

Scottish Women's Aid input to the Temporary Accommodation Task and Finish group

November 2022

1. Introduction

SWA welcomes the invitation to provide an input to the Temporary Accommodation Task and Finish Group. Women's pathways into and experiences of homelessness differ from those of men. Their access to safe and adequate housing is particularly impacted by women's economic inequality and by men's violence against women.

*"Growing international evidence demonstrates that there is a complex, gender-specific dimension to women's homelessness and a gender lens needs to be applied to any strategy that aims to prevent and to end homelessness for women. Gender lens means acknowledging the specific challenges associated with gender and it should be part of any solution to women's homelessness."*¹

The Scottish Government working group on improving housing outcomes for women and children experiencing domestic abuse, made a series of intersecting recommendations including a targeted response from social landlords which understands and responds to the gendered nature of homelessness and domestic abuse.² The recommendations are aimed at preventing women and children's homelessness, would consequently reduce the need for women and children to enter temporary accommodation and support the development of a gender competent response for women going through the homeless system.

The report recommendations were accepted by the Scottish Government. The specific recommendations for temporary accommodation and refuges are included at the end of this paper.

2. Context: domestic abuse and women and children's homelessness

Domestic abuse is the main cause of women's homelessness in Scotland. A dispute within the household violent or abusive was the reason given by 4,810 people when making a homeless application in 2020-21. In total 3,615 applications, 75% of applications in this category were made by women, with almost half of these applications (46%) including children.³ These statistics underestimate the scale of the issue due to inadequate collection, categorisation and disaggregation of homelessness data and the barriers women experience

¹ Feantsa <https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2021/03/08/guide-for-developing-effective-gender-responsive-support-and-solutions-for-women-experiencing-homelessness?bcParent=27>

² <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Improving-Housing-Outcomes-for-Women-and-Children-Experiencing-Domestic-Abuse-Report.pdf>

³ Scottish Government Homelessness Statistics Equalities breakdown 2020-21

that deter them from making a homelessness application. Figures from the Office of National Statistics provide additional data to understanding the structural and intersecting inequalities that are the cause and consequence of domestic abuse and women's homelessness, these include:⁴

- Women who experience domestic abuse are up to four times more likely to face housing instability than women without experience of domestic abuse.
- Young women, single parents, disabled women and women living in social housing are more likely to be victims of domestic abuse.
- Women living in single-adult households with children were the most likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months (20.5%). They were four times as likely to have experienced partner abuse than those living in a household with other adults and children (4.9%).
- Women who lived in single-adult households with children were seven times as likely to have experienced stalking by a partner or ex-partner (7.0% compared with 0.9%). They were also three times as likely to have been a victim of sexual abuse by a partner or ex-partner than women living in households made up of more than one adult and children (1.2% compared with 0.4%). (Stalking is a common experience for victims of domestic abuse)
- Women who lived in households that earned less than £10,000 were more than four times as likely (14.3%) to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months than women living in households with an income of £50,000 or more (3.3%).
- The structural inequality experienced by black and minoritised and marginalised women means they often suffer more severe abuse for longer, and face more challenges to accessing support than their white counterparts.⁵

Women's pre-existing structural inequality coupled with soaring energy and food costs, stagnant wages and an inadequate social security safety net, enables perpetrators of domestic abuse to entrap women and places more women and children at increased risk of abuse. According to recent research 73% of victims said the cost of living crisis had prevented them from leaving their abusive partner or would make it harder to do so.⁶

3. Women's experiences of temporary accommodation

3.1 Gendered barriers and risks

Gender-based violence is a major cause of women's homelessness, it is also for many women a consequence. Homelessness exposes women to continuous violence and fear. Sleeping rough, staying in unsuitable precarious accommodation or in temporary homelessness accommodation, where women are stigmatised, verbally and physically

4

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/womenmostatriskofexperiencingpartnerabuseinenglandandwales/yearsendingmarch2015to2017>

⁵ Siddiqui, H. (2018). 'Counting the Cost: BME women and gender-based violence in the UK.' IPPR Progressive Review. Vol. 24 (4). Pp. 361-368

⁶ Davidge, S (2022) The cost of living crisis is preventing women from fleeing domestic abuse. Women's Aid. Available at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/the-cost-of-living/>.

assaulted and at risk of violence and sexual abuse forces women to choose between familiar and unknown fear and risk.

Some women avoid homelessness services due to this risk to their own and their children's safety. As well as the perceived shame and stigma of homelessness and domestic abuse which are inherently gendered. Research suggests that women's previous bad experiences of services may influence what they do, as well as concerns about safety, confidentiality,⁷ lack of childcare, fear of losing children, job, or repercussions from an abusive partner, stigma about seeking support, misconceptions about services, and lack of trust in services.⁸

Research by the University of Dundee found that women experience increased vulnerability and exploitation when in mixed-sex temporary accommodation. Many women reported being harassed by male residents, while some experienced sexual violence, theft and other crimes. Women experienced stigma, judgement and/or incomprehension from some services. Practitioners had little knowledge or understanding of how trauma resulting from GBV affects women. Women, in turn, felt disbelieved and belittled. This results in women facing service generated barriers to support, disengaging from support, ongoing vulnerability and further trauma.⁹

3.2 SWA survey of Women's Aid Groups experiences of temporary accommodation

In October 2022 SWA carried out an online survey on temporary accommodation with our members, 34 Women's Aid groups working across Scotland:

- 70% responded that there was no suitable single sex local authority temporary homeless accommodation for women with or without children in their area.
- 90% said that women feel unsafe in temporary homeless accommodation in their local authority area.

Examples provided of **why women are and feel unsafe in temporary accommodation were that women were subjected to unwanted sexual contact, including rape and sexual assault. As well as intimidation, harassment and predatory behaviour.**

"we are supporting a woman who is in a hotel and men are knocking in her door at all hours, she hides in the bathroom to feel safe"

"Women from BME communities feel that it brings shame on their families to live in accommodation with men, this adds to their vulnerability and on many occasions results in women returning to their abuser."

"All temporary housing is in one area, this often means that the victim and perpetrator are housed nearby. This has led to many sexual assaults and to the continuation of domestic abuse and coercive control."

⁷ Scottish Women's Aid. (2015). Change, Justice, Fairness: why should we have to move everywhere and everything because of him? Available at: <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Change-Justice-Fairness.pdf>

⁸ Lopez, M. and Smith, F.M. (2019). Gendered approaches to service provision: research report. University of Dundee/Dundee Women's Aid. Available at: <http://www.dundee womensaid.co.uk/uploads/genderedapproachestoserviceprovision.pdf>

⁹ Ibid

Women's experiences of temporary accommodation mean that they will decide to return to their home and their abusive partner.

- 85% of survey responses stated that women often return to their abusive partner.

Examples given

"when they are with the perpetrator they know what to expect and can manage their safety accordingly. Their own and their children's safety and mental health is easier to manage than in homeless accommodation."

"Women experience racism from other residents and from some members of staff."

"Because the alternative, returning to the abuser, appears the better option which is despairing."

Women face multiple barriers when trying to end a relationship with an abusive partner. Ending a relationship and leaving their home is the most dangerous time for women, domestic abuse intensifies post separation¹⁰ and killings of women are more likely to occur in the first few months of separation.¹¹ Where women try to leave and have to return because the accommodation and service responses are unsafe this increases the risk of serious harm to them and their children, has a long-term impact on women and children's health and wellbeing and reinforces perpetrators control.

3.3 Children's experiences of temporary homeless accommodation

Children make up a large and increasing population of people living in temporary homeless accommodation. When SWA consulted children on their views and experiences of being made homeless, children were clear about the unfairness of having to leave their home. Saying that "the perpetrator should always be the one who is forced to leave the home, as they are the ones who have done something wrong." And "Why should you have to leave your stuff and friends when you haven't done anything wrong?"

Children's experiences of temporary accommodation were that:

- It affects children's mental health, they felt scared by the anti-social behaviour they witnessed, not able to sleep/sleep issues, bed wetting, behavioural issues, they were scared and didn't feel safe.
- Homeless accommodation was experienced as difficult, it was too far from school or friends and any sort of normality in their lives, for example there was no WIFI to be able to do homework or keep in contact with friends, or a TV.
- Some children with additional support needs found the change in routine very difficult

¹⁰ Humphreys, C. and Thiara, R. (2015) 'Absent presence: The ongoing impact of men's violence on the mother-child relationship', Child and Family Social Work, 1-9.

¹¹ <https://www.femicidecensus.org/reports/>

- There was nowhere to play in the accommodation, they were not allowed to make any noise in the B & B, or it was unsafe to go out and play

3.4 Specialist support for women and children

In the survey we asked if the local authority homelessness service routinely referred women and/or children to Women's Aid for support.

- 47% responded that they always or usually receive referrals, 35% said sometimes and almost 20% that women or children are never or rarely referred for support.

There is wide range of research that demonstrates the critical impact that specialist domestic abuse support has on post traumatic recovery, on enabling victim-survivors to leave an abuser, and to help rebuild their lives. Developing collaborative relationships and good referral systems to specialist services for women and children at risk of homelessness is a relatively straightforward measure for homelessness services to put in place. These are central principles of the Domestic Abuse Good Practice Guidance for Social Landlords produced by ALACHO, CIH, SFHA, Shelter and SWA.¹²

3.5 Domestic abuse training for homelessness staff

In the survey we asked if Women's Aid had provided domestic abuse training for homelessness staff in their area.

- 25% had provided training
- 40% had not been asked to provide training
- 35% had offered/discussions had taken place but this was not followed up.

A key priority of Scotland's Equally Safe Strategy is that interventions are early and effective in preventing violence and maximising the safety and wellbeing of women and girls. The strategy seeks to ensure that service providers, including housing practitioners, are competently able to identify those at risk of violence against women and girls and offer an appropriate, safe and consistent response.¹³ This again should be a relatively straightforward measure for homelessness services to put in place.

4. Recommendations for temporary homeless accommodation

The recommendations from improving housing outcomes for women and children experiencing domestic abuse working group aim to address the risks and barriers women experience in accessing temporary accommodation. These are that

- Local authorities and their partners should review their provision of temporary accommodation to provide suitable single-sex temporary accommodation for women and women and their children.

¹² <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Domestic-abuse-guidance-for-social-landlords-FINAL.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/equally-safe-scotlands-strategy-prevent-eradicate-violence-against-women-girls/documents/>

- All staff working in homeless services and relevant support services should receive specialist training on domestic abuse and other forms of VAWG.
- Temporary accommodation standards should be based on gender analysis; reflect the needs of diverse groups of women; and respond to women's experience of GBV. The working group developing these standards should include representatives of women's and children's rights organisations.

Subsequent reports from Feantsa, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, make similar recommendations both on the need for a gendered homelessness response and on safe homeless spaces for women. As does the Centre for homelessness Impact report, Women homelessness and violence: what works?

The Feantsa report¹⁴ sets out Key Principles of a Gender-Informed Homelessness Service Response this includes:

- Creating safety by providing women-only spaces by women for women
- Establishing the physical, psychological, and emotional safety of women and working from a perspective which recognises GBV as cause of women's homelessness and the impact of trauma on women
- Providing staff training to recognise GBV and effects of trauma
- Providing support in an accessible, flexible, and non-judgemental way and fighting stigmatisation and stereotyping

5. Refuge provision in Scotland

Refuges are provided by Women's Aid in Scotland: a network of Women's Aid groups providing support services to women, children and young people. Refuges are direct-access accommodation, with the majority of women self-referring to Women's Aid for support and refuge. Refuges provide women and their children with one-to-one and peer support, which enables them to cope with the trauma they have experienced, and to begin to rebuild safe and independent lives. Women's Aid support goes beyond providing a safe place to stay: it also includes a range of integrated support services responsive to the complexity, and impact on women and children, of domestic abuse.

At present the provision of refuges in Scotland does not meet the minimum standards set out in the Istanbul Convention for the number of refuge spaces, their distribution or general suitability. The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, (the Istanbul Convention) is the comprehensive legislative framework to tackle violence against women and girls. It sets minimum standards for governments to meet when tackling violence against women. When a government ratifies the Convention, they are legally bound to follow it. The convention was ratified by the UK Government in June 2022 and came into effect in the UK on the 1st November 2022.¹⁵

¹⁴ <https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2021/03/08/guide-for-developing-effective-gender-responsive-support-and-solutions-for-women-experiencing-homelessness?bcParent=27>

¹⁵ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence: <https://www.coe.int/fr/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e>

Pre-pandemic there was insufficient refuge spaces in Scotland to meet demand. As a third are provided in shared, usually local authority owned, accommodation, this number has reduced to meet COVID regulations and has not recovered. Refuges are exempt from the requirements of the UAO legislation and Women's Aid groups have campaigned for better quality replacement provision.

- SWA's annual Census Day survey (2019) found that Women's Aid groups were unable to accommodate 58% of women and 38% of children and young people who requested refuge, because of lack of space
- Only one in six women making a homeless application as a result of domestic abuse gets a refuge space when she needs it
- There has been a stark increase in waiting time for refuge. Over half of Women's Aid groups have waiting lists for what is supposed to be crisis provision
- There are only 13 refuge spaces for BME women in Scotland provided by specialist BME domestic abuse services. These are available only in Glasgow and Edinburgh. Research carried out for the Scottish Executive as long ago as 2004 highlighted this shortage and the need for refuge space for BME women
- Women with NRPF face insurmountable barriers to refuge and other domestic abuse services.

6. Refuge provision recommendations

- The Scottish Government should review specialist refuge provision and develop this to meet international standards for the number of spaces, distribution and suitability. This includes specific provision for BME women and women with NRPF.
- This would remove the need for the Unsuitable Accommodation Order exemption and acceptance of substandard accommodation for women and children who have experienced domestic abuse.
- This review should include an assessment of a programme of sustainable funding for refuge support services for women and children.

The working group commissioned by the Scottish Government to make recommendations to improve housing outcomes for women and children reported in 2020. The working group was made up of representatives of ALACHO, COSLA, Scottish Government, Shelter, CIH, SWA, housing association and local authority practitioners as well as legal and gender expertise. The working group spent a year working to develop a range of recommendations that are a combination of systemic change, legislation and actions to prevent homelessness for victim-survivors of domestic abuse which will make a fundamental difference to improving not only the housing outcomes for women and children in Scotland but also their health and wellbeing, thus upholding the human rights of women and children to live in a home in dignity and security, free from abuse.

SWA strongly recommend that the Temporary Accommodation Task and Finish group support the relevant recommendations as set above.

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