

# Hidden or unseen? Nomen's stories of chronic homelessness

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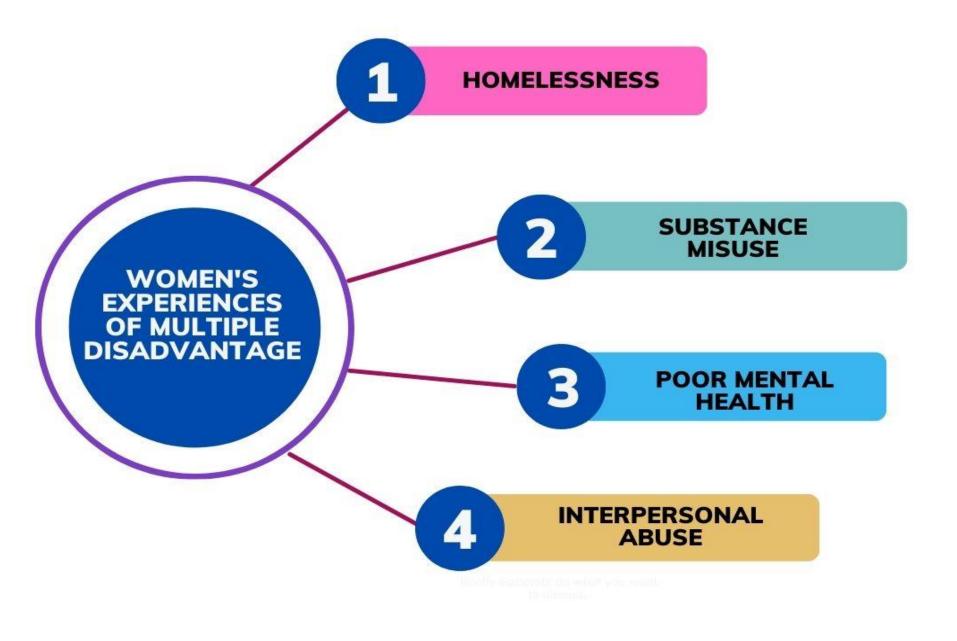
### Sensitive themes:

- Substance misuse
- Trauma
- Suicidal ideation and self-harm
- Domestic violence
- Child removal



#### Women's homelessness: background

- A "constellation of disadvantage" including homelessness, leaving care, sex working, child removal, substance misuse (BSWAID, 2021)
- Poor physical and mental health
- Often described as "complex", "chaotic", "difficult to engage"
- Tend to disengage from support quickly
- Chronic homelessness



### What do we know about women's hidden homelessness?

- Undercounted: If homelessness is defined in terms of men's experiences and practices... then women's homelessness becomes invisible. If it is invisible it is not counted and therefore it is underestimated (Watson 2000)
- Less visible on streets: The lives of women ... are better framed as multiple 'journeys' through places, systems and institutions, and the dynamics of their homelessness is more accurately understood as a complex pattern of movement through precarious housing and 'hidden' homelessness (Mayock, et al., 2015)
- Organisations working with women have reported that women experiencing homelessness tend to avoid or delay contact with services. But are women hidden or not being seen?

#### Aims

- defining aspects of multiple exclusion and pathways to homelessness
- links between homelessness and health, focusing on mental health and wellbeing
- exploring how effectively services have responded to single women's needs

#### Data collection

- 20 interviews
- Oct 21 Mar 22
- Gateshead, via homeless services, community groups & snowball sampling.

#### Sampling criteria

- homeless more than 2 times or longer than 3 months
- previous or current multiple unmet needs
- Over 18
- Single (i.e. without dependent children).

#### Method

- Questionnaire
- MSPSS
- Semi-structured interview





## Uncovering hidden stories

- Listening Guide (Gilligan, 2015)
- What stories do we tell?
- Reading between the lines / listening to silences
- Highlight voices which less often heard

#### **Findings**

- 1. Trauma and substance abuse
- 2. Reclaiming space, choice and control
- 3. Bodies tell a story
- 4. Motherhood & mothering
- 5. Rethinking 'access to services'
- 6. Rewriting stories



#### I - Poems

I met a guy

I'd never touched drugs

**I know** 

I had crack

I didn't really know what

I was taking

I think me mam and dad

told us to leave

I did

<mark>I met a guy</mark> who was like 29 and he gave us heroin, like I'd never touched drugs in me life he injected us, with heroin. I know. I had crack. I didn't really know what I was taking. He introduced us to heroin at 15. I think me mam and dad told us to leave they wanted me to go and I did. I went to the Council. And cos I was a minor they had to help. So they put us in But I'm left with a drug addiction. So I was stuck on heroin, erm just walking around sick, trying to do me A levels. And when I did leave school, just like sick I just went into the careers office so I joined the navy cos I thought I was going to get looked after, like 3 meals a day. So I went down there must have been like a cold turkey, I didn't know what it was erm I was ill, absolutely ill, didn't know what it was. Did me 8 weeks basic training, got on a ship. And then when I came out me mam and dad sajá you're not living here.

#### Gillian's Story

I met a guy

I'd never touched drugs

I know

I had crack

I didn't really know what

I was taking

I think me mam and dad told us to leave

I did...

I got kicked out

I had to go back to the lad who got us on drugs

I was just sofa surfing

I was just there for the drugs



### 1. Trauma & substance use

- Childhood trauma
- Low family support
- Substance use as a way of managing mental health
- Substance use linked with entry into chronic homelessness via negative relationships
- Coercion to take drugs = increased dependency



#### **Amy's Story**

I'd get kicked out of the hostel

I'd have to go and spend ... like with me friends on the streets. A few times

I'd woke up and there'd be like Greggs beside us

Underpasses. Abandoned buildings. If

I could find me mates

I used to go with them but if

I couldn't I'd be by myself.

I always try and get myself out of that situation,

I avoid crowds,

I don't go down dark alleys – I always try to keep myself in light places with cameras.



## 2. Reclaiming space, choice & control

- Hidden homelessness directly impacted health
- Unreported sexual assault
- Interpersonal violence
- Grey area of relationships/ place to stay
- Sofa surfing a pathway to chronic homelessness



#### **Dee's Story**

I just wish now,

I'm not a grass

I thought nah

I'll be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life

I sometimes wish,

I had of pressed charges

I didn't want to leave me home town, change me name

I thought nah I couldn't live like that

I wasn't gonna live being on edge

## 3. Bodies tell a story

- Broken jaw, raped, every scar on my body is off something like that – Delia
- Scars, missing teeth etc = marks of exclusion
- Sexual exploitation, and sometimes sex working
- Trauma whilst homeless
- Domestic abuse: physical and emotional (coercive control not always recognised)



#### Rosa's Story

I had me own tenancy,

I had everything for her ...

and then social services came along ... one minute

I was a full-time parent,

the next minute it was just an empty house....

I'd get up,

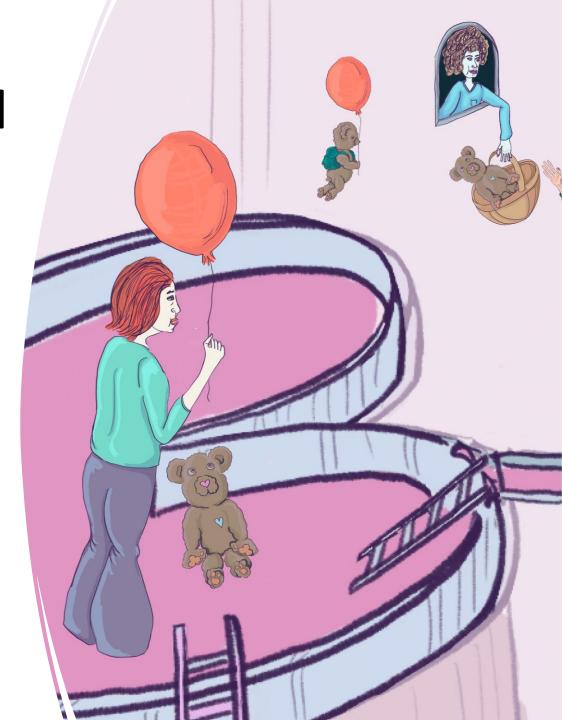
I would hear her cry on a morning

I'd get up and realise, she's not there.



## 4. Motherhood & mothering

- Mothering in marginalized contexts
- Stigma
- Trauma of child removal
- Lack of support for mothers



#### Sarah's Story

I said I'm gonna kill meself.

I was really irate she hung up on us.

I thought what the fuck.

I rang the doctors they said you need to ring the Crisis team

I said nah.

I said no, cos ... she was really abrupt with us. Didn't help me.

I was irate.

I said a few swear words you know what I mean.

I was upset. And she hung the phone up.

I just thought, "I'm so lost right now".

I ended up cutting meself after that.

I'd never cut meself ever in me life like



## 5. Rethinking "access to services"

- All women had accessed services multiple times in past 12 months
- High (but appropriate) emergency healthcare utilization
- Barriers to access: stigma, cost (time and money), and lack of opportunity to describe full picture
- Inflexible (e.g. lack of refuge spaces for women with multiple needs)
- Missed opportunities for support





#### **Delia's Story**

I keep myself to myself

I keep all the riff raff away

I'm just content

where I am

I hope

I'll be able to stay

I've started decorating

I was sleeping in flat stairwells

I'm going to wake up it's been a dream

I'll wake up, still in the flat stairwell

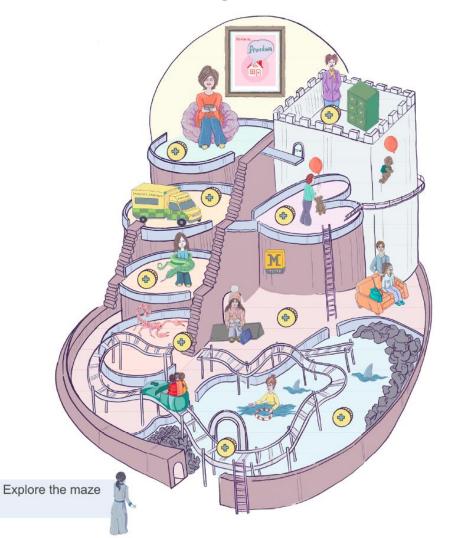


## 6. Summary: Rewriting stories

- Health impacts long lasting
- Listening to the whole story
- Disentangling from old networks ("draining ties")
- Open-ended support is rare



#### www.sphr.nihr.ac.uk/maze/



#### Services are invisible. So hard to find.

Women's narratives of multiple exclusion, homelessness and accessing support.

#### **MENU**



Click to navigate the maze



Roll over to zoom in on research insights



Roll over for data insights



Roll over for women's thoughts on services



Click to learn what home means



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#### Thank you! Further reading:

- McGrath, J., Crossley, S., Lhussier, M., & Forster, N. (2023). Social capital and women's narratives of homelessness and multiple exclusion in northern England. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 22(1), 41.
- McGrath, J., Lhussier, M., Crossley, S., & Forster, N. (2023). "They Tarred Me with the Same Brush": Navigating Stigma in the Context of Child Removal. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(12), 6162.
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