

Introduction

Homeless women are some of the most vulnerable in our society. Their needs are particularly complex, with higher levels of poor mental health than homeless men, and 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.

Drivers and consequences of women's homelessness

Homeless women's needs are particularly complex. Statistics show that:

- The average age of death for a homeless woman is a shockingly low 42.ⁱ
- Rough sleeping women tend to be younger, and are significantly more likely than men to be under 25.ⁱⁱ Homeless women are more likely to experience mental ill health than homeless men, and homeless women with mental health problems are more likely to experience long term or repeated homelessness.ⁱⁱⁱ

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

- Agenda research shows that 1.2 million women in England have experienced extensive abuse as both a child and an adult, and a fifth of these women have been homeless.^{iv} By comparison, only 1% of women with little or no experience of abuse have been homeless.
- 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.^v
- 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 prostitution to raise money for accommodation.^{vi}
- As well as increasing the risk of facing further violence, involvement in prostitution puts women at risk of contact with the criminal justice system, creating further barriers to breaking out of homelessness.

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 amongst women

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

- 57% of statutorily homeless households in England are women with dependent children or lone women.^{vii}
- Government estimates that 14% of rough sleepers are women.^{viii} Women's rough sleeping rose 28% between 2016 and 2017, while overall rates of rough sleeping rose 15% over the same period.^{ix}

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

- Rough sleeping women 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 homeless women 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.
- Many women may stay in abusive relationships to avoid having to live on the streets.

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.^x Yet just 11% of homelessness services offer women-only accommodation.^{xi}
- Homeless women 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.^{xii}

Research by Agenda and AVA, *Mapping the Maze*, identifies what specialist services for women exist across the substance misuse, criminal justice, homelessness and mental health sectors in England and Wales.^{xiii} 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 experiencing multiple disadvantage who are homeless with very few women-specific safe options.

Homeless mothers

Women facing multiple disadvantage often speak of the importance of motherhood to their identity, and as a motivating factor for engaging with services. Many "single" homeless women 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.^{xiv}

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.

Having children removed into care, particularly when they are permanently removed, can be deeply traumatic for women. It 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.

The policy context

Current legislation states that women should be considered "priority need" if they are vulnerable as a result of fleeing domestic abuse. However, this is not always the case in practice: 53.6% of survivors supported by Women's Aid's No Woman Turned Away project were turned away from local authority housing teams as they were not deemed to meet assessments of vulnerability under "priority need".^{xv}

Fleeing abuse in itself makes women vulnerable: both because they may be at risk from the perpetrator of abuse, and because of the physical and psychological toll abuse can take.

Agenda recommends that, if the priority need system is kept, women fleeing domestic violence should be automatically considered to be in priority need of housing, rather than having to meet an additional test of vulnerability.

Further, we would welcome a review of the homelessness legislation with a view to either expanding or abolishing priority need criteria, whilst ensuring protection for the most vulnerable including women with children is maintained.

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 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 breakdown, and be reviewed to ensure accurate reflection of the numbers of homeless and rough sleeping women.
4. Victim/survivors of domestic abuse should automatically be classified as in "priority need" for housing, rather than meet assessments of vulnerability as is currently the case.
5. A review of the homelessness legislation with a view to either expanding or abolishing priority need criteria. Any review, must ensure protection for the most vulnerable including women with children is maintained.
6. 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.
7. A 'whole housing' approach should be taken to domestic abuse that ensures there is a full suite of housing options available to victim/survivors, including for women with complex needs.

About Agenda

[Agenda](#), 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: Connie Muttock, connie@weareagenda.org

ⁱONS (2018), [Deaths of homeless people in England and Wales: 2013 to 2017](#)

ⁱⁱ University of York (2018), [Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ ibid

^{iv} Agenda (2016), [Hidden Hurt](#)

^v University of York (2018), [Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology](#)

^{vi} Crisis (2006), [Homeless women: still be failed yet striving to survive](#)

^{vii} University of York (2018), [Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology](#)

^{viii} Gov UK (2019), [Rough Sleeping in England: Autumn 2018](#)

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

^x Agenda and AVA (2017), [Mapping the Maze: a review of the literature](#)

^{xi} Homeless Link (2017), [Supporting women who are homeless](#)

^{xii} Brighton Women's Centre and Homeless Link (2018), [Coupling Up: The danger of being a woman on the streets](#)

^{xiii} Agenda and AVA (2017), [Mapping the Maze: services for women experiencing multiple disadvantage in England and Wales](#)

^{xiv} St. Mungo's (2014), [Rebuilding Shattered Lives](#)

^{xv} Women's Aid (2018) [Nowhere to turn: Findings from the Second Year of the No Woman Turned Away Project](#)