

**The Challenge to Survive: Trauma, Violence and Identity in  
the Lived Experience of Homeless Women**

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## MANUSCRIPT DETAILS

TITLE: The Challenge to Survive: Trauma, Violence and Identity in the Lived Experience of Homeless Women

## ABSTRACT:

To understand how females who had recently been street homeless made sense of their lived experience, seven women engaged in semi-structured interviews. This study provides an insight into the complexities of the gendered homeless experience, whilst using theories of trauma and victimisation to propose a new approach to understanding the cycle of female homelessness.

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was chosen to explore the phenomenon of female homelessness. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small homogenous sample of women recruited in a city in the south of England.

Two super-ordinate themes emerged: Victimisation and Trauma, and The Group and the Individual. In the male-dominated world of homelessness, women were caught in a cycle of multiple traumatic loss, compounded by pervasive gender-based violence, struggles in identity, and systematic control. Gendered, trauma-informed women's homelessness services are required.

CUST\_RESEARCH\_LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS\_\_(LIMIT\_100\_WORDS) :No data available.

Findings demonstrate the desperate need for an expansion in female-only homelessness services. The lived experience of the participants add to an evidence base which is vital to inform effective trauma-informed gendered service provision.

CUST\_SOCIAL\_IMPLICATIONS\_\_(LIMIT\_100\_WORDS) :No data available.

Homelessness policies draw principally on the prevalent literature on men; UK research with women is lacking. This study gives voice to a hidden population, using the lived experience of women to suggest a new model of female homelessness.

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3 **The Challenge to Survive: Trauma, Violence and Identity in the Lived**  
4 **Experience of Homeless Women**  
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HOMELESS WOMEN: TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, IDENTITY.

## Introduction

~~Between 2018 and 2020 in England and Wales it was estimated that around 2688 to 4677 people were sleeping on the streets. Homelessness in England and Wales was estimated between 2688 and 4677 people sleeping on the streets between 2020 and 2018, respectively, around of whom~~ 14% of whom were women (Ministry of Housing, Communities ~~&~~ Local Government, 2018). It is likely, however, that statistics greatly underestimate the number of homeless women (Holly, 2017a; Pleace, 2017), as women are more likely than men to be in unstable housing or ‘sofa surfing’ rather than sleep on the streets (Maycock *et al.*, 2015; Pleace, 2017).

This phenomenon of ‘hidden homelessness’ within the female population (Johnson *et al.*, 2017) has been addressed by several different theories. It is thought women in the UK may be less visible in the street population as they avoid male-dominated spaces (May *et al.*, 2007), and might find it difficult to ask for help from services designed for men (Hutchinson, Page ~~&~~ Sample 2014). ‘Hidden homelessness’ is also thought to relate to women’s struggles with identity, in that women prefer to avoid the stigma associated with street homelessness (O’Sullivan ~~&~~ Higgins, 2001).

Women sleeping on the streets are vulnerable to ~~victimization~~ victimisation (May *et al.*, 2007). A study completed by a UK housing charity indicated that 27% of women had experienced physical abuse after becoming homeless, and 22% suffered sexual abuse (Evolve Housing + Support, 2018). Studies internationally report disproportionately high levels of physical, sexual and stalking ~~victimization~~ victimisation experienced by homeless women, in comparison to women who are housed (Jasinki *et al.*, 2005), and these findings are relevant to women who are both street homeless and residents in a temporary hostel (Bunker, 2017). This victimisation has been shown to be ‘gender-related’, meaning that women experience a

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3 HOMELESS WOMEN: TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, IDENTITY.  
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5 disproportionate amount of victimisation that is related to their gender (i.e. sexual assault,  
6 genital mutilation, trafficking related to sexual exploitation) (Morash, 2003).  
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10 For many homeless women this victimisation has been shown to begin prior to  
11 becoming homeless (Jasinki *et al.*, 2005), and childhood sexual and physical abuse have been  
12 shown to significantly predict adult ~~victimization~~victimisation in homeless women (Rayburn  
13 *et al.*, 2006). Research indicates that homeless women in the UK (Gordon *et al.*, 2019) and  
14 internationally (Weinrich *et al.*, 2006; Browne &and Bassuck, 1997) describe a  
15 disproportionately high number of traumatic events compared to housed women. It appears  
16 then that abuse victimisation acts as a vulnerability factor for homelessness (Bender, Brown,  
17 Thompson, Ferguson &and Langenderfer, 2014), which in itself is a vulnerability factor for  
18 abuse (May *et al.*, 2007). A cycle of abuse and victimisation begins with early trauma and is  
19 perpetuated by the vulnerabilities associated with homelessness.  
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33 Structural-choice theory of ~~victimization~~victimisation (Miethe &and Meier, 1990)  
34 might offer an explanation as to why homeless women are particularly at risk to violence  
35 ~~victimization~~victimisation (Padgett &and Struening, 1992). The theory outlines how macro-  
36 level processes, (such as being close to high crime areas or exposure to offenders), relate to  
37 the criminal opportunity structure while also identifying micro-level or 'choice' processes  
38 which encourage perpetrators' selection of certain victims (Miethe &and Meier, 1990).  
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47 Wenzel *et al.* (2000) theorized that homeless women might be 'attractive' targets due to  
48 vulnerabilities such as substance misuse and health issues, which can lead to compromised  
49 vigilance.  
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54 Goodman *et al.* (1991) suggested that the experience of homelessness itself is  
55 sufficient to lead to psychological symptoms of trauma, and that this high prevalence of  
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5 trauma among homeless women may be due to three principle factors: the loss of the home,  
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7 adverse living conditions in homeless shelters, and histories of abuse.  
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10 When trying to understand how this trauma might be experienced by homeless  
11 women, it might be useful to consider Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) (Hobfoll,  
12 1989) ~~is~~ a framework used to explain trauma in female victims of domestic abuse (Clair,  
13 2005), female offenders (Daphna Ram et al., 2017) and women from low socio-economic  
14 backgrounds (Hobfoll, *et al.*, 2003). COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) states that people are  
15 instinctively motivated to protect their most valuable social and personal resources, with a  
16 loss of these resources leading to traumatic stress, adverse clinical outcomes and depleted  
17 coping skills (Hall *et al.*, 2006). Ruch and Leon (1986) stated that rape (an experience  
18 for many homeless women) is a definitive example of a traumatic stressor, whereby an  
19 individual's personal wellbeing is severely threatened and control of the body is taken away,  
20 leading to the loss of trust and wider sense of control.  
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35 It appears that in addition to victimisation and trauma, homeless women may also  
36 struggle with issues around identity. Research conducted in the north of England indicated  
37 that homelessness threatened women's personal identity (Casey *et al.*, 2007), which might be  
38 explained by McCarthy (2015) and Gonyea (2017) drawing on Goffman's (1959)  
39 'dramaturgical' theory. Using theatrical imagery, Goffman (1959) states that there are two  
40 felt identities, a 'front stage' self that is in keeping with the social nature of the setting, and a  
41 'back stage' or personal self. Incongruence between the 'front-stage' and 'back-stage' selves  
42 leads to a renegotiation of identity. It is suggested that homeless women engage in 'identity  
43 work' due to an identity incongruence (Casey *et al.*, 2008) brought on by the depiction of  
44 homelessness as a male experience (Lenon, 2000).  
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## HOMELESS WOMEN: TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, IDENTITY.

Reports commissioned by UK charities have stressed the need for women-only, trauma-informed homelessness services (Holly, 2017b). ~~This comes~~This would come under the bracket of a ‘gendered’ approach service provision, meaning that services recognise and respond to the social context of the women they support (in particular around social inequalities) (Holly, 2017a), as well as considering that mental health and other vulnerabilities are gendered in nature – meaning they require different approaches for effective treatment (Women’s Health Council, 2004). ~~For example, they recognize the~~ Women experience both homelessness (Bretherton, 2017) and trauma differently from men (Olf, 2017) and it is suggested that the trauma experienced by women might be escalated by the relatively delayed stage, compared to men, at which they have been found to begin service engagement (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2014).

There has been a noted lack of research into female homelessness in the UK (Reeve, 2018) and it is suggested that homelessness policies in England and Wales are informed by research predominantly focusing on the experiences of homeless men (Holly, 2017). In the context of this gender imbalance within homelessness research and policy-development, qualitative studies can provide an ‘insider’s perspective’ (Noon, 2018) on the female lived experience of homelessness.

This study aims to gain an insight into that lived female experience which past research has shown to be complex and multi-faceted. This study will explore the phenomenon using a broad focus, allowing an integrated understanding of the subjective experience of homelessness based on how the women themselves make sense of their world. These learnings will be used to develop a new approach to understanding the experience of female homelessness.

### Method

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### *Design*

This exploratory, qualitative study employed a semi-structured, one-to-one interview design to investigate the lived experiences of homelessness.

### *Sampling and Participants*

Recruitment took place in May and June 2019, from three homelessness projects in a provincial city in the South East of England: a 52-bed mixed-sex homeless shelter, a women's homelessness project (run by the same organization), and a small homelessness day center. The location is not specified in order to protect the identities of the women. Inclusion criteria were a period of street homelessness in the past two years and a basic level of spoken English.

A purposive homogenous sample is recommended in the literature for IPA studies  
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) literature recommends a purposive  
homogeneous sample (Smith, 2009). In order to facilitate the necessary detailed and time-consuming analysis six to eight participants are recommended (Pietkiewicz, &and Smith, 2012; Turpin et al., 1997).

In consultation with caseworkers, all female residents of the homeless shelter (n=15) and the women's project (n=5) were considered for participation in the study. From the shelter, two women were excluded due to lack of spoken English, two were deemed to not have capacity to consent, two declined to participate and three were given three different appointments that they did not attend. In total, five women participated (33% response rate). From residents of the women's project, one did not meet the street-homeless criterion, one declined, two were offered three appointments but did not attend and one woman participated (20% response rate).



## HOMELESS WOMEN: TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, IDENTITY.

During five separate visits to the day center the eligibility of all females present (n=8) were considered in consultation with caseworkers. Four women did not meet the street homelessness criterion, three women agreed but were not seen at the center again, and one participated (13% response rate).

All seven participants were white British between the ages of 20 and 54 years (mean age 39). Pseudonyms and age ranges have been used to protect identities; see Table 1 for demographic characteristics.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

### ***Procedure***

Project workers displayed study posters in communal areas and acted as gatekeepers for the recruitment of participants and arrangement of interview times.

At interview, participants were provided with an information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. The interviews lasted between 27 and 44 minutes and were audio-recorded. Following the interview participants were provided with a debrief form outlining where specialized support could be reached.

### ***Materials***

In accordance with recommendations by Smith *et al.*, (2009) a semi-structured interview schedule was utilized with open-ended questions focusing on the participant's housing patterns and their experience of life on the streets. This style of interview is recommended so that the questions remain as a guide, allowing flexibility for the interviewer to facilitate the participant's exploration of their lived experience – keeping them as the expert in the narrative (Smith et al., 2009; Eatough and Smith, 2017). The interview schedule was developed through the existing literature on homelessness and drawing on gender- and trauma-informed approaches to working with women (Young &and Hovarth, 2018).

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Questions were written in line with recommendations by Smith et al. (2009), ensuring that areas of interest were gently encouraged rather than explicitly stated (again trying to “enter the life world” through how the person themselves understands it – rather than investigating it) (Eatough and Smith, 2017). An example question was ‘what led you to become homeless?’, and prompts such as ‘how did that make you feel?’ were used to pursue subjects of interest, address ambiguities in the participant’s perspective or encourage engagement with the question.

### *Analytic approach*

IPA was selected as the most appropriate analytical method for this study due to its epistemological approach, in which the understanding of an ideographic, subjective experience is developed through the interpretation of how that experience has been given meaning by the participant (the double hermeneutic). The ontological focus on accessing a person’s unique cognitive life-world (Biggerstaff &and Thompson, 2008) makes IPA a suitable method to advance current understanding around the complex and multidimensional phenomenon of female homelessness (Phipps *et al.*, 2019).

In this study, data analyses were conducted in line with recommendations from Smith (2009). IPA literature states that analysis is focused on the particulars, first eliciting and analysing an in depth account of each case and then beginning to looking at convergence and themes (Eatough and Smith, 2017).–As a first analytical step, the researcher actively engaged with the data by reading and re-reading the original transcripts. Points of interest and basic interpretations (initial coding) were noted in a right hand margin. Using the initial codings, emergent themes were then identified for each individual transcript and noted in a left hand margin. The emergent themes were then ordered into a chronological list used to compile clusters of related themes, and super-ordinate themes. Following analysis of each individual

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5 transcript, patterns between cases were then identified by comparing the emergent and super-  
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7 ordinate themes. As a final step following the integration of these themes, a table of super-  
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9 ordinate themes was compiled.  
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12 Following coding of the final interview it was felt that data saturation had been  
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14 reached, as no further themes emerged. Two of the interview transcripts (29%) were  
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16 independently coded by the second author, with discussions taking place to explore and  
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18 resolve differences in interpretation. The emergent themes were then presented to the three  
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20 women (43%) who could still be contacted in order to incorporate their views into the  
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22 interpretation of the data.  
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### 25 26 *Ethics and reflective log* 27

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29 Prior to data collection, ethical approval was granted by XXXX (blinded for review),  
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31 Ethics Committee, the management of the organization that runs the homeless shelter and  
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33 women's project, and the management of the day center.  
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36 As a female research team, gender might have provided enhanced sensitivity to  
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38 female-specific issues during interviews and analysis. Furthermore, the first author's  
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40 profession as a local homelessness worker (not in the recruitment sites) potentially allowed  
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42 for deeper understanding when contextualizing the participants' transcripts.  
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### 44 45 **Results** 46

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48 Two key themes emerged through IPA (see Table 2).  
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51 TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

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53 These themes illustrate the traumatic and gender-related experience of female  
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55 homelessness, and how challenges to identity from the groups and systems encountered shape  
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57 the female response. It is evident that there are interrelationships between these themes, and  
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HOMELESS WOMEN: TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, IDENTITY.

that a complex picture of traumatic ~~victimization~~victimisation alongside negotiation of differing group dynamics makes up the broader experience of female homelessness.

### *VictimizationVictimisation and Trauma*

This super-ordinate theme illustrates the strong sense of trauma and gendered ~~victimization~~victimisation that ran throughout the women's accounts. The first two sub-themes present the recurrent references to the female experience of ~~victimization~~victimisation, and how past trauma remains present in the day-to-day lives of participants. The final sub-theme exemplifies how homeless women respond to the threat of ~~victimization~~victimisation.

#### *The female experience of vulnerability*

Participants identified specific risks faced by homeless women, providing numerous accounts of stalking, gender-based violence and sexual assault. The women's accounts indicated that they felt surrounded by people who wanted to actively abuse or take advantage of them. This ranged from dealers exploiting their drug habits, to sexual and violence victimisation from males among both the homeless community and the public:

Cos some of them boys, if they like the look of you, they'll follow you, they won't leave you alone, that's why you have to learn to fight them [...] but then again you'll never beat a man will ya, never. I had one stalking me for two and half years, he smashed our tents down, beat us up [...] he picked me up by me throat, and I went down the police station and told them. Police not bothered though, They're not bothered, at all ... like anybody could come in them tents, you can't lock them. I even got raped when I was in the tent. (Tess)

Tess makes reference here to how the vulnerabilities of gender and homelessness require the responsive formation of a fighting identity. She presents a sense of powerlessness

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in both the police response to her homeless identity and the futility of trying to fight against a man who is stronger than her. Her reference to the inability to “lock out” predatory men evokes the high risk homeless women perceive without physical walls to protect them:

There’s a lot of assumption that if you’re on the street or a drug user that you’ll do things for drugs and money. Erm yeah. They just automatically assume [...] literally two weeks ago there was a taxi parked up the top [...] he was like “jump in” I was like “no thanks I’ve got no money” he said “no, no you don’t need money come here.  
(Jane)

Jane explains how the stigmatization of homeless women increases the risk of victimisation from the public. Her repeated use of ‘assumption/assume’ indicates a felt dissonance between her desired personal identity and the social identity given to her by the public. She stated next that this happens “everywhere, anywhere”, suggesting she has accepted this victimisation as part of daily life as a homeless female, and that the incongruence with her personal identity is something that is felt, but that cannot be changed.

Despite numerous accounts of gender-related victimisation, the women also expressed some more positive experiences from interactions with the male population. There was a strong sense that although some men were perceived as dangerous and abusive, other men within the homeless community provided the women with protection:

There’s a kind of, quite a small, large, kind of bubble, of Polish folk, people, that are living on the streets and they completely took me under their wing, in a kind of fatherly manner. It wasn’t sexual, it wasn’t, they didn’t want anything from me. It was like a protection thing. (Ellie)

In describing the men as father figures, and strongly emphasizing the non-sexual, non-exploitative nature of the relationship, Ellie conveyed the sense of a family dynamic she felt

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within the group. This is consolidated in her use of the word “folk”, often used to refer to a mother or father (HarperCollins, 1994)

Carol also used the phrase “took me under their wing” to refer to a male rough sleeper, denoting male protection and evoking a powerful image of safety provided by something bigger than the self and with access to the protection of the wider group. In this context, Carol also said that the male group “showed me the ropes”, a term used to refer to starting a new role and which here portrays a sense of joining a collective force.

*Living with trauma*

This sub-theme identifies how previously experienced trauma continues to resonate strongly in the women’s current lived experience:

When I was 13. My dad, my stepdad kicked me out, over something stupid, over his dog. ‘Cos my mum asked me to feed the dogs and I fed the dogs, and my step dad said ‘oh you fed the dogs’ wrong dah dah dah, ‘pack your stuff and get out of my house’, so I packed my stuff and left, and never turned back. (Hannah)

By using “dah dah dah” Hannah seems to distance herself from the experience, dismissing the details of the event. This device separates herself from the vulnerability of her younger self, allowing her to reflect on the trauma without compromising her current feelings of self-worth. She stated that she “never turned back”, indicating that it is important for her to have closed that part of her life. However, there remained resonance of this experience in her later accounts: “I shouldn’t have been kicked out when I was 13, my mum should have done something about it but she didn’t” (Hannah). Hannah’s repeated reference to the event indicates the significance it still has in her current lived experience.

In the context of multiple traumas, participants made reference to domestic abuse:

HOMELESS WOMEN: TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, IDENTITY.

Me and me husband split up, years ago, 'cos he's violent and everything, not a good man, and he made me kids get took in care and everything. So there I were in a battered wife house in [a town in the North of England], and then I find out I was having another little baby, but she died. I had her but she died when she was 18 month. (Tess)

In using the phrasing "and everything" Tess, like Hannah, used reductive phrasing to summarize an experience of complex trauma. This minimizing effect is also seen in the softening of Tess' language, "not a good man" and "little baby", trying to take the starkness out of the traumatic reality. Related to this, her frequent references elsewhere to the younger females in the shelter as "little girls" might indicate how the trauma of the loss of her daughter remains active in her perceptions. Her lack of willingness to reflect in detail is later confirmed in her annoyance at staff making her speak about her trauma: "they want you to go on about all your past, what you forgot about" (Tess) indicating an awareness of repressed trauma.

Creation of a survival persona

The experience of homelessness revealed pre-homeless identities to be inadequate for survival, and that the creation of a 'survival persona' was required to cope with the new sense of threat:

I was totally different before all this, you wouldn't believe it. Sounds stupid but I thought it were going to be a laugh, had no idea what was about to swallow me. You learn to fight quick though, you got to 'cos they all know you're the new girl. You learn to fight and they get the message. (Rachel)

Rachel here makes reference to her younger self, emphasizing with "swallow me" her helplessness in saving her previous identity against the all-consuming nature of

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5 homelessness. She then explains with “you got to” a sense of necessity in creating a fighting  
6 persona to cope with the vulnerability of being a “new girl”. She describes the importance of  
7 communicating to the threatening “they” that the “new girl” has learnt to fight. Similarly,  
8 Tess referred to the necessity to change persona when describing sexual harassment by male  
9 rough sleepers, stating that the initial tactic of not saying “too much” does not work and as a  
10 female you “have to end up fighting them all ... even the boys, you have to fight them, to get  
11 them to keep away from you” (Tess).

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21 Hannah in particular seemed to feel pride in describing her understanding of street  
22 “rules” and her ability to “sort” violent situations:

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26 I was on the streets aged 13, so I grew up, throughout my teens, growing up, learning  
27 the ins and outs of the streets ... so if you see a fight leave it alone but if it’s  
28 something to do with you there’s one rule and one rule only...if you’re fighting  
29 someone out on the street, number one there’s no rules on the street, number two, it is  
30 what it is. You sort it out. (Hannah)

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40 Hannah expresses a sense of achievement in her capacity to negotiate the world she  
41 found herself in, which relates to her presentation of herself throughout the interview as a  
42 person who has ‘sorted herself’ through her own agency. This might signify that the early  
43 development of her survival persona has now become a key part of her primary identity.

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48 *The female experience of vulnerability*

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51 Participants identified specific risks faced by homeless women, providing numerous  
52 accounts of stalking, gender-based violence and sexual assault. There was a strong sense that  
53 although some men were perceived as dangerous and abusive, other men within the homeless  
54 community provided the women with protection:



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There's a kind of, quite a small, large, kind of bubble, of Polish folk, people, that are living on the streets and they completely took me under their wing, in a kind of fatherly manner. It wasn't sexual, it wasn't, they didn't want anything from me. It was like a protection thing. (Ellie)

In describing the men as father figures, and strongly emphasizing the non-sexual, non-exploitative nature of the relationship, Ellie conveyed the sense of a family dynamic she felt within the group. This is consolidated in her use of the word "*folk*", often used to refer to family.

Carol also used the phrase "took me under their wing" to refer to a male rough sleeper, denoting male protection and evoking a powerful image of safety provided by something bigger than the self and with access to the protection of the wider group. In this context, Carol also said that the male group "showed me the ropes", a term used to refer to starting a new role and which here portrays a sense of joining a collective force.

Beyond this male protection, it appears that the women were also surrounded by people who would like to actively abuse or take advantage of them. This ranged from dealers exploiting their drug habits, to sexual and violence victimization from males among both the homeless community and the public:

Cos some of them boys, if they like the look of you, they'll follow you, they won't leave you alone, that's why you have to learn to fight them [...] but then again you'll never beat a man will ya, never. I had one stalking me for two and half years, he smashed our tents down, beat us up [...] he picked me up by me throat, and I went down the police station and told them. Police not bothered though, They're not

## HOMELESS WOMEN: TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, IDENTITY.

~~bothered, at all ... like anybody could come in them tents, you can't lock them. I even got raped when I was in the tent. (Tess)~~

~~Tess makes reference here to how the vulnerabilities of gender and homelessness require the responsive formation of a fighting identity. She presents a sense of powerlessness in both the police response to her homeless identity and the futility of trying to fight against a man who is stronger than her. Her reference to the inability to "lock out" predatory men evokes the high risk homeless women perceive without physical walls to protect them:~~

~~There's a lot of assumption that if you're on the street or a drug user that you'll do things for drugs and money. Erm yeah. They just automatically assume [...] literally two weeks ago there was a taxi parked up the top [...] he was like "jump in" I was like "no thanks I've got no money" he said "no, no you don't need money come here. (Jane)~~

~~Jane explains how the stigmatization of homeless women increases the risk of victimization from the public. Her repeated use of 'assumption/assume' indicates a felt dissonance between her desired personal identity and the social identity given to her by the public. She stated next that this happens "everywhere, anywhere", suggesting she has accepted this victimization as part of daily life as a homeless female, and that the incongruence with her personal identity is something that is felt, but that cannot be changed.~~

*Living with trauma*

~~This sub-theme identifies how previously experienced trauma continues to resonate strongly in the women's current lived experience:~~

~~When I was 13. My dad, my stepdad kicked me out, over something stupid, over his dog. 'Cos my mum asked me to feed the dogs and I fed the dogs, and my step dad~~

## HOMELESS WOMEN: TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, IDENTITY.

said ‘oh you fed the dogs’ wrong dah dah dah, ‘pack your stuff and get out of my house’, so I packed my stuff and left, and never turned back. (Hannah)

Hannah makes reference to her “*dad*” before rephrasing that as “*stepdad*”. She appears to revisit how, although he may have previously held an identity as father, in his behavior he failed in that role. A similar distancing is also evident when she states “*dah dah dah*”, dismissing the details of the event. Both devices separate herself from the vulnerability of her younger self, allowing her to reflect on the trauma without compromising her current feelings of self-worth. She stated that she “*never turned back*”, indicating that it is important for her to have closed that part of her life. However, there remained resonance of this experience in her later accounts: “*I shouldn’t have been kicked out when I was 13, my mum should have done something about it but she didn’t*” (Hannah). Hannah’s repeated reference to the event indicates the significance it still has in her current lived experience.

In the context of multiple traumas, participants made reference to domestic abuse:

Me and me husband split up, years ago, ‘cos he’s violent and everything, not a good man, and he made me kids get took in care and everything. So there I were in a battered wife house in [a town in the North of England], and then I find out I was having another little baby, but she died. I had her but she died when she was 18 month. (Tess)

In using the phrasing “*and everything*” Tess, like Hannah, used reductive phrasing to summarize an experience of complex trauma. This minimizing effect is also seen in the softening of Tess’ language, “*not a good man*” and “*little baby*”, trying to take the starkness out of the traumatic reality. Related to this, her frequent references elsewhere to the younger females in the shelter as “*little girls*” might indicate how the trauma of the loss of her daughter remains active in her perceptions. Her lack of willingness to reflect in detail is later

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confirmed in her annoyance at staff making her speak about her trauma: “*they want you to go on about all your past, what you forgot about*” (Tess) indicating an awareness of repressed trauma.

*Creation of a survival persona*

The experience of homelessness revealed pre-homeless identities to be inadequate for survival, and that the creation of a ‘survival persona’ was required to cope with the new sense of threat:

I was totally different before all this, you wouldn’t believe it. Sounds stupid but I thought it were going to be a laugh, had no idea what was about to swallow me. You learn to fight quick though, you got to ‘cos they all know you’re the new girl. You learn to fight and they get the message. (Rachel)

Rachel here makes reference to her younger self, emphasizing with “*swallow me*” her helplessness in saving her previous identity against the all-consuming nature of homelessness. She then explains with “*you got to*” a sense of necessity in creating a fighting persona to cope with the vulnerability of being a “*new girl*”. She describes the importance of communicating to the threatening “*they*” that the “*new girl*” has learnt to fight. Similarly, Tess referred to the necessity to change persona when describing sexual harassment by male rough sleepers, stating that the initial tactic of not saying “*too much*” does not work and as a female you “*have to end up fighting them all ... even the boys, you have to fight them, to get them to keep away from you*” (Tess).

Hannah in particular seemed to feel pride in describing her understanding of street “*rules*” and her ability to “*sort*” violent situations:

I was on the streets aged 13, so I grew up, throughout my teens, growing up, learning the ins and outs of the streets ... so if you see a fight leave it alone but if it’s

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~~something to do with you there's one rule and one rule only...if you're fighting someone out on the street, number one there's no rules on the street, number two, it is what it is. You sort it out. (Hannah)~~

~~Hannah expresses a sense of achievement in her capacity to negotiate the world she found herself in, which relates to her presentation of herself throughout the interview as a person who has 'sorted herself' through her own agency. This might signify that the early development of her survival persona has now become a key part of her primary identity.~~

***The group and the individual***

From the beginning of the homeless journey women have a heightened sense of their individual identity within the homeless 'group', a feeling that continues as they become part of the female community, and which extends to women's interactions with services.

*Group threat to identity*

A recurrent theme in the women's accounts is how the perceived 'group' of rough sleepers posed a threat to their existing individual identities. In terms of the early stages of homelessness, everyone apart from Ellie stated that they deliberately stayed away from homeless services, sofa surfing or staying in hidden rough sleeping locations:

I did a year then homeless, sleeping in doorways, sleeping in tents, and sofas, and backs of cars and stuff, 'cos I was too scared to come here, because I, in my head I had visions of dorms and old men with beards, and smelling of pee and drinkers and all that stuff. Um, but yeah so it took me a year to actually accept that I needed to come here. (Jessica)

Jessica described strong sensory ideas of how this future had seemed and her difficulty in psychologically placing herself within this visceral vision of homelessness. Her

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account of the men highlights how she felt her identity was incongruous with the shelter community, both due to her gender and her perceived lack of fit with a homeless stereotype.

It appears that once women have aligned themselves within the homeless community, they then face an additional threat to their identity from perceived public disapproval. All of the women described feelings of shame brought about by their new social identity:

It's despicable, it's disgraceful, the people who've got homes, who treat us people like a piece of dirt or something like that and it's not right ... somebody out there knows that us people are human beings, not a piece of shit on the floor, we're not that, we're human beings, we have feelings. (Hannah)

Hannah makes frequent reference to feeling dehumanized and like "*dirt*", but turns the perception of the public's disgust around in describing her own disgust at their treatment of her; doing so might help her to cope with stigma. In her words "treat us people" Hannah seems to proudly locate herself in the homeless 'group', but later distances herself from this position: "*I mean, help the homeless because they need help more than we do*" (Hannah).

Her description of the homeless as "*they*" may reflect a conflict caused by the transition of her identity from one of the homeless group, to the group "*who've got homes*".

*The community of women*

All of the participants' accounts conveyed a strong sense of the community of women within the homeless group, varying in perception according to whether participants were in a shelter, the women's project or on the street.

Tess described herself as the "*granny*" of the shelter, and later described herself and a friend as "*mothers*"

There's a lot of us girls in here, well there's me and [name], we've been here the longest, so if we like, the little girls getting bullied, so long as they're alright girls,

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like there's one who's just come in, and she's nothing but trouble, she causes pure trouble, so we're not bothered about her, but people like [name], she gets drunk all the time, try and keep like, a bit of an eye on her. (Tess)

Through her reference to the "*little girls*", Tess identifies herself as a senior member of the female shelter community, apparently feeling a sense of hierarchical power in deciding which women will be issued with her protection. It might be that this sense of bestowing exclusive protection makes her feel less vulnerable in her own identity, and helps alleviate some of the feelings of powerlessness she has described when among men and with the authorities. In "*getting bullied*" she displays an awareness of exploitation occurring in the shelter, yet makes a point of her selective lack of empathy in "*we're not bothered*", illustrating the power she feels she has within the female group.

The community structure of the shelter is echoed in the smaller context of the women's house, where Ellie described a fellow resident:

She was absolutely brilliant and she was kind of the mother hen of the house. But the fact that we, we do support each other, and I know that I can knock on anyone's door, and two, well three of the girls leave their doors open when they're in. (Ellie)

Ellie's account displays no apparent tension between the women and the senior figure of the "mother hen", and indicates how the women's pro-social use of the physical space also leads to a feeling of a safe psychological space.

In contrast to the communities described in supported housing, Carol's experience of street life suggests a lack of unity in the female street community:

There were a lot of men on the street, and not so many women I suppose, so. And I don't think the women stick together either, 'cos you've got women in addiction and

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things so it's not like oh sisters all together, it's not like that. It really isn't. So erm, yeah I found it scary. (Carol)

Carol suggests that had there been a supportive female community, her feelings of fear may have been reduced. She used irony to illustrate how far from family the group of women felt to her. She attributed this to females being 'in' addiction, hinting at the subsuming nature of her own addiction.

*The experience of authority systems*

This sub-theme represents how the women experienced systems of authority as having let them down and, in some cases, exacerbating feelings of a lack of safety: So it's like you've gone from normal life into hell or, that's what it feels like, and you're stuck, you can't get out. But like us lot, we've done more than a life sentence on the streets, just because the council don't give us somewhere to live and that's wrong, and at least in the prison you get life, you know you've got a release date when you're getting out. In here, you've got no release date, so you never know when you're getting out. (Tess)

Tess describes how when she entered the homelessness system she descended into "hell", a world in which she is "stuck" and cannot escape. Speaking of the "life sentence" she has served on the street, she indicates a feeling of being under total control of the institution and the cycle of homelessness, a powerlessness potentially also referred to in her previous descriptions of her abusive relationship and loss of her children. The statement "that's wrong" shows how she felt let down by the system. Her comparison to prison portrays the council as jailers rather than enablers in a situation where she is unable to determine her own trajectory.



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In talking about how grateful she was for male protection on the street, Carol spoke of a fear of the system:

Otherwise I don't know what I would have done, because it's people say 'oh go down to the night shelter' but it's quite a scary place. If you don't know the people and you haven't done it before, and erm, it's scary. Definitely scary. (Carol)

When she says "*people*" say "*oh go down to the night shelter*", Carol may well be speaking about recommendations by street services and the council to use the night shelter as a first step out of homelessness. In "*oh*" she draws attention to the ease of such a process and that homeless clients should have faith in the system. She contrasts this with the reality of the experience by repeating the word "*scary*", indicating that in practice the system triggers her feelings of vulnerability.

Jessica, having decided to enter the hostel system after a year spent sofa surfing and on the streets, describes her subsequent substance relapse:

It messes with your head, man, you're suddenly around all these men that look like they're going to, I dunno. They just shove you in a room. It feels like prison. You don't know who people are [...] like I walked in and got offered drugs, straight away, like. I was clean. It was everywhere in there. How you meant to do that? How you meant to make that work? (Jessica)

By stating that "*it messes with your head*" Jessica indicates that she had attained some stability in her mental state before entering the hostel, and that her experience there created a threat to this comparatively stable identity. Her description "*they just shove you*" illustrates the violence of this transition, and the lack of support. The depersonalizing sense of "*shoved*" is echoed in her mention of the prison, the idea of one's identity being stripped away when placed in institutionalized physical surroundings. Jessica had previously described a history

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of exploitation, drug dealers using the flat she shared with her son. This trauma appears to be revisited in her description of how drugs were around her “*everywhere*”. Her repeated question “*how are you meant to do that?*” signifies how drug-related activity has again removed her feelings of personal agency and her sense of inability to do what she feels she is ‘meant to’ by the system, precisely as a result of the situation she is placed in by the system itself.

### Discussion

This study used the subjective reflections of seven women to explore the lived experience of homelessness by how they themselves made sense of their world. The lived experience of homelessness for seven women, using their subjective reflections to understand how they themselves made sense of their world, was explored. An analysis of the women’s accounts revealed the multiple, interrelated mechanisms that make up the broader experience of female homelessness. This process uncovered a picture of pervasive gendered victimisation and complex trauma strongly present in the daily lives of women. Struggles with identity and feelings of vulnerability led the women to taking steps to protect themselves. They continued however, to experience trauma as a result of their interactions with the ‘homeless group’, the general public and the systems of authority to which they were asked to adhere. Two superordinate themes emerged from the data:

‘~~Victimization~~ Victimisation and trauma’ and ‘The group and the individual’.

The strong presence of gender-related ~~related~~ victimisation in the women’s accounts reflected the high prevalence rates shown in past literature in previous studies (Jasinski et al., 2005). The women demonstrated a keen awareness of how their status as homeless females increased their vulnerability to predatory men, reflecting the findings of May et al. (2007) exploring ‘hidden homelessness’ among British women. This new analysis indicates that the

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5 women are themselves aware of how the macro-level structural processes (such as staying in  
6 a tent) or micro-level choice processes (such as being assumed to be an addict), as outlined in  
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8 Structural Choice Theory (Miethe [&and](#) Meier, 1990), put them at an increased risk of  
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12 gender-[relateded](#) victimiszaation.  
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15 This heightened awareness appears to have led to the women using male protection to  
16 cope on the streets. Research has shown that homeless women in the UK enter into dangerous  
17 relationships to gain that protection (Clement [&and](#) Green, 2018; Bunker, 2017), yet non-  
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19 exploitative male group protection has not been a focus of recent studies. It appears that these  
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21 male groups may also be aware of the macro and micro processes putting the women at risk.  
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25 Another coping behavior among the women was the creation of a ‘survival persona’.  
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27 This strategy has been under-researched in homeless females, however a study by Szifris  
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29 (2018) demonstrated that male prisoners created a ‘hyper-masculine’ fighting identity in  
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31 order to survive the hostile prison experience. Szifris (2018) draws on Goffman’s (1959)  
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33 dramaturgical perspective suggesting that the prison environment necessitated the creation of  
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35 a new survival ‘front stage’ self. Applying this perspective to the current study it appears that  
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37 the women, like the incarcerated men, sense the high-risk nature of their social setting – both  
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39 within hostels and on the street - and adjust their ‘front stage’ self accordingly. [This is an  
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[important consideration for practitioners working with homeless women.](#)

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57 In accordance with previous studies of homeless women (Browne [&and](#) Bassuck<sup>2</sup>s,  
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59 1997) the participants were struggling with ongoing and historic complex trauma. Theories of  
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multiple trauma describe a dose-response effect, whereby each new trauma worsens the  
outcome (Kubiak, 2005). The idea of cumulative trauma is addressed in the Conservation of  
Resources Theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 1989), which can provide a framework to understand the  
women’s experience of trauma. It might be that early losses were compounded by further

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rapid loss of resources brought on by homelessness, and that some women have overburdened their 'resource loss threshold' and have entered into a 'loss cycle' which they do not have the means to exit. [Again, there are important considerations here for practitioners, and specifically the need for trauma-informed approaches and environments.](#)

The findings relating to the second super-ordinate theme 'the group and the individual' support the idea that 'hidden homelessness' occurs because women struggle to align their identity with the stigmatized male-dominated homeless group (McCarthy, 2015). In view of Goffman's (1959) theory of identity, the women's actions might be based on a strong feeling of dissonance between their felt personal identity and the social construction of the homeless 'dirty bearded male' (Williams, 2001). This dissonance is also evident in the women's accounts of their interaction with the public, a finding documented in studies exploring perceived stigmatization in UK homeless women (Casey *et al.*, 2007, 2008) [and which requires further research to explore.](#) -Goffman (1959) stated that identity is formed through social interaction, and it is possible that the women's degrading interactions with the public compound difficulties they already have with holding on to their personal identities. [Therefore, identity and how women make sense of themselves in the context of homelessness will be relevant for practitioners to hold in mind, alongside a trauma-informed approach.](#)

In terms of the women's social reaction within homeless accommodation, the notion of hierarchy has been little explored. Goffman's (1959) 'dramaturgical self' could be used to theorize that creation of a 'mother hen' role allows women to combat individual feelings of low self-worth created by stigmatization from the general public and a sense of inferiority to the men. [Therefore, there are helpful dynamics among groups of homeless women that can be nurtured and supported by practitioners.](#)

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The women's strong sense of themselves against a group extended to their feelings about the hostel and wider homelessness systems. Their strong sense of depersonalization, trauma and powerlessness in the high-risk, violent, and male-dominated hostel environment was exemplified in their frequent comparisons to a prison, and reminiscent of Goffman's (1961) explored the damaging power dynamics of a 'total institution', a definition now thought to encompass homeless shelters due to increased bureaucratization (Bogard, 1998). Goffman (1961) outlined that in 'total institutions' rules aim to reinforce hierarchy whilst increasing systematic control (Deward, 2010). Admittance into a hostel requires complete submission to its bureaucracy (Mulder, 2004;) and it has been suggested that procedures in the services will often re-trigger symptoms of trauma (Harris &and Falot, 2001). Staff power dynamics and institutional control can recapitulate past experiences of abuse (Harris &and Falot, 2001), and the women's experience of depersonalization in entering the shelter is reminiscent of Goffman's (1961) idea of self-mortification - the stripping away of the individual identity by institutional policies. These ideas bring together the concepts of trauma and identity for the women in this study and emphasise the importance of dual consideration for practitioners and services. —was evident in the depersonalization the women described feeling on entering the shelter.

In considering the female experience of homelessness, three theories make useful contributions. Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) provides a coherent account of the broader experience of female homelessness, a process of loss which starts long before the actual loss of a home but is then accelerated by the multiple traumas and triggers of homelessness. Structural Theory of Crime (Miethe &and Meier, 1990) explains how the women's loss of resources is exacerbated by their awareness of their vulnerability, leading to their avoidance of services and prolonged periods of homelessness. Goffman's (1959) model

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of the ‘dramaturgical self’ also relates to women’s awareness of their vulnerability in the way it leads to their creation of a ‘survival persona’.

In light of the multiple complex traumas experienced by homeless women, researchers have emphasized the need for an increase in gendered, trauma-informed care (TIC) within homelessness services (Elliott et al., 2015; Young & Hovarth, 2018). TIC focuses on empowering clients in an environment which will not re-traumatize them, helping victims to understand and manage their symptoms within a collaborative power relationship with staff (Harris & Fallot, 2001). An understanding of the experience of gender-based violence, and of women’s experiences in male-dominated spaces is integral for service delivery (Holly, 2017a). TIC stresses that emotional safety can only be achieved with physical safety: as also found in this study, male-dominated spaces are threatening for victims of violence (Holly, 2017a).

The findings from this study help to substantiate the case for an increase in women-only, trauma-informed homelessness services. The study suggests that women struggle to break a ‘resource loss cycle’ (Hobfoll, 1989) due to the re-traumatizing presence of men in the shelter, and triggers from systemic control. The strengths-based approach underpinnings of TIC could help women rebuild lost resources within a safe environment, aided by staff relationships promoting growth in self-efficacy and trust. A women-only environment may also remove a number of the macro- and micro-level risks (Miethe & Meier, 1990) associated with reluctance to access services or feelings of vulnerability within hostels. The same approach model could remove the need for the creation of the fighting ‘survival identity’, instead promoting a more unified sense of self in order to safely process historic trauma. It is worth noting that the theories that this approach draws on are not based on recent

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5 research, and it would be valuable for more up to date theories to be developed and  
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7 incorporated into current practice.  
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10 In the COVID era there is a significant global increase in violence against women,  
11 with UN Women describing this as a ‘shadow pandemic’ (UN Women, 2020). With domestic  
12 violence acting as a pathway into homelessness (Pleace, 2008) it may be that this already  
13 vulnerable population are at an even higher risk of trauma and victimisation than before  
14 COVID-19. For this reason, trauma-informed approaches could be increasingly important in  
15 effectively supporting the needs of homeless women.  
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24 In terms of implications for longer-term future service provision, this paper clearly  
25 highlights the need for an increase in gendered, trauma-informed service provision. It is also  
26 worth thinking however about how current service provision can be improved to meet the  
27 needs of these women. An initial first step might for homelessness organisations to take  
28 meaningful steps towards becoming trauma informed. This requires a paradigm shift within  
29 an organisation, and a commitment to embed understandings regarding violence and abuse  
30 throughout all layers of service delivery (Elliot et al., 2015). There are numerous papers that  
31 provide instructions to implement this approach, and measures include training all staff  
32 around the impact of trauma-trauma, screening all service users for experiences of trauma and  
33 thinking about which organisational processes may cause re-traumatisation (Elliot et al.,  
34 2015; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014; Menschner and  
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51 A key element of trauma-informed work is for someone’s care to be individualised  
52 (McCartan, 2020). Organisations should take account of the gender specific needs of the  
53 people who use the service and consider how these can be supported. This could for instance  
54 include using different assessment templates for women that explore areas such as pregnancy,  
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rape and sex working. In light of the findings from this current study it is also recommended that services look at how to reduce the macro-level risks to females within mixed services, considering what measures could be put in place to lessen victimisation and increase feelings of safety and empowerment. How to address risks to women (both emotional and physical) within mixed homeless shelters could be a valuable area of future research.

Interpretation of the lived experience of homeless women in this study and it conclusions drawn are framed within clear limitations. Although the recommended sample size for IPA is six to eight participants (Pietkiewicz &and Smith, 2012; Turpin et al., 1997), there is, nevertheless, a limit to the generalizability of the findings to the lived experiences of homeless women. It is worth noting that the sample were all White-British and between the ages of 34 and 54 years. The study was also unable to include non-English speakers, likely missing important sub-groups of women living on the streets with no recourse to public funds (Farmer, 2017). It would be valuable for future research to explore the experience of non-white participants, considering how they may be living with multiple layers of discrimination; for their status as a female, as a homeless person, and their ethnicity.

Complex needs and chaotic lifestyles create barriers to attending appointments, so it is possible that the women who did attend ~~had less complex needs and~~ were, again, not fully representative of the local homeless female population. There is likely also experience of relevance to the study through the voices of the women who chose not to talk to the researcher; perhaps reflective of an experience of systemic control and/or a vulnerability to perceived stigma or challenge to self-identity from engaging with the task of thinking and talking about homelessness. ~~Finally, i~~It was only possible to recruit over a period of two



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months. A longer recruitment time may have led to a sample with broader demographic characteristics and lived experiences. Finally, due to resources only two of the transcripts (representing over a quarter of data) were double-coded, and no discrepant interpretations were identified. However, given the small sample size and with additional resource double coding of the entire data set would have further increased validity. upon reflection it may have increased validity if all participant's accounts had been coded by another researcher.

~~In the COVID era there is a significant global increase in violence against women, with UN Women describing this as a 'shadow pandemic' (UN Women, 2020). With domestic violence acting as a pathway into homelessness (Pleace, 2008) it may be that this already vulnerable population are at an even higher risk of trauma and victimisation than before COVID-19. For this reason, trauma informed approaches could be increasingly important in effectively supporting the needs of homeless women.~~

Due to the small sample size and lack of racial diversity these findings cannot be taken as representative of the national female homeless population. This study can, however, provide a valuable initial insight into the female experience of homelessness, and the mechanisms that would benefit from further investigation within other female homeless communities.

### **Conclusion and future directions**

This study demonstrated how the lived experience of homelessness for women is complex, gender related, ed and highly traumatic, marked by multiple losses, often beginning at an early age and continuing throughout the experience of homelessness. Participant accounts convey a strong sense of vulnerability as females living in a context of pervasive, gender-based violence and social inequality within predominantly male environments. The significant challenges experienced by women living within the mixed hostel system indicate a

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clear need for an increase in female-only, trauma-informed homelessness services.

Understanding the real lived experience of homeless women is essential to such an improvement in provision (Meares, 2014).

Continued, sensitive exploration of the under-researched area of women's homelessness (Reeve, 2018) is critical to inform future gendered service provision. In line with the recommendation for TIC services to understand a variety of needs and socio-political factors (Urquhart & Jaisura, 2012), further research is needed into the experience of sub-groups within the homeless community, such as ethnic minorities and female youths.

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**Implications for practice:** ~~Continued, sensitive exploration of the under-researched area of women's homelessness (Reeve, 2018) is critical to inform future gendered service provision. In line with the recommendation for TIC services to understand a variety of needs and socio-political factors (Urquhart & Jaisura, 2012), further research is needed into the experience of sub-groups within the homeless community, such as ethnic minorities and female youths.~~

~~- The needs of women should be carefully considered in future homelessness policy making and service development. More resources should be allocated to creating women only services that work within a trauma informed approach.~~

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5 - Current mixed gender service providers should embed understandings of trauma in  
6 their processes and explore how to become trauma informed as an organisation.  
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8 - These services should also address the gender-specific needs of homeless women in  
9 their procedures and consider how issues such as victimisation, trauma and identity can be  
10 supported within their service.  
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Table I. Participant demographic characteristics

Pseudonyms	Age (years)	Length of homelessness*	Current accommodation
Tess	50 - 59	25 years	Homeless Shelter
Jessica	40 - 49	3 years	Homeless Shelter
Jane	30 - 39	2 years	Homeless Shelter
Rose	20 - 29	10 months	Homeless Shelter
Hannah	30 - 39	4 years	Homeless Shelter
Ellie	30 - 39	8 years	Women's Project
Carol	40 - 49	12 years	Supported Housing

\* Length of homelessness classed as length of time since previous secure housing

Table II. Superordinate and sub-themes

<b>Superordinate Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
1. Victimisation and trauma	1.1 The female experience of vulnerability
	1.2 Living with trauma
	1.3 Creation of a survival persona
2. The group and the individual	2.1 Group threats to identity
	2.2 The community of women
	2.3 The experience of authority systems

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