

Back from the Bottom: Focused on Women

Research Report

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(civic association)
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About Jako doma

Jako doma is a civic association dealing with women's homelessness and strengthening the capacity of homeless women.

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Introduction

These women have no permanent shelter. Yet, we don't see them in the streets very often. Homeless women haven't been getting much attention. As women's homelessness has been hidden from public view, it comes as no surprise. It is an uncharted territory and our expedition into the mysteries of women's homelessness was remarkable. The following text will present you with the conclusions made from this journey.

Homelessness clearly affects both men and women. Our study, however, deliberately focused solely on the stories, destinies and needs of homeless women, as very little attention had been paid to them so far. Their survival strategies, the risks they face and other aspects of women's homelessness proved very different from those of homeless men.

Another major reason for examining homelessness through a gender lens related to feminization of poverty. As we know from gender studies, poverty affects women more severely and more frequently than men and financial distress can easily lead to homelessness. But why do we see fewer women than men on the street?

According to the last census (CSO 2011), women in the Czech Republic accounted for 21.5 % of homeless people. We also know that increased poverty among women does not reflect on the numbers of homeless people. This might be explained by hidden (latent) homelessness. In the course of our research, we learned that women at-risk of acute poverty often postpone living on the street by staying in violent and unsatisfactory relationships, spending nights with acquaintances or friends or creating special-purpose short-term relationships.

Women have many reasons for *hiding*. These include reasons associated with motherhood, child care, stigmatization and the society's disdain for *fallen* women. Cultural norms force women to hold on and teeter on the brink before hitting the bottom for much longer than men. It is important for us to think about the implications of this tendency of women to *hide*. It relates to another distinctive feature of women's homelessness – violence. Violence featured strongly in the narratives of the vast majority of the homeless women interviewed for this study.

We examined these disturbing phenomena and yet to be answered questions about women's homelessness from April to August 2013. The aim of the study *Back from the Bottom: Focus on Women* was to explore the risk factors of women's homelessness, the needs of the clients of social services and the barriers to their return to their own homes and the labour market. We approached fifty communication partners in Prague and Ostrava. The basic methods of data collection included individual in-depth interviews and semi-structured focus groups. The result of the study is not a professional academic text but a summary report aimed at identifying the risk factors that lead to homelessness among women and describing their needs (especially their social needs and career needs).

Summary of Major Findings

This report summarizes the findings of research conducted for the project *Back from the Bottom: Focus on Women* on the nature and specifics of women's homelessness. The organization *Jako doma* examined women's homelessness in the context of existing social services, opportunities and barriers to the re-integration of women into everyday life and the labour market. The key conclusions are as follows:

- **The unique nature women's homelessness** is linked to three main factors: women's increased exposure to **physical, sexual and verbal violence by men, women's increased vulnerability during their life on the street and their lower economic power**. Moreover, unlike men, women usually bear the burden of child care or face the inability to provide it.
- Women's homelessness is rarely caused by a single trigger or event. In most cases, the loss of home results from a combination of causes, which particularly include: **domestic and other forms of violence, poverty, a traumatic change in life such as the death of a child or partner, lack of affordable and safe housing, age and gender discrimination in the labour market, drug or alcohol addiction, family history of exclusion, a serious psychiatric illness**.
- Although homeless women welcome the existing social services such as shelters and dormitories, they view them as **a safe haven on their escape from violence or acute problems**. However, the time limitations on client residence in these facilities are insufficient for their psychological and social recovery.

- Many women experience **hidden homelessness** when they use informal housing outside the available social services and stay with friends, family members or partners. **The instability of this kind of accommodation is one of the reasons why women unwillingly experience life on the street.**
- Homeless women are often **afraid to visit shelters for the homeless** because they feel threatened by men and their numerical superiority.
- The barriers to return to normal life for homeless women include particularly: **poverty and limited job opportunities, age and gender discrimination in the labour market, lack of affordable housing, health problems, debts, and a loss of motivation to change as a result of long-term homelessness.**
- **Women who become repeated or long-term clients in the system of social services rapidly lose their ability to see positive change as possible.**
- **For these reasons, the primary issue in resolving women's homelessness is the availability of permanent and safe affordable housing.**

Summary of Recommendations

The situation of women is unique and deserves special, tailor-made measures. These would not only improve the services for homeless women and meet their specific needs, but also end the current *impasse* on some aspects of women's homelessness:

Structural recommendations:

- **The government strategy to prevent and combat homelessness must take into account women's issues, particularly violence against women and the need to create and provide services that address the unique needs of homeless women and women at-risk of homelessness.**
- **The government strategy to prevent and combat homelessness must take into account** the creation and funding of gender-specific facilities for women at-risk of homelessness, including drop-in centres, centres providing emergency housing, shelter housing and subsequent housing.

Recommendations for the transformation of the existing services:

- **To take into account women's issues, particularly violence against women and the need to create specific services to help homeless women and women at-risk of homelessness.**
- **To establish *safe zones*** – creating *women-only spaces* either by specifying time or space reservations on services only for women (not just in drop-in centres).
- **To create a dignified and respectful environment** – We recommend participatory approaches to (social) work, involving women clients in decision-making about the services they use, the facility rules and other aspects of the provision of accommodation and services.

- **Capacity building** – homeless women face greater barriers in the process of job search and in the job market (see above). Skills, work experience and self-confidence of homeless women can be gained through volunteering or leisure activities. We recommend motivating homeless women and women without shelter to volunteer, to participate in leisure activities and to organize such activities on their own initiative.
- **To mediate therapeutic services** – Given the high frequency of women's experience with abuse and (sexual, physical and verbal) violence, we recommend provision of individual and group psychotherapy services.
- **Increasing the awareness of homeless women about their rights, jobs and housing opportunities.**
- **To nurture a sense of community, motivate women to cooperate and create a space for group activities and for *mutual support*** – We recommend promoting positive group dynamics in the area of services. Women are typically open to collaboration and sharing; therefore, to grow their capacities, we recommended supporting their sense of community and mutual support, learning and sharing. We recommend opening “community rooms” or spaces where women can meet and engage in self-help activities. We recommend motivating women to developing their own activities, thus enhancing their capacities and confidence.

- **Shelters and other support institutions should stop sharing *negative references*, i.e. sharing information about *difficult clients*** – research discovered that institutions serving the homeless share information about women clients without their permission or knowledge. This practice breaks the principle of equal access and was a commonly cited reason for distrust and refusing to seek help on the part of the women respondents.

Recommendations for reintegration into the labour market:

- **Free unlimited internet access** – Due to the time and financial costs of the process of employment and housing search, we recommend increasing the number of computers in client facilities, especially in shelters. Internet access should be free and unlimited. Service providers must acknowledge the fact that the internet is now a major tool in the search for employment, information and opportunities that can lead to a positive change.
- **Free unlimited accesses to phones** – The financial cost of telephone use is a frequent barrier in finding employment and housing. We recommend that facilities, especially shelters and drop-in centres enable clients to use the telephone for free to seek employment and to make contact with family and friends. There should be no time restraints on telephone use.
- **Free transportation tickets to job interviews** – Women endure increased stress as a result of repeated rejections at job interviews. The financial costs of transportation to interview destinations and the financial strain of the job search process in general frequently demotivate women from persisting on looking for a job, particularly when they are rejected more than once. We recommend providing free transportation tickets in the course of job search.

- **Legal aid and debt counseling** – homeless women display a keen interest in learning about their rights in the areas of housing, employment, family, welfare benefits and debt. We recommend regular legal counseling is made available.

Recommendations in the area of housing:

- **Extending the time limit on shelter residence up to a period of two years** – we recommend to extend the time limits of shelter and other safe housing, especially for first-time clients. Longer time in the shelter would enable women to recover from violent relationships, to feel socially more secure and to improve their chances of finding a job and stable long-term housing outside the system of social services.
- **Assistance with finding subsequent/temporary housing outside the social service system** – the vast majority of homeless women long for a secure, affordable permanent housing situation which would enable them to recover, psychologically and socially, and to find a permanent job. We recommend that counseling and assistance services are provided to help women locate this type of housing.

Research Methodology

Research Methods

The nature of the information we studied required qualitative methods in this phase of the research to re-examine the respondents' subjective understanding of their own life stories. We were interested in how homeless women perceive themselves in relation to homelessness, health, housing, employment and affordable services. We selected the framework of individual interviews so that the communication partners/respondents can share their life stories freely and openly with the researchers and also anonymously with the general public. In addition, we used moderated group discussions to map the issues and barriers in the area of social services and re-integration into the labour market. In the group discussions, key words were used to initiate discussion. The overarching approach we adopted in the study was the socio-constructivist approach (Guba and Lincoln, 2005), which led us to respect the fact that the findings do not reflect a singular reality rather than the complicated social structures and subjective experiences of the participants.

Data Collection

The data were collected in the summer of 2013. Individual interview sites varied between drop-in centres, shelters, street so that we could collect data across different groups of homeless women in Prague. We sought out twenty-eight women in different social situations and of a range of ages and ethnic backgrounds who made our final sample. The interviews typically lasted between two and three hours. All were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The settings and frameworks for each individual interview can be found in the appendix.

In addition, we conducted four group interviews with twenty-two women in Prague and Ostrava. Again, these sessions were recorded with a tape recorder and a camcorder and their key parts were also recorded in the form of notes. The main goal of these focus groups with four to six participants was to identify the needs and barriers

related to the use of social services and issues related to the return to the labour market. The participants of the group interviews were residents of shelters for women and shelters for mothers and children, who all showed a keen interest in our topic. The opportunity to talk about their problems clearly stimulated their interest in finding a resolve to their situations. The settings and frameworks of the focus groups can be found in the appendix.

The Respondent Sample

The term "homeless woman/women", which was primarily used to describe the target group, includes women who are currently using the services of daily drop-in centres for the homeless, dormitories and shelters. These include women living on the street, women living in temporary non-subsidized housing (outside the social services system) as well as women who utilize housing facilities within the system of social services. The vast majority of these women have mixed experiences with homelessness, including periods of *hidden/latent homelessness* (see below), living on the street or staying in dormitories, shelters and other forms of housing funded by social services. All the women we interviewed were approached individually in drop-in centres and shelters, where we also carried out the data collection.

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents range in terms of their birthplace, size of the place of residence, age, ethnicity and partnership status; on average, the women were middle-aged (42). For more information, please see the appendix.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed according to the principle of partial analysis (Morse and Field, 1995). The researcher tried to determine *common themes* and derive at important cross-cutting concepts and topics which emerged in the individual interviews. Data collected via group interviews were analysed with the help of the consensus positions of the groups.

Homeless Women's Identities

Most people understand *homelessness, people without home*, as well as the predominant term *the homeless* in male terms and the language we use to describe homeless women has not yet been subjected to scrutiny. We believe that a terminological re-orientation would help us reflect the needs of homeless women in different areas, including the area of social services. To use correct expressions and to understand the various identities of homeless women is particularly important because the way the homeless woman identifies herself typically determines whether she seeks out and uses social services or not.

The identity and the self-concept of homeless women are directly related to their daily survival strategies and they influence their experience of homelessness. Although all the respondents in the study do fit the ETHOS (Feantsa 2013) definition of homeless people¹, only very few identified as *homeless women*.

These women are homeless and stay in shelters and dormitories for longer periods. Although their vast majority have unwillingly lived on the street, they cannot or wish not to identify themselves as homeless. Among other things, this also proves the lack of dignity associated with the position of homeless people.

Naturally, public perception has a direct impact on how homeless women see themselves. The respondents overwhelmingly agreed that they feel that other people, including the service providers, see them as inferior, second-class citizens and treat them with contempt. This experience seemed to cut across the services, the authorities as well as the public and health care facilities used by the respondents.

¹ According to ETHOS (European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion), homeless people form a population group including both visible homeless people, i.e. people sleeping outside, and people who live in accommodation facilities due to their inability to find other housing, people whose housing is insecure, and people who live in conditions that do not meet the minimum standards of living in the cultural and social environment.

The danger of stigmatization of homeless people (and its growing tendency) lies in the resulting reluctance of homeless people to use social and other public services. Several respondents were so deterred by their negative experience that they completely refuse any assistance, including getting registered as an unemployed person, which put them in debt with the health insurance system. In the interviews, many women described their negative experience and the way it affected their attitude to themselves. As Dana (55) put it: "*You're all alone, a second-class citizen; no one can help you.*"

Therefore, for homeless women the term *homelessness* and the associated stigma constitute the primary barrier to getting help. A considerate and sensitive use of terminology and sensitive communication with homeless women on the part of the service providers, health professionals, public officials and the police are key to effective aid to vulnerable women.

It is important to realize that negative self-reflection not only deepens the feelings of shame and failure (“...I do not deserve help...”) but deters women from seeking professional help and reduces their motivation for positive change. In the course of our study, we discovered a sad paradox: The homeless women who distanced themselves from the term *homeless woman* had a greater tendency to look after their appearance and make their homelessness invisible. These women also found it unthinkable to use services for the homeless:

“I left work and took the tram; I stayed in it all night and in the morning I went to my shift again. I liked the twelve-hour shifts the best. It was warm at work.” (Pavla, 45)

Conversely, women who accepted their homelessness and identified themselves as *homeless* represented women who had given up their fight for a dignified life:

“The office workers told me it was only my own fault; I just want to spend the rest of my life somewhere; I don’t care. I won’t be able to pay for accommodation any more, I just want peace.” (Zuzana, 62)

Women without housing find themselves in a double trap – those who have accepted the status of homelessness feel hopeless and unworthy of institutional aid services. These women feel as if their situation has no solution. They have experienced discrimination on the grounds of homelessness in the past and strive to avoid it again. Fear of stigmatization and discrimination is also the reason why even women who refuse to accept their homeless status do not seek out services for people in need.

Terminology

In the course of the research we came to a shift in our understanding the terminology of female homelessness. We believe that one of the preconditions of successful recovery and re-integration of women without permanent housing into the society is their capacity to talk about the problem and name it.

The process of group interviews made it clear that a sensitive and correct terminology approved by the participants and the target group facilitates emancipation, better reflection on their own situation, increased concern for their own well-being and a desire to seek solutions.

The women participants typically assumed strong attitudes against the label *homeless*. Nevertheless, a deeper understanding of their own situation usually followed in the course of individual interviews along with a reflection on the meaning of the word *home*. The women respondents were able to self-identify in the terms of the following framework we had developed:

A homeless woman – the respondents in this study associated the concept with someone in a situation of urgent need, typically on the street. They linked the image of a homeless woman was linked to pain, loneliness, filth, cold and despair. Most of the respondents strongly disassociated from this label due to its degrading nature even though they had had first-hand experience with living on the street.

A woman without shelter/housing – the women respondents associated this concept with the following terms: a person without shelter, hopelessness, loneliness, psychological damage, loss of family and children, loss of work. Many of the respondents (including shelter residents) were able to identify with this term only after having gained a deeper insight into their own situation. Label *a woman without shelter* was perceived as a lot more respectable than *a homeless woman*.

A woman without regular housing – most of the respondents strongly identified with this term, agreeing that they have stayed in a night shelter or a dormitory. According to the respondents, this label would also cover persons with routine short-term street experience. The majority of the respondents felt this label was the most appropriate for their own situation.

A women’s shelter resident – this term elicited similar reactions as the term *a woman with no regular housing*. We could see women strongly identify with this term, particularly women who have stayed in a shelter in the past. The term *women’s shelter* associated the following concepts: *substitute, temporary solution to a problem* and *shelter*.

Roads to Homelessness

A loss of housing is very seldom a consequence of a sole incident. It is usually the culmination of a complex situation. Women suffering a loss of home typically suffer from increased psychological stress, financial strain and become extremely vulnerable as they fall through all safety nets. Our research validated that when a person first loses shelter, they are usually completely unaware that there are services they can use. Some of the respondents had spent up to two years on the street before they learnt about women's shelters and drop-in centers. Although situations leading to a loss of home can be extremely complex, some triggers are characteristic for desperate situations and signalize potential loss of regular housing.

Family or Relationship Break-Up

- *The first time I came to a shelter was four years ago. My mum'd found a new boyfriend and he did not like that I was still living with her so he practically kicked me out... I lived in the street for a long time, I had no clue there were shelters for women.* (Monika, 32)

The break-up of a family or a partnership ranks as one of the top triggers for homelessness among the women we interviewed. Many of these women were forced to leave the homes they had shared with their partners as a result of a breakup of their marriage or partner relationship. The death of a partner, parents or other family members who had shared the same household is another similar reason for leaving home. A rapidly deteriorating financial situation linked to a loss of support networks and a quick loss of accommodation options featured in the majority of the women's stories we collected, along with a complete lack of awareness about services for people without shelter.

Domestic Violence

- *I ran away from my partner who used to beat me up. Drugs and alcohol were also involved. On one hand I was relieved because (running away) had saved my life. I was hit on my head twenty times and nobody helped me, I had no idea where to go.* (Helena, 35)

Escaping from violence inflicted by a partner seems to be another most frequent reason for women's loss of home. Loss of home usually leads to a loss of job and a disintegration of traditional supporting networks:

„The family were partial to him and blamed me for leaving”. (Sylva, 28)

The respondents indicated they had often stayed in violent relationships in order to keep a roof over their head or because of the children. They said they had left when they felt their life was in danger or when the situation had become so extreme it was impossible to endure any longer.

Here, it is important to note that this reason behind homelessness is characteristic for women and must be addressed in the services provided to people without shelter.

Poverty and Economic Distress

- *„I had no clue that my husband wasn't paying the rent. One day, they just came and threw us out from the flat. We didn't even get to keep the furniture. Fortunately, the kids were grown. My husband moved to Prague afterwards.* (Jana, 54)

For women, poverty and economic distress are another very frequent reason behind becoming homeless. The loss of their ability to pay the rent and a dysfunctioning financial inter-dependence with another person often results from a change of marital status, entering retirement or the loss of job.

Other economic reasons for becoming homeless include receiving wages behind schedule or losing a home because of sudden changes in rental fees (related to market de-regulation or moving flats, for example).

Approximately two thirds of the respondents were caught in homeless situation as a result of unreasonable debt.

Long-term unemployment, unstable employment and insufficient income from short-term or part-time jobs are other reasons for women's insolvency and inability to pay market prices for housing. This situation usually correlates with low education levels among women.

Women in this situation are often extremely motivated to find stable employment and housing but fail to succeed in the long term. Let us not forget that this situation also affects women disproportionately as a result of economic inequality.

Women earn lower wages and thus also qualify for lower old age pensions and other welfare benefits. In other words, their economic activity in productive years affects their options at the time of need. Poverty affects women more adversely than men and their possibilities are therefore more limited than those of men.

Lack of Affordable and Safe Housing

- *„The deposit money is impossible, I don't have the money for rent and I don't want a man any more... (Pavčina, 32)*

Regardless of the actual triggers of their homelessness, all the interviewed women also expressed a sense of hopelessness. Once their residence ends is linked to their Women who utilize shelters and other facilities repeatedly or for long periods of time often fail adequate long-term housing. The situation is reinforced by the scarcity of subsequent housing available to shelter clients. This trend strongly contrasts with the apparent interest of the respondents in improving their situation, namely by finding long-term employment and housing.

The very absence of affordable housing can be seen as a cause of homelessness.

Co-educational commercial hostel- and motel-style houses often came up in the context of subsequent housing. Ninety percent of the respondents viewed these institutions as unacceptable as a reliable housing option. Similarly, shelters were also perceived as unsanitary, dangerous and high-risk by the women respondents including women who had not experienced violence by men. Women's shelters and safe houses, on the other hand, were typically preferred.

- *“I divorced my second husband. We lived in a shelter and I had nowhere to go. I didn't want to stay in the shelter by myself, cause you never know who is placed in your room, it can be an alcoholic and I wouldn't have managed that because of my childhood.” (Markéta, 34)*

These predominantly negative attitudes towards co-ed shelters are primarily related to the presence of men and the increased risk of alcohol-induced. This specific aspect of women's homelessness is alarming.

Unlike men, homeless women are limited in their choice of subsequent housing because of their vulnerability to potential violence in hostels and motels. Unfortunately, independent safe housing on rental basis is financially out of their reach.

Absence of Specialized Services

Absence of specialized housing facilities for women with long-term psychiatric problems, alcohol and non-alcohol drug addictions and other specific needs can be seen as a system deficiency that contributes to women's homelessness.

Many of the interviewed women utilized the services of drop-in services and day centres. When in good health, they would occasionally also use hostels and shelters. The lack of continuous assistance to women suffering from psychological problems or addiction in combination with their inability to adapt to the rules of shelters and other service providers (such as sobriety or accommodation fees) reinforce homelessness in this demographic group. There are currently no facilities serving women with such special needs and they are rarely able to address their problems and end their homelessness alone.

Other Roots of Homelessness

Our research revealed that other causes of homelessness include psychological problems (up to a clinical extent), alcohol and non-alcohol addictions and family history of social exclusion particularly in the case of women who had grown in up institutional care or had undergone a trauma. **Long-term homelessness undermines women's motivation to positive change and perpetuates their situation.**

Other Cross-Cutting Themes

Homeless Women and Violence

- „Women face harsher judgment (than men). By involuntarily living in the streets they face the risk of violence. Still, the reason why they often end up on the street is that they try to escape from violence in their homes.“ (Jana, woman, 55)

Ninety percent of the female respondents interviewed for the study indicated they had experienced some form of sexual, domestic, physical or verbal violence typically inflicted by men. In addition, a considerable number of the respondents said their condition had got worse after losing shelter. Even the respondents, for whom running away from domestic violence was not the primary or the direct trigger of homelessness, had experienced a considerable amount of violence.

Although many women hoped to retreat from violence by leaving their homes, their situation rapidly worsened and the risk of being attacked was present again in the shifting conditions of their housing situation and in the new street environment. In the interviews, respondents said that the risk of being attacked by other people without shelter, by members of the public or by the police was significantly high in these new contexts.

The respondents, who did not have first-hand experience with violence but had witnessed physical violence being inflicted upon other people without shelter, described living in the streets as marked by fear of being attacked, robbed or threatened by other forms of violence by members of the public, the police and other people without shelter. The respondents also reported having been treated with refusal, insults and condescending attitudes on the part of public officials and health care professionals.

Homeless women frequently cited the fact that violence, robbery, intimidation and other threats inflicted by men were common in shelter facilities. This was a common reason why women did not utilize services in facilities dominated by male users.

Sexism of the Street

The homeless women who took part in the study frequently mentioned they had experienced abuse by men more frequently at times when they involuntarily lived in the streets.

- “When a woman is out on the street alone, everybody is making advances at her.“ (Dana, 55)

Incidents of financial abuse were particularly high, according to the respondents; men would take away women's welfare money, use rooms rented by women as their temporary shelter or failed to financially participate in shopping costs for essential goods such as food.

- “When you are out on the street, you always have to hide so that you don't get robbed. The women get the doll and the guys take it from them right way.“ (Dana, 55)

The women respondents also talked about having to endure the company of drunk men. The reason for remaining involved in unhealthy and uncomfortable relationships was the need of protection against the dangers of the street, attacks and intimidation. They said that living on the street is *too high-risk* for solo women so they would form relationships to help them stay safe. The price of protection is high however, as these relationships often involve sexual and financial abuse (survival sex).

Dana (55) summarized her street experience following: *“The exhaustion is the worst part. The worst thing (about living in the street) is that you can’t lie down, you are tired, you are constantly watching your stuff. You are afraid somebody is going to take it away, beat you up, the cold isn’t even that bad, that you can’t sleep is the worst.”*

Vulnerability and an increased exposure to violence are typical for women’s homelessness.

Hidden Homelessness – Women’s Specialty

Our research suggests that hidden/latent homelessness represents a relatively common strategy to postpone the reality of becoming a person without shelter. The vast majority of the respondents mentioned they had utilized substitute housing independent from the shelter services system. These women would temporarily live at the homes of their relatives, acquaintances or on the couches or floors in different people’s homes. They would also stay involved in unhealthy relationships with their partners or pursue relationships with the goal of securing housing. An imbalance between the material means of the partners and a strong dependence of women on men were typical for these relationships.

The risk involved in this kind of hidden homelessness consists in the instability of the living situation. In the lives of the respondents, periods of hidden homelessness were often followed by periods of living in the street and vice versa: *“It was his house, and he just kicked me out.”* (Pavla, 47) What’s more, the problem is shut behind the closed doors. These women stay invisible as they fall through the cracks in the safety net of services for people in need: *“I had no idea there were shelters.”* (Jana, 38)

Shared elements could be found in the stories of women who had had periods of hidden homelessness; their lives were marked by isolation, disintegration of support networks, feelings of helplessness and a lack of awareness about shelters and other services for people in need.

- *“I’d lived on the street and (stayed) with different acquaintances for two years before I found out it was possible to get help.”* (Jitka, 50)

In the course of the period of hidden/latent homelessness, most respondents said they believed recovery or finding a job or stable housing was unrealistic. In these times, women would endure severe psychological stress. Their situation was always likely to change quickly and housing was unstable and unreliable.

- *“When I first came to the shelter, I slept for three days, I was so tired and exhausted from it all. Finally, I could sleep safely.”* (Patrika, 45 – in order to secure housing, she stayed in an unhealthy relationship for two years.)

Hidden homelessness serves to postpone the moment of starting to live on the street as well as the moment of seeking out help. Hidden homelessness does not resolve the housing problem. On the contrary, women are exposed to potential violence and risk getting involved in unhealthy and potentially harmful relationships (sexual or other).

Homeless and Unemployed Women

- *“All I want is a job and a place to live. I am fifty-five. I won’t find a job and I won’t be able to put down a housing deposit. I don’t want a man. I am not going to let anyone hurt me again. But (I wonder) what I will be able to do on my own?”* (Petra, 55)

Respondents under fifty years of age displayed a keen interest in finding a steady job. Their vast majority saw long-term employment to be the key to ending their homelessness. The high amounts required as deposits in the current housing market were an important motivation factor for saving money. These women also showed an interest in re-training and other educational programs. Low education levels and a lack of work experience, on the other hand, represented the obstacles to reaching these goals. Other barriers they mentioned included the need for childcare and the lack of available childcare services, the lack of suitable work opportunities and the limited availability of re-training programs. Another common barrier to finding a job was insufficient computer skills and limited access to the phone and/or the internet.

Female respondents over fifty years of age also understood work as their only way to end homelessness. However, due to their long-term negative experience with seeking a job, they were very doubtful about their chances to gain employment. Gender and age discrimination in the job market was the primary barrier to employment and housing for women over fifty interviewed for this study.

- *“A guy can work in construction or agriculture, in the forest. (But) nobody will employ a fifty-year old woman.”* (Dana, 55)

Another frequently cited barrier was the stress of the job search process, which the respondents found demanding in terms of logistics and finance. Women living in hostels, motels or shelters either did not have the necessary computer skills and access to the internet or the phone or they could not afford it. Shelters would offer internet use only for a limited period of time (and sometimes for a fee). Access to the computers and their number was insufficient. For these reasons, the possibilities of securing a job in the current job market were minimal for homeless women.

- *“When you are on welfare, thirty crowns for a ticket to a job interview is a lot of money. So you travel without a ticket, arrive to the site and find out the job was taken ages ago, and on top of that you get caught for not having a ticket.”* (Daniela, 38)

The respondents expressed frustration with the cost of the job search process and showed a keen interest in assistance services which would aid them with job search, identifying suitable educational opportunities (re-training, computer skills and others) and opportunities to gain work experience, for example by volunteering.

Homeless women and Services of Interest

In the interviews, women displayed an interest in intensive counseling services in the area of job search, re-training, education and volunteering.

These women were also interested in greater support with finding subsequent housing, specifically in help in finding rental apartments and information sharing.

In addition, the respondents were interested in debt counseling and free legal aid.

These women showed an interest in being able to use the phone and the internet free-of charge in order to find a job, non-shelter housing and to keep in contact with family, friends and partners.

The women respondents expressed a preference for gender-segregated shelters rather than co-educational settings for the following reasons: absence of men, alcohol and drugs; cleanliness and hygiene)

Finally, homeless women were interested in participating in leisure activities and volunteering opportunities.

Magda's Story

I am never going to let anyone hurt me again: A Story With Open End

Magda is 51. She used to live with her husband and her daughter in an apartment rented from the City of Ostrava. According to Magda, the relationship with her husband was violent but they were raising two daughters and could afford the rent. Despite frequent problems and physical beatings their relationship lasted for over ten years. Seven years ago, when the City offered the apartments for sale to the renters, the family realized they could not afford to buy their apartment. This was followed by an event which Magda is not very clear about. She says: *"The owner had us sign a paper – he said it was (a contract) to extend the rental period indefinitely but (in fact,) it was a notice to leave."* The family moved out of the apartment, she split up with her husband and started living in motels, at the houses of her acquaintances and in the streets. Five years ago, Magda qualified for subsidized housing: *"I got a flat because they'd found out I was on the street with a kid."* However, Magda says she had to leave the flat a year later (this service was time-limited) and moved around motels again. At the moment, she lives in a shelter and her daughter is in institutional care. Magda says that now in the shelter she finally realized that she does not want to get involved with another man ever again: *"To move into some guy's house again, not again. Now that I am here (in the shelter) I am thinking about what all I let them do to me...(I need) to get myself together, put my thoughts in order... it's better to just rely on myself. I let them hurt me too much. When you are on the street, you've got to stick with the gang or you won't survive. And you'll drink the wine even if you don't like it. When you know you'll be back on the street in a year, you don't feel like going on..."*

To an extent, Magda's story illustrates the typical cycle homeless women find themselves in. She longs for stable housing, for recovery from a violent relationship and for a new, independent start. However, she is also aware of the fact that in her economic situation she cannot afford to rent own place and fulfill her dream. Sharing the household with another man is not an option for her. Magda would also like to re-establish the relationship with her daughter but she is afraid that the authorities won't allow it until she has found stable housing. She is also anxious about the moment when she has to leave the shelter (time-limited service) without having another housing situation secured and she hopes she will be able to move into another shelter. So far, Magda has not been able to find a job in the course of her shelter residence. She has not been offered any counseling services which would help her heal her traumas related to past violence and the impossibility to look after her seven year old daughter. Magda suffers from serious psychological stress which prevents her from feeling more balanced and able to find a job, in her opinion. Magda feels hopeless.

Conclusion

The findings published in this report are shocking. The lives of women without permanent shelter are traumatic and yet, they do not have access to the housing and the aid they urgently need. Hidden from the public sight they shy away from available services in order to preserve their dignity. Many homeless women have no other choice but to sleep on the street, in a squat or to resort to their friends or family members. Sometimes they get involved in unhealthy sexual relationships with the purpose of securing a place to stay. Violence is their companion in life, on the street and behind closed doors. They have nowhere to go. There is not a single center that serves homeless women or women at-risk of homelessness.

When the makeshift structures they set up finally fall apart, they arrive in a shelter at the end of their breath. At the shelter women strive to preserve their dignity and hope for better future. However, the reality catches up with them: they are going to have to leave whether they have recovered from a violent relationship or not, whether they have got back on their feet and regardless whether they have come closer to their dream about having a job and a permanent place to live.

Service providers serving homeless women usually understand homelessness in generic terms. They *provide the same services to everybody* and find gender issues new and unfamiliar. Although the problems of paralyzing domestic violence and violence against women have been discussed in the area of social services for some time, service providers claim they do not have the capacity to provide any other additional services to women. Moreover, the providers lack the capacity to offer intensive counseling, access to information about jobs, women's rights, housing, or even access to information technologies and the phone. Access to these means of communication is generally limited and insufficient. This situation is not surprising. The current system of shelters is under-financed and there is no money for extras. The government strategy to prevent and combat homelessness does not address the specific needs of homeless women either. On their way towards their dreams, homeless women usually have to rely on the help and understanding of individual social workers. Neither the government strategies to prevent poverty and homelessness nor service providers account for the structural causes of the likely growing problem of homelessness among women (feminization of poverty).

Analysis of the interviews conducted with homeless women led us to suggest ways to improve the situation of these women. Some of our recommendations are addressed to our public officials in the area of welfare and subsidized housing and others are meant for the current service providers.

Structural recommendations:

- **The government strategy to prevent and combat homelessness must take into account women's issues, particularly violence against women and the need to create and provide services that address the unique needs of homeless women and women at-risk of homelessness.**
- **The government strategy to prevent and combat homelessness must take into account** the creation and funding of gender-specific facilities for women at-risk of homelessness, including drop-in centres, centres providing emergency housing, shelter housing and subsequent housing.

Recommendations for the transformation of the existing services:

- **To take into account women's issues, particularly violence against women and the need to create specific services to help homeless women and women at-risk of homelessness.**
- **To establish *safe zones*** – creating *women-only spaces* either by specifying time or space reservations on services only for women (not just in drop-in centres).
- **To create a dignified and respectful environment** – We recommend participatory approaches to (social) work, involving women clients in decision-making about the services they use, the facility rules and other aspects of the provision of accommodation and services.
- **Capacity building** – homeless women face greater barriers in the process of job search and in the job market (see above). Skills, work experience and self-confidence of homeless women can be gained through volunteering or leisure activities. We recommend motivating homeless women and women without shelter to volunteer; to participate in leisure activities and to organize such activities on their own initiative.

- **To mediate therapeutic services** – Given the high frequency of women's experience with abuse and (sexual, physical and verbal) violence, we recommend provision of individual and group psychotherapy services.

Increasing the awareness of homeless women about their rights, jobs and housing opportunities.

- **To nurture a sense of community, motivate women to cooperate and create a space for group activities and for *mutual support*** – We recommend promoting positive group dynamics in the area of services. Women are typically open to collaboration and sharing; therefore, to grow their capacities, we recommended supporting their sense of community and mutual support, learning and sharing. We recommend opening “community rooms” or spaces where women can meet and engage in self-help activities. We recommend motivating women to developing their own activities, thus enhancing their capacities and confidence.
- **Shelters and other support institutions should stop sharing *negative references*, i.e. sharing information about *difficult clients*** – research discovered that institutions serving the homeless share information about women clients without their permission or knowledge This practice breaks the principle of equal access and was a commonly cited reason for distrust and refusing to seek help on the part of the women respondents.

Recommendations for reintegration into the labour market:

- **Free unlimited internet access** – Due to the time and financial costs of the process of employment and housing search, we recommend increasing the number of computers in client facilities, especially in shelters. Internet access should be free and unlimited. Service providers must acknowledge the fact that the internet is now a major tool in the search for employment, information and opportunities that can lead to a positive change.
- **Free unlimited accesses to phones** – The financial cost of telephone use is a frequent barrier in finding employment and housing. We recommend that facilities, especially shelters and drop-in centres enable clients to use the telephone for free to seek employment and to make contact with family and friends. There should be no time restraints on telephone use.
- **Free transportation tickets to job interviews** – Women endure increased stress as a result of repeated rejections at job interviews. The financial costs of transportation to interview destinations and the financial strain of the job search process in general frequently demotivate women from persisting on looking for a job, particularly when they are rejected more than once. We recommend providing free transportation tickets in the course of job search.
- **Legal aid and debt counseling** – homeless women display a keen interest in learning about their rights in the areas of housing, employment, family, welfare benefits and debt. We recommend regular legal counseling is made available.

Recommendations in the area of housing:

- **Extending the time limit on shelter residence up to a period of two years** – we recommend to extend the time limits of shelter and other safe housing, especially for first-time clients. Longer time in the shelter would enable women to recover from violent relationships, to feel socially more secure and to improve their chances of finding a job and stable long-term housing outside the system of social services.
- **Assistance with finding subsequent/temporary housing outside the social service system** – the vast majority of homeless women long for a secure, affordable permanent housing situation which would enable them to recover, psychologically and socially, and to find a permanent job. We recommend that counseling and assistance services are provided to help women locate this type of housing.

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Appendices:

Appendix No.1 Respondents' Sociodemographic Profile

Appendix No.2 List of Respondents

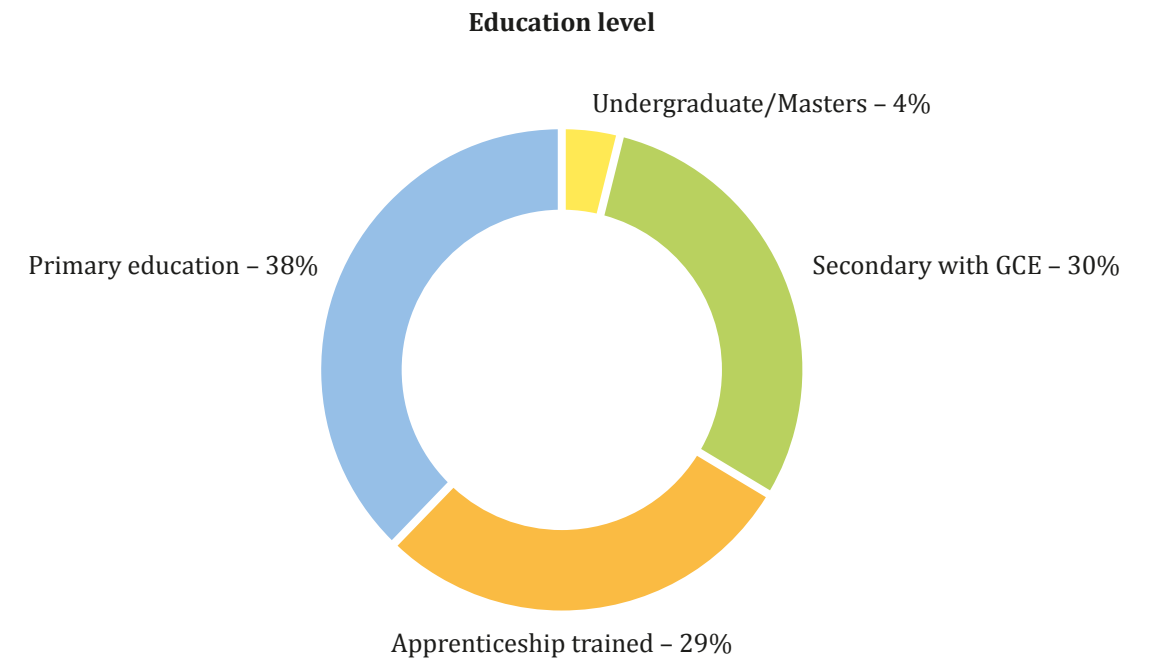
Appendix No.3 Individual Interview Framework

Appendix No.4 Focus Group Framework

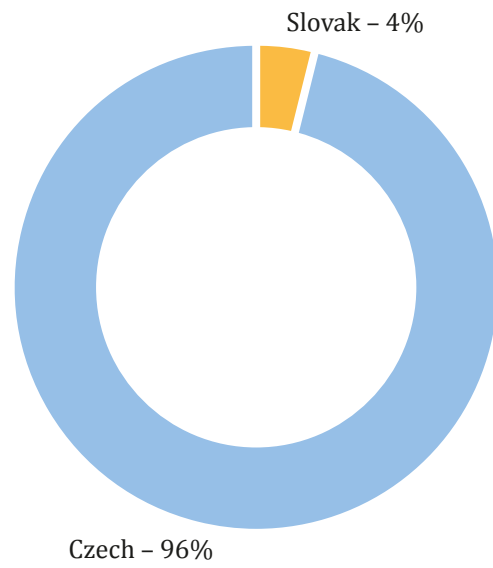
Appendices

Respondents' Sociodemographic Profile

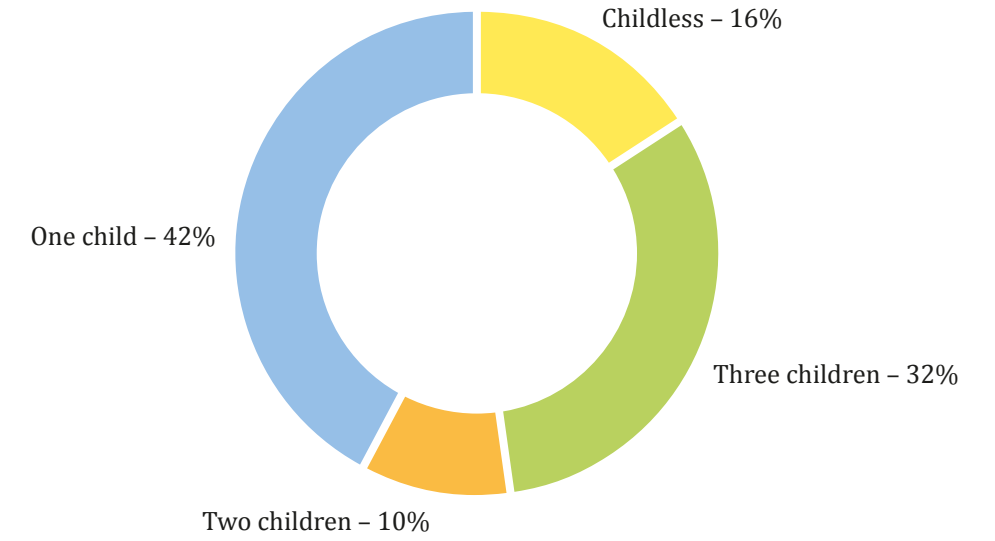
Average age: 42 years, Age Range: 20 – 81 years



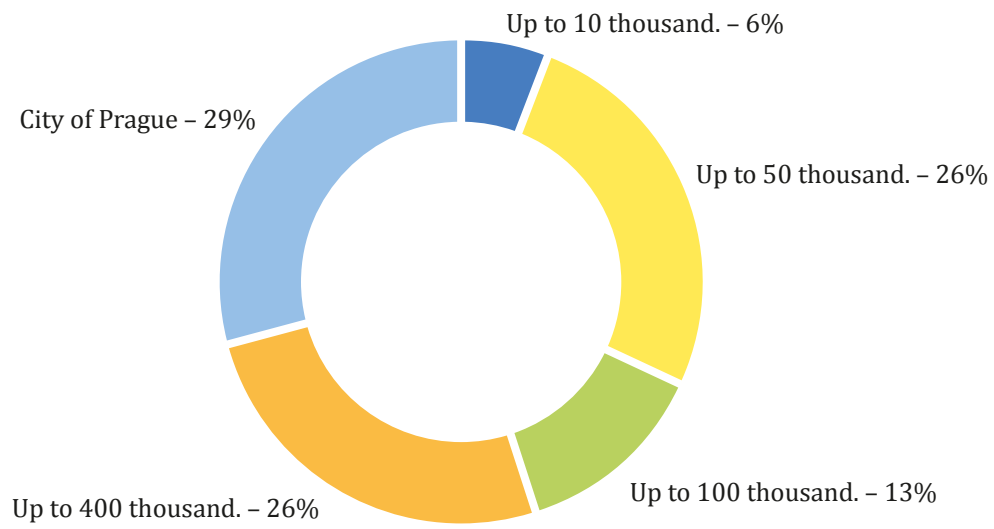
Nationality



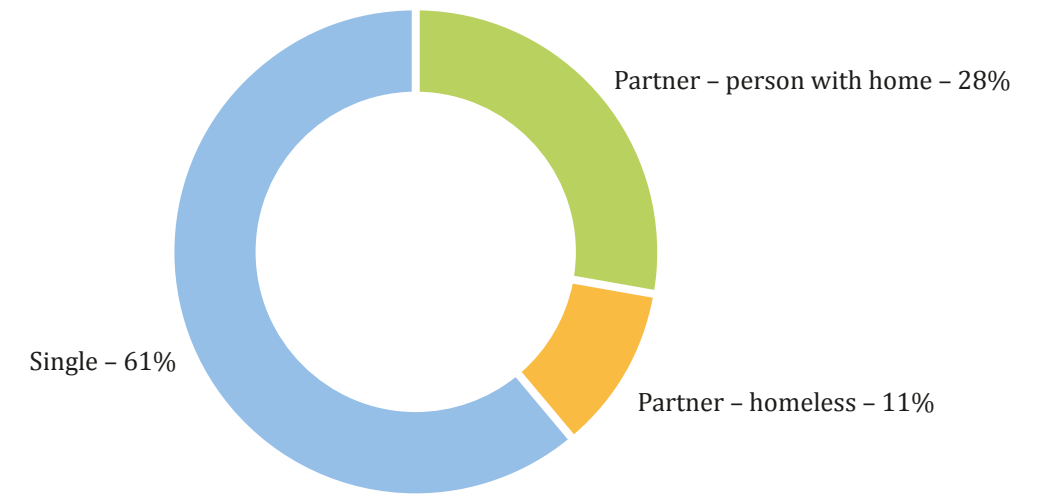
Parental status



Size of the place of origin by population



Relationship status



Respondent Overview

Nickname	Date	Point of Contact	Interview Carried Out Yes/No	Interview Recorded Yes/No	Reason for Declining Interview
Lada	Sept 9, 2013	Prague shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Romana	Sept 9, 2013	Prague shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Pavla	Sept 9, 2013	Prague shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Iva	Sept 9, 2013	Prague shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Lenka	Aug 20, 2013	Ostrava shelter for mothers and children	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Ilona	Aug 20, 2013	Ostrava shelter for mothers and children	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Zuzana	Aug 20, 2013	Ostrava shelter for mothers and children	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Zora	Aug 20, 2013	Ostrava shelter for mothers and children	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Markéta	Aug 20, 2013	Ostrava shelter for mothers and children	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Soňa	Aug 20, 2013	Ostrava shelter for mothers and children	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Jana	Aug 21, 2013	Ostrava shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Julie	Aug 21, 2013	Ostrava shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Barbora	Aug 21, 2013	Ostrava shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Jitka	Aug 21, 2013	Ostrava shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Nada	Aug 21, 2013	Ostrava shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Dora	Aug 21, 2013	Ostrava shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Natálie	Aug 22, 2013	Ostrava shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Marta	Aug 22, 2013	Ostrava shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Ema	Aug 22, 2013	Ostrava shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Andrea	Aug 22, 2013	Ostrava shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Petra	Aug 22, 2013	Ostrava shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Hana	Aug 22, 2013	Ostrava shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Martina	Aug 22, 2013	Ostrava shelter for women	Yes (FG)	Yes	N/A
Patrika	August 2013	Prague shelter for mothers and children	Yes	No	N/A
Dana	August 2013	Prague shelter for women	Yes	Yes	N/A
Petra	August 2013	Prague shelter for mothers and children	Yes	Yes	N/A
Jiřina	August 2013	Prague shelter for mothers and children	Yes	No	N/A
Kamila	August 2013	Prague hostel	Yes	Yes	N/A
Kamila	August 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	No	N/A

Luda	August 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	Yes	N/A
Milada	June 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	No	N/A
Žaneta	June 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	No	N/A
Sylvie	June 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	Yes	N/A
Jarka	June 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	Yes	N/A
Miroslava	June 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	Yes	N/A
Dita	May 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	Yes	N/A
Martina	May 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	No	N/A
Hedvika	May 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	No	N/A
Rozálie	May 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	No	N/A
Julie	May 2013	Prague drop-in	Yes	No	N/A
Marika	July 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	No	N/A
Denisa	July 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	No	N/A
Klementína	July 2013	Prague drop-in	Yes	No	N/A
Sabina	July 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	Yes	N/A
Viktorie	July 2013	Prague squat	Yes	Yes	N/A
Adéla	July 2013	Prague shelter	Yes	Yes	N/A
Zuzana	May 2013	Prague squat	Yes	No	N/A
Ema	June 2013	Prague squat	Yes	No	N/A
Terezie	May 2013	Prague street	Yes	No	N/A
Viola	June 2013	Prague hostel	Yes	No	N/A

Individual interview: Framework

The goal of individual interviews is to use open-ended questions to record the life stories of the women respondents and to map the roles homelessness plays in their lives. In case the free narration does not include elements of the following themes, researchers can use prompts to elicit them:

Self:

1. Say three words which define you.
2. When you were a little girl, what did you imagine your life would be like?
3. How would you describe your current situation?
4. Please describe your current family or the family you have had.
5. What happened, how did you lose your permanent home?
 - How is it not to have a permanent home?
 - Has your idea of homelessness changed over time?
 - Have you ever lived on the street? How did it happen? How was (living on the street)?
6. How do you see yourself in the future?
7. Please tell us what men mean to you/what's your attitude towards men?
8. Please tell us what children mean to you/what's your attitude towards children/what's your relationship with your children like?
9. Please describe your safety nets - people, friends, organizations and institutions you can turn to when you are in crisis. Have these safety nets changed over the course of your life?

Society:

- What word should we use to describe women without permanent and stable housing? (homeless women/women without shelter/women without permanent home/??)
- Is the life of a woman without shelter different from that of a man?
- How do people/the society see women without shelter? How should people/society view women without shelter?
- What people/the society don't know/should know about women without shelter?
- How does society view men without shelter and women without shelter /is there any difference?
- What was life like for you before and now? How would you describe the times nowadays?
- Please tell us about the relationships among people in the same or in a similar situation as you (mutual help/competition among homeless women?).
- Are there any bright sides to being homeless/living without shelter? What are the highlights or moments of hope?
- Coping strategies: How does one come to terms with such a difficult situation? What does one do to survive? How can one manage to live without permanent shelter/be homeless?

Services:

1. Let's think about/Please tell us what a shelter/a hostel/a motel means to you. What's your experience?
 - Men's/women's/co-ed shelter facilities: What are the advantages and the disadvantages of M/W/COED shelters?
 - What is it like/would it be like: a "women only" environment?
2. Please describe your experience with social services and social workers.
3. What services for homeless people/people without shelter are missing?
4. Please describe your experience with medical and health services/did you notice any change in attitude (as a result of your current status)?
5. Please describe your level of education and what it means to you. Please tell us what education you have and what it means to you.
6. Let's think about what work means to you. Please describe the jobs you have had and what they meant to you.
7. What would need to happen/what do you need to happen to resolve your situation for good?

Risk Factors/Dangers:

1. What risks/threats/kinds of danger are there? What dangerous situations can a woman without shelter/a woman on the street get into?
2. Does sex play the role of a currency to be exchanged for help/money/shelter in the life of a homeless woman/woman without shelter?
3. What is the role of violence in lives of women without shelter? Please tell us about your experience with violence.
4. What are the roles of drugs and alcohol in the lives of homeless women/women without shelter? Please tell us about your experience with drugs and alcohol.

Focus group: Framework

INTRODUCTION: welcome, researcher introduction, NGO introduction, clarifying concept of focus group, discussion guidelines.

KEY WORDS I: Researcher notes down responses to the following words:
home, shelter, children, homeless woman, woman without shelter, men, work, family.

DISCUSSION/INTERVIEW: Structure

Part I. Lead-in Questions:

1. What is a home?
2. How is it not to have a permanent home?
3. Why does one lose her home? Why does one not have a home?
4. Is the life of a woman without shelter different from that of a man?
5. How do people/the society see women without shelter? How should people/society view women without shelter?
6. What word should we use to describe women without permanent and stable housing?
7. How does society view men without shelter / women without shelter?
Is there a difference in perception of men and women?
8. Is there anybody you can turn to when you feeling down? Do you know anybody who will help you when you are in a crisis? Who is it?

Part II. Services:

1. Men's/women's/co-ed shelter facilities. What are the advantages and the disadvantages of M/W/COED shelter facilities?
2. Please describe your experience with social services and social workers.
3. What services for people without shelter are missing? What services for women without shelter are missing?
4. Please describe your experience with medical and health services/did you notice any change in attitude (as a result of your current status)?
5. Let's think about what education means to you. Please describe your level of education and what it means to you. What would you need?
6. Let's think about what work means for you. Please describe the jobs you have had and what they meant to you.

Part III. Conclusion:

1. Are there any bright sides to living without shelter? What are the highlights or moments of hope?
2. How does one come to terms with a difficult situation? What does one do to survive? How can one manage to live without shelter?
3. What do you dream about?
4. What would have to happen for you to manage to get out of your situation and move into a home?

KEY WORDS II: researcher notes down responses to the following words:
joy/fun/happiness, dreams, society, help/aid/assistance, future.



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