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RESEARCH DIGEST NO.3

WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS

JUNE 2025



The Research Digests are among the EPOCH Practice resources provided to representatives of EU Member States and all stakeholders working to combat homelessness in Europe.

The Digests aim to help policymakers and practitioners make use of academic research on homelessness

In 2025, six Digests will be published, covering various themes and disciplinary perspectives.

The Third Digest, dated June 2025, highlights the importance of gender in how we should understand and respond to European homelessness.

This Digest was written by Professor Nicholas Pleace and designed by the EPOCH Practice team.



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INTRODUCTION BY DORA WELKER



Dora Welker is a Project Officer at FEANTSA, working on the Equal House project, which explores housing inequality across Europe. She holds a PhD in Urban Studies from Heriot-Watt University (UK), where her research focused on the links between gender-based violence and women's homelessness. Her doctoral work examined the dilemma many women face between staying in abusive households or risking homelessness and explored emerging interventions that support women to remain safely housed.

Increasing numbers of women, children, migrants, and other marginalised groups face homelessness in Europe. This reflects both real demographic changes, the intersectional nature of housing precarity, and persistent limitations in how homelessness is defined, understood, and measured.

Public perception of homelessness still centres on single men, often with complex needs, while women's experiences remain more invisible, not due to a lack of need, but because of systemic failures to recognise diverse experiences within narrow definitions. Official data prioritises visible forms of homelessness, such as rough sleeping and shelter use, which are more commonly associated with men. In contrast, women's homelessness often takes less visible forms. Understanding these realities demands a shift in how we conceptualise home and homelessness. For example, many women, home is not a place of safety, but of control and violence. Feminist research shows that gender-based violence, including intimate partner abuse and childhood trauma, is a common cause of homelessness. When combined with economic inequality, caregiving responsibilities, and a lack of affordable housing, women can face an impossible choice: stay in an abusive home or become homeless.

Without viable alternatives, women often adopt survival strategies that render them invisible in statistics: sofa surfing, remaining with perpetrators, staying in overcrowded or unsafe housing, living in vehicles, or exchanging sex for shelter. The evidence is well-established: the lack of safe, affordable, and independent housing is a major reason women remain in or return to violent relationships. Secure housing is a prerequisite for safety, recovery, and long-term stability.

This EPOCH Research Digest places women's homelessness in Europe at the centre of focus. It highlights the need for more robust, gender-disaggregated data and calls for a gender-relational lens that accounts for the structural and interpersonal drivers of housing exclusion. Women's homelessness is not a marginal issue but a critical and under-recognised dimension of housing inequality. Addressing it requires a fundamental rethinking of how homelessness is defined, measured, and addressed in policy and practice.

1. WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS

- **European Homelessness** is a wider social problem than people living rough. Women's homelessness in Europe has often been **undercounted**. Many existing methods of counting or estimating homelessness are not effective at recording women's experiences.
- Women are much more likely than men to experience homelessness associated with **domestic abuse and gender-based violence**, i.e. they lose their home because it is unsafe to remain there. When women who have lost their homes use domestic abuse/gender-based violence services, their homelessness **is often not recorded**.
- Women are less likely to be found living rough or in emergency accommodation than men. There is evidence that women **hide when sleeping rough** and **avoid emergency accommodation** in which many lone men are present, because they feel unsafe.
- **European welfare systems and homelessness services** are often designed on an assumption that most homelessness involves lone men, which can mean women **lack access to appropriate services**.
- Women often choose different pathways through homelessness than men. Women are more likely than men **to experience hidden homelessness** i.e. precarious living arrangements with acquaintances, friends or family, which means they **do not have a home** which is safe, private, secure and legally theirs.
- There is evidence of women experiencing long-term and repeated homelessness associated with multiple and complex needs. **Housing First** services in Europe are often working with women who have high treatment, care and support needs alongside **near-universal experiences of trauma and abuse**.
- Women are much more likely than men to experience **family homelessness** as a lone parent. The assumption that European welfare systems stop with children women from becoming homeless **has been criticised**, as women can and do **experience hidden homelessness** with their children. Most 'family' homelessness in Europe is lone women parent households. Many lone women experiencing homelessness are also parents who have **lost contact with their children**.
- There has been much more research on lone homeless men using emergency shelters and living rough than on **any other group experiencing homelessness**. There are evidence gaps that limit current understanding of women's experience of homelessness. There is little research on the impacts of homelessness on women's **health and wellbeing** and there is also insufficient data on the **extent and nature of women's homelessness** across Europe and within individual EU Member States.
- European homelessness has **not often been research from a gender sensitive perspective**. Many studies have just noted the presence of women in European homelessness, but **not explored the gender dynamics of homelessness** systematically, nor have many studies explored the **views of women experiencing homelessness**.

2. CHANGING UNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

In 1981, Helen Austerberry and Sophie Watson argued that women's domestic position in inherently sexist societies, in which women were assumed to almost always be housewives, mothers and carer, concealed women's homelessness. Women were expected to be in a domestic role in a family and that meant that women were not looked for among people experiencing homelessness. Almost 30 years later, in 2010, Isabel Baptista argued that this assumption that women that were unlikely to be homeless was still very widespread and that three aspects of women's homelessness in Europe were being largely ignored:

- European women were being made homeless by gender-based violence. Although the huge social problem of gender based violence was increasingly recognised, the homelessness that women experienced as a result of that violence and abuse was not.
- Women became homeless with their children, sometimes as a result of poverty, such as loss of family income after a relationship breakdown and more often as a result of gender-based violence/domestic abuse. Most 'family' homelessness in Europe was actually women lone parents and their children.
- Research was exploring homelessness in more and more detail through the 1990s to 2010, in Europe, North America and beyond. This research was very often indicating that more and more women were experiencing forms of homelessness that had been thought to be largely experienced by lone men.

Major challenges still exist in recognising and recording the extent of women's homelessness in Europe. A review of European homelessness policies in 2019 reported that only a few EU Member States had at least some data on women's homelessness. A 2023 report for the European Parliament noted flaws in recording of women's experiences of homelessness and evidence gaps, including on women experiencing homelessness as lone parents. As Joanne Bretherton and Paula Mayock argued in their 2021 FEANTSA evidence review on women's homelessness, there are three sets of longstanding problems causing low visibility of women's homelessness:

- Spatial errors, i.e. an assumption that homelessness only exists in certain places, such as on the street and in emergency shelters/accommodation. These are places in which women will often feel unsafe and, while homeless, will often avoid them. If hidden homelessness is estimated or counted, the numbers of women found experiencing homelessness greatly increases, as is described in the EPOCH Practice Research Digest 2: Counting European Homelessness.
- Administrative errors, which mean that women's homelessness is only recorded in some circumstances. Most of the European families who become homeless are lone women parents, but the data are often recorded as "family" homelessness. Gender-based violence is increasingly recorded across the EU, but the homelessness that results from gender based violence is often not recorded.

- Methodological errors, occur because point-in-time (PIT) counts are more likely to count men, as women experiencing homelessness avoid the places where the counts take place. PIT counts also overrepresent men with multiple and complex needs, as they are the most likely to be present whenever a PIT count takes place. This means PIT counts can give a false impression that homelessness is largely male and that most of the men experiencing it have multiple and complex needs, concealing the nature and extent of women's homelessness. This problem is also described in the EPOCH Practice **Research Digest 2: Counting European Homelessness**.

3. WOMEN'S ROUTES THROUGH HOMELESSNESS

European homelessness is usually linked to the absence of **three aspects of support** in someone's life, which are access to financial resources, access to familial and social support and access to social protection systems. If a woman lacks money, or cannot access to her money because of **financial abuse**, maintaining and securing any housing is instantly difficult, the more so when she cannot get any practical support from family and friends and when social protection systems cannot, or will not, offer her enough assistance to keep an existing home or find a new one. European homelessness is **broadly associated with poverty** and this means that while homelessness can in theory happen to almost any woman, it is **much more likely** to happen **to a woman experiencing poverty**. **Women who have multiple and complex needs**, including experience of trauma in childhood and as an adult, are also more likely to lack access to financial resources and to familial and social support and may be at heightened risk of homelessness.

Gender based violence and domestic abuse are a **widespread and very significant cause** of women's homelessness in Europe. The cause of women's homelessness is **often distinct** from that of lone men, because women are much more likely to **become homeless because of violence and abuse**. Women are also more likely to **face ongoing risks of abuse and violence** during their experiences of homelessness than men.

Most family homelessness in Europe does not involve two parents with children, it is overwhelmingly composed of **lone women parents and their children**. Distribution of family homelessness in **European Member States is uneven**, something that may be linked to the relative strengths of **social protection (welfare) systems** for families containing children. For example, rates of family homelessness appear lower in Nordic countries than in Member States like France and Ireland. Outside the EU, the UK has the longest established legal framework designed to stop children becoming homeless, and data collected by that system since the 1980s until the present day have consistently shown that **most families seeking assistance are lone women parents**.

Women's routes through homelessness often differ from those of men. As **Joanne Bretherton** argues women very often seek to navigate their own way through homelessness by drawing on their own resources. Women appear to be much more likely to negotiate with acquaintances, relatives and friends to secure some sort of precarious accommodation, i.e. entering situations of hidden homelessness or sofa surfing than lone men. A woman might enter hidden homelessness for many reasons:

- There are no homelessness services available that suit her needs, for example the available shelters, emergency accommodation or support services are designed exclusively for men.
- She does not feel available homelessness services are safe and/or wants to avoid living rough (street homelessness) because it is dangerous.
- She does not qualify for government assistance because of **local connection rules** that require someone to be resident of a municipality/local authority for a set time before they can receive benefits, or she has only limited access to welfare payments, which may be the case for women without children with them.
- She is trying to keep herself (and sometimes her children) concealed, because of an **ongoing risk of abuse**, concerns about the standards in available services or a worry that social (work) services might intervene and place her children in care.

As the work of **Paula Mayock and Sarah Sheridan** also shows, the routes that women take through homelessness, including the nature and duration of hidden homelessness they experience, should not be oversimplified. The realities of women's homelessness are complex and varied, and the needs, characteristics, experiences and choices of women, as well as the circumstances they find themselves in, are always important. Women may have partial control, some of the time, greater control at other times, but their capacity to exit homelessness will depend on many factors. Some evidence suggests that women quite often approach formal homelessness services only at the point at which their **other options are exhausted**.

Women **may enter into intimate relationships** in order to provide themselves with accommodation and protection, as one of the possible responses to becoming homeless. However, as **Cecila Hansen-Löfstrand and Deborah Quilgars** have argued, images of women experiencing homelessness are linked to old cultural responses that expect a woman to have domestic roles as wife, mother and carer. This can lead to inaccurate assumptions, such as believing that most women experiencing homelessness are 'undeserving' people, who are often involved in criminality, because those women are not fulfilling their expected domestic role. There is a much **more complex reality** of women experiencing homelessness in Europe, which is very different from these false assumptions.

There is **evidence** of women experiencing repeated and long-term homelessness that is associated with **multiple and complex needs**, including addiction, mental illness and experience of trauma, including harmful experiences in childhood. **Housing First** services in Europe have been reported as routinely working with women who have these sorts of needs. One challenge for Housing First services when working with women with multiple and complex needs, is that there can often be an ongoing risk of abuse or violence, **which means safeguarding** – not a part of the original Housing First service design – has to be implemented in Housing First Services for women. Research has also indicated that most women using Housing First are parents who are separated from their children, something that is less often the case for lone homeless men, which means Housing First for women needs to recognise needs **linked to being an estranged parent** that were not explicit in the original model.

Many researchers, currently including **Joanne Bretherton, Paula Mayock** (often working with **Sarah Parker and Sarah Sheridan**), **Magdalena Mostowska, Kesia Reeve, Juliet Watson** alongside many others, argue that there is still a basic misunderstanding of women's homelessness in Europe and beyond. Part of the problem is that **far more research** has been directed at lone homeless men living rough or in emergency shelters than on understanding women's homelessness. However, these academics argue that the main limitation with current evidence is that women's homelessness has not been looked at in a gendered way, using the insights of Feminist theory and methodologies to fully understand how and why women's experience of homelessness differs from that of lone men. Many of these scholars were involved in the 2016 book **Women's Homelessness in Europe** and there are further free to access articles focusing on women's homelessness in the **European Journal of Homelessness**.

4. BEYOND ACADEMIA

Poor by Katriona O'Sullivan – A Powerful Memoir of Gender, Class and Survival

In *Poor*, Katriona O'Sullivan shares a raw and compelling account of her life growing up in poverty in 1980s and 1990s Ireland – navigating addiction, neglect, homelessness, and teenage motherhood. Her story lays bare the structural barriers faced by women in deep poverty, including those who experience hidden forms of homelessness: sofa-surfing, unstable housing, and survival strategies shaped by gender. From living on the margins to becoming a leading academic, O'Sullivan challenges dominant narratives about personal failure and social mobility. *Poor* is both a searing personal memoir and a powerful lens into the gendered dimensions of homelessness, offering vital insight for anyone working on social justice and housing issues.

 [Poor by Katriona O'Sullivan – Penguin Books UK](#)