

Long Abstract – Monographic Section

Rethinking Welfare to prevent and combat gender-based violence: challenges and opportunities for an integrated system

edited by Pietro Demurtas and Emiliana Mangone

Gender-based violence and homeless women: between invisibility and hiding.

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In recent years, the phenomenon of homelessness has undergone significant transformations, both in quantitative terms and regarding the socio-demographic profiles of the people involved. This paper analyses the evolution of adult severe marginality, placing emphasis on the specific gender dimension and the progressive “feminization” of homelessness.

Starting from data from the 2014 Istat survey, which identified the female component as 14.3% of the homeless population (with a prevalence of 53.9% foreign women and 62.9% single women), the analysis integrates the most recent observations at both the European (FEANTSA) and national (fio.PSD) levels. In-depth studies highlight a clear increase in access to services by women, including young women and mothers with children, signalling a profound transformation of the traditional socio-demographic profile.

The article underscores that, although structural factors such as economic poverty and housing exclusion are transversal determinants, the experience of not having a home is articulated in a substantially different way between men and women.

The symbolic and cultural dimension associating the female figure with notions of home and family is explored; consequently, the homeless woman suffers amplified stigmatization due to the deviation from normative models of femininity imposed by patriarchal societies, which identify women primarily in caregiving and nurturing roles.

A focal point of the analysis concerns the institutional and social invisibility of women, often attributable to the phenomenon of “hidden homelessness,” characterized by precarious, informal, or unstable arrangements that escape official data collection systems and reinforce the underrepresentation of the phenomenon.

Unlike their male counterparts, women tend to avoid public spaces and life on the street to escape violence and moral judgment, resorting to precarious, informal, or unstable housing solutions (such as caravans, hospitality from acquaintances, or encampments), thus eluding traditional detection systems.

A central focus concerns the structural relationship between female homelessness and gender-based violence. International literature recognizes domestic and relationship violence as one of the main causes of housing loss for women, as well as a factor that perpetuates its cycle. Fleeing from abusive family contexts, often marked by physical, psychological, and economic violence, leads many women toward situations of severe housing exclusion.

However, women who find refuge in anti-violence structures or temporary solutions are not always recognized as homeless people, generating distortions in data and public policies.

Furthermore, the contribution presents the preliminary results of exploratory qualitative research initiated in the Municipality of Palermo, based on biographical interviews with ten homeless women, aged between 32 and 50.

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The collected narratives show pathways marked by family fractures, economic poverty, health problems, migratory experiences, and past violence, often preceding life on the street.

Violence emerges as a transversal element, both as a triggering factor for the condition of homelessness and as a constant risk in daily survival strategies.

Women adopt practices of invisibilization and dissimulation to protect themselves, yet exposing themselves to serious consequences on psychological, identity, and relational levels.

The results highlight the need to integrate a gender perspective and an intersectional approach into the analysis and interventions on homelessness, recognizing the intertwining of gender, violence, class, ethnicity, and housing conditions.

The article concludes by underlining the urgency of promoting multidimensional interventions capable of responding to the specific needs of homeless women, through the integration of services for housing marginality and specialized gender-based violence services, with a view to recognition, autonomy, and social justice.

Cite me: Santa Giuseppina Tumminelli, “Violenza di genere e donne senza dimora: tra l’invisibilità e il nascondimento”, in “WELFARE E ERGONOMIA” 2/2025, pp. 139-150,

DOI: 10.3280/WE2025-002010.