

# Inequalities and cumulative violence experienced by "invisible" homeless women:

towards an intersectional, participative, embodied, and trauma-informed perspective

Desigualdades y violencia acumulativa experimentadas por mujeres sin hogar "invisibles": hacia una perspectiva interseccional, participativa, encarnada y sensible al trauma  
Desigualdades e violência cumulativa vividas por mulheres sem-teto "invisíveis": em direção a uma perspectiva interseccional, participativa, incorporada e informada pelo trauma



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## Resumen

En todo el mundo, tanto en países de bajos ingresos como en países desarrollados, las poblaciones sin hogar representan algunos de los grupos más desfavorecidos y vulnerables. Sin embargo, son sin duda las mujeres quienes llevan la pesada carga de la desventaja socioeconómica acumulativa a lo largo de sus vidas, a menudo exacerbada por la violencia patriarcal basada en el género y las suposiciones socioculturales sobre los roles de género. En este artículo, primero revisamos la reciente literatura académica sobre los dañinos estereotipos de género, conceptos erróneos y actitudes sociales críticas que perduran a lo largo de las épocas y tienden a (re)estigmatizar continuamente a las mujeres marginadas y excluidas residualmente. Para superar estos sesgos frecuentes, recomendamos aplicar sistemáticamente perspectivas de género e interseccionales, con un énfasis particular en el análisis profundo de las trayectorias individuales de las mujeres a través de narrativas cualitativas y enfoques biográficos o etnográficos. En segundo lugar, examinamos los factores estructurales e individuales, como los eventos adversos en la infancia, los eventos estresantes de la vida, la violencia doméstica, la violencia de pareja íntima, las enfermedades mentales graves y el trastorno de estrés postraumático, que contribuyen a encerrar a las mujeres en riesgo en un "ciclo de vulnerabilidad perpetua" con pocas posibilidades de reparación o reinserción socioeconómica. Para evitar los múltiples tipos de violencia de género, incluida la recuperación patriarcal de los cuerpos de las mujeres en estrategias de supervivencia en la calle, estas mujeres intentan disimular su presencia urbana para protegerse de la constante agresión sexual, verbal, física y emocional. Destacamos la necesidad de investigaciones participativas empoderadoras y el diseño de políticas que consideren el trauma como algo vivido y sentido a través del cuerpo (cis y trans) femenino.

## Abstract

Across the world, in low-income as well as in developed countries, the homeless populations represent some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Still, it is certainly women who carry the heavy load of cumulative socioeconomic disadvantage throughout their lives, often exacerbated by gender-based patriarchal violence and sociocultural gender role assumptions. In this article, we first review the recent academic literature concerning the damaging gendered stereotypes, misconceptions, and judgmental social attitudes that endure through the eras and tend to continually (re)stigmatize the marginalized residentially excluded women. To overcome these frequent biases, we recommend systematically applying gendered and intersectional perspectives, with a particular emphasis on in-depth analysis of women's individual life trajectories via qualitative narratives and biographical or ethnographic approaches. Secondly, we examine the structural and individual factors, such as adverse childhood events, stressful life events, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, serious mental illnesses, and post-traumatic stress disorder, which contribute to locking at-risk women in a "cycle of perpetual vulnerability" with few possibilities of reparation or socioeconomic reinsertion. To avoid the multiple types of gender-based violence, including patriarchal recuperation of women's bodies in strategies of street survival, these women attempt to dissimulate their urban presence to protect themselves from constant sexual, verbal, physical, and emotional aggression. We highlight the need for empowering participative research and policy design that considers trauma as lived and felt through the female (cis and trans) body.

## Resumo

Em todo o mundo, tanto em países de baixa renda quanto em países desenvolvidos, as populações sem-teto representam alguns dos grupos mais desfavorecidos e vulneráveis. Ainda assim, são certamente as mulheres que carregam o pesado fardo da desvantagem socioeconômica acumulada ao longo de suas vidas, muitas vezes exacerbada pela violência patriarcal baseada em gênero e por suposições socioculturais sobre os papéis de gênero. Neste artigo, revisamos primeiro a literatura acadêmica recente sobre os estereótipos de gênero prejudiciais, equivocados e atitudes sociais julgadoras que perduram através das eras e tendem a (re)estigmatizar continuamente as mulheres marginalizadas e excluídas residualmente. Para superar esses preconceitos frequentes, recomendamos a aplicação sistemática de perspectivas de gênero e interseccionais, com ênfase particular na análise aprofundada das trajetórias de vida individuais das mulheres por meio de narrativas qualitativas e abordagens biográficas ou etnográficas. Em segundo lugar, examinamos os fatores estruturais e individuais, como eventos adversos na infância, eventos estressantes da vida, violência doméstica, violência por parceiro íntimo, doenças mentais graves e transtorno de estresse pós-traumático, que contribuem para aprisionar mulheres em risco em um "ciclo de vulnerabilidade perpétua" com poucas possibilidades de reparação ou reinserção socioeconômica. Para evitar os múltiplos tipos de violência de gênero, incluindo a recuperação patriarcal dos corpos das mulheres em estratégias de sobrevivência nas ruas, essas mulheres tentam dissimular sua presença urbana para se protegerem da constante agressão sexual, verbal, física e emocional. Destacamos a necessidade de pesquisas participativas capacitadoras e de elaboração de políticas que considerem o trauma como vivido e sentido através do corpo (cis e trans) feminino.

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## Introduction

### "Empirical context justifying the importance and urgency of addressing women's homelessness"

While the definitions of "*homelessness*" vary among different countries and there is no current consensus on data collection methods to measure and understand the scale and reasons behind this social phenomenon (Herre & Arriagada, 2024), existing figures that rely on single-night counts each year of those sleeping on the street indicate different patterns for men and women. As an example, in France, the data collected from 2018 to 2025 by the Parisian local government during their annual single-night count show a relative stability of around 3,500 rough sleepers for approximately 2,100,000 residents (except for a decrease during the COVID-19 lockdown period, 2021–2022), with women representing approximately 14% of this population (versus 86% of men) (APUR, 2025). A similar 15% estimate of women rough sleeping, compared to 85% of men, has been consistently found since 2016 by the British government, both for London and nationally (DLUHC, 2024; Wright et al., 2024). In addition to this visible female minority on the streets, when French national statistics include temporarily housed individuals in hotels, they conclude that a larger proportion of homeless women benefit from more stable temporary housing conditions than men: 24% versus 12% (Yaouancq & Duée, 2014). These findings, however, have long been called into question by certain academics and field workers, highlighting the inherent and undeniable vulnerability of homeless women, who are constantly exposed to risks such as rape, violence, and survival strategies including prostitution in order to secure even temporary accommodation (Marpsat, 1999; Bretherton & Pleace, 2021; Gandarias Goikoetxea, Navarro Lashayas & Garcia Cid, 2024; Wright et al., 2024).

## Inequalities and cumulative violence experienced by "invisible" homeless women towards an intersectional, participative, embodied, and trauma-informed perspective

Throughout the world, there is currently a growing recognition of the importance of women's physiological, psychological, cultural, and social specificities", as the previously applied supposedly "universal" and "gender-neutral" methodology not only introduces significant statistical and scientific biases in research but also endangers women's lives and silences their voices (Criado-Perez, 2019, pp. 13, 261, 315). These instances of gender-based violence (GBV), that is, of violence disproportionately affecting women as a socially oppressed group (COE, 2025), increase even further when women accumulate additional vulnerabilities such as poverty, homelessness, gender identity, and immigration history, with calls for intersectional approaches that are increasingly present in the international literature (Loison-Leruste & Perrier, 2019; Bretherton & Pleace, 2021; Vázquez, Cala-Montoya & Berríos, 2021; Ekoh et al., 2023; Rubio-Guzmán et al., 2024). While the concept of "intersectionality", or the idea that different identities, such as gender, class, race, or age, combine and interact to produce irreducible and unique forms of life experience, has existed in women's studies for several decades, it is still not being systematically integrated in research and policy design (Warner, 2008; UN Women, 2019; APA, 2022). The recent social and health crises, epidemics, violent conflicts, and climate changes additionally aggravate the situation of this already fragile subpopulation (HAS, 2021; Yakubovich & Maki, 2022), with women being forced into transnational migration, often with the risk of becoming victims of trafficking and rape along migration routes (Gatet & Niakaté, 2023). The identified growth in homeless populations in some countries (Herre & Arriagada, 2024; Wright et al., 2024), in parallel with this increased precarity and vulnerability of women worldwide, highlights the urgency to address the current gender gap in data in general (Criado-Perez, 2019, p. 14) and in homelessness data in particular (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021; Young & Hodges, 2022; Wright et al., 2024). The emergent acknowledgment of both the gravity and urgency of the question of women's homelessness is reflected in growing political momentum (FEANTSA, 2022; Evren et al., 2024) and practical policy implementations (Fondation des Femmes, 2021; Braud & Loison-Leruste, 2022; Wright et al., 2024).

Thereby, this theoretical reflection article for the themed issue of Revista Iberoamericana de Psicología dedicated to "Inequality, Gender Violence and Psychology" aims to call the attention of the international research community to this crucial subject, as well as to assemble some of the latest major leads and ideas in this field. The methodology consists of a review of studies in English, French, and Spanish focusing on the phenomenon of women's homelessness, with a particular emphasis on recent sources published in the last five-year period, using common archives such as the National Institutes of Health National Library of Medicine, the Digital Library Cairn, the PsychInfo database, Google Scholar, and other university resources. The main objective of this article is not a quantitative, systemic, or exhaustive analysis of the academic literature to date, but rather an identification and association of the newest qualitative arguments that might facilitate future research and policy design. To this end, the first part of the article is dedicated to the broad historical and social perspective of the issue of women's homelessness, as well as the mechanisms that appear to sustain vicious cycles and damaging gendered stereotypes that "invisibilize" different homeless subpopulations. The second section of the article aspires to unite current interdisciplinary academic and field viewpoints to argue for gender-informed, intersectional, and qualitative future investigations that incorporate lived experiences of women through narrative or "embodied" approaches, taking into account their possible past traumas. The article concludes with a revision of the main points and arguments developed in the text.

## Persistent gendered stereotypes and judgmental social attitudes (re) stigmatizing marginalized women

While the issue of homelessness in general and that of women's homelessness in particular does not represent a new or emerging phenomenon, sexist beliefs and representations, perpetuated by the social patriarchal structure, mean that the specificities of women's gendered experiences of homelessness remain largely ignored by researchers, academics, and public policy managers alike. Indeed, important gender-specific data gaps remain that exclude women from research and policy design under the pretext of "universalist" and "gender-neutral" ideology that actually perpetuates systemic patriarchal violence where men dominate the decision-making process that ultimately places women at a disadvantage or even in life-endangering situations (Criado-Perez, 2019, pp. 21, 89, 315; Veronese et al., 2025). This historical "blind spot" in our understanding of actual and specific women's experiences persists to this day and throughout the world, despite women's gender roles and cultural representations varying across the nations and even in the current era of growing awareness since the #MeToo movement, increasing political stances, and media engagement (André & Leprince, 2023).

As a sociodemographic category, "homelessness" in itself appears challenging to describe, and the definitions vary from one country to another (Herre & Arriagada, 2024), with some scholars pointing out that the populations lacking a "home" are often heterogeneous and fluctuating (Laporte & Le Méner, 2008; Warburton et al., 2022; Loison-Leruste & Perrier, 2019), rendering it more difficult to characterize their residential and life trajectories and regularly producing confusing and ambiguous categories (Loison, 2023). When it comes to women's homelessness, the operational definitions used, for example, to measure homelessness rates in annual counts to visually identify people rough sleeping ("those bedded down or about to bed down in certain locations", to use the British classification) have to be adapted and expanded to reflect the complex nature of women's rough sleeping that is hidden, transient, and intermittent, meaning that women tend to walk all night, regularly change sleeping arrangements, mix temporary shelter accommodation and informal sofa surfing, and generally make decisions on a night-by-night basis (Young & Hodges, 2022; Loison, 2023; Wright et al., 2024).

Even larger definitions of "homelessness" that encompass rough-sleeping and other temporary shelter (individual or collective accommodation provided by a local government or an association), used in less frequent national statistical surveys (Yaouancq & Duée, 2014), do not seem to accurately describe the reality of women's homelessness, who exist in a chronic "liminal state," circulating through multiple institutions, but also social and family networks (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021). French and international studies point toward the numerous concealment and avoidance strategies developed by homeless women in order to protect themselves against physical, verbal, and sexual violence, to which they are disproportionately exposed (Braud & Loison-Leruste, 2022; Peñafiel, 2022; Calvo et al., 2022; Rubio-Guzmán et al., 2024; Schmidt, 2024). However, despite this confusion

in categories and definitions, it appears that, throughout history and across continents, the damaging representations and stereotypes continue to influence how society perceives and treats homeless populations, specifically women and minorities. As an example, a historical and longitudinal analysis of labels given to “vagrant” women in Australia between the years 1900 and 1940 shows a marked polarity that differentiates “women without homes” into two opposing categories: the “deserving” housewife and mother, who inspires a philanthropic response, and the “undeserving” criminalized single woman, arrested and judged as “disorderly” and transgressive by the tribunals (O’Brien, 2018). This deeply imbedded patriarchal ideology means that society views women either as mothers and homemakers or as deviant and “prostitutes” (Cresswell, 1999; Wardhaugh, 1999; O’Brien, 2018; Reeve, 2018; Lyons & Smedley, 2021), whereas the complex reality of homeless women’s life trajectories is not reflected by these simplified and extreme social categories. Indeed, a recent British urban field study has found that 40% of isolated homeless women are still mothers, with their children placed either with relatives or by social services (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021), whereas institutional support for mothers with dependent children or of pregnant women is reported to be better than that of single women (Dębska & Mostowska, 2021; Matulic Domandzic et al., 2024). These cultural and social processes create a representational void that leads to a widespread phenomenon of “invisibility” and stigmatization of homeless women. As a result, academic literature and policy designs go through the cycles of constant (re)discovery of this “hidden” subpopulation as “new” (Chamberlain, Johnson & Robinson, 2014, p. 16; O’Brien, 2022).

These harmful sociopolitical representations remain active today, especially clearly incarnated by the dominant media discourse that conveys rigid stereotypical images of homeless people as generally passive receivers of aid, dependent on public sympathy, often alone, and fundamentally separated from the housed public by the “we-they” divide (Kawash, 1998; Hodgetts, Cullen & Radley, 2005; Lyons & Smedley, 2021). These images crucially frame the shared “community narratives” around homelessness that, in their turn, “empower or impede” the individual subjective homelessness experiences (Rappaport, 2000), while simultaneously influencing collective perspective, policy change, and politics (Barrick & Worsham, 2020; Gleason, Martin & Bernier, 2024). However, the most important “blind spot” in the media, political, and academic discourse on homelessness concerns the longstanding failure to take into account the gender differentials, leading either to a continued “invisibility” of homeless women’s experiences and hence minimization of their needs or to a creation of outreach programs and emergency provisions based on the normative stereotype of a homeless person as a middle-aged single rough-sleeping white man (Reeve, 2018; Lyons & Smedley, 2021; Braud & Loison-Leruste, 2022). Such important oversights often lead to biased representations of homeless women’s requirements and certain failures in the support services that target this subpopulation, with a recent notable example of women’s specialist facilities in Paris, France (Braud & Loison-Leruste, 2022).

The omission of the gendered perspective on women’s homelessness stems not only from the structurally ingrained patriarchal stereotypes about women as homemakers dependent on men’s provision but also from the general social power inequalities when dealing with dominated subgroups such as “homeless”, resulting in their voices and real experiences being unheard by the “experts” that advise on policy design (Kawash, 1998; Hodgetts, Cullen & Radley, 2005; Lyons & Smedley, 2021). Such perpetuated assumptions and prescriptions grounded in normative gender roles, which disregard the lived experiences of marginalized women, could have significant implications explicitly in health in general and mental health in particular (Duke & Searby, 2019; Allen & Vottero, 2020). For

instance, primary healthcare providers in Chile tend to under-report sexual violence, pass lifestyle judgments, and presume sexual consent when abortion is demanded by socially excluded groups that intersect gender, age, race, and class (Casas et al., 2022). A recent Spanish study has highlighted the (re)stigmatization and sexual discrimination suffered by homeless women when faced with institutional barriers in police, judicial, health, and social services that increase their risk of (re)traumatization (Matulic Domandzic et al., 2024). In the French context, at least 25% of homeless women interviewed report unmet healthcare needs, with migrant women especially affected (Vuillermoz et al., 2017).

Applying the prism of gender to the question of an already oppressed and vulnerable population of homeless persons (men and women) allows us to appreciate the complex and heterogeneous manner in which multiple marginalized social positions could accumulate over a lifetime for each individual, creating a hierarchy of exclusion and resulting in increased difficulties in accessing social and health care services (Sadeghipouya, 2023). Methodological sensitivity to the issue of sex (biological)/gender (social identity) and the inclusion of cis, trans, and non-binary people in research (Hyde et al., 2017; Young & Hodges, 2022) are all the more important because more women than men are homeless due to discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (LGBTQI+) (Sadeghipouya, 2023; Galán-Sanantonio et al., 2024). Thus, the latest research on homelessness around the world highlights the plight of specific at-risk demographics, such as women, children, the elderly, and the displaced, that often overlap to create complex intersectional dynamics of extreme exclusion. While investigators from West Bengal, India, employ first-person narratives and observations to provide a nuanced perspective on mental health and social isolation among the homeless, the authors also stress the importance of homeless people’s local knowledge and their participation in the urban economy and ecosystem (Bose et al., 2023), a perspective echoed by recent North American research (Goldfischer, 2018; Goldfischer, 2020). Similarly, the lifelong experiences of older displaced women living in camps in Abuja, Nigeria, are ignored due to age-related and gendered stereotypes that result in their exclusion from skills acquisition programs and political participation, severely impacting their mental well-being and perceived self-worth, as well as rendering them completely dependent on others for basic sustenance and medical assistance (Ekoh et al., 2023). Moreover, the intersectional and gendered perspective in low-income countries, such as Nicaragua, subject to processes of chronification and accentuation of social marginalization, unfortunately remains under-researched (Vázquez, Cala-Montoya & Berríos, 2021).

The difficulties of current statistical approaches to define and evaluate women’s homelessness and housing marginality are frequently attributed to their supposed “invisibility”, with field studies and annual counts regularly underestimating their occupation of urban street spaces compared to that of rough-sleeping men (Marpsat, 1999; Yaouancq et al., 2013; Wright et al., 2024). However, more thorough qualitative investigations imply that as many as 66% of homeless women regularly sleep rough, but only 12% of them maintain contact with outreach services (Reeve, 2018). In fact, research suggests that the more time women spend on the streets, the fewer services they contact, potentially increasing their (auto)isolation (Young & Hodges, 2022; Bullen, 2023). More recent Spanish studies appear to replicate this apparent discrepancy between a lower proportion of women identified as visibly rough-sleeping compared to men (Galán-Sanantonio, Botija & Gallén-Granell, 2024) and a relatively large percentage of homeless women who declare having resorted to rough sleeping (38%) or having exchanged sex for accommodation (37%) (Gandarias Goikoetxea, Navarro Lashayas & Garcia Cid, 2024). In addition, the newly developed women-specific rough-sleeping census

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in Britain equally indicates higher proportions of women on the street: despite their *"invisibility"*, half of the 753 women surveyed report sleeping outside, and 36% report walking continuously throughout the night, with significant impacts on physical and mental health (Wright et al., 2024). This incongruity leads to the suggestion that existing statistical and cartographic tools designed to *"study"*, *"control"* and *"manage"* the doubly dominated group of homeless women only serve to reinforce the inequalities and pre-existing misconceptions without taking into account the diverse gendered, racialized, and classist individual experiences (Loison-Leruste & Perrier, 2019; Braud & Loison-Leruste, 2022; Schmidt, 2024; Gandarias Goikoetxea, Navarro Lashayas & Garcia Cid, 2024). Furthermore, these methods reinforce the dominant patriarchal ideology of women as dependent and passive *"victims"*, devoid of agency and self-determination, increasing the risk of their (re)stigmatization (Phipps et al., 2020; Kneck et al., 2022).

The majority of research into homelessness through a gendered lens confirms the complexity and heterogeneity of women's life experiences and itinerant trajectories, largely agreeing that a definite typology of a *"homeless woman"* constitutes an illusion, if not a conceptual and discriminatory fallacy (Radley, Hodgetts & Cullen, 2006; May, Cloke & Johnsen, 2007; Laporte & Le Méner, 2008; Gandarias Goikoetxea, Navarro Lashayas & Garcia Cid, 2024). Nonetheless, it might be postulated that the population of homeless women, although diverse, could be approximately divided into two large subgroups with distinct characteristics and needs: younger single mothers with underage dependent children, who often seek emergency shelter due to domestic and family violence; and older lone women, who frequently present a longer history of homelessness, as well as a history of mental health issues, alcohol or substance use, and prior psychiatric hospitalization (Warburton, Papic & Whittaker, 2022). Under the stereotypical gender role assignment, women who benefit from the sociopolitical and cultural categorization as a *"mother"* seem to be prioritized and protected by society, in what could be described as a *"secondary advantage of a dominated status"* (Marpsat, 1999; Loison-Leruste & Perrier, 2019). Even though the *"mothers"* habitually benefit from more secure accommodation at the beginning of their homelessness *"career"*, homelessness and motherhood represent two generally incompatible realities. Once their children have been taken into care, women lose their temporary accommodation as well as the sympathy of social workers and self-identify as a *"failed parent"* (Reeve, 2018; Loison-Leruste & Perrier, 2019).

Another subgroup of homeless women that remains regularly neglected, both in academic circles and from the point of view of policymaking, is composed of older women over the age of 50 in a variety of precarious housing circumstances that could be described as a continuum from *"almost homeless"* to living on the streets (Hall, 2020; Dębska & Mostowska, 2021; Gandarias Goikoetxea, Navarro Lashayas & Garcia Cid, 2024). In the context of the general feminization of homelessness (Richards et al., 2010; Bullock et al., 2020) as well as the aging of the chronically homeless population (Culhane et al., 2013; Grenier et al., 2016; Grenier & Sussman, 2024), we call for an intersectional and in-depth qualitative approach to older women's individual life experiences that could transcend the inefficient and occasionally ill-adapted statistical approaches and challenge some of the elder gendered (re)stigmatizing stereotypes of cumulative housing marginalization, including that of a *"Bag Lady"*: old, alone, and *"strange"*, surrounded by a mass of her countless possessions, she represents the image of *"otherness"* to avoid and fear, resulting in indirect aggression by exclusion (Kisor & Kendal-Wilson, 2002; Lyons & Smedley, 2021; Valtorta, Baldissarri & Volpato, 2023; Webster, 2023). Added to said evolving older demographic are the growing numbers of migrant women and families, whose specific

needs and trajectories have to be understood from the gendered and intersectional perspective in order to overcome administrative and social barriers, notably in regard to access to health care (Poncet & Andro, 2022). Indeed, as an example, foreign-born women represent 79% of homeless women in Paris, France (Braud & Loison-Leruste, 2022). In the absence of detailed intersectional research, public policies and services risk missing their target population and creating the situation of further isolation and (re)traumatization (Braud & Loison-Leruste, 2022).

## Breaking the cycle of gendered violence and cumulative exclusion via intersectional and participative research, taking into account women's embodied and traumatic experiences

Once a gendered and intersectional lens is applied to a heterogeneous group of homeless women, notably employing qualitative data analysis of semi-structured interviews, using narrative and biographical approaches, as well as participatory ethnographic observations (Bonugli, Lesser & Escandon, 2013; Mayock, Sheridan & Parker, 2015; Maurin, 2015; Dębska & Mostowska, 2021) to explore singular personal life stories and experiences, complex patterns emerge that allow us to appreciate the extent to which gendered violence permeates and shapes the lives of women, from their early childhood through to their old age. In particular, among the salient factors reported as responsible for women's pathways into residential instability are specific forms of intimate partner violence (IPV) and intrafamilial violence: in a French cohort, 36% of homeless women versus 19% of homeless men report having experienced violence as a minor, often at the hands of a close male family member; and 90% of displaced persons who had to leave their homes due to domestic violence owing to domestic violence (DV) are women (Loison-Leruste & Perrier, 2019). In a broader definition, a recent narrative review of existing qualitative North American data has found that adverse childhood events (ACEs), such as traumatic family and relationship breakdowns, foster care placements, exposure to substance use, and experience of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, in addition to recurrent episodes of homelessness during childhood and adolescence, considerably disrupt women's life trajectories and contribute to a multigenerational cycle of trauma, mental health problems, and homelessness in adult life (Kohlera, Pylypchuk & Reisdorfer, 2024). In a British sample, 22% of homeless women were previously in the care of child protection services (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021).

As adults, single women as well as mothers with dependent children experience GBV in a much greater proportion than men and identify this element, together with mental health difficulties and socioeconomic structural factors, as major causes of entry into situations of residential marginalization and as those that characterize

their everyday experiences of homeless life: in France, 45% of temporary housed women have left their homes due to DV (Loison-Leruste & Perrier, 2019); in Barcelona, Spain, 80% of women with histories of homelessness have previously filed police complaints related to gender-based violence (Matulic Domandzic et al., 2024); in Argentina, more than 60% of homeless women interviewed experienced a combination of stressful life events (SLEs), such as economic fragility and unemployment in the family, witnessing their mother suffering from DV, fights and arguments with and between family members, and previous physical abuse (Lenta, Di Iorio & Vázquez, 2023); in Nicaragua, women living homeless identify multiple and severe SLEs during their childhood and adolescence as a major vulnerability factor leading to the replication and chronification of socioeconomic disadvantage in adulthood (Vázquez et al., 2023). While lifetime exposure to non-partner sexual violence, a reality for at least 6% of women worldwide, constitutes a human rights violation and a public health concern (Sardinha et al., 2024), sexual and physical assaults, besides recourse to “*survival sex*” as a strategy to gain precarious accommodation, represent traumatic everyday experiences of homeless women (Reeve, 2018; Gandarias Goikoetxea, Navarro Lashayas & Garcia Cid, 2024; Silver et al., 2024).

Despite this evident gender-oriented overlap between the higher incidence of women’s sexual and physical abuse and their homelessness entry and experience, social workers in shelters, police and justice systems, as well as politicians and policymakers, tend to classify women as either “*homeless*” or “*victims of violence*” (including forced marriages and female genital mutilation), not only failing to assess women’s specific needs according to their individual life histories but also expressing an underlying sexist bias that can (re) stigmatize women as “*passive victims*”, deny their agency, and further disempower them (Loison-Leruste & Perrier, 2019; Braud & Loison-Leruste, 2022; Bullen, 2023; Matulic Domandzic et al., 2024). This indirect institutional violence has far-reaching repercussions on the feelings of injustice and lack of control, since the underlying systematic rejection and prejudice seem to be introjected by women into their life “*narratives of fracture*” (Lockwood, 2017, p. 144; Dębska & Mostowska, 2021), which reflect the chronic and cyclical nature of women’s trajectories from one type of service structure to another and create barriers to their homelessness exit (Maurin, 2015; Mayock, Sheridan & Parker, 2015; Li & Urada, 2020). According to a recent Spanish study, only 24% of professionals working directly with women in situations of residential exclusion, in temporary housing or social facilities, estimate having sufficient awareness, vocational training, and experience of trauma and GBV necessary to provide a good quality service adapted to this at-risk subpopulation (Matulic Domandzic et al., 2024).

It is nevertheless partly due to the “*universalist*” and normative line of thinking that appears to effectively erase specific vulnerable women’s needs by equating them to those of a white middle-aged heterosexual male, through which the society participates, to a certain degree, in the process of rendering these women “*invisible*” (Criado-Perez, 2019, p. 14; Braud & Loison-Leruste, 2022). Despite this unconscious bias, there seems to be a growing recognition of homeless (cis and trans) women’s unique requirements in terms of access to reproductive and menstrual health care, as well as their greater demand regarding personal body hygiene, intimacy, and feelings of security and control in a non-mixed housing environment (Maurin, 2015; Earle-Brown, 2022; Sadeghipouya, 2023; Gandarias Goikoetxea, Navarro Lashayas & Garcia Cid, 2024; Orsini et al., 2024). Significantly, several authors highlight different strategies of avoidance of mixed male-oriented public services and self-dissimulation that women employ to keep their vulnerability “*hidden*”, especially if they perceive social discrimination and negative judgment from bureaucratic and temporary

housing systems, preferring to first exhaust the options of appeal to friends, family, or even workplaces before turning to collective facilities (Radley, Hodgetts & Cullen, 2006; Lewinson, Thomas & White, 2014; Mayock, Sheridan & Parker, 2015; Gandarias Goikoetxea, Navarro Lashayas & Garcia Cid, 2024). In fact, homeless women, more than men, maintain flexible social networks with other people on the streets, people who are domiciled, as well as their own family members (Radley et al., 2006; Peñafiel, 2022; Sadeghipouya, 2023; Galán-Sanantonio et al., 2024). Thus, it is important to understand women’s support networks and their potential evolution in relation to chronic or repeated homelessness. The absence of specialist non-mixed health services and the lack of gendered perspective in the design of dedicated accommodation and community therapeutic spaces only further isolate homeless women by renewing the cycle of continuous (re)stigmatization (Braud & Loison-Leruste, 2022; Casas et al., 2022; Panushka et al., 2023; Yohannes et al., 2023).

To stop the “*cycle of perpetual vulnerability*” to gendered violence and cumulative socioeconomic exclusion experienced by women and to overcome the current chronic state of “*paralysis*” due to iterative trauma, inadequate shelter, lack of mental health support, and shortage of reproductive health provision (Li & Urada, 2020), we recommend, in addition to systematic gendered and intersectional perspectives, integrating trauma-informed, ‘embodied,’ and participative approaches in future research and policy design. “This recommendation aligns with emerging feminist scholarship emphasizing the importance of embodied and somatic approaches to understanding and addressing gender-based violence and trauma (Brigden & Hlavka, 2024).” Body care, more precisely female body care, represents a central issue for homeless women at the crossroads of social and individual experiences, which affects health (irreducible to solely reproductive health) and hygiene, according to current cultural norms of beauty and gender stereotypes (Dębska & Mostowska, 2021; Earle-Brown, 2022; Peñafiel, 2022). There exists a negative relationship between chronic or repeated homelessness and women’s health (mental and physical), partly due to barriers in access to health services (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021; Sadeghipouya, 2023), as well as feelings of shame and experiences of stigmatization (Vuillermoz et al., 2017; Peñafiel, 2022; Bullen, 2023; Matulic Domandzic et al., 2024; Schmidt, 2024). In general, homeless women consider themselves to be in worse health (physical and mental) than men (Moysi, 2015) and are more likely to identify their mental health as a cause of their residential instability; for example, 35% of homeless women in Valencia, Spain, have serious or chronic conditions, while 19% declare experiencing mental health difficulties (Galán-Sanantonio et al., 2024).

According to recent research, gynecological care can be a point of articulation between the medical world and the female body, where a timely encounter can create a lasting bond and a desire for treatment (Peñafiel, 2022). In Paris, France, 81% of homeless women report not having seen a doctor or gynecologist in the past three years; two-thirds report menstrual cycle disorders and/or suffer from gynecological conditions; and 70% do not use any contraception (ADSF, 2020). Homeless women may have complex needs, including several comorbidities (Duke & Searby, 2019; Bretherton & Pleace, 2021; Groton & Spadola, 2023) and consequences of trauma and violence (Matulic Domandzic et al., 2024; Schmidt, 2024). Traumatic and often violent events tend to precede and punctuate women’s homelessness trajectories (Braud & Loison-Leruste, 2022; Calvo et al., 2022; Rubio-Guzmán et al., 2024; Schmidt, 2024). Domestic and intrafamilial violence, as well as relationship breakdowns, are often identified as a trigger for women’s homelessness (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021; Braud & Loison-Leruste, 2022; Galán-Sanantonio et al., 2024). Taking into account the predominance of trauma and GBV in homelessness, we argue for the importance of body-centered

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approaches that integrate the female bodily and sensory experiences, including non-verbal, emotional, and *"formless"* knowledge that has to be accessed and *"interpreted"/"decoded"* on a case-by-case basis (Humphreys, 2024; Humphreys & Diban, 2024).

In order to improve services for homeless women, previous studies advocate for the inclusion of *"experts by experience"* or peers in the development of public policies to simultaneously empower women, reintegrate their voices in the cis-heteronormative and patriarchal social discourse that directly and indirectly impacts them, and capture their unique experiential knowledge (Bretherton & Pleace, 2021; Sadeghipouya, 2023; Rubio-Guzmán et al., 2024; Schmidt, 2024). Taking as an example the specialist program *"Luciérnagas" (Fireflies)*, implemented since 2021 by the Luz Casanova Foundation in Madrid, Spain, we argue that such in-depth targeted *"tailor-made"* approaches, adapted to every woman, her life trajectory, and her singular needs, together with trauma-informed psychosocial interventions (individual, group, and community) by a network of highly committed professionals specifically sensitized to at least ten types of GBV, are essential to creating a secure and safe environment that fosters women's trusting relationships with service providers and peers (Rubio-Guzmán et al., 2024). This trauma-informed intervention, partly inspired by a successful Canadian project *"Peer Education and Connection through Empowerment" (PEACE)* (Kahan et al., 2020; Reid et al., 2021), as well as by current academic and policy recommendations (Ponce, Lawless & Rowe, 2014; Calvo et al., 2022), helps to halt the process of violence *"normalization"* and overcoming a strong feeling of guilt that often inhibits women from engaging in the therapeutic process of resolving their inner trauma and pain, advancing in their socioeconomic reinsertion, and preventing further (re)victimization. The authors of the article, as well as the social workers at the *"Luciérnagas"* project, particularly emphasize the central role of developing distinct psychosocial instruments and activities that specifically aim to improve women's sense of well-being, integration, autonomy, self-confidence, resilience, empowerment, and coping strategies to face further situations of GBV in life (Rubio-Guzmán et al., 2024). Indeed, apart from reproductive, menstrual, and chronic physical health complications, a range of mental health issues, such as constant states of stress, anxiety, depression, sleep disruption, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in addition to some pre-existing serious mental illnesses (SMI), problematic substance use and risk-taking behaviors, often characterize and exacerbate (cis and trans) women's difficult pathways through homelessness (Vuillermoz et al., 2017; Duke & Searby, 2019; Groton & Spadola, 2023; Sadeghipouya, 2023; Modani et al., 2024; Rousseaux, 2024). Despite these past and current violence-related traumas, social professionals at the *"Luciérnagas"* project choose to focus on women's capacity for resilience, autonomous action, and empowerment instead of defining them in terms of their *"problems"* as *"passive victims"*: *"They are the women who shine in the dark"*, to cite one of the project's social workers (Rubio-Guzmán et al., 2024). This decision appears in strong agreement with other researchers who call attention to homeless women's extensive social networks, both within and outside their family circles; adaptability in their multiple street identity negotiations; resourcefulness and resilience while navigating complex gendered urban cartographies, in contrast with the implicit stereotype of homeless persons as powerless passive receivers of public aid (Hodgetts, Cullen & Radley, 2005; Radley, Hodgetts & Cullen, 2006; May, Cloke & Johnsen, 2007; Laporte & Le Méner, 2008; Groton & Radey, 2019; Greenfield et al., 2020; Peñafiel, 2022).

To harness and realize the vital potential of these protective factors as means of self-affirmation, empowerment, and independence for vulnerable women in cumulative residential and socioeconomic exclusion, we argue in favor of participative and body-centered

investigative approaches in future academic research and psychosocial rehabilitative interventions in order to ultimately give back women's unique voices and opinions in policy implementations that affect them directly and indirectly. To this end, a number of past and contemporary studies have drawn on participative photography or qualitative visual *"Photovoice"* action research methodologies (Radley, Hodgetts & Cullen, 2006; Tyminski, Hung & Drummond, 2023; Bova, 2023; Snow-Hill et al., 2024), which are currently gaining momentum with community-wide cross-national collaborations such as the recently announced *"New Women's Project: Putting Women's Voices at the Heart of Homelessness Support (2024-2027)"* by the European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) (FEANTSA, 2024). Given the particular resonance of felt homelessness experiences with the female (cis and trans) body, we further propose the use of the feminist decolonial Latin American approach of *"Cuerpo-Territorio"*, which focuses on the mapping of *"body-territories"* or women's distinctive bodily ingrained knowledge and *"embodied"* memories, aiming to *"decolonize"* women's bodies and voices of historical patriarchal *"occupation"*, exploitation, and violence (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2017; Colectivo de Geografía Crítica del Ecuador, 2018; Da Silveira, 2021; Earle-Brown, 2022). In a recent study, this original methodology was used with three homeless women in Germany to reveal important and otherwise verbally inaccessible lived experiences, including circular perpetual mobility, genitalia and sexual exploitation, violation of body integrity, body and feet exhaustion, and sensorial saturation due to constant hypervigilant scanning of the environment for signs of danger (Schmidt, 2024). These methodologies constitute just some of the examples of the potential research and policy approaches possible that make center stage the voice and narratives of individual homeless women, as we hope more attention and resources will be attracted to this important and urgent topic in the future.

## Conclusion

Even with recent social, political, and media awareness about the gender-specific violence against women, throughout the world, women continue to endure disproportionate exploitation, harassment, and abuse originating in persistent patriarchal social structures and harmful gender stereotypes. Gender inequality and discrimination against women are frequently disguised as *"gender-neutral"* or *"universalist"* research and public policy design, where heterosexual white men are considered the default standard, leading to important gaps in data on women's physical and mental health. Moreover, it is important to systematically apply an intersectional lens to women's lived experiences, taking into account multidimensional definitions of complex social identities and cumulative vulnerabilities due to age, race, class, sexual orientation, immigration status, and so on. Current statistical and quantitative approaches that tend to map, survey, and control different homeless populations can recreate and perpetuate the oppressive dynamic of social domination and symbolic power assertion over already vulnerable and stigmatized persons. In particular, it has been shown that various homelessness counts regularly underestimate the number of rough-sleeping women and misrepresent, or rather silence, their lived individual experiences and voices. Moreover, according to multiple European and international studies, women in situations of homelessness employ numerous concealment and avoidance strategies to protect themselves from physical, verbal, and sexual violence.

When an effort is made to question the representations of women's homelessness, a different reality emerges that points

towards women's greater vulnerability to homelessness, as well as their greater risk of verbal, physical, and sexual violence during episodes of homelessness. While the homeless population generally presents itself as heterogeneous and difficult to apprehend scientifically, this seems further exacerbated for women who exist in a chronic **"liminal state,"** circulating through multiple institutions, social networks, and families. Furthermore, the women surveyed highlighted their greater difficulties in accessing services and facilities, worse physical and mental health than homeless men, as well as more specific needs that remain unmet, particularly in terms of body care and personal hygiene. Many studies highlight violence and the resulting trauma as a major marker of the gendered experience of homelessness, both as a triggering factor and as the daily experience of homeless women. Chronic homelessness and unresolved traumas create complex needs that call for individualized, qualitative, and trauma-oriented approaches in order to promote women's agency, empowerment, and self-confidence. We propose focusing on developing distinct psychosocial rehabilitation and research approaches on a case-by-case basis, which cannot only draw upon women's voices as **"experts by experience"** but also create unique and ongoing support methods, taking into account some emotional and body-centered **"narratives"** that have to be initially **"translated"** in a non-verbal way through, among others, **"Photovoice"** or body cartographies.

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## Inequalities and cumulative violence experienced by "invisible" homeless women

### towards an intersectional, participative, embodied, and trauma-informed perspective

[value-of-intersectionality-in-understanding-violence-against-women-and-girls#view](#)

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