
Women and Homelessness

Isabel Baptista

Centro de Estudos para a Intervenção Social (CESIS), Lisboa, Portugal

› **Abstract_** *There has been a relative paucity of European research on women's homelessness since the European Observatory on Homelessness promoted the first overall study on the subject in 2001. This chapter provides a critical review of the research undertaken since then, focusing on the continuities and consistencies found regarding the previous findings and exploring the developments brought about by the new research produced. Given the almost total absence of comparative European research on women's homelessness, the literature review is based on available national studies on the theme. Beginning with the potential impact of recent developments in defining and measuring homelessness in Europe on the (in)visibility of female homelessness, the chapter examines the complexity of the hidden nature of women's homelessness, the material and immaterial challenges and constraints faced by homeless families and the response strategies they adopt, the experiences of homeless women as service users and their interactions with the welfare system and its actors, as well as the importance of developing sound theoretical frameworks for understanding women's homelessness. Finally it identifies the major gaps that persist in the research into this area and explores some key questions for the development of the research and policy agenda.*

› **Keywords_** *Women; homelessness; research review; Europe*

Introduction

The first overall picture of women's homelessness in Europe – its nature, trends and causes – was published in 2001. *Women and Homelessness in Europe – Pathways, Services and Experiences*, edited by Bill Edgar and Joe Doherty, brought together the results of the research carried out by FEANTSA's European Observatory on Homelessness on the specific topic of women and homelessness. This work presented and discussed contextually relevant dimensions and trends for the understanding of women's homelessness in Europe. It also contained several country-oriented chapters on three broad topics: the scale and composition of women's homelessness; the level and appropriateness of service provision for homeless women; and women's experiences of homelessness and of homeless services.

Following Edgar and Doherty's dedicated volume on women and homelessness in Europe, the Observatory re-addressed this subject, albeit briefly, in three reports on homelessness research in the EU (Doherty *et al.*, 2002; Doherty, 2003; Doherty *et al.*, 2004). These publications focused on existing available research across countries on a number of themes, including specific vulnerable groups, one of which was women, and the impact of policies and service provision targeting homeless women.

This chapter critically reviews research undertaken across Europe on women and homelessness since 2001.¹ By that time, a considerable gap in gender-specific research on the subject of homelessness had been widely recognised (Novac *et al.*, 1996; Jones, 1999; Edgar and Doherty, 2001) and increasing, although disparate, evidence of a rising number of homeless women had been reported in several EU countries (Cabrera, 2001; Jones, 1999; Mina-Coull and Tartinville, 2001; Pels, 2001). However, one of the most striking features of research on women's homelessness in Europe is the relative paucity of it.

In spite of the multiplicity of national contexts and realities among EU member states, Edgar and Doherty identified 'an intriguing consistency':

First, all the national reports indicate that the typical form of homelessness among women is 'hidden' homelessness. Second, while the evidence drawn from each country demonstrates that rooflessness remains a predominantly male problem, up to a fifth of the street homeless and around a third of all homeless people are women. Third, data from homeless service provider records indicate that over recent years, in most countries, women represent an increasing proportion of users. Fourth, and perhaps most significantly, there is

¹ Literature published in English, French and Portuguese has been included. significant international work has also been reviewed where little European research was found.



an observable change in the composition of the female homelessness population reflected in increases in younger women and in women from ethnic minority groups or immigrant backgrounds. (2001, p.231)

The 2001 report directly addressed and explored the nature of women's vulnerability to homelessness and the factors underlying their exposure to the risk of homelessness. The authors noted that the socio-demographic and economic transformations taking place across Europe seemed to be producing opposite outcomes for women: either encouraging female emancipation and autonomy (e.g. the changing role of the family and the increased entry of women into the labour market) or increasing their exposure to the risk of homelessness (e.g. the growing number of female-headed households, the feminisation of poverty, the increased participation in part-time/low-wage jobs and the reduced availability of affordable housing).

This chapter will explore the extent to which the 'intriguing consistencies' identified in 2001 remain relevant in the light of more recent research evidence. Given the lack of comparative research at the European level on these specific topics, the chapter will focus on national evidence produced since 2001. It considers the potential impact of developments in defining and measuring homelessness in the EU on the visibility of homelessness among women in Europe. It then discusses the importance of developing a structural understanding of women's homelessness and the apparent move to 'lighter' forms of addressing those structural dimensions in the post-2001 research literature.

The issue of the hidden nature of homelessness among women is the focus of sections on gender and the relative risk of homelessness and on gender performances. The first presents some research showing how women's risk of ending up in more extreme forms of homelessness can be lessened by the way welfare systems work and interact with homeless women. The second draws on studies in which the issue of women's hidden homelessness is explained by unveiling specific survival responses (or performances) that are modelled by dominant social gender perceptions.

The chapter moves on to consider recent inputs from the theoretical debate and to discuss the importance of developing consistent theoretical frameworks in order to increase our understanding of homelessness, encompassing both the diversity of women's experiences of homelessness and the underlying social structures. The section on parenting and homelessness presents recent research developments on the issue of homeless families. The studies reviewed address the challenging living conditions of these families, the strategies they adopt to preserve their parental identity and the impact of specific assistance programmes and social work practices. The new research outcomes presented in the section on service provision directly address Edgar and Doherty's questions about whether services for

homeless people across Europe have managed to improve their effectiveness and appropriateness regarding the needs of homeless women and whether we are moving towards more gender-sensitive programmes and services. Finally, the chapter identifies the major gaps still persisting in our knowledge of women's homelessness and indicates possible 'new roads' for the future research and policy agenda in this specific field.

Definitions and Measurement of Women's Homelessness

According to some authors (e.g. Watson, 2000), the analysis of women's homelessness demands an unveiling of the interconnections between three 'inseparable layers': visibility/invisibility, estimated significance of the problem and its definition. If homelessness is defined as rough sleeping, or as single homelessness, then women's homelessness becomes invisible. Therefore it is not counted and is underestimated. In many European countries the adoption – officially or not – of a restricted definition of homelessness (Bruto da Costa and Baptista, 2001) has contributed to this situation. The latest European review of statistics on homelessness (Edgar, 2009) reveals that the categories of homelessness in which there is total consensus are rough sleeping and living in emergency homeless hostels, which suggests that women's experiences of homelessness may continue to be overlooked.

Although outside the scope of the present chapter, it is important to acknowledge recent developments on the definition and measurement of homelessness in the EU (see Chapter 1). In fact, the development of ETHOS – European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (Edgar *et al.*, 2004) – may contribute to a more comprehensive awareness of specific homelessness and housing exclusion situations that have been reported as particularly affecting homeless women or women exposed to the risk of homelessness (e.g. women living in refuges, temporarily living with family/friends and/or living under the threat of violence). The fact that many countries across Europe are referring to ETHOS in their efforts to develop a national definition of homelessness (Busch-Geertsema, 2010) may represent important progress in improving the visibility of some gendered forms of homelessness. A recent report on homelessness in Dublin (Homeless Agency, 2008) directly refers to ETHOS, both by reporting on the homelessness categories 'counted in' (rooflessness and houselessness) and by announcing the launch of future research on the housing exclusion categories 'left out' (insecure and inadequate housing). If in the former situations women's experiences of domestic violence gain an increased visibility, in the latter the possibility of actually estimating the significance of those situations where women are temporarily staying with family and friends continues to be postponed.

Whatever definition of homelessness is adopted at the national level, it is important to recall that the prevalence of hidden forms of homelessness among homeless women in most European countries was already one of the strong messages in Edgar and Doherty's 2001 book. Women may be hidden because they try to avoid the increased risks of being on the streets or in specific shelters; because they have managed to secure alternative housing solutions (doubling up, sharing with family or friends); or because they, and their children, are seen as the 'fragile' family elements and therefore are concealed by welfare systems reactive to this condition. As a result, such women are statistically invisible in most existing data systems on homelessness throughout Europe.

From Structural Explanations towards Structural Contextualisation

Homeless women have to date received relatively little attention, probably because they are far less likely than men to be in this position. But this of course begs the question of why this should be. Most homeless people are recruited from the poorest sections of the population; yet these are the categories in which women are the most numerous. So why do women form only a small minority among the homeless, and why are they less likely than men to end up in the street after losing their home? (Marpsat, 2008, p.147)

The relationship between the feminisation of poverty and homelessness among women was one of the key messages in Edgar and Doherty's 2001 report. Evidence collected across all member states (Cabrera, 2001; Enders-Dragässer, 2001; de Feijter, 2001) identified poverty as one of the structural factors undermining the capacity of women to establish and maintain independent homes, thus directly contributing to an increased vulnerability to homelessness.

Reeve *et al.* (2007), in their 'journey' through homeless women's 'landscapes and careers' in England, recognise the importance of women's encounters with structural forces such as poverty, the housing market and the labour market, which exert a strong impact on the landscapes where women live, 'exercise choice and make decisions' (p.3).

A study on family homelessness in England – drawing on evidence collected on families and 16 and 17 year olds accepted as statutory homeless – points out that the immediate causes of statutory homelessness (e.g. disintegration of social relationships, housing pressures) 'lend some support to arguments for a 'structural' understanding of family homelessness, insofar as eviction or being threatened with eviction was more commonly reported as a reason for applying as homeless in the areas of highest housing stress' (Pleace *et al.*, 2008, p.29).

Watson (2000) draws attention to some major 'shifts in the gendered nature' of homelessness: the changing social climate brought about by the increasing expectations of equality among women and their search for financial and personal independence; the decline of the nuclear family and the increase in single-person households; increasing longevity with particular impact on the rising numbers of older women living into their eighties and nineties; changing migration patterns; and shifts in welfare responsibilities and access to housing markets.

According to several authors (Edgar and Doherty, 2001; Watson, 2000; Shinn, 2007), such socio-economic and demographic transformations brought increased risks of vulnerability, which are particularly challenging to women and female-headed households. Despite women's rising educational levels and their progressive entry into the labour market, female employment patterns across Europe are characterised by persistent high levels of gender segregation, low pay and unemployment. According to recent EU figures, the increased convergence of male and female employment rates since 2000 has been accompanied by relative inertia in terms of the gender pay gap and of the occupational and sectoral gender segregation across the twenty-seven member states. Between 2005 and 2008 there was a steady, and even slightly increasing, trend registered in those figures.²

Moreover, the reduced commitment to welfare in many EU countries and the particular configurations and operation of welfare policies at the national and local levels have placed particular challenges on women's (and female-headed households') resources and their ability to manage the risks of homelessness. As Edgar and Doherty observed in 2001:

The capacity of women to form and maintain an autonomous household has been shown to be dependent on their economic status, their family status and also on the extent to which social protection systems support their housing needs. Within the context where housing market changes are re-establishing a closer link between a household's economic circumstances and their housing situation, the economic status of female-headed households has become a critical factor in their vulnerability to homelessness. (p.43)

Shinn (2007), drawing on a comparative international analysis of papers on homelessness, discusses the association between rates and composition of homelessness, inequality levels, social policies and underlying social and cultural beliefs. Social policies, she argues, can shape the composition of the homeless population in each country. She compares the vulnerable situation of women and children in Europe with their counterparts in the United States and concludes that although their situation 'in Europe may be more fragile than that of men, this fact is counter-

² Data available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=477&langId=en>.

balanced by more amenities', which are less available in the US. This finding is linked to the fact that the US devotes a significant minor share of social spending to families, compared with the situation in western Europe.

Few would argue against the need to contextualise explanations of women's homelessness within a sound understanding of the complex interactions between different levels of structural, relationship and personal factors. However, the absence of comparative European research on women's homelessness since Edgar and Doherty's 2001 study makes it hard to pinpoint any significant progress in the identification of relevant structural trends that might help promote the wider understanding of women's situations and trajectories in comparative perspective. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that much of the post-2001 literature reviewed (focusing on national realities) explicitly refers to most of the above-mentioned societal changes as important contextual elements for the interpretation of women's homelessness experiences (Reeve *et al.*, 2007; Löffstrand, 2005; Join-Lambert, 2009; Enders-Drägässer, 2010).

Gender and the Relative Risk of Different Types of Homelessness

The recognition that hidden forms of homelessness are prevalent among homeless women led to an increasing number of studies unveiling the hidden nature of women's homelessness (Jones, 1999; Watson, 2000; Reeve *et al.*, 2006; Reeve *et al.*, 2007; Enders-Drägässer, 2010) and highlighting women's experiences in the 'home-to-homelessness continuum' (Watson and Austerberry, 1986).

Recent research on women's homelessness provides an interesting portrait of homeless women's encounters with different risks and 'constructions' of homelessness, and with service provision practices and welfare systems' operating modes. 'Given that gender is constructed in a host of ways in this society, combating women's homelessness requires flexibility and innovative approaches. It also requires change on a diversity of shifting terrains, from the provision of housing to the construction of meanings and dominant images.' (Watson, 2000, p.169)

Marpasat (2008) questions the apparent relative 'advantage' of women regarding the risk of homelessness – understood as rough sleeping or houselessness – and argues that there is a balance between the advantages (e.g. higher degrees of welfare protection and informal support) and the difficulties (e.g. greater exposure to enduring unbearable home situations such as domestic violence, higher risk of severe financial hardship when without a job) faced by homeless women. Women and men in Western countries, she argues, are distributed differently along a continuum of different types of situation (e.g. housing market, labour market), 'which they invest with different meanings' (p.173).

Brousse (2009), drawing on the results of the large national INSEE 2001 survey on the homeless population in France, argues that homeless women are better accommodated than men, which can be partly explained by the presence of accompanying children:

Homeless women accompanied by children, or one in two, are directed towards accommodation modes more compatible with family life: three quarters are housed in bed-sits or flats and a quarter in shelters where they can stay during the day if they wish. However, even childless women enjoy much better accommodation conditions than men: twice as many are accommodated in housing and three times as many in night-only shelters. (p.35)

In the UK context, Fitzpatrick (2005, p.8) argues that 'women are more likely than men to approach local authorities and housing associations when they find themselves homeless, and to be treated more sympathetically by these agencies than their male counterparts'. However, some studies have shown (Reeve *et al.*, 2007) that accessing service-led accommodation does not mean that women engage in a sustained trajectory out of homelessness, as they often circulate between this type of accommodation and different hidden situations.

More important than the discussion of who – among the homeless population – is more or less visible is the ability to develop a critical understanding of the reasons why gender and some gendered factors affect either homeless men or women in different ways. As discussed below, the contribution of the critical realist theoretical approach presented by Fitzpatrick (2005) may provide useful explanations without undermining the pertinence of established theories or assumptions about homelessness, namely that 'male oppression of women could still be one of a number of social structures with a "tendency" to cause homelessness, even if men predominated in the homeless population' (p.9).

But hidden homelessness among women may also result from complex interactions between power structures (e.g. patriarchal relationships and assumptions) and individual agency through the adoption of women's specific survival responses to 'visible' homelessness. Fichtner's (2010) study on male homelessness in Germany shows how men also construct gender through patterns of interpretation that connect social structure to individual behaviour. Based on interviews with homeless men conducted in different cities in Germany, the author concludes that 'images of men' – understood as patterns of interpretation of masculinity – and 'other patterns of action and interpretation... co-determine the activities in and barriers to overcoming the situation of homelessness or urgent housing need of the men concerned' (p.11).

From Gender Invisibility to Gender Performances

Women's position in society and the dominant societal perceptions of gender seem to play a role in either increasing or buffering the risk of homelessness among women and in shaping its hidden dimensions. Two studies (Huey and Berndt, 2008; May *et al.*, 2007) have explored the survival strategies that women employ to cope with the particularly insecure and dangerous conditions of street homelessness.

In their research on the relationship between space and victimisation among homeless women living on the streets in five different cities – Edinburgh, San Francisco, Vancouver, Montreal and Ottawa – Huey and Berndt (2008) explore the strategic gendered dimensions involved in the different ways women perceive and use the public space in order to protect themselves. The authors examined ethnographic material collected in three of the cities and conducted a set of interviews with both women and service providers, directly focusing on gendered survival strategies employed by women living on the streets. They identify four main types of gendered performance: the femininity simulacrum, the masculinity simulacrum, genderlessness and passing. By interpreting dominant social gender constructs, homeless women reinvent performative strategies of self-protection, which they envisage as the most adequate to the objective and symbolic characteristics of the space they inhabit.

The final performance strategy identified, 'passing', is one whereby a woman who self-identifies as heterosexual retains elements of their gendered identity but attempt to pass themselves off as lesbians when approached by men... The strategy of passing may be performed in combination with either the masculine simulacrum (presenting as 'butch') or with genderlessness (attempting to present as ambiguous). (p.190)

May *et al.* (2007) question the consequences of the growing attention given to hidden forms of female homelessness as regards the danger of ignoring – once again but for different reasons – the experiences of street homeless women and their needs. The authors discuss the dominant perception of street homelessness as a male preserve and explore the reasons behind the invisibility of women's homelessness. The disruptive and threatening way in which the female body irrupts in the established public/private boundaries, the awareness of strongly male-dominated spaces, the activation of strategies to avoid the specific difficulties and dangers arising from rough sleeping are some of the issues discussed by the authors. Drawing on Wardaugh's (1999) and Watson's (1999) conceptual frameworks on the use of the body as a gendered tool to address the street space and to build alternative gendered homeless identities, May *et al.* identify four different groups of women, which they conceptualise as composing alternative 'cartographies' of homelessness:

... we attempt to make better sense of these women's experiences by distinguishing between four main groups: those who distanced themselves from recognised spaces of homelessness and from a 'homeless' identity; those existing... in the shadows of a street homelessness scene; those whose presence on the streets marked them as obviously and visibly 'homeless'; and those who, though sharing the spaces of the homeless city with other visibly homeless people, were understood by neither the housed public nor homeless service providers as 'homeless' at all but marked with a quite different identity. (p.11)

The way the authors anchor their analysis of street homeless women's identities to the spaces and places they live in is an interesting and innovative contribution to the discussion around the visibility/invisibility of homelessness among women. They also draw policy-relevant lessons from this type of approach, namely by stressing the importance of recognising that 'the most effective response is likely to be one that works with rather than denies the very different identities articulated by different homeless women' (p.25).

From Individual Agency to Policy Implications: Inputs from the Theoretical Debate

New approaches regarding the phenomenon of hidden homelessness may be read in terms of the debate around the potential of alternative theoretical perspectives for understanding homelessness (Neale, 1997; Fitzpatrick, 2005). Doherty (2001) briefly explored the disputes between essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives when conceptualising homelessness among women and the dangers of a fundamentalist approach:

While it is important that we are sensitive to context and recognise heterogeneity among women, it is also important, as Neale (1997) reminds us, that we do not lose sight of women's 'shared gender experiences'. An anti-essentialist viewpoint in neglecting the commonality of women's position and experiences in male-dominated societies is in danger of descending into a 'formless relativism' where research becomes immersed in specifics, producing empathetic accounts, but losing sight of the wider agenda and, indeed, of dispensing entirely with the idea of improvement and progress in the condition of women. (p.18)

Recognising the lack of 'rigorous and comprehensive theoretical analysis of homelessness', Neale (1997) draws upon a range of theoretical approaches (e.g. feminism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, critical theory) and explores their specific interpretative potential in informing our understanding of homelessness and particularly the beneficial changes they may bring to the development of policies and practices in this field.

Sharing Neale's concern on the need to develop more rigorous frameworks for developing our understanding of homelessness, Fitzpatrick (2005) engages in a critical analysis of prevailing explanations of homelessness and existing theoretical frameworks. The specific aim is to 'illustrate how a (complex) critical realist approach could enable account to be taken of the full range of potential causal factors in homelessness – and their necessary and contingent inter-relationships – while avoiding making any one level “logically prior” to all others' (p.15).

Although neither Neale's nor Fitzpatrick's analysis was directly focused on the issue of women's homelessness, they provide an interesting conceptual framework for the analysis of the research presented above on the invisibility of women's homelessness. Looking, for instance, at the methodological implications of a critical realist approach to research on homelessness, the studies conducted by May *et al.* (2007) and by Huey and Berndt (2008) seek to uncover hidden aspects of the social reality of homeless women, identifying relevant theoretical frameworks of analysis, but also clearly 'proposing a focus on “what works, for whom, in what circumstances”' (Fitzpatrick, 2005, p.11).

For women like Julie and Sharon, for example, the need was for a space set apart from the main sites of homelessness and from an obvious 'homeless' identity in which they could work on rebuilding a sense of themselves and plan for their future. But the kind of environment provided by Gateway would hardly be appropriate for Theresa or Jules – whose sense of identity and self esteem were intimately bound up with their position in Bristol's street homeless scene. (May *et al.*, 2007, p.25)

That hidden homelessness was a typical manifestation of homelessness for women had clearly been established by Edgar and Doherty (2001), drawing on both national evidence collected through the national reports produced for the European Observatory on Homelessness and on existing European and other international literature. Progress made since then shows us that hidden homelessness indeed remains a typical manifestation of female homelessness (Löfstrand, 2005; Reeve *et al.*, 2006; Marpsat, 2008; Join-Lambert, 2009), but a new understanding of the diversity and complexity of these hidden forms has become possible by exploring relevant cultural and social dimensions adequately framed by more comprehensive theoretical approaches to homelessness, paving the way for more rigorous and realistic evaluations of intervention practices and policies.

Parenting and Homelessness: Challenging Responsibilities, Challenged Identities

Although not directly addressing the issue of parenting and homelessness as a specific topic, Edgar (2001) pointed out the importance of recognising the heterogeneity of homelessness among women, which may have led to acknowledging different perspectives or interpretations (particularly at a time when there was growing awareness of the increase of new homelessness situations) such as the rise in the number of young homeless women and immigrant women. 'It may point to the need for greater awareness of the impact of structural changes on women – for example, the increase in single-person households and the *changing role or capacity of the family resulting in changing living circumstances*' (p.45, my emphasis).

More recent research (Löfstrand, 2005; Thierry, 2008) has focused precisely on the experiences of families with children, from the perspective of the challenges parents face and how these affect their identity as mothers or fathers. Thierry (2008) discusses the situation of women living with their children in homeless hostels (CHRS)³ in France, focusing on the consequences of their housing and living conditions in an environment where social relationships with the workers are marked by their condition as 'vulnerable and assisted mothers'. Women were interviewed in a number of the CHRS. Extreme poverty, domestic violence, family breakdown and lack of social support were some of the factors identified in the pre-institutionalisation stage of these women's trajectories. Although the women interviewed expressed different perceptions of their entrance into the hostel, related either to their experiences (e.g. violence) or to the length of their stay, Thierry notes several threats to their parenting role and identity. Living in a space with rules they cannot control, with forbidden or limited social interactions and where they are confronted by other educational patterns and practices contributes to the building up of a self-perceived low-value social image and social status with worrying consequences on their parental identity.

Certaines mères s'inquiètent de la répercussion de ce statut dévalorisé sur l'image parentale donnée à leurs enfants. Elles craignent en particulier un manque de respect de la part de ces derniers, qui mettrait à mal leur autorité si la situation venait à perdurer. (Thierry, 2008, p.9)

Faced with these constraints, women develop different strategies to protect and preserve their parental identity. These include creating 'protection spaces' within the collective institutional space, which may be translated into the physical protection of private spaces within the hostel, or intentionally selecting the 'legitimate' educational supports.

³ Centres d'hébergement et de réinsertion sociale.

Exploring the different ways that mothers (and fathers) experience these transition periods in hostels, their self-image, the anchoring elements of their parental identity, and the strategies they develop to preserve their parental role and identity may represent an important contribution to a more adequate response to homeless parents' needs during such complex life-changing events.

Pleace *et al.* (2008), in their study of family homelessness in England, report positive impacts on families accepted as homeless regarding the assistance they receive under the homelessness legislation, which resulted in 'a substantial overall net improvement' in their quality of life:

The findings of this study could be viewed as largely a 'good news' story with regards to families accepted as homeless. These families appeared in the main not to be extremely vulnerable, but rather were generally low income households who found themselves unable to secure alternative housing when they were confronted with a crisis such as relationship breakdown or eviction which caused them to lose their settled accommodation. The provision of statutory homelessness assistance seemed to have secured a substantial overall net improvement in the quality of life for both adults and children in these families. (p.36)

Taking a different approach, Löfstrand's (2005) paper entitled 'Making Men into Fathers – or Fathers into Men? Gendered Homelessness Policies in Sweden' presents an interesting reflection on the interconnecting images of homelessness, gender and parenthood and how they have influenced social work practices in Sweden. The author discusses the transition of the discourse of the 'negligent father' into the 'equal father' and then into the 'abusive man' in Sweden and argues that there are two incompatible discourses on men: the equal father and the violent man. The vulnerable condition of homeless fathers makes them particularly 'adjustable' to the latter category as they interact with the different actors within the Swedish social public system. Here, too, the issue of the parental role – this time the father's role – and of parental identities seems to be at stake:

Men with children registered as clients at the social welfare office are generally assumed not to be responsible and care-giving fathers. According to professional helpers, to encourage men to become caring fathers is generally difficult, and presupposes extra time and energy on behalf of the social worker... When it comes to men in general encouraging men as fathers is thought of as a good thing, while the goal seems to be totally different when it comes to homeless men. (p.5)

Within a context of a society where equality between men and women has gained a central place and where the politics of fatherhood have promoted men as (equal) fathers, Löfstrand notes that social work practices to address homelessness seem

to erase these social images and to rebuild new differences with direct consequences on parenting among homeless men (and women): 'While the Swedish politics of fatherhood has... made men into fathers, in the local homelessness work fathers are made into (single) men. The gender-neutral categories of "homeless" and "homeless addicts" cannot be combined with the category "father", which is an explicitly gendered category' (p.13).

Although it has not been possible to identify any other references in European⁴ research on the topic of parenting and homelessness, extensive research has been undertaken in the US (Barrow and Laborde, 2008; Cosgrove and Flynn, 2005; Friedman, 2000). Paquette and Bassuk (2009) note the increasing concerns about the fast-rising number of families threatened by homelessness as a result of the current financial and economic crisis.

Women's Homelessness and Service Provision

Edgar and Doherty (2001) found evidence in many countries of important changes in the composition of homelessness among women (e.g. the growing numbers of young women and immigrant women who were increasingly being reported as service users). By then, evidence had already been collected questioning the effectiveness and appropriateness of homelessness service provision regarding the needs of homeless women. Less clear was the understanding of the reasons behind these changing trends and how these women were experiencing the reality of using the services.

CRISIS promoted several pieces of research in the UK focusing precisely on the experiences and trajectories of homeless women and on their relationship with the services. A 1999 report entitled *Out of Sight, out of Mind?* (Jones, 1999) provided a descriptive account of homeless women's experiences based on in-depth interviews and focus groups. It highlighted their housing histories and reasons for being homeless. Following this report, CRISIS commissioned the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research to investigate women's experiences and trajectories; two reports were published.

In the first report, *Homeless Women: Still Being Failed yet Striving to Survive* (Reeve *et al.*, 2006), the authors explore a wide range of issues. Although the hidden nature of women's homelessness is once again highlighted, the prevalence of rough sleeping among the women interviewed arises as a very common experience in the

⁴ Research written in English, French or Portuguese.

early stages of homelessness, which, according to the authors, reflects both a lack of other options and a limited knowledge regarding available support. Negative experiences of approaching services and barriers to services were reported:

Many respondents were unaware of the outcome of their application... some [were] being 'turned away at the door' or deterred by front-line staff from making an application... The fragmentation of services emerged as a key barrier preventing respondents from receiving the assistance they required... Few services were capable of addressing the multiplicity of needs... (pp.5–6)

The second report (Reeve *et al.*, 2007) focused on exploring the trajectories of women through homelessness. The authors plotted and analysed the biographies of twenty-nine women by mapping each woman's housing and homelessness trajectories, significant experiences and engagement with services. The women's homelessness journeys disclose some interesting and important elements that may constitute key messages for the improvement of the provision of services for homeless women. These findings directly address the three main stages of service provision on which Edgar and Doherty (2001) called for further research: prevention, alleviation and resettlement.

We have seen in this report that as women move through their homelessness journey they frequently fall through the net, failing to access appropriate accommodation and failing to access the support they require. They find themselves in situations and places of danger at times when adequate intervention may have kept them safe. We have also seen that engaging with services, or accessing temporary accommodation, is rarely the end of the story. (Reeve *et al.*, 2007, p.44)

The research also identifies critical points or transitions in some of the women's homelessness trajectories that may be crucial in terms of intervention, namely transition into independence, transition into first tenancy or exit from prison. In the context of the pertinence of the critical realist theoretical framework for the understanding of homelessness (Fitzpatrick, 2007), as discussed above, the biographical analysis undertaken reveals both the strength of the structural and institutional forces that women encounter and the diverse strategies they use to cope with their difficult living conditions and to interact with others, which results in particular choices and actions and subsequently influences the way women are perceived and treated in those interactions.

Rosengren (2003), in an ethnographic study of homeless women in Sweden and their relationship with drugs, also explores the coping mechanisms adopted by women in their interactions with the service system and the multiple constraints and 'brutality' of the housing services in addressing their specific needs.

Enders-Dragässer (2010) argues that in Germany the growing acknowledgement of homeless women as a specific target group with specific needs has brought about considerable progress and innovation in the provision of support services for homeless women. Further and sustainable improvements, she concludes, will only be possible if the gender debate initiated over three decades ago evolves into an actual gender mainstreaming in all fields of social work.

Still in the arena of practitioner–client relationships, Juhila (2009) analysed social workers' records in one organisation in order to identify the existence and use of different interpretative repertoires in their daily work with homeless women. Drawing on Edley's (2001), concept that 'interpretative repertoires are "relatively coherent ways of talking about objects and events in the world" Edley's (2001, p.198)' (Juhila, 2009, p.3) and that taking up one or other type of repertoire is governed by culturally available resources, Juhila identified six different interpretative repertoires: repertoire of care, repertoire of assessment, repertoire of control, repertoire of therapy, repertoire of service provision and repertoire of fellowship. Some of the most interesting results of this study seem to address directly one of the concerns voiced by Edgar and Doherty (2001) regarding the need for improved dissemination of best practice in the area of service provision:

Care assessment, control, therapy, service provision and fellowship are all well-known professional categorizations of social welfare work. In many cases, however, they have been approached as mutually exclusive, so that fellowship, for example, is incompatible with control, or service provision with caring... This study, however, shows that in the organization studied, the set-up is not an 'either-or', but a 'both-and' one... One possible explanation for the 'both and' set-up is that the quantitatively most frequent repertoire – that of caring – is the carrying principle of daily work, and this is the one that ultimately enables the adoption of the other repertoires. (Juhila, 2009, pp.14–15)

Overall, these different pieces of research reveal that Edgar and Doherty's 2001 identification of the lack of appropriate and gender-sensitive programmes and services to meet the needs of homeless women still holds true. Recent research, involving more detailed and in-depth analyses of women's experiences and trajectories, has revealed some hidden mechanisms and some critical issues within the relationship between homeless women and their experience of services in a European context.

Bridging the Gaps and Moving towards Policy Improvements

Research has addressed some of the gaps identified in the Observatory's 2001 study on women and homelessness, but other gaps remain. Although there has been an increased focus on homeless women's trajectories and pathways through homelessness, the exploration of the reasons for the increasing proportion of specific groups – young women and immigrant women – has not been addressed. Neither has any progress been observed on determining the scale of women's homelessness in Europe.

The links between domestic violence and homelessness have been identified in the wider literature on homelessness. The research review for this chapter found only one specific study aimed at exploring the impact of prevention-centred homelessness policy responses to domestic violence (Netto *et al.*, 2009). The authors assess the effectiveness of sanctuary schemes in the UK,⁵ recognising positive outcomes but also challenging emerging shifts from state to individual responsibility.

Domestic violence is, nevertheless, an important common feature in many women's trajectories and landscapes. FEANTSA's (2007) policy statement on homelessness and domestic violence provides a European overview of some common needs of women fleeing domestic violence and the adequacy (or not) of services available to them. Thus, domestic violence – as a recurrent pattern implicated in homeless women's pathways – should be further explored. Novac (2006) summarises the 'current knowledge about the relationship between family violence and homelessness' (p.ii) in Canada, given the significant research evidence of the high prevalence of family violence in homelessness trajectories. This literature review, along with the findings in Edgar and Doherty's study (2001), highlights the importance of engaging in specific, focused research on this interconnection within the European context. In most European countries domestic violence and homelessness services are developed and funded separately, which may explain the persistence of this research gap, and specifically the invisibility of domestic violence data within homelessness statistics (Edgar, 2009).

Another potential future direction for European research on women and homelessness would be the development of studies on family homelessness more broadly, in order to explore possible emerging trends, to identify the scale of the problem and to further unveil the challenges and coping strategies undertaken in the relationship between families and the services, particularly at a time when the financial and economic crisis seems to be producing new excluded groups.

⁵ Sanctuary schemes aim to enable victims of domestic violence to remain in their own accommodation if they choose to do so, and if so to ensure their safety.

The dissemination of positive experiences in the relationship between homeless women and the services would also be welcomed. Few examples have been found, but their contribution to the improvement of practices and policies is as important as the identification of constraints and obstacles.

Comparative research on women and homelessness remains another important gap. Increased efforts should be directed towards the promotion of comparative studies that could increase our knowledge and understanding of common (and specific) trends, patterns and experiences of women's homelessness in a wider European context. The adoption (or at least the acknowledgement) of a common European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) should pave the way for comparative explorations of the realities lying behind some of the ETHOS categories and living situations for homeless women.

Conclusion

This review of the research produced on women and homelessness in Europe since 2001 has shown that many of the conclusions reached in the Observatory's 2001 research remain valid today, although they have been invested in or (re)interpreted in different ways, either restating or challenging previous perspectives on women's homelessness, or directly addressing (partially) some of the gaps identified in 2001.

The explanatory frameworks for women's homelessness and its gendered nature, based on the identification of major trends and structural forces, which had been given particular importance in the research reviewed by Edgar and Doherty (2001), have now been addressed differently. Rather than taking these dimensions further, the post-2001 research reviewed here mainly acknowledges their importance as contextually relevant frameworks for the specific approaches developed on women's homelessness. The fact that most of the recent research has adopted a qualitative perspective may be one of the reasons for this different utilisation and exploration of major structural explanations.

On the other hand, recent research on women's homelessness provides an interesting and particularly useful approach to the 'construction of homelessness', its practices, socially perceived images and discourses, and offers important insights on policies and practices. Research produced on hidden homelessness and on the gendered interactions and perceptions of homeless women on their living spaces, landscapes and trajectories has increased our understanding of the complex interactions between power structures and individual agency.

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This review has also shown how the development of more rigorous frameworks for understanding homelessness may be a powerful tool for interpreting the ways in which some of the new approaches to women's homelessness explore the relevant culturally and socially gendered dimensions of the experiences and pathways to homelessness among women.

Furthermore – and although less developed in Europe than elsewhere – the changing living circumstances faced by homeless families have been explored in a few European countries. The research produced on parenting and homelessness has shown the importance of identifying the constraints and strategies that homeless women (and men) face in the exercise of their parental roles and in the building up of their parental identities. At the same time, organisational practices and policies have been questioned in the context of the construction of social and institutional discourses on gender and homelessness.

The move to more qualitative research and the increasing focus on pathways through homelessness are apparent in the research reviewed regarding women's homelessness and service provision. Recent research has enabled a better identification of the recurring life events and circumstances implicated in pathways into homelessness and the needs and experiences of female service users has gained increasing visibility. While there is still a lack of appropriate gender-sensitive programmes and services for homeless women, as reported by Edgar and Doherty (2001), it has been possible to identify examples of original outcomes arising from the adoption of innovative methodological approaches.

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