

## Workshops in Ireland

My name is Hayley, and I'm a PhD student at South East Technological University (SETU) Waterford. I'm currently researching START, a supported housing initiative aimed at promoting recovery, inclusion, and independent living for people experiencing mental health difficulties. I am part of the SETU team working on this project, along with my PhD supervisor Méabh. As part of the Women's Visual Voices project, we began facilitating workshops in March 2025 with Cork Simon Community. Our first group consisted of staff members from across various projects within the organisation. This yielded some really important discussion around the healing power of safe and trusting relationships with women accessing the services there. Staff can enable this through key working and nature-based activities that serve to nurture relationships and trust as highlighted below. Staff also highlighted the consequences of the invisibility of women's lived experiences and needs within policy and service design and delivery. This invisibility can compound the abuses and traumas women have experienced throughout their lives.



### Belonging and Hope

I work with women who have experienced homelessness and are rebuilding their lives. They come to a horticulture class every Tuesday and Thursday.

We start off with nourishing food and a cuppa and a chat.

We planted these plants from seed and have nurtured them, transplanted them to bigger pots and hope to plant them in our garden when they are strong enough.

Just like the women who come to our classes we nourish them with good food and a listening ear. They are valued and loved for the unique women they are, like each individual plant. And once they feel strong enough, they move on and take their skills to grow plants in their own houses.

Our plants are kept safe by our women who are kept safe during these classes twice a week.

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I see sign for male/female shared space.

Many spaces in homeless services (toilets/bathrooms included) are not gender specific.

Due to previous traumatic experiences, some women do not feel comfortable using shared facilities.

Although doors can be locked from the inside, there is always a fear someone will try to open the door.

There should be more effort put into designing gender specific services and supplying them with products women need.

In May 2025, I started running workshops directly with women accessing Cork Simon services. Workshops took place in the women's shelter, where the majority of women were living, with some also living in supported housing.

What began with an empty room and a table of untouched cakes soon turned into a powerful journey of connection, learning, and community. Our initial information session was a reminder that trust and participation grow best when activities take place in spaces where women feel comfortable and supported. Although I work part-time with this service, in a different area, I was entering this space as an external facilitator. It was important to recognise that trust had to be earned slowly and on the women's terms. The women's shelter is a relatively recent addition to Cork Simon's wider community. The seven-bed building, now designated for women, was previously a mixed residential project. Its transformation reflects a growing recognition of the need for gender-specific services within the homelessness sector.



The area where the door is located feels very unsafe. I constantly fear being attacked, beaten, or robbed. I often experience panic attacks at the door, just hoping I can get inside quickly without having to wait outside for too long.

The women's shelter is located in a highly active and often chaotic part of the city. It sits beside a mixed emergency shelter, a day centre and across from the Local Authority Homeless Support Service, which provides temporary placements for people experiencing



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homelessness. A rough sleep service also operates nearby. I would later come to learn that even accessing and exiting this space—despite being a place of refuge—was fraught with challenges. While the women’s shelter itself offered safety, it was surrounded by chaos. This means that, for many women, even accessing or exiting the building can feel unsafe and anxiety-inducing. There were some initial challenges in securing a suitable location due to the location of the building and busy surroundings. The day centre and other potential location were explored as locations to host the workshops but were deemed unsuitable

There were some initial challenges in securing a suitable location for the workshops due to the building’s location and busy surroundings. The day centre was initially used for an information session but proved not to be a suitable space for the women. After exploring other options, the women’s shelter was chosen as the location for the sessions because it was a familiar and trusted space for the women accessing services. Holding the workshops here provided a safer, more supportive environment where women could feel comfortable participating.



Our first workshop session began with three women attending. In that first session, we explored photo literacy and the power of storytelling. Many women described feeling unsafe when accessing or leaving the women’s shelter, with experiences of harassment, being followed, shouted at, or spoken to in demeaning ways. Crowded spaces triggered intense anxiety. Some shared how witnessing violence in public brought back deeply traumatic memories. Despite this emotional weight, the space became one of rare solidarity. Several women expressed gratitude for simply having a chance to speak and be heard. One said, “We don’t have anyone to talk to about this,” capturing the isolation many of them carry.



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As the sessions progressed, we saw the group deepen in both size and connection. By session two, five women attended. While challenges related to accessing the women's shelter remained a constant thread, a more hopeful theme emerged: the safety and comfort they found in one another and in the support of some staff. One woman brought a bundle of gifts—small but deeply meaningful—including safety whistles for the group. It was a beautiful gesture of care that reflected how women look after each other even while navigating extreme adversity.



By session four, the focus turned toward women's health—particularly reproductive health—and the ways in which women's pain and concerns are often ignored or dismissed. One participant shared a story about a medical issue that had been brushed aside, only to be confirmed later, leaving her with feelings of betrayal and hopelessness. Another woman, overwhelmed by the emotion of her photo caption, asked a peer to read it aloud. The tenderness and support shown in that moment was deeply moving—a reminder of the strength women find in each other when they are given safe, intentional space to share.

As we prepare for the final session, the group will come together to curate their photographs and captions collaboratively for the exhibition. This event is not simply about presentation—it is a powerful platform for the women to share their perspectives, highlight the safety issues they face, and advocate for change. The women will decide who to invite, whether that be media, policy makers, politicians or other key stakeholders. Within the projects methodology, the exhibition stage is a crucial opportunity to reach those who can influence change—particularly policymakers, service providers, and the wider public. By displaying their photographs and accompanying narratives, the women can educate staff and services and the wider public about women's lived experiences and needs, fostering dialogue that supports the creation of safer, more gender-responsive services.



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