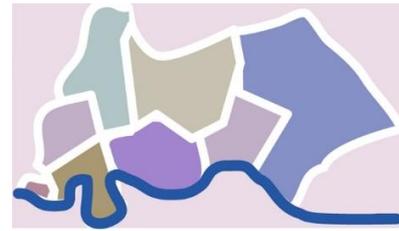


## Womens Hidden Homelessness

Margaret Williams

Homelessness Project Manager

East London Housing Partnership



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### Rough Sleeping and Womens Hidden Homelessness

Womens homelessness is under reported and frequently linked to experience of abuse. Rough sleeping is the starkest form of homelessness and it is often the most vulnerable female survivors who sleep rough during their escape from abuse. Women rough sleepers also experience domestic abuse in their relationships on the streets, where specialist gender specific services to address their particular needs are few and far between.

Reports from Crisis, St Mungos, AVA and Homeless Link amongst others have highlighted the hidden nature of womens homelessness, its links with domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). Alongside these findings are calls for specialist womens sector organisations to collaborate with the rough sleeping sector to deliver a gender specific approach to rough sleeping that is responsive to women and men's different routes into and out of homelessness. It is rarely a single incident or experience that results in women rough sleeping, more often it is a series of circumstances and events that lead to women losing their home, or being unable to return to their home due to the threat and fear of abuse. Womens Aids' study of the findings from the first year of the No Woman Turned Away project reported that 11% of women in the study slept rough and 40% stayed with family or friends during their escape from domestic abuse.<sup>i</sup>

When arrangements with family and friends break down women may find themselves with nowhere to stay and no option but rough sleeping. This is particularly so for the most vulnerable women, those with mental health or substance use issues and women without dependent children, or experiencing residential separation from their children.

A Crisis study of womens homelessness (2006) identified that staying with family and friends was the most common accommodation situation for 51% of homeless women, 62% had slept rough at some stage.<sup>ii</sup>

St Mungos (2014) reported that nearly 50% of their female clients had experienced domestic abuse and 19% had experienced childhood abuse. Domestic abuse contributed to the homelessness of a third of women in their study<sup>iii</sup>.

*'I did a lot of sofa surfing after I left my violent partner. But then I ran out of friends and became homeless.'* St Mungo's client

Survivors with multiple or complex support needs such as substance use, mental health issues, trauma or childhood abuse, are frequently those living in precarious circumstances. Women that are the most disadvantaged and have the most complex needs are at greatest risk of their needs not being met and face the risk of rough sleeping.

AVA (2015) reported that the links between gender based violence, mental ill health and substance use are well documented and for many the trauma associated with violence is managed by substance use. Despite these clear links safe accommodation is often difficult to access.<sup>iv</sup>

Few local authority areas have the services in place that respond collectively to women's multiple disadvantage, experience of violence and homelessness. In some cases where services do exist they are disconnected from each other, leaving women with few safe options.

Here a woman without children and without recourse to public funds who entered the UK as the spouse of a British Citizen talks about her experience of rough sleeping

*'My husband was violent to me and threw me out of the house. The first night I slept on his door step, I had nowhere else to go. The police told me to go to social services, who said they could not help me as I had no recourse to public funds and he was responsible for me. I was sent to housing, then back to the police and back to social services. I was given a list of numbers to call, none of them could help because I had no recourse to public funds. Eventually I went back to the house, he beat me and threw me out again. A neighbour called the police and I ended up in hospital and then a shared house for refugees.'*

This woman was eventually accommodated in a refuge and supported to make a successful application for leave to remain under the domestic violence rule.

In 2014 East London Housing Partnership<sup>v</sup> set up the East London Women's Project (ELWP), a pilot funded for 18 months. ELWP provided shared, supported accommodation for female rough sleepers with multiple disadvantage who did not fall within the local authority duty to provide accommodation.

The project was funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and was delivered by St Mungos. Support was provided by an all-female specialist team in a woman only house in the sub region. ELWP assisted women to move on from their experience of rough sleeping, to re-establish themselves and where possible to return to work, education or training. For women who were able to live independently ELWP provided a rent deposit and accommodation in the private rented sector, with resettlement support.

At the point of referral primary support needs were

Substance use 65%

Mental health 77%

Offending behaviour 58%

Domestic abuse 73%

The majority of women had multiple support needs. Before accessing ELWP women had been squatting, rough sleeping, in prison, living in insecure accommodation, sofa surfing and for most women a combination of these.

Physical ill health, self-care and living skills were a support need for almost 90% of women using the project. Anecdotal feedback from staff was that women who had not disclosed abuse at the point of referral later disclosed violence or other forms of abuse, often extending back to childhood, once an empathic and trusting relationship had developed between staff and the woman. For women using ELWP rough sleeping was a symptom of the problem rather than the problem itself.

*'Most if not all of the women had a history of domestic violence and for many this was the catalyst for their homelessness.'* ELWP Evaluation 2016<sup>vi</sup>

Using figures available prior to opening, ELWP estimated that the project would assist 25 women. Unable to secure further funding, ELWP closed in December 2015<sup>vii</sup> by which time 26 women had been accommodated in the project, with an average length of stay of 7.5 months. There were 92 referrals all of whom met the referral criteria although only 10 were listed on the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN).<sup>viii</sup> The number of referrals highlighted the hidden nature of womens homelessness. Most women had not had consistent engagement with housing options services or services for rough sleepers before hearing about the project. A key success of ELWP was the gender specific person-centred support delivered by staff.

*'Service users were overwhelmingly positive about the key worker support they received from the project and most felt that this was the biggest single benefit and contributor to their progress.'* ELWP Evaluation 2016.

A Crisis study (2006) found that 10% of homeless women had not been in contact with any services since becoming homeless and 23% had not been in regular contact. 40% had not sought assistance when they became homeless and had relied on advice and support from friends. Bureaucracy and inflexible services deterred women from seeking advice and male dominated services were avoided.<sup>ix</sup>

It is irrational to expect women to use services that may also be used by men that have threatened or abused them, worse still for survivors to be in the position that there is no other option but to use those services.

ELHP was able to re-establish the East London Womens Project (ELWP) following a successful bid to the DCLG fund for specialist accommodation based support and service reform. ELWP provides shared supported accommodation for female survivors of VAWG with multiple support needs. The new revised ELWP is delivered in partnership between ELHP, St Mungos, Praxis and AVA with an all-female staff team of specialist workers in the project.

ELWP is open to self-defining LGBT women and one fully funded bed space is set aside for women without recourse to public funds.

### Counting and Monitoring of Rough Sleepers

The CHAIN is a multi-agency database recording comprehensive information about rough sleepers in London. Commissioned and funded by the Greater London Authority (GLA) and managed by St Mungos, the system helps service providers to share information in order to help clients. Crucially information held on CHAIN helps decision makers to develop strategies and services. CHAIN provides an analysis of trends, numbers and needs that local authorities and services in London and other areas can compare.<sup>x</sup>

In the year 2016/17 15% (1175) of people seen sleeping rough in London were women and 85% (6929) were men, other details in the main CHAIN reports are not reported by gender. A breakdown of reports by gender would help to target support needs and other interventions more effectively for both women and men. For this article CHAIN have provided the following information broken down by gender:

A higher percentage of women (14%) were recorded in the 18 – 25 age group than men (9%) and a higher percentage of men (36%) were recorded in the over 45 age group than women (29%).

- 15% of women and 9% of men had been in care
- 22% of women and 35% of men had been in prison
- 1% of women and 8% of men had been in the armed forces.

Support needs information is derived from assessments carried out with rough sleepers.

- 26% of women and 14% of men had a mental health support need
- 5% of women and 6% of men had a drug support need
- 4% of women and 15% of men had an alcohol support need.
- 17% of women and 13% of men had a combination of alcohol, drugs and mental health support needs
  
- 11% of women and 3% of men reported being a victim of violence, harassment or abuse leading to loss of their last settled base.
- 0% of women and 0.7% of men reported that they had lost their home as a result of being a perpetrator of domestic violence

Rough sleeping of people bedded down on the street is the most visible example of street homelessness. All local authorities are required to submit an annual figure to DCLG indicating the number of people sleeping rough in their borough. This snapshot can be captured through an estimate or count of people seen rough sleeping in a single night during October or November.

The figures are used by central government and local authorities to determine whether current measures are effectively tackling rough sleeping or if new approaches are needed. DCLG produces a statistical release based on the data each year. Counting criteria requires that people are seen bedded down or about to bed down, either lying down, sleeping, sitting or standing next to bedding, in tents, doorways, parks, bus shelters or encampments.

The 11% of women identified by Womens Aid as sleeping rough during their wait for refuge accommodation would not appear in these figures unless they came to the attention of street outreach services during their time on the streets.

The counting and monitoring of rough sleepers has a gender bias towards the male experience of rough sleeping. Reports and studies by homelessness sector organisations evidence that many women rough sleep differently to men, in the main to protect themselves, avoiding bedding down by riding public transport, hiding, using 24-hour services such as bus garages, or walking at night. Women are incredibly resourceful, making themselves invisible through blending in with other people around them in environments such as hospitals, stations and airports. Therefore womens homelessness will not be accurately represented in the counts and estimates figures or in CHAIN data, and it is these figures that are used to develop services and plan provision.

The Female Entrenched Rough Sleepers Project (FERPS)<sup>xi</sup> provides interventions for older female rough sleepers in London with mental health problems who have been out of accommodation for some time. FERSP women move across borough boundaries using buses, trains and hospitals rather than bed down at night and do not sleep in places where they might come to the attention of outreach services. These are women who, for example, might sit at a bus stop with a shopping trolley, seen but not seen. They are nonetheless sometimes known to services, who struggle to engage with them.

*'These women often feel too unsafe to bed down at night and so traverse local authority boundaries on public transport or on foot.'* Daniel Jones, CNWL Joint Homelessness Team

An example provided of a FERSP client with a history of domestic abuse was an older female who left home escaping violence from her partner, and simply did not go home again.

Because of their transient habits and avoidance of contact with services FERSP women have lost any local connection with a borough that they might have had. Their age, poor mental health and lack of visibility make the group particularly vulnerable.

*'Initiatives have not extended to meet the needs of this group of women who are rejected far more than they reject contact'. Dagnija O'Connell, FERSP*

Examples of abuse experienced by FERSP women while living on the streets include a 70 year old women woken by a man with his hands round her neck, checking for jewellery, on another occasion she woke to find a man with his hands in her trouser pockets attempting to assault her. Women reported being accosted for sex, offered money for sex or expected to offer sex in return for accommodation. They experience verbal abuse, indifference, intolerance and rejection on a daily basis while they try to survive on the streets.

A survey of 458 rough sleepers by Crisis found that one in three had been hit, kicked or subjected to violence. Half said they had been intimidated or threatened and 10% had been urinated upon. Others had their possessions stolen and 7% had been sexually assaulted while homeless.<sup>xii</sup>

### Rough Sleeping and Domestic Abuse

Perpetrators of VAWG also gravitate to the street through similar routes to survivors. Following loss of their accommodation or action against them perpetrators presenting to housing options are likely to be found intentionally homeless and like survivors spend time sofa surfing. When these relationships breakdown they may become street homeless.

*'Work with perpetrators on the streets is essential to increase womens safety. In-depth work is highly specialist and should not be undertaken without appropriate training.'* Davina James-Hanman, 2011<sup>xiii</sup>

Action to move perpetrators off the streets could include rough sleeping organisations undertaking Respect<sup>xiv</sup> training, to include interventions based on behaviour change and managing risk. Work with perpetrators should be delivered from the perspective of improving the safety and security of women.

A case study from a domestic abuse and rough sleeping event in 2011<sup>xv</sup>

*'M was a regular user of crack with her partner who was sent to prison as a result of domestic abuse against M. The property the family lived in belonged to his family so M left and her children were taken into care. M formed a relationship with P and the couple were rough sleeping together using squats. When met by outreach teams it was not apparent that M was experiencing violence from P. M was advised to approach housing options as she was fleeing abuse from her former partner. Housing options assessed that she was not eligible for accommodation and M was given contact details for womens refuges, none of which could help due to her drug use. M remained rough sleeping with P but then returned to her ex-partner when he was released from prison. Following a further incident of violence M was*

*accommodated in a hostel. M continued to see P and disclosed that this relationship was also abusive.'*

## Next Steps

The knowledge and expertise within the specialist womens sector is central to support womens empowerment to move on from their experience of rough sleeping and abuse and stay off the streets.

Capacity building might include joint training initiatives, with specialist womens organisations and rough sleeping service providers training each other to deliver outreach on the streets together. Collaboration across sectors could bring together the expertise of both to address gaps in provision.

Brighton Womens Centre (BWC) has developed a partnership with Worthing Churches Homeless Project (WCHP). BWC is delivering women only drop-ins and has Women's Accommodation Support Workers in both East and West Sussex.<sup>xvi</sup>

The Pan London Womens Outreach Network brings together organisations working with homeless women to collaborate on homelessness prevention. A recommendation in the FERSP report 2013/14 was for a Pan London Womens Outreach Team. This team could respond to womens different experience of rough sleeping and routes into and out of homelessness. Female former rough sleepers could be recruited to advise on delivery of the service.

At the invitation of East London Delivery Board (ELDB) street outreach partners, who are keen to work more closely with specialist womens sector organisations, Dr Lucy Allwright from AVA went out on a shift with City of London<sup>xvii</sup> outreach team and comments

*'I would recommend shadowing an outreach shift to help get a better grasp as to what it is like on the streets at night and get a better understanding of the skills workers use to engage and support rough sleepers.'*

The government has made a commitment to reduce rough sleeping by half by 2022 and eliminate it by 2027. These targets will be difficult to achieve unless womens different approach to rough sleeping, and the links between VAWG and rough sleeping of women and men are addressed.

It is well documented that women rough sleepers frequently hide, do not engage with services and rough sleep differently to men. While the counting and monitoring of rough sleeping remains based on the male experience of street homelessness women will remain hidden and hard to reach, the data used to develop services will remain flawed and fail to meet their needs, which has to be an equalities issue.

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Margaret Williams

East London Housing Partnership

Homelessness Project Manager

[Margaret.Williams@elhp.org.uk](mailto:Margaret.Williams@elhp.org.uk)

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<sup>i</sup> Nowhere to Turn; Findings from the first year of the No Woman Turned Away project, Womens Aid, 2017

<sup>ii</sup> Still being failed but striving to survive, Crisis, 2006

<sup>iii</sup> Rebuilding Shattered Lives, St Mungos, 2014

<sup>iv</sup> Access to Safety; housing women with multiple disadvantage, AVA, 2015

<sup>v</sup> [www.elhp.org.uk](http://www.elhp.org.uk)

<sup>vi</sup> East London Womens Project Evaluation, JVM Consultants, 2016

<sup>vii</sup> ELWP reopened for survivors of abuse with low/medium support needs in 2017, details at [www.elhp.org.uk](http://www.elhp.org.uk)

<sup>viii</sup> Combined Homelessness and Information Network, a method of tracking rough sleepers use of services in London

<sup>ix</sup> Still being failed but striving to survive, Crisis, 2006

<sup>x</sup> [www.mungos.org/chain](http://www.mungos.org/chain)

<sup>xi</sup> Female Entrenched Rough Sleepers Project, Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust, Dagnija O'Connell, 2017

<sup>xii</sup> 'Rough Sleepers Subjected to Abuse and Attacks', Crisis reported in Sky News on line, 2017

<sup>xiii</sup> Davina James-Hanman from AVA speaking at the DV and Rough Sleeping Conference, 2011

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://respect.uk.net/>

<sup>xv</sup> DV and Rough Sleeping event delivered by ELHP, Homeless Link and St Mungos, hosted by the GLA, March 2011

<sup>xvi</sup> <http://www.womenscentre.org.uk/services/accommodation-support-services-east-west-sussex/>

<sup>xvii</sup> City of London recorded 379 rough sleepers seen in 2016/17