

Who Gets Hurt: Sexual Exploitation Among Women During Episodes of Homelessness

Aoife Chow

Professor Pickett

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this paper.

Introduction

While the issue of homelessness has been heavily researched, the relationship between sexual assault among women experiencing homelessness remains an underacknowledged subject. Moreover, although both sexual assault and homelessness detrimentally affect a wide range of individuals and communities, the intersection of these two issues impact women in unique ways. Sexual violence as experienced by women experiencing housing insecurity severely challenges their physical, emotional, and social capacity to lead a life in which their humanity is fully respected. Therefore, in an effort to better understand and address the intersection of homelessness and sexual violence among women, it is crucial to acknowledge the unique harms that emerge from these compounding issues that impact a significant number of American women.

This analysis will delve into the pervasiveness of homelessness and sexual assault among women and explore social structural factors that potentially contribute to such injustices. This analysis will also propose recommendations, guided by the principle of nonmaleficence, that seek to address the immediate harms that women experience at the intersection of these specific vulnerabilities. Fundamentally, this discussion is grounded in a deep regard and respect for the people at the center of this issue and attempts to discuss how we may work to rectify the injustices that have been and currently are being inflicted on members of society.

Part I: Harms and Disadvantages

One woman who experienced homelessness, Lori Yearwood, wrote about the sexual, physical, and emotional trauma she endured during the two-years she spent on staying with friends, on the streets, and in shelters following the loss of her home. While Yearwood's account

should not be considered a definitive reflection of the experiences of women who experience sexual exploitation during episodes of homelessness, her story does illustrate the pervasive disadvantages that women in positions similar to hers may experience. Repeatedly assaulted and harassed by various men, Yearwood illuminates the “particular brutality of life as a homeless woman” in her testimony (Yearwood). Discussing her nights in various transient spaces, Yearwood paints a picture for the reader of the bleak conditions that she, and other women experiencing homelessness, were forced to grapple with. She recounts the trauma she endured at the hands of an abuser, claiming “men thought it was open season on [her]” because she lacked physical, economic, and social protection (Yearwood). Moreover, when she had clearly suffered abuse and returned to shelters, “people looked at [her] [...] and then they looked away” (Yearwood). The trauma inflicted as a consequence of both homelessness and sexual violence further enhanced her vulnerability and made leaving her episode of homelessness a far greater challenge. Yearwood’s account offers one example of an individual’s experience at the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation. Though it cannot be considered representative of the population, Yearwood’s experience does help illustrate the deep harms associated with these two issues and help illuminate how the inherent autonomy, dignity, and opportunities of female survivors of homelessness are limited.

Data

Both first-hand accounts and statistical data offer insight into how women are impacted by homelessness and sexual violence and, therefore, in a further effort to discern the unique impact that these intersecting issues have on American women, the pervasiveness of each must be explored. Sexual violence and assault refer to any sexual action or touching that is unwanted or, in other words, in situations when specific, informed consent has not been given. Sexual

violence can refer to sexual assault, sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, incest, and drug-facilitated sexual assault. (RAINN). In the United States, there are approximately 463,634 known victims of sexual assault, ages 12 years old or older, each year in the United States (RAINN). Women, however, are significantly more likely than men to experience sexual violence in their lifetimes. CDC data shows that nearly 1 in 5 women have experienced completed or attempted rape in their life, with 1 in 3 of these victims experiencing it for the first time between the ages 11 to 17, and 1 in 8 victims experiencing assault for the first time before the age of 10 (CDC).

Statistics on homelessness reveal that hundreds of thousands of individuals are impacted by housing insecurity in the United States. Homelessness is often associated with spending nights in places such as streets, shelters, or “in other settings not intended for human habitation” (Goodman et al. 1). While this definition is accurate and important, expanding our understanding of housing insecurity allows us to see different types of vulnerability. Couch surfing, relying on dangerous living situations, and trading sexual acts for shelter should also be considered manifestations of housing insecurity and are referred to as “hidden homelessness” (Goodman et al.1). Moreover, homelessness may be temporary or chronic which often makes gathering exact numbers difficult. According to data provided by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, however, 580,466 people experienced homelessness on a single night in January 2020 (HUD). Nearly three in ten individuals experiencing housing insecurity in 2020 were women, equaling 29% percent of the population experiencing homelessness (HUD 20).

Evidently, both sexual violence and homelessness are pervasive, far-reaching issues on their own, but they can come together to inform and exacerbate each other. While women experiencing homelessness are more likely to have experienced sexual violence before episodes

of homelessness which may contribute to the housing insecurity they face, the condition of homelessness itself significantly increases a woman's vulnerability to sexual exploitation. When compared to low-income, housed women, women experiencing homelessness "reported childhood physical or sexual abuse, rape, of physical assault more frequently" (Browne 372). A large study published in 2000 surveyed 974 women experiencing homelessness in the Los Angeles metropolitan area with the intent of documenting the relationship between rape, homelessness, and health characteristics. Researchers found that 13% of the participants "reported rape during the previous year, and half of these women were raped at least twice in that year" (Wenzel et al.). Exchanging sex for shelter and/or provisions is also a reality for some women experiencing homelessness who do so as a "last resort strategy for survival" (Goodman et al. 5). Women who exchange sex or sexual favors are "three times more likely to experience sexual assault and other forms of violence relative to their homeless peers who did not engage in sex trade" (Goodman et al. 5). When substance abuse is involved, women who engage in prostitution face an even greater risk of sexual exploitation. Moreover, for women experiencing homelessness that suffer from mental illness, "rape appears to be a shockingly normative experience" with 15.3% of women in a particular study reporting that they had been assaulted in to previous 2 months (Goodman et al.). Yearwood's testimony mirrors this data, particularly as she remarks that she began to feel a kinship with female survivors experiencing homelessness, many of whom she encountered in shelters. Their shared experience is a testament to the nearly incomprehensible pervasiveness of sexual violence among this population (Yearwood). The physical vulnerability of housing insecurity, coupled with a lack of social, economic, and political resources, harm women experiencing homelessness in that they lack both the means to protect themselves from assault and seek justice after the fact.

Impacts

The impacts that emerge from the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation for women vary, extending from physical suffering to crippled social networks to psychological trauma. On a basic level, sexual assault fundamentally violates a person's right to exert control over their body and what happens to it. Sexual exploitation constitutes arguably the most personal and intimate violation of an individual's physical self. Yet, while the physical disadvantages that correlate with sexual assault are incredibly important, the impacts that often go unseen or unnoticed also present pressing practical and ethical dilemmas. The psychological and social consequences that women face at the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation constitutes an assault against their ability to live in a way in which their position as autonomous human beings is respected.

Mental and psychological distress routinely correlate with homelessness as an experience but when coupled with sexual violence, the harms multiply. Being a victim of sexual assault while experiencing homelessness increases the likelihood that a woman will "experience high levels of depression, medical problems, and substance abuse issues, as well as increased psychotic symptoms" (Phipps et al.). In her essay, Yearwood recalls suffering from symptoms of PTSD due to her experiences before homelessness and during. Rather than receiving treatment for her PTSD, Yearwood states that "[her] condition worsened as [she] was traumatized again on the streets" (Yearwood). Her exposure to physical and sexual exploitation exacerbated her mental vulnerability, thus further compounding the distress she experienced. Yearwood's experience corroborates the data collected regarding the connection between trauma and mental health among women who have experienced homelessness and sexual violence. Almost two thirds of women experiencing homelessness who reported being survivors of assault had

contemplated suicide in the last year and one-third reported having attempted it (Stermac and Paradis). Further, links have been found between symptoms of depression and anxiety among female survivors experiencing homelessness and there is “a positive relationship between victimization and psychotic symptoms” (Stermac and Paradis). As Stelmach and Paradis claim, women who experience both homeless and sexual exploitation may not “differ from housed women in terms of the correlation between abuse and mental health problems,” however, the degree to which survivors experiencing homelessness experience these issues is more significant (Stermac and Paradis). As Yearwood’s account highlights, a woman who experiences homelessness also endures more constant vulnerability therefore increasing their chances of trauma or re-traumatization and making escaping episodes of homelessness even more difficult.

In a similar vein, the combination of homelessness and sexual exploitation cripples a woman’s capacity to pursue and develop a healthy emotional and social life, thus rendering her more vulnerable to further harms. Due to a lack of proper social and institutional structures that can adeptly support survivors experiencing homelessness, women continue to suffer. Associated psychological harms such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideations can obstruct a woman’s ability or willingness to develop meaningful, trusting, healthy social relationships. In general, “homeless women have significantly less social support than women who have never been homeless” (Phipps et al. 6). For female survivors of sexual violence experiencing homelessness, an understandable fear of trusting others coupled with the seeming indifference of broader society contributes to a breakdown of social relationships. This reality poses a compelling obstacle as social networks constitute a crucial factor in both ending episodes of homelessness and supporting survivors of sexual assault. Social networks provide emotional, and potentially even economic, resources that can help a woman both seek help and healing and work

to exit an episode of homelessness. Through the lens of Nussbaum's central capabilities, the social harms that emerge from such trauma violate a woman's right to affiliations. As a central capability, affiliation refers to an individual's ability to both "engage in various forms of social interaction," have the capacity for empathy and sympathy, and be "able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others" (Nussbaum 79). Because female survivors experiencing homelessness possess a potentially hindered ability to form social networks and because they have been treated as beings that lack dignity and worth, their central capabilities are violated, and they are made more vulnerable to exploitation.

At the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation, women are repeatedly confronted with a loss of autonomy and agency over their bodies and lives. In considering the disadvantages that extend beyond the fundamental physical violation that is inherent in sexual exploitation, we can see harms that routinely go unseen and unacknowledged, but which severely violate human dignity. Recognizing that psychological trauma and crippled social networks are real harms suffered by female survivors experiencing homelessness allows for a better understanding of the pervasive disadvantages that this population faces and opens up the possibility of addressing homelessness and sexual assault in a comprehensive manner.

Part II: Social Structure Analysis

Homelessness, sexual exploitation, and their associated harms are experienced by both men and women across demographic groups. Women experiencing homelessness, however, are uniquely susceptible to sexual violence due to their physical, economic, and social vulnerability and because of this, I will focus solely on this subpopulation of women with the belief that they are particularly harmed by existing structural forces. Approaching this analysis, however,

necessitates an understanding that women do not exist as a coherent monolith. Rather each individual is complex and structural forces impact various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups differently, particularly when these identities intersect. Acknowledging this is crucial to honoring the complex and varying experiences of women, however, I will be analyzing women as a single social group united by a common positioning within patriarchal society which makes them incredibly vulnerable at the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation. Thus, while creating space for women's distinct experiences, this analysis will explore several overall social structures that women experiencing homelessness exist in relation to that make them more physically, economically, and socially vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

According to Eastwood and Smith, social structures are “durable, individual-spanning aspects of the social environment that both enable and constrain action” (1). In other words, social structures last across time, impact individuals and relationships that exist within those structures, and dictate what individuals may or may not do. Held up by relations, representations, and rules, social structures dictate relationships throughout society, particularly those of domination and subordination (Eastwood and Smith). Relations refer to the complex social networks that partially determine how individuals do or do not act. In this case, the relations that lead to and perpetuate the disadvantages faced by female survivors experiencing homelessness are fundamentally patriarchal and define women as lesser in value in comparison to men. Representations refer to the ways in which members of groups are culturally viewed and understood. For women experiencing homelessness and sexual exploitation, representations may involve being stereotyped as prostitutes, as “welfare queens,” or as having a substance abuse issue. Finally, rules “are shared understandings about what we should and should not do” (Eastwood and Smith 9). In this case, rules can point to institutional failures to provide resources

perhaps due to relations and representations. As Tauna Sisco states, “social constructions of target groups are important because they increase public officials’ willingness to create public policy for those groups and provide justification for those policies” (389). Ultimately, each of these characteristics of social structures work to create and uphold the injustices that female survivors experiencing homelessness live through. They result in physical vulnerability, a lack of economic equity, and violated autonomy which, intersecting in complex ways, exacerbate one another and make ending episodes of homelessness or sexual exploitation incredibly difficult.

Intertwined with institutional flaws, the physical vulnerability that women experiencing homelessness are met with makes them quite literally more susceptible to sexual exploitation. One study found that women experiencing homelessness are “more likely to have been assaulted outdoors” and “that homeless women's life circumstances do place them at risk for sexual assaults that differ significantly from those experienced by housed women” (Stermac and Paradis). This study also found that women experiencing homelessness reported more assaults by an unknown assailant, likely due to a greater exposure to strangers and the lack of privacy enclosed spaces afford (Stermac and Paradis). It is reasonable to assume, then, that the physical positioning of women in public spaces exposes them to a greater number of potential aggressors on a more consistent basis. While it is unclear if the assaults reported in the study occurred during closed shelter hours or if the women had access to a shelter, the institutional flaws of shelters and crisis centers do contribute to women’s physical vulnerability. In her account, Lori Yearwood recalls being ushered out of the shelter she was staying at every morning and it was during these hours of rootlessness that she first encountered the first man who would ultimately assault her for a period of time (Yearwood). By offering things such as gloves and a secure

storage unit to hold her belongings, her assailant exploited her lack of privacy and her public exposure in order to violate her person.

Due to budget constraints and an overall lack of resources, shelters often impose time limits that individuals can remain inside for, offering only a bed to sleep on. Similarly, many emergency centers devoted to being havens for victims of sexual exploitation impose time limits and lack space due to tight resources and in the interest of serving individuals seeking immediate shelter. Additionally, according to the Administration for Children and Families, a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “over 31,500 adults and children fleeing domestic violence found refuge in a domestic violence emergency shelter or transitional housing program” on a single day in 2015. On that same day, however, 12,197 requests made to domestic violence programs went unmet, 63% of which were requests for housing (ACF). Evidently, while housing is a fundamental necessity that provides security and privacy, it can also be a temporary privilege. As a result, women may find themselves in a situation where they must inhabit public places which potentially compromises their physical safety.

In addition to issues of physical vulnerability, economic factors can significantly contribute to the risk of sexual exploitation for women experiencing homelessness. Homelessness and a lack of sufficient economic means are intrinsically linked, both predisposing a woman to the risk of assault as well as inhibiting her from accessing costly supportive resources. At the macro level, the social structures that disadvantage women economically are perpetuated by relations which establish and uphold gendered divisions of labor. Rooted in patriarchal beliefs about women existing to serve as primary caregivers, women often perform unpaid labor within the traditional family structure. As a result, they “pay the price” for their lack of protections when serving as caregivers as they are at a heightened “risk of poverty across the

lifespan” (Bullock 17). In the job market, women are often paid less when compared to men who occupy similar roles with the same level of experience. And while women have undoubtedly made significant strides in professional settings and are more represented in the labor market than they have been previously, they are still overrepresented in “lower paying, lower status jobs” and underrepresented in higher paying professions (21). By earning less, therefore, women are at a greater disadvantage when trying to enter the housing market which is already incredibly unaffordable. Ultimately, these macro level trends within the family structure and labor market do not comprehensively explain the vast array of economic reasons women may become homeless, but they do point to reasons that women already face economic vulnerability.

On a micro level, a woman’s lack of economic resources while experiencing homelessness can be due to her lack of opportunity because of stereotypes, physical vulnerability, and mental illness brought on by a variety of factors. Often women experiencing homelessness are painted as drug addicts or prostitutes. While some women experiencing homelessness do use substances or engage in prostitution, these categorizations are not only offensive generalizations but also make employers less likely to offer work to women. These depictions and their associated biases fail to conform to traditional representations of women that suppose they should be virtuous or maternal. Negative representations seemingly confirm the belief that due to their status as homeless, women are inherently unqualified, unmotivated, or untrustworthy, and therefore, undeserving of aid. Additionally, physical vulnerability not only exposes women to a greater risk of assault but also to robbery and a lack of spaces to keep documents and money in either paper or card form. Maintaining any form of economic capital in transient housing or in public habitations becomes incredibly challenging. Lastly, mental

illnesses brought about by genetic factors or events that occurred before or after episodes of homelessness of sexual exploitation can hinder an individual's ability to gain employment.

Finally, an overall lack of social resources can potentially exacerbate women's disadvantage at the intersection of homelessness and sexual violence and violate their fundamental autonomy. Though meant to be sources of aid and safety, resources such as crisis centers and shelters can negatively impact a woman's experience. As Goodman and her coauthors point out, homelessness "is inherently chaotic" and "the very process of accessing the variety of programs necessary to rise out of homelessness may itself create a chaotic situation" (7). Shelters, for example, are communal spaces in which there is little privacy which can be an extremely uncomfortable experience particularly for women who are survivors of sexual exploitation. Yearwood recalls that the shelter she stayed in "turned out to be an intensified replication of the chaos on the streets — the same desperation, the same violence — concentrated in a single building" (Yearwood). First-hand accounts provided by Bimpson, Reeves, and Green contend that one woman "felt threatened and constantly felt unsafe" which was "especially difficult for her after being abused by a man; so, she felt safer on the streets" (22). This chaos, particularly in mixed-sex environments, can be retriggering for survivors as they seek temporary shelter. Additionally, strict rules regarding access to resources, mandatory appointments, and behavioral requirements may be enforced that cause women to feel alienated or out of control. By attempting to influence "women's control over their behaviors and decision-making, these factors result in a diminished sense of competence and autonomy, which can impact their ability to bring about change in their lives" (Phipps et al. 12). Moreover, shelters that specialize in serving individuals experiencing homelessness often lack the training and skills needed to help women who have been victims of sexual violence. And as mentioned above,

shelters designed to serve women that have experienced sexual exploitation often have strict time limits and limited space and are then forced to turn women away. As a result, women are left dissatisfied and potentially retraumatized by their encounters with these services. First-hand accounts cited by Phipps and coauthors include mentions of feeling “let down” and “bitter” toward service providers (6). Thus, despite existing to offer services and support for both women experiencing homelessness and survivors of sexual violence, these institutions often fail to provide consistent aid and, at worst, further limit the inherent autonomy these women possess.

The harms that women experience at the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, institutional failures resulting from patriarchal relations, negative representations, and ineffectual rules contribute to the sexual exploitation of women experiencing homelessness. While this subpopulation of women cannot and should not be considered a faceless monolith due to the complexity of individuals and experiences, each of them exist in and must navigate systems that are inherently patriarchal. Thus, understanding their shared positioning in society and the social structures that continuously fail them is necessary in discerning potential remedies.

Part Three: Recommendations and Ethical Analysis

The harms that emerge at the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation as experienced by women are neither unexplainable nor inevitable. Throughout the course of this analysis, I have explored the legitimate wrongs and disadvantages this population of women endure and the social structures that contribute to their fruition. The harms that they endure and the trauma they must live with is not a result of individual misfortune or action, but rather exist as the consequences of systems that do seek to prevent harm or help after it has occurred.

Existing economic structures imbued with patriarchal values systematically devalue women and contribute to their economic vulnerability. Shelters, crisis centers, and law enforcement are fundamentally unprepared to comprehensively support women at the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation. Cultural representations paint women as immoral, helpless, or unworthy of help. Each of these factors undermines their access to basic necessities such as housing, physical and emotional safety, and the exercise of individual autonomy.

Addressing the structures and harms that women experiencing homelessness and sexual exploitation face requires approaches that prioritize individual autonomy and recognize the complex interplay of housing insecurity, sexual violence and trauma, mental health, and economic vulnerability. However, the mere scope of this issue raises questions of what and how much can truly be done. Large contributing factors such as patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes and a complex and inherently flawed housing market simply cannot be solved with a handful of policies. Addressing these issues requires an overhaul of society and societal institutions. For that reason, rather than attempting to solve upstream issues, my immediate focus will be on creating systems through which actors seeking to help can provide true support. Implementing trauma-informed interventions and increasing access to women-only facilities are two such frameworks that can be worked within. Training temporary accommodation personnel and local law enforcement to engage in trauma-informed interventions has the potential to support a substantial number of women experiencing an intersection of vulnerabilities. Increasing temporary accommodation for female-identifying individuals in particular offers a valuable opportunity to support survivors experiencing homelessness in ways that actively attempt to promote feelings of safety and security. Each of these demand that a deep level of human

empathy is imbued in policy and program execution as well as an acknowledgement of the unique ways in which women experience homelessness and sexual exploitation.

Trauma-Informed Intervention

Because a significant obstacle women face in accessing and accepting aid when experiencing homelessness and sexual violence lies in the lack of preparedness on the part of providers, utilizing trauma-informed interventions can produce positive outcomes in regard to mental health, feelings of safety, and self-efficacy. By training shelter, crisis center, and law enforcement personnel—those with the greatest potential for frequent interaction with this population—in the practice of trauma-informed intervention, the likelihood of truly supporting a survivor in a substantial way increases. If the individuals at the “front lines” of this issue have the tools to respond with empathy, humanity, and an understanding of the pervasive effects of trauma, women will be less likely to turn away due to feelings of shame or resentment. This approach is “predicated on two core ideas: that any person seeking support might be a trauma survivor; and that systems of care need to recognize, understand, and counter the sequelae of trauma to facilitate recovery” (Sullivan et al. 564). Trauma-informed interventions center the individual seeking help in the process and actively work to honor their experiences without further victimizing or traumatizing them. According to one small study working with survivors of domestic violence, “survivors overall reported increased self-efficacy, higher safety-related empowerment, and decreased depressive symptoms from the beginning to the end of their shelter stays” (Sullivan et al. 568). Each of these impacts facilitated by trauma-informed interventions can enable women to heal while also rebuilding the social networks that are so crucial to survival and personal well-being. When care providers and personnel prioritize the experiences of women, acknowledge that they may be living with trauma, and take steps to empower rather than

constrain them, then the women who are at the center of this issue begin to receive their due support and care. Importantly, however, trauma-informed interventions are not quick fixes or one-off sessions. Rather, engaging in this form of care necessitates a recognition of the ongoing impact of trauma and harm. This process and those involved in its execution must be “willing and able to engage with complexity” (Bimpson et al. 35). Healing is an extensive journey that has no clear or correct path. Providers must be willing to put the complex experiences and personhood of each survivor first in this process in order to facilitate healing and positive outcomes.

Yet, how to practically execute trauma-informed intervention is not always clear as, according to Bimpson, Green, and Reeves, “there is no consensus definition of trauma-informed practice” (27). Practices may include involving the patient in treatment, screening for trauma, and training staff in trauma-specific treatments (CHCS 7). This approach also emphasizes the need for creating safe, comfortable environments in which survivors are at lesser risk of becoming further traumatized. Doing so might look like regulating noise levels, keeping areas well-lit, and enforcing security with guards or other personnel (CHCS 4). One organization that utilizes trauma-informed care is the Downtown Women’s Center in Los Angeles, California. As the only supportive service that specializes in serving women experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles, DWC understands that the experiences of women are unique. DWC’s approach to trauma-informed intervention is guided by six key principles: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support and mutual self-help, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, voice, and choice, and cultural, historical, and gender issues (DWC). Informed by these principles, DWC seeks to acknowledge “the widespread, long-term impacts of trauma” and integrate “knowledge about trauma into all policies and practices” (DWC). Moreover, DWC

moves beyond their space and provides training in trauma-informed approaches to local law enforcement and government organizations. By centering the experiences of women experiencing homelessness and acknowledging the pervasive consequences of housing insecurity and sexual exploitation, DWC works to respect the dignity of each individual and help women begin their healing process.

Female-Only Spaces

In addition to adopting trauma-informed interventions, increasing access to female-only temporary accommodations can reduce the risk of exploitation and re-traumatization. The need for gender specific accommodation points to the unique reasons that women may become homeless and how they experience homelessness. Women are at dangerous risk of sexual exploitation while experiencing homeless and a foundational reason that they constitute a large portion of the “hidden homeless” is because they often choose to not seek out support from places such as shelters. Shelters can be chaotic spaces that reflect the turmoil outside and can expose individuals to retriggering situations. Unfortunately, mixed-sex accommodation is generally more common than female-only temporary accommodation. Bimpson, Reeves, and Green note that in England only 10% of “homelessness providers offer single-sex housing” (23). It is safe to assume that in the United States the statistics are similar. As a result, survivors experiencing homelessness are left with little choice if they seek shelter, especially if they are accompanied by children or other dependents. Thus, they may choose to remain in abusive relationships, stay with friends, or sleep in places not meant for human habitation. Increasing the number of and accessibility to female-only shelters and care facilities decreases the likelihood that women experiencing homelessness are forced to stay in spaces where they are in constant

fear of exploitation and danger. Simply put, should they choose to seek refuge, there will be somewhere safe for them to go.

Female-only spaces open up the possibility of addressing gender-specific issues associated with homelessness and sexual exploitation. In female specific spaces, providers can more aptly engage in trauma-informed interventions that are guided by understandings of the intersecting disadvantages women face. The likelihood of offering tailored support for women who have experienced sexual trauma, health and hygiene issues, or emotional trauma increases in such spaces. Lotus House in Miami, Florida is one such organization that provides sanctuary to female-identifying individuals experiencing homelessness with the understanding that women often survive but suffer as a result of their invisibility. Offering a “trauma-informed sanctuary,” Lotus House provides support for female identifying individuals experiencing homelessness who are victims of sexual or physical abuse, suffer from mental health issues, are medically fragile, are developmental challenged, or are elderly (Lotus House). Because Lotus House provides a female-only safe-haven, the organization is able to offer services such as support groups, female-specific medical care, therapy, and educational services. Their ability to practice trauma-informed care is amplified because they work within a space that seeks to uplift and empower women who have experienced horrific traumas. Yet, places like Lotus House are far and few between and constitute the exception rather than the rule. Increasing the number of spaces like Lotus House decreases the likelihood that women will be forced to choose between remaining in dangerous situations and finding a safe bed to sleep on at night.

Ethical Analysis of Potential Responses

At their core, both of these programs seek to support women at the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation in ways that respect their inherent dignity, recognize the

uniqueness of their positioning in society, and center their voices in the healing process. Yet, each carries its own unique complexities which raise important questions as to how and why we have a responsibility to enact them. How do we implement these programs practically? How can we ensure that we will not cause further harm than if we were to do nothing? Are these recommendations truly the best course of action? Do we even have a responsibility to act? These questions carry great weight both politically and ethically and considering them constitutes a necessary step in deliberation. However, they do not outweigh the moral demand for these programs. To be sure, these recommendations alone will not be enough to solve systemic failures, but they offer an opportunity to support a substantial number of women and may open the door to new ideas, responses, and policies that can reach the root of the issue.

First, I will address questions as to why we have a responsibility to intervene in this issue. Simply put, women at the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation experience severe disadvantage due to their positioning within social structures. Current systems fundamentally fail to prevent and address the harms they endure, transforming individual disadvantage into systemic injustice. As a society, our responsibility to address these harms lies in our inability to effectively deny that they are wrong. Thomas Scanlon argues that if an individual has a complaint regarding how the principle of a certain action affected them and that principle can be reasonably rejected, then that principle is unjust (229). The impact of the principle in question may have affected an individual's well-being or was applied to them unfairly. Scanlon's contractualism philosophy provides an opportunity to compare the relative burdens that individuals bear and determine whose well-being will be most impacted by certain actions. Adopting this lens, I argue that the harms suffered by women at the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation can be reasonably rejected. The reality that a significant portion of the

population suffers as a result of continued social structural failures is a principle that can be reasonably rejected. The burden they bear is perpetuated by structures they have no power over as the physical, mental, or emotional trauma, vulnerability, and a loss of autonomy they experience emerges as a result of their positioning in society rather than individual action. Thus, because of the unjust nature of their disadvantage, we, as a society, have a moral duty to act.

How we act, however, matters. Ashford contends that there exists a tension between “the duty to actively aid someone and the duty to refrain from interfering in someone’s life in such a way as to cause them to be significantly worse off than they would have been” without any intervention (187). Ascertaining when situations call for inaction, or negative duties, and when they require action, or positive duties, forms a central tenet of ethical intervention. Guided by this understanding of positive and negative duties, I am moved to suggest that by not acting we would be morally remiss. But, we must prioritize the voices of women and center them in their own support processes when we act. Not doing so would create a situation in which their autonomy is once again violated, and they may be made to be worse off than before. Ultimately, women experiencing homelessness and sexual violence will not be better off if we continue to allow inadequate systems to fail. What we owe to each other in this situation is to intervene in ways that respect the inherent dignity of survivors, honor their experiences, and prioritize the exercise of their autonomy without causing more harm.

These principles directly impact how we understand the necessity of trauma-informed interventions and increasing access to female-only temporary accommodations. Both of these recommendations create concerns over the potential burden their implementation may place on taxpayers. While taxpayers would likely be called on to pay more in order for this recommendation to be realized, their financial burden is lesser than the physical, mental, and

emotional harms suffered by women at the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation. One can reasonably reject the principle of withholding societal aid based on a financial burden experienced by taxpayers because this burden is substantially less than the harms that occur and would continue to occur because of a lack of aid. An additional barrier to adopting trauma-informed intervention is the potential burden it may place on care providers and law enforcement. Yet, because these groups are the most likely to routinely interact with vulnerable populations, they already must receive training to do their job. Police officers, for example, must undergo training before and after entering the force that enables them to better perform their role. Care providers occupy a similar position whereby they must receive training in order to perform their specific job. Introducing trauma-informed intervention training would constitute an additional program rather than a complete overhaul of their training system. Therefore, introducing trauma-informed intervention training programs will not place an undue burden on groups that must already undergo several forms of training.

Moreover, training programs for trauma-informed intervention will not reduce or take away resources for other individuals experiencing homelessness. While I have recommended this approach with women experiencing homelessness and sexual exploitation in mind, trauma-informed care fundamentally recognizes that anyone can be a victim of trauma and can therefore benefit a wide range of individuals. Law enforcement and care providers who are well versed in trauma-informed care will be better prepared to help not just women experiencing homelessness and sexual exploitation but also every at-risk individual they may encounter. Fundamentally, trauma-informed intervention is a more comprehensive, considerate form of care that will support more individuals than it may inconvenience. By not implementing it, survivors would not be more well off and would continue to face providers and law enforcement personnel that

lack the tools to properly support them. A woman experiencing homelessness who has been sexually violated can reasonably reject the principle of refusing to implement trauma-informed care on the basis of not placing an undue burden on others. Her suffering dramatically outweighs that of those who would need to undergo a training program in order to provide better support.

Increasing the number of and access to female-only shelters raises more complex debates. Throughout the United States, there already exists a significant shortage of beds, facilities, and care providers for those experiencing homelessness. Receiving support, regardless of gender, sex, and age, already presents an incredible challenge. Focusing on gender-specific accommodations raises questions regarding the efficient use of resources. Those embracing a utilitarian lens would debate both the “interests” such a policy “would protect” and “the cost that protecting these interests would impose on others” (Ashford 188). By directing resources to female-only spaces, would we be committing great harm against others while failing to maximize the potential good our capabilities can produce? While these are valid concerns and there is a substantial lack of support for all those experiencing homelessness, justifying the refusal to adopt this policy is difficult. Men experiencing homelessness would still have access to mixed-sex or male-only shelters as this recommendation would not seek to lessen the number of shelters available to them. Rather, this recommendation seeks to create new spaces that would become safe havens for women. As it stands now, existing resources are not effectively serving women who form a considerable portion of the population experiencing homelessness. Women are far less likely to seek refuge in shelters due to past trauma, fear of potentially encountering unknown men, and the chaotic nature of some shelters. Thus, they are more likely to sleep in public places, remain in abusive relationships, or resort to occupations such as prostitution, all of which potentially subject them to further harm and injustices. Should we refuse to increase

female-only spaces and instead continue to only emphasize mixed-gender accommodations, we are potentially perpetuating harms against women experiencing homelessness. In adopting this recommendation, we would not be unjustly burdening another group.

The injustices that women face at the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation do not exist in a vacuum. These harms are perpetuated by inadequate social structures that are influenced and upheld by patriarchal attitudes, inequity, and exploitation. Recognizing that harm exists, however, is not enough. Guided by an understanding of our moral responsibility to act in ways that support and do not cause more harm, we must move to address such injustice. Though not comprehensive, implementing trauma-informed intervention and increasing access to female-only spaces are two ways that we can begin to respond. Both recommendations seek to honor the inherent dignity and experiences of survivors experiencing homelessness while offering more empathic, attentive care.

Conclusion

At the intersection of homelessness and sexual exploitation exist real women who experience real injustices and harms. Often overlooked or written off as inevitable consequences of life in our world, homelessness and sexual exploitation impact countless women, many of whom may never make it into studies or research that seeks to quantify impact. They do exist, however, and their experiences, stories, and voices must be listened to and honored. Throughout the course of this analysis, I sought to explore the pervasiveness of this issue, expound upon the societal and structural factors that contribute to their existence, and the ways by which we, as a society, may fulfill our moral duty to act rightly and facilitate healing and care. Though not all-encompassing, this analysis and its recommendations aim to shine light on an issue that can no

longer be ignored, especially as homelessness becomes an increasingly urgent issue across the United States. Adopting recommendations that can provide immediate support allows for the development of richer dialogue about other responses that can reach beyond the surface and, perhaps, reach the heart of the issue. All of this, however, must be predicated on one nonnegotiable truth: these women, their experiences, their autonomy, and their dignity matter.

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