



## Engender submission of evidence on homelessness to Scottish Parliament Local Government and Communities Committee

Engender works in Scotland to advance women's economic, social and cultural, and political equality. We make visible the ways in which women's inequality impacts Scotland, and bring women together to make change happen.

Engender welcomes the Scottish Parliament's Local Government and Communities Committee study on homelessness in Scotland, and its aim to 'explore the underlying reasons which can lead to a person seeking homelessness services, and whether homelessness prevention services are effectively tackling those underlying reasons for homelessness'.

### INTRODUCTION

In 2015-2016, 34,663 homeless applications were made in Scotland.<sup>1</sup> Of these:

- Almost a third were aged 25 to 34, 31 percent of whom were women;
- Two-thirds of applications were from single person households, of which 21 percent were women; and
- Approximately 27 percent of applications were from households with children; 20 percent of applications were from single parent households, of which 79 percent were women.

Though these statistics provide a snapshot of homeless applications made by women, they may not accurately depict the reality of women's homelessness in Scotland. For reasons explored in further detail below, women's homelessness is considered 'invisible', as women often find and reside in precarious housing (e.g., sofa surfing) when they are roofless.<sup>2</sup> As such, women who are

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government. (2017). 'Homelessness in Scotland'.

<sup>2</sup> May, J., Cloke, P. & Johnsen, S. (2007). 'Alternative cartographies of homelessness: Rendering visible British women's experiences of 'visible' homelessness'. *Gender, Place and Culture*. 121-140.

without a safe home may not be captured in official statistics or be known to charities working with homeless people.<sup>3</sup>

A review of policy and practice quickly reveals that approaches to tackle homelessness remain ungendered. Women's experience of homelessness, including their pathways into and out of homelessness, are different from men's, but poorly studied and understood. As explained by researchers in the UK, while 'literature has increasingly acknowledged the presence of women amongst the visibly homeless population, it has rarely explored their experiences in any detail or sought to unpack the experiences of visible homelessness through an explicitly gendered perspective'<sup>4</sup>.

## 1.0 WOMEN'S INVISIBILITY IN HOMELESSNESS

*'Women's homelessness is largely hidden from public view'.<sup>5</sup>*

While homeless people will inevitably share common experiences of homelessness, the lack of understanding of women's distinct experiences and situations results in ineffective and inadequate responses to tackle and prevent women's homelessness. The subject of women and homelessness has received little attention in research, but in policy-making also.<sup>6</sup> Their invisibility in the discourse on homelessness has been attributed to several factors, including that women try to avoid the increased risks of living on the streets or in specific shelters (e.g., avoiding shelters with men), or that women manage to find alternate, temporary and often volatile accommodation (e.g., sharing with family or friends, sleeping in bed and breakfast hostels, 'sofa surfing').

Most recently, research on women and homelessness in Europe concluded that 'hidden homelessness indeed remains a typical manifestation of female homelessness.'<sup>7</sup> A number of factors, including those highlighted above, have been attributed to women's invisibility in homelessness. It is vital to consider how systems, policies and practices should be responsive to these factors, both to make visible women's homelessness, but also to design more effective interventions.

One reason women are not considered 'visibly' homeless is tied to personal safety. Women will resort to desperate measures to avoid sleeping on the street, including remaining in abusive

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<sup>3</sup> May, J. et al.

<sup>4</sup> May, J. et al.

<sup>5</sup> Whitzman, C. (2010). 'Making the invisible visible: Canadian women, homelessness, and health outside the "big city' in: Hulchanski, D., Campsie, P., Chau, S., Hwang, S., Paradis, E. *Finding Home: Policy Options for Addressing Homelessness in Canada* (e-book), Chapter 4.3. Toronto: Cities Centre, University of Toronto.

<sup>6</sup> Marpsat, M. (2008). 'An Advantage with Limits. The Lower Risk for Women Becoming Homeless'. *Population*. 247-291.

<sup>7</sup> Baptista, I.

relationships or taking up extended periods of time ‘sofa surfing’.<sup>8</sup> Rough sleeping presents particular challenges for women, ‘not only because of the increased danger of sexual harassment and abuse, but also because of the importance of cleanliness...not only...the problems of remaining clean during menstruation, but also [because] remaining clean and respectably dressed is a method of self-protection’.<sup>9</sup> Though shelters are touted as a place of refuge, personal safety will often preclude women from relying on them. The reality is that many women avoid using shelters, viewing them as a potential threat to their safety and security by virtue of the overrepresentation of men within shelters. As explained by one study into women’s homelessness in England, women felt an ‘unease in approaching such places [shelters]’, as they ‘represented a space of fear rather than care’.<sup>10</sup>

Another reason for women’s invisibility lies in our perceptions of homelessness. Societal views of women who are homeless perpetuate misunderstandings of what homelessness looks like for women. As described by researchers in the UK, ‘though women do appear in popular portrayals of street homelessness, their presence tends to be restricted to a limited number of roles: the vulnerable young girl preyed upon by older, homeless men, or the elderly ‘bag lady’.’<sup>11</sup> Stereotypes of women who are homeless narrows our understanding of homelessness and prevents us from seeing the realities of women who are homeless. While there are women who sleep rough and who use shelters, these forms of homelessness – which dominate public discourse and drive public policy – ignore other types of women’s homelessness. The effect of these stereotypes is to push women to the margins of policy development around tackling homelessness, leaving space to be filled by policies considered gender-neutral, but which really only respond to male experiences of homelessness.

## 2.0 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WOMEN’S HOMELESSNESS

*‘Current explanations of homelessness do not adequately capture the complexity of homeless women’s lives’.*<sup>12</sup>

Data collected by the Scottish Government focus on 15 reasons for homeless applications. These include: 1) termination of tenancy / mortgage due to rent arrears / default on payments; 2) other action by landlord resulting in the termination of the tenancy; 3) applicant terminated secure accommodation; 4) loss of service / tied accommodation; 5) discharge from prison / hospital / care / other institution; 6) emergency (e.g., fire); 7) forced division and sale of matrimonial home; 8) other reason for loss of accommodation; 9) dispute within household: violent or abusive; 10) dispute within household / relationship breakdown: non-violent; 11) fleeing non-domestic

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<sup>8</sup> May, J. et al.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, J. (1999). ‘Gender and homelessness’ in: Hutson, S. & Clapham, D. *Homelessness: Public policies and private troubles*. London: Cassell.

<sup>10</sup> May, J. et al.

<sup>11</sup> May, J. et al.

<sup>12</sup> Savage, M. (2016). ‘Gendering Women’s Homelessness’. *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*. 44-65.

violence; 12) harassment; 13) overcrowding; 14) asked to leave; 15) other reason for leaving accommodation / household.

Many of these reasons are an outcome – or a byproduct – of a larger crisis in Scotland: inequality. Though a myriad number of individual factors may contribute to women being without a safe home, none are independently responsible for a woman’s homelessness. To suggest otherwise would ignore a complex set of economic, cultural and political factors contributing to women’s inequality or, more simply, to ‘the multitude of ways that women hold significantly less power than men in society.’<sup>13</sup>

Previous explanations of homelessness ‘focused on individual characteristics associated with the person experiencing homelessness. These accounts often emerged within social work responses which sought to ‘blame’ or label the individual as either deviant or immoral.’<sup>14</sup> More recently, however, the discourse has shifted to examining the structural factors that lead to homelessness, in particular women’s homelessness. As noted in the literature, it was essential to make the link between women’s homelessness and ‘the structural conditions that shape the lives of homeless people.’<sup>15</sup>

Structural explanations of homelessness focus primarily on inequality. Below are excerpts from recent literature on the root causes of homelessness amongst women:

- ‘The primary causes of single women’s homelessness relate to economic disadvantage cause by low income and inadequate affordable housing.’<sup>16</sup>
- ‘Empirical studies from Europe and the USA demonstrate that homeless women had experienced greater levels of sexual abuse and emotional abuse than men in childhood, and into adulthood.’<sup>17</sup>
- ‘Poverty, violence/abuse in childhood, intimate partner violence, imprisonment and motherhood all influence women’s journey’s into, through and out of homelessness.’<sup>18</sup>
- ‘Research has demonstrated a relationship between poor welfare policies, a shortage of suitable and affordable housing options, and/or poor access to labour market/labour market inflexibility, and poverty.’<sup>19</sup>
- ‘Care of the state [looked-after and accommodated children] is a key predisposing factor for homelessness as an adult.’<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Savage, M.

<sup>14</sup> Savage, M.

<sup>15</sup> Savage, M.

<sup>16</sup> Casey, S. (2001). ‘Snakes and Ladders: Women’s Pathways Into and Out of Homeless’ in Eardley, T. & Bradbury, B. *Competing Visions: Refereed Proceedings of the National Social Policy Conference 2001*, SPRC Report 1/02, Kensington: Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales. 75-90

<sup>17</sup> Savage, M.

<sup>18</sup> Savage, M.

<sup>19</sup> Savage, M.

<sup>20</sup> Casey, S.

→ 'The outcome of increasing numbers of people on low and uncertain income has led to delays in home purchase and increasing numbers of people seeking out low-cost private rental.'<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, research on homeless people's perceptions of homelessness found that individual, rather than structural factors were used to explain their homelessness (e.g., drug and/or alcohol use, mental illness).<sup>22</sup> Though homeless people attributed the cause of their homelessness to individual events or factors, the research concluded that the negative events homeless people had described could happen in anyone's life.<sup>23</sup> The key difference that allowed individual circumstances to lead to homelessness was 'when people lack resources of human, social, material, or financial capital to negate the effects of these individually experienced negative events.'<sup>24</sup>

### 3.0 UNGENDERED RESPONSES TO HOMELESSNESS

*'The need to re-orientate policy towards gender sensitive approaches that take account of the diverse and complex situations of women'.<sup>25</sup>*

In 2003, the Scottish Government introduced a target to end 'unintentional' homelessness<sup>26</sup> by 2012. In 2010, COSLA and the Scottish Government agreed to priorities to support local authorities to meet the 2012 homelessness target, which included promoting and improving joint working and preventing homelessness where possible. This work was – and continues to be – underpinned by the Housing Options model.<sup>27</sup> In 2013, the Housing Support Duty came into effect, requiring local authority to conduct housing support assessments for applicants deemed 'unintentionally' homeless or threatened with homelessness.

Scotland's existing approach to homelessness is ungendered, and there appears to be a significant gap in policy and practice, namely a recognition and understanding of the gendered dimensions of homelessness, such as a women's relationship to mothering, and domestic violence. In 2015, Scottish Women's Aid conducted a research study into women's homelessness in Fife, and it is one of the only studies we are aware of that looks into women's homelessness in Scotland. The research study was conducted to better understand the difficulties women face when they become homeless as a result of domestic or sexual abuse.

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<sup>21</sup> Casey, S.

<sup>22</sup> McNaughton, C. (2008). *Transitions Through Homelessness, Lives on the Edge*.

<sup>23</sup> Savage, M.

<sup>24</sup> Savage, M.

<sup>25</sup> Mayock P., Parker, S. & Sheridan, S. (2015). 'The Dynamics of Women's Unresolved Homelessness'. *Housing Studies*. 877-900.

<sup>26</sup> Housing is provided if someone is found to be unintentionally homeless. Intentionally homeless means that a person could have avoided becoming homeless.

<sup>27</sup> The Housing Options approach requires local authorities to conduct an interview with clients to offer advice and support to try to resolve a housing problem, with focus on prevention and putting the client first.

One of the findings of the study was that ‘the lack of national or local gendered policy and practice response to homelessness, as a result of domestic or sexual abuse, means that the existing inequalities experienced by women are repeated and reinforced’.<sup>28</sup> In examining structural responses to homelessness amongst women who experience domestic violence, Scottish Women’s Aid found that the existing approach to homelessness in Scotland – Housing Options – raised ‘serious concerns about the housing options available to women who are at risk of homelessness due to domestic and sexual abuse’.<sup>29</sup> More specifically, women who fled domestic abuse were being forced by the system to move from one temporary accommodation to another, without option of a stable home.<sup>30</sup>

Another finding was that, amongst 39 women asked about the housing options presented to them by the council (e.g., bed and breakfast, women’s aid refuge), ‘more than half said they had not been informed about any of the options when they were seeking help with their housing.’<sup>31</sup> In response to the research findings, Scottish Women’s Aid developed a number of recommendations for the Scottish Government and local council, including the need for a specific housing options approach for women who experience domestic and sexual abuse.

The research by Scottish Women’s Aid is an insightful glance into the impact of ungendered approaches to homelessness in Scotland, and of the need to adapt responses to consider the realities and needs of women at-risk of homelessness or who are homeless.

## 4.0 LOOKING AHEAD

*‘At the edge of what is still a barely visible policy issue, the experts reside in shelters, motel rooms, and trailers, on couches and in sleeping bags.’<sup>32</sup>*

A recurring word in the literature on women’s homelessness is ‘complexity’, and it highlights that there is no single solution to preventing and eradicating women’s homelessness in Scotland. A first step in ameliorating existing policy and practice is to acknowledge that the realities of women have not been considered in housing strategies, and to commit to gendering our approaches to tackling homelessness. Though the literature on women and homelessness can help direct future strategies, there is little in the way of research on women’s homelessness in Scotland. Regrettably, much remains unknown about the determinants of women’s homelessness and the impacts of homelessness on women in Scotland. As examples:

- How does homelessness impact the personal wellbeing of women?
- How does homelessness among women affect their families?

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<sup>28</sup> Scottish Women’s Aid. (2015). ‘Change, Justice, Fairness: Why should I have to move everywhere and everything because of him’.

<sup>29</sup> Scottish Women’s Aid.

<sup>30</sup> Scottish Women’s Aid.

<sup>31</sup> Scottish Women’s Aid.

<sup>32</sup> Whitzman, C.

- What are the experiences of women who are roofless (i.e., without a shelter of any kind)?
- What are the experiences of women living in insecure housing (i.e., threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies and eviction)?
- What are the experience of women living in inadequate housing (i.e., caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding)?
- Do women feel supported by existing services?
- What is the difference in service level from rural communities and towns to cities?
- Are service providers aware of the gendered dimensions of homelessness?

Though research by Scottish Women’s Aid provides some of this information in the context of women who experience domestic abuse, we must also consider young women, rural women, refugee and asylum-seeking women, and black and minority ethnic women. To respond effectively to women’s homelessness first requires an understanding of their unique experiences in comparison to men, and a recognition that experiences differ amongst different women.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provides that every person has the right to an adequate standard of living, which includes housing. Every woman has a right to a safe, secure and affordable home, as well as access to gender-sensitive programs and services which support her in finding and maintaining accommodation. To achieve these aims means listening to women’s lived experiences of homelessness and incorporating their experiences and needs into the development of strategies to tackle and prevent homelessness in Scotland. It is our recommendation that research should be undertaken to answers the questions we have outlined above, both to better understand women’s homelessness and to find effective ways to tackle and prevent it.

### For Further Information

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### About Engender

Engender has a vision for a Scotland in which women and men have equal opportunities in life, equal access to resources and power, and are equally safe and secure from harm. Engender is a feminist organisation that has worked in Scotland for 20 years to advance equality between women and men.

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<sup>33</sup> May, J. et al.