

# National Women's Strategy

## Focus Ireland Submission

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### Introduction

Focus Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the National Women's Strategy 2017-2020. Focus Ireland is one of the leading housing and homelessness organisations in the State. We are driven by the fundamental belief that homelessness is wrong. We are committed to tackling the fundamental features of homelessness; the causes, systemic failures, people's perceptions and how it is tackled. We believe that the real solutions lie in preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place and ensuring they have help to stay in their home once they have found one.

Ireland is currently experiencing the highest rates of homelessness since administrative records began. The causes of homelessness are complex and varied. However, poverty and structural disadvantage are generally at the root of the problem. This sometimes interacts with mental health or substance misuse issues. Over the past 2 years we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of individuals and families who are becoming homeless as a direct result of structural and economic factors. These include rising rents and a severe contraction of affordable housing supply.

The housing and homelessness crisis has prompted considerable public, media and political interest. A cross-departmental government housing action plan, Rebuilding Ireland, has recently been published and includes proposals and plans to tackle homelessness as well as longer term initiatives to improve the housing sector. We accept that the National Women's Strategy must reflect existing policy commitments in the area of housing and homelessness. However, such plans face limitations in addressing the prevalence of inequality, discrimination and stigma inherent in the experience of homelessness.

We believe that the National Women's Strategy provides an opportunity to recognise and address the particular experience of discrimination faced by women who are homeless. Inequality manifests itself in the pathways of women into homelessness and their interactions with homeless services.

In the Public Consultation Paper, the Department of Justice and Equality asked that contributors outline the 'issues for women and girls in Ireland that are most important to address over the next four years'. The Department has highlighted objectives relating to citizenship, leadership and decision-making. While integral to securing gender equality, it is extremely difficult for individuals to achieve these goals without the stability and security of a home.

One of the proposed objectives is to 'advance socio-economic equality for women and girls'. Any discussion of socio-economic equality must consider the current housing and homelessness crisis, and

its particular impact on women. International research suggests women – specifically low income women – are at a disproportionate risk of poverty, housing exclusion and homelessness<sup>1,2</sup>. The National Women’s Strategy must ensure that the needs of low income women, in particular, are reflected in its provisions and commitments.

This submission will focus on the key objective of ‘advancing socio-economic equality for women and girls’. We will examine:

- the extent of women’s homelessness;
- the distinct pathways of women into homelessness;
- their experiences of homeless services;
- the stigma suffered; and
- recommendations for inclusion in the forthcoming strategy.

## Measuring Women’s Homelessness in Ireland

1,803 women are currently experiencing homelessness nationwide, with 1,363 of these accessing services in the Dublin region. As noted above, the numbers of individuals and households experiencing homelessness has increased across all demographic groups and regions. Family homelessness has increased most dramatically, and this has impacted on the numbers of women experiencing homelessness. Previously, there was always a higher percentage of men counted as homelessness in the State (though homeless counts are widely recognised as underestimating the number of women experiencing homelessness as women are more likely to reside in ‘hidden’ homelessness situations such as doubling up with friends or family members).

With the dramatic rise of families entering emergency homeless accommodation, the gender gap in the official figures has decreased. For example, when comparing gender breakdown between 2014 and 2016 (as outlined in Table 1), the percentage of women experiencing homelessness across Ireland has increased by 8%.<sup>3</sup>

	Men	Women
<b>August 2014</b>	65%	35%
<b>November 2016</b>	57%	43%

**Table 1: Gender Breakdown of Persons Residing in Emergency Accommodation Nationally**

This increase can be partially explained by the increase in family homelessness – particularly female-headed one parent families – over the same period. Indeed, given the particularly steep rise of family

<sup>1</sup> FEANTSA Magazine (2016) *Perspective on Women’s Homelessness*. Brussels: FEANTSA.

<sup>2</sup> Mayock, P. and Bretherton, J. (2017, forthcoming) *Women’s Homelessness in Europe*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

<sup>3</sup> From Department of Housing data, available here:

<http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>

homelessness in Dublin, the proportion of women among adults experiencing homelessness is notably higher. For example, in November 2016, 47% of all homeless adults in emergency accommodation were women; up from 35% in August 2014.

Many of these families are headed by lone parents. In November’s emergency accommodation statistics (2016), as cited in Table 2, 65% of families experiencing homelessness were single parent families. This was even higher in August 2014 when almost three quarters (74%) families experiencing homelessness were headed by lone parents.

	Families	Lone Parents
August 2014	385	288
November 2016	1205	788

**Table 2: Breakdown of Lone Parent Families among Families Experiencing Homelessness**

Regular administrative data analysis published by Dublin Region Homeless Executive and point-in-time surveys conducted by Focus Ireland have demonstrated that the majority of lone parent families experiencing homelessness are female-headed.<sup>4</sup> This pattern is also replicated in national statistics<sup>5</sup>.

On the other hand, rough sleeper counts demonstrate far higher numbers of men. The latest rough sleeper count conducted in November 2016 showed that 85% of those counted on the street were male. This most acute and visible form of housing exclusion traditionally attracts the greatest policy and media attention. As a result, homelessness policy and service delivery could be described as ‘gender-blind’ in its overemphasis on the needs of male service users. This is despite the fact that there is an increasing acknowledgment across the international literature on women’s homelessness that women’s routes into, through, and out of homelessness can differ from their male counterparts<sup>6</sup>.

There has been almost no discussion in Ireland, and relatively little discussion internationally, about whether governmental policies and strategies adequately address the distinct housing and support needs of women who are at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness or housing instability. The National Women’s Strategy must, therefore, acknowledge and seek to address both the rapid increase in women’s homelessness and the distinct needs of women, as a matter of urgency.

<sup>4</sup> See Focus Ireland Insights into Family Homelessness: Insight 1 <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Insight-into-Family-Homelessness-No-1-2016-Snapshot-Profile-of-Children-residing-in-Emergency-Accommodation-in-Dublin-Region.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Census 2011 data revealed that 186,284 family units were headed by a lone mother; while 29,031 were lone fathers: [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie)

<sup>6</sup> Women and Homelessness in Ireland, Research Paper 1 (2012) [https://www.tcd.ie/childrensresearchcentre/assets/pdf/Publications/research\\_paper\\_one\\_women\\_and\\_homelessness\\_in\\_ireland.pdf](https://www.tcd.ie/childrensresearchcentre/assets/pdf/Publications/research_paper_one_women_and_homelessness_in_ireland.pdf)

## The Distinct Pathways of Women into Homelessness

While structural disadvantage, poverty and housing market failure are so often the root causes of homelessness for both men and women, there are ways in which these issues disproportionately impact on women<sup>7</sup>. Low income women, in particular, face risks of poverty, for example – labour market inequalities, childcare difficulties and interrupted careers, domestic violence or abuse, and more. This submission will focus on two of the most urgent of these themes: domestic violence and homelessness among low income families.

### Domestic Violence

Recent research conducted by Focus Ireland examined the pathways of families into homelessness<sup>8</sup>. 72 families who presented as homeless in March 2016 were contacted and asked to detail their previous four accommodations before presenting as homeless (and reasons for leaving these accommodations). 11 of the 72 survey respondents reported that domestic violence was the *main cause* of their recent experience of homelessness<sup>9</sup>. A further 5 respondents reported that domestic violence had negatively impacted on their housing stability in the past. It is worth noting that the nature of this violence was in the form of intimate partner violence and also violence within the family home.

The findings above are echoed in other research studies. A 2015 report “Women, Homelessness and Service Provision”<sup>10</sup> involved secondary analysis of 60 life history interviews with women experiencing homelessness. 55 of the women (92%) experienced some form of violence or abuse during their lives. Indeed, the association between homelessness among women and violence / victimisation has been highlighted repeatedly across the international literature<sup>11</sup>.

However, despite this, there is a broad disconnect between homelessness and domestic violence services (as is the case in the UK context also<sup>12</sup>). This results in gaps in provision as homelessness policy does not adequately incorporate the housing needs of women (and children) where that need arises from violence and abuse, and domestic violence services typically do not cater for the complex support needs of women who report mental health or substance misuse issues.

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<sup>7</sup> Edgar, B. and Doherty, J. (2001) *Women and Homelessness in Europe*. Brussels: FEANTSA.

<sup>8</sup> Insights into Family Homelessness Number 4 <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Insight-into-Family-Homelessness-No-4-2016-Telephone-Survey-of-Families-that-Became-Homeless-during-March-2016.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> 5 of these 11 families had resided in a domestic violence refuge prior to presenting to their local authority as homeless. These 5 families cited capacity problems in the refuge and due to this, they were advised to move to mainstream homeless accommodation.

<sup>10</sup> Mayock, Parker, Sheridan for Simon Communities

<sup>11</sup> Baptista, I. (2010) Women and Homelessness. In: E. O’Sullivan, V. Busch-Geertsema, D. Quilgars and N. Pleace (Eds) *Homelessness Research In Europe*. Brussels: FEANTSA.

<sup>12</sup> Quilgars, D. and Pleace, N. (2010) *Meeting the needs of households at risk of domestic violence in England: The role of accommodation and housing-related support services*. London: Dpt. of Communities and Local Government.

Importantly, this disconnect between homelessness and domestic violence responses also manifests itself in the measurement of homelessness. Due to the separation of funding streams in Ireland between both homelessness and domestic violence services (funded by the Department of Housing and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs respectively), women residing in domestic violence services are excluded from national statistics on homelessness, despite their urgent housing needs. Nor do the Department of Children or Tusla publish data on use of domestic violence accommodation. This exacerbates the disconnect between the two issues and further obscures the prevalence of women experiencing homelessness more broadly.

Focus Ireland welcomes the recent publication of guidance on housing and domestic violence by the Department of Housing, and the Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan acknowledges that policies to prevent homelessness must acknowledge the impact of domestic violence and commits to the provision of additional emergency refuge spaces. Nevertheless it is important that the Strategy responds to the housing and support needs of women and children in domestic violence accommodation, particularly for low income women or women among migrants or Traveller groups who may demonstrate additional barriers to escaping violence in their homes<sup>13</sup>.

### Family Homelessness

As already stated, the rise in the number of women experiencing homelessness is a result of the unprecedented increase in family homelessness. 65% of families experiencing homelessness are headed by a single parent, and the vast majority of these are women. There is growing evidence of the impact homelessness has on the daily life of families who are residing in commercial hotels – sometimes for significant periods of time. The strain and difficulties related to families sharing a single room, sometimes residing considerable distances from their centres of interest, difficulty transporting children to school, lack of safe spaces for children to play, lack of privacy for older children and parents, and financial problems are all reported through both research<sup>14</sup> and to Focus Ireland staff members working on the front-line.

While experiencing homelessness with dependent children is immensely difficult, it is even more so for single parents. As already cited, 65% of families in homeless services are headed by lone parents, and research indicates that the vast majority of these are women<sup>15</sup>. The difficulties faced by couples are compounded for those parenting alone in these emergency settings. For example, staff from the Family Homeless Action Team report that, oftentimes, children are not allowed to be present in the kitchen of a hotel. However, they are also not allowed to be left alone either. This leaves lone parents in a particularly difficult position.

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<sup>13</sup> Mayock, P., Sheridan, S. and Parker, S. (2012) Migrant women and homelessness: The role of gender-based violence. *European Journal of Homelessness*, 6, 1, 59-82.

<sup>14</sup> Walsh, K. and Harvey, B. (2015) *Family Experiences of Pathways into Homelessness: A Families' Perspective*. Dublin: Housing Agency.

<sup>15</sup> From Department of Housing: <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>

These factors put unimaginable strain on family life and many parents experience feelings of guilt while children report shame of their homeless reality, often hiding what's going on from their friends or school peers. Staff members note that many parents report deteriorating mental health, particularly if they are in emergency accommodation for long periods of time. This can result in an undue care burden being imposed on younger family members in the context of these exceptionally trying circumstances. Above all, this reality can be disempowering as both a mother and as a woman.

## Existing Service Responses to Women's Homelessness

Policy and service responses differ according to whether or not a woman is accompanied by children. Families experiencing homelessness in Ireland initially present to their local authority and once there is a proven housing need, the family is accommodated in emergency homeless accommodation or commercial hotels (more commonly the latter given the scale of family homelessness). Women who do not have children, who are not accompanied by their children, or are with a partner, are routed into the 'mainstream' homeless emergency system. If women - with or without their children - are fleeing domestic violence and have no chaotic drug or alcohol problems, they are accommodated to domestic violence refuges (pending capacity and availability).

As referenced above, homelessness policy and services have developed to respond to a problem which was traditionally seen as predominantly affecting men. Perhaps as a result of this, women have been found to report a sense of reluctance to engage with homelessness services, leading to the prevalence of 'hidden homelessness'<sup>16</sup>, and analyses of women's homeless journeys or trajectories are frequently "characterised by a lack of service engagement" with some women actively avoiding contact with homeless services, which they perceived to be "unclean, intimidating, frightening and/or unsafe"<sup>17</sup>.

Many domestic violence refuges do not accept women who are actively using substances, on the basis that this jeopardises the safety of other residents. Such restricted access to protection through domestic violence services can result in women remaining in unsafe situations due to a lack of alternative housing options<sup>18</sup>. This may also result in certain groups of women who are in housing need as being conceptualised perhaps as less worthy, and therefore less 'deserving', of support and assistance. Women themselves have been found to internalise these different service criteria – and concepts of 'deserving' and 'undeservingness' - which can further exacerbate feelings of stigma and shame<sup>19</sup>.

There are additional barriers for women who seek to flee situations of domestic violence. Women often leave dangerous or violent situations expeditiously, and may not have the ability to collect documentation. For example, officials often require proof that an individual does not have alternative

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<sup>16</sup> Mayock and Sheridan (2012)

<sup>17</sup> Mayock et al (2015) p 20

<sup>18</sup> Above

<sup>19</sup> Williams (1998) Domestic violence and poverty: The narratives of homeless women. *Frontier: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 19,2, 143-165.

accommodation in which they can reside. It can be difficult for a woman, who might jointly own or rent a home, to prove why she cannot safely return. Migrant women who are undocumented – or those who lose a valid immigration permit upon separating from their partner – can often face further barriers in accessing emergency accommodation or welfare payments, which in turn places them at high risk of prolonged housing exclusion or, in many cases, returning to their violent or abusive partner<sup>20</sup>.

Women can be reluctant to enter homeless services where living spaces are shared with men and many express a desire for women-only emergency accommodation. This is particularly true of women who have experienced gender-based violence<sup>21</sup>. While women-only shelters will not be required by all, particularly those who are experiencing homelessness with a partner, more options in terms of emergency accommodation would improve women's perceptions of service safety and accommodation options. This might encourage more women to seek help, rather than remaining in potentially dangerous situations.

## Women, Homelessness and Stigma

While many individuals experiencing homelessness report negative stereotyping and feelings of stigma and shame, homeless women can experience multiple levels of discrimination and difficulties in this regard. According to traditional gender ideologies and norms, there is an expectation placed on women to remain in the domestic sphere. Indeed, these gender roles are also sanctioned by the Irish constitution. Women who are homeless, therefore, are often viewed as failing in this fundamental role, particularly those who are not accompanied by children or whose children who are in the care of the State or relatives. Women are shamed not only for experiencing homelessness, but for failing to live up to gendered expectations. State policies must acknowledge such intersectional discrimination and stereotyping and commit to tackling it.

Additionally, as is often the case for people who are experiencing homelessness or in any way reliant on social services, there are public and political conceptions about those who are 'deserving' and 'undeserving'. Women struggling with alcohol or drug misuse, women with mental health issues or diagnoses, and women who have engaged with the criminal justice system are particularly stigmatised. These particular groups of women are frequently subjected to perpetual housing exclusion, and for many, cycle between different institutional spaces such as hostels, prison, treatment facilities and acute hospitals<sup>22</sup>.

Focus Ireland was founded by Sister Stanislaus Kennedy subsequent to research she conducted into the experiences of women who were homeless in Dublin, and argued that 'these women are not oddities,

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<sup>20</sup> Mayock, P., Sheridan, S., Parker, S. (2012) Migrant women and homelessness: The role of gender-based violence. *European Journal of Homelessness*, 6,1 59-82.

<sup>21</sup> Mayock et al (2015)

<sup>22</sup> Mayock, P., Sheridan, S. and Parker, S. (2015c) 'It's just like we're going around in circles and going back to the same thing ...': the dynamics of women's unresolved homelessness. *Housing Studies*, 30,6, 877-900.

not eccentrics'.<sup>23</sup> Stereotyping is common in the public perception of homelessness and despite its prevalence, homelessness remains misunderstood. People frequently assume that all those experiencing homelessness are dependent on drugs or alcohol, are happy to rely on state subsidies, and, in a sense, 'choose' to remain homeless<sup>24</sup>. While many of those experiencing homelessness do have mental health and substance misuse problems, poverty is almost always the root cause. Therefore early intervention is essential in preventing or quickly resolving homelessness, and for those with longer histories of homelessness, a supported exit into a stable tenure is needed to end their housing exclusion. The Housing First model has proven very successful in supporting people experiencing long-term homelessness into secure tenancies. However, Housing First typically targets those engaged in entrenched rough-sleeping. Women experiencing homelessness are more likely to be 'hidden' and therefore might not come within the remit of this model.<sup>25</sup> Alternatives must be offered to ensure that women with long homeless histories can access the requisite support.

## Recommendations

The previous National Women's Strategy (2007-2016) was drafted during a time of significant State prosperity. The new strategy must reflect women's experiences of nearly a decade of economic austerity. While Ireland's economic outlook is now more promising, those who bore the brunt of social spending cuts have been left behind. We are experiencing the worst period of family homelessness since administrative records began, and women are being disproportionately affected. The following are Focus Ireland's recommendations for inclusion in the forthcoming Strategy and are structured in line with the questions posited by the Department of Justice and Equality.

### *What do you think are the issues for women and girls that are most important to address over the next four years?*

- The National Women's Strategy must acknowledge the importance of stable and secure housing as a right upon which other rights are built and name homelessness as a key challenge to be addressed in the next four years. The Strategy must consider the rapid increase in women's homelessness as a result of the family homelessness crisis.
- The Strategy must acknowledge and work to address poverty as the root cause of many homeless episodes. For example, OECD data demonstrates that 29% of female workers in Ireland are in low paid jobs, compared to 19% of male workers.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Stanislaus Kennedy "But where can I go" 1985

<sup>24</sup> The Homeless Hub: Myths and Questions about Homelessness <http://homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/homelessness-101/myths-and-questions-about-homelessness>

<sup>25</sup> Homes for Women briefing, "Housing First, Women Second? Gendering Housing First", available at: <http://ywcanada.ca/data/documents/00000382.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> OECD Economic Survey of Ireland, 2015, available at: <https://www.oecd.org/eco/surveys/Ireland-2015-overview.pdf>



- The Strategy must acknowledge the role of domestic violence in homeless pathways and must ensure that women in refuges benefit from commitments made to address the housing crisis.

### *What outcomes should we aim to achieve?*

- A decrease in the number of women experiencing homelessness alone or with a partner.
- A decrease in the number of women experiencing homelessness with their family.
- The holding of a referendum on the inclusion of the right to housing in the Irish constitution.

### *What actions could be taken to advance those objectives?*

- An increase in basic social welfare rates and social housing support rates to reduce the level of poverty and a commitment to increasing them in line with inflation.
- Research into whether changes to the labour market conditionality rule for One Parent Family payments increased the risk of homelessness.
- The reintroduction of priority social housing allocations for homeless and other vulnerable households.
- A referendum to introduce a justiciable right to housing in the Irish constitution.
- Research into the prevalence of lone parents in homeless services, and an examination of whether one parent families are more at risk of longer-term homeless episodes.
- Increased investment in prevention services. Focus Ireland recently ran a successful targeted campaign in Dublin 15 with the assistance of the local Department of Social Protection office.
- The inclusion of women residing in domestic violence refuges in monthly homelessness statistics.
- The provision of women-only emergency accommodation for individuals who want it. While Focus Ireland believes that stable affordable homes are the correct response to homelessness, we accept that a small amount of short-term emergency accommodation will always be required.
- The incorporation of women to a greater extent in homelessness policies and strategies. In particular, the input of women who have experienced homelessness should be sought to inform decision-making.