



In from the storm

Most rough sleepers are men, but the true number of women who are homeless is unknown. And getting them to come forward for help is difficult. Esther Sample from St Mungo's on a new initiative to protect vulnerable women

When most homelessness charities developed in Britain in the 60s and 70s, they were set up with homeless men in mind. Men have traditionally formed the majority of rough sleepers and hostel residents. Official figures suggest, however, that while far fewer women than men become homeless, women still make up a quarter of the homeless population.

Statistics do not record the extent of women's hidden homelessness, however. Rather than sleeping on the streets or coming forward to support services, women are more likely to sofa surf between family and friends, stay in abusive relationships, squats or insecure housing situations. Why? The dangers of being female and sleeping on the streets are obvious, but reasons for not coming to services include the fear of children being taken into care, support services which are male dominated and stigma. These same reasons throw up barriers to presenting at a whole range of services including those which support people with drug and alcohol problems.

When women do resort to sleeping rough, they often choose hidden shelters or areas that feel safer away from public

view. Perversely, these are often more dangerous due to their isolated nature. Women also often sleep in the day, staying awake at night for safety. Women who sleep rough in this way would not necessarily show up on official street count figures which cover people 'bedded down' on the streets on a particular night each year. It is also common for women who do sleep on the streets to do so as part of a couple. Unfortunately, relationships can become unbalanced and abusive if the woman is dependent on a partner for protection, particularly when substance use, alcohol and mental health issues are involved. Women are also at risk of becoming involved in prostitution.

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Our research report, *Battered, Broken, Bereft, Why People Still End up Sleeping Rough*, published in October last year,

asked outreach workers nationally about who was still sleeping rough and why. In addition to outreach responses, we also included the results of our latest annual survey of our clients. This found that 35% of our female clients who had slept rough did so after escaping domestic violence. It also showed that it is women with the most complex needs that are not being picked up by services. Of those women who had slept rough because of domestic violence, 90% used drugs or alcohol problematically or had done in the past, compared to 58% for those that had gone straight into services and not slept rough. They were also much more likely to have a significant medical condition.

More broadly, we have found that women in our services, whether they have slept rough or not, have different and often higher levels of support needs (such as substance use and mental health) than men. Data from 2008 showed that overall, female clients were coming into services with higher support needs (and at a more pre-contemplative stage of recovery), and were also progressing more slowly than the men in projects.

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So how do we make homelessness and related support services more accessible, appealing and effective for women who need them?

If women feel that services cater for their specific needs and that they will not be judged or isolated as a female client, they are more likely to come forward for support. Since 2008, St Mungo's has been working to improve services for women, and conducting extensive peer research with female clients through our client representative group, *Outside In*, as to the specific issues they face.

What became clear is that, although some routes into homelessness are shared by both genders, women do have different routes into homelessness to men, and can need different support to move forward. The research found that the profound emotional trauma experienced by women through issues such as domestic abuse, sexual exploitation and loss of children and family is key to their not being able to progress out of services and move on from issues such as substance use.

St Mungo's Women's Strategy aims to ensure all services are meeting the personal, emotional and social needs of women, as well as the potential for housing, health and work. Partnerships with the drug and alcohol sector on these issues, together with domestic violence services and especially social services will be key to the success of the project.

Although the women we work with are seen as 'single homeless', 50% of our female clients are mothers and 60% of those children are in care. We want to support women to regain contact with children or if this is not possible, provide support to grieve the loss of

SARAH'S STORY

When Sarah arrived at one of our hostels, she had recently had a baby and had been violently assaulted by the baby's father. The baby has since been adopted. The father is in prison.

During her childhood, Sarah's step-father was extremely violent and she went into care. Her alcohol use was so concerning that she went to detox and then rehab in her late teens. Although she stayed eight months, she didn't complete due to feelings of loneliness.

Sarah has had unstable housing and periods of homelessness throughout her life. She has four children in total, none of whom have stayed in her care. She feels terrible guilt about these children, particularly her daughter as she was subsequently subjected to assault from a step-mother.

Sarah has had few opportunities to learn and benefit from loving relationships, either as a child or as a partner of anyone. She has always been subject to assault. Her substance use and alcohol consumption continue to provide an escape from overwhelming emotions, and at present, St Mungo's staff are working to help her feel settled and cared about.

North London Women's Project: enabling contact with children

St Mungo's North London Women's Project is a 29 bed hostel for vulnerable single homeless women with support needs such as physical or mental health problems, drug or alcohol issues, prostitution and domestic violence. The project supports residents through assessment and planning to meet their individual needs, and to access other services such as GPs, substance use or education providers. The project encourages women to maximise relationships with their children by liaising with external services, as well as enabling contact in the project. Keyworkers provide emotional support to the women around their relationship with their children.

children, something our clients say is rarely acknowledged by services. Fear of losing children as a barrier to accessing services also needs to be explored.

The majority of homeless services have been, and still are, both designed for and dominated by men. If we are to truly meet the needs of homeless women and give them the support they need to move forward, then this needs to be urgently re-thought.

To that end, in 2012, St Mungo's will focus on women's homelessness. The views and experiences of the drug and alcohol sector will be invaluable to finding better prevention strategies and homelessness support for women.

Chrysalis: Psychologically Informed Environment

The Chrysalis Project, a partnership between the London Borough of Lambeth, St Mungo's and Commonweal Housing, provides housing and support for women who are homeless and have support needs related to substance use, trauma, abuse and sexual exploitation. The service offers 31 beds for women. All clients have access to formal psychotherapy and personalised support. St Mungo's runs the hostel and Commonweal Housing provides a mix of self-contained move-on flats. The hostel has become one of St Mungo's Psychologically Informed Environment (PIE) pilot schemes. With the support of clinically trained psychotherapists, staff are given the opportunity to reflect and develop skills that are psychologically informed. This helps build resilience in coping with the emotional impact of their work and encourages a reflective way of working. For the clients, it fosters an emotionally safe environment, supports understanding of behaviour and relationships with others, and helps to encourage a sense of community.

The photographer Georgina Cranston runs a multimedia project exploring women's homelessness in London at www.wherfromwherenow.org/the-project

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