

Introduction

Rough sleeping women are some of the most vulnerable in our society. Their needs are particularly complex, with higher levels of poor mental health than homeless men, and extensive experiences of physical and sexual violence and abuse. Yet most homelessness services do not respond to women's specific needs, and the vast majority offer support in male-dominated environments which can put women at risk of intimidation and violence.

Drivers and consequences of rough sleeping among women

Abuse is a cause and consequence of women's rough sleeping:

- Agenda research shows that 1.2 million women in England have experienced extensive abuse as both a child and an adult, and a fifth of these women have been homeless.¹ Only 1% of women with little or no experience of abuse have been homeless.
- St Mungo's reports that 54% of their female clients that slept rough have experienced abuse from a partner or family member, and 33% say domestic abuse contributed to their homelessness.²
- Women who are homeless are particularly vulnerable to being further targeted by perpetrators of both physical and sexual abuse, with 28% of homeless women having formed an unwanted sexual partnership to get a roof over their heads, and 20% having engaged in prostitution to raise money for accommodation.³

Case study: Alison's story
After an abusive boyfriend set fire to her home, Alison spent time in a hostel, where she met another man who was abusive.
"Because I didn't want to be on the street, I ended up staying with him and moving in with him and his dad ... One day he proper battered me, he had a knife, he was slashing me. I had to run out in my dressing gown and shoes. I ran into town and that's how I became homeless."

Rough sleeping women's needs are particularly complex. Statistics show:

- The average age of death for a homeless woman is just 42.⁴
- Rough sleeping women tend to be younger, and are significantly more likely than men to be under 25.⁵
- Rough sleeping women are more likely to experience mental ill health than homeless men, and women with mental health problems are more likely to experience long term or repeated rough sleeping.⁶

Extent of rough sleeping among women

Government estimates that 14% of rough sleepers are women.⁷ Women's rough sleeping rose 28% between 2016 and 2017, while overall rates of rough sleeping rose 15% over the same period.⁸

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

- Rough sleeping women may make efforts to hide away or try to keep moving, for example sleeping on buses or walking through the night, because of the risk of violence.
- Many women may find alternative and unsafe arrangements, for example engaging in so-called 'sex for rent' and other exploitative arrangements in order to put a roof over their heads.
- Many women may stay in abusive relationships to avoid having to live on the streets.

Accessing support

Most homelessness services are designed for men by default, and the majority of people who access these services are men. These male-dominated environments can be intimidating and unsafe for women, and are rarely set up to meet women's distinct needs.

- Many women report that a women-only space is important in enabling them to feel safe and to start dealing with the issues they face.⁹ Yet just 11% of homelessness services offer women-only accommodation.¹⁰
- Homeless women are likely to enter into often abusive and exploitative relationships to stay safe from violence on the streets. This means they are less likely to receive support from homelessness services, most of which only offer support for single homeless people.¹¹

¹ Agenda (2016), [Hidden Hurt](#)

² University of York (2018), [Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology](#)

³ Crisis (2006), [Homeless women: still be failed yet striving to survive](#)

⁴ ONS (2018), [Deaths of homeless people in England and Wales: 2013 to 2017](#)

⁵ University of York (2018), [Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology](#)

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Gov UK (2019), [Rough Sleeping in England: Autumn 2018](#)

⁸ University of York (2018), [Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology](#)

⁹ Agenda and AVA (2017), [Mapping the Maze: a review of the literature](#)

¹⁰ Homeless Link (2017), [Supporting women who are homeless](#)

¹¹ Brighton Women's Centre and Homeless Link (2018), [Coupling Up: The danger of being a woman on the streets](#)

Research by Agenda and AVA, *Mapping the Maze*, identifies what specialist services for women exist across the substance misuse, criminal justice, homelessness and mental health sectors in England and Wales.¹² It found:

- Patchy provision for women, with a woman's ability to access services being dependent on where she lives.
- Only 59 of 173 areas in England and Wales provided accommodation specifically for women that was not a refuge, with refuge provision the most commonly reported type of homelessness provision for women.
- Many refuges were either unable to provide support to women experiencing multiple disadvantage or had limited capacity to do so.

Current legislation states that women should be considered "priority need" if they are vulnerable as a result of fleeing domestic abuse. However, this is not always the case in practice: 53.6% of survivors supported by Women's Aid's No Woman Turned Away project were turned away from local authority housing teams as they were not deemed to meet assessments of vulnerability under "priority need".¹³

Homeless mothers

Women facing multiple disadvantage often speak of the importance of motherhood to their identity, and as a motivating factor for engaging with support. Many "single" homeless women will in fact have children who are not in their care: half the women St. Mungo's work with are mothers, and 79% of these have had children taken into care.¹⁴

Mothers who have become homeless, for example as a result of fleeing domestic violence, and whose children are temporarily out of their care can find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle. A local authority will not allow their children to be returned to their care until they have secured accommodation, but they are not a priority for local authority housing assistance until their children are returned to them. This cycle can result in children remaining in care unnecessarily, simply due to a lack of suitable accommodation.

Having children removed into care, particularly when they are permanently removed, can be deeply traumatic for women. It can prompt or exacerbate mental health or substance misuse problems. Women may need support to deal with the trauma of losing a child, to establish contact with children or around care proceedings. Services which work with homeless women must recognise and respond to this.

What can you do?

We would be grateful if you would attend the debate on rough sleeping **this Thursday**, and raise some of the issues outlined in this briefing. In particular, this week (4th-10th February) is Sexual Abuse and Sexual Violence Awareness Week, making it a pertinent time to raise awareness of the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse faced by rough sleeping women, and the need for specialist support to help women cope with these histories of trauma.

Agenda is calling for:

1. Women's specific needs to be included in all strategies to target homelessness at a national and local level and women have the choice of accessing women-only services.
2. Approaches to tackling homelessness to include involvement from other relevant government departments and include a focus on violence against women and girls (VAWG).
3. All homelessness data, including rough sleeping counts to include a gender breakdown, and be reviewed to ensure accurate reflection of the numbers of homeless and rough sleeping women.
4. Victim/survivors of domestic abuse to be automatically be classified as in "priority need" for housing, rather than meet assessments of vulnerability as is currently the case.
5. A review of the homelessness legislation with a view to either expanding or abolishing priority need criteria, whilst ensuring protection for the most vulnerable including women with children is maintained.
6. For women whose children are temporarily cared for elsewhere, whether that be through the care system or by family or friends, a lack of housing to never be a barrier to children returning to their mother.
7. A 'whole housing' approach to be taken to domestic abuse that ensures there is a full suite of housing options available to victim/survivors, including for women with complex needs.

About Agenda

[Agenda](#), the alliance for women and girls at risk, is working to build a society where women and girls are able to live their lives free from inequality, poverty and violence. We campaign for women and girls facing abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction and homelessness to get the support and protection they need. www.weareagenda.org

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¹² Agenda and AVA (2017), [Mapping the Maze: services for women experiencing multiple disadvantage in England and Wales](#)

¹³ Women's Aid (2018) [Nowhere to turn: Findings from the Second Year of the No Woman Turned Away Project](#)

¹⁴ St. Mungo's (2014), [Rebuilding Shattered Lives](#)