Single Women’s Homelessness in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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There is very little research on women’s experience of homelessness in New Zealand. There is even less on the experience of Māori women, our Pacific sisters and other women of colour. Few services for the homeless prioritise the needs and experiences of single women at their point of service delivery. This article looks at the experience of single homeless women in Aotearoa/New Zealand and looks at the specific service example of the Wellington Homeless Women’s Trust.

What the Research Says

Dr Kate Amore measured the ‘severely housing deprived’ population recorded were female, a total of 19,679. These statistics recorded women and families living in women’s refuges at the time of the census but does not break the severely housing deprived living situations down by gender, so it is difficult to understand the nature of their homelessness.

Joanne Bretherton comments that although there is very little research on women’s homelessness in the United Kingdom (UK) and Europe, the indications are that there are differences in the paths each gender takes. Women’s pathways tend to be linked with domestic violence, a ‘protection’ by welfare systems when they have dependent children and a greater tendency for women to use and exhaust informal support as opposed to using homelessness services.

Bretherton’s UK analysis concluded that:

‘there is a need to cease a longstanding focus on the streets, homelessness services and (predominantly) male experience, and to look instead at the more nuanced interrelationships between gender and agency to fully understand the nature of homelessness in Europe.’

Sandy Darab and Yvonne Hartman reviewed the available literature on this area in Australia for single older women. It appeared, they say, that ageing and single status are compounding factors that place non-home owning women at higher risk of homelessness or inappropriate housing: ‘Our analysis leads us to suggest that women’s traditional roles in society are largely responsible for housing insecurity in their later years.’

Canadian statistics of women experiencing homelessness show that they have high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (36 per cent), mental health issues like depression (50 per cent) and report high rates of sexual exploitation, violence and assault, which ranged between 37 per cent and 89 per cent.

There is a relationship between violence and homelessness for women. The Canadian experience is that violence is an overwhelming if not ubiquitous factor in pathways to, and within the experience of homelessness for women. The experience of intimate partner violence increases one’s risk for homelessness four-fold.

Many of the women ending up homeless in New Zealand do not qualify for emergency accommodation because they do not have children in their care. If they can stump up the money, their main accommodation alternatives are boarding houses that offer no support and are far less safe and secure than alternative services, say the Salvation Army.

The Wellington Women’s (Boarding) House provides low-cost temporary housing for up to 16 single women at any one time for around six months. They have seen more, older women coming through their service of late and more referrals of women with high needs, especially mental health issues.

‘We are struggling to move women into more permanent housing, especially older women. Flatmate...’
wanted ads aren’t usually for older, mature women and affordable rentals just don’t seem to be out there at the moment,’ says House Manager Margaret Speirs.

Wellington Homeless Women’s Trust (WHWT)

Referrals to the Wellington Homeless Women’s Trust can be quite diverse. Sometimes these referrals come from women transitioning from prison, the hospital or rehab, or from those ‘sleeping rough’ on the streets or in cars. Women referrals may have just arrived in the region after fleeing abuse elsewhere. All of the women arrive with their own story and their own experience of homelessness – and of trauma.

Take Joan* for example. Joan had been living on the street for quite some time. She is an older woman with physical health and mental health issues. She did not trust buildings due to earthquakes and other trauma – so keeping her inside was a key goal.

Located down a nondescript lane in Central Wellington, tucked under a multilevel building, the Wellington Women’s Housing Trust is pretty hard to find.

Everything they do is designed to help the women feel protected, and safe. There are security cameras at the door and inside. They always ask if there is a protection order before anyone can stay there. No males are allowed on the premises and all the women have one common denominator – they just need that ‘stepping stone’ to safer and more secure housing.

The five bedrooms each have double beds and all the furniture needed. A woman can literally arrive with her carrier bag and move in. They have a key to their room and it comes with all the linen, bedding, and toiletries. The Trust will source anything else they need.

It is only for single women and invariably it is full. Nearly half of the women are between 40 and 70 years old and there is a high rate of Māori women (57 per cent).

Because the house is not staffed 24 hours a day, staff need to be confident that a woman is ready to enter the house and has the ability to manage herself in the house safely. House criteria have been set up to keep everyone in the property safe – and the property itself safe. The main objective is to support as many women as possible by providing a safe and comfortable space where they can focus on a support plan to move on.

The Trust receives referrals from a variety of Wellington-wide agencies. Having an established relationship with most of these agencies helps to streamline the process and make it easier for the women to come into the service.

Sena* is a refugee and has been in New Zealand for two years. She was living in Pilmuir House in the Hutt when Red Cross contacted WHWT Manager Paula Lloyd about her. ‘They realised Sena was locking herself in her room. The Red Cross contacted me because where she was staying was bringing up trauma from her past and this was the reason she was a...’
refugee. Being in a women’s only house was the only option for her to feel safe.’

Originally set up in 2013, WHWT was the result of several homeless women having to spend the night in the central police station with nowhere to go. While the Trust’s preference was for emergency housing, budget constraints meant they had to go for the transitional housing option. The Trust relies on donations for its operation.

‘Not having a government contract can be an asset as it allows the flexibility to be responsive,’ says Paula. ‘I don’t have to work to targets that don’t always make sense. I can work where the need is.’

Paula is also involved in advocacy work on behalf of the women. This can mean supporting women to get emergency housing through Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) and a number of them have had to stay sleeping on the streets for days while the WINZ processes are worked through.

There is a skill to engaging people on the street. Asking the right questions, keeping yourself safe – it needs a consistent familiar face. And there are many aspects that are specific to these women that need to be considered, such as the abuse and discrimination they may have had to cope with in their lives that has caused obstacles to their progress. Many of the women the Trust works alongside have been invisible for most of their lives.

Tenants are given the opportunity to stay for up to three months and provided with caring support and personal advocacy. This includes creating a support plan with each resident on arrival to assist in addressing the issues relating to their homelessness, turning their lives around and re-establishing themselves. The Trust then assists in finding each woman safe sustainable accommodation.

The majority of the women coming through the service have experienced trauma and some have ongoing threats to their safety. Their time in the house is often a time to reflect on their past and become motivated to make the necessary changes to move forward.

‘From the beginning to the end we want to be supporting women to move along to do the best that they can.’

Concluding Comments
Although the experience of New Zealand women who are homeless is not well-documented, there is nevertheless a gendered dimension to their experience of homelessness. All homelessness services need to be cognisant of the different experiences and needs of women who are homeless.

* Not her real name.

Endnotes
1. www.homeless.org.nz
2. Amore K 2016, Severe housing deprivation in Aotearoa/New Zealand 2001-2013, He Kainga Oranga/Housing and Health Research Programme, University of Otago, Wellington
3. Severe housing deprivation refers to people living in severely inadequate housing due to a lack of access to minimally adequate housing. This means not being able to access an acceptable dwelling to rent, let alone buy.