



FEANTSA

Motherhood and homelessness

Introductory note

This introductory note identifies some of the most important themes around motherhood and homelessness.

- Women as mothers

-Mothers represent a significant and growing segment of the homeless population. number of families entering into the situation of homelessness has increased significantly in many countries, including France, UK, Ireland, Belgium etc. and we know that when we talk about family homelessness, the majority of homeless families are headed by a young single woman.

-Women in situation of homelessness have very strong identities as mothers and yet it is not recognised, especially if the children are not in their care.

- Trauma of separation

- Mothers who are homeless and do not have their children in their care have specific vulnerabilities. Separated from the children, often they are not seen as mothers (within a wide range of service settings they are counted and treated as 'single homeless'.) and do not get the support around grieving the loss. This leaves women feel disempowered and results in diminished self-esteem and loss of confidence.

-Failing to acknowledge homeless mothers who are separated from their children. Women are less likely to engage with services if they do not feel recognised.

- Services are not well equipped to respond to the trauma of loss of children. There is a need for trauma-informed services. (lack of training, professionals who fear that they are causing increased risks.) if such support is not in place, women may seek refuge in drugs or fast subsequent pregnancies in an effort to replace the lost child.

- Reconnection and eventual reunion

Many studies highlight that mothers strong desire to reconnect and reunite with children, just the hope of this reunification can be a strong motivating factor in their lives.

- Parenthood as an asset

This positive effect of motherhood is well documented and definitely shows that having children in mothers' care can be a protective and positive function for women who experience homelessness.

While we know of the positive effect of having children, we also know that there are wide range of stressors for mothers and for children living in emergency accommodation or in hostels and living in such circumstances mean significant challenges to provide adequate care for their children.

Women who are homeless with young children face additional challenges to their parenting roles and responsibilities, opportunities for labour market participation, mental health and physical health

issues of their own and their children's. They worry about the stressful situation, the impact of shelter living has on children. Studies have highlighted the impact of shelter life on the children and also on mother-children relationship.

- Fear and suspicion

Other experiences mothers who are homeless (trauma of losing the home, intimate partner violence, mental health problems) which have an impact on the ability to parent and provide safety. Research has shown that mothers underreport substance use as well as mental health problems and avoid treatment services for fear that children will be removed from their custody.

Fear and suspicion dominant feelings: One woman said in an interview with her that: 'she feels like being treated with suspicion even though she knows that they were just following procedure'—very important non-judgmental trauma informed support, to find the right way to support while recognising the experience but doing it in a non-intrusive way. Similarly recognising the vulnerabilities but also strength and the resilience of women.

- Feeling of Shame and embarrassment

For being homeless and failing as mothers --- 'feel like failing to provide for them on the most basic level.' Or those who are separated at birth from their children are denied even the chance to be mother.

- Societal expectations, gender roles

Need to mention the societal expectations about gender roles, motherhood. Strong and multiple stigma women/mother who experience homelessness face.

Very important to give women voice and control of how their stories are told, how they are perceived.

Peer support is emerging promising practice, could be important step in building healthy networks and relationships. Which we know that are key to recovery. (here research is mixed, so I am curious about your experience, whether you have any peer support model in place, could be very interesting practice, certainly less threatening than individual counselling, breaking the power dynamic etc.)

- How could the system better respond to the needs of women?

Supporting women often through multiple and disconnected systems. In most countries homeless women may be in contact with various services but usually there is a lack of coordination between services but clearly there is a need for joined up services (good practices like Pause and Orbit project)

- Intergenerational cycle, prevention

By helping homeless mothers, we are preventing homelessness in next generation. We know the long-term impact of adverse childhood experiences are, physical mental health problems, addiction issues adult homelessness etc. It is, therefore, important to prevent adverse childhood experiences to take place in the first place. Need to focus on both mothers and children.

- Need for longitudinal studies

To understand their circumstances and the challenges of homeless mothers are facing on the route from homelessness to stable housing.