

Gender and Social Inclusion in France: Rethinking Social Support Systems and Organizations

THE SALVATION ARMY AND THE WOMEN'S VOICES PROJECT



The Salvation Army Foundation in France is involved in the Women's Voices project through the center *La Cité de Refuge-Centre Espoir (CRCE)*, located in the south of Paris.

At the CRCE, there is a long-term shelter for social reintegration of 300 people, an employment integration program, and a day and overnight shelter space for homeless women.



The question of how to specifically support women runs through all the center's activities. Consequently, a team made up of social workers, psychologists, and a service manager has been actively involved in the Women's Voices project.

SYMPOSIUM ON "GENDER, POVERTY, AND SOCIAL INCLUSION"

In December 2024, a group of sociologists organized at the CRECE a symposium on the theme of "Gender, Poverty, and Social Inclusion." This issue is closely linked to the Women's Voices project, which focuses on the safety of homeless women and was presented during the event.

At the symposium, sociologists and social professionals working with women in various NGO's in France discussed the importance of considering gender in social work practices. In France, gender inequalities persist in the areas of social and professional integration. Although programs exist to support vulnerable individuals, they often fail to meet the specific needs of women and gender minorities.



Introduction by Rachel Cohen (part of Women's Voices project) and Marie-Loison, sociologist who organized the symposium.

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As Marie Loison, a sociologist who introduced the symposium, explained, gender is a social construct, a relationship, and a power dynamic that intersects with other power relations. There are indeed specific aspects of female homelessness. While the domination and appropriation of women's bodies by men is a global issue, homeless women—dominated by class, gender, and often race—are particularly affected by gender-based violence throughout their lives, from childhood to adulthood. These psychological, physical, or sexual violences, mainly perpetrated by men, recur over time and across all spheres of life. They are frequently the cause of leaving the parental or marital home and increase the risk of further exposure to such violence. This continuum of violence shapes homeless women's social (in)visibility and their experience of homelessness.

“While the domination and appropriation of women's bodies by men is a global issue, homeless women—dominated by class, gender, and often race—are particularly affected by gender-based violence throughout their lives, from childhood to adulthood.” Marie Loison, sociologist

Throughout the day, professionals and sociologists also discussed the relative "social invisibility" of poor women and the categories used to describe them, such as “migrants”, “homeless”, “drug users”, etc. It was emphasized that while these categories help secure funding and guide people into appropriate programs, they also encourage selection and can evolve throughout a person's life. As a result, individuals are continually forced to "fit into the boxes" created by public policy.

This symposium also explored the issue of gender integration within support programs. Most participants viewed gender-segregated spaces as necessary for women in extreme difficulty. Such environments provide respite and the opportunity to speak openly about trauma. However, some argued that gender integration is inseparable from the inclusion process that these women are expected to engage in.

There was also a focus on the professional integration sector, which tends to perpetuate the devaluation of jobs traditionally associated with women. Many programs direct women toward sectors with precarious, low-paying jobs, such as home care or cleaning. This raises the issue of gender segregation in the labor market. How can we rethink professional integration in a way that takes into account women's aspirations without confining them to traditionally female and underpaid sectors?

A Necessary Political Reflection

In conclusion, sociologist Éric Fassin highlighted the importance of gender analysis in understanding the mechanisms of social inclusion. Gender encompasses more than just relations between men and women; it includes all power dynamics in society. To be effective, social support systems must take these power dynamics into account to combat the reproduction of inequalities.

The symposium underscored the need for deeper dialogue between academic research and field practitioners to develop more inclusive and truly emancipatory approaches. The fight against exclusion must go hand in hand with a broader struggle against gender inequalities, even within the systems that aim to reduce them.

Rachel Cohen, deputy director of « la Cité de Refuge » (Salvation Army, France)