

THE HIDDEN FACE OF HOMELESSNESS

THE WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE AND THE NEED TO INCORPORATE A FEMINIST APPROACH IN THE FIGHT AGAINST HOMELESSNESS

“**W**hen I was on the streets, I didn't like to sleep at night for fear that a man might attack or rape me”. Alice Sioux said this in an interview at Lola's Lokal, a space created by the association "Lola No Estás Sola" to offer a safe, empowering and listening place for homeless women in Nou Barris neighbourhood of Barcelona. Alice is from Algeria and has lived in Spain for more than 25 years. Two years ago, after being evicted from her flat, she found herself on the streets. Today she lives in one of the flats of the feminist project "Lola No Estás Sola". She is one of the many women whose stories are made invisible.

Data show that women and their children are the fastest growing group within the homeless community in the European context. In Sweden, for example, between 1993 and 2017,

the proportion of women experiencing homelessness increased from 17% to 38%. In 2017, in Ireland, 44% of the homeless people counted were women. On the other hand, in England and Scotland, nearly 90% of lone parents claiming public homelessness benefits in 2018 were women. In Spain, an increase in the number of women has also been identified, accounting for 25% of homeless people in 2020, up from 20% in 1999. However, these data are unreliable given that multiple studies have shown the inability of European states to determine the real extent of residential exclusion suffered by women and that, according to the experience of organisations fighting against female homelessness, it is still hidden. Clara Naya, coordinator of the "Lola No Estás Sola" empowerment project for homeless women in Barcelona, pointed out in an interview that the data are not true because



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"we are not being able to access homeless women", and the question is why?

OECD¹ members have begun to identify this growing incidence of "hidden homelessness", referring to people who do not appear in official homelessness statistics, and which most often affects women. There is therefore a clear need for a census with accurate and up-to-date data on the number of women experiencing housing exclusion in order to make female homelessness visible. The problem of misinformation starts with the lack of a harmonised and complete definition of what is meant by "homelessness". In 2005, FEANTSA² established a classification of homelessness as a broad phenomenon that goes beyond living

directly on the streets, distinguishing four types of homelessness (ETHOS): homeless people (1) - sleeping rough or in shelters -, homeless people (2) - in centres and shelters such as CIEs³ -, people living in insecure housing (3) - occupied spaces or living under the threat of violence from relatives or partners or temporarily sheltered by relatives or friends - and finally, those living in inadequate housing (4) - temporary housing or shacks or in fuel poverty -.

Multiple research warns that it is imperative that states apply a broad definition of homelessness in both enumeration statistics and strategies tackling homelessness. This request is based on the fact that it is in the latter

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCDE). <https://www.oecd.org/acerca/>

² European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless. <https://www.feantsa.org/en>

³ Detention Centre for Foreigners in Spain.

categories (3 and 4) - precisely those which are the most invisible and for which the least data exist - that the number of women is notably higher. However, in the European context, homeless people are still counted on the basis of criteria centred on the most visible categories of homelessness (1) and using methodologies and enumeration techniques that under-represent women in street situations, such as night-time street counts. These statistics from different European countries ignore the particularities of being a woman in the street and the inherent difference between men and women in the way they reach and react to homelessness in our society.

Studies at European level show that women are less likely to turn to shelters and the street, preferring first to seek accommodation solutions with friends and families. On the other hand, data clearly suggest that family homelessness affects mostly single women with dependent children. This situation is closely related to domestic violence and economic marginalisation. In the case of women who have suffered gender-based violence, and who are in shelters or similar services, they are categorised in statistical studies as "victims of gender-based violence" and not as women experiencing homelessness, which again obscures this reality. Moreover, in much of Europe, women continue to suffer forms of housing exclusion at a higher rate than men. In Spain, women have greater difficulties, both in accessing and maintaining the costs associated with housing, due to their lower integration in the labour market. Data from Barcelona indicate that 65% of the people who seek help from the platform of people affected by mortgages are women

(PAH 2018). Likewise, according to data from the 2018 Survey on Integration and Social Needs, female-headed households in which women are the main or sole breadwinner do indeed have greater difficulties in coping with housing costs, as well as higher levels of fuel poverty.

The main local organisations specialising in this area in the city of Barcelona agree with the diagnosis that female homelessness is a phenomenon affected by structurally different causes than male homelessness and with added difficulties in relation to gender and also to their social role. In a conference on female homelessness, Clara Naya declared that "*the street situation is a superlative version of what we live in our society, and therefore machismo, invisibilisation and violence towards women, as well as the different vulnerabilities that we suffer, are magnified in the street*", therefore it is an increased reflection of the situation of gender inequality existing in our society. Women are particularly affected by risk and vulnerability factors related to pressure, sexual abuse, gender-based violence or prostitution. In this sense, in the aforementioned interview, Alice Sioux shared: "*I was afraid to sleep at night, I slept during the day and spent the nights walking, being in open spaces, in places with tourists like the Ramblas. At first I slept on the beach until noon, then when the heat started I would go to the Ciutadella park to rest during the day. Women are hidden and alone*". Faced with the great exposure of sleeping in the street as a woman and the fear it entails, many hide to sleep, which means that they are not visible in the nightly counts used to count this group.

In Barcelona, women represent "15%" of the visible group of homeless people. Every night, 117 women sleep on the streets of the city. At the "Centre Assís" - that cares for homeless people- they received 40% more women in 2018 than the previous year. In the same year, they conducted an internal survey which found that the main causes of female homelessness among the women surveyed were related to break-ups and gender-based violence. They also found that a large number of these women end up sleeping on the streets as the last phase of a long process of violence, loss and deprivation and that because they are women, they arrive on the streets in worse conditions due to their disadvantaged position in society, constant exposure to violence and greater stigmatisation.

A study based on an interview with 132 homeless women in Madrid, conducted in 2016 by Dr. Sonia Panadero, found that throughout their history, 52% of them had suffered physical aggression in adulthood, 32% had suffered sexual aggression, 56% had suffered gender-based violence and 48% had made a suicide attempt. In other countries, similar data show the existence of this violence in the majority of women in street situations. An investigation carried out in Ireland in 2015 revealed that 92% of the women interviewed - all of them in homeless shelters - had suffered some form of physical violence or sexual abuse. Another study by the NGO Crisis in England found that 58% of women on the streets were intimidated or threatened with violence between 2016 and 2017. Alice's story reflects the violent reality of many women, as during her time on the streets she even suffered an attempted rape; *"the first time I slept at night, at around three in the morning, I felt the tent I was in open up and my*

name was called. It was an acquaintance who slept in the same area. At that moment I sensed something bad and closed the tent. Then he got in and covered my face, turned me upside down and started to strangle me. Just as I was about to lose consciousness, from the fear of thinking that he wanted to abuse me, I pulled strength from where I didn't know I had it, I shouted as loud as I could and he ran away. I saw a police car and I explained to them but they didn't pay any attention to me, they called me crazy, they didn't even take me to the doctor, telling me that it was a very long procedure that wasn't worth it".

In terms of health status and health needs, there is also a differentiation in that homeless women have more health problems than women who do not suffer from residential exclusion, and than men who are also in a street situation. European studies show that mortality rates are higher in women than in men, with a sevenfold increase in mortality in men and an eleven fold increase in mortality in women. As far as sexual health is concerned, there is little data, but in relation to violence, Clara understands that *"women who are in street situations, because of the fear of possible rape, end up disconnecting from their own bodies, they don't have sexual relations in a healthy way and this has repercussions on their gynaecological health. Many of the women we have met have haemorrhages, infections..."*.

There are even more specific forms of violence associated with the gender role imposed on women in the patriarchal structures of our society. When they face homelessness, women put their health to one side, as the

search for housing, food and clothing for themselves and, in many cases, for their children becomes the priority, as it is understood that they should be the ones to take care of it. Clara pointed out that "the loss of housing, both socially and emotionally, is experienced by women in a very different way to men, because of our socialisation with regard to the home". She also commented on the fact that many women experiencing homelessness are judged in relation to their motherhood and are reluctant to apply for social benefits for fear that custody may be withdrawn. She said that most of the women attending Lola's Lokal have had their children taken away from them, especially pregnant women on the streets. Alice had custody of her son and two daughters taken away from her nine years ago; *"I don't know the youngest one because they took her away from me when she was a baby, in the hospital. They took her away because she had no fixed roof over her head. I was in a room and they told me that if she was in good condition they would give her back to me but because I couldn't pay they threw me out and didn't give her to me. If I look for her now they can penalise me because she is not of legal age. When they took my children away from me I was depressed for five months. ...] They made it sound like it was my fault, they traumatised me. ...] They beat you up, they make you feel that you are responsible, I didn't feel relieved until I saw them again."* This seriously affected her mental health, a problem that was magnified when she found herself in a street situation.

After analysing the different data, studies, personal experiences of women in situations of homelessness and the organisations that attend them, the existence of female

homelessness is clearly affirmed - despite the fatal lack of data-. The serious violations of rights suffered specifically by women in this situation are also confirmed. However, in the institutional context, these gender-based differences have not been identified and studied, thus pointing to a lack of resources to provide an adequate and specific solution to effectively protect the rights of homeless women. The evident lack of information and understanding keeps them invisible in a macho society that rejects and ignores them. Invisibilisation is also another form of structural violence as most homeless services are currently deeply masculinised both methodologically and structurally. Moreover, they focus only on the reality of men, without taking into account the vulnerabilities associated with female homelessness - and of course, without considering the realities of migrant women who suffer from homelessness, and are judged under triple discrimination.

As noted, women face many inequalities and health problems that need to be addressed through specific policies and programmes. Also, in relation to exposure to sexual violence, it is crucial that they are able to rely on non-mixed safety spaces. When they arrive at homeless resources, they are again confronted with primarily male-dominated spaces where hostilities and violence are reproduced. In this regard, Alice commented that several acquaintances had been assaulted in showers in mixed-gender homeless shelters.

On the other hand, the responses driven to address female homelessness are often inherently sexist, especially when a woman is not living in the expected role of mother, wife or

carer. There is evidence that even in some of the most advanced homelessness and social care systems in Europe, sexist and culturally influenced responses to women's homelessness are taking place. In relation to this point, it should be noted that multiple organisations denounce the indiscriminate removal of custody in Catalonia - where are carried out 40% of the removals in the whole country - and that they focus on the children of migrant women who find themselves in a situation of residential exclusion without offering them a housing alternative so that they can support their children. Clara also indicated that cases have been found in which daughters whose custody was withdrawn from their mothers due to homelessness have also ended up suffering situations of residential exclusion, which suggests a serious problem due to a system that is not capable of providing solutions that effectively protect daughters and do not criminalise their mothers for not having a good economic situation.

The organisations warn that receiving intensive and continuous accompaniment, as well as recovering social networks, are the factors most valued by them. They stress that it is essential to include a feminist perspective in the prevention, detection and subsequent response to homelessness. Only with this perspective will it be possible to make them visible and create resources to access and respond to women's homelessness - for example, by counting women in daytime rather than night-time services and offering non-mixed care centres. It should be stressed that it is not only a question of differentiated spaces but also of differentiated care that takes into account the specificities of

female homelessness. In this sense, they stress the need to include training in a gender perspective for workers who care for homeless people so that violence is not perpetuated.

"The women arrive at Lola's Lokal with a process of personal devaluation and a very deteriorated identity. This is why we have to put women at the centre of the intervention and accompany them in their empowerment from a feminist point of view", said Clara in response to her frustration at the lack of specific resources to respond to women's homelessness. Many women come to "Lola's Lokal" in search of a place where they don't feel judged, where they can be calm and forget. Alice concluded the interview by pointing out the reasons why she feels comfortable with the "Lolas"; *"they don't judge you. Instead social workers beat you up, you go to ask for help and come out crying, they question your life, as if you were a little girl. Here you are free to tell or not your things. They support you and if they can, they give you solutions. They don't make you feel guilty, they don't insinuate that you brought this situation on yourself".*

It is essential, therefore, to promote a feminist and empowering response to the serious violation of rights suffered by women experiencing homelessness and to promote effective visibility of the phenomenon of female homelessness because **what is not named, does not exist.**

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