

Global Female Homelessness: A Multi-Faceted Problem

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Published online: 27 September 2008
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Abstract International female homelessness is a difficult subject to address for a number of reasons. First, understanding what defines homelessness poses a problem because female homelessness often takes on a different form than that of male homelessness. Also, homelessness in industrialized countries looks different from that of developing nations where women are more likely to have inadequate housing in temporary shelters or live as squatters. Both of these factors affect the visibility of female homelessness as well as the ability to garner an accurate account of the number of homeless women around the world. Understanding the causes of female homelessness from a global perspective is no less difficult to comprehend because it encompasses so many other multifaceted issues. Women in developing nations face a different set of issues than their counterparts in the industrialized world because of differences in property rights, women's rights generally, access to education, and access to social services. Finally, immigrant women face a unique set of circumstances of being a foreigner without an adequate social support network.

Keywords Homelessness · Female homelessness · Definition of homelessness

Introduction

Female homelessness is a challenging problem to study because it is interconnected with so many other equally complex issues. One cannot separate female homelessness from gender neutral causes of homelessness, such as poverty, mental illness, and drug and alcohol abuse. In addition, there is the perniciousness of domestic violence and sexual abuse that, although they do not exclusively affect women, tend to play a larger part in contributing to female homelessness. On top of

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all of these factors, it is impossible to address female homelessness without also considering the plight of homeless children, whose fortunes are tied to those of their mothers.

In a global context, female homelessness takes on another layer of complexity. Although female homelessness is an international problem, the issues affecting homeless women around the world are not uniform. The face of female homelessness in industrialized nations is often the same as their American counterpart. However, there are differences even within industrialized nations, especially among countries where women are less educated and have fewer employment opportunities. Meanwhile, homeless women in the developing world experience even greater challenges, most of which are exacerbated by a country's social structure, insufficient legal rights, and inadequate or non-existent employment opportunities for women. Immigration is yet another complexity of female homelessness as non-native homeless women face a unique set of problems. These differences stem from being far from their social support network, language and cultural barriers, and, in some cases, from having questionable citizenship status.

In this paper, I begin the discussion of global female homelessness with a suitable definition of homelessness. This is important because there are certain types of homelessness that are specific to women and there are variations across countries. Relatedly, it is also necessary to discuss how many women around the world are homeless and what issues affect the visibility of such women. This is important because homeless women often languish in the shadows, and therefore do not get the appropriate attention and resources they desperately need. Finally, in the remaining sections, I touch upon the three additional aspects of global female homelessness: female homelessness in industrialized nations, female homelessness in the developing world, and the impact of immigration on female homelessness.

What is Homelessness? A Gendered Definition

In thinking about global female homelessness, it is important to use a broad definition to garner a full understanding of the extent of the problem. This is important for two reasons: (1) female homelessness looks very different from male homelessness and (2) female homelessness takes on different forms depending on where a woman lives. To the first point, definitions matter because “if homelessness is defined narrowly, as rough sleeping or pavement dwelling, women are less visible because they tend to conceal their homelessness by staying with friends and family whenever possible.”¹ While this type of homelessness is the one that may initially come to mind, it is more prevalent among homeless men than homeless women. Indeed, as will be seen in the next section, the numbers of homeless women are often under-reported because of the differences in visibility between male and female homelessness. This is evidenced in a study on German homelessness where “the bag lady, who is the publicly visible stereotype of a homeless woman,

¹ See [13, p. 131].

represents only a small percentage of the female homeless reality.”² For these reasons, we need a definition that also captures the “hidden homeless” women.³

To the second point mentioned above, we also need a definition that takes into account differences between countries that affect the form that female homelessness takes. A broad definition is necessary because “the number of people in Africa, Asia and Latin America that live in accommodation that is both insecure and substandard is much higher” than in other parts of the world.⁴ For example, a definition that does not take into account the prevalence of squatters in certain parts of the developing world perpetuates “the stereotypical image of homeless people as predominately lone, younger men” and misses the fact that in “some situations, women and children are equally likely to be homeless.”⁵

For these reasons, I prefer to use the definition developed by the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA). This definition “classifies homeless people according to their living situation:

- *rooflessness* (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping rough)
- *houselessness* (with a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelters)
- living in *insecure housing* (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence)
- living in *inadequate housing* (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding).⁶

Although no definition is perfect, the one developed by FEANTSA is most applicable to global female homelessness because it covers a wide range of types of homelessness affecting women all over the world. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges to understanding global female homelessness is the different forms that it takes depending on what part of the world the woman is living in.

How Many Women are Homeless? A Data Problem

The definition of homelessness matters because it affects the number of women who are counted in that category. “Worldwide, the number of homeless people can be estimated at anywhere from 100 million to one billion or more, depending on how homelessness is defined.”⁷ By using a broader definition, a more accurate portrayal of global female homelessness can be achieved. The question then remains as to what percentage of the total homeless population is female.

As would be expected, it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics on the percentage of a country’s population that is homeless. This task becomes even more challenging when attempting to make generalizations across many countries and

² See [8, p. 36].

³ See [11, p. 23].

⁴ See [16, p. 6].

⁵ See [13, p. 132].

⁶ See [5].

⁷ See [16, p. 6].

nearly impossible when trying to determine how many women are homeless. All of this assumes, of course, that a government entity or organization is attempting to collect data on the homeless. Information on homeless people is particularly problematic for less developed nations where the lack of social services for the homeless leads to a “scarcity of data on homelessness in developing countries.”⁸

Despite the problems of collecting accurate data on homelessness, we know that female homelessness is continually under-reported. This is because identifying homeless women is particularly difficult considering the “hidden homeless” problem mentioned in the previous section. These “hidden homeless” are women who...

have decided to stay with an abusive partner rather than face the impossible task of finding an affordable place; others couch-surf from friend to relative; some shack up with pimps; some hang out in bars looking for a man to take them to bed for the night; and others hide so well that no one realizes that they and their children are sleeping in a car or in bushes.⁹

There are a number of reasons that homeless women, more so than men, decide to remain hidden. One reason is because of the shame associated with being labeled homeless.¹⁰ Safety also plays a role because it is dangerous for a woman to live on the street on her own. Personal accounts from all over the world are rife with examples of homeless women being sexually assaulted while sleeping out on the streets. For example, a South Korean social worker from the Korea Foundation for Women says that “homeless women go through the most difficulty at night. Most of them have had to deal with men pestering them. If and when they happen to fall asleep, they wake up and find their clothes off. Some women thus would rather follow one homeless man than be harassed through the night.”¹¹ A Canadian news story reported that men would sometimes wait outside of homeless shelters to find women to attack, causing one former homeless woman to simply say, “It’s worse for women on the street.”¹² Unfortunately, these stories are all too common. However, they help further explain why homeless women choose to either stay in hiding or find temporary shelter.

Another reason female homelessness remains invisible is that most of the shelters that are available are focused on men and do not adequately meet the needs of homeless women.¹³ For example, a survey of services for the homeless in England found that “when provision is targeted at women, they appear as if out of nowhere, whereas they do not make demands on general provision.”¹⁴ So while homeless women will make use of targeted services, they do not seek them out the same way that men do. This phenomenon indicates that the under-reporting of homeless

⁸ See [13, p. 131].

⁹ See [11, p. 23].

¹⁰ See [15, p. 220].

¹¹ See [9].

¹² See [2].

¹³ See [15, p. 220].

¹⁴ See [10, p. 42].

women means homeless men continue to get more attention, which further drives women into the shadows. Or as one New Zealand Newspaper article put it, “It’s a man’s world—even when you’re homeless,” when talking about a town that has homeless shelters for men but no such accommodations for women.¹⁵

Another reason for the difficulty in identifying homeless women is that in some cultures, the idea of homeless women is inconceivable or unacceptable. For example, a study of homelessness in South Korea during the Asian Debt Crisis from 1997 to 2001 found that “Seoul city managers assumed that there were no homeless women...When pressed, [they] would later claim that the number of homeless women was negligible.”¹⁶ Any South Korean homeless women that existed were treated as aberrations or mentally ill because no self respecting woman would be homeless.¹⁷ Cultural factors such as these undoubtedly play a role in the perception and presence of “visibly” homeless women. In Islamic Bangladesh, one author hypothesizes that the low number of homeless women is due to female members of homeless families being sent to live with relatives.¹⁸ Furthermore, the lack of homeless women in some Islamic countries may be attributable to the fact “that young, single, female rural migrants, arriving in the cities without any peer support, prior information about the area or education and skills, are most likely to survive through prostitution.”¹⁹

Although an accurate count of homeless women is hard to identify for the previously mentioned reasons, recent data also shows that the number of homeless women is on the rise. “In the United States [women] currently make up 22% of the population, and in England their number has also increased. This trend was also noted in Denmark and Germany.”²⁰ Looking at data from seven industrialized nations, “females make up from 10 to 33.33% of the [homeless] population in all countries” and “women are increasingly seeking assistance in all European Union countries because they lack shelter.”²¹

Trends in Female Homelessness in Industrialized Nations

Although there are more similarities between female homelessness in the United States and other industrialized nations than differences, it is useful to first summarize those commonalities before explaining why they occur. These similarities have already been touched upon to a great extent. For example, in the Western world, “the typical form of homelessness among women is ‘hidden’ homelessness.”²² The reasons for the “hidden homeless” women have already been

¹⁵ See [7].

¹⁶ See [12, p. 47].

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁸ See [13, p. 132].

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

²⁰ See [8, p. 220].

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

²² See [3, p. 231].

discussed and do not need further consideration. Also, “women represent an increasing proportion of users” of social services for the homeless.²³ This trend has also already been discussed. However, specific demographics within the female homeless population have so far not been addressed. Many scholars note that, “there is an observable change in the composition of the female homelessness population reflected in increases in younger women and in women from ethnic minority groups or immigrant backgrounds.”²⁴ The situation of immigrant women will be addressed in a later section. However, it is important to note that homeless women tend to be younger than their male counterparts. For example, a German study reports that “in comparison to the male homeless population, most female homeless are under 30 years old.”²⁵

There are a number of reasons why female homelessness among industrialized nations show similar patterns or trends. One of the major factors has to do with greater female independence as a result of the women’s rights movement, which brought greater equality, access to education, and employment opportunities for women. These societal changes mean that as “women’s access to housing is becoming less dependent on a male breadwinner, it is to be expected that the importance of relationship factors will diminish and their nature will change.”²⁶ Women in many parts of the industrialized world are no longer dependent on men for their livelihoods. However, as women are becoming increasingly independent of men, they are becoming increasingly reliant on themselves to provide for their own way of living. As such, their success “depends on access to resources either through the market place in secure and well paid employment or (when rewarding employment is absent) through the social protection policies of the welfare state.”²⁶

Without access to quality education and good paying, steady work opportunities, women in industrialized nations become increasingly reliant on social welfare programs. This occurs because of the breakdown of family support networks that had traditionally provided for women in need. For this reason, the strength of services for homeless women is all the more necessary in industrialized societies. And yet, as evidenced from the previous section, much of the available resources are geared towards men. Additionally, while welfare programs in many countries provide for homeless women, particularly those with children, certain groups of women are still being left behind. Those include “younger and older single women without children (or who have lost custody of their children) and immigrant women.”²⁷ It goes without saying, then, “that there are clear weaknesses in the existing landscape of service provision for women.”²⁸ As stated previously, the need for female specific programs is because “women have specific and distinct needs, and that specialist services are needed to protect women from abuse and exploitation.”²⁹

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

²⁵ See [8, p. 232].

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

One final note of caution is that the status of female homelessness is not uniform across all industrialized nations. There are definite differences between countries based on nation specific circumstances. Some have greater problems with immigrant populations. Others have undergone more recent societal changes affecting women's rights and are less far along than some parts of the Western world. Spain is an example of one such country. Specifically, Spanish "women, with lower levels of education and with little work experience, are at risk in the housing market if their relationships break down. Often these women also have social integration problems as a result of domestic violence."³⁰ Because Spain lags behind other European nations in employment for women and access to education, it "demonstrates the growing precariousness of the position of women and their increasing vulnerability to homelessness in the context of the changing social and economic structures of Spanish society in the last quarter of the 20th century."³¹

Trends in Female Homelessness in the Developing World

Without a doubt, the situation of homeless women in the developing world is more difficult than those of Western women. This is because they often lack the education and employment opportunities that are critical to female independence and the countries in which they live do not have any formalized social welfare programs. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that "women of the developing world are doubly disadvantaged. Not only is there insufficient adequate housing for those seeking independence, even if it was available, the social, cultural and economic context would prevent them from accessing it."³²

At the forefront of the problem is a lack of rights, specifically property rights, for women in many developing nations. In parts of Africa, the practice of "property grabbing," whereby relatives of a dead man take all his property and leave his widow and children homeless, is "a failure of the rule of law—one far more common and destructive, especially for women and girls."³³ Actions such as these, and the government's inability to protect such women, indicate that homeless women in the developing world have a long way to go before they can be at the level of their sisters in Europe and North America.

Women in the developing world are also adversely affected by "rapid social change" that "has reduced the role of extended family support."³⁴ This is evidenced in the movement of people from rural areas to cities in search of work. The lack of both a familial support network and governmental welfare support network coupled with insufficient housing in the cities mean that many more women and children in

³⁰ See [1, p. 68].

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³² See [13, p. 136].

³³ See [6].

³⁴ See [13, p. 136].

developing nations are experiencing a different kind of homelessness, brought on by rapid modernization.³⁵

Although there are many differences between homeless women in the developing world and industrialized nations, there are still a fair number of commonalities. For instance, “domestic violence is a major cause of women’s homelessness in the developed world...and it is extremely prevalent in many developing countries, where women have even less recourse to the law to protect themselves or their children.”³⁶ Additionally, solutions to problems faced by homeless women in the developing world are much the same as those of all homeless women. Specifically, the problems women in developing countries face also “call for a range of responses, including girls’ education and the economic empowerment of women. It is difficult to know and claim your rights if you cannot read, and difficult to leave an abusive environment if you cannot earn a living on your own.”³⁷ Increasing the rights available to women in developing nations will have the same effect that it had in the industrialized world—it will reduce female homelessness by giving women the opportunity to provide for themselves.

Homelessness Among Immigrant Women

While the previous sections have addressed the plight of homeless women from different parts of the world, this final section addresses the added complications for women who have migrated from their native country to a foreign land. If these women seek out help from women’s shelters, it is often for the same reasons that other women do—to get away from an abusive spouse. “Evidence from a number of countries (including Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK) indicates that the proportion of immigrants (or women from minority ethnic communities) in shelters for women fleeing domestic abuse has been increasing in recent years.”³⁸ A newspaper story on homeless Muslim women in Washington, D.C. “said most were driven from home by abusive husbands or are unable to work because of their immigration status, leaving them without money for housing.”³⁹

However, immigrant women are in an even more precarious position than native women trying to get away from abusive spouses because of their unfamiliarity with their adopted country. Specifically, a Danish study found that immigrant women at a women’s shelter “are poorly integrated in Danish society and as a result they had little insight with regard to their own rights and opportunities (and moreover had a very fragile or non-existing social network).”⁴⁰ The findings were similar in a study conducted by a Netherlands women’s shelter. There, immigrant women “lead isolated lives, do not speak the language and sometimes have had no schooling. It is

³⁵ Ibid., p. 136.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 138.

³⁷ See [6].

³⁸ See [4, p. 143].

³⁹ See [14].

⁴⁰ See [4, p. 144].

usually not accepted for a wife to divorce or return to her family when there are marriage problems. In most cases the social network of these women is very limited.”⁴¹ Because they have even fewer resources than native women, it is perhaps not surprising, then, that the number of immigrant women in shelters is on the rise.

In addition to these obstacles, immigrant women are also at a disadvantage because they often rely upon being married to remain in the country or they are in the country illegally. These factors may make immigrant women less likely to even seek shelter from an abusive spouse. At one Danish women’s shelter, workers found that immigrant women were more likely to go back to their abusive spouse because their citizenship depended upon them being married.⁴²

Conclusion

This analysis has addressed the complex topic of global female homelessness. In such a short paper, however, it is impossible to cover every facet of the problem. Instead, this paper outlines some of the broader issues of this global phenomenon. In highlighting the challenges of defining homelessness, it is easy to see the importance of accurately identifying the homeless female population around the world. This affects everything from the amount of services available to women to the type of assistance provided by government agencies. It also becomes apparent that the circumstances affecting female homelessness are categorically different from those of their male counterparts and, therefore, deserving of distinct attention.

Furthermore, trends in female homelessness in industrialized nations demonstrate a great deal of commonality between many homeless women around the world. However, the plight of women in developing nations is vastly different from those of women in the Western world. Finally, immigrant women face a uniquely difficult set of circumstances when faced with an abusive spouse or an inability to work because of restrictions on their employment eligibility. Although a fair amount of research has been done on homeless women from certain parts of the world, particularly Europe and North America, more can be done on female homelessness in the developing world and making comparisons between countries. Doing so would allow for greater understanding about the causes of female homelessness, the tools that are needed to help women who are homeless, and the policies needed to prevent female homelessness in the future.

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