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# Reconsidering Gender in Homelessness

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➤ **Abstract\_** *Although research has been sporadic, the available evidence indicates that gender is consistently associated with differentiated trajectories through homelessness in Europe. Women's pathways through homelessness have been linked to domestic violence, women being 'protected' by welfare systems when dependent children are living with them and an apparently greater tendency for women to use and exhaust informal support, rather than homelessness or welfare services. This evidence is frequently disregarded in current European homelessness research, which often uses conceptualisations, definitions and methodologies developed when homelessness was seen predominantly as a social problem among lone adult men. The sites at which homelessness is studied and the ways in which data are collected, limit accuracy of measurement and inhibit understanding, but, this paper contends, the real issues centre on how mainstream definitions of homelessness exclude women. **Women, who lack any security of tenure, physical safety, privacy and whose living conditions are otherwise unacceptable – who are homeless – are too often outside the scope of contemporary European homelessness research.** Drawing on recent UK studies and the wider European literature, this paper argues that there is a need to cease a longstanding focus on the streets, homelessness services and (predominantly) male experience and to look instead at the more nuanced interrelationships between gender and agency to fully understand the nature of homelessness in Europe.*

➤ **Keywords\_** *Gender, homeless women, hidden homelessness, agency*

## Women's Homelessness: Invisibly Different

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Women's disadvantage in European housing markets, reflecting women's greater experience of relative and absolute economic marginalisation, was first highlighted by social researchers decades ago (Watson with Austerberry, 1986). Women continue to experience some forms of housing exclusion at a higher rate than men across much of Europe (Domergue *et al.*, 2015).

Research has reported European welfare systems conditionally ending or preventing women's homelessness when they have dependent children with them, but often being less supportive in other circumstances (Doherty, 2001; Löfstrand and Thörn, 2004; Baptista, 2010). Culturally driven and often inherently sexist responses to women experiencing homelessness are also reported, particularly when a woman is not living in the 'expected' role of mother, wife or carer, within homelessness services as well as health and welfare systems (Bretherton *et al.*, 2016; Hansen Löfstrand and Quilgars, 2016).

Visibility is also linked to how welfare systems respond to women's homelessness. The UK has statutory systems specifically focused on family homelessness, disproportionately supporting lone women parents and recording the support that is provided. In other European contexts, family homelessness may be less visible because mainstream welfare systems respond more effectively to it or do not record such families as 'homeless'. Family homelessness may also be less visible because there are few supports, beyond the informal help a woman can find for herself and her children (Bretherton *et al.*, 2016).

The distinct nature of family homelessness, as a highly gendered experience, disproportionately experienced by younger women who are lone parents, has been recorded both in Europe (Pleace *et al.*, 2008) and the USA (Shinn *et al.*, 2013). This research highlighted major differences between family and single homelessness. Family homelessness often involves lone women with dependent children and is closely linked to domestic violence and economic marginalisation. It is not often associated with the high rates of severe mental illness, drug use, contact with the criminal justice system and poor health, seen among single long-term and recurrently homeless men (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010).

Women have also been found sleeping rough and within lone adult homeless populations across Europe, seemingly less numerous than men, but nevertheless clearly present. Inaccuracies in enumeration, particularly street counts which include only visible rough sleepers, when there are obvious reasons for women to hide themselves, may partially explain this pattern (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014, Johnson

et al., 2017). The point, however, is that there are, quite evidently, women among the people experiencing what is still seen, and often still recorded, as the largely male experience of single adult homelessness.

Finally, there is the evidence that women appear to often *choose* to take specific trajectories through homelessness, particularly in relying on informal supports to keep themselves accommodated (Jones, 1999; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012). Women appear more likely to rely on relatives, friends and acquaintances to keep themselves accommodated when they become homeless, only approaching homelessness and other services when or if these supports are exhausted (Shinn, 1997; Reeve et al., 2007; Pleace et al., 2008; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012). Women's homelessness appears to be different to that experienced by men because there is evidence that women often do not react to homelessness in the same way as men.

Reviewing the evidence on women's homelessness in Europe, it becomes apparent that data showing, or at least suggesting, the *inherently* gendered nature of homelessness, are routinely ignored in European research (Mayock and Bretherton, 2016). Homelessness is still often defined by European researchers in terms of people living rough and in emergency accommodation. While researchers tend to report that women are present in these homeless populations, it will often be in relatively low numbers and when a female presence is detected it often is merely noted, rather than thoroughly investigated (Pleace, 2016).

## Typologising Women's Homelessness

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Women's homelessness falls outside the focus of much European homelessness research because of how homelessness is defined. Women who lose their homes due to male violence and who have to use refuges and other services are often defined – and researched – as women who are 'victims of domestic violence' not as *homeless* women (Baptista, 2010; Jones et al., 2010; Quilgars and Pleace, 2010). European research has shown that in Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden, women made homeless by domestic violence who are being accommodated in refuges or similar services, are *not* counted as homeless. If a woman, made homeless by domestic violence, were in an emergency shelter, living on the street or in temporary supported housing for homeless people, in any of these countries, she *would* be recorded as homeless (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2014). In the UK, women made homeless by domestic violence are recorded as homeless if they receive the main or full duty (re-housing) under the four different sets of homelessness legislation.

However, women are not necessarily recorded as homeless if they head straight to a refuge because they have been made homeless by domestic violence and do not seek assistance under the statutory systems (Quilgars and Pleace, 2010).

Feminist analyses are characterised by discussions on the social construction of homelessness and the role of patriarchy and misogyny within the definition of homelessness. Such analysis is framed in terms of how a society and welfare systems within a society responds to women, particularly the social and cultural construction of women's roles. Women's homelessness is therefore viewed as a function of how women, in general, are responded to by the societies in which they live. Women's homelessness can then be seen and defined as being a social problem generated via these wider, structural and cultural, patriarchal forces (Watson, 2000).

For Neale (1997), feminist discussions of homelessness have added something to the discussion on the nature of homelessness, because patriarchy has shaped the contexts in which women's homelessness has occurred. Yet, as she argues, these feminist interpretations can reduce women to 'passive victims constrained to the private sphere of the home' (Neale, 1997, p.51). There is evidence that, even in what are regarded as some of the most advanced welfare and homelessness systems in Europe, sexist and culturally influenced responses to women's homelessness exist (Löfstrand and Thörn, 2004; Bretherton *et al.*, 2016; Hansen Löfstrand and Quilgars, 2016). However, for Neale (1997), experiencing homelessness within biased systems, while disadvantageous, does not mean that women lack agency, the capacity to influence their trajectory through homelessness.

Two variables are working in combination to influence how women's experience of homelessness in Europe is viewed. The first is the tendency to focus on largely male experience in research that is focused on male domains of homelessness, the street and emergency shelters. The forms of homelessness that women, on some evidence at least, appear more likely to experience, the hidden homelessness of living as a concealed household with friends, relatives or acquaintances, receive less attention from researchers, partially because only some European countries recognise hidden homelessness and partially because hidden homeless populations are harder to find and to research (Pleace and Bretherton, 2013). The second is both conceptual and administrative. Homeless women in refuges are often not regarded as homeless, but as 'victims' of domestic violence. Similarly, lone women parents with dependent children are visible when specific support systems exist and record their activities, but are not necessarily visible in other contexts.

## The Differences in Women's Homelessness

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Criticisms of the idea that women's experience of homelessness is distinct from that of men rest on the argument that the analysis of gender in homelessness is incomplete. When gender is used to explain differential experience of homelessness, critics usually argue that other variables, that would 'explain away' any apparent associations between patterns in homelessness and gender, are missing from the analysis.

For example, one criticism is that apparent 'gender' associations fail to take sufficient account of lifetime experience of poverty, poor educational attainment and other variables. This leads to an over-emphasis of the fact that someone is female, while de-emphasising the poverty, marginalisation and stigmatisation, shared with men, that are 'better' explanatory variables (Drake, 1987). Here, the argument is that class, rather than gender, 'explains' homelessness. It may be that the major trigger for homelessness is poverty and exclusion, but it is also clear that women do not experience homelessness in the same way as men. **The triggers for women's homelessness are often different and their trajectories while homeless are often different, women's experience of homelessness is *different*. Gender plays a role.**

Evidence of support and treatment needs can also be used to criticise the use of gender as an explanatory variable, arguing for example that single homeless women have characteristics, such as poor mental and physical health, that are more 'important' than their gender in explaining their experiences of homelessness. When socially scientific robust research shows single homeless women in homelessness services, sharing characteristics with homeless men (see for example, Benjaminsen, 2016), the idea that gender is a less important explanatory variable than support needs, can seem like it is being reinforced.

However, there is a real need for caution here, as it is clearly the case that women living rough and in emergency accommodation are only one *aspect* of female homelessness. There are women experiencing sustained and recurrent hidden homelessness, some of whom have high support needs, who do not appear to have contact with services or live rough. Female experience of family homelessness is also much more strongly correlated with poverty than with the presence of any support needs. The presence of women who share characteristics with men among rough sleepers merely means that male and female rough sleepers share characteristics. This does not mean all homeless women experience homelessness in the same way, or for the same reasons as homeless men, as, again, it is clearly the case that women's experiences are often different.

Consequently, recent debates around gender and homelessness have been informed by discussions on intersectionality and the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion (Davis, 2008). As Mostowska and Sheridan (2016) argue, the use of intersectionality to attempt to understand women's homelessness, with its capacity to encompass the interaction between the differing categorizations that women find themselves in alongside the macro (structural) and micro (lived experience) analysis is a more appropriate methodological approach.

### ***Women's response to homelessness***

If homeless women are assumed to be, broadly, the same as homeless men, two questions arise. The first centres around the logic of that assumption, in the face of what appears to be a very considerable difference in the nature of homelessness causation among women, i.e. the scale of the role of domestic violence, both in the experience of single women and women with families (Jones, 1999; Reeve *et al.*, 2007; Baptista, 2010; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012). If women are experiencing homelessness due to domestic or gender based violence at much higher rates than men, the idea that their needs and their pathways through homelessness can really be *consistent* with those of men, does seem rather a large assumption to make.

The second question centres on where all the homeless women are, because if anything, women experience socioeconomic marginalisation, poverty and poor life chances at higher rates than men (Domergue *et al.*, 2015). The standard answer, that women are not present because welfare systems and domestic violence services prevent and reduce a substantial proportion of women's homelessness, is not satisfactory in the light of the, now considerable, evidence that women *avoid* services and use informal support to maintain themselves in situations of hidden homelessness (Baptista, 2010).

Patriarchy, welfare system operation and responses to domestic violence are explanations of the differentiated nature of women's homelessness that effectively remove agency from homeless women (Neale, 1997; Casey *et al.*, 2008; McNaughton-Nicolls, 2009). Following these arguments, women's experience of homelessness is lower, or at least takes a different form, largely because potentially homeless and homeless women are processed by welfare and homelessness systems in a different way from men. The evidence on women's homelessness is less extensive than the evidence on male homelessness in Europe, but it is nevertheless the case that multiple studies clearly show women influencing and also determining their own trajectories through homelessness (Mayock and Bretherton, 2016).

Homeless women are often not in homelessness services, not living rough, not using domestic violence services, nor, when they have dependent children with them, necessarily being supported by welfare systems; they are instead using

friends, family and acquaintances to keep a roof over their heads (Shinn, 1997; Jones, 1999; Reeve *et al.*, 2007; Baptista, 2010; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012). Structural responses seem likely to have a significant role in the causation and sustainment of women's homelessness, but it is important not to become overly focused on the observable differences between welfare and homelessness systems when there is clear evidence that agency can determine whether and how women experience homelessness.

### *The enumeration quandary*

The question then arises as to what the true extent of the differences between female and male homelessness are. Women are, the available European and North American evidence shows, living in situations of hidden homelessness in which they lack any legal right to occupancy and may lack privacy or any separate living space. The problem, across much of Europe, is that **hidden homelessness is difficult to count**. There are several issues here, including the fluid, temporary and often precarious nature of arrangements made by women experiencing hidden homelessness, and the inherent difficulty in counting multiple households living in a single dwelling (Pleace and Bretherton, 2013).

In the relatively data-rich context of the UK, specifically the administrative area of Northern Ireland where the State is a major provider of social housing, the author explored the possibility of enumerating homelessness using ETHOS and ETHOS Light as a broad framework for data collection. The inherent challenge in enumeration centred on the need for administrative contact, i.e. the statutory and other homelessness systems, which are extensive, could only record women and women with dependent children, when or if, they made contact. The challenges in counting hidden homelessness were summarised by one service provider (Pleace and Bretherton, 2013, p.42):

*They could be homeless for a long period of time and be bouncing from family to friend and only eventually come to the attention of the [homelessness services] when that breaks down, or they've exhausted all those options. Service Provider.*

Attempting to populate ETHOS and ETHOS Light for this research was challenging in respect of people living in insecure accommodation (8.1, 8.2 and 8.3 in ETHOS<sup>1</sup>). However, data on broader housing conditions were relatively rich, and it was possible to draw on survey data and statistical estimates to determine that, in 2013, approximately 11 057 households were living temporarily with family and friends,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion?bcParent=27>

out of a total estimated homeless population of 25 445 experiencing homelessness. In other words, the best estimate was that 43% of the homeless population was experiencing *hidden* homelessness (Pleace and Bretherton, 2013).

Finland, which has been enumerating homelessness for decades through a combination of data collection and estimation, reported that the bulk of the homeless population was people experiencing hidden homelessness in 2014 (76%). This figure was recorded in the context of a sustained, strategic effort to reduce long-term homelessness among people with complex needs and extensive homelessness services and generous welfare and social housing systems. The Finnish homeless population, including hidden homelessness, was relatively small in 2014, at only 7 107 households, but Finland estimated that 23% of homeless people were lone women (ARA, 2015).

Where hidden homeless populations are counted, or estimated, within Europe, they tend to be recorded as a significant proportion of overall homelessness. Denmark has reported that 28% of all homelessness is people sharing temporarily with friends or family, and one region of Germany with relatively extensive homelessness statistics, North Rhine-Westphalia, has reported 37% of homeless people are in the same situation (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014).

The presence of hidden homelessness – in those areas of Europe where staying temporarily with family and friends in the absence of any alternative is seen as homelessness – is not direct evidence of women's homelessness. The Finnish data do indicate significant numbers of women, but that is one country among many and the patterns shown there may not be replicated elsewhere, especially as Finland has systemically pursued the reduction of homelessness. Nevertheless, the scale of hidden homelessness, when combined with the research about the nature of women's homelessness, raises at least the possibility that women's homelessness may involve considerable numbers. There are caveats, for example the evidence that young people of both genders often experience hidden homelessness (Quilgars *et al.*, 2011) and of course men are not exempt from trying to temporarily put a roof over their head by relying on friends or relatives.

Some research suggests that hidden homelessness may be a more 'practical' option for women than men, although this is difficult to quantify, and risks entering into the kinds of generalisations that Neale (1997) criticises in some feminist interpretations of homelessness. The idea here is that women are seen as non-threatening and are more likely to be perceived as victims in need of support due to cultural constructions of women as more 'vulnerable' than men. Also within this of course, is the possibility that sexual exploitation can be used to barter for somewhere to sleep. The risks of these ideas and images are raised by Löffstrand and Thörn (2004) who highlight



assumptions made by service providers in Sweden that women had exchanged sex for somewhere to stay and that their homelessness equated to moral debasement, regardless of the reality of a woman's situation or her experiences.

### *Differing pathways – the evidence*

Research based on the still widely used definition of homelessness, lone adults sleeping rough and/or using homelessness services, provides another means by which to explore the extent to which homelessness pathways are differentiated by gender. European evaluations of homelessness services targeted on lone adults tend, as in some of the author's own work, to report a minority of women among largely male service users. In an analysis of an innovative London-based service, using a 'Time-Banking' model, wherein homeless people enter into a barter economy based on exchanging time, one hour of activity helping someone else produces a time credit that can be spent accessing a service, support or other activity for an hour, the author found 26% of a user group of 412 were female (Bretherton and Pleace, 2014). Women using this service, alongside being less numerous, were significantly less likely to report contact with the criminal justice system, but were otherwise not found to be consistently distinct from the men. They were not characterised by engaging with the service any differently than the men. As noted, other European analysis of single homeless adults using homelessness services can report similar patterns (Benjaminsen, 2016).

In the evaluation of a large programme of education, training and support services, designed to promote socioeconomic integration for single homeless people, the author was again able to look at gender. The Crisis Skylight programme engaged with 14 148 single homeless people, who shared information on their gender, in the UK, over the course of 2013-2015. Fieldwork took place in six sites, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Merseyside (Liverpool), Newcastle-upon-Tyne, London and Oxford (Bretherton and Pleace, 2016).

Both parallels and differences were found between women and men. While outnumbered by men, 32% of those using the Crisis Skylight programme were women. Women were, at first contact with services, significantly less likely to be sleeping rough (4% compared to 13% of men), but reported being in a state of hidden homelessness (16%) at only a slightly greater rate than men (14%). The programme was open to single people at imminent risk of homelessness, i.e. housed but at risk of losing that housing, which women were significantly more likely to report than men (42% of women, 29% of men) (Pleace and Bretherton, 2017).

The 4 500 women using the programme reported **experiencing domestic violence at much higher rates than men (26% compared to 7%)** and were, as found in earlier research, less likely to have had contact with the criminal justice system

(9%, compared to 26% of men). Women also reported a history of drug and alcohol use less often than men (20% compared to 30%), though were closer to men when it came to a history of mental health problems (36% compared to 32% of men). Women were, following contact with the programme, marginally less likely than men to secure a job (8% compared to 10%), entered further education at essentially the same rate (9%) and did the same with respect to volunteering (8%) (Pleace and Bretherton, 2017).

An in-depth longitudinal analysis of use of the programme, tracking 158 single homeless people who had actively engaged with services, involving up to four interviews with each person over three years, identified different trajectories through the programme. Some service users regained progress, homelessness having disrupted what had hitherto been a position of socioeconomic integration, others made progress for the first time, moving away from sustained marginalisation that had characterised their life until that point, some experienced a mix of progress and problems, while for others, little progress, in terms of socioeconomic integration, appeared to be possible (Bretherton and Pleace, 2016). Women represented 30% of the group whose progress through the programme was tracked over time. In this group the women were quite distinct from the men, 53% of the women had regained progress, i.e. had returned to a situation of relative socioeconomic integration that had existed prior to homelessness, compared to 37% of the men. The men were, by contrast, more likely to be moving towards socioeconomic integration for the first time (38%) compared to women (17%). A similar proportion of both genders had made less progress (Bretherton and Pleace, 2016; Pleace and Bretherton, 2017). Again, women had experienced domestic violence at a far higher rate than men, though not every respondent chose to answer questions on this subject.

This research was an examination of a homelessness service programme, it was not a representative survey of the single homeless population, not least because it was research on the use of an entirely voluntary education and training focused programme. Several trends, also suggested by some other European research, did however appear to be evident among the people using the programme. Women were significantly less likely to be literally homeless, and more likely to report being at risk of homelessness or in a situation of hidden homelessness. Compared to the men, women were less likely to be using drugs or alcohol, less likely to have had contact with the criminal justice system and much more likely to have experienced domestic violence. Among the subgroup whose experience of using the programme was tracked over a period of up to three years, there was a sense of women being more likely to be people whose relatively integrated socioeconomic position had been disrupted by homelessness, but who, given support, had been able to move back towards their former position. The men were, by contrast, more likely to have experienced sustained socioeconomic exclusion.

A French national survey reported that lifetime prevalence of homelessness was clearly associated with gender, with men markedly more likely to experience rough sleeping and emergency accommodation than women. This research was based around a working definition of homelessness that focused on people living rough and in emergency shelters. Analysis indicated isolation, beginning with a disrupted childhood, was predictive of these forms of homelessness, i.e. men who had become socially marginalised as children and stayed that way, were those who entered homelessness. This kind of isolation, or at least this type of homelessness, was something women seemed less likely to experience. Living without a family or partner was interpreted as introducing personal emotional vulnerability and financial insecurity. The greater tendency of men to be single for prolonged periods was, in itself, seen as a risk factor (Brousse, 2009). By contrast, research into women's homelessness has tended to highlight relationship breakdown, particularly violent relationship breakdown, as a causal factor and the creation and deployment of relationships as a key resource that women draw upon to counteract homelessness, using friends, acquaintances and family to keep a roof over their heads (Reeve *et al.*, 2007; Baptista, 2010; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012).

Belgian research focused on populations characterised by precarious housing, i.e. not actually homeless but at heightened risk of homelessness, found more single people than couples or families compared to the general population, but not the same overwhelmingly male group as reported in many studies of single homelessness. This research suggested that once the focus is moved away from the extremes of single adult homelessness, into an examination of those at risk of homelessness, hidden homelessness and the experience of housing exclusion, women start to become much more visible (Meert and Bourgeois, 2005).

It could be concluded therefore that there is evidence that suggests patterns of visible female homelessness, i.e. women captured by surveys and in service evaluations, may still be distinct from male experience (see also Mayock *et al.*, 2015). While some single homeless women do look similar to homeless men, in terms of their experiences and needs, others do not.

### ***Domestic violence***

Domestic violence is a leading cause of women's homelessness and is a widespread experience among homeless women (Pleace *et al.*, 2008; Mayock *et al.*, 2016). The interrelationships between domestic violence and women's homelessness exist at two broad levels. First, there is the differential causation, which can be linked to specific trajectories through homelessness, which will not be experienced in the same way and certainly not to the same extent by homeless men. Second, there is the interface between homeless women and domestic violence services; where present, domestic violence services may prevent and reduce

homelessness, but this option may not always be open to women. Equally, women going through some domestic violence services may not receive the same kinds of support as that offered by homelessness services, in terms of preventing homelessness and sustaining an exit from homelessness. Some domestic violence services, such as Sanctuary Schemes (see Jones *et al.*, 2010) are in many senses a preventative intervention designed both to remove a woman from risk and to prevent homelessness, but some refuges may be more focused on immediate safety and emotional support, rather than housing sustainment.

In a survey and analysis of 321 domestic violence services in England, 57% reported that they “frequently” turned away women and women with children seeking support, with a 93% occupancy rate being reported for 3 707 bed spaces in refuge services. The survey also reported that 27% of domestic violence services were operating a waiting list, this included the emergency services designed to provide a woman at risk of violence with a safe and secure environment. Women made homeless by domestic violence or the threat of violence, were, in the UK at least, approaching domestic violence services at a rate higher than those services could manage (Quilgars and Pleace, 2010). This research was conducted prior to the sustained cuts to domestic violence services that has followed the ‘austerity’ measures being introduced in the UK from 2010 onwards. British research conducted in 2005 reported 13% of family homelessness in England was directly caused by domestic violence, with 44% of women experiencing such violence and 14% having experienced sexual assault (Pleace *et al.*, 2008). Similar associations appear to be universally present in Europe, Australia and in North America (Baptista, 2010; Mayock *et al.*, 2016).

Many homeless women appear to experience something that most men do not, homelessness that is triggered by violent relationship breakdown, homelessness that begins with having to escape what is supposed to be the secure and safe environment of their own home. The damage that this violence can do, and the disruption to women’s lives that can result from it, brings a dimension to women’s homelessness that is unique. Counter arguments are sometimes made, i.e. that men also experience violence of this sort, which is of course true, but one cannot assert there is some sort of parity or comparability in experience between genders. Men do experience domestic violence and abuse, as a cause and contributing factor to homelessness, but at a fraction of the rates experienced by women (Mayock *et al.*, 2016).

## The Similarities in Women's Homelessness

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One danger in emphasising differences in pathways through homelessness associated with gender is the risk that women having very similar experiences to homeless men, particularly single homeless men, might receive less attention than they should. Looking at long-term homelessness, Bowpitt *et al.* (2011), drawing on qualitative research results, highlight what they view as evidence that certain assumptions about women's homelessness are flawed. In particular, they argue that the assumption that long-term homeless women are less likely to sleep rough than men is flawed. It is important to note that this research was with a specific population, specifically selected on the basis that they were long-term homeless, which as North American research (Piat *et al.*, 2014) and some European data (Jones and Pleace, 2010) indicate may only be a relatively small element of overall homelessness. Yet for Bowpitt *et al.* (2011), women in this specific situation of long-term homelessness shared many characteristics with long-term homeless men, to the extent that the similarities were viewed by these researchers as more important than the differences.

The author evaluated nine of the first Housing First services to be piloted in England in 2014/15, 27% of service users were women, their support needs paralleling those of male service users in every respect. Again, while women had distinct needs, the similarities with the men, in this specific population of homeless people with high and complex needs were notable (Bretherton and Pleace, 2015).

This reiterates the point that gender differences relate to definitions. Women's homelessness, in Finland, Germany or Northern Ireland, is more visible because the categorisations of homelessness, like ETHOS, include hidden homelessness. Use a narrower definition of homelessness as in France, Spain or Italy and women become less visible. Women become less prominent and less distinctive because, as in the French case, the homelessness taxonomy basically incorporates people living rough, in emergency shelters and in temporary accommodation. In these countries, women are apparently less numerous, but this is because hidden homelessness is not recognised, meaning that the distinctive nature of many women's homelessness pathways are not recorded, or indeed, researched (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014).

Here, the evidence that homelessness can, in contexts like Finland and Denmark, be reduced to what is effectively a functional zero, may be important. In these contexts, women can and do, experience hidden homelessness, but the rate at which they do so may be comparatively very low. In those European contexts where poverty and therefore homelessness itself is less common, women's homelessness may be both narrower and, in some respects – probably excepting associations with domestic violence – less distinctive from that of men. The prevalence of severe mental illness, drug and alcohol use, disrupted childhoods, criminality and other

shared characteristics *may* sometimes be more important than gender (Benjaminsen, 2016). In European countries without integrated homelessness strategies, or sufficient welfare, health and social housing services and where poverty is more widespread, experience of homelessness among women appears to extend well beyond being a part of populations living rough or in emergency accommodation, and to include hidden homelessness on what may be some scale (Reeve *et al.*, 2007; Baptista, 2010; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012).

One further point can be raised here, which is the possibility that the effect of the more commonly researched forms of homelessness, rough sleeping and living in homelessness services may not be even. The differences within genders may be greater than the differences between genders, but some research has raised the possibility that women may sometimes be even more harmed by these forms of homelessness than some men. Following an evaluation of the first pilot of a Housing First service in London in 2012/13, it became apparent to the author that the needs of women, in what was a small service, tended to exceed those of men. Their experiences had been more negative, more damaging and their requirements for treatment were higher and more complex than those of the men among the small group of service users (Pleace and Bretherton, 2013).

## Conclusions

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The evidence base on women's homelessness in Europe is less well developed than is the case for single homeless men. The deficiencies in European evidence are fourfold. First, what may be a key aspect of women's homelessness, the experience of hidden homelessness, has received only limited attention. Second, family homelessness is less extensively researched than single homelessness among men. Third, when women are found among single homeless people, their presence is more likely to be noted than examined in depth (Bretherton and Mayock, 2016). Fourth, the experience of domestic violence causing homelessness is not sufficiently recorded, recognised or analysed as being homelessness, instead being treated as a 'separate' social problem of domestic violence (Mayock *et al.*, 2016).

The limitations in evidence have to be seen in the context of the wider evidence base on European homelessness. Research is heavily skewed to the North West, particularly the UK, and tends to focus on people living rough and in homelessness services. Data on homelessness is improving; Spain, Italy, Portugal and Poland now collect quite extensive data, for example. However, the issue of using definitions or frames of reference that exclude various dimensions of female homelessness remains widespread (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014).

A key gap in the evidence base centres on understanding the roles of women's agency and decisions, both in terms of their homelessness and in terms of the nature of European homelessness itself (Neale, 1997; McNaughton-Nicolls, 2009). Women's homelessness is influenced by welfare systems, culture, sexism, patriarchy, the nature of homelessness services and the economy and housing markets. All of these influence the contexts in which women experience homelessness, but how women react to homelessness remains a key determinant of their experience. There is too much evidence showing women not using services and employing their own resources, often in the form of existing and new relationships, as their initial, or sometimes their sole, response to homelessness (Bretherton and Mayock, 2016). A woman experiencing domestic violence who becomes homeless as a consequence may use homelessness services, may go to domestic violence services (and often not be recorded as homeless) or may rely largely, or solely on friends, relatives or acquaintances. Choices may sometimes be constrained, there may not be a service to go to, but that does not mean that it is still not possible to decide which of a limited choice of trajectories through homelessness to pursue.

The hypothesis advanced by this paper is that while European homelessness is gendered by a range of interacting factors, understanding the *decisions* of homeless women is central to understanding how gender differentiates the experience of homelessness. While economics, culture, sexism, and patterns of welfare, health and social housing system provision may all play a role, women are not, this paper contends, deprived of agency once they are at risk of homelessness (McNaughton-Nicolls, 2009). Understanding how women navigate through homelessness may be the key to comprehending the differences in women's homelessness and the true nature and extent of women's homelessness in Europe.

Decisions and actions are not the sole means to understand women's homelessness, but understanding and focusing on this subject is the first step in understanding the multiple trajectories that women can take through homelessness. Homelessness systems and homelessness research have missed women's homelessness, in large part because of definitions which created a narrow focus on only some aspects of homelessness. Whole dimensions of the social problem of homelessness, which are often those involving or disproportionately experienced by women, from family homelessness to the role of domestic violence in homelessness causation and the nature and extent of hidden homelessness are under-researched. The pathways that women take through homelessness need to be better understood (Clapham, 2003).

Clearly, better understanding must involve much more systematic attempts to understand hidden homelessness. Of particular interest are two questions. The first is the extent to which Shinn's (1997) hypothesis in relation to North America, that

homeless women and female headed lone parent families have a tendency to exhaust every source of informal help from friends and relatives before seeking services, holds true in European contexts. The second is the extent to which hidden homelessness is a perpetual or near perpetual state for some women (Mayock and Sheridan, 2012), because if there is a population experiencing hidden homelessness for years, even perhaps decades, without accessing formal support, it is clearly a cause for concern. Alongside this, understanding both the relative and absolute scale of hidden homelessness, while presenting challenges (Pleace and Bretherton, 2013), is important, not least to try to understand quite what the real dimensions of women's experience of homelessness may be.

Another dimension of women's homelessness highlighted by this paper is the true level of understanding of women's experience of the most widely recognised forms of single homelessness. Women's presence in these populations has been noted by researchers, but it has been argued here and elsewhere that there is a tendency to note that a minority of women are present, but not to pursue further analysis (Casey *et al.*, 2008; Bowpitt *et al.*, 2011). Some research indicates that at the extremes of homelessness, women and men may have many experiences and needs in common, but while there is this possibility, the evidence is not yet at a point where it can be safely assumed, for example, that the effects and experience of rough sleeping is not differentiated by gender.

Equally, there are specific dimensions of women's homelessness that it is important to better understand. Some research suggests migrant women may be at heightened risk of homelessness, facing specific issues alongside the challenges of trying to integrate, work and seek publicly funded support in European countries (Mayock *et al.*, 2012). There are also indications that trajectories through youth homelessness may be differentiated by gender, particularly when young people reach their late teens and early twenties and males start to outnumber females. These patterns have been interpreted as young women forming relationships more quickly than young men and also, perhaps rather crudely and possibly incorrectly, interpreted as young homeless women becoming pregnant and accessing welfare systems and exiting homelessness through that route (Quilgars *et al.*, 2008).

Some of the intersecting concerns and issues with European homelessness research, for example the need to redress the 'Northern' bias in evidence, apply specifically to women. A key question here is whether and to what extent women's homelessness, including their tendency to resort to, or choice to use, informal support from friends, family and acquaintances may relate to welfare systems, social housing and the nature of strategic responses to homelessness (Bretherton *et al.*, 2016).



The key concern, as the author and others have raised elsewhere (Mayock and Bretherton, 2016), is the relative neglect and, by extension, the untested nature of the assumptions about gender and homelessness in Europe. This gap in understanding about women's homelessness is a major gap in evidence about European homelessness, indeed homelessness in general. The failure to fully research gender and homelessness is a failure to fully research and seek to understand the nature of homelessness itself.

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