules that govern the everyday routines and interactions of residents.¹⁴¹ However, studies that have focused specifically on the service expe-

riences of women have identified particular losses that accompany shelter life, very often highlighting interactions with service systems and service providers that serve to undermine their autonomy and ability to exert control over their lives and their housing futures.

Many women first access homelessness services at a crisis point in their lives and with poor knowledge of the homeless service system. There is evidence that women have limited awareness of available services and that they find homelessness and broader social care services difficult to navigate¹⁴², particularly during the initial phase of engaging with the shelter system as they become accustomed to the regulations and practices that dictate the pace of everyday life in these settings. While some women report that rigid rules – including curfews, strict security measures and inflexible time frames for access to showers and meals – provide structure and engender a sense of personal safety and security, these rules are more often perceived as controlling and as conveying strong negative messages about their position, worth and capabilities. Permeating much of this literature is a focus on power; more specifically, the power differentials perceived by women to dominate their interactions with service providers.¹⁴³ Several studies have documented the lack of control experienced by women within homelessness services, highlighting ways in which prevailing practices within services

137 Mayock, P.; Sheridan, S. and Parker, S. (2015) ['It's just like we're going around in circles and going back to the same thing ...': The Dynamics of Women's Unresolved Homelessness](#), *Housing Studies*, 30(6), 877-900.

138 Paradis, E., Bardy, S., Cummings Diaz, P., Athumani, F. and Pereira, I. (2012) [We're not asking we're telling. An inventory of practices promoting the dignity, autonomy, and self-determination of women and families facing homelessness](#). Toronto: The Canadian Homeless Research Network Press.

139 Baptista, I. and Marlier, E. (2019) [Fighting Homelessness and Housing Exclusion in Europe: A Study of National Policies](#) European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission.

140 Pleace, N.; Baptista, I.; Benjaminsen, L. and Busch-Geertsema, V. (2018) *Homelessness Services in Europe* Brussels: FEANTSA.

141 McMordie, L. (2020) Avoidance strategies: Stress, appraisal and coping in hostel accommodation. *Housing Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/02673037.2020.1769036; Neale, J. and Stevenson, C. (2013) A qualitative exploration of the spatial needs of homeless drug users living in hostels and night shelters. *Social Policy and Society*, 12(4), 533-546; Sanders, B. with Reid, B. (2018) ['I won't last long in here': Experiences of Unsuitable Temporary Accommodation in Scotland](#) London: Crisis; Watts, B. and Blenkinsopp, J. (2021) Valuing control over one's immediate living environment: How homelessness responses corrode capabilities. *Housing, Theory and Society*, DOI: 10.1080/14036096.2020.1867236

142 Cameron, A., Abrahams, H., Morgan, K., Williamson, E. and Henry, L. (2016) From pillar to post: Homeless women's experiences of social care. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 24(3), 345-352; northern territories. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 74, 29778. doi:10.3402/ijch.v74.29778

143 Mayock, P. and Sheridan, S. (2020) [Women Negotiating Power and Control as they 'Journey' Through Homelessness: A Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective](#). *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(2), pp. 17-41

produce feelings of objectification and a sense of powerlessness and loss. By creating an atmosphere that works against women's empowerment, the constraints of shelter rules and regulations can also lead to a perceived loss of independence.¹⁴⁴

Biederman and Nichols' research on the service encounters of women accessing a homeless emergency shelter in the US depicted their experiences as falling along a 'dehumanising/humanising continuum', with large numbers reporting dehumanising interactions that led them to feeling powerless, alienated and judged. Separating those encounters described by women as either humanising or dehumanising was the level of trust and power experienced by them in their interactions with service staff. According to the authors, dehumanising experiences "have a cumulative effect with consequences manifesting over time". Women in this study were found to "internalize the negative messages" they received and to respond "with subservient behaviour".¹⁴⁵ However, other research has documented an opposing response by women who feel disrespected and disempowered by the surveillance techniques deployed within shelters, drawing attention to the strategies of resistance used by them and arguing that women are not passively situated in discourse but rather actively negotiate positions within the discursive constraints that surround them¹⁴⁶.

The negative perspectives held by women on the homelessness services they access also appear to be closely associated with experiences of infantilisation. Women routinely report being 'treated like children' by shelter staff and assumed to be incapable or incompetent as women and as mothers. Research in a number of European countries, including the UK, Hungary, Ireland, Sweden and Germany, suggests that many mothers who experience or are at risk of homelessness fear that their children will be taken into state care¹⁴⁷ and that they may avoid contact with homelessness and other health and social care services for this reason.¹⁴⁸

US research found that mothers who were homeless with their children felt disrespected and judged by service staff, which in turn led them to withhold information because they feared that their children would be removed from their care.¹⁴⁹ In the UK, a recent study of mothers experiencing homelessness found that the women interviewed "felt punished, blamed, and abandoned, rather than protected and supported by the services, policies and legislation designed to help them".¹⁵⁰ Findings such as these raise questions about the quality and adequacy of accommodation and related supports available to mothers who experience homelessness, which is a concerning issue given that the available data tell us that lone women, with their children, comprise the bulk of the population who experience family homelessness in Europe.¹⁵¹

144 Hoffman, L. and Coffey, B. (2008) Dignity and indignation: How people experiencing homelessness view services and providers. *The Social Science Journal*, 45, 207-222

145 Biederman, D.J. and Nichols, T.R. (2014) Homeless women's experiences of service provider encounters *Journal of Community Health Nursing*, 1, p.46.

146 Mayock, P. and Sheridan, S. (2020) [Women Negotiating Power and Control as they 'Journey' Through Homelessness: A Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective](#). *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(2), pp. 17-41.

147 Hutchinson, S., Page, A. and Sample, E. (2014) [Rebuilding Shattered Lives](#). London: St Mungos; Szoboszlai, K. (2010) [Homeless women in Hungary](#). *Homeless in Europe—The Magazine of FEANTSA*, Gender Perspectives on Homelessness, p.17-20.

148 Enders-Dragässer, U. (2010) Women and homelessness in Germany. *Homeless in Europe—The Magazine of FEANTSA*, Gender Perspectives on Homelessness, p.12-14.; Gerull, S. and Wolf-Ostermann, K. (Eds.) (2012) *Unsichtbar und ungesehen. Wohnungslose Frauen mit minderjährigen Kindern in Berlin* [Invisible and unseen: Homeless women with minor children in Berlin]. Berlin, Milow, Strasburg: Schibri Verlag.

149 Sznajder-Murray, B. and Slesnick, N. (2011) "Don't leave me hanging": Homeless mothers' perceptions of service providers. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 37(5), 457-468.

150 Bimpson, E., Reeve, K. and Parr, S. (2020) *Homeless Mothers: Key Research Findings*. UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE).

151 Baptista, I.; Benjaminsen, L.; Busch-Geertsema, V. and Pleace, N. (2017) [Family Homelessness in Europe](#) Brussels: FEANTSA.

Mothers, on the other hand, who are accessing homelessness services alone without their children, lose their status as mothers.¹⁵² There is now substantial evidence that a large number of women who access homelessness services alone (without accompanying children) are in fact mothers.¹⁵³ Homeless mothers who are separated from their children experience multiple devastating losses and may be subjected to disapproval and criticism, particularly if their behaviour (for example, substance use or criminal justice contact) challenges gender stereotypes.¹⁵⁴ Research in Ireland has drawn strong attention to the negative impact of mother-child separation among 'single' homeless women and to the multiple losses associated with their lack of contact with their children, often related to shelter rules that prohibit visits from family members and others. According to the authors, many of the women in this study "responded to stigmatized motherhood by seeking ways to increase contact with their children, a response that was largely unsupported by services or other informal channels, leaving them vulnerable to further trauma".¹⁵⁵ Other studies have similarly found that 'invisible mothers' who are separated from their children feel stigmatised as inadequate and judged by service providers.¹⁵⁶ The situations and experiences of mothers who are separated from their children frequently go unrecognised and services, in the main, appear not to be equipped

to "understand and respond to the further trauma that arises from separation from children".¹⁵⁷

It is perhaps unsurprising given the extent to which women's perceived loss of autonomy features in the literature, that there is corresponding evidence that women's needs are not adequately met within shelters and other emergency or short-term accommodation settings. Gaps and inadequacies within homeless service systems that render their responses to women's specific situations and needs inadequate have long since been documented in the European research literature. More recent studies have highlighted the negative impact on women of the uncoordinated nature of the supports they receive; deficits in staff training on domestic and other forms gender-based violence to support holistic responses on the part of service providers; and the need for trauma informed approaches to equip providers in homeless service settings to respond, not only to the immediate crisis of homelessness, but also to the longer-term needs of women.¹⁵⁸ Finally, and importantly, the available research evidence provides a compelling argument for models of service provision that are informed by women's own perceptions and experiences of the service systems they navigate.¹⁵⁹ This requires acknowledgement of women's agency; of their knowledge and resources and their capacity to articulate their experiences and needs.

152 Savage, M. (2016) *Gendering women's homelessness*. *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*, 16(2).

153 Mayock, P. and Sheridan, S. (2012) *Women's 'Journeys' to Homelessness: Key Findings from a Biographical Study of Homeless Women in Ireland*. *Women and Homelessness in Ireland, Research Paper 1*, Dublin: School of Social Work and Social Policy and Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin.

154 Mayock, P. and Sheridan, S. (2020) *Women Negotiating Power and Control as they Journey' Through Homelessness: A Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective*. *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(2), pp. 17-41; Mina-Coull, A. and Tartinville, S. (2001) Homeless women in France. In: B. Edgar & J. Doherty (Eds.) *Women and homelessness in Europe: Pathways, Services and Experiences*. Bristol: The Policy Press. pp. 141-151.

155 Mayock, P.; Sheridan, S. and Parker, S. (2015) 'It's just like we're going around in circles and going back to the same thing ...': *The Dynamics of Women's Unresolved Homelessness*, *Housing Studies*, 30(6), 877-900.

156 Barrow, S. M. and Laborde, N. D. (2008) Invisible mothers: Parenting by homeless separated from their children. *Gender Issues*, 25(3), 157-172.

157 Hutchinson, S., Page, A. and Sample, E. (2014) *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*. London: St Mungos

158 Milaney, K., Williams, N., Lockerbie, S.L., Dutton, D.J. and Hyshka, E. (2020) Recognising and responding to women experiencing homelessness with gendered and trauma-informed care. *BMC Public Health*, 20, 397, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-8353-1>

159 Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. (2016) Conclusions. In: P. Mayock & J. Bretherton (Eds.) *Women's Homelessness in Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillian. pp. 265-285.

Women Seeking Solutions to their Homelessness Independently

A number of studies that have examined women's experiences of homelessness services have drawn attention to decisions and actions taken by women in response to their service experiences. As noted earlier, women are more likely than their male counterparts to seek informal solutions to their homelessness, particularly during the early stages of their homelessness. There is also evidence that women continue to rely on the informal support of family, friends and romantic partners after they engage with formal homelessness services and of women trying to resolve their homelessness independently by exiting the shelter system and seeking accommodation elsewhere.¹⁶⁰ These routes through homelessness appear to be related to women's reluctance to remain in homelessness services because of the inherently stressful nature of these environments and/or because the services they access are perceived by women as not providing a solution to their homelessness. US research has found evidence of women opting out of services in their efforts to regain a sense of dignity and autonomy which, the authors suggest, allowed them "to disappear from one grid of visibility and reappear on their own terms".¹⁶¹

Focusing on trajectories of long-term homelessness among women, research in Ireland examined women's movement into and out of homelessness services.¹⁶² Over time, many of the study's women had embarked on an 'institutional circuit' charac-

terised by protracted stays in homeless shelters, interrupted by temporary exits to prison, acute and/or psychiatric hospitals and drug/alcohol treatment centres. A considerable number had secured private rented accommodation at some point, sometimes on more than one occasion, but ultimately did not maintain these living situations, forcing a return to the homeless service system. These women's movements out of homelessness services were found to be strongly influenced by their loss of faith in the ability of 'the system' to find a resolution to their situations and their desire to escape service environments perceived as exacerbating rather than ameliorating the challenges they faced in their efforts to achieve housing stability. Similar patterns of women "effectively excluding themselves from services" have been noted in the UK¹⁶³ while research on women accessing shelter accommodation in Los Angeles partly attributed their patterns of movement into and out of shelters to their disillusionment with an "institutionalized way of life".¹⁶⁴ In Canada, research concluded that many women left services because their right to dignity, autonomy and self-determination had been violated.¹⁶⁵

As Reeve and her colleagues observe, accessing homeless accommodation services does not mean that women progress along a trajectory out of homelessness; rather, many continue to circulate between accommodation of this kind and situations of hidden homelessness.¹⁶⁶ Recent research in Spain, where the "revolving door of homelessness" was found to affect women to a greater

160 Bretherton, J. (2020) *Women's Experiences of Homelessness: A Longitudinal Study* *Social Policy and Society* 19(2), pp. 255–270.

161 Hoffman, L. and Coffey, B. (2008) Dignity and indignation: How people experiencing homelessness view services and providers. *The Social Science Journal*, 45, 207-222, p. 216.

162 Mayock, P., Sheridan, S. and Parker, S. (2015b) *'It's just like we're going around in circles and going back to the same thing ...': The Dynamics of Women's Unresolved Homelessness*, *Housing Studies*, 30(6), 877-900.

163 Reeve, K., Casey, R. and Goudie, R. (2006) *Homeless Women: Still being Failed yet Striving to Survive*. London: Crisis, p.64.

164 DeVerteuil, G. (2003) Homeless mobility, institutional settings, and the new poverty management. *Environment and Planning A*, 35, 361-379.

165 Paradis, E., Bardy, S., Cummings Diaz, P., Athumani, F. and Pereira, I. (2012) *We're not asking we're telling. An inventory of practices promoting the dignity, autonomy, and self-determination of women and families facing homelessness*. Toronto: The Canadian Homeless Research Network Press.

166 Reeve, K., Casey, R. and Goudie, R. (2006) *Homeless Women: Still being Failed yet Striving to Survive*. London: Crisis, p.64.

extent than men¹⁶⁷, has similarly highlighted a tendency for women to drift in and out of homelessness services.

Women's experiences of homelessness service provision appear to play a role in driving patterns of service use that lead them to essentially (temporarily) disappear from service environments as they attempt to secure a path to housing, often in the absence of formal supports. There is evidence that as women move through homelessness, "they frequently fall through the net, failing to access appropriate accommodation and failing to access the support they require".¹⁶⁸ Commenting on the lengthy homeless histories of a large number of women and the tenuousness of their ties to housing over many years, the findings of research in Ireland has similarly noted that many women experiencing homelessness had fallen through the gaps in policy and service provision despite being "viewed through a succession of professional lenses".¹⁶⁹ Rather than providing "time and space for self-improvement and a return to mainstream housing"¹⁷⁰, shelters and other forms of temporary accommodation are likely to diminish the capabilities of individuals and can have detrimental impacts, particularly in terms of not facilitating exits from homelessness.¹⁷¹

Clearly, additional research is needed to more fully understand the factors and experiences that influence women's interactions with homelessness services and their willingness to access and/or

remain in these service settings. This may, in turn, produce a more robust understanding, not only of how women navigate services, but of the impact of women's service experiences on their trajectories through and out of homelessness.

THE ENABLING IMPACT OF POSITIVE SERVICE EXPERIENCES

While much the available research evidence points to service experiences that engender feelings of powerlessness and shame among women, the findings arising from a number of these studies also draw attention to the positive impact of service interactions considered by women to be enabling and empowering.

Many women who experience homelessness clearly encounter multiple challenges, particularly in their efforts to secure housing. Equally, however, women demonstrate personal initiative and resilience, calling into question images and stereotypes that portray them as "victims who need to be helped and 'fixed'".¹⁷² Canadian research on the trajectories of women's homelessness has described the numerous challenges and obstacles confronted by the women – related to trauma, poverty and their highly constrained housing options – but also draws sharp attention to their strengths:

167 Vázquez, J.J., Panadero, S. and Pascual, I. (2019) [The particularly vulnerable situation of women living homeless in Madrid \(Spain\)](#). *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 22, e52, p5.

168 Reeve, K., Goudie, R. and Casey, R. (2007) [Homeless Women: Homelessness Careers, Homelessness Landscapes](#). London: Crisis.

169 Mayock, P. and Sheridan, S. (2012) [Women's 'Journeys' to Homelessness: Key Findings from a Biographical Study of Homeless Women in Ireland](#), *Women and Homelessness in Ireland, Research Paper 1*, Dublin: School of Social Work and Social Policy and Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin, p.16.

170 DeVerteuil, G. (2003) Homeless mobility, institutional settings, and the new poverty management. *Environment and Planning A*, 35, p.371.

171 Watts, B. and Blenkinsopp, J. (2021) Valuing control over one's immediate living environment: How homelessness responses corrode capabilities. *Housing, Theory and Society*, DOI: 10.1080/14036096.2020.1867236

172 Hansen-Löfstrand, C. and Quilgars, D. (2016) Cultural Images and Definitions of Homeless Women: Implications for Policy and Practice at the European Level in Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. *Women's Homelessness in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 41-73, p.61.,

Although women described their struggles, they also spoke of their strengths that, if supported, could help them achieve their aspirations for employment, improving education, healing from trauma, securing housing, participating in activities with friends and contributing to positive change in the system to benefit others.¹⁷³

Women are clearly knowledgeable about their situations and what they need and when positive services experiences are evident, they value and benefit from feeling supported and respected. There is evidence that when women access homelessness services where they feel relatively content and supported, they are far more likely to make positive developments in several areas of their lives, including embarking on education or training course and reducing their alcohol or drug consumption. Emphasising that women's homelessness "can be prevented and it can be resolved", Reeve and colleagues' research highlighted the critical importance of services that "respond to the particular needs and preferences of homeless women".¹⁷⁴ Studies have also drawn attention to the benefits women derive from service interactions that communicate compassion and respect and demonstrate knowledge about their lives and situations. Research has shown that the humanising experiences identified by women are those associated with staff interactions where they feel cared for, trusted and empowered.¹⁷⁵ Mothers in a US-based study expressed a desire to be understood and for positive support to enable them to achieve personal goals, highlighting the importance of having trust in the service providers they encounter, particularly in relation to confidentiality

and the disclosure of personal problems and challenges.¹⁷⁶

Finally, research in Canada that examined the causes and consequences of women's homelessness and included a specific focus on women's perspectives on possible solutions to their housing instability, has highlighted the crucial importance of "principles of dignity, autonomy and self-determination" if women are to successfully engage with service providers. The women in this study equated safe environments with non-judgemental settings and places where rules and procedures are reasonable and serve to empower rather than constrain, with women consistently stressing the need for services based on empowerment rather than control, supervision and surveillance. Good practice within homelessness services therefore extended far beyond the provision of shelter, food and other basic needs to include practices that promoted and upheld women's dignity and strengths.¹⁷⁷

As Löfstrand and Quilgars point out, images of family, women, homelessness and home "have shaped the development of policies and practices aimed at assisting women who experience homelessness".¹⁷⁸ These same images have, whether inadvertently or not, arguably supported deficit models of intervention and practice that fail to recognise and acknowledge women's agency, skills and strengths. The nature of service provision for women experiencing homelessness warrants critical appraisal with a view to capitalising on women's knowledge and their perspectives on what is enabling in assisting them to progress along a path to housing stability.

173 Schmidt, R., Hrenchuk, C., Bopp, J. and Poole, N. (2015) Trajectories of women's homelessness in Canada's 3 northern territories. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 74, 29778. doi:10.3402/ijch.v74.29778 p.7.

174 Reeve, K., Goudie, R. and Casey, R. (2007) *Homeless Women: Homelessness Careers, Homelessness Landscapes*. London: Crisis, pp. 44-45 (emphasis in original)

175 Biederman, D.J. and Nichols, T.R. (2014) Homeless women's experiences of service provider encounters *Journal of Community Health Nursing*, 1, p.46.

176 Sznajder-Murray, B. and Slesnick, N. (2011) "Don't leave me hanging": Homeless mothers' perceptions of service providers. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 37(5), 457-468.

177 Paradis, E., Bardy, S., Cummings Diaz, P., Athumani, F. and Pereira, I. (2012) *We're not asking we're telling. An inventory of practices promoting the dignity, autonomy, and self-determination of women and families facing homelessness*. Toronto: The Canadian Homeless Research Network Press.

178 Hansen-Löfstrand, C. and Quilgars, D. (2016) Cultural Images and Definitions of Homeless Women: Implications for Policy and Practice at the European Level in Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. *Women's Homelessness in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 41-73, p.66.

4

Service Responses to Women's Homelessness

The past five years have seen the emergence of a robust evidence base on the nature of homelessness service provision throughout Europe. A recent comparative study conducted by the European Observatory on Homelessness, involving sixteen European countries¹⁷⁹, provides detailed information on homelessness services as well as patterns of service provision in cities, larger towns and rural areas across the participating countries. More broadly, the study explored the extent to which it might be possible to construct a typology of the range of homelessness services available in Europe. This research identified a wide range of different types of services, including emergency shelters, hostels, day centres, street outreach services, floating mobile support, temporary supported housing, Housing-first services, transitional housing, housing-led services and temporary accommodation, among others. A proposed typology of European homelessness services was developed based on the classification of services according to low versus high intensity support, on the one hand, and housing focused versus non-housing focused supports, on the other. Although not developed to capture “the detail of often very complex and nuanced differences that can exist between countries”¹⁸⁰, this typology is a useful and effective tool for classifying the main types of homelessness services in Europe. The

main features of the typology were summarised by the authors as follows:

*Low intensity services, offering basic non-housing support and emergency/temporary accommodation, probably form the bulk of homelessness service provision in Europe. Congregate and communal services that offer supported, temporary accommodation and transitional housing, designed to make homeless people 'housing ready', rather than immediately providing housing, outnumber housing-led and Housing First services. Housing-led and Housing First services, centred on immediately providing permanent homes for homeless people and the support they need to sustain those homes (housing-led services), are probably the least common form of service, although they are present to some degree in most countries.*¹⁸¹

More recently, an analysis of existing national strategic approaches to homelessness and housing exclusion and service provision for individuals experiencing homelessness in 35 European countries found that the staircase model of service provision prevails in an overwhelming majority of countries. Thus, in most countries, the types of support available to assist homeless people are focused primarily on the provision of “different

179 Pleace, N.; Baptista, I.; Benjaminsen, L. and Busch-Geertsema, V. (2018) [Homelessness Services in Europe](#) Brussels: FEANTSA.

180 Pleace, N.; Baptista, I.; Benjaminsen, L. and Busch-Geertsema, V. (2018) [Homelessness Services in Europe](#) Brussels: FEANTSA, p.7.

181 As above, p.11.

forms of temporary housing support up to the point where they are ready to live independently in their own home".¹⁸²

Across Europe, most temporary accommodation provides non-housing focused support; that is, communal, supported accommodation rather than ordinary housing and, within existing staircase models of service provision, services that aim to support people become 'housing-ready' up to the point when they are equipped to live independently predominate in a majority of countries. However, while staircase models clearly prevail, a shift towards housing-led and Housing First approaches was found to be evident in many countries while in a smaller number of countries where the staircase model is dominant, there was also evidence of the emergence of small-scale Housing First programmes. According to the authors, there also appears to be increased "recognition of the crucial role of homelessness prevention services, and the implementation of multi-level and multi-sectoral governance structures aimed at enhancing cooperation in policy and delivery".¹⁸³

This research did not specifically analyse homelessness service provision according to gender but it seems clear that staircase models dominate in Europe for both men and women experiencing homelessness. Based on the findings of Baptista's and Marlier's research¹⁸⁴, it can also be reasonably assumed that homelessness services remain focused on responding to the most urgent and basic needs of women through the provision of shelter or short- to medium-term accommodation. Currently, there is no systematic or reliable information available on the extent to which women-only homeless-

ness services are available in countries throughout Europe. Women can access women-only services in some countries, including in Ireland, Poland, Portugal and the UK but these accommodation types are far fewer in number than mixed gender facilities.¹⁸⁵ According to the recently published *Guide for Developing Effective Gender-Responsive Support and Solutions for Women Experiencing Homelessness*:

*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).*¹⁸⁶

Speaking more broadly about the five main elements of effective homeless strategies in Europe, the European Observatory on Homelessness research explicitly noted the need for:

*... services that reflect and respond to the diversity of homelessness, ranging from low-intensity rapid rehousing services for people whose primary need is simply affordable housing, through to housing-focused and support-focused services run for women, by women.*¹⁸⁷

Systematic Europe-wide information on service provision for women experiencing homelessness is lacking and there is a clear need for research that examines the extent to which the types of services available to women who experience homelessness reflect and respond to their needs.

182 Baptista, I. and Marlier, E. (2019) *Fighting Homelessness and Housing Exclusion in Europe: A Study of National Policies* European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission, p.77.

183 As above, p.13.

184 As above.

185 Pleace, N. (2016) Exclusion by definition: The under-representation of women in European homelessness statistics. In: P. Mayock & J. Bretherton (Eds.) *Women's Homelessness in Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. pp.105-126.

186 <https://www.feantsa.org/public/user/Resources/resources/Guide%20supporting%20and%20solutions%20for%20women.pdf>

187 Pleace, N.; Baptista, I.; Benjaminsen, L. and Busch-Geertsema, V. (2018) *Homelessness Services in Europe* Brussels: FEANTSA, p. 98.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES

Helplines for women and their children experiencing or at risk of domestic violence are available in [46 European countries](#) (Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE)).¹⁸⁸ Domestic violence shelters are also provided in all these countries, although only three countries (Luxembourg, Norway and Slovenia) met the minimum standard of one place per 10,000 in 2014.¹⁸⁹ It is widely recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to rising numbers of women and girls experiencing domestic abuse, producing unprecedented challenges for domestic violence services in terms of responding to violence when and where it occurs.¹⁹⁰

Services and organisations working with domestic violence survivors have historically been under-funded. Research in some countries suggests that existing services are simply not adequate to meet need and there is evidence that shelter provision for women and children experiencing domestic violence is under-resourced across Europe.¹⁹¹ Women fleeing domestic violence may therefore have no other option but to access mainstream homelessness services or, alternatively, may have to enter into homelessness services after they leave refuge services because they have been unable to source and secure affordable housing. If survivors of domestic abuse cannot find suitable housing, they “can be confronted with the ‘option’ of facing homelessness and housing insecurity or having to return to a perpetrator”.¹⁹²

There are other barriers of access to specialised domestic violence services. In some countries domestic violence services may be unwilling to accept women with mental health problems, those with substance misuse issues and/or individuals who exhibit anti-social behaviour. Consequently, women with complex support needs, including women who have children, frequently have no option but to access low-threshold, largely male-dominated emergency settings that are ill-equipped to meet their needs. Very often, the type and level of support offered within emergency homelessness services is not adequate for women who have become homeless due to domestic violence.¹⁹³

Historically, across most European countries, service responses to domestic violence and to homelessness have been separate in their organisation, structure and aims. While as discussed earlier, there is a well-documented association between women's homelessness and domestic violence, service responses to homelessness and domestic abuse remain largely distinct. Domestic violence and homelessness are more often than not classified and understood as discrete processes – and are responded to by two separate service systems – despite the fact that they are intertwined and overlapping. This disconnect between domestic violence and homelessness support services has been noted beyond the European context. Commenting on the lack of coordination between homelessness and domestic violence service providers in the US, some research

188 https://www.wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE_folder180919_low.pdf

189 Women Against Violence Europe (2015) [WAVE Report 2014: Specialized Women's Support Services and New Tools for Combatting Gender-based Violence in Europe](#). Vienna, Austria: WAVE.

190 World Health Organization (2020) [COVID-19 and Violence Against Women: What the Health Sector/System Can Do](#). WHO, 26 March 2020.

191 Women Against Violence Europe (2015) [WAVE Report 2014: Specialized Women's Support Services and New Tools for Combatting Gender-based Violence in Europe](#). Vienna, Austria: WAVE.

192 Shelter (2019) [Response to MHCLG Consultation: Support for Victims of Domestic Abuse in Safe Accommodation](#). London: Shelter.

193 Quilgars, D. and Pleace, N. (2010) [Meeting the Needs of Households at Risk of Domestic Violence in England: The Role of Accommodation and Housing Related Support Services](#) London: Communities and Local Government.

has drawn strong attention to the risks posed by this disconnect, suggesting that women fleeing domestic abuse will continue to “not fit perfectly into either system, and therefore, receive insufficient or inappropriate services”.¹⁹⁴

Complex social issues such as homelessness and domestic violence are cross-cutting and, despite considerable investment in efforts to address them, the lack of integration among stakeholders, policies, government, community members, agencies and other service providers is a significant problem. Recent pan-European research has consistently highlighted the need for better coordination and integration of responses to homelessness and domestic violence:

*There is also a need for full integration of domestic violence services within strategic responses to homelessness, again both in respect of homelessness prevention and in responding rapidly when a family does become homeless.*¹⁹⁵

*There should be further cooperation and exchange between the homelessness and the domestic violence (DV) sectors, with a view to better responding to the needs of women escaping violence and using homelessness support services, and to improving the housing outcomes of the support provided within the DV sector.*¹⁹⁶

Service sector integration is complex and also challenging, particularly in countries where domestic abuse and homelessness have historically been treated as separate social problems and where homelessness enumeration techniques do not include women (and children) living in domestic violence services. However, the case for policy

and service models that address the intersection of domestic violence, homelessness and housing instability is compelling, particularly given the extent to which women who experience domestic abuse will typically interact with both statutory and non-statutory organisations involved in the delivery of shelter, housing, health and children's services. Greater and more effective collaboration between homeless and domestic violence service sectors would clearly greatly enhance efforts to meet the housing and safety needs of domestic violence survivors and their children.

HOUSING FIRST FOR WOMEN

As Housing First takes centre stage in European responses to homelessness among people with high and complex needs¹⁹⁷, the first explorations in adapting Housing First, so that it operates effectively in different European contexts¹⁹⁸ and, with modifications to the North American models, have begun. Among the earliest experiments were the development of Housing First for Youth projects and programmes, both in Europe and in Canada, which relate to meeting the needs of women experiencing homelessness in providing specific support for young people with high and complex needs, including contact with child protection/social work services.¹⁹⁹

The broad point that is often made about Housing First services in relation to women's experience of homelessness is that the concerns that barriers to services designed for men, on the assumption that almost all homelessness involves lone men, should fall away because this is a service model that gives a woman her own, ordinary, home. There is no concern about male residents or any worries about

194 Baker, C., Billhardt, K., Rollins, C. and Glass, N. (2010) Domestic violence, housing instability, and homelessness: A review of housing policies and program practices for meeting the needs of survivors. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 15, 430–439, p.435.

195 Baptista, I.; Benjaminsen, L.; Busch-Geertsema, V. and Pleace, N. (2017) *Family Homelessness in Europe* Brussels: FEANTSA, p.78.

196 Baptista, I. and Marlier, E. (2019) *Fighting Homelessness and Housing Exclusion in Europe: A Study of National Policies* European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission, p.21.

197 Pleace, N.; Baptista, I. and Knutagård, M. (2019) *Housing First in Europe: An Overview of Implementation, Strategy and Fidelity* Brussels: Housing First Hub Europe.

198 <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/guide/>

199 <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/housing-first-for-youth/>

living with other women who may have complex needs, because there is no stay in congregate or communal fixed site services, Housing First provides a self-contained *home*.

The evidence base on Housing First for women in EU Member States is very limited. There is some research from the UK, which has been experimenting with women-only Housing First services for some time. One of these, the Threshold Housing First service in Manchester that has been subject to a five-year evaluation²⁰⁰, showed that a service built by women and run by women could achieve high rates of success in sustained rehousing for women with very high and complex needs. This particular project worked with women who had a history of repeated contact with the criminal justice system, along with sustained and recurrent homelessness. Their needs were extremely high and complex, including combinations of severe mental illness, addiction and trauma linked to experiences of separation from children and domestic abuse that were almost universal. Development and sustainment of these sorts of projects in the UK context, where funding for homelessness services has fallen drastically and become precarious, presents challenges, but further experiments are running at the time of writing in London and Manchester.

The modifications of Housing First that can be required for women with high and complex needs experiencing homelessness, based on a still emerging evidence base on Housing First for women, can be summarised as follows:

- ▶ Services need to be run and staffed predominantly by women. The nature of the experiences of women experiencing long-term and repeated homelessness associated with high and complex needs necessitates this. Housing First for women must also work to Trauma Informed Care (TIC) and Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) models or equivalent approaches.²⁰¹

- ▶ It is something of an oversimplification, but the original Housing First model was built around the needs of what was thought to be a 'typical' American citizen who was experiencing long-term or repeated homelessness, 'chronic' or 'episodic' homelessness who had high and complex needs and was most likely to be *male*. A common characteristic was a high degree of social marginalisation, a man living without family, partner or strong friendship bounds who was alienated or disconnected from wider society, in part because he was stigmatised by that society. In essence, one of his needs centred on the *absence* of any relationships.²⁰² By contrast, women using Housing First, on current evidence, are often likely to face ongoing risks and challenges to their wellbeing from ongoing, abusive, relationships. Housing First must help women manage and control these relationships and build the alternative, positive relationships, within the framework of Housing First as a service model that is user-led and controlled, thus, it is for the women to decide what they require and be supported in that. This creates a need for Housing First services for women to provide physical and administrative protection for women when they need it, to a greater degree than is the case for men.

While Housing First is growing in importance in Europe and shows the same successes in ending homelessness as has been achieved elsewhere, it is a specific intervention for people with high and complex needs. The successful Finnish national homelessness strategy, which has very significantly reduced long-term and repeated homelessness, is described as a Housing First approach, but while it incorporates very similar services, it uses a distinctive, home-grown Finnish version of Housing First within a strategy that also emphasises prevention, coordination and provision of social housing. After the first few years of the Finnish strategy, it was determined that more women-specific services were needed and new approaches were put in

200 Quilgars, D.; Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. (forthcoming, 2021) *Threshold Housing First for Women*, University of York.

201 <https://www.homeless.org.uk/trauma-informed-care-and-psychologically-informed-environments>

202 <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/guide/>

place to facilitate this.²⁰³ Some doubts have been raised about the overall effectiveness of Housing First, in relation to promoting social integration and improving health and wellbeing²⁰⁴, which might mean that the nature of the support offered will change in the European context, as might the specific adaptations to ensure Housing First meets women's needs.

Far more research is needed on the specific requirements for an effective Housing First strategy for women experiencing homelessness, particularly in European Member States.

203 Pleace, N. (2017) [The Action Plan for Preventing Homelessness in Finland 2016-2019: The Culmination of an Integrated Strategy to End Homelessness?](#) *European Journal of Homelessness* 11(2).

204 Aubry, T.(2020) [Analysis of Housing First as a Practical and Policy Relevant Intervention: The Current State of Knowledge and Future Directions for Research](#) *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(1), pp. 13-26.

5

Conclusions

Since the authors of this review co-edited the 2016 volume *Women's Homelessness in Europe*²⁰⁵ the evidence base has improved and the nature of the debate has changed. In 2016, the absence of evidence on many aspects of women's homelessness, including both a stark lack of data on some areas, particularly outside North America, and significant gaps between research projects on women's homelessness, meant that some of the only evidence that could be referred to was dated. Compared to the extensive material on lone, male homelessness on the streets and shelters, the research base on women's homelessness was extremely limited. Initiatives like the [Women's Homelessness in Europe Network](#) (WHEN)²⁰⁶ and the efforts of our fellow scholars, other researchers and women working to reduce homelessness in policy and practice across Europe, have started to redress that imbalance.

More is known, more work is being done and, crucially, debates in policy and research have started to shift and change. Even five years ago, the idea of women's homelessness as a significant European social problem was often met with open scepticism, as there were (in particular) no

numbers as well as a research base hampered by the spatial, administrative and methodological errors reviewed above. The idea that just because existing data and research failed to show women experiencing homelessness and that there was therefore very little homelessness among women has lost currency and, perhaps now, credibility in any robust analysis of homelessness in Europe and beyond. Clearly, as was argued in 2016, with rather less evidence than now, as soon as the frame of reference moves beyond men on the streets and in homelessness shelters, women's homelessness is a pan-European social problem which, if looking in the right places in the right way, becomes visible.

However, we are still working in a context in which – unlike lone male homelessness – all the different dimensions of women's homelessness remain under-researched across Europe. There is a lack of basic data on the nature and extent of women's homelessness, on how that homelessness might differ within and across different Member States, on exactly how the intersections with domestic abuse manifest themselves and on what needs to be done to prevent and end women's homelessness as quickly and effectively as possible.

205 Mayock, P. & Bretherton, J. (Eds.) (2016) *Women's Homelessness in Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

206 <http://womenshomelessness.org>



FEANTSA

**European Federation of National Organisations
Working with the Homeless**

194 Chaussée de Louvain, 1210 Brussels, Belgium
T +32 (0)2 538 66 69 • information@feantsa.org

www.feantsa.org

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