

‘Making Women Count’ – challenging the systems that keep women’s rough sleeping unseen

By Lucy Campbell, Head of Multiple Disadvantage, Single Homeless Project

If I found myself homeless tonight with nowhere to go but the streets of London, the last thing I’d do would be bed down on the pavement. Why? Because I’m a woman, and to spend the night lying on a dark street, alone, would be terrifying. Instead, I’d seek out some brightly lit 24-hour McDonalds, and spend the night hunched in a corner over a coffee, hoping the staff wouldn’t ask me to leave. Or perhaps sit on a hard plastic chair in an A&E waiting room; uncomfortable, but at least indoors, surrounded by other people. Train stations. Night buses. Places with bright lights, places with staff. Places that feel safer, because as a woman with nowhere to go at night, your priority wouldn’t be sleep. It would be to protect yourself against verbal, physical and sexual attack.

I’ve worked with women experiencing homelessness for 16 years, and have seen first-hand the sometimes irreparable damage that rough sleeping causes to women’s physical and mental health. A woman I know well, Michelle, was rough sleeping for three and a half years before she was found and supported by services. When I ask about her experience, she says, simply: “The trauma that I experienced never goes away. It will affect me for the rest of my life.”

The consequences of rough sleeping are devastating for everyone, but they are especially devastating for women. The way in which England’s rough sleeping support systems have been designed disadvantage women further. It’s in our Government’s power to change that, and new report, ‘Making Women Count’, shines a light on how this can be done.

Out of sight, out of mind?

Research, lived experience, and intelligence from front-line services all tell us that women experience homelessness differently to men. Due to the constant risk of violence, women often hide away when rough sleeping, or spend the night walking and sleep in the daytime, or alternate rough sleeping with other forms of dangerous hidden homelessness. This disadvantages women further in two ways. Firstly, they are less likely to be visible to outreach teams – hiding from harm causing them to be hidden from help. Secondly, the way that rough sleeping rates are measured – snapshot counts of people visibly bedded down at night – under-represents women. This makes it extremely difficult to evidence the need for more - and better - women’s services. The Government has set out a strategy for ‘ending rough sleeping for good’ - but how can that happen when the scale and nature of women’s rough sleeping is yet to even be recognised?

The first ever women’s rough sleeping census

In October 2022, a coalition of homelessness and women’s sector organisations, supported by researchers, designed and delivered the first pan-London women’s rough sleeping census. We designed a new methodology that included a broader definition of rough sleeping, and created guidance for outreach teams to help them to work in a way that encompassed women’s experiences. We spoke to 154 women who were rough sleeping over five days, gathering data by means of a snapshot survey about their circumstances.

The resulting report, ‘Making Women Count’ by social research consultancy Praxis Collab, clearly states what many of us in the sector have known for years: that women’s rough sleeping is often transient, intermittent and hidden, and that *“rough sleeping is not currently defined in a way that incorporates how women experience rough sleeping.”*

The dangers of hidden rough sleeping

The report tells us that current systems to measure and respond to rough sleeping are not designed for how women rough sleep. This means that women are often precluded from accessing the support and housing they so desperately need. The effects of this inequity are severe: A 2021 study by the University of York highlighted that experiences of violence and abuse are “near universal” for women who sleep rough. Additionally, the average age of death for a woman experiencing homelessness is just 43 years old, even younger than their male counterparts, despite women having a higher life expectancy in the general population. Talking about the toll that almost four years of hidden rough sleeping has taken on her body and mind, Michelle, 45, lists Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), chronic sciatica and alcohol use disorder. She is now in accommodation and better able to manage these conditions, but support and treatment for co-occurring conditions remains poorly resourced, and to some extent, the damage is done.

How can we change the system?

The team behind the census - Single Homeless Project, the Women’s Development Unit (Solace and the Connection at St Martins) and St Mungo’s, supported by London Councils and the Greater London Authority - are calling for change. We want the Government to mandate the annual repetition of the census, and produce guidance to support local authorities to improve access to rough sleeping services for women. We want all women in Michelle’s position to be reached and supported – and we want to change the narrative that tells us that women’s rough sleeping isn’t a big problem.

Two London boroughs, Westminster and Camden, have agreed to pilot our recommendations, and the census team has been invited to meet with the Minister’s officials. It feels – especially to those of us who have been pushing for women’s experiences to be recognised and responded to for many years – that things are slowly moving forward.

Ending rough sleeping means ending rough sleeping for everyone. That includes every woman who will be seeking refuge tonight in a café, hospital waiting room, stranger’s flat or night bus – hiding from harm and hidden from help. If the Government and local authorities put in place our recommendations, they will make a real and lasting impact to hundreds of women every year.

[Read the full report and our recommendations](#)