Growing numbers of women are experiencing homelessness throughout Europe and, in Ireland, this is happening at an accelerated rate – 44 percent of individuals who are currently homeless in Ireland are women, a figure well above the European norm of 20 to 30 percent. The crisis of family homelessness in Ireland has particularly impacted women who are parenting alone, with recent figures reporting that 96 percent of homeless families are headed by a single mother. Women’s homelessness is now a major social problem across Europe but national homelessness policies have largely failed to engage with the notion that women who become homeless have distinct experiences. These are just some of the critical findings documented in Women’s Homelessness in Europe (Palgrave, 2016) which I edited with a colleague from the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York. The volume, which examines women’s homelessness using a comparative pan-European approach, is the first international collaboration between leading homelessness researchers co-operating through the Women’s Homelessness in Europe Network (WHEN) www.women-shomelessness.org. I established WHEN in 2012 with the help of funding from the Irish Research Council’s (IRC) ‘New Ideas’ Award.

The research evidence presented in Women’s Homelessness in Europe highlights several gendered dimensions of women’s homelessness. Critically, it draws strong attention to the role of domestic and other forms of gender-based violence in women’s homelessness. Intimate (male) partner violence is the reason why many women are forced to leave their homes; these women essentially find themselves choosing between domestic violence and homelessness, which means that women may delay leaving an abusive home situation.

The invisibility of women experiencing homelessness — A distinctive feature of women’s homelessness is the extent to which it remains concealed and invisible within public, academic and policy discourses. The reasons for this invisibility are complex and multi-dimensional. Firstly, women are less likely to be ‘counted’ as homeless because they frequently occupy spaces of ‘hidden’ homelessness, meaning that they live temporarily with family members, friends or acquaintances. Thus, available figures are likely to underestimate the extent of women’s homelessness. Secondly, women may rely on informal networks because they distrust homelessness services (see below). Finally, and importantly, there is a particular stigma attached to the notion of a homeless or ‘unaccommodated’ woman because it challenges traditional normative beliefs about femininity, family and motherhood.

“I ended up homeless but I wouldn’t go stay in any hostels because the stories I heard of them were terrifying ... I never had to resort to anything like that in my life and I didn’t want to kind of let people see that I was weak” (Gráinne, age 31).
Homeless women's distrust in the apparatus of the state — An important dimension of women's homelessness relates to their distrust of homelessness and other support services, a finding that emerged strongly from a national study of women's homelessness that I led a few years back. Funded by the IRC's Research Fellowship Scheme, the project employed a multi-method design involving interviews with 60 homeless women alongside ethnographic observation undertaken in several homeless hostels. The women's stories revealed the extent to which they avoided homelessness services because they felt threatened and unsafe in these male-dominated environments. Women's perception that their autonomy and decision-making capacities were not recognised also acted as drivers of their invisibility. Many preferred to leave hostels to enter into situations of 'hidden' homelessness.

Better services and preventative policies

Homelessness policy and service provision, historically resistant to the notion of gendered homelessness and primarily oriented towards the image of the stereotypical homeless male needs to engage with the distinct situations, experiences and requirements of women. There is strong evidence in Ireland and other European countries that homelessness services are currently failing to respond adequately to the needs of women and their children. A core aim of my research is to provide policy makers with a strong evidence base on the causes and consequences of women's homelessness that will inform the development of more effective services and preventative policies.

→ "The word homeless, it shows a picture of somebody sleeping on the streets, not a nice picture" (Tereska, age 25).
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