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Item type	Article
Authors	Maycock, Paula; Sheridan, Sarah; Parker, Sarah
Citation	Maycock, Paula et al. "Migrant women and homelessness: the role of gender-based violence" European Journal of Homelessness Volume 6, No. 1, August 2012
Journal	European Journal of Homelessness
Downloaded	30-Aug-2017 12:10:32
Link to item	http://hdl.handle.net/10147/247814

Migrant Women and Homelessness: The Role of Gender-based Violence

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› **Abstract_** *A distinct Europe-wide problem of migrant homelessness has become increasingly apparent. However, the available evidence base on migrant homelessness remains relatively weak and there is a particular dearth of research on the homeless experiences of migrant women. Internationally, research has established an association between gender-based violence and homelessness among women, including migrant women. However, the dynamics of this association, as well as the range of issues that surround it, remain largely unexplored. This paper presents findings from biographical interviews with seventeen migrant women who are part of a larger study of homelessness among women in Ireland. It specifically aims to explore the relationship between the experience of gender-based violence and homelessness, including migrant women's responses to their abusive home situations, their interactions with services, and their perspectives on their situations. The findings highlight the structural underpinnings of the relationship between gender-based violence and homelessness. These span economic, social, legal and cultural domains, and impact women's responses to violence/abuse and to the systems of intervention designed to meet their needs. The consequences for migrant women are multi-faceted, affecting their ability to leave abusive home situations, access appropriate services, and exit homelessness. The implications for structures and services, particularly those with responsibility for meeting the needs of migrant women, are discussed.*

› **Keywords_** *Homelessness, migrant women, gender-based violence, Ireland, biographical interviewing*

Introduction

There has been growing evidence over the past two decades of a specific Europe-wide social problem of migrant homelessness (Daly, 1996; Edgar *et al.*, 2004; Harrison *et al.*, 2005; Pleace, 2010). This phenomenon is undoubtedly linked to the recent migration experience in Europe, which is characterised by increasing levels of immigration and a growing recognition of its importance in driving population change (Edgar *et al.*, 2004). The determinants of migrants' experiences in, and impacts on housing systems include many factors such as migrants' characteristics (e.g. age, income level, type of visa, length of time living in host country), preferences (e.g. household size, renting versus owning, quality of accommodation), and restrictions of access to social housing (Vargas-Silva, 2011). Therefore, different types or categories of migrants, with different rights, opportunities and resources are likely to have very different experiences in, and degrees of impact on the housing system of their host countries. It is nonetheless clear that migrants face considerable obstacles within housing markets, which may lead them towards undesirable and unsafe housing circumstances as well as housing instability (Somerville and Steele, 2002; Edgar *et al.*, 2004; Robinson *et al.*, 2007).

Discrimination in housing among migrants has been documented in the European context for some time. For example, a comparative analysis of disadvantage and discrimination against migrants and minorities in the housing sector across fifteen EU countries found that ethnic minorities live in comparatively poor housing conditions, which contribute to entrenched patterns of social and economic inequality (Harrison *et al.*, 2005). In the Irish context, Pillinger's (2009) research on the experiences of migrants living in a large suburb of Dublin city found that they had different patterns of housing from those in the general Irish population, with the majority living in privately rented accommodation, often of poor quality, overcrowded, and in a poor state of repair. Similarly, in the UK, Robinson *et al.*'s (2007) research on newly arrived migrants in Sheffield reported poor living conditions, particularly for those first arriving in the UK. Some new immigrants also reported problems of insecurity and poor living conditions in more permanent, longer-term housing.

Migrants, like other individuals, can experience homelessness in all its various forms, from rooflessness to insecure and inadequate housing, insecure and inadequate housing (Edgar *et al.*, 2004). Possibly to a greater extent than indigenous groups, migrants may not use hostels or other homeless services, and instead rely on couch-surfing, or draw on their own social networks for temporary, and often precarious, accommodation (MacNaughton-Nicholls and Quilgars, 2009). 'Hidden homelessness' is a recognised feature of migrant homelessness (MacNaughton-

Nicholls, 2009; Stephens *et al.*, 2010) and, consequently, the available statistics may not present an accurate picture of the extent and nature of homelessness among migrants (FEANTSA, 2002).

There are different categories of migrants who experience housing instability and homelessness (FEANTSA, 2002; Edgar *et al.*, 2004; Pleace, 2010). Pleace's (2010) typology of migrant homelessness in the EU includes the following broad groups: people seeking asylum and refugees; failed asylum seekers and undocumented migrants; women and children from outside the EU who lose their immigration status when escaping domestic violence; A-10 economic migrants who have become homeless in EU-15 member states; and ethnic and cultural minorities who appear to be at a disproportionate risk of homelessness but who are not recent migrants. Nonetheless, across the EU, the extent to which each of these categories of migrants is at risk for housing instability and homelessness remains unclear, although it is widely acknowledged that migrants without immigration status, asylum seekers and refugees, and new immigrants are particularly vulnerable to homelessness (Edgar *et al.*, 2004; Spencer *et al.*, 2007; MacNaughton-Nicholls, 2009; Stephens *et al.*, 2010). Although the evidence base on migrant homelessness remains relatively weak across Europe, a 'hierarchy of vulnerability' has been suggested, highlighting the possibility that migrants may often, but do not necessarily, face a heightened risk of homelessness (Edgar *et al.*, 2004).

Migrants' vulnerability to housing instability and homelessness depends on their legal status, personal characteristics and resources, as well as the welfare regimes and immigration policies of their host countries (Edgar *et al.*, 2004; Stephens *et al.*, 2010; Pleace, 2010). It is also recognised that migrant women's particular circumstances and experiences may render them acutely at risk of homelessness (FEANTSA, 2002). For example, there are spouses and children who have no personal rights of residency, and who would lose their legal status in the host country if family breakdown were to occur. Family breakdown has been identified as a primary cause of homelessness among migrant women (FEANTSA, 2002; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (OPDM), 2005) and the role of domestic violence in homelessness among women is well documented, even if the dynamics of this relationship remain unclear (Jones, 1999; Edgar *et al.*, 2004; OPDM, 2005; FEANTSA, 2007; Robinson *et al.*, 2007; Jones *et al.*, 2010; Quilgars and Pleace, 2010).

Migrant Women and Homelessness: The Role of Gender-based Violence

There is increasing recognition that women's experiences of homelessness differ from those of men and that there is an important gender dimension to the problem of homelessness (Watson & Austerberry, 1986; Watson, 1999; Edgar and Doherty, 2001). Nonetheless, gender remains a lesser explored dimension of homelessness in the European context (Young, 2010), and the literature has only recently expanded to include or focus on women's experiences (Baptista, 2010). It is perhaps unsurprising in this context that there is a dearth of dedicated research on homelessness among migrant women in Europe, and that their routes to homelessness are poorly understood.

In North America, where research has focused to a greater extent on the experiences of female immigrants, migrant women are claimed to face multiple issues in addition to those confronted by indigenous populations, which make them vulnerable to homelessness. These include increased risk due to poverty, unrecognised employment and education credentials, isolation, and discriminatory rental and accommodation practices (Baker *et al.*, 2003, 2010). Migrant women may face particular vulnerabilities, and their need for access to housing may be more pressing because they often do not have established support systems (Sev'er, 2002; Graham and Thurston, 2005). They also face disadvantages in social status and basic human capital relative to immigrant men (Erez *et al.*, 2009), which make them particularly vulnerable in contexts of victimisation.

Numerous studies have demonstrated a relationship between gender-based violence and female homelessness. Gender-based violence is defined as "any act of... violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering for women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life" (United Nations, 1993). According to COSC, Ireland's National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence, "[t]he term gender-based violence acknowledges that such violence is rooted in gender inequality and that the majority of severe and chronic incidents are perpetrated by men against women and their children" (COSC, 2010, p.21). Understood in this way, the violence is gender-based since it is targeted at women because of their sex and/or their socially constructed gender roles.

In the European context, research in the UK in particular has highlighted an association between domestic violence and women's homelessness. In one study domestic violence was found to be the reason most commonly cited by women to explain their present episode of homelessness (Jones, 1999). More recently, Reeve *et al.* (2006) found that 20% of the 134 homeless women they surveyed had become homeless because they were experiencing violence from someone they knew, whether a

partner or a family member. For the women aged 41-50, domestic violence was the most common trigger for homelessness, with 40% of women in this age group reporting that they had left their last settled home to escape violence from a partner. Recent research in Ireland has similarly documented high rates of gender-based violence among homeless women (Mayock and Sheridan, 2012). In England and elsewhere throughout Europe, recent years have seen the introduction of policies aimed at tackling the issue of domestic violence and preventing victims from entering homelessness (Quilgars and Pleace, 2010). These have given rise to targeted initiatives such as local 'Sanctuary Schemes', which seek to maintain victims of domestic violence in their homes by removing the perpetrator and providing and installing additional security measures and supports (Jones *et al.*, 2010).

Women who are victims of domestic and other forms of gender-based violence typically face more housing barriers than other impoverished or marginalised women (Richards *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, migrant women who experience gender-based violence may not disclose their abusive home situations to family members or friends (Thurston *et al.*, 2006), and those who are economically reliant on their spouses or partners may remain in violent relationships for far longer than would otherwise be the case (Latta and Goodman, 2005). Women reporting a history of domestic violence also face numerous economic and housing difficulties once they enter the homeless service system which, in addition to the effects of domestic violence, appear to decrease their chances of making a successful exit from homelessness (Metraux and Culhane, 1999).

While an association between domestic and other forms of gender-based violence and homelessness among women has been reasonably well established internationally, there is a need for additional research 'that moves beyond simply documenting the association between the two but also attempts to understand why such an association exists' (Baker *et al.*, 2010, p.431). Indeed, it appears that a complex range of issues surrounds the link between violence and homelessness and that the relationship may not necessarily be a direct one (Baker *et al.*, 2010). This paper specifically explores the relationship between gender-based violence and homelessness among migrant women, drawing on data from biographical interviews with seventeen migrant women who are part of a larger study of women's homelessness in Ireland. The experience of gender-based violence was a dominant and recurring theme in the life stories of a large number of the migrant women interviewed. In the sections to follow, we attempt to unravel the dynamics of gender-based violence and the impact of intimate partner violence, in particular, on the housing situations and homelessness of migrant women.

As a starting point, however, it is useful to provide an overview of immigration trends in Ireland and to review the available, albeit limited, data on migrant homelessness in the Irish context.

Setting the Scene: Migrants and Homelessness in Ireland

While Ireland has traditionally been a country of mass emigration, from the early 1990s a period of rapid economic growth saw a reversal of migration flows for the first time. According to the Central Statistics Office, Ireland's foreign-born population increased from 6% of the total population in 1991, to 10% in 2002, and reached 15% in 2006 (Ruhs, 2009). Following EU enlargement in 2004, Ireland (along with the UK and Sweden) offered citizens of the ten new accession states of Eastern Europe full and immediate access to the labour market with no restrictions (Mac Éinrí and White, 2008). This led to a large number of young, economic migrants from Eastern Europe, particularly from Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, often entering into relatively unskilled, temporary jobs in response to Ireland's labour shortage in the construction, services and other employment sectors (Barrett *et al.*, 2002). According to Census 2011, 17% of the population were born outside of Ireland – a significant increase since the previous census of 2006 (Central Statistics Office, 2012).

Since 2008 the negative impact of the global recession, combined with a spectacular decline in the housing market, has had a dramatic negative impact on the Irish economy. The unemployment rate currently stands at 14.3 percent nationally (Central Statistics Office, 2012). While 18000 migrants were signing on the Live Register of unemployed persons in December 2006, this figure had risen to just over 76200 by December 2011 (Central Statistics Office, 2012). These latest figures are likely to underestimate the number of migrants affected by rising unemployment, since unemployed migrants with no entitlement to social welfare are not accounted for in the official live register of unemployed persons.¹

Even before the economic downturn, there had been a recorded increase in the number of migrants utilising food and homeless accommodation services in the Dublin area (Bergin and Lalor, 2006). The Homeless Agency's official count in Dublin in 2008 found that 303 people, or 13% of the homeless population, were 'foreign nationals', roughly two-thirds of them EU citizens. A further 104 foreign national households were reported to be using homeless food and day services (Homeless Agency, 2008). Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have also reported increases in the number of migrants accessing their services, highlighting the economic crisis as a major precipitating factor in their homelessness (Stanley, 2010). Although the available data provide only a very partial picture of migrant homelessness in Ireland, they nonetheless suggest that a greater number of

¹ Migrants who do not satisfy the requirements of the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC) have no entitlement to social welfare payments. Introduced in 2004 by the Irish state, the HRC is a stipulation pertaining to the length and continuity of residence in Ireland, as well as to the employment history of migrants. Individuals must satisfy the HRC in order to qualify for social welfare payments.

migrants are accessing homeless services than previously. This broadly mirrors the picture throughout Europe where there has been a documented increase in migrant homelessness (Edgar *et al.*, 2004; Pleace, 2010).

Methodology

This research integrated biographical interviewing with ethnographic observation in a study which aimed to conduct an in-depth examination of the lives and experiences of homeless women in Ireland with specific attention to their homeless 'pathways' – that is, their entry routes to homelessness, the homeless experience itself and, possibly, their exit routes from homelessness.² Fieldwork began in late 2009 with a 'Community Assessment' phase, an approach that proved valuable in our earlier cross-sectional and longitudinal studies of youth homelessness (Mayock and O'Sullivan, 2007; Mayock and Carr, 2008). A strategy developed to enhance 'control' over the types of selection bias that often undermine research on 'hard-to-reach' populations (Clatts and Sothoran, 2000), it involved a period of intensive engagement with professionals involved either directly or indirectly in the provision of services to homeless women. This phase of the research served to inform the community of professionals working with homeless women about the research, and it also facilitated access to numerous sites for the purpose of recruitment. We gained the co-operation of twenty-one services nationally, including permission to use these settings as recruitment sites.

In total, sixty women were recruited for interview from these strategically chosen sites, which included emergency homeless hostels (both single and mixed gender), domestic violence refuges, long-term supported housing, and transitional accommodation. The eligibility criteria for entry to the study included: (1) a woman who is homeless or has lived in unstable accommodation during the past 6 months; (2) aged 18 years and upwards; (3) single and without children *or* a parent living either with, or apart from, her children; (4) Irish or of other ethnic origin. Interviews were carried out in the Dublin metropolitan district and in two other urban locations in the South and West of the country known to have a significant homeless problem. Women were recruited through a combination of purposive, snowball, theoretical and targeted sampling. This combined sampling strategy helped to circumvent the risk of bias that can arise from an over-reliance on one approach, and it also contributed to the study of variability (in terms of age, ethnicity, duration of homelessness, and so on). From the outset of the study, we aimed to recruit a significant

² This research was funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) Research Fellowship Scheme, 2009-10 and the Health Service Executive, Social Inclusion.

number of migrant women – approximately one-quarter of the total sample. The proportion of migrant women interviewed (n=17 or 28% of the larger sample) meant that this aim was realised.

The biographical interview was the core method of data collection. An approach to interviewing deemed ‘the most appropriate method for unpacking the more sophisticated explanations of homelessness’ (May, 2000, p.633); it is particularly suited to researching sensitive dimensions of people’s experiences. It allows participants to tell their stories in their own words and to weave parts of their past, present and future as they recount their experiences (Atkinson, 1998). Rather than tracing *only* a person’s housing and homeless history, the interview thus attempted to construct *multiple* biographies by capturing transition and change, along the same timeline, in the women’s personal, social and economic circumstances. Interviews commenced with an invitation to women to tell their life ‘story’ and several specific issues were then targeted for questioning. Examples of these interview topics include: housing/homeless history, family circumstances; children; drug/alcohol problems; health and mental health; and women’s perspectives on their situations, past, present and future.

Throughout the data collection phase, ethnographic observation was undertaken at four homeless service settings including two homeless hostels (one female-only and another mixed-gender) and two food centres, all located in or adjacent to Dublin’s city centre. This use of ethnographic observation aimed to capture the daily experiences of homeless women within ‘natural’ settings by ‘being there’ and experiencing ‘their worlds’ first-hand (Agar, 1997; Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). The ethnographic data also helped to supplement and triangulate the data garnered from the biographical interviews. We interacted with migrant women in two of the four selected settings over the course of the study. In order to further enhance ethnographic engagement, it was decided during the data collection process to introduce an ‘auto-photography’ dimension to the research. Auto-photography is increasingly viewed as an effective method of examining how participants understand and interpret their worlds (Radley *et al.*, 2005; Noland, 2006). Sixteen women initially agreed to take part in the photography project but due to the transitory and sometimes chaotic nature of their lives, a total of seven, one a migrant woman, were final participants in the project. These photographs captured many aspects of the daily lives of participating women and also provided opportunities for critical engagement on the part of the researchers with what it *means* to women to be without a home.

Although guided primarily by a biographical approach, the study utilised several complementary data collection methods in order to capture multiple aspects of the everyday realities of study participants (Denzin, 1978). The overarching aim was to

produce a rich and nuanced understanding of the lives and experiences of homeless women. The findings documented here draw on the narrative data generated through the conduct of biographical interviews with seventeen migrant women. All identifying information (the names of family members, friends, and places) has been removed from the narrative excerpts and pseudonyms have been assigned to the women to protect their anonymity.

The Study's Migrant Women

The seventeen migrant women interviewed were aged between 25 and 52, with an average age of 32.5. Ten came from the Eastern European countries of Poland, Latvia, Slovakia, Estonia and Romania, and one woman was from Southern Europe. The remaining six women were born outside the European Union. Of the six non-EU migrant women, four had no immigration status and therefore no right to work, study or to access social welfare benefits. Two of these women had a valid work permit based on their husband's immigration status at the time of their arrival to Ireland but their immigration status was no longer considered valid because they had left these relationships. Five women who originated from different areas of Europe did not satisfy the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC) and therefore had no entitlement to social welfare payments.

The women were relatively well educated, with sixteen having completed Leaving Certificate (A-Level) equivalent educational level or higher. Eleven reported strong employment histories in Ireland (for example, full-time work with the same employer for more than one year), albeit in low-paid jobs, usually either in the hospitality or manufacturing sectors. However, only one had paid employment at the time of interview. Fifteen of the seventeen women had children. Most of their children were young, many under the age of 10, and several had children under the age of two. Two of the women were the mothers of adult children who resided in their countries of origin, and eleven were the full-time carers of children under the age of eighteen.

The duration of the women's homelessness ranged from one week to three years. Three had been homeless for less than six weeks and a further three for between six weeks and five months. Thus, six of the women would be classified as 'newly homeless'. Eight had been homeless for between six months and two years, and the remaining two women had homeless histories of over two years.

Migrant Women's Journeys to Homelessness

The events and circumstances surrounding migrant women's first and/or subsequent homeless experiences were multifaceted and complex. Nonetheless, a number of dominant themes or strands of experience did emerge from the narrative data. The first of these was the experience of gender-based violence, which triggered homelessness in the case of a considerable number of participants. These women's stories also point to their economic dependence on their partners as significantly impacting their ability to leave abusive home situations. Job loss, as well as barriers to labour market participation, simultaneously featured in their accounts. It is important to note that these experiences were not mutually exclusive but rather overlapping and recurring within migrant women's stories of becoming homeless; together, they compromised migrant women's ability to secure and/or maintain housing and simultaneously created vulnerability to housing instability and subsequent homelessness.

Gender-based violence as a 'trigger' to homelessness

Thirteen of the seventeen migrant women had experienced violence or abuse in the context of an intimate partner relationship.³ Both the nature and duration of these experiences varied, although most of the women reported a combination of physical (e.g. hitting, slapping, punching or choking), emotional/verbal (e.g. intimidation, name calling, manipulation, threats of violence), sexual (e.g. forced sexual intercourse, sexual assault, rape), and financial/economic (e.g. controlling the household budget and financial transactions, confiscation of immigration documentation) abuses. All thirteen women had experienced emotional abuse as well as at least one incident of physical abuse or violence, while six also reported sexual abuse or violence by an intimate male partner. The women's narratives almost always referenced the negative and long-lasting impact of domestic abuse on their lives.

"I was really weak, like powerless and without my will and anything... So my whole life changed, all the ambitions... At the moment I am not able to do anything what I want. I am not able to be fully free, you know..." (Tereska, 25 years).

³ Intimate partner violence was the form of gender-based violence most commonly reported by the study's migrant women. High levels of intimate partner violence were also reported by the study's non-migrants, with 45% reporting violence and/or abuse by a male intimate partner. Non-migrant women were more likely than migrant women to report other forms of gender-based violence including child sexual abuse (23 of the 43 non-migrant versus 5 of the 17 migrants) and rape during adolescent or adulthood by an individual *other than* an intimate partner (11 of the 43 non-migrants versus 1 of the 17 migrants).

Ten of the thirteen who had experienced gender-based violence attributed their homelessness either directly or in large part to intimate partner violence or abuse. Irene, like others, talked of becoming homeless as a direct consequence of her partner's violent behaviour.

"I mean the things that comes from your partner, the person that you love, the person that you share your life with and you find, out of the blue, after two years that this is not the person... and I lost complete faith in myself. I said I have bad judgement, I start blaming myself. He turn everything against me and then I found myself, out of the blue, homeless, living under a stairway" (Irena, 55 years).

Maria, who had come to Ireland to join her husband approximately four years earlier, explained that she had become homeless "because of domestic violence".

"I just came here because he [husband] applied for a visa for me to join him but everything was just suddenly changed and that's what made me homeless, because of domestic violence" (Maria, age 29).

Many of the women's accounts were therefore suggestive of a clear link between the experience of gender-based violence and housing instability. However, close examination of the narratives uncover a range of realities and experiences that significantly influenced women's responses to intimate partner violence and, thus, the process of their becoming homeless. Indeed, these same factors affected their risk of homelessness after separating from their partners. While intimate partner violence triggered homelessness in many cases, the women's stories highlight a host of economic, social, cultural and legal factors that impacted their 'journeys' to homelessness. These particularly came to the fore in women's accounts of the process of leaving abusive relationships.

The process of leaving abusive relationships

For most of the women interviewed, leaving an abusive relationship was a process rather than an abrupt event. A majority articulated an awareness of the negative consequences of violence and abuse for them (and their children), as well as a desire to escape their abusive partners, for a considerable period prior to leaving their homes. Many had appraised their situations at various junctures, particularly at times when the violent behaviour of their partners escalated, but confronted many obstacles in their attempts to leave these relationships. A number felt "trapped" in their relationships while others had returned following initial or early attempts to flee because they had "nowhere to go"; yet others feared for their personal safety in the event of leaving an abusive partner.

"I say I leave you, he will kill me... the police can only take you one night from the house... so I was scared, I turn and I go back to house" (Immanuela, age 29).

Problems surrounding the loss of immigration status, as well as economic dependence on their partners, were the most commonly cited barriers to exiting abusive home situations.

“It was difficult [to leave], you know... you don’t have anything, you don’t have assistance...” (Maria, age 29).

“My husband have job and me same had job. It’s not fair because he have my money” (Dominikia, age 39).

Women’s reluctance to expose violence to ‘outsiders’, including family members, also emerged strongly from their accounts and contributed to a perception of violence as something to be endured rather than escaped. Indeed, a considerable number described a set of community or cultural values that acted as obstacles to seeking help. Particularly strong for some was a fear of negative repercussions in the event of family knowledge of their leaving an abusive relationship. A smaller number conveyed an expectation on the part of family members that they would remain in an abusive home situation.

“They [my family] don’t want to listen to me that he was hitting me... they said the wife must stay with the husband even if one time he hit you... they say to me that I must pray, maybe he change” (Immanuela, age 29).

When reflecting on her situation, one woman framed her current experiences using her home country as a key reference point. As her account suggests, some migrant women arrive from countries where domestic violence may not be reported because of a lack of legal protection or cultural prescriptions that prevent women from reporting violence.

“I would say the root of my problem is the patriarchal culture in [country of origin]; the lack of development there; women are victimised so much and we are made to believe that this is normal, that our husbands will always treat us badly and hit us and that we must endure this. This is what the problem is. If I could change the situation, I would try and solve the problem of poverty and violence, this is the root of all my problems and the reason for which I am here...” (Sofia, age 34).

The absence or lack of social support, coupled with women’s economic dependence on their partners, significantly hampered their ability to envisage or plan a ‘way out’ of abusive relationships. However, there were other barriers to help-seeking. Women typically stated that they did not “know the system” or how to go about seeking help, advice and support. This resulted, in many cases, in women remaining in abusive home situations for far longer than might otherwise have been the case.

“I had no idea a place like this [refuge] exist. I had no idea the guards would help you. I had no idea the school would understand, the GP would understand. I had no idea about anything. I felt alone and just because of that I didn’t leave him [husband] earlier” (Alexandra, age 30).

Most relied on some form of ‘supported escape’ from abusive home situations but these sources of support were unpredictable and it took time to establish connections with people whom women felt they could approach for help. The individuals highlighted by women as having encouraged and enabled them to exit abusive situations *over time* included the police, parents or teachers at their children’s schools, friends or neighbours, and a social worker in fewer cases. However, not all women found themselves in a situation where they could avail of either formal or informal support, and many depended to a far greater extent on a chance encounter. Indeed, three of the women had approached a stranger whom they believed to be of the same ethnic origin to seek help in relation to their homelessness and/or domestic abuse. Sofia explained that she had walked the streets of Dublin’s city centre “looking for people who looked like me” who might be able to provide her with temporary accommodation. Maria had likewise approached a man of the same ethnic origin on the street for help.

“I just found him [person who helped] on the street, you know, we are the same [ethnic origin]... he knew I was really scared. I didn’t know where to go, I didn’t know the system in Ireland... I was just living two days with [him], you know, because he just offered me. He gave me information about the [refuges] and that made me go to that emergency accommodation” (Maria, age 29).

Several were confused about their residency rights and about the impact of their immigration status on their eligibility for support services, while others were misinformed or relied on partial or inaccurate information. Indeed, the fear of telling *anyone* who may have been able to intervene or offer advice, including medical professionals, was perceived as a significant barrier for migrant women.

“So it [the violence] started when I was six month pregnant and then was very, very often because he know that I don’t tell anybody this, I was so scared of talking. I never go to doctor to show my bruises” (Immanuela, age 29).

A majority of migrant women were initially anxious about approaching homeless or domestic violence services for assistance. These feelings were strongly associated with a perceived shame surrounding domestic abuse. Women also worried about the stigma of a homeless status and identity: “I don’t like the word homeless... it shows a picture of somebody sleeping in the streets and everything, not really nice picture” (Tereska, age 25). A number were reluctant to use homeless services due to negative perceptions of homeless hostel accommodation, while others expressed

safety concerns for themselves and their children in these contexts. For a majority there was a powerful stigma associated with being homeless and this impacted on women's willingness to access services.

Job loss and economic marginality

For five of the women in the sample, financial strain arising from job loss and unemployment emerged as a dominant reason for their homelessness. Cecylia, for example, had moved to Ireland five years earlier and had worked full-time until one year prior to her interview. She was made redundant quite unexpectedly and, unable to sustain rental payments, she reluctantly presented herself to an emergency homeless hostel a number of months later. She described the consequences of her sudden redundancy notice.

“So, I was shocked, I lost my job. You know everything was OK and then they said people are just redundant, you know... Yeah, it was a shock for me because then I checked my balance and I said, ‘Jesus Christ, I have no savings, nearly no savings’. Because if I knew the recession would come I would save, but I didn’t...” (Cecylia, age 27).

Income poverty was a significant challenge for all of the migrant women interviewed and was particularly acute for those with no immigration status. Delilah had been living in emergency hostel accommodation with her daughter for nineteen months at the time of interview. She had experienced abuse by her husband over a lengthy period, both prior and subsequent to her arrival in Ireland, and was not eligible for labour market participation or welfare benefits because she had no immigration status. She survived by seeking charity donations, and sporadically earned cash payments from cleaning the home of an acquaintance. Her perceptions of “existing” and of feeling “invisible” reveal the impact of this ongoing situation on her life.

“I called [name of charity] sometimes, sometimes they come and sometimes they don’t, it just depends. I call them for food, I ask friends... I feel like I have been abandoned now, you know when you don’t have nothing and you keep calling friends and sometimes they visit or you want to visit them but you think maybe they think I want money. So I have been living basically like a beggar, not living, I call it existing in Ireland because I feel like I am invisible” (Delilah, age 30).

Nala's account similarly highlights the economic, social and emotional consequences of having no immigration status.

“For two years, I’m just wasting my time, I cannot go for work, I cannot do study, I cannot do [training] courses and I feeling like I am just wasting my time... and then with the children and feel sometimes lonely as well because of not any friends...” (Nala, age 30).

Others, including those who were eligible for labour market participant, reported additional difficulties as constraining their efforts to gain employment. Immanuala, who had a one-year-old son, described the problems she experienced when seeking work, which included a lack of English language proficiency.

“I want to find job but always they say to me that it’s too much, you know, the language barrier is too high and I cannot [work]. I have lots of experience, I have ten years experience with my job but I don’t have English perfect” (Immanuala, age 29).

Financial strain was particularly evident in the women’s narratives of motherhood. Several experienced difficulties in meeting their children’s needs, typically reporting that they felt unable to adequately provide their children with basics including clothing, food, toys and social outings. Their child care responsibilities in turn compromised their ability to seek or maintain employment since labour market participation necessitated child care support. A number had been forced to quit their jobs due to the financial strain of maintaining employment without housing and child care support. Katia described how she had previously had to leave her job because of the absence of affordable child care.

“How can I go [to work] without a house, without a babysitter or there wasn’t a crèche. So I went away from the job and stayed in [a homeless hostel] till I find something else” (Katia, age 25).

The impact of ongoing economic insecurity was severe for a majority of the migrant women. Despite high educational attainment and strong employment histories in many cases, a combination of problems with the cost of child care and a lack of English language proficiency posed a significant barrier to labour market participation. Women with no immigration status, as well as those who were ineligible for social welfare assistance because they did not meet the Habitual Residency Condition, lived with a great deal of uncertainty, and their paths out of homelessness were seriously constrained.

Barriers to Exiting Homelessness

Women's lack of access to affordable housing and their income poverty combined to act as significant barriers to their exiting homelessness. Those who were living in a homeless hostel or refuge and in receipt of welfare payments, particularly those with dependent children, struggled to save money for the payment of a deposit for private rented accommodation. Several others had applied for supported housing but this transition was reported to involve long waiting periods. Women who waited for move-on options invariably felt "stuck", "trapped", or "left behind" in emergency accommodation.

A majority of the women were dependant on some form of state income support. However, four had no immigration status and, consequently, no welfare entitlements, and an additional five did not meet the Habitual Residence Condition. All of these women struggled to make ends meet and depended primarily on emergency payments, donations from charities, and/or casual and unpredictable low-paid work. A number worried that their emergency payments would cease, highlighting the impact of persistent financial insecurity.

"So always you are terrified that, Oh my God, if the payments [emergency payments of €100 per week to support her and her two children] stop, then what will happen because I am not allowed to work in this country as I have no status and I don't have any social welfare help. So I am always worried" (Bina, age 32).

A range of other factors affected the women's ability to find secure housing and live independently. These included problems related to their physical and mental health. These health problems had often resulted from poor eating habits, sleep deprivation and/or high levels of anxiety. Women also attributed their health difficulties to the trauma of intimate partner violence and to the experience of homelessness itself, which had resulted in income poverty, lack of social interaction or support, insecure housing, and uncertainty about the future.

"I have too many problems, no school for kids; [services] have not help me nothing you know? I'm very, very tired I don't know, I'm not happy... I have problem 'cause no house, no money, not have passport..." (Monika, age 39).

"Last two months I am having kind of breathing problem, there is no asthma so maybe there is subconscious stress... maybe [it has gotten worse] because I become lonely again, I'm not lonely actually, but not doing anything [active]" (Aisha, age 31).

The health problems described by many women affected their ability to enter the labour market, seek help and support, and function productively in everyday life. Additional barriers to housing stability were reported. These included abusive ex-partners who engaged in 'stalking' behaviour, forcing them to move repeatedly in an effort to ensure their safety. Social isolation and the absence of family or friendship networks also hampered the women's ability to exit homelessness, since many did not have close family members living in Ireland and struggled to maintain regular contact with family members in their countries of origin. Those who did have contact with parents and siblings often had not informed them about their experiences of domestic violence and homelessness because of stigma or feelings of shame; others did not want to burden their family members with knowledge about their situations.

"Seeking help in a refuge is like a stigma for our community and people are too ashamed to say these things... whenever they know about my situation, they just step back" (Bina, age 32).

"My family doesn't know what is going on and I am living this life, do you know, of nothingness. I feel my pride is being crushed" (Delilah, age 30).

It is important to note that, despite the challenges they faced, migrant women did not see themselves as victims and a very considerable number expressed strong self-determination in relation to their situations. Others clearly perceived a 'victim' role as an undesirable and inaccurate portrayal of their lives, situations, and experiences.

"I don't want to go and spread the word around that I was abused, I don't want people to look at me and think 'oh the poor thing, the victim', you know? Because I am more than that" (Delilah, 30).

Migrant women were proactive in their efforts to resolve their homelessness. Many, for example, had established positive relationships with service staff members, and had tried to access education and to improve their English language skills. However, they faced numerous structural barriers related to welfare, the labour market and housing structures. These restrictions impacted strongly on their ability to access housing.

Conclusion

As highlighted earlier in this paper, an association between gender-based violence and homelessness is relatively well documented throughout Europe (Jones, 1999; Edgar and Doherty, 2004; OPDM, 2005; FEANTSA, 2007; Robinson *et al.*, 2007; Jones *et al.*, 2010; Quilgars and Pleace, 2010; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012). However, there has been little attention dedicated to the dynamics of this relationship for either migrant or non-migrant women who experience homelessness. This paper specifically sought to move beyond simply documenting an association between gender-based violence and migrant women's homelessness by focusing on broader issues and experiences that surround the relationship. The findings presented uncover a complex mix of social, economic, legal and cultural factors as impacting migrant women's 'journeys' to homelessness.

The analysis has limitations as well as strengths. In terms of the latter, migrant women were well-represented in the study's larger sample. The interviews conducted sought to provide women with opportunities to articulate their experiences in their own words, and the analysis was grounded in their life stories. Nonetheless, the sub-sample of migrant women is relatively small and does not claim to 'represent' the experiences of all migrant women who experience housing instability and homelessness in the Irish context. Although never the aim, this is an important caveat, and draws attention to the need for additional and ongoing research and monitoring of housing and homelessness among migrant women. In terms of the broader European context, the dynamics explored in this paper are clearly illustrative in nature but are nonetheless relevant to other countries with a documented problem of homelessness among migrant women. Migrant women are a lesser researched sub-group of the homeless population; their experience of gender-based violence, and its impact on their homeless pathways, is poorly understood.

Gender-based violence was a prominent 'trigger' of homelessness among the migrant women interviewed, and an experience that had far-reaching economic, social and personal consequences. The experience of intimate partner violence interacted in powerful ways with broader factors, and these in turn influenced women's responses to their abusive home situations, serving to prolong their exits from abusive relationships in many cases. Economic stability, food and housing were primary considerations for the women and, for most, the economic consequences of leaving an abusive home were severe. Those whose immigration status depended on that of their spouses were particularly vulnerable as they lost their legal status upon leaving these relationships and also faced exclusion from both the labour and housing markets.

While economic factors strongly mediated women's responses to gender-based violence, there were other significant influences on women's responses. For example, women's experiences in their home countries sometimes shaped their perceptions and influenced their responses to intimate partner violence. It appears that a considerable number risked being socially isolated by their communities, family members and friends in the event of disclosing abuse by an intimate partner, while others did not perceive that they could approach a relevant authority or social service for help. Women's lack of knowledge about available support services emerged strongly from their accounts and made their experience of becoming homeless more daunting, intimidating and frightening. This was particularly evident in the case of women who relied on strangers for advice on seeking help, highlighting women's lack of knowledge about available services and supports, and their fear of approaching services directly. Migrant women frequently occupied a space in which they acknowledged their need for help and advice but were simultaneously uncertain about their eligibility for support.

Many of the issues and experiences that impacted migrant women's paths to homelessness continued to act as barriers to their exiting homelessness. Their marginal economic positions and their limited access to housing were the strongest obstacles to housing stability. The women also identified problems with English language proficiency, as well as challenges associated with balancing child care responsibilities, while searching for and/or maintaining a job. Dealing with the aftermath of gender-based violence also compromised their ability to seek employment and housing since many had to prioritise their own and their children's physical and mental health needs on separating from their abusers.

The findings demonstrate that homelessness among migrant women was strongly connected to their socio-economic positions. For example, all who reported experiencing gender-based violence also experienced economic difficulties related to their immigration status, and/or economic dependence on their partners. This concurs with previous research which suggests that women are more likely to report economic-related issues as a major factor leading to their homelessness (Baker *et al.*, 2003). The structural underpinnings of the relationship between gender-based violence and homelessness are therefore highlighted, demonstrating migrant women's responses as intimately linked to broader factors – economic, social, legal, cultural – within which their lives are played out and ultimately bound. The findings also demonstrate that migrant women's experiences of gender-based violence interact in powerful ways with factors such as immigration law, welfare and domestic violence policy. Women can gain independence from abusive partners by seeking support from housing and welfare systems. However, the social and legal position of many of this study's migrant women excluded them from these

systems of support. Consistent, then, with other research and commentary, the intersection of welfare regimes and immigration policy is critical to understanding migrant homelessness (Edgar *et al.*, 2004; Harrison *et al.*, 2005; Pleace, 2010).

Arising from the study's findings are several implications for the provision of services that are responsive to the needs of migrant women who experience homelessness. Perhaps most obviously, migrant women need better access to information about available services. Furthermore, information and communication about services and access to services needs to be culturally mediated in gender-sensitive ways. Women's understanding of systems and services is clearly of great importance and will determine what services they access and whether they may access services at all. The findings also highlight the need for culturally competent service provision as well as an emphasis on empowering migrant women. Other important implications include the need for gender issues to be taken into account in planning and monitoring homeless services, so that services are gender-proofed for their impact on women in general and women in migrant communities specifically. Finally, and importantly, gender perspectives need to be incorporated into all areas of homeless policy (Edgar and Doherty, 2001) and access to housing for migrants needs to be an integral part of national integration policies and strategies (Edgar *et al.*, 2004).

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