In Her Shoes:
Young Women's Experiences of Homelessness

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give homeless
young people
a future

Contents

Executive Summary

A young person's gender identity can play a major role in their experiences of homelessness, impacting on the reasons for homelessness, their access to support, and any risks, harms and longer term consequences.[1,2] However, the experiences of homelessness for young women specifically are arguably less explored in existing research literature.

Evidence shows that homelessness can impact women in a specific way in terms of types of housing insecurity and instability. The number of women in England living in temporary accommodation has increased by 88 per cent in the last 10 years.[3] However, despite the large number of women experiencing homelessness, there is a significant lack of women-specific homelessness services in England, with only 10 per cent of services providing female-only accommodation.[4]

This scoping report explores the homelessness and housing experiences of young women, using in-depth qualitative interviews with young women and key stakeholders, analysis of Centrepoint's Youth Homelessness Databank for 2021/22, and a review of existing research data relating to women's experiences of homelessness. In doing this the report reflects the challenges faced by this cohort in attempting to move on from homelessness and lead meaningful lives.

In England 2020-21, more than 46,000 young women (aged 16-24) presented to their local authority as they were homeless or at risk of homelessness.[5]

There were five times as many young women (aged 16-24) who lost their last settled accommodation due to domestic violence as men in England 2020/21.[6]

It was found that 1 in 5 young women had experienced sexual assault once or more while they were homeless.[7]

Key findings include:

Identity and discrimination:

- Young women described how their gender influenced their experiences of homelessness. For example, women with experiences of domestic abuse described feeling more at risk in environments where they are exposed to men. Furthermore, interviewees described how the combination of traditionally disadvantaged aspects of identity may inform experiences of homelessness. For example, a young woman who is under 18 and a refugee is likely to face greater complexity in navigating her homelessness.

- Several women spoke about how being homeless had affected their self-esteem and wellbeing. This was often due to feelings of loneliness, shame, and trauma.

Suitability of accommodation:

- The majority of young women interviewed indicated that they had a preference for accommodation that reflected their identities. However, they also stated that there is a lack of female only provision for homeless young people. Additionally, stakeholders mentioned that there is a lack of provision for LGBTQ+ homeless young people.

- Young women expressed that they were happy when their environment complemented their individual needs. For example, interviewees who were parents stated that they preferred living in accommodation where their children could socialise in shared gardens and playrooms. Likewise, interviewees highlighted that accommodation that did not take into account their traumatic experiences with men exacerbated mental health issues such as anxiety.

Access to income and resources:

- Several interviewees identified their age and gender as having a negative impact on their experiences of accessing income and resources while they were homeless.

- Women additionally spoke about how they struggled to keep up with their financial responsibilities when they were on benefits, with the majority stating they could not financially support themselves.

Relationships:

- Seven out of nine of the women interviewed had experienced domestic abuse.

- Several young women highlighted that their age or gender meant that service providers did not take their perspectives seriously. Some also spoke about how professionals did not believe them when reporting abuse or neglect from partners and carers.

Responsibilities and aspirations:

- Young women indicated that responsibilities associated with their gender and societal role affected their experiences of homelessness. For example, the young mothers faced additional caring responsibilities and had to consider all their decisions relating to their homelessness with regard to their children's needs.

- Education and employment aspirations have helped to make the lives of the young women interviewed feel less chaotic because they ground them in the present and help them to navigate complex environments.

Key recommendations include:

Identity and Discrimination:

✓ *Frontline and support staff working in services with homeless young people should undertake gender awareness training and learn about psychologically informed environments (PIE) to ensure that services work with a trauma and gender informed approach.*

✓ *Improve time and resources available to frontline and support staff working with vulnerable young women to ensure that staff are able to offer a person-centred approach to their clients.*

Suitability of Accommodation:

✓ *Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and local authorities should allocate more funding for specific homelessness provision, including women-only and LGBTQ+ services, to accommodate for vulnerable young people's individual needs.*

Access to Income and Resources:

✓ *Institutions such as local authorities, Job Centre Plus, and schools to improve accessibility of information around benefits, employment, education, homelessness, and housing to help young women find the information that they need in order to make informed decisions.*

✓ *Department for Work and Pensions to introduce a new Youth Independence Payment of £16.06 per week for young people living independently without family support. This would raise their overall Universal Credit entitlement to the rate that over 25s receive in recognition that they face the same living costs.*

✓ *Department for Work and Pensions to continue to uprate benefits to reflect the real cost of living to ensure vulnerable households do not face a real-terms cut to their incomes.*

✓ *Department for Work and Pensions to remove the requirement for couples to make joint claims for Universal Credit to provide young women with financial independence and reduce the risk of financial abuse.*

Relationships:

✓ *Institutions such as local authorities, schools, and social care providers must improve awareness of support for domestic violence and unhealthy relationships.*

✓ *Improve communication between agencies such as local authorities, Department for Work and Pensions, and HM Revenue & Customs, to ensure that vulnerable young women receive efficient, comprehensive support.*

Responsibilities and Aspirations:

✓ *Department for Work and Pensions must ensure Universal Credit supports vulnerable young women into education and training in order for them to develop their skills and to work towards a career they aspire to.*

✓ *Department for Work and Pensions should introduce new employment schemes for vulnerable young women with a variety of options and carefully considered pathways to progress into careers.*

✓ *Department for Work and Pensions should improve affordability of childcare for vulnerable young women on low incomes or benefits to help them to be able to engage in education and employment opportunities.*

Introduction

Centrepoint's Youth Homelessness Databank identified that in 2020-21, more than 46,000 young women (aged 16-24) presented to their local authority as homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Research also suggests that gender plays a significant role in paths to homelessness and subsequent homelessness experiences.[8,9] Moreover, it shows that gender informs reasons for homelessness, how homelessness is experienced, and how relationships are mobilised to counteract homelessness.[10,11]

However, the evidence base on homelessness, including homelessness statistics and research, often focuses on 'male domains' of homelessness such as the streets, emergency shelters, and supported accommodation.[12] For this reason, the experiences of homeless women are often less accounted for, and evidence points to women being more likely to experience hidden forms of homelessness.[13]

The difficulty in enumerating hidden homelessness can also lead to misconceptions about the severity of young women's experiences. For example, it is well established that poverty and socioeconomic marginalisation are contributing factors to homelessness.[14] However, despite young women being more likely to experience these issues than their male counterparts, their experiences are still underrepresented in homelessness research and statistical data.[15]

This gap in data also leads to a lack of understanding of the homelessness pathways for young women; i.e. how they enter into homelessness and navigate subsequent support systems. This can make it difficult to understand the barriers they face in accessing support, employment and housing to relieve their homelessness, especially when considering those with multiple marginalised identities and severe and complex mental health needs.

This report seeks to fill some of this gap in the data by giving voice to women with experiences of youth homelessness. Through qualitative interviews with women with experiences of homelessness and sectoral stakeholders, and analysis of data from Centrepoint's Youth Homelessness Databank, this report examines the drivers leading to homelessness for young women, how homelessness is experienced, and the impact of support and assistance available.

Some of the key findings of young women's experiences of homelessness and support included in the report are: the role of identity and discrimination; the need for women-only and other specific homelessness provision; improved support for domestic abuse survivors and wider training for professionals; the need for a flexible approach to support; greater financial support; improved awareness and options in education and employment.

Methods

Interviews were conducted between June and October 2022. During this time, nine in-depth interviews were conducted with women who have had experiences of youth homelessness aged 20 - 29 from London, Yorkshire, or Tyne and Wear. Interviews were mainly conducted via video call or phone call, with a small number conducted face-to-face. Additionally, twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders including frontline staff, managers, and health workers. The interviews were semi-structured and included the topics: reasons for homelessness; benefits experiences; housing support experiences; experiences of homelessness; health and wellbeing; relationships; risk and safety; and policy recommendations.

The data was analysed via thematic analysis, using verbatim transcripts of interviews to conduct line by line inquiries of emerging themes. These themes were then recorded and each interview was reanalysed

as themes developed and changed. The most widely cited themes are highlighted in the report and include: identity and discrimination; suitability and experiences of accommodation; access to income and resources; relationships; and responsibilities and aspirations.

Data was also analysed from Centrepoint's Youth Homelessness Databank. The Youth Homelessness Databank is Centrepoint's main tool to explore the true picture of youth homelessness in the UK. Data is collected by bringing together information from local and national governments across the UK concerning the scale and impact of homelessness among young people. In particular, the Youth Homelessness Databank displays the number of young people aged 16 to 24 who presented as homeless or at risk of homelessness to their local authority, as well as their subsequent journey under the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA 2017).*


Young women's homelessness in context

Hidden homelessness

The Centrepoint Youth Homelessness Databank shows that for the past two years there has been a greater number of young women compared to young men presenting as homeless. In 2019/20, 37,247 women aged 16-24 presented as homeless compared to 26,652 men; and in 2020/21, there were 46,091 women and 34,451 men.[16] Of the young people who were assessed in 2020/2021, it was found that a greater proportion of young women were owed a prevention duty (meaning that they were at risk of homelessness and that the Local Authority must take steps to help them maintain their current accommodation or secure alternative accommodation) whereas a greater proportion of men were owed relief duty (indicating that they were currently homeless and the Local Authority must help them to secure accommodation for at least six months).

Centrepoint research (2019)has also found that young women are more likely to have sofa surfed and stayed in a home with an abusive partner, while young men are more likely to have slept in public areas like parks, building doorways and car parks. These findings suggest that young women may be more likely to experience hidden homelessness and be less likely to rough sleep than young men. Furthermore, this may explain the gender differences in whether a young person is owed prevention or relief duty seen in the findings of the databank.[17]

Research by Crisis found that 70 per cent of the homeless women in their study had experienced 'hidden homelessness' situations.[18] Hidden homelessness can be defined as staying in accommodation situations that are informal and not provided by service providers such as the homes of relatives or friends or sleeping on night buses. They are not visible on the street or to formal agencies that provide homeless accommodation services, meaning that women can be frequently excluded from homelessness statistics.
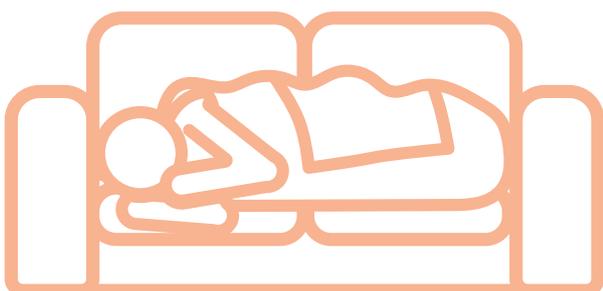
Risks, harms and exploitation

In addition to hidden homelessness, research shows that homeless young women are also at risk of sexual victimisation. Findings from a systematic review of studies on youth homelessness and sexual exploitation highlight that young women regularly experience sexual assault, rape and fear of being sexually victimised while homeless.[19] These findings are highlighted by Centrepoint research showing that that 1 in 5 women within their sample of homeless young people had experienced sexual assault while homeless.[20] Research by Crisis has found that women were more likely to have formed an undesired sexual partnership with a person in order to obtain a roof over their head than men (28 per cent of women and 14 per cent of men).[21] While not exclusive to women, these types of experiences pose a risk to the safety and wellbeing of a large number of homeless young women. It is, therefore, important to investigate sexual exploitation and victimisation risks in order to try and prevent them in the future.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that women who have experienced physical and sexual violence are significantly more likely to have experienced disadvantage in other sectors of their life such as health problems, disabilities, substance misuse, poverty, debt, housing problems, childhood adversity and discrimination.[22]

"I think there is a very specific experience of young women, which is hidden more, you know, because women don't rough sleep in a way in which outreach teams can find them... all young people are at risk of exploitation of violence on the streets but I think there is a further level of that, that young women, non-binary young people, trans young people face because they are more vulnerable to being exploited financially or sexually."

– Stakeholder, London

Additionally, research has shown that insecure housing and homelessness are often linked to poor mental health. According to a 2016 report by the Mental Health Foundation, young women aged 16-24 were more likely to suffer from common mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression (26 per cent of young women in comparison to 9.1 per cent of young men),[23] while one study found that homeless young women had significantly worse mental health than young men and a higher suicide attempt rate.[24] This evidence suggests that homeless young women have a greater risk of experiencing mental health issues compared to young people generally.

Drivers of homelessness for young women

Relationships

The Centrepoint Databank (2020/21) found that the three biggest reasons for the loss of last settled home for young people were: family no longer willing or able to accommodate (49 per cent), domestic abuse (9 per cent), and friends no longer willing or able to accommodate (6 per cent).[25] However, when split by gender domestic violence as a cause of loss of last settled home is much greater in young women (15 per cent) than young men (3 per cent). This reflects one key difference in young men and women's experiences of homelessness.

Domestic violence has been found to be highly prevalent in women who have experienced homelessness. Research from the Centrepoint Databank (2021) found that domestic violence was identified as the cause of homelessness for 15 per cent of homeless young women, a figure that is five times larger than young men.[26]

In addition to high rates of domestic violence, women also experience diminished access to associated support services. Since 2010, 17 per cent of specialist Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) refuges in England have closed.[27] Furthermore, Women's Aid found that in 2019-2020, 57 per cent of referrals to refuges were rejected due to lack of space or capacity.[28] Moreover, the research states that these women are often housed in general accommodation: a form of housing that is considered to be unsuitable for those who have experienced domestic violence due to them requiring greater support and safeguarding. This evidence suggests that women fleeing domestic violence struggle to find appropriate housing and get the support that they need.

Additionally, financial instability has been identified as playing a role in some relationship breakdown, another key driver of homelessness.[29] This can mean young women from disadvantaged backgrounds face additional risks of losing a place to live, and this evidence suggests that homelessness may become entrenched within families. Lone parents have a greater risk of becoming homeless themselves and their children have a greater risk if their families have faced financial hardship. Furthermore, the risk is even greater if the parent or child is a woman.[30]

Access to income and resources

Research shows that homelessness is rooted in long-term disadvantage. The Office for National Statistics found that 'disadvantaged' school pupils (defined as those eligible for free school meals) were half as likely to be earning above the full-time Living Wage at the age of 25 as students who were not eligible for free school meals.[31] When broken down by gender, it was found that female free school meals recipients were over 2.5 times less likely to be earning above this threshold than males who were not eligible. Research has highlighted that the difficulty of living on a low wage can be a contributing factor to becoming homeless.[32] For example, earning an inadequate wage, affects a young woman's ability to afford to pay rent which could result in a need to stay in an unstable setting. This suggests that coming from a 'disadvantaged' family, especially as a woman, increases the likelihood of being on a lower income later in life and subsequently experiencing homelessness.

Evidence also suggests that long-term poverty and socioeconomic marginalisation are contributing factors to homelessness.[33] Women are more likely than men to experience persistent poverty, a form of deprivation that prevents the development of a financial safety net in times of hardship.[34] This is because women frequently struggle to accrue financial resources, with men earning a higher hourly median rate of pay than women in the majority of ethnic groups.[35] Accordingly, women are more likely to live hand to mouth and could, subsequently, be pushed into debt if unexpected costs arise. Furthermore, women who are experiencing poverty are more likely to have experienced abuse and violence.[36] This suggests a complex interplay between young women's experiences of poverty, abuse, and homelessness.

In the UK, the vast majority of lone parent households are headed by women (90 per cent).[37] Moreover, in 2018 Shelter reported that lone-parent households were more likely to be at risk of homelessness and that 93 per cent of lone-parent households living in temporary accommodation were headed by homeless women.[38] Lone parents are often less able to work full time hours due to childcare responsibilities. This means that many lone parents receive child benefit and/or Universal Credit to supplement their income. Research has found that female lone parents were the hardest hit by cuts to tax and benefits services of all household types between 2010 and 2020.[39] Furthermore, lone parents are the most likely of any household composition to be struggling with poverty.[40] This evidence suggests that lone mothers are less likely to be financially well off and are more likely to be at risk of homelessness. Lone young mothers have greater costs of living than most other young people without children and have less capacity to work if they do not have the available finances or support network for childcare. This can leave them to be unable to afford rent and subsequently be more at risk of becoming homeless.

Furthermore, women are also disproportionately affected by cuts to tax and benefit services.[41] Aspects of the benefits system such as: the benefit cap; the five-week wait for the first Universal Credit payment (the main benefit for people who are out of work or on a low income); unaffordable debt deductions from benefits; and Local Housing Allowance rates failing to bridge the gap between housing costs and benefits all increase poverty for vulnerable women in the UK.

Social security challenges for young women experiencing homelessness

The benefit cap

The benefit cap is an overall limit on the amount of benefits working age people can get. It largely affects families with children and some single people in high cost rent areas. Either the persons Universal Credit or Housing Benefit is cut so that their benefit entitlement is within the cap, this makes it harder to afford to pay rent and meet living costs. Evidence also shows that the benefit cap impacts female-headed households to a greater degree, with 69 per cent of capped households in May 2022 being single parents with children.[42]

The five week wait for Universal Credit

When someone applies for Universal Credit, they need to wait for five weeks before they receive their first payment. The claimant can receive an advance for this payment however, this payment is a loan which will be paid back via monthly deductions from their future Universal Credit payments. Many young people do not have the finances to support themselves during the five-week wait and have no choice but to take the advance payment. This means that these young people start their claims in debt and have to survive on even smaller monthly payments.[43]
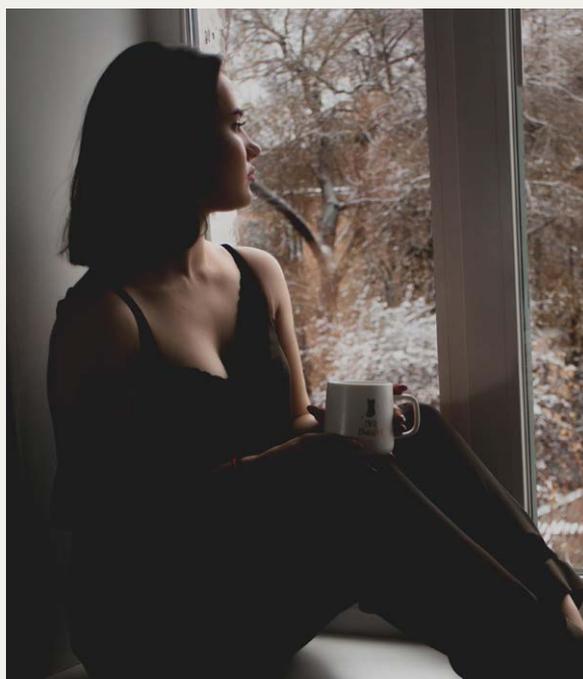
Sanctions

Research has shown that benefit sanctions have disproportionately affected young people. Despite 16 -25 year olds only representing under 15 per cent of Universal Credit Claimants, people under 25 received 41 per cent of all Universal Credit sanctions decisions made between May 2016 and January 2021.[44,45] These sanctions are often applied without proper explanation and young people feel they are not able to or are unaware of how to challenge them.[46,47]

Local Housing Allowance

Young people can get Housing Benefit if they are living in: a homeless hostel or refuge; types of supported housing; and emergency or temporary housing after a homeless application. If young people are in private rented accommodation and on Universal Credit, they will receive their housing costs as part of their Universal Credit claim. Local Housing Allowance is used to work out both Housing Benefit and Universal Credit housing element. Within the Local Housing Allowance (LHA), the amount of benefit most young people can claim is limited to the Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR), an amount deemed adequate to rent a room in a shared house at the lower end of the private rental market. The LHA rate does not effectively cover rental costs, with less than 9 per cent of properties for rent in London being affordable on LHA in 2020-2021.[48] This leaves many vulnerable young people forced to pay for rent which they cannot afford which pushes them into poverty and increasing their risk of homeless.[49]

Lower rates for young people

The Universal Credit standard allowance for under 25s is more than £15 less a week than that of over-25s. This is based on the assumption that under-25s are living with or supported by family networks and, therefore, do not have the same financial responsibilities as older adults. However, this is not the case for many vulnerable young people who are living independently and do not have financial support from family networks, meaning that they struggle to cover rent and living costs.[50]

Findings and Discussion

Identity and discrimination

A key theme to emerge from discussions with young women and stakeholders was the role of identity, and how this impacted on young women's experiences and access to support.

Analysis of interviews shows that various gender norms affect experiences of homelessness. These are norms relating to: their appearance e.g. "societal pressure on women to be beautiful"; being seen as more "vulnerable"; and being seen as "weak" compared to men. Due to these norms being seen as vulnerable or weak, in the face of "men [who] feel superior", many women highlighted that they felt more at risk from abuse in vulnerable situations:

"I think it did have a negative impact the fact that I was a woman, definitely, I was more exposed to abuse, domestic abuse. And that was experienced when I was sofa surfing. So yeah, it was really, really tough as a woman, and also I felt as a woman, I was undervalued by the system."

– Louisa, London

Furthermore, some young women described how structural barriers relating to their gender, such as the gender pay gap, exacerbate the complexity of homelessness:

"Because women, you know, we experience a lot of discrimination. You know, low pay. It goes on for centuries."

– Louisa, London

Components of identity are not mutually exclusive. Rather, characteristics can intersect, meaning that identity must be considered holistically for each individual. Other important aspects of identity include race, sexuality, age, and culture. For instance, interviewees described how the coalescence of traditionally disadvantaged aspects of identity may inform experiences of homelessness:

"Young women who are refugees, who are black, Asian, minority ethnic, their situation is further complicated because of the intersection of language, of racism, of immigration. So you know, like, a queer young black woman is going to have quite like very hidden experience compared to lots of other people. So I think it's really important to kind of recognise that within those groups, there are lots of different experiences."

– Stakeholder, London

Furthermore, specific challenges can arise for women who identify as LGBTQ+:

"I think LGBTQ young people, have, you know, lots of needs around identity, body dysmorphia, eating disorders, coming to terms with sexuality, you know, mental health that connects with some of that."

– Stakeholder, London

Stakeholders who were interviewed mentioned that LGBTQ+ women frequently experienced discrimination, such as misgendering and the use of dead-names (referring to a transgender or non-binary person by a name they used before transitioning) when interacting with homelessness services. They argued that it was often difficult to ascribe new names uniformly across services which meant that young people were repeatedly addressed in ways that were distressing for them. When misgendering happens or dead-names are used, it makes people feel invalidated and it can negatively impact their self-esteem. In order to address this, stakeholders identified the need to implement comprehensive inclusion training and formal processes for name changes and pronoun preferences across institutions.

"...systems are still set up in a binary way like, are you male or female, like, you know, young people being asked for dead-names where they have a deed poll and their name is changed and that affects housing, that affects employment."

– Stakeholder, London

Participants also raised the issue of identity and behaviour, with behaviours seen as 'challenging' meaning young women were not offered the support they needed. For example, one woman who was experiencing abuse at home had become withdrawn at school as a result. The behaviour was labelled by staff as being a result of normal hormonal stages that teenage girls experience and the problems she was experiencing were not picked up. This in turn led to her disengaging from education and being further excluded:

"Because I just wouldn't go to school because when I would go there they would tell me that I'm being difficult and I'm not studying, but they're not asking me why I'm not studying, or why my clothes wouldn't be ironed, or why there was bags under my eyes, why you are you not sleeping? Why is a year 7 not sleeping? Why is she sleeping in class? All these things you know?"

– Freya, London

Stakeholders spoke about how the young women's frustration with systems including benefits and housing similarly could be perceived as aggressive, leading to staff being less likely to help them. Those interviewed spoke about best practice when working with vulnerable young women:

"A good key worker will understand the anger. Negative emotions are just emotions that a young person is expressing. They're not expressing at the staff member. They're just letting out those emotions."

– Stakeholder, London

Additionally, stakeholders highlighted the importance of understanding an individual's behaviour against the backdrop of their current situation and past experiences. Every young woman coming into homeless accommodation has had different experiences throughout their lives and each individual processes trauma differently. Organisations with ethics and processes that are informed by a person centred approach can more effectively support homeless young people. As such, specialist organisations may be more adept at supporting someone with specific experiences. For example, a stakeholder spoke about an organisation which supports black and minority women who have experienced domestic violence called Southall Black Sisters and praised the specialist work that they do.

It is clear that every young woman's identity is distinct and that they each experience homelessness in different ways. However, one commonality of several of the young women's identities was an internalised sense of a homeless identity. Several women spoke about how being homeless had affected their self-esteem and wellbeing and had led to loneliness, shame, and trauma. Furthermore, some women spoke about how their homelessness made them feel disparate from their friends in college and school:

"When all your friends are like at sixth form and they have a different lifestyle to you. It's a very big and very scary adjustment."

– Ella, London

This feeling of disconnection from peers further exacerbates feelings of embarrassment and "brings up a lot of insecurities". The effects of homelessness as a part of identity are displayed in additional difficulties in school, work, and mental health. For example, if a young woman feels stigmatised in school, she may stop attending. Furthermore, financial aspects of being homeless play a role in school and college attendance. Centrepoint research has shown that some homeless young people do not attend college because they cannot afford travel or food.[51]

This experience subsequently reproduces the homeless identity as these young women are missing out on experiences that characterise the lives of other young people, perpetuating further feelings of exclusion.

It was highlighted by several women interviewed that more needs to be done to raise awareness and recognition of homelessness and housing insecurity, as a means of reducing stigma and disconnection from others:

"Yeah, I definitely think it needs to be something that's more recognised. I think it's something where, you know, young people can be going through something like being homeless, and they're too ashamed to share it because it can be considered embarrassing, or like, in that sort of way."

– Ella, London

Several women spoke about the importance of raising awareness of youth homelessness in schools to reduce stigma. Similarly, existing literature highlights the importance of early intervention, awareness raising, and programs for children, young people, and their families to reduce the stigma of homelessness.[52]

✓ **Recommendation:** *Frontline and support staff working in services with homeless young people should undertake gender awareness training and learn about psychologically informed environments (PIE) to ensure that services work with a trauma and gender informed approach.*

✓ **Recommendation:** *Improve time and resources available to frontline and support staff working with vulnerable young women to ensure that staff are able to offer a person-centred approach to their clients.*

Suitability of accommodation

The suitability of accommodation came up frequently in interviews with women with experiences of youth homelessness and stakeholders. The suitability of accommodation refers to how appropriate the accommodation was for the interviewee, based on physical and social aspects of the accommodation. Key notions which made accommodation suitable were: housing safety; security; and being close to places of work, education and existing social connections.

Several of the participants highlighted how it is important for young people to feel a sense of belonging and safety in their accommodation, in order to address mental and physical health needs and effectively engage with support. This could relate to the areas in which they are being housed; the people they are housed with; and the general suitability of the housing they are placed in.[53]

However, for all of the young women interviewed, accessing suitable and safe housing options proved a challenge, limiting their ability to move on from homelessness and damaging their health and wellbeing.

Interviewees reported that the local area was a key element in feeling comfortable in their accommodation. Due to the lack of available housing in her area, one young person was going to be accommodated in another town. However, her social worker successfully advocated for her against this move as she was under 18 and had no family or friends in the proposed housing location. Several participants reported not being aware or informed of rules around local connection and eligibility for homeless services, highlighting the importance of effective advice and advocacy on housing options for young people.

Furthermore, a stakeholder spoke about where survivors of domestic abuse try to approach a borough for housing but are passed on to a different borough where they have a local connection. It can be very challenging to explain that that borough is not safe for them and show that they need to be housed elsewhere.

Another woman described how it was very challenging that her accommodation was based in central London as this meant having to shop for food in small express supermarkets which were "super expensive and didn't have hardly anything in [them]." She also highlighted how the contrast of being surrounded by wealthy shoppers while personally experiencing homelessness made her feel especially out of place and uncomfortable.

One woman expressed frustration towards the housing options that were provided to her upon becoming homeless after leaving a psychiatric ward. She was not able to return to the family home due to abuse, could not afford accommodation in the private rented sector, and there was little chance of her being offered social housing. Her social worker took her to see a room in an elderly care home, but the care home manager refused to house her as it was clearly unsuitable, resulting in her having nowhere to stay and her being forced to stay in an unsafe setting with an ex-partner:

"I was actually quite shocked at the level, you know, the lack of support."

– Chloe, Yorkshire

This situation highlights both the severe shortage of suitable accommodation for young women facing homelessness and the perceived lack of understanding from professionals about what constitutes appropriate accommodation. Several women described how social workers did not seem to care about whether they felt comfortable in their housing:

"I think it's just a case of - they've got a roof over their head now, just leave them to it."

– Ella, London

Increasingly, however, greater consideration is being given to the needs of homeless young people beyond their need for shelter. For example, Housing First services have been shown to be effective housing options with high tenancy sustainment and positive well-being outcomes for young people.[54] Housing First principles for young people include: immediate access to housing with no preconditions; youth choice and self-determination; positive youth development orientation; individualised and client-driven supports; and social inclusion and community integration. These principles reflect similar notions which were brought up by interviewees such as the need for a person-centred approach and social inclusion. Thus, these principles should be considered as an approach to improving young women's housing services.

The majority of young women interviewed indicated that they had a preference for women-only accommodation. However, issues surrounding a lack of female only provision for homeless young people were regularly cited. Additionally, stakeholders who were interviewed mentioned the lack of provision for LGBTQ+ homeless young people:

"I think in terms of the options, it's not the greatest either. There was never an option for them to say – 'Would you like to be in the female only share shared accommodation? Would you like to be in a mix?' It was a case of you get what you're given, deal with it."

– Ella, London

Several of the women interviewed highlighted the role of personal experience and identity in establishing a sense of belonging in their housing environment:

"I think in a situation where especially if you're dealing with somebody young, yes, they're in a desperate situation, yes, they do need somewhere to stay. But at the same time, you need to take into consideration their needs and their wants."

– Ella, London

For example, one young person with a history of familial instability suggested that it was important for this to be taken into account when considering appropriate housing options:

"I think is really important to try and make that [environment] feel like as stable as possible. Because you've already come from so much instability."

– Georgie, London

Some young women also expressed that they were happy when their environment complemented their individual needs. For example, interviewees who were parents stated that they preferred living in accommodation where their children could socialise in shared gardens and playrooms. Likewise, interviewees highlighted that accommodation that did not take into account their traumatic experiences with men exacerbated mental health issues such as anxiety:

"They didn't consider the impact of mental health. Realistically, if they had considered 'okay, this ain't the best for her, let's put her into a smaller unit with females.' Would my anxiety be as bad as it is now? Who knows?"

– Ella, London

In addition to considerations around who they should be housed with, participants spoke about the importance of the physical quality of their accommodation.

For example, some women reported that they did not feel comfortable to have friends visit them because of the appearance of their accommodation. Due to the current cost of living crisis, many young women experiencing homeless cannot afford to go out with friends in places like cafes and pubs. This can promote feelings of isolation if they cannot meet friends at home or in public places which cost money.

Several women spoke about how some of the temporary accommodation that they stayed in felt more like an "institution" than a home. For example, interviewee's spoke about the lack of decorations and comfortable furnishings in their temporary accommodation. Similarly, others shared that their temporary accommodation felt uninviting as they were large buildings with secure doors and entry systems. However, these tools did not always engender security, as some women claimed that locked doors and windows promoted notions of restriction and vulnerability:

"Your house should be a safe space. You sleep there, you should feel safe. You know, after a long day, you should want to be able to come home, not run away from home. It plays into the whole mental health thing, but your mental health can really deteriorate if you're not in a good housing environment."

– Freya, London

This finding illustrates the significance of ensuring that homeless accommodation is psychologically informed. Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) take into account the emotional and psychological needs of individuals. It relates to how staff interact with young people and help them to deal with complex emotional trauma. Additionally, the concept of PIE highlights that the physical environment is also crucial to ensuring the young person's wellbeing. The space around them should have the ability to make young people feel safe and encourage positive relationships, so needs to be maintained to good physical condition. The design of the space, which will depend on the needs of those that use the services, will send a positive message about valuing those living or working within it. Therefore, it is important to take the design and appearance of accommodation for vulnerable young women into account.

✓ *Recommendation: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and local authorities should allocate more funding for specific homelessness provision, including women-only and LGBTQ+ services, to accommodate for vulnerable young people's individual needs. Furthermore, these accommodations should be designed to be psychologically informed.*

Access to income and resources

Existing research shows that young people struggle when seeking to access income and resources. For example, recent Centrepoint research found that benefit rates for young people living independently are too low, leaving many struggling to meet essential living and housing costs.[55] Analysis of interviews has corroborated these findings in terms of young women's experiences of the benefits system. Moreover, the research indicates that these outcomes damage young people's health and wellbeing, impact on their ability to access employment, education and training, and put them at risk of exploitation and abuse. These findings were reflected within this research and expanded on in relation to young women's specific experiences of access to income and resources.

Several interviewees identified their age and gender as having a negative impact on their experiences of accessing income while they were homeless. For example, one person highlighted how structural difficulties associated with age and gender, such as the gender pay gap (men earn around 8 per cent more than women in work[56]), affect a person's risk of homelessness:

"If you're under the age of 25, you get paid less, less wages, than someone who's 25. We all know about the pay gap between male and female as well. So as a young female, it's not exactly like, I'm getting paid the same as everybody else."

– Ella, London

Moreover, rules and norms associated with the ages of young women meant that they regularly faced additional difficulties when seeking to access services and sources of financial support. For example, one young person, under the age of 18, found it difficult to access Housing Benefit because "as far as they [the local authority] were concerned I should've been supported by my parents".

Most people under the age of 18 are not eligible for Housing Benefit. This rule is grounded in the assumption that all young people live with or are supported by their parents.[57] This is not the case for many homeless young women whose relationships with family or partners have broken down, left care or whose families do not have the financial capacity to support them. Therefore, Housing Benefit should be more flexible and look at individuals on a case by case basis in order to effectively support homeless young people.

Young women who are non-UK nationals and refugees face additional difficulties accessing income and resources:

"I had my immigration case going on... I didn't have any money, no accommodation. I couldn't even speak English properly. I was so nervous. I didn't even have a doctor. And that time, like, I felt like a new person. Like I had to start life from the beginning"

– Serena, Yorkshire

These added challenges such as language barriers meant that this young woman needed additional support from homelessness services in order to access income and housing. With the help of this added support, she was able to become fluent in English and find full time work.

Many interviewees spoke about the effect of low wages on their ability to keep up with their responsibilities. In doing this, interviewees emphasised that it was often a "struggle" to manage their finances on minimum wage: with people under 18 receiving £4.81; 18-20 £6.83; 21-22 £9.18; and over 23 £9.50.[58] This means that young people who do not have support from their parents or wider family need to work more hours to meet their living needs:

"I was getting paid like six pounds an hour, but I think realistically, I don't have the same situation as every other 18 year old, every other 18 year old lives at home and gets to do what they want. I don't - I have bills to pay, and realistically, my pay is not reflecting that"

– Ella, London

The above quote highlights how receiving a minimum wage can leave some young women struggling to support themselves. As such, many young women have to take on extra work in order to survive:

"I work a lot like sometimes I work seven days a week, like I work sometimes 55 hours a week. And some months it can be very challenging, like to make do, especially at the minute with the living crisis, where rates are going up, electricity goes up, council tax goes up, and we're struggling."

– Ella, London

Additionally, women and stakeholders spoke about how young women struggle to meet their financial responsibilities when they were on benefits. In doing this they highlighted that the benefits system often lets down young women with specific needs such as domestic abuse survivors. This is because members of this cohort receive Universal Credit as a joint claim alongside their abusive partner, leaving them at risk of financial abuse.[59] It can then take some time for their claims to be made into an individual claim, meaning that the survivor can be left with limited funds to survive on:

"I don't see the benefit system as adequate at all. I mean, I think there probably does need to be really specific look at how the benefit system supports victims, homeless people, supports victims of domestic violence and abuse... I think, yeah, being able to get benefits to people quicker, and being able to get claims set up quicker for individuals where there's a risk is all really important."

– Stakeholder, London

Where additional financial support was available, participants spoke about how this helped cover essentials and reduce the anxiety of not having enough to get by. For instance, one participant mentioned the positive impact of support she received while she was homeless at sixth form:

"... when I was at college, I used to get EMA, which used to be at 30 pounds a week. But that stopped. That was actually really helpful. So it's bad that they cut that."

– Georgie, London

This evidence shows how a small amount of added support can make financial responsibilities such as paying for food, travel, and bills more manageable. EMA stands for Education Maintenance Allowance and was financial support for young people studying. It has been replaced by the 16 to 19 bursary fund. Unfortunately, the new bursary only helps young people between the age of 16 to 19 to access education, training and ensure that they have enough to pay for school supplies and travel. Thus, it is important for the government to think about how they can similarly support people above this age. The Universal Credit £20 uplift was an example of how a wider cohort of people, including those aged above 19, were supported. The reinstatement of the £20 uplift could equate to this added support and help enable young women to manage their responsibilities to excel in their lives.**

✓ **Recommendation:** *Department for Work and Pensions to introduce a new Youth Independence Payment of £16.06 per week for young people living independently without family support. This would raise their overall Universal Credit entitlement to the rate that over 25s receive in recognition that they face the same living costs.*

✓ **Recommendation:** *Department for Work and Pensions to continue to uprate benefits to reflect the real cost of living to ensure vulnerable households do not face a real-terms cut to their incomes.*

✓ **Recommendation:** *Department for Work and Pensions to remove the requirement for couples to make joint claims for Universal Credit to provide young women with financial independence and reduce the risk of financial abuse.*

✓ **Recommendation:** *Institutions such as local authorities, Job Centre Plus, and schools to improve accessibility of information around benefits, employment, education, homelessness, and housing to help young women find the information that they need in order to make informed decisions.*

**Between March 2020 and October 2021, the government temporarily increased Universal Credit by £20 a week to help claimants financially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Centrepoint research found that the withdrawal of this uplift greatly negatively impacted vulnerable young people's finances. https://centrepoint.org.uk/media/5293/uc-cut-report-a4-single-pages.pdf

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Relationships

Formal and informal relationships have been identified as helping young people to navigate homelessness and access support. This is because the networks influence how young people understand and interact with notions of support.[60] Young women's experiences of homelessness are influenced by how they relate to and interact with others, from reasons leading to homelessness through to access to housing advice and support. All of the young women in this research spoke of the importance of relationships and social networks.

Unhealthy relationships and domestic violence

The importance of learning about healthy relationships came up frequently during interviews with Centrepoint staff and young women. A healthy relationship makes you feel loved, safe and empowered. However, if you feel scared of consequences from a partner, friend or family, from being honest, yourself and confident, then there may be certain behaviours and attitudes in the relationship that are defined as unhealthy. It was common for the relationships of the young people to be unhealthy – it was reported that many young people frequently missed "red flags" in partners that other people might notice. Some staff members attributed this to the young people's "desire to be loved and cared for and wanted and seen", especially if they had experienced familial rejection. They reported that the young people sometimes "just want someone to care, even if that person isn't really caring" for them. Due to this need for relationships, young women experiencing homelessness may be at greater risk of being in abusive relationships The new curriculum introduction of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), which replaced Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) in 2020, is a welcome improvement and should help increase awareness of healthy relationships for young women in the future.[61]

Seven out of the nine women interviewed reported experiencing domestic abuse. Domestic abuse can be defined as 'a pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner'.[62] Domestic abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological. Emotional and psychological abuse can often go under the radar and some people do not immediately recognise them as domestic abuse.[63] All forms of domestic abuse are traumatic and impact the survivor during and after the abusive relationship.

Couples that claim Universal Credit receive their benefits as a joint payment paid into the nominated bank account of one of them as the 'main claimant'. Stakeholders interviewed identified that these joint payments can leave young women vulnerable to financial abuse. As one partner has sole control over the couple's finances, they are able to restrict the other partner's financial freedom and make them critically dependent on them.[64]

One woman spoke about how she would receive deductions to her benefits as her partner was not meeting his claimant responsibilities in their joint claim:

"It was difficult, because if he didn't do his job search up to standard and I did, then it was both of our income getting affected."

– Jasmin, Tyne and Wear

This example shows the risk involved in joint claims for Universal Credit. The government should remove joint claims so that young women are evaluated and paid independently of their partners.

One woman had experienced abuse from a parent as a child and suggested that this experience went on to affect her in subsequent relationships. In doing this, she described it as a "cycle" of being in and out of abusive relationships throughout her life. Furthermore, she stated that she "didn't get much support" and was sometimes told by abusers that she would not be believed if she reached out for help:

"That's really difficult, just the fact that they know that they can get away with it. Like and that's what they'd say, who's gonna believe you? You know, a mentally ill homeless girl."

– Chloe, Yorkshire

The manipulation to make her think that no-one would believe her meant that she was less likely to seek support. Moreover, past research has found that maltreated young people are less likely to seek help.[65] It is, therefore, important that relevant institutions, such as the police and domestic violence support services, be made visible and approachable to young women in vulnerable situations. This visibility would ensure that young women know that support is out there and how to reach out for it. Furthermore, staff in these institutions should ensure that they take the time to listen to and trust young women's accounts of abuse so that they feel valued and protected.

Professional relationships

The role of positive professional relationships are identified as key in helping young people build the confidence and resilience needed to successfully move on from homelessness.[66] Several young women spoke about how much they valued their relationships with staff:

"I love the key workers. I could literally go down there for a chat anytime, it didn't have to be about anything serious."

- Charlotte, London

Interviewees mentioned how staff had helped them access benefits, housing, food and support. One woman highlighted that Centrepoint staff had advocated for her to get money back from the council when she was unfairly charged:

"Yeah if I didn't have them behind me, kind of backing me then I wouldn't have got that back."

– Charlotte, London

Furthermore, it was described how staff can help to promote confidence and guidance around getting support:

"...that woman is amazing. I'm still in contact with her. She's the one that made me want to do counselling."

– Freya, London

Stakeholders commented on how it was important to be flexible and take the difficulties young women were facing in to account, such as by recognising that poor mental health and a lack of financial resources could make it more difficult to make appointments.

However, some young women felt that staff in schools, social care, or social security had failed to take into account their individual needs, with one woman attributing their reluctance to employees attempting to avoid extra work – "it's more paperwork, that's what it is."

Research has shown that organisations that are adaptive to fit the needs of their clients see better engagement and attendance.[67] By being understanding and flexible, it allows staff to build stronger, compassionate relationships with young women. For example, one woman said that she had been unable to complete her college courses in the past and was "ready to give up" when a teacher made an exception so that she only had to attend once a week:

"...and it was a lot of hard work. And he like trusted me enough to know that I was gonna do it, I was gonna get there... because of him I've got my GCSEs in English and Maths and I've got my level three."

– Freya, London

Unfortunately, several women spoke about negative relationships with institutions such as councils and housing services. Interviewees described how different services would try to "fob you off to somebody else" which would result in longer claims and/or problems with housing and benefits. Additionally, participants argued that being passed between people and services often reduces rapport and promotes mistrust between service users and staff. High staff turnover rates in social care are very common and relate to excessive workloads and stress levels.[68] This means that young women may be passed on to different staff when their current staff member leaves the organisation. Furthermore, excessive caseloads often leave staff with limited time and resources to meet the needs of the young people they are supporting. Therefore, it is important that social care staff working with young women have reasonable workloads to avoid burnout and to have enough time to provide a flexible, person-centred approach to clients.

For example, several of the women reported having to visit their council several times before being formally accepted as needing support and being owed a homelessness duty. Indeed, one interviewee stated that she was initially rejected by the council for housing and support, and had to get a medical note from her GP:

"I went to the council… and they said no. So I was like, I was at home, and sofa surfing for a year. And then I had to go back to the local authorities and said, look this is what's been going on since the time you refused me. And they said, yes, we can help you."

- Louisa, London

This highlights that some young women are falling through the cracks and may be forced to stay in unsafe or unsuitable housing. For example, one young woman who had been in care spoke about how she had reported domestic abuse to her social workers but was not taken seriously and had no choice but to stay with the abuser:

"So if I said to my social worker, I'm not happy because my foster carer said this, or done this. They won't believe me"

– Jasmin, Tyne and Wear

Several young women highlighted the experience of not being taken seriously: suggesting that their, age and/or gender were factors in promoting disbelief. Research has highlighted the impact of disbelief from institutions, such as the police and court services, and how young people and children are frequently not believed by professionals when they report abuse.[69] This, in turn, can mean that young women are less likely to report future harms and experiencing secondary trauma from perceived disbelief. These experiences were reflected in the interviews of this research:

"They basically just called me a liar and believed everything that my mum had said, and it was like, we're not going to support you, you're basically, let's just say you're spoilt brat, you're going back to your mum's house."

– Ella, London

It is, therefore, important that housing and support staff receive training to ensure that they do not discriminate against young people either consciously or unconsciously. The best relationships that the women reported with staff members from these institutions were when they were "supportive" and "they took me seriously".

Additionally, young women should be able to access the information for themselves to know how to challenge decisions and advocate for themselves.

✓ **Recommendation:** *Institutions such as local authorities, schools, and social care providers must improve awareness of support for domestic violence and unhealthy relationships.*

✓ **Recommendation:** *Improve communication between agencies such as local authorities, Department for Work and Pensions, and HM Revenue & Customs, to ensure that vulnerable young women receive efficient, comprehensive support.*
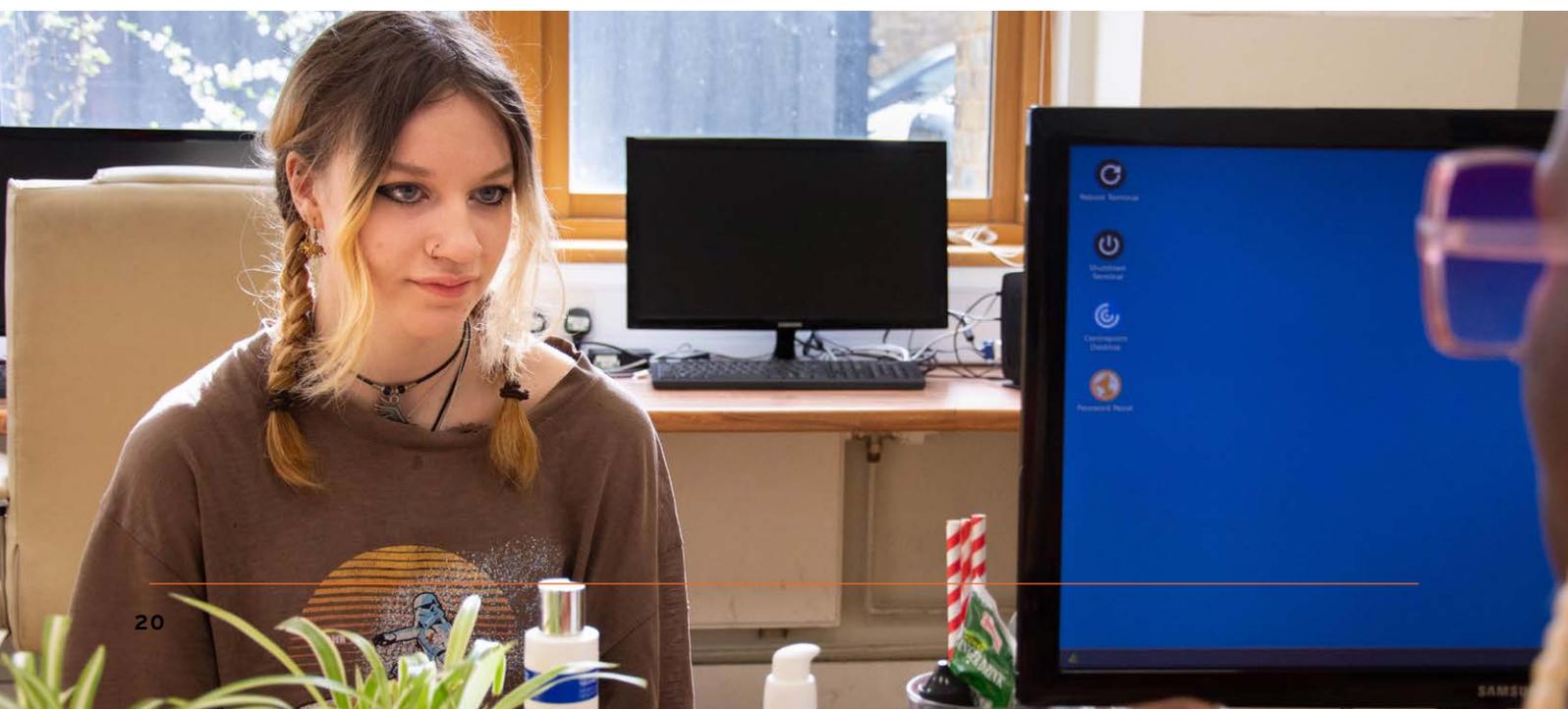
Responsibilities and aspirations

For the young women in this research, a key element of their experience of homelessness centred on responsibilities associated with gender and gender roles in society. Equally, young women highlighted that the perceived need to pursue aspirations motivates them to keep up with their responsibilities. Therefore, it is important to help young women realise and pursue their goals and aspirations.

Responsibilities

Young women experiencing homelessness face responsibilities conventionally associated with adulthood throughout their life course. For example, young women spoke of having to engage in activities such as accessing full time employment, paying bills and food shopping at earlier points in their lives than their non-homeless peers. This is because homeless young women are often forced to rely on themselves for subsistence and have to rapidly confront an emerging array of responsibilities:

"You have to grow up incredibly quick. It's not a case of you can take your time and do it as easy as you want, it's a case of you have to fix up, you've got two years to sort yourself out. So I think in terms of the support it's not the greatest"

– Ella, London

A major responsibility that young women face when moving into homeless accommodation is navigating their finances. This can be challenging if they have not previously been responsible for household expenditures. Moreover, restricted Universal Credit allowance for under 25s and stagnating wages relative to inflation increases the complexity of budgeting for things like food, bills and travel. As such, young women are likely to struggle with budgeting when moving from the family home and into homeless accommodation:

"Often I wouldn't have enough money to pay the rent, just because of like not been able to budget properly. Because you can't budget when you were like, a teenager"

– Georgie, London

Difficulties with budgeting are often made more acute when young women are mothers. Interviewees that were mothers identified the additional responsibilities they had due to having children:
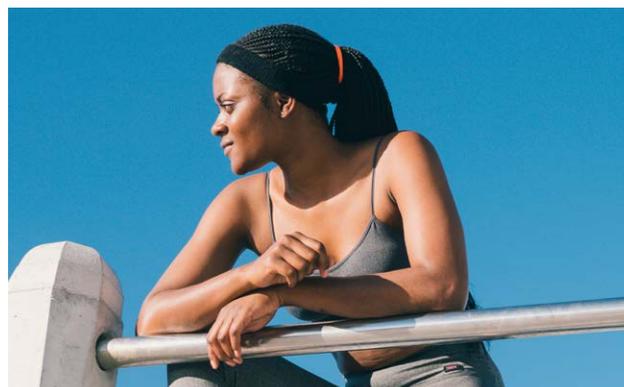
"Being homeless as a parent, your main concern is the kids... Your main focus is them making sure they're good, making sure everything around them is good, making sure... For example if you're in a hostel with kids you don't know what they might see, you don't know what they might experience you know, you don't know the other people that might be around them, that sort of stuff."

– Charlotte, London

This evidence shows that experiences of motherhood often complicate already complex issues such as those relating to money, housing, education, and work. Interviewees argue that the wellbeing of their children grounds and informs the ways in which issues are approached and decisions are made. Thus, mothers report that they must prioritise buying food for their children over other essential items, working less hours to be able to look after them, and sofa surfing with family to avoid temporary accommodation that felt unsafe for their children. These examples reflect the added responsibilities of homeless young mothers.

The weight of emerging adult responsibilities, alongside the experience of having a child while homeless, can often be too heavy for young women to cope with, causing burnout and poor wellbeing. One woman spoke about feeling burned out and disillusioned as a result of the barriers she faced when seeking to access housing and mental health services. She spoke about how she experienced difficulties when trying to access domestic violence support which resulted in her disengaging entirely:

"So I was just like I'm just gonna leave it like I can't be bothered. You know what I mean? Like, I'm knackered, I'm absolutely exhausted by it all, I don't want to be chasing around different organisations."

– Chloe, Yorkshire

Disengaging from services can often act as a catalyst for further withdrawal. This is because negative experiences of services reduce levels of trust in providers and increase the likelihood that users will not seek future support when needed. Thus, this woman's disengagement from health services could have resulted in her losing her Personal Independence Payment (PIP) if she did not attend health services to review her long-term condition. As a result of losing this entitlement, she would potentially be unable to afford to pay her rent. Therefore, it is important for support services, such as mental health and domestic violence services, to keep in touch with clients to ensure they stay engaged and do not become distrustful of services in general.

However, it is not inevitable that young women will struggle to cope with forms of responsibility. One young woman responded well to the responsibility of cleaning and cooking upon moving into temporary accommodation. This was because she was used to taking care of the housework in her family home due to her parents struggling with substance use issues:

"When I lived with my mum, I was very independent anyway, like, I kind of cooked for me and my brother and I was very much responsible for the household things like cleaning, keeping on top laundry. So in that aspect, I kind of knew what I was doing anyway."

– Ella, London

However, it was felt that responsibilities such as managing bills and household budgets were more difficult to take on without prior experience or support from family:

"I was lost, it took me a year to switch energy suppliers, cos I had no idea what I was doing. The same as like water bill, I didn't even know how to sign up for that at first… realistically, when you move out from your parents' home, your parents are there to do that with you, your parents are there to show you how to do these things. But not all of us have that opportunity."

– Ella, London

In order to help young women to successfully respond to their responsibilities, it is important to remember that different young women need varying levels and types of support. For instance, one young woman spoke about how she found it frustrating to be monitored by her keyworker while staying in temporary accommodation:

"You're not treating me like an adult… I'm here in the low support unit and I should be treated like that… I don't want someone constantly checking up on me."

– Freya, London

The quote highlights how too much or unwanted support can result in frustration and leave young women feeling as though they are seen as irresponsible. Therefore, there is a need for individual personalised risk assessments of young women's needs in order to effectively support them. This will ensure that those who need more support are effectively assisted and those who need less support feel trusted to handle their responsibilities.

In some instances where the young women felt they were not supported appropriately, they felt apprehensive and avoided their responsibilities. Some women described anxiety over dealing with responsibilities such as completing administrative tasks:

"I don't open the letters. Like a bit of an ostrich in that I put my head in the sand. And I'm just like, no, I can't deal. I'll just wait until they get so bad. And then I'll suddenly go right, I need to start dealing with this now."

– Chloe, Yorkshire

This avoidance response reflects situations where the young woman does not feel that she is supported to fulfil her responsibilities and achieve her goals. Furthermore, this reiterates the importance of offering tailored support for young women to help them to stay focused on their responsibilities and to feel that their goals are achievable:

"I feel like there should be more like support tailored to women, you know, empowerment. You know, even like group therapy… creating those hubs, like women only, maybe more opportunities for women to have like therapy together and things like that."

– Louisa, London

Youth specific homelessness services for women were regularly reported as helping support young women to manage their responsibilities and develop their independent living skills. Many of them spoke about the assistance which Centrepoint provided to them and identified that without it they may have struggled to cope. For example, one woman spoke about the wide ranging support that she received during her stay with Centrepoint:

"Yeah, I gained a lot of experience, a lot of confidence, I met a lot of good people and got involved in a lot of stuff. Centrepoint it was like my first step towards the life I want to have. And it actually made a huge difference in my life. I feel like I'm a complete different person just because of Centrepoint because they actually helped me in a lot of ways. Not only helped me to stay to like give me accommodation or helped me financially gave me food parcels, but a lot of other ways as well."

– Serena, Yorkshire

Aspirations

In addition to daily responsibilities, interviewees stated that they also felt responsible for their own personal goals and aspirations. In doing this, they suggested that having something to work towards in the future enabled them to focus on their goals and cope with their responsibilities:

"...doing something like learning crafts and like actually doing something with your life is so important because it keeps you on the straight and narrow. It like keeps you grounded in reality, rather than just like being with the chaos of like having a really, really challenging life, you know, it grounds you in something."

– Georgie, London

Aspirations were spoken of as sources of motivation that can help guide young women to stay on paths to their life goals. Participants also stated that they helped to make life feel less chaotic, by grounding young women in the present and helping them navigate complex and challenging environments. For example, one woman's goal upon entering temporary accommodation was to improve her mental health and focus on getting herself prepared for university. This meant that she spent more time focusing on her wellbeing as she was motivated to pursue her goal of being prepared to start university.

Education was identified as a key area linked to aspiration. Interviewees emphasise that forms of learning have acted as steps towards achieving their goals. For example, one woman spoke about wanting to be a counsellor and the various qualifications required to get there. The clear path of progression helped her to stay motivated when engaging in her studies and the focus on the future helped her to progress. However, other women are unsure of their future goals, yet still view education as a good basis to advance from. For instance, one woman spoke about how she was happy that she managed to complete college and get her A-levels, despite feeling unfocused at the time:

"You forget, when you're 16, like, you're not going to be 16 forever. In the future, you are going to need to support yourself, and like do something with your life, you know?"

– Georgie, London

The notion of education as a valuable form of responsibility is also evidenced in how interviewees spoke about further education. One woman asserted that having the opportunity to go to university enabled her to grow as a person and develop aspirations for the future:

"I feel like uni is a great adventure to do as a young person. Like it's just good to have ambition and have a vision."

– Louisa, London

Barriers

As highlighted previously, barriers to fulfilling responsibilities and aspirations can lead to disillusion around the achievability of goals. Unfortunately, there can be barriers for young women when accessing education. For instance, one woman spoke about how she was concerned that her benefits could be impacted by taking on a college course:

"And like, even with college, like even though I've got accepted onto the course, I'm still a bit worried that it might affect my benefits. So I need to look into that. But that's ridiculous. Because like, I'm trying to better myself, but then they're trapping me… So I'm hoping that it doesn't affect them because if it does, then obviously, I won't be able to do the course."

– Chloe, Yorkshire

Like education, employment was often viewed as a positive responsibility in interviewee's lives as it was linked to their aspirations. When young women viewed their current employment as a step in the right direction to achieving their aspirations they felt that their work was worthwhile and, therefore, more doable. However, many women faced barriers to gainful employment such as poor mental health, inflexibility around other responsibilities e.g. child care and a lack of qualifications. As highlighted previously, these barriers to achieving goals can make responsibilities feel overwhelming and unfeasible. For example, one woman spoke about how her qualifications were often viewed as invalid by potential employers as they were from another country. This meant that she struggled to find regular employment, an outcome that affected her mental health:

"Then I ended up when I came back home and I ended up crying like I was having a meltdown that I can't even find a job. And I can't even, I can't get a good job because I don't have any qualification. And I can't study because there a lot of obstacles in our way."

– Serena, Yorkshire

Another interviewee spoke about how she had to work less hours to be able to look after her children which meant that she had to rely on benefits to top up her income. She wanted to work more hours but the unaffordability of childcare options meant that this was not feasible. These examples speak to the importance of providing options and flexibility when employing young women. If employers are adaptable to the young woman's needs, then they will be more likely to be satisfied in their work and more able to focus on fulfilling their responsibilities.

In terms of options for employment for young women, interviewees argued that Jobcentres and schools promote limited choices e.g. "just do this care job or just do this bakery job". As such, it is advised that these institutions work to spread awareness of the different types of employment that are available when transitioning into full time and regular work. If young women do not feel suited to their employment, then it is unlikely that they will feel that their work is worthwhile and may be unable to keep up with their responsibilities. Whereas, if young women are offered employment that helps them work towards a job that they aspire to then they will feel more motivated to maintain their role. Employment programmes specifically designed for young people to find their career paths are beneficial. For example, the Kickstart Scheme provided a variety of six-month employment placements to young people. One woman spoke about how she enjoyed her placement with the scheme but was concerned about the job options that would be available following on from the placement. While employment schemes for young people such as this are welcome, there should be more consideration of the options and security following from a short placement for young people in future schemes.

✓ **Recommendation:** *Department for Work and Pensions must ensure Universal Credit supports vulnerable young women into education and training in order for them to develop their skills and to work towards a career they aspire to.*

✓ **Recommendation:** *Department for Work and Pensions should introduce new employment schemes for vulnerable young women with a variety of options and carefully considered pathways to progress into careers.*

✓ **Recommendation:** *Department for Work and Pensions should improve affordability of childcare for vulnerable young women on low incomes or benefits to help them to be able to engage in education and employment opportunities.*

Conclusion

While this research constitutes a small sample of women with experiences of youth homelessness, the experiences highlighted are indicative of reports from stakeholders and previous literature. The women interviewed had a variety of different experiences such as motherhood, substance misuse, and domestic violence. Furthermore, the women had varying beliefs, cultures, and backgrounds. Although the women interviewed had many different experiences, there was a commonality around safety and vulnerability. Many vulnerable young women across the UK are falling through the cracks and not getting the support that they deserve. Steps need to be made to ensure the safety and security of vulnerable young women in the UK. This research aims to be a part of the discussion around improving and preventing homelessness experiences for young women and Centrepoint is keen to encourage others to be part of this dialogue.

End Notes

1. *'Women and homelessness: putting gender back on the agenda'* Reeve, K (2018) http://shura.shu.ac.uk/23215/1/women-homelessness-putting-gender-on-the-agenda.pdf

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