

Erasmus+ 'Women and homelessness' – 'Motherhood and children'

From our own organization, project UDENFOR, a research report from 2018. "I like when I can smell that I have washed my fingers" (freely translated). The report is an examination of a small group (21) of women's experiences with homelessness through qualitative interviews. (No statements or claims have been checked).

Chapter title: "The essential motherhood"

The homeless mothers describe their children as "everything" – They say they adore and love them. The emotional significance appears as big smiles when the mothers talk about their children, with pictures on the walls at the shelters or by name printed in the skin as tattoos.

The women talk proud about their children – about their achievements in school and jobs. The women talk about being worry – just like most mothers!

The conversations with the women show that motherhood is essential for homeless mothers with small *and* grownup kids. But the motherhood is continually challenged by the mothers' homelessness and often combined with other social, mental and/or physically problems, and in some cases lack of help through the social system.

Placements

It is not known that there are women living with underage children on the streets in Denmark – or in homeless shelters.... They do live as homeless (no home) in family shelters or in crises center/shelters.

Children are not allowed in homeless shelters/hostels.

Some women have had underage children, when their life began to go wrong and have conferred their children to another party such as family members or foster care. The women describe the placement with frustration, sorrow and as "not to live up to own expectations". A small percent of the interviewed women talk about the placement as an interaction of factors – alcohol or drug abuse, self-medication of mental and/or physical illness, not having the power to cope with being a parent, lack of help through the social system and/or treatment system, in combination of losing their residence because they didn't afford it.

Some women have deliberately chosen to place their children in foster care, as an attempt to take responsibility for their children's well-being.

Case: Woman not in a good place, daughter sad and have problems in school – stops going to school, and the mother don't have the strength to help. She decides to bring her child to foster care, so they can give the daughter the help she needs.

Room/space for togetherness

Challenge: no physical space to spend time with their kids.

Case: one woman tells that her relationship with her child got worse after moving into a shelter/hostel, where the child was not allowed to visit.

Sofa surfing: not a good environment for kids where there often are drugs and/or alcohol and chaos, sometimes violence. Some women choose not to see their children in these bad environments because they care for their children.

Some women have created creative solutions to their situation and where traditional ways of being a family is challenged:

One woman tells that she sees her youngest child every second weekend in her grownup daughters' apartment. It's the best option she has, but at the same time she doesn't like that she needs to involve her oldest child.

Another woman tells that she is a mother and a grandmother. Her biggest wish is to have her grandchild for sleepover, but it's not possible because she lives at a shelter/hostel.

Instead she and her grandchild have picked a "special place" in the city that they both like and enjoy. It has become "grandmothers place" and an tradition = a positive experience.

Some commonalities:

The women wish and have the need to maintain a relationship with their children (and grandchildren in some cases) through togetherness, care and joint activities.

Motivation and motherhood as a resource

Some women (only 2) have no contact with their children.

Most mothers have the hope for reunion or more togetherness with their children – for some this wish is a motivation to get out of homelessness. It's important that we (Professionals) remember that motherhood also can be a resource – and not just something that is connected to extra support and difficulties.

Multiple problems/challenges – also society

Besides the women's problems with mental and physical illness, social and economic problems, they also feel guilt and shame connected to not being able to take care of their children.

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The women experience that society (and in some cases social workers) also look down on them (Maybe because of society's gender-based expectations, where women is known as the primary caregiver – and the homeless mothers challenge the stereotypical understanding of motherhood.

Social services (statements from the prof.)

- Most mothers have difficult and bad relationships with their children.
- Some shelters/hostels helps very actively to support mothers in their relationship with their kids.
- Their children means everything to them, but because so much sorrow is connected to the situation, the mothers often don't want to talk about their kids + staff don't want to open up anything they can deal with – they don't feel they have the right knowledge and tools to give the right support.

OBS! You need to be aware that the last statement doesn't end up being a narrative that becomes truth – that ends up, with staff not talking with the mothers about their kids. The mother's sorrows and thoughts doesn't disappear just because we don't talk with them about it – then they are just alone with it.