Women's Experiences of Homelessness: A Longitudinal Study

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Drawing on the results of a qualitative longitudinal analysis of the experiences of homeless people using an employment related programme in the UK, this article explores the experiences of homeless women. Research focused on women's trajectories through homelessness remains unusual and this comparatively large study provided an opportunity to look at a group of homeless women over time. The results from 136 in-depth interviews with forty-seven homeless women are reported. The interviews explored their lives prior to becoming homeless, their routes into homelessness and their trajectories through and out of homelessness. The article does not compare experiences across gender, focusing solely on women, because the existing evidence base focuses largely on the experiences of lone homeless men. The goals of the article are twofold, first to add to the existing evidence on women's experiences of homelessness and second to add to emergent debates on whether gender is associated with differentiated trajectories through homelessness.

Keywords: Homelessness, homeless women, longitudinal, trajectories.

Exploring gender and homelessness

Conceptualisation of lone adult homelessness has changed over time (Pleace, 2016). Earlier explanations that emphasised behavioural drivers, homelessness as a 'deviant' choice, were replaced by the idea of a 'deserving' homeless population, who were mentally ill (Zlornick et al., 1999). Cuts to public welfare and health programmes, falls in social and affordable housing supply, alongside shifts in labour markets towards more relatively low paid, part-time work, were also seen, by some, as creating conditions that triggered increasing levels of homelessness (Marcuse, 1988). Debates about the nature of lone adult homelessness have been described as 'sin-talk' (the individual pathology of homelessness as deviance), 'sick-talk' (homelessness triggered by illness) and 'system-talk' (homelessness triggered by changes in welfare systems and economies) (Gowan, 2010). A 'new orthodoxy' had arisen by 1990 arguing homelessness was a result of the interplay between individual and structural variables. The argument was that retrenchment from progressive social and housing policy, linked to economic and social change, created a higher overall risk of homelessness for particular groups of people, whose decisions, characteristics, experiences and needs could be the trigger factors for homelessness and also cause repeated and sustained homelessness (Vincent et al., 1995; McNaughton-Nicolls, 2009; Lee et al., 2010; Pleace, 2016).

These theories have been partially modified over time. There is growing evidence that differences in welfare systems may be associated with variations in the nature and extent

of homelessness. There appears to be more homelessness associated with extremes of poverty in countries with less extensive social protection (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Metraux *et al.*, 2001; Aubry *et al.*, 2012; Chamberlain and Johnson, 2013; Metraux *et al.*, 2016), alongside evidence of homelessness tending to be experienced by small groups with high and complex needs, who appear to have fallen through the more extensive safety nets of highly developed welfare systems (Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015; Benjaminsen, 2016; Pleace *et al.*, 2016; Dyb, 2017).

These ideas and arguments about the nature of homelessness are all associated with an evidence base that reports that lone adult homelessness is a highly gendered phenomenon throughout the economically developed world, an extreme of poverty and socioeconomic marginalisation that is experienced mainly by lone, adult men. Women are present in these homeless populations, but they are never a majority, nor do they ever really get close to equalling the numbers of men (Anderson *et al.*, 1993; Jones and Pleace, 2010; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010).

The standard explanation has been that welfare and social work systems tend to protect women from potential homelessness at a higher rate than men, particularly when a woman has dependent children with her (Baptista, 2010). There is also obfuscation stemming from distinct systems dealing with domestic abuse and violence, refuges and related services, which record activity around helping the overwhelmingly (although not exclusively) female population who experience domestic abuse and who are made *homeless* by that abuse, but who are often recorded in administrative systems as victims of abuse, not as homeless people (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014). Just as lone adult homelessness is supposedly a gendered experience in that most of the people who experience it are men, family homelessness, across the UK, Europe and North America, appears equally gendered, the bulk of homeless families are lone women parents (Toohey *et al.*, 2004; Baptista *et al.*, 2017).

Working from this assumption, it is logical to argue that study of lone adult women's homelessness, while it is still a visible social phenomenon, can never be more than the study of a small subset of the homeless population. This is because many women, who become, or who are at risk of homelessness, get assisted by domestic violence and social/ family services, and in the case of the UK, are also protected by family-orientated statutory homelessness systems (Fitzpatrick and Pleace, 2012).

Feminist scholars have argued that women's homelessness is interpreted and responded to within the culturally expected 'norms' of women fulfilling specific roles, as partner/wife, mother or carer (Watson with Austerberry, 1986; Watson, 2000; see also Edgar and Doherty, 2001). Within a patriarchy, women are not expected to exist outside the father/male partner controlled 'home', which means lone female homelessness is, from a patriarchal perspective, seen as an extreme and rare event (Löfstrand and Thörn, 2004; Baptista, 2010; Hansen Lofstrand and Quilgars, 2016). These arguments centre on the idea that society does not *expect* women to be homeless, because women are viewed, essentially, as being the core of family structures, the core of what society understands as 'home'. The idea that lone women may be experiencing homelessness at any sort of scale collides with dominant social and cultural paradigms about who women are, or how they live their lives.

While it is possible to argue about the relative importance of these different potential influences on the extent of social scientific research on women's homelessness, it is clearly the case that the experience of homeless women has received only sporadic

attention. There has been research focusing on women, but the bulk of the evidence base on lone adult homelessness has been characterised by recording what proportion of a studied population were women and noting any broad variations between genders, rather than by detailed examination of women's experiences (Baptista, 2010; Mayock and Bretherton, 2016).

Explanations of homelessness that effectively disempower homeless people, i.e. they are homeless because of 'sickness' or 'sin' or 'systems' (Gowan, 2010), have been subject to sustained criticism (Somerville, 1992; Neale, 1997; Somerville, 2013; Pleace, 2016), a key aspect of which is the lack of consideration of the impact of the agency of homeless people (McNaughton-Nicolls, 2009). Likewise, earlier explanations of women's homelessness that centred on patriarchy have been criticised as both depriving women of agency, i.e. they are portrayed as being swept into homelessness in ways they cannot control by patriarchy, and as failing to take account of other social and economic factors (Drake, 1987; Neale, 1997; Bretherton, 2017).

Some researchers are now arguing that there is evidence of women *choosing* particular routes through homelessness at higher rates than men. There is older evidence of homeless lone women parents 'exhausting' informal options before seeking formal assistance in the USA and UK (Shinn *et al.*, 1998; Pleace *et al.*, 2008) and also some more recent studies indicating that women are more likely to seek informal solutions, relying on friends, family and acquaintances. Further, when women do approach services, it is quite often only at the point at which they have exhausted these other, informal, options (Bretherton, 2017). In essence, women may be experiencing 'hidden' homelessness at higher rates than men, sleeping on floors, on sofas and in spare rooms, with no legal rights to the space they are occupying, possibly limited control over that space and limited privacy, and while not on the streets or in a shelter, definitely without a home (Baptista, 2010; Bowpitt *et al.*, 2011; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012; Mayock *et al.*, 2015; Bretherton, 2017; Johnson *et al.*, 2017).

Defining 'hidden' homelessness in exact terms is difficult. If the focus is on the physical situation in which someone is living, defining who should be seen as 'legitimately' homeless can become mired in political, ideological and cultural arguments about what constitutes actual homelessness (Phillips, 2000). However, the work around ETHOS (the European typology of homelessness) and the MPHASIS project on enumerating homelessness has been useful (Busch-Geertsema, 2010; Pleace and Bretherton, 2013; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014). Under these definitions, homelessness is the absence of any legal rights and secure personal space, i.e. homelessness includes situations where a woman is sleeping on someone's floor, on a sofa, or in a spare room, without anything that defines that space as her own. Homelessness is the absence of the legal, physical and cultural constructions that are used to create a home (Busch-Geertsema, 2010). There is a consensus across many European and OECD countries that homelessness is the absence of a recognisable 'home', rather than just the absence of a roof (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014).

Women experiencing lone adult homelessness also appear to have different characteristics from men. Domestic violence and abuse are causes of female homelessness in a way that does not apply to lone men to the same extent (Jones, 1999; Reeve *et al.*, 2007; Mayock *et al.*, 2016). Lone homeless men can be fathers who are separated from their children, but the experience of being a parent separated from children appears to be much more widespread among lone homeless women (Jones, 1999; Reeve *et al.*, 2007; Mayock

et al., 2015). These routes into homelessness and differences in life experiences may, because they are clearly distinct from those of many lone adult homeless men, also influence the ways in which women experience and respond to homelessness.

A comparative absence of data may also be leading to assumptions that are not backed by robust data. One of the key tropes around women's homelessness is the idea that it is closely linked to sex work, essentially for the purposes of survival and for the purposes of maintaining shelter, i.e. sex is exchanged for a roof over one's head. While there is evidence that these kinds of association can exist (Harding and Hamilton, 2009), some research has raised questions about how widespread it actually is and highlighted the dangers of negative, false, stereotyping of homeless women associated with patriarchal imagery that – again – processes women's homelessness as 'deviance' from the expected family/partner centred roles, being outside the 'home' being conflated with deviance from 'expected' female sexual norms (Löfstrand and Thörn, 2004; Hansen Löfstrand and Quilgars, 2016).

This article has two goals. The first is to add to the evidence base specifically focused on the experience of lone adult women who become homeless. The second is to draw on the results of a large, longitudinal, qualitative study of an economic integration programme for homeless people which created an opportunity to look at women's homelessness over time. The article looks at women's trajectories through homelessness and begins to explore the possibility that those trajectories may have patterns associated with gender.

Methods

This article is based on an opportunity to study homelessness among lone adult women that arose through a large-scale evaluation of an employment, education and training programme for lone homeless adults. That study centred on a longitudinal study that interviewed people using the programme at six-monthly intervals, over a two-year period (2014–2015). The programme operated in six locations, all of which were in the UK, Birmingham/Coventry, Edinburgh, Merseyside, Newcastle, Oxford and London (Pleace and Bretherton, 2017).

A total of 158 respondents took part in 406 interviews for the cohort study. In all, 169 hours of interviews were recorded and analysed using dedicated qualitative analysis software. The interviews ranged from approximately twenty to forty minutes in length, typically lasting around thirty minutes. The interviews were designed to assess the impact of the programme being evaluated on homelessness trajectories, which meant analysis of life history, routes into homelessness, the history of each individual's homelessness and, where an exit from homelessness occurred, how that exit had come about (Pleace and Bretherton, 2014, 2017; Bretherton and Pleace, 2016). Participants in the longitudinal research were asked for permission to analyse their trajectories through homelessness alongside exploring their views of the programme that was being evaluated. Ethical approval for the research was secured from the University of York Ethics Committee.

While the original study was intended as programme evaluation, this task was approached by exploring existing trajectories through homelessness in detail and then assessing the extent to which contact with the programme had altered these trajectories, the ultimate metric of success being an exit from homelessness clearly associated with the programme (Pleace and Bretherton, 2017). This created a rich, qualitative, data set on the *experience* of homelessness which could be used to explore women's trajectories of homelessness.

Sampling was based simply on who had engaged with the service for more than a few weeks, the only criteria being that, because this was a study of the impact of a programme, someone had to have actually made appreciable use of that programme. Any study of lone adult homelessness faces the same challenges around the representativeness of a group or sample, centred on the sample universe not being known. Data on homelessness, while comparatively extensive in the UK (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014), are almost always inherently limited, as surveys miss individuals who are concealed and administrative data, or studies taking samples from people using services, like the one reported here, are ultimately only samples of the homeless population using those services (Pleace, 2016a). The programme was also quite large, with some 4,000 women using it over 2014–2015, and the women who took part in the interviews were not necessarily representative of all the women who engaged with it.

Data were collected on forty-seven lone adult women with experience of homelessness. Collectively, the forty seven women agreed to take part in 136 interviews. The median number of interviews was three per participant and the mean was 2.9 interviews per participant. Overall, 23 per cent of the women were interviewed once, 13 per cent twice, 15 per cent three times and 49 per cent four times. Small cash payments were offered in return for the women's time, which were increased at each successive interview (Pleace and Bretherton, 2017). Maintaining contact with homeless and precariously or temporarily housed populations is a challenge, even for the most well-resourced research (Scutella and Johnson, 2018). The two-year longitudinal study used a 'permission to locate' approach, which involved asking each participant for permission to recontact them directly, or through a number of other individuals or services that they specified. Permission was reviewed and renewed at each contact.

Alongside experiences of homelessness, the interviews covered physical health, mental health, social support, housing, employment, emotional support, community engagement, crime and addiction. As a semi-structured approach was used, participants were also encouraged and supported to raise any issues or experiences that concerned them. Alongside this, the interviews explored the experience of using the programme from the women's perspectives. The women were also asked for their opinions on homelessness in a broader sense and their views on the kinds of assistance homeless people needed.

Thematic grid analysis with the aid of qualitative analysis software *Nvivo* was employed, with the researchers checking each other's work and reviewing transcripts to ensure there was consistency in how the interviews were conducted and, in the analysis, which used a jointly developed coding frame (Clark, 2003; Gilmore *et al.*, 2019; Jackson and Bazeley, 2019). After the initial interview, the respondents were given a potted history of their previous responses and asked how their circumstances had changed, which meant that the researchers' previous interpretations and analysis of each respondent's situation were relayed back to them, providing an additional series of checks on the accuracy of the analysis (Bretherton and Pleace, 2016; Pleace and Bretherton, 2017).

The women

The forty-seven women were mainly in their thirties and forties. Two-thirds of the women were of White European ethnic origin, and one third were of Black British/African Caribbean ethnic origin or from other ethnic backgrounds.

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Four of the forty-seven women self-reported a criminal record. Poor health, including limiting illness and/or a disability were self-reported by nearly half the women (twenty-two). Seven women self-reported problematic use of drugs and/or alcohol and nearly two thirds self-reported that they had a history of mental health problems.

Nineteen were homeless at first contact with the programme and nineteen had a recent history of homelessness. The others had been assessed by the programme as being at imminent risk of homelessness. Experience of living rough was quite widespread but appeared to be mainly on a short-term basis, although some women reported repeated experiences.

Thirteen women had not completed formal education, seventeen had finished school and another seventeen had reached further and/or higher education (post-sixteen education, including University). All were unemployed at first contact with the researchers.

Becoming homeless

The main, self-reported, trigger events for homelessness given by the women were mental health problems, and violence, both domestic violence and abuse, and threats, abuse and violence from neighbouring households.

Differing experiences of the associations between mental health and homelessness were reported by the women participating in the research.

> Yeah, been homeless. I lost a University place in my twenties due to mental health issues. Couch surfing.

> I've got a diagnosis for ADHD which in my case the diagnosis and the specialised support has made a huge difference in terms of managing what were the main causes of me being homeless in the first place.

> I suffer from depression and that became worse as I didn't have somewhere to live. I was sleeping at other people's houses and it just got worse and worse, unless I had somewhere of my own. I'm typical of someone with depression. You know, not much of a talker when things get tough and you want to just hide away.

Violence and abuse in their former homes were reported as trigger events for homelessness. However, domestic abuse, while clearly present, was not as widely reported among this group of homeless women as some earlier studies have suggested (Jones, 1999; Mayock *et al.*, 2016).

> I had to leave my . . . I used to have my house with my partner, had to leave there through domestic violence.

> . . . I was homeless . . . cos I was leaving a relationship that was domestic violence.

However, violence and abuse as a trigger for homelessness existed in a wider form that some earlier research has indicated. Women reported losing their homes not because there were risks of abuse and violence from within their own household, but from neighbouring households, anti-social, violent and abusive behaviour had driven some of the women out of their homes.

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Yeah, I've been homeless. I'm fine now, I've got a place, but I had problems with bad neighbours in the past . . . homeless because of them, and about two weeks ago I was homeless, had a lot of trouble with neighbours . . .

I've experienced some harassment off neighbours, so that can make things quite difficult.

My own experiences of it [homelessness]*, several of them, my last one was because of a neighbour who was really violent, ended up in a refuge.*

The 'trigger' events that women identified, like mental health problems or domestic abuse had led to homelessness because the women lacked personal, practical and financial resources, did not have, or had exhausted, informal support from family or friends, had either avoided services, or been turned away when seeking assistance. Some women emphasised an experience of poverty as the immediate cause of homelessness and as the main obstacle they faced to exiting homelessness.

Having an income, because for me that was what caused mine [homelessness]*, I didn't have a consistent income that I had before . . . It upsets me because when I think to move forward you need money in this world, you really need that funding and that finance behind you.*

Pathways through homelessness

The women's experiences of homelessness were diverse, but there was evidence supporting the conclusions of some of the more recent work on gender and homelessness (Mayock and Bretherton, 2016; Reeve, 2018). Women reported contact with formalised homelessness services but were also often relying on informal support from family, friends and acquaintances when they experienced homelessness. There was evidence that in order to keep some sort of roof over their heads, many of these women had relied on informal support that they had organised for themselves and that those who were making use of formal services had often relied on informal support, on family, friends or acquaintances, at some point during their homelessness. Six of the women described some of these experiences.

Yeah. Used to have to sofa surf, around my friends, and I slept rough and stuff.

Sofa surfed for a while, but I got kicked out eventually.

I was sofa surfing for about six months.

So, I was mainly a sofa surfer, with occasional rough sleeping.

I have no place just at the moment. I'm just staying with different friends every other day.

I've been homeless for almost ten years of my adult life and moving around and sofa surfing, staying with friends and temporary accommodation and supported accommodation.

If the definition of homelessness and therefore 'hidden' homelessness discussed earlier in this article is accepted (Busch-Geertsema, 2010; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014),

the findings of this research support the assertion of some recent studies that at least some women's homelessness may not be visible, because women use informal responses, choosing to rely on family, friends and acquaintances (Mayock *et al.*, 2015; Mayock and Bretherton, 2016). However, there was also evidence that access to formal services could be limited, in that while women were drawing on their own resources to find informal solutions to homelessness, this was in part a reaction to not being able to secure help elsewhere.

Barriers to formal services were reported. The different homelessness laws that operate in the four main administrative regions of the UK (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) are increasingly focused on prevention, but the original legislation was designed to protect people at risk from violence and homeless children (Wilson and Barton, 2018). The women had for the most part not received accommodation from the statutory homelessness system, or significant support from associated preventative services. The study predated the most recent legislative reforms in Wales and England that are designed to enhance preventative services. There is longstanding evidence that lone adults, including lone women, can face multiple barriers to assistance under the homelessness laws (Niner, 1989; Anderson *et al.*, 1993; Pleace *et al.*, 2008; Bretherton *et al.*, 2013; Dobie *et al.*, 2014; National Audit Office, 2017) and this appeared to be the case for this group of women. Resources have become concentrated on homeless families containing dependent children over the last twenty years (Carr and Hunter, 2008; Bretherton *et al.*, 2013; National Audit Office, 2017). When the women had sought help from local authorities their experience had generally not been positive:

> *I didn't realise that the council lets you become homeless before they step in. I didn't know any of this, and they kept saying they would work with me to find somewhere, but I didn't realise they were leaving me to go through the eviction, go to court . . .*

> *. . . the council put us into me council flat where I've been for two years, in* [date] *was two years . . . Well, I ended up having to take the council to the court because they wouldn't . . . well, Citizens Advice* [charity offering legal support] *referred us to a solicitor* [lawyer] *who prosecuted the council through court because they wouldn't behave legally.*

> *I'm having to battle with the council and everything, get MPs* [elected member of UK Parliament] *involved and everything.*

Contact with emergency accommodation and temporary, congregate, supported housing for homeless people, generally known as hostels, was reported only by a minority of the women. When women did experience these services, it could involve sometimes long stays and the experiences were sometimes reported as being stressful.

> *I have yes, I've stayed in various hostels. First hostel was in* [X]*, that got closed down, sold off the building, threw everyone out, then I moved to another one in* [X]*, that got closed. So, then I stayed with various people in various places . . . I'm still floating.*

> *. . . everyone's got their different issues and they come from different backgrounds, and they're there for different reasons. I mean, you get all that tension. I mean, you could have like, two individuals who had a bad day, and they don't mean to take it out on each other, but they do. So, imagine, times that by fifty people . . . .*

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It has been hypothesised that women may avoid services dominated by homeless men (Mayock *et al.*, 2015). There was not clear evidence that this had been a major factor in women's engagement with homelessness services, although of course this was a group of women using an employment, education and training programme that was also used by a largely male population. The programme offered some women-only activities, but most service provision, other than one-to-one support with workers, often involved being in a mixed gender setting (Bretherton and Pleace, 2016). The experience of women in this instance tended towards services not offering the right range of support, or as inaccessible, partly perhaps of the presence of men, both influencing service design and limiting availability, but the presence of men per se, did not seem to explain why use of formal services was not greater. One additional finding was potentially important here, which was that some women also reported that information on service provision in different areas could be limited.

> . . . it's how to get out of it, you know what I mean, and a lot of people don't know that there's support, you know, and I used to have this misconception that the support isn't there for me, you know.

The women could be grouped into one of four pathways through homelessness during the course of two years of data collection, allowing that not all forty-seven women completed all four interviews. The largest group, of twenty-five women, had pathways that were characterised by a broadly 'usual' life, in the sense of living an existence in which they were stably housed, had often been in paid work or full time further or higher education and had the conventional family and personal relationships. For this group, homelessness or the risk of homelessness had been associated with a sudden shift, which in many cases was a deterioration in health, particularly mental health, which had disrupted their normal life and the stability of their housing. Over the course of the analysis, this group tended to self-exit from homelessness, with the support of the programme and other services, alongside informal social supports, i.e. their homelessness was a transitional state that had been associated with illness or another 'shock', which in a few cases had included domestic abuse, that had been overcome.

Three smaller groups had differing trajectories. There were eight women who had experienced social and economic marginalisation for prolonged periods, including sustained and recurrent homelessness. Contact with the programme had beneficial effects for this group, which meant that they began to change direction and move out of homelessness, as both the programme itself and other services, sometimes accessed via the programme, provided the correct mix of support that had hitherto been absent. There was no sense in which this was a reorientation of the individual, i.e. a 'choice' not to be homeless, instead the evidence suggested that being offered a route out of homelessness, by a service model that emphasised and respected individual choice, had been the key factor in altering pathways (Bretherton and Pleace, 2016).

For two other groups, the pathways through homelessness over the course of 2014–2015 were not positive. One small group of five women had made steps towards exiting homelessness, including moves towards further or higher education and towards paid work, but deteriorations in mental and physical health had reversed these gains, even where access to treatment was being facilitated, movement away from homelessness had not occurred.

Finally, there was a group of nine women, characterised by recurrent and sustained homelessness and higher support needs, whose situation remained a constant, they received some benefits from participating in the programme and were often being supported and accommodated by other homelessness services, but the right combination of support and access to housing that would have enabled an exit from homelessness had not been found. The study slightly predated the increasing use of 'Housing First' models as a response to homelessness among people with complex needs, which has shown some significant successes with long-term and repeatedly homeless women (Quilgars and Pleace, 2018).

Exiting homelessness

At the point of last contact, thirty-three of the forty-seven women described themselves as moving away from homelessness and towards mainstream social and economic life. Eight had secured work and the other twenty-five were in education, training, working and/or in a position where they could actively seek work. These women were in the largest group who had experienced transitional homelessness as a result of a 'sudden shock' and those who, after more sustained experience of homelessness and socioeconomic marginalisation had been assisted away from homelessness by the employment, education and training programme that was being evaluated (Pleace and Bretherton, 2017).

Twenty-four of these thirty-three women reported they were housed. Of these, the largest group, of sixteen women, were in social rented housing, another six were in the private rented sector, one was in owner occupation and another in accommodation tied to their work. Of the remaining nine, two were housed, but reported they were going to have to move because their private rented sector tenancies were time limited. Four women were in supported temporary accommodation and three were still experiencing hidden homelessness but regarded themselves - and were established - as being clearly en route to their own housing. For the women in the other two groups, the five whose progress away from homelessness had been curtailed by a deterioration in mental or physical health and the nine whose situations had not been changed by contact with the programme, there was not a clear trajectory to settled housing.

There are dangers in associating routes out of homelessness (and routes into homelessness) with individual action or inaction and seeing exits from homelessness in terms of 'determination' rather than luck (O'Flaherty, 2010), having access to the right supports and actually being in a position in which it is possible to exercise meaningful choices (Parsell and Parsell, 2012). For some of the women themselves, the idea of there being a straightforward 'exit' from homelessness was problematic. These women questioned the underlying logic by which some homelessness services worked; the idea homelessness could be exited on a sustained basis through individual action.

> . . . [services] *expect you to have sorted yourself out, be abstinent, got a job, got . . . it doesn't always work like that, do you know what I mean? It often goes in cycles. You get a place, you're homeless again, do you know what I mean? People need support for a long time afterwards.*

A key finding was that many of the women led lives in which precarity, in terms of income, housing and, to a lesser extent, relationships was a near constant. Those who had 'exited' homelessness had not always done so in a way that they viewed as necessarily

being sustainable. If they had work, the amount they earned per week could vary, jobs were often short-term and their housing, which was generally in the private rented sector, was on short-term tenancies. Rent levels, relative to what the women were able to earn and/or secure through the benefits system, were high, meaning that the women who had exited homelessness were often in financially challenging situations. Some of the women who had 'exited' homelessness did not view themselves as being secure from becoming homeless again, instead they were sometimes returning to situations that they saw as uncertain.

> *Well I've never had to sleep rough. But from an early age, I've been travelling all over the place. So, I know what it's like to, sort of, not have a permanent home and not only that, but I've had, sort of, very close experiences with people who are living in, sort of, very precarious situations as well. So, you know, it all kind of comes together.*

> *With private rented* [housing] *it can be very precarious. How can you plan if you're only going to be somewhere for a year? Like, you just said to me, 'Nearly four years.' I keep saying in my mind three and a half. You don't realise that it's been that long, and sometimes it takes that long to resettle from experiences and actually begin to get to where you're going.*

> *I've had Housing Benefit stopped about two or three times. It's stopped at the moment, for about the last month, so I'm constantly beginning to think, okay, I felt as if I've finally settled down for a bit, but then, who knows where this goes ...*

Evidence of populations that exist in a near constant state of housing precarity is not new (Meert and Bourgeois, 2005; Mayock *et al.*, 2015). However, this group of women were quite often describing shifts between one precarious housing, or accommodation, situation after another, which could be punctuated with actual homelessness, rather than a very simple pathway of housing stability, then homelessness and then a return to stability.

From this perspective, homelessness was an extreme point in the lives of women that were characterised by physical and legal housing precarity. Homelessness existed within a *pattern*, rather than being a break from a 'normal' trajectory through housing, which raises questions about what we should regard as a 'successful' exit for a woman from lone adult homelessness (Meert and Bourgeois, 2005). The view that ending homelessness is somehow a sufficient or desirable 'outcome' in itself, has been criticised in other contexts (Johnson *et al.*, 2012; Quilgars and Pleace, 2016). This research raises some questions around how we need to define what constitutes a true 'exit' from homelessness in general and, in particular, what it means for a woman who has experienced homelessness to feel that the risk she will ever experience it again has been minimised.

While there have been breakthroughs in service design, such as Housing First, the results of this study showed that there are still groups of homeless people, in this instance groups of homeless women, whose mix of needs is not being properly recognised and responded to. The evidence of a mutually reinforcing interplay of addiction, crime, mental illness, poor physical health and long-term and recurrent homelessness is longstanding (Kemp *et al.*, 2006) and this research, alongside other studies, shows that women are within this group of homeless people and need the right mix of services, which may need to be gender specific, to exit homelessness (Bretherton, 2017; Quilgars and Pleace, 2018).

Discussion

This article had two main objectives. The first was to add to the evidence base on women's experience of lone adult homelessness. There are caveats to this research which have been noted above, but the research did allow for the collection and analysis of detailed information on the lives and experiences of forty-seven homeless women over a two-year period, which have been presented here.

The second objective was to consider the extent to which the results of this analysis support the idea that the experience of homelessness may be shaped or influenced by gender. Here, the point is not that women's homelessness will necessarily always be distinct from that of men, nor that women and men will always take differing pathways through homelessness that can be broadly associated with gender. Instead, the argument is that women's experiences, characteristics, situation, needs and choices mean both their routes through homelessness and the help they need to exit homelessness may be different from those of men (Bretherton, 2017). These differences are not, it is important to stress, constants. It is rather that gender may be a significant variable in understanding trends and patterns within homelessness and that gender – in particular, the experience of women – should not be assumed to be unimportant, which is something we have been dangerously close to doing in the past.

The aspects of this research that reinforce the idea that women's experiences may be different centre on women's use of informal responses. The scale and nature of women's homelessness may be being missed because we have paid insufficient attention to the rate of hidden homelessness among lone adult women (Mayock *et al.*, 2016). The associations between domestic abuse and homelessness, alongside separation from children, are less evident among this group of women, although some did report their homelessness stemming from domestic violence and abuse. This may be related to who these women were and the kind of service they were using, in that this was not a group comprised largely of women with high and complex needs or sustained experience of homelessness, many had a transitional experience of homelessness. The risks of the old sampling error, of overrepresenting people with high and complex needs by visiting homelessness services or drawing samples over a short time period, that Culhane and colleagues first reported in the late 1990s (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998), remain. We need to be careful that our picture of who homeless women are is not based on recurrently and long-term women with complex needs who are most likely to be using homelessness services on any given day. The finding that the biggest element among the forty-seven women were those whose hitherto generally normal lives had been disrupted by a shock, like sudden severe illness or a relationship breakdown, but who had, with some assistance, regained their previous trajectory is an interesting one and raises some further questions about how women might be experiencing homelessness.

Finally, there is the evidence that precariousness in housing, income and employment endured beyond homelessness for many of those women who had 'exited' homelessness. The associations between housing precarity, linked to income precarity, and homelessness are being increasingly recognised and in the context of evidence that housing exclusion, alongside poverty, follows a gendered pattern in much of Europe, with women being more likely to be in situations of disadvantage (Fondation Abbé Pierre and FEANTSA, 2019). There is a need to consider what really constitutes a meaningful 'exit' from homelessness for lone adult women.

A proper understanding of the specific intersections between gender on homelessness does require further, dedicated research (Bretherton, 2017; Bretherton and Pleace, 2018; Reeve, 2018). This article adds to the evidence that there are some differences in how women can experience homelessness, in terms of how it is caused, experienced and how it may be exited. If nothing else, the extent of the experience of hidden homelessness among women requires further investigation and it seems unlikely that differentiated patterns of causation, even if we need to be cautious about making simple assumptions, are not also associated with differentiated pathways through homelessness.

Gender seems unlikely to have a simple, 'binary' effect on homelessness trajectories. It is probably not the case lone adult woman will always have a far greater probability of experiencing particular patterns of causation and trajectories through homelessness than a man, but there are indications of differences in tendency. Gender is important, not as a sole determinant of homelessness exits, trajectories or causation, but because it appears to be associated with gender-differentiated tendencies in causation and experiences, it is a factor in the experience of homelessness that must be taken into account and properly explored. Women do not necessarily experience homelessness in the same way as men and we need to know more about why, how significant any differences are and what the implications for research, service design and strategic responses to homelessness may be.

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