

Introduction

Women and girls experiencing homelessness are some of the most at risk in our society. Their needs are particularly complex, with higher levels of poor mental health than men who are homeless, and often extensive experiences of physical and sexual violence and abuse. Yet most homelessness services do not respond to women's specific needs, and the vast majority offer support in male-dominated environments which can put women at risk of intimidation and violence. Women and girls are also more likely to be among the 'hidden homeless', invisible to data collection and often to support.

Drivers and consequences of women's homelessness

The needs and experiences of women who are homeless are **particularly complex**:

- Women who are homeless are more likely to experience mental ill health than men who are, with **58% of women sleeping rough reporting ill mental health** compared to 44% of men. Women who are homeless with mental health problems are more likely to experience long-term or repeated homelessness.ⁱ
- Charity Groundswell report **74% of women who are homeless have a current physical health issue**.ⁱⁱ
- St Mungo's report a staggering **65% increase in women sleeping rough in London with drug and alcohol problems** since 2014-15, compared to a 16% rise among men. In most cases, drug and alcohol problems develop before a woman first sleeps rough, the product of traumatic experience in their lives.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Women who are rough sleeping **tend to be younger**, and are significantly more likely than men to be under 25.^{iv}
- Homeless Link research shows that **2/3 of practitioners reported they had seen an increase in the number of women with multiple disadvantage** presenting to their service over two years.^v
- The average age of death for a homeless woman is a **shockingly low 43 years**.^{vi} This is almost 40 years younger than the average age of death for women in England. The number of women dying on the streets has more than doubled in the past five years, rising from 32 in 2013 to 77 in 2017 – an increase of 140 per cent. This is compared to a 15% rise in the number of men who have died.^{vii}

Violence and abuse is both a **cause** and **consequence** of women and girls' homelessness:

- Agenda research shows that 1.2 million women in England have experienced **extensive abuse** as both a child and an adult, and 1/5 of these women have been homeless.^{viii} By comparison, only 1% of women with little or no experience of abuse have been homeless.
- The research also shows that many of these **women first experienced homelessness in childhood**, with 22% having run away from home as a child, compared to just 2% who had experienced little or no violence and abuse.
- St Mungo's reports that 54% of their female clients that slept rough have **experienced abuse from a partner** or family member, and 33% say domestic abuse contributed to their homelessness.^{ix}
- Homeless Link report high instances of other types of VAWG as contributing to women's homelessness, such as stalking, harassment and honour-based violence.^x
- Women who are homeless are **particularly vulnerable to being further targeted** by perpetrators of both physical and sexual abuse, with 28% of homeless women having formed an unwanted sexual partnership to get a roof over their heads, and 20% having engaged in sex work to raise money for accommodation.^{xi}
- As well as increasing the risk of facing further violence, involvement **in sex work puts women at risk of contact with the criminal justice system**, creating further barriers to breaking out of homelessness.
- Asylum-seeking women experiencing homelessness are particularly **vulnerable to violence and abuse**, with a quarter of women experiencing rape or sexual abuse.^{xii}

Agenda research shows that **1.2 million women in England have experienced extensive abuse as both a child and an adult, and 1/5 of these women have been homeless.**

Case study: Alison's story

After an abusive boyfriend set fire to her home, Alison spent time in a hostel, where she met another man who was abusive.

"Because I didn't want to be on the street, I ended up staying with him and moving in with him and his dad ... One day he proper battered me, he had a knife, he was slashing me. I had to run out in my dressing gown and shoes. I ran into town and that's how I became homeless."

Extent of homelessness among women

Women are more likely to experience some forms of homelessness than others:

- **56% of statutorily homeless households in England are women with dependent children or lone women.**^{.xiii}
- The Government estimates that 14% of people sleeping rough are women.^{.xiv} **The number of women sleeping rough rose by 28%** between 2016 and 2017, while overall rates of rough sleeping rose 15% over the same period.^{.xv} On any given night there are over 614 women sleeping rough in England.^{.xvi}

But these figures do not give a full picture, with many women and girls likely to be among the '**hidden homeless**', invisible to data collection and often to support.

- Women who are rough sleeping may make **efforts to hide away or try to keep moving**, for example sleeping on buses or walking through the night, because of the risk of violence.
- Many women who are homeless may find **alternative and unsafe arrangements**, for example engaging in so-called 'sex for rent' and other exploitative arrangements in order to put a roof over their heads.
- Women's Aid found that **44% of women fleeing domestic violence sofa-surfed** while waiting for a refuge space.^{.xvii}
- Many women and girls may **stay in abusive relationships** to avoid having to live on the streets.
- There is little data available on the number of BME, LGBTQI and disabled women and girls experiencing homelessness, meaning their experiences are often invisible. However, **evidence shows these communities are disproportionately likely to experience homelessness**. For example, BME households accounted for 31% of statutorily homeless households in 2017/18,^{.xviii} LGBT young people make up 24% of the youth homeless population,^{.xix} and last year the number of ill and disabled people becoming homeless increased by 53%.^{.xx}

Mothers who are homeless

Many "single" women who are homeless will in fact have children who are not in their care: **half of the women St. Mungo's work with are mothers, and 79% of these mothers have had children taken into care.**

Women facing multiple disadvantage often speak of the importance of motherhood to their identity, and as a motivating factor for engaging with services.

Having children removed into care, particularly when they are permanently removed, can be deeply traumatic and can prompt or exacerbate mental health or substance misuse problems. Women may need support to deal with the trauma of losing a child, to establish contact with children or around care proceedings. Services which work with homeless women must recognise and respond to this.

Mothers who have become homeless, for example as a result of fleeing domestic violence, and whose children are temporarily out of their care, can find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle. A local authority will not allow their children to be returned to their care until they have secured accommodation, but they are not a priority for local authority housing assistance until their children are returned to them. This cycle can result in children remaining in care unnecessarily, simply due to a lack of suitable accommodation.

Provision of services

Most homelessness services are designed for men by default, in part because more men tend to access these in larger numbers. These male-dominated environments can be **intimidating and unsafe for women**, and are rarely set up to meet women's distinct needs.

- Many women report that a women-only space is important in enabling them to feel safe and to start dealing with the issues they face.^{.xxi} Yet **just 11% of homelessness services offer women-only accommodation.**^{.xxii}
- Women experiencing homelessness are likely to enter into often abusive and exploitative relationships to stay safe from violence on the streets. This means they are less likely to receive support from homelessness services, most of which **only offer support for single homeless people.**^{.xxiii}

Research by Agenda and AVA, *Mapping the Maze*, identifies what specialist accommodation and community-based services for women exist across the substance misuse, criminal justice, homelessness and mental health sectors in England and Wales.^{xxiv} It found:

- **Patchy provision for women** across these sectors, with a woman's ability to access services being dependent on where she lives.
- **Only 59 of 173 areas in England and Wales provided accommodation specifically for women** that was not a refuge, with refuge provision the most commonly reported type of homelessness provision for women.
- **Many refuges were either unable to provide support to women experiencing multiple disadvantage** or had limited capacity to do so. This leaves women who are homeless and facing multiple disadvantage with very few women-specific safe options.
- Services for **LGBTQI women, those with a physical or learning disability, who are refugees or asylum seekers, were absent in all the mapping data collected.**

Other evidence shows that specialist by and for **services for BME women are particularly limited** and under resourced.^{xxv}

Agenda recommends:

1. Women's specific needs are included in all strategies to target homelessness at a national and local level and women have the choice of accessing women-only, trauma-informed services.
2. Approaches to tackling homelessness include involvement from other relevant government departments and should include a focus on violence against women and girls (VAWG).
3. All homelessness data, including rough sleeping counts should include a gender and ethnicity breakdown, and be reviewed to ensure accurate reflection of the numbers of women who are homeless and rough sleeping.
4. A review of the homelessness legislation with a view to either expand or abolish priority need criteria. Any review must ensure protection for those facing the greater vulnerability, including women with children, is maintained.
5. The Domestic Abuse Bill's statutory duty on local authorities to provide accommodation-based support to women and children fleeing domestic abuse should be extended to include a duty to provide community based services, backed by sufficient funding.
6. Ensuring all victims/survivors who are made homeless as a result of VAWG have access to accommodation-based support and all other homelessness services regardless of immigration status. This should mean services are available for all women including those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF).
7. For women whose children are temporarily cared for elsewhere, whether that be through the care system or by family or friends, a lack of housing should never be a barrier to children returning to their mother.
8. A 'whole housing'^{xxvi} approach should be taken to domestic abuse that ensures there is a full suite of safe and stable housing options available to victims and survivors of abuse, including for women with complex needs.

About Agenda [Agenda](https://www.weareagenda.org), the alliance for women and girls at risk, is working to build a society where women and girls are able to live their lives free from inequality, poverty and violence. We campaign for women and girls facing abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction and homelessness to get the support and protection they need. www.weareagenda.org

For further information, please contact: Hermione Greenhalgh hermione@weareagenda.org

ⁱ Agenda (2016) *Hidden Hurt*

ⁱⁱ Groundswell (2020) *Women, Homelessness and Health*

ⁱⁱⁱ St Mungos (2020) *Knocked back: Failing to support people sleeping rough with drug and alcohol problems is costing lives*

^{iv} University of York (2018) *Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology*

^v Homeless Link (2018) *Exploring gendered approaches to supporting women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage*

^{vi} ONS (2019) *Deaths of homeless people in England and Wales: 2018*

^{vii} ONS (2019) *Rough Sleeping Statistics Autumn*

^{viii} Agenda (2016) *Hidden Hurt*

^{ix} University of York (2018) *Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology*

^x Homeless Link (2018) *Exploring gendered approaches to supporting women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage*

^{xi} Crisis (2006) *Homeless women: still be failed yet striving to survive*

^{xii} Women for Refugee Women (2020) *Will I Ever be Safe?*

^{xiii} Gov UK (2020) *Statutory homelessness live tables: Detailed local authority level tables: July to September 2019*

^{xiv} Gov UK (2020) *Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2019*

^{xv} University of York (2018) *Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology*

^{xvi} Gov UK (2020) *Rough sleeping snapshot in England: autumn 2019*

^{xvii} Women's Aid (2019) *Nowhere to turn 2019*

^{xviii} Race Disparity Audit (2018) *Ethnicity Facts and Figures*

^{xix} The Albert Kennedy Trust (2015) *LGBT Youth Homelessness: A UK National Scoping of Cause, Prevalence, Response & Outcome*

^{xx} Gov UK (2019) *Statutory homelessness in England: April to June 2019*

^{xxi} Agenda and AVA (2017) *Mapping the Maze: a review of the literature*

^{xxii} Homeless Link (2017) *Supporting women who are homeless*

^{xxiii} Brighton Women's Centre and Homeless Link (2018) *Coupling Up: The danger of being a woman on the streets*

^{xxiv} Agenda and AVA (2017), *Mapping the Maze: services for women experiencing multiple disadvantage in England and Wales*

^{xxv} Imkaan (2018) *Summary of the Alternative Bill: From the Margin to the Centre Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls*

^{xxvi} Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) (2018) *The Whole Housing Approach (WHA)*