

September 2017

Key words: homelessness, women, feminization, invisibility, poverty, housing exclusion, rooflessness, violence

Homeless women. The invisibility of female housing exclusion

Albert Sales (Departament of Political Sciences – UPF) and Laura Guijarro Sant Joan de Déu Social Service

Even though extreme forms of homelessness are still considered to be a mainly male problem, the number of women suffering from housing exclusion continues to rise. This article focuses on the features of female homelessness and explores why these remain hidden. The consequences of that lack of detection are also tackled, as well as the knowledge gaps in the designing of strategic plans and policies targeted to the most extreme forms of homelessness. These public policies usually overlook the specific needs of homeless women.

1. Introduction

The number of homeless women is rising in many European countries and cities. Despite the difficulties in quantifying homelessness on a gender basis, several European countries register indicators pointing to growing figures of female housing exclusion. In France, for instance, a 22% rise in women asking for emergency housing¹ from February 2015 to February 2016 has been detected. In Ireland, between January 2016 and January 2017 only, women's access to homelessness support services increased by 28%². Barcelona is not an exception; although female homelessness is less visible, it doesn't mean it doesn't exist³.

Homelessness has been, and continues to be, considered a problem mainly affecting men, due to the invisibility of women suffering from housing exclusion. If we look at the available data, we can see that only 11% of rough sleepers in Barcelona are women (Sales et. al. 2015), and the number in emergency night shelters is only 14%. But it must be remembered that homelessness is a multi-faceted phenomenon and, although men are the most visible (sleeping rough or in accommodation for homeless people, such as emergency shelters), we can confirm that a lack of housing access and impoverishment put women in situations of great vulnerability which remain hidden due to an androcentric and restricted conception of homelessness.

1. I 15 Barometer February 2016 - Alerte au I 15 sur l'absence d'hébergement pour les femmes et les familles. Available at <http://www.federationsolidarite.org/publications-fnars/barometre-I15/barometre-archives-menu/6549-cop-fnars-barom%C3%A8tre-I15-f%C3%A9vrier-2017>

2. Homelessness report January 2016, Homelessness report January 2017. Available at <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>

3. Barcelona data are presented in the following epigraph.

2. The invisibility of female homelessness

In Barcelona and Catalonia, women are more likely to suffer poverty than men⁴ (Belzunegui, 2012; Sarasa and Sales, 2009). Even so, although poverty is a largely female phenomenon, homelessness is considered to mainly affect men. The principal reason is that the housing exclusion forms suffered by women usually remain hidden in a private ambit. There is a hidden homelessness experienced inside, away from the street, leading to serious situations of housing deprivation that, although not seen in public, limit the capacity to develop life on a self-sufficient basis and the chances of exiting extreme poverty forms.

Housing exclusion itineraries leading to homelessness operate in different ways with men and women. Despite the serious lack of official data on female homelessness in the EU⁵, several studies conducted in different countries and cities address some of the causes of the reduced presence of women sleeping on the street across Europe, making us aware of the invisible forms of female housing exclusion.

Research carried out in Ireland (Mayock and Sheridan, 2012), the United States and the UK (Passaro, 2014), agree that women ask for help from social services to deal with housing problem only when they can't count on family and friends' support. In the case of women with children, the refusal to be assessed by social services, fear of losing the power to decide over their children or losing custody are factors that explain why, in the first instance, women prefer to choose informal solutions. When women lose the possibility of sustaining a household, stronger personal relationships than men and a subsequent greater capacity to mobilize social capital prevent them from ending up on the street or in the circuit of shelters and night accommodation facilities. Women, because of their historically assumed gender role, maintain stronger social ties with family and friends. The diversity of roles they undertake in their daily life seems to provide them with a greater capacity to mobilize relationship resources (Bourdieu, 2000) that, in times of extreme precariousness, could protect them from ending up on the street (Escudero, 2003). On the other hand, men are usually identified more strongly by their job and earning capacity. Becoming unemployed rapidly undermines the meaning an individual gives to his daily routine (Sales et. al. 2015).

If friends, family or associates can provide protection for women in the most extreme situations of social exclusion, informal networks also force women who can't access housing into situations of insecurity and exploitation which constitute, as well, invisible forms of homelessness with an impact on their wellbeing and opportunities to construct a dignified life (Baptista, 2010, Mayock and Sheridan, 2012). These are situations that are difficult to quantify and detect; for instance, living in overcrowded flats without a rental contract, trusting the good will of the person housing them, living in a sub-tenancy room with no legal security and without being able to be on the residence register or staying in a relative's house who's also in a vulnerable situation, with all the added tension implied.

One of the most obvious results of that invisibility is that attention policies to homeless people are designed from a male perspective, based on those people affected by housing exclusion who spend the most time on the street, mainly men. If available, homelessness data is obtained

4. Belzunegui and Valls (2014) outline in the paper *La pobreza en España desde una perspectiva de género* (Poverty in Spain *from a gender perspective*) how the convergence of the at-risk-of poverty rate of men and women in Spain over the last few years of the crisis has been caused by the worsening of the financial situation of families and how resources are distributed within the family is not considered. Methodologies scoping the at-risk-of-poverty rate based on the premise of autonomy are summarized by the authors, concluding that the standard at-risk-of-poverty rate isn't greatly influenced by the gender inequalities in which women continue to suffer higher and starker poverty.

5. Complaint repeatedly documented on Women's Homelessness in Europe Network.

<http://www.womenshomelessness.org/>

through the information provided by the organizations and public institutions that plan these services (Pleace, 2016). As a result, the housing exclusion forms measured are those that have traditionally shaped the creation of the attention schemes. In Barcelona, data collected annually by XAPSLL (Network of Attention to Homeless People) reveal a large male overrepresentation in the ETHOS categories, which have traditionally constituted the intervention framework of organizations and services specialized in roofless people attention. According to XAPSLL, in 2015, around 11% of rough sleepers were women. Among the people who slept in shelters and emergency centers, women represented 14% of the total number of users. In accommodation centers and community homes offering intensive social case management, women represented 20% of the total number of residents. In inclusion flats and other shared housing with professional support, the figure was 23%. And, among the people who lived in sub-tenancy rooms or hostels thanks to the financial support of an organization or social service, the figure rose to 30% (Sales et al. 2015).

According to the homelessness definition set out in the ETHOS typology, XAPSLL data accurately records the people who are close to a street situation, but present some important gaps when scoping the housing exclusion forms which traditionally have not been considered by homeless people support policies. In that sense, there's a lack of data from the categories "Living in temporary accommodation for migrants or asylum seekers"; "Living in housing institutions or penal institutions, prospect of being dismissed in a deadline without shelter housing available"; "Living under threat of eviction"; "Living under threat of family or partner's violence"; "Living in inappropriate housing according to legislation"; "Living in overcrowded housing".

When the homelessness phenomenon is restricted to the people who sleep on the street or in accommodation centers, the problem of homeless women becomes invisible (Pleace, 2016). Social services and organizations see homelessness as a problem of an accumulation of social challenges, identified only by rough sleepers and use of emergency shelters. In this way, many European countries consider a homeless person as an individual who sleeps rough or in a support center, making invisible thus housing exclusion that is not seen on the street. National statistic and legal agencies in social services in Spain, Italy, Portugal, Greece, and the latest countries incorporated in the European Union, still utilize a limited definition of homelessness. Meanwhile only Denmark, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and Luxembourg have adopted ETHOS categories to systematize data about homelessness on a national level (European Commission, 2013).

Table 1. Number of homeless people in the city of Barcelona. ETHOS typology, categories and available information (March 2015).

	Operational category	People	Men (%)	Women (%)	Younger than 18 -boys and girls- (%)
Roofless	1. Living rough or in a public space ¹	693	89.03	10.97	0.00
	2. Sleeping in a night shelter and/or forced to spend the day in a public space	252	85.71	14.29	0.00
Houseless	3. Living in shelters or in accommodation for the homeless. Temporary accommodation	511	68.69	19.96	11.35
	4. Living in women's shelter	4	0.00	50.00	50.00
	5. Living in temporary accommodation for migrants or asylum seekers	nd			
	6. Living in housing or penal institutions, without shelter housing available upon release	nd			
	7. Living in supported accommodation for homeless people	481	58.63	23.28	18.09
Insecure housing	8. Living in insecure tenancy housing. Without paying rent	424	52.59	30.90	16.51
	9. Living under threat of eviction	nd			
	10. Living under threat of partner or family violence	nd			
Inadequate housing	11. Living in temporary or non-conventional structures ²	434	54.61	23.73	21.66
	12. Living in unfit housing according to legislation	nd			
	13. Living in overcrowded housing	nd			
Total		2,799	68.81	20.08	11.11

1. Proportion of men, women and minors, according to contact made by the Social Insertion Service from Barcelona City Council during March 2015

2. Proportion of men, women and minors contacted in settlements by the Social Insertion Service from Barcelona City Council during 2014.

Source: Sales et. al. 2015

In the European countries that systematize homelessness data, the number of women in the categories 3 and 4 (insecure housing and inadequate housing) becomes more visible, even though some variations can be found in the definitions where not all homeless women are represented. Female homelessness is not always classified in categories such as health or services devoted to female victims of sexist violence. In fact, a woman forced to abandon her home due to domestic violence is classified as a woman at risk of violence and not as a homeless woman and, accordingly, in many European countries women who are living in shelter homes for abused women are not defined as homeless, despite having lost their space of security and wellbeing that a home provides and despite the great challenges they face to build a home again due to labor market and housing obstacles (Pleace, 2016).

3. Women in services support for homeless people

Female homelessness is a different phenomenon to male homelessness, and an adequate analysis of it is undermined by the difficulties in obtaining data of housing exclusion experienced away from public spaces and social services intervention. Adopting a broad definition of homelessness such as that suggested by FEANTSA through the ETHOS categories means that policies must be designed to tackle the reality of people who live in overcrowded or unfit housing, under threat of eviction or about to leave a care home or prison without available housing options. Understanding homelessness as a complex housing inclusion process demands a preventive approach, often forgotten by homeless support services and, consequently, putting special emphasis on homeless women.

Attention policies to homeless people have been focused on male homelessness forms, shaping a services array and intervention methodologies more adapted to male trajectories than women's. Women and men's behavior when they experience housing exclusion forms and their engagement with emergency accommodation centers are conditioned by an androcentric design of facilities and by the fact that women are the minority (Pleace et. al. 2016). The fear and lack of intimacy caused by the lack of a home persists, very intensively, among women who need to use

these types of resources (Sales et. al. 2015), meaning the situation of women in a homeless situation becomes more chronic.

Not only are roofless women forced to live in an uncomfortable masculine environment, they also face double stigmatization. The stigma coming from their situation of poverty on the street is complemented by that of a supposed abandonment of their role as a domestic carer. The loss of family ties that lead to family breakdown is seen as a personal failure by roofless women and their environment (Van den Dries et. al. 2016). That breakdown continues and worsens when the accommodation centers make more difficult or impede the reconstruction of these bonds. The lack of intimacy spaces in public and private housing resources delay the rebuilding of family relationships. When the person attended doesn't consider the center his/her home, it will hardly become an intimacy space.

Research conducted in Sweden also points out that women avoid night shelters and emergency housing resources for roofless people due to the social stigmatization that associates street life with prostitution (Pleace et. al. 2015). According to surveys of women who have suffered a roofless situation in Barcelona, a strong relation between prostitution and women living a roofless situation is also seen (Sales et al. 2015).

Strategies for fighting against homelessness launched in pioneer countries explore the barriers excluding women from the services and housing resources for roofless people. The invisibility of homeless women in public spaces and in specialized centers can't justify the tragic reality of female housing exclusion not being included in policy design.

4. Different trajectories, different needs: female homelessness and violence

Sexist violence and female homelessness are strongly linked, especially when we look at street situations (Baptista, 2010). According to research in that area, the proportion of women who lived on the street and had suffered violence from their partners is very high. Recent research conducted in Ireland in 2015 (Mayock et. al. 2015) reveals that 92% of the women interviewed – all of them attended in resources devoted to roofless people– had suffered some kind of physical violence or sexual abuse in their adult life, whereas 72% had suffered some form of violence or abuse in their childhood.

In Sweden, data indicates that escaping from a partner's physical attacks is the primary cause of women rooflessness (Sahlin, 2004). According to research carried out in Barcelona, the need to break away from familiar spaces and social networks to escape from a situation of sexist violence undermine women's capacity to find informal alternatives to prevent a temporary situation of housing exclusion (Sales et. al. 2015).

There's no doubt that these experiences have a serious impact on women's mental health, weakening their capacity to trust in other people, enjoy an autonomous life and engage in healthy relationships. The problem worsens if we factor in cases of alcohol or substance abuse or some kind of sexual work to get through financially (Pleace et. al. 2016). All of this shows that the situation of homeless women is due to multiple and complex factors that shouldn't be ignored when designing adequate methodologies of social intervention.

In the United Kingdom, a woman at risk of gender violence is legally considered a homeless person (Quilgars and Pleace, 2010). That acknowledgement is the key for priority access to social housing, but latest studies point out that migrant women married to United Kingdom citizens are still very vulnerable to homeless situations caused by sexist violence due to the risk of losing their residence permit and being sent back to their country of origin (Mayock et al, 2012).

Once on the street, violence and sexual harassment are still problems that affect women to a greater extent than men. If we look at the homeless people survey from the National Statistics Institute in 2012, 24,2% of women who live on the street have suffered some type of sexual

aggression, versus 1,5% of men. Research conducted by the NGO *Crisis* in the UK reveals that 58% of women who live on the street have been violently intimidated or threatened over the last 12 months⁶. On the other hand, in the city of Barcelona, the diagnosis report on the homelessness situation in 2015 made by XAPSLL (Sales et. al. 2015) highlights that sexual harassment –both physical and verbal– suffered by roofless women is very high.

Fear and insecurity seem, thus, to be determining factors when seeking alternatives to sleeping rough and, even, accepting institutional support rejected while the social support networks had been effective (Escudero, 2003; Pleace et. al. 2016). Women who have lived in a street situation report situations of harassment, with differing degrees of frequency and intensity. Women who sleep on the street often use group strategies to increase their feeling of safety, both joining other women and becoming part of a group of men. Women residents in accommodation centers also frequently report being victims of sexual harassment and they feel almost constantly at risk (Sales et. al. 2015).

5. Conclusions

When homelessness is acknowledged through the broad perspective of ETHOS categories of housing exclusion forms, we notice that a great part of homeless women are neither considered nor counted by the statistics or registers of public administrations and organizations. Official data of homeless people fails to include victims of sexist violence, who are forced to abandon their homes and break away from their social support networks; or the women with children who receive support after losing their housing, but who don't resort to shelters designed with only men in mind.

Trajectories leading to homelessness are very diverse and there's empirical evidence that each gender experiences homelessness in a very particular way. Men and women suffer the risk factors and experience crisis and poverty in different ways. Relationship breakdowns, episodes of abuse by their partner or sexist violence leave women, with or without family-care responsibilities, in a situation of risk of housing loss. They are able to mobilize resources to deal with the risk of social exclusion or housing loss, living in sub-tenancy rooms, occupied, overcrowded or substandard flats. Tackling the homelessness that remains hidden to official statistics requires early detection through social services, the education or health system and preventive policies aimed at avoiding housing loss.

A gender-based analysis of housing exclusion allows us to widen the comprehension of the homelessness phenomenon, putting an end to the lack of connection between housing policies addressed to the whole population and accommodation policies for roofless people; it helps bring into the open the hidden suffering of poverty inside homes and makes us focus on the right to housing instead of working on service planning policies. But we must also reconsider strategies to attend the people who are sleeping or who have slept on the street. The resources to attend roofless people are designed to attend a broadly male population. Women on the other hand are a minority, a reason why they can feel frustrated, vulnerable, scared and rejected. It is, thus, hugely important that measures addressed to those who have lost their home are person-centered and not service-centered, providing an attention from a gender-perspective, more qualitative, respectful and dignified.

Tailoring policies towards housing provision as the first step of the process of connecting with social services is proven to be a more effective strategy than interventions that start in shelters and communal facilities. Housing First programs or small housing units with an emphasis on self-management are clearly advantageous and foster homeless women to repair their social ties.

⁶ "Homeless women are even more vulnerable than homeless men", published at The Guardian on February the 14th 2017. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2017/feb/14/homelessness-women-disadvantaged-channel-4-councils>

Redefining homelessness as a result of the lack of housing access and acknowledging the relationship between the different situations defined by the ETHOS categories must help to change the limited thinking when services and social support policies are organized. If social services are to be person-centered, individual attention cannot be based on labels chosen by staff to qualify the situation. Empirical research encourages us to stop attending “homeless women”; “women victims of sexist violence” or “women in situation of energy poverty” in order to tackle housing exclusion as the key element for reconstructing the lives of the people affected by multiple social problems.

Bibliography

Baptista, I. (1990). *Women and homelessness. Reflections on Homelessness Research in Europe*, 2010.

Belzunegui, A. (2012). *Socialización de la pobreza en España*. Barcelona: Icaria.

Belzunegui, Á & Valls, F. (2014). *La pobreza en España desde una perspectiva de género*, Madrid: Foessa.

Bourdieu, P. (2008). *La dominación masculina*. Barcelona: Anagrama. 2000.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION. (2013) *Confronting Homelessness in the European Union*. (Available at <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=9770>)

Quilgars, D., & Pleace, N. (2010). *Meeting the needs of households at risk of domestic violence in England: The role of accommodation and housing-related support services. Communities and Local Government*.

Passaro, J. (2014). *The unequal homeless: Men on the streets, women in their place*. Routledge.

Pleace, N. et. al. (2015). *The Finnish Homelessness Strategy – An International Review*. Helsinki: Ympäristöministeriö

Pleace, N. (2016). *Exclusion by Definition: The Under-representation of Women in European Homelessness Statistics*. At *Women’s Homelessness in Europe* (pages. 105-126). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Pleace, N., Bretherton, J., & Mayock, P. (2016). *Long-term and Recurrent Homelessness Among Women*. In *Women’s Homelessness in Europe* (pp. 209-233). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Mayock, P., Sheridan, S., Parker, S., (2012). *Migrant women and homelessness: the role of gender-based violence*. *The Role of Gender-based Violence. European Journal of Homelessness Journal*, 6(1).

Mayock, P., Sheridan, S., Parker, S., (2015). *Women, homelessness and service provision*. Dublin: Simon Communities.

Sahlin, I. (2004). Central state and homelessness policies in Sweden: New ways of governing. *European Journal of Housing Policy*, 4(3), 345-367.

Sales, A., Uribe, J. & Marco, I. (2015). *Diagnosi 2015. La situació del sensellarisme a Barcelona. Evolució i polítiques d'intervenció*. Barcelona: Xarxa d'Atenció a les Persones Sense Llar de Barcelona.

Sarasa, S., & Sales, A. (2009). *Itineraris i factors d'exclusió social*. Barcelona: Barcelona City Council. Barcelona Ombudswoman. 2015.

Van den Dries, L., Mayock, P., Gerull, S., van Loenen, T., van Hulst, B., & Wolf, J. (2016). *Mothers Who Experience Homelessness*. In *Women's Homelessness in Europe* (pp. 179-208). Palgrave Macmillan UK.