

# Better coordination of agencies and understanding the role of gender is key for homeless women

**A long-term study of vulnerable women in Bristol suggests a pivotal worker and an awareness of the gendered nature of particular problems related to homelessness could deliver better results for an easily overlooked minority.**

**T**o understand why a woman becomes homeless – and to help her find a better life – you have to appreciate that simply being female is a factor. Underlying difficulties, rooted in child sexual abuse, may be on-going. She may be in trouble around sex work. Additionally, domestic and sexual violence is sometimes the trigger for a woman to lose her home. And once she is homeless, sexual exploitation is frequently a danger. On top of all this can be problems generally found among both homeless men and women - alcohol, drugs, finance, mental health issues, family disputes and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Tackling an issue such as female homelessness lies at the heart of the SSCR mission. If the School is to prevent and reduce the need for adult social care, then dealing early and quickly with problems that might be well hidden is vital. Additionally, the School's aim to develop integrated services faces a pertinent challenge in the multiplicity of agencies that care for homeless women.

A team from Bristol University, funded by the SSCR, has been tracking 38 homeless women over 18 months. The Tara project aims to understand in depth their needs, problems and the experiences they have



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*'The thing is I knew him when I had nowhere to live, and I stayed there for a night. And people don't realise how vulnerable you are when you have nowhere to go.'*

*'Being an advisor to the project is a massive passion for me. I get really a fire in my belly about it. It helped me use my voice, my experience, I'm a lot less afraid to speak out. It's helped me get involved with loads of other projects.'*

Homeless woman who acts as advisor to TARA project

of social care – as well as talking to the agencies that aim to help them.

Building trust among women whose lives may be chaotic is vital for the project and has required careful planning. One woman said about attending a training event for project advisors: 'I was petrified before coming. It was such a big thing for me walking into a room full of women in a university. Oh my goodness! I was so glad that I was there. You know they even sent taxis for people to make sure we were there. That was just so thoughtful.'

#### **'Pivotal key worker' may help**

We have found that women are using multiple services which are poorly coordinated. The key worker in the hostel may feel that the main issue for a woman is alcohol use. In contrast, the worker in the alcohol service may think that housing is the big problem. Unless these professionals have regular contact, they cannot establish realistic goals for the woman. She is likely to end up evicted and back on the streets.

We expect that the project will recommend that each woman has a 'pivotal key worker' – a person with overall responsibility for her, whose job is to liaise with other services. In Bristol, the

local authority has already suggested such a role in its 'Dual Diagnosis Strategy'. However, they have yet to implement it for the women we are tracking.

Interviews are revealing the need for workers to understand the gendered nature of particular problems related to homelessness. One woman explained being sexually assaulted by a man who offered her a place to sleep: 'The thing is I knew him when I had nowhere to live, and I stayed there for a night. And people don't realise how vulnerable you are when you have nowhere to go. You – you pick all – you're vulnerable to all sorts of people. And believe me I've met people that are not nice, and they take advantage of the situation.'

When the project is complete in 2013, the findings will support improved practice in homelessness services for women through dissemination across networks for practitioners, service users and policy makers as well as providers of social and housing care. We hope to support multiple agencies working where women commonly have multiple and entrenched difficulties, including mental health problems, offending, drug and alcohol use as well as histories of child neglect and abuse.

**Project:** A longitudinal study of the service use and need of homeless women

**Lead:** Dr Emma Williamson (e.williamson@bristol.ac.uk)

**Institution;** University of Bristol

**Web:** [www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/research/projects/current/RK7228/index.html](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/research/projects/current/RK7228/index.html)

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