

WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS

MASTERCLASS PRESENTATION
SEPTEMBER 27TH, 2022

DR. PAULA MAYOCK

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL POLICY

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

THE EXTENT OF WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

- Available estimates suggest that women constitute between 22 and 38% of homeless populations in countries throughout Europe (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021).
- Family homelessness, which has increased in several countries Europe-wide and in North America, is primarily impacting (low income) women who are mothers; typically young and often parenting alone.
- 'Single' homeless women – many of them mothers, separated from their children – have been sidelined or ignored.

A RAPID FEMINISATION OF HOMELESSNESS IS EVIDENT IN MANY EUROPEAN COUNTRIES



WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS TYPICALLY UNDERESTIMATED



Homeless Women's Invisibility

- **Spatial Errors in Enumeration:**

- Operational definitions are artificially narrow (often a reflection of constructions of what 'homelessness' is, i.e. - rough sleeping/living in emergency shelters).
- While data are improving, **definitions that exclude dimensions of female homelessness remains widespread** (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014).

- **Administrative Errors in Enumeration:**

- Women's homelessness only recorded within certain systems – e.g. in cases of domestic violence (DV) and abuse.
- A broad European tendency to classify those entering DV services as DV and not as homelessness, despite being in a situation of homelessness resulting from domestic violence and abuse (Baptista, 2010).

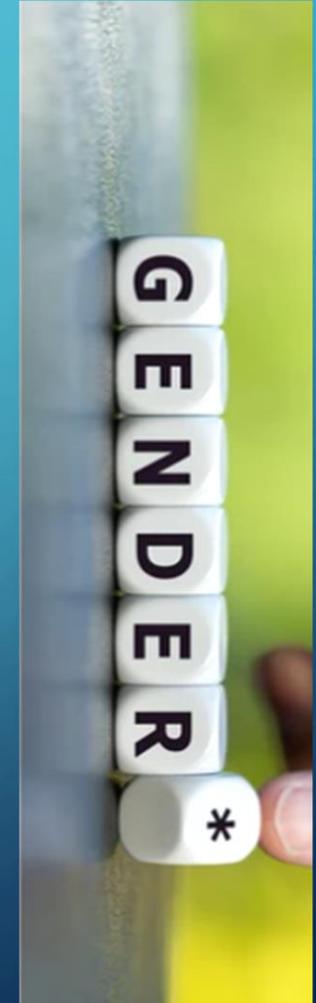
HOMELESS WOMEN'S INVISIBILITY

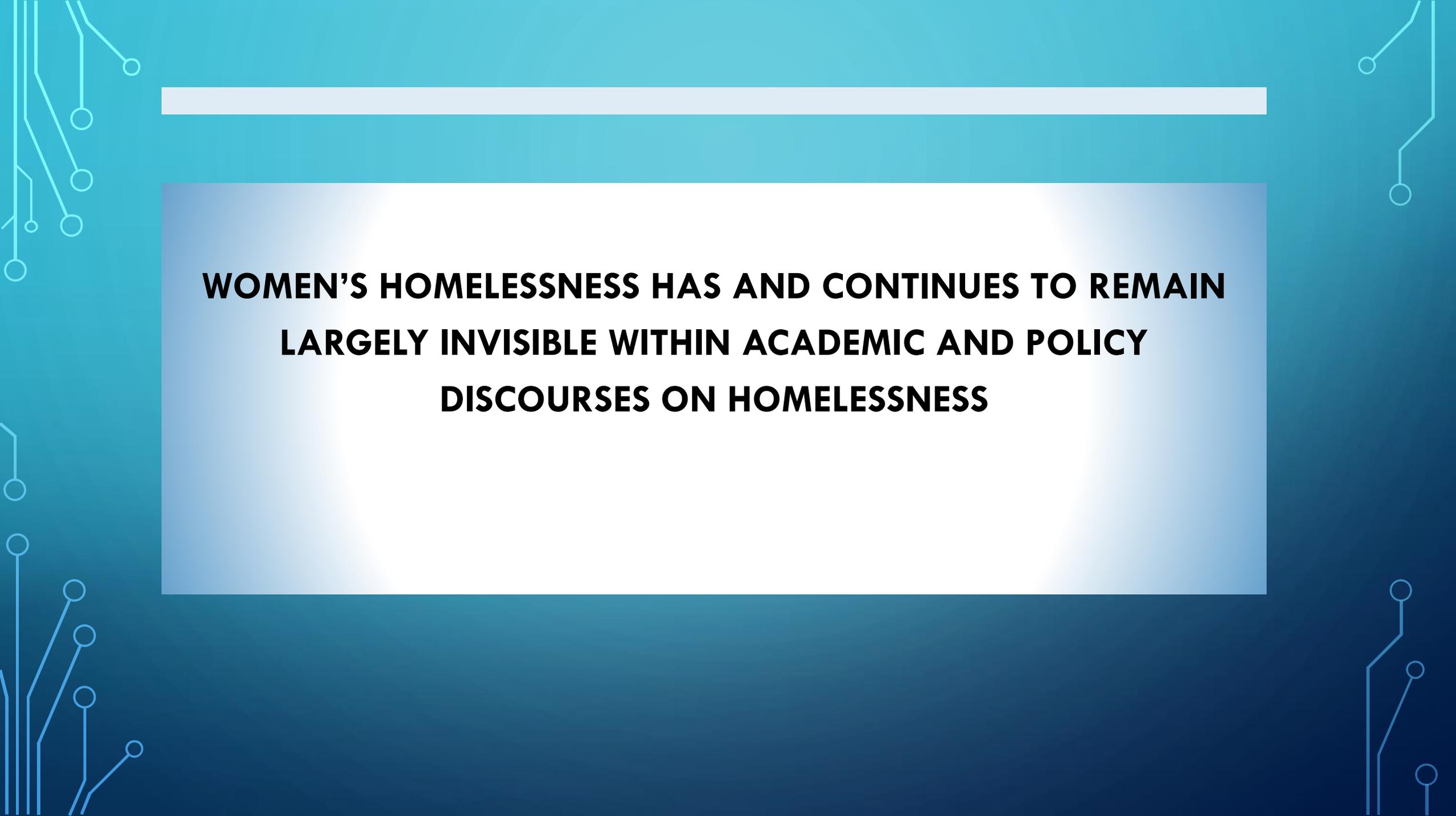
So, there are intersecting factors that account for homeless women's invisibility (Pleace, 2016; Mayock & Bretherton, 2016; Mayock & Sheridan, 2020), including but not limited to:

- 1) The issue of **MEASUREMENT** – enumeration techniques that serve to obscure the extent of women's homelessness.
- 2) **UNDERCOUNTING OF WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS** – women accessing domestic violence services not counted as homelessness in many European countries, including Ireland.
- 3) Homeless women's **RESPONSES TO HOMELESSNESS AND TO HOMELESSNESS SERVICES** – can serve to conceal their situations.

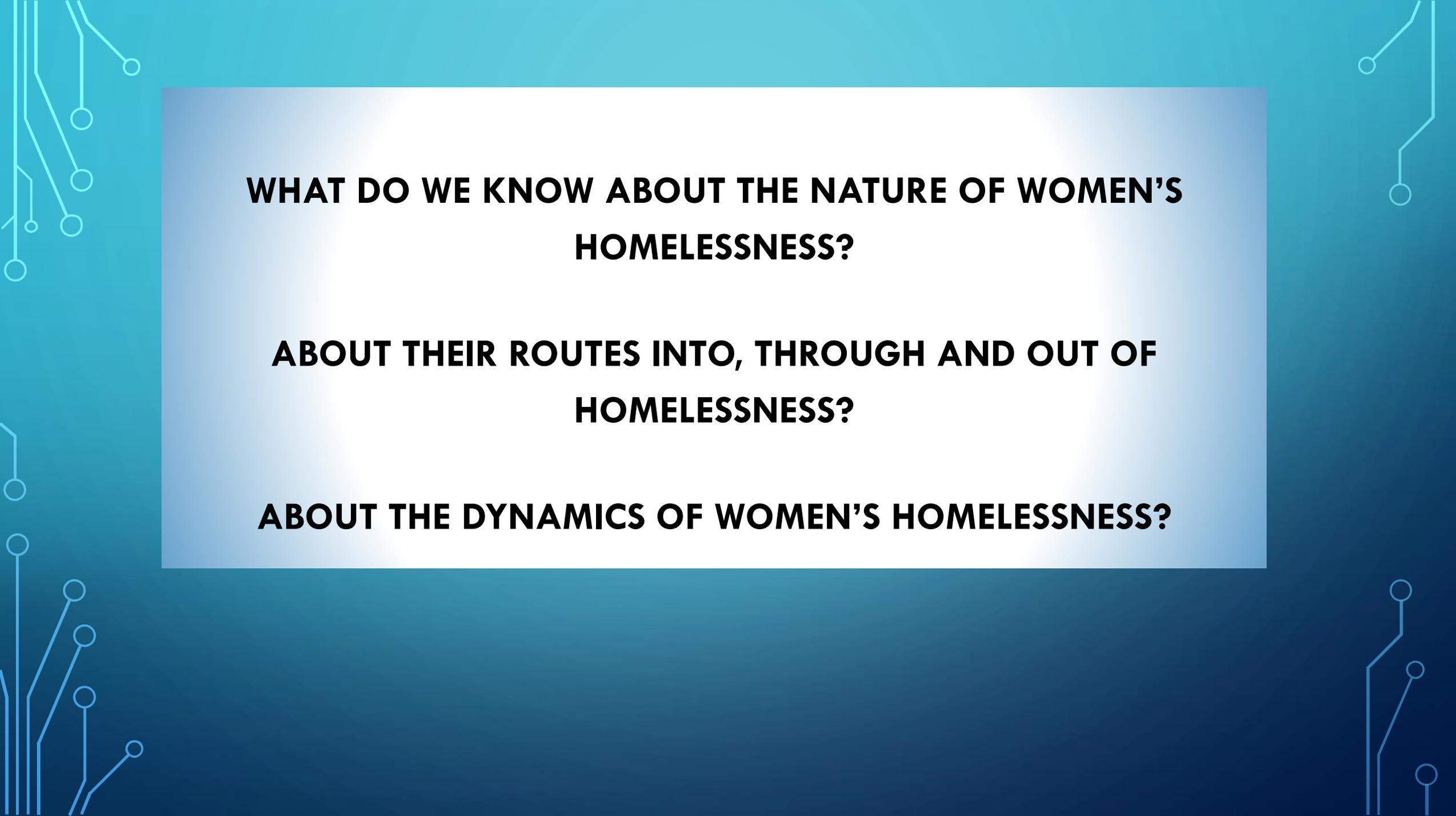
GENDER AND HOMELESSNESS

- Homelessness research has long since been critiqued for its gender-neutral approach (Watson and Austerberry, 1986; Edgar and Doherty, 2001) and the experiences of homeless women have only received sporadic attention in the research literature.
- Policy discourses throughout Europe have historically ignored gender (Edgar & Doherty, 2001; Mayock & Bretherton, 2016).
- Service responses are recognised as lacking gender sensitivity (Edgar & Doherty, 2001; Mayock & Bretherton, 2016; Bretherton & Mayock, 2021).
- Homelessness service provision is male-oriented in most European countries.



The background is a teal-to-blue gradient. In the corners, there are white line-art graphics resembling circuit boards or neural networks, with lines connecting to small circles.

**WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS HAS AND CONTINUES TO REMAIN
LARGELY INVISIBLE WITHIN ACADEMIC AND POLICY
DISCOURSES ON HOMELESSNESS**

The background features a teal-to-blue gradient with white circuit-like lines and nodes in the corners. The text is centered in a light blue rectangular box.

**WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE NATURE OF WOMEN'S
HOMELESSNESS?**

**ABOUT THEIR ROUTES INTO, THROUGH AND OUT OF
HOMELESSNESS?**

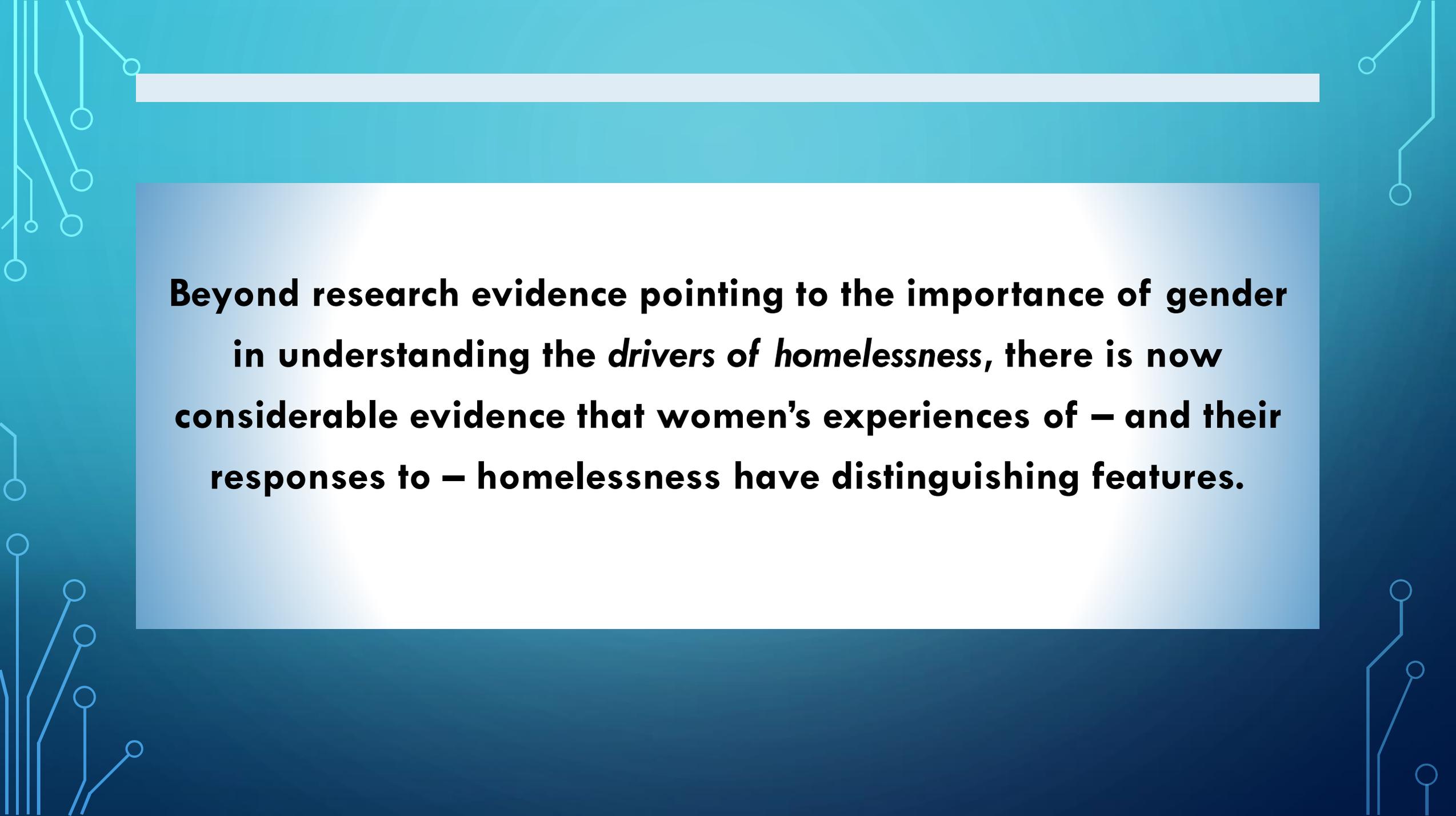
ABOUT THE DYNAMICS OF WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS?

WOMEN'S PATHWAYS TO HOMELESSNESS (CAUSATION)

- **Evidence shows that the following experiences can push women out of home and lead them into a trajectory of housing instability and homelessness (Bretherton, 2020; Reeve et al., 2006; Mayock & Sheridan, 2012a,b; Schwan et al., 2020):**
 - **Family adversities related to poverty and neglect**
 - **Relationship breakdown**
 - **Lack of adequate, affordable housing**
 - **Migration status**
- **In European countries, including the UK and Ireland, and in North America and Australia, family homelessness, which is highly gendered, is strongly associated with housing market conditions and the lack of affordable housing (Allen et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2015; Pleace et al., 2008; Shinn & Khadduri, 2020)**

GENDERED HOMELESSNESS

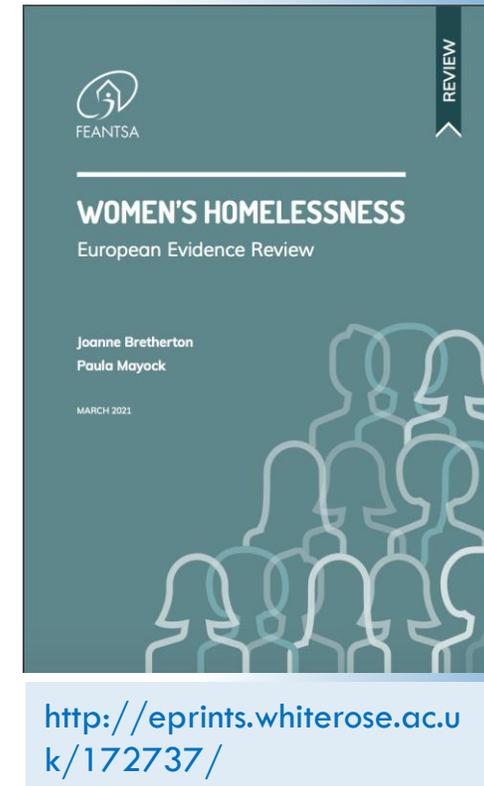
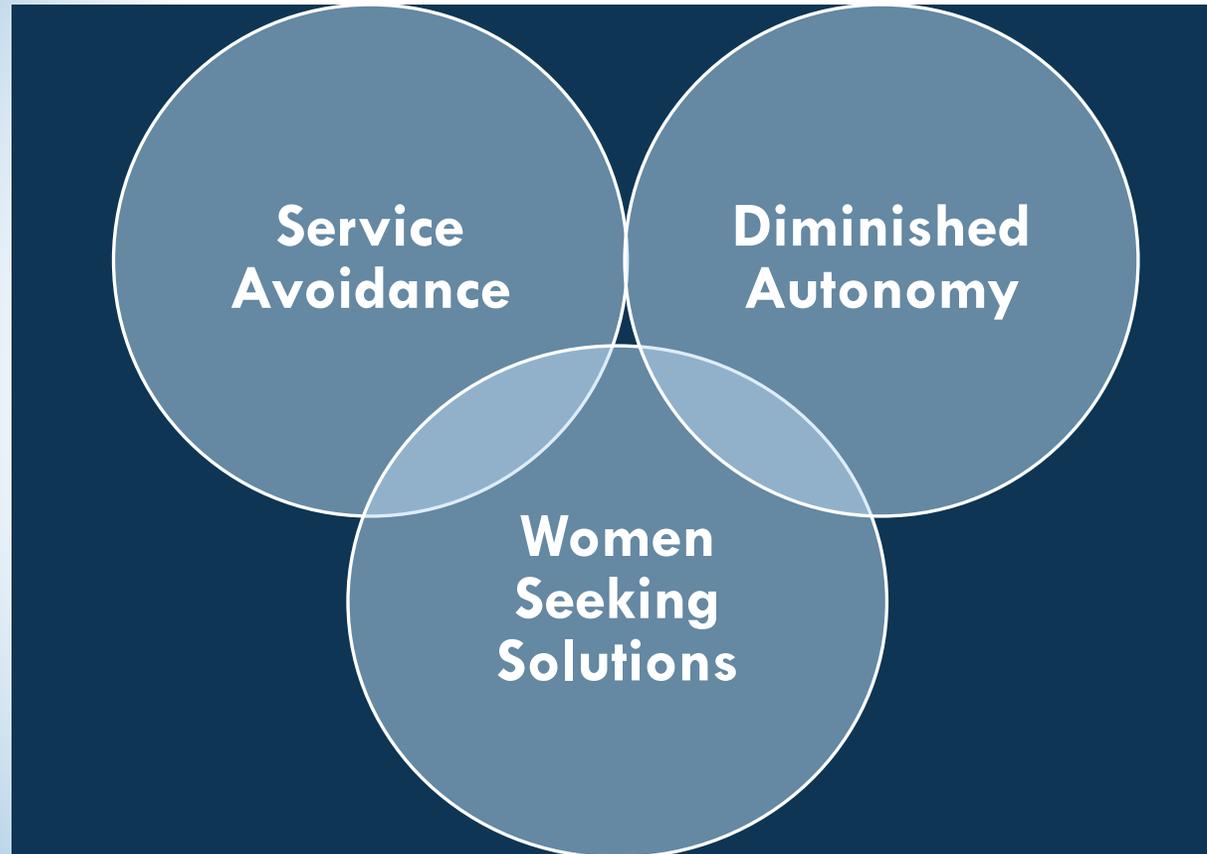
- A growing body of research is contributing to a gendered understanding of homelessness, including the causes of homelessness.
- Experiences such as childhood sexual abuse and violence, intimate partner violence and maternal trauma have been demonstrated to push women along a trajectory of housing instability and homelessness.
- While these experiences are not limited to women, they are gendered.
- The **ROLE OF DOMESTIC AND OTHER FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE** in women becoming homeless is possibly one of the strongest indicators that gender matters.
- COVID-19 and domestic violence: rising numbers of girls and women experiencing DV.
- DOMESTIC VIOLENCE THE SHADOW PANDEMIC.



Beyond research evidence pointing to the importance of gender in understanding the *drivers of homelessness*, there is now considerable evidence that women's experiences of – and their responses to – homelessness have distinguishing features.

THE DYNAMICS OF WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

Three Dominant Themes (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021)



WOMEN'S SERVICE EXPERIENCES

Service Avoidance

- Women using informal 'solutions'.
- Avoidance of hostels due to fear, because women feel threatened.
- Stigma, leading to desire to conceal homeless 'status'.

Diminished Autonomy

- Experiences of infantilisation.
- Women feeling judged.
- The stigma of lost motherhood.
- Rules and regulations: leading to feelings of subservience.

Seeking Solutions

- Women effectively excluding themselves from services.
- Women exiting without support, leading to a cycle of returning to homelessness.
- Women seeking 'ontological security'.

WOMEN'S TRAJECTORIES THROUGH AND OUT OF HOMELESSNESS

Women Negotiating Power and Control as they 'Journey' Through Homelessness: A Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective

Paula Mayock and Sarah Sheridan

School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

European Journal of Homelessness

https://www.feantsaresearch.org/public/user/Observatory/2020/EJH_142_Final_version/EJH_14-2_A1.pdf

- ❖ Longitudinal biographical study, conducted over a three-year period
- ❖ Ethnographic fieldwork in shelters (short- and long-term accommodation)
 - ❖ 60 women (aged 18-62; average age 34.8) at baseline in 2010
 - ❖ Sample included 17 migrant women
- ❖ 40 re-interviewed late 2012-2013; reliable information obtained on an additional 9 women

WOMEN'S TRAJECTORIES THROUGH AND OUT OF HOMELESSNESS

- 21 of the 49 women (43 per cent) who were successfully 'tracked' had transitioned to stable housing.
- 28 (57 per cent) either remained homeless (i.e. were 'houseless' or 'roofless' or in a living situation that was 'insecure' or 'inadequate').
- This represents a low rate of exiting, particularly considering the time lapse of 3 years between Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the research.
- The women's 'journeys' through homelessness were characterised by high levels of mobility and residential instability.

Women with children in their care were far more likely to have exited.

Of the 21 women who were living in stable housing by Phase 2, 17 were mothers with children living with them.

'DESERVING' AND 'UNDESERVING' WOMEN

POLICY AND SERVICE RESPONSES TO WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

- A recent analysis of national strategic approaches to homelessness in 35 European countries found that the staircase model of service provision prevails in an overwhelming majority of countries (Baptista & Marlier, 2019).
- Homelessness services tend to be designed to serve the needs of male residents and they lack gender sensitivity (Edgar & Doherty, 2001; Bretherton & Mayock, 2021).
- Women can access women-only services in a number of countries but these accommodation types tend to be far fewer in number than mixed gender facilities (Please, 2016).

According to FEANTSA (2020):

“Women-only services are run by female staff for women and they are crucial for women on both an emotional and physical level. Women only spaces provide safety and allow women to speak freely about their experiences. (If a service is mixed, it is important to ensure women-only activities and spaces provided by female staff)”

SERVICE RESPONSES TO WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

- ***Domestic violence and homelessness* are more often than not classified and understood as discrete processes – and are *responded to by two separate service systems* – despite the fact that they are intertwined and overlapping.**
- **A ‘disconnect’ between homelessness and domestic violence services (Baker et al., 2010; Baptista, 2010; Mayock et al., 2016).**

The need for better coordination and integration of responses to homelessness and domestic violence:

“There should be further cooperation and exchange between the homelessness and the domestic violence (DV) sectors, with a view to better responding to the needs of women escaping violence and using homelessness support services, and to improving the housing outcomes of the support provided within the DV sector” (Pleace et al., 2019).

SERVICE RESPONSES TO WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

Housing First for Women:

- Internationally, Housing First (HF) discourses largely ignore gender.
- Housing First for women is currently very underdeveloped and the evidence base on HF for women throughout Europe is extremely limited.

Quilgars et al's (2019) Evaluation of Threshold HF for Women has highlighted the need for:

- A trauma-informed approach to service delivery.
- Service responses that recognise that many women are mothers coming to terms with the loss of children; and aim to work towards positive reconnection with their children and wider families.

CONCLUSIONS

- **Discourses are gradually shifting and the nature of the debate on women's homelessness is changing. Progress is, however, slow.**

- **A lack of basic data on women's homelessness; undercounting of women's homelessness.**

- **Homelessness policy in countries throughout Europe has largely ignored gender and failed to address the complexity and diversity of women's homelessness.**

- **A clear need for service responses that acknowledge the situations and experiences of homeless women.**

RESPONDING MORE EFFECTIVELY TO WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

- **Homelessness policies and strategies that recognise and aim to respond to gendered homelessness.**
- **Greater co-ordination and collaboration between DV, homelessness and housing service sectors.**
- **Women-only services and spaces.**
- **Investment in Housing First for women.**
- **Trauma-informed approaches, with an emphasis on re-connecting women with their children.**