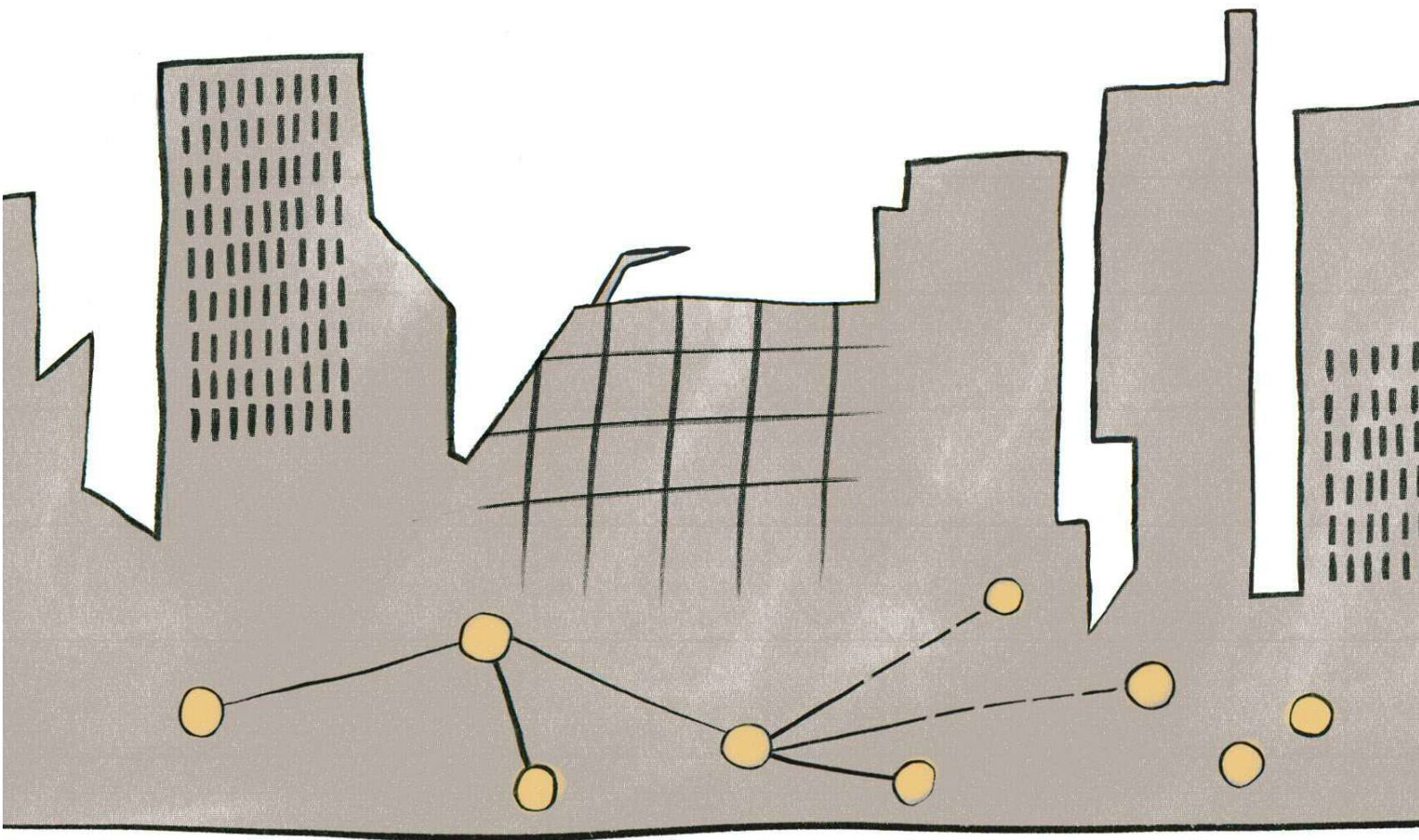




WOMEN'S SAFETY

Austerity and Intersecting crises in Manchester

January 2024

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Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to all the women who spoke in May 2023 and shared their experiences of homelessness, temporary accommodation, and working within stretched frontline services in a difficult economic climate.

Big thanks too to all those who attended the event and contributed to the discussions that form the basis of this report. We hope this report does justice to all the vital experiences and issues raised and contributes to necessary discussions and initiatives

to improve support for women experiencing homelessness and poverty across Greater Manchester.

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1. SUMMARY OF REPORT

This report is the product of an event on women's safety held at the University of Manchester in May 2023. (*'woman' is used in this report to refer to anyone who identifies as a woman*).

It outlines the key challenges facing the individuals and services working to support the safety of women who are experiencing homelessness in the context of austerity and intersecting crises in the UK.

The challenges and concerns raised at the event fall into two broad categories: (1) supporting women to access affordable housing, and (2) ensuring women have access to services.

Useful responses at the individual, local and national levels are highlighted in relation to these challenges. The report demonstrates that there needs to be an increased awareness and understanding of the relationship between housing and women's safety, and that policy on housing and homelessness must be more inclusive moving forward.

There are 6 recommendations at the end of this report that centre on the topics of advocacy; prioritising women's safety; supporting women moving out of temporary accommodation; service visibility; supporting complex and diverse needs; and multi-agency working.

2. INTRODUCTION

In May 2023 members of the Manchester Urban Institute Feminist Collective hosted an event entitled 'Women's safety: Housing and intersecting crises in Manchester'. The event was organised to bring together individuals, organisations and those working with and for local authorities to discuss women's¹ safety in the context of austerity and intersecting crises in the UK.

The event created space to reflect on the challenges facing individuals and services who support the safety of women experiencing homelessness in Manchester, and provided an opportunity to consider what responses would be helpful at different levels. The definition of women's safety used in this report goes beyond physical safety to include emotional and mental well-being.

The event began with a panel discussion in which [Manchester Action on Street Health \(MASH\)](#), [Safety4Sisters, Shelter, Women Asylum Seekers Together \(WAST\)](#), and [Manchester Women's Aid](#) shared information about their work to support women's safety.

Each organisation highlighted how their work has been impacted by

austerity and intersecting crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and rising costs of living in the UK. This discussion further revealed the shared challenges experienced by the women these organisations support. The remainder of the event involved attendees sharing ideas about:

- **Responses at individual, local and national levels**
- **Partnerships, principles, and practices**
- **Different stakeholders and where they can help**

This report outlines the critical issues surrounding women's safety and homelessness in Manchester raised within discussions at the event.

Section 3 provides the context of austerity and intersecting crises in the UK. Section 4 details the challenges faced by individuals and organisations working to support women's safety in Manchester that are intensified by intersecting inequalities. The report concludes with recommendations for policy makers. Our key recommendation is that policy on housing and women's safety must be more inclusive going forward.

3. CONTEXT OF INTERSECTING CRISES IN MANCHESTER

In the UK, austerity policies have been used to respond to the 2008 financial crisis (Cummins, 2018). Austerity policies involve significant cuts to

public and welfare spending with the intention of reducing budget deficits and national debt (Cummins, 2018; Abed and Kelleher, 2022). In England, austerity cuts have been unevenly distributed, and Manchester City Council (MCC) has lost £419 million of public funding over a decade of austerity (Briggs and Hall, 2023).

In this context, the burden of service delivery has been shifting from the public sector onto the voluntary sector (Briggs and Hall, 2023). As a policy choice, austerity disproportionately impacts women, and particularly marginalised groups of women (Abed and Kelleher, 2022; Reis, 2018).

The recent rapid increase in the cost of essential goods and services in the UK has created a cost-of-living crisis that adds to the pressure that low-income households were already experiencing due to conditions of austerity (Briggs and Hall, 2023). These impacts are gendered and racialised, meaning women from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to be experiencing poverty (Hall et al., 2017). Housing costs have also persistently increased in the UK, producing a housing crisis which disproportionately affects those with lower incomes (Poinasamy, 2013).

In Manchester, housing in the private rental sector (PRS) has become increasingly unaffordable and the lack of social housing has resulted in limited housing options for people on lower incomes. Research conducted

for Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) has highlighted that only 4% of tenancies in Greater Manchester are affordable within Local Housing Allowance (LHA) Rates (GMCA, 2023).

Since women are economically disadvantaged, they are more likely to access social security payments than men, meaning welfare cuts and caps on LHA under austerity negatively impact women's access to housing. Discrimination by landlords - known as DSS discrimination - such as refusing to house women in receipt of social security payments (Shelter, 2022), or single women with children, further limits women's housing options in the PRS. The combination of austerity, the housing crisis, and the cost-of-living crisis in the UK is forcing women into precarious housing situations in the PRS that pose risks to their safety.

A visible consequence of the housing crisis in Manchester is the increased number of people presenting as homeless and living in temporary accommodation. Shelter reported in 2023 that one in 74 people are homeless in Manchester, although the true figure is likely to be higher as some types of homelessness go undocumented (Shelter, 2023).

Understandings of homelessness tend to be male dominated, with women's homelessness often being referred to as 'hidden'. A better understanding of women's experiences of violence while homeless is required, but we do know

that the rates of violence against women who are homeless are high measured against any standard (Jasinski, 2010).

4. DISCUSSION

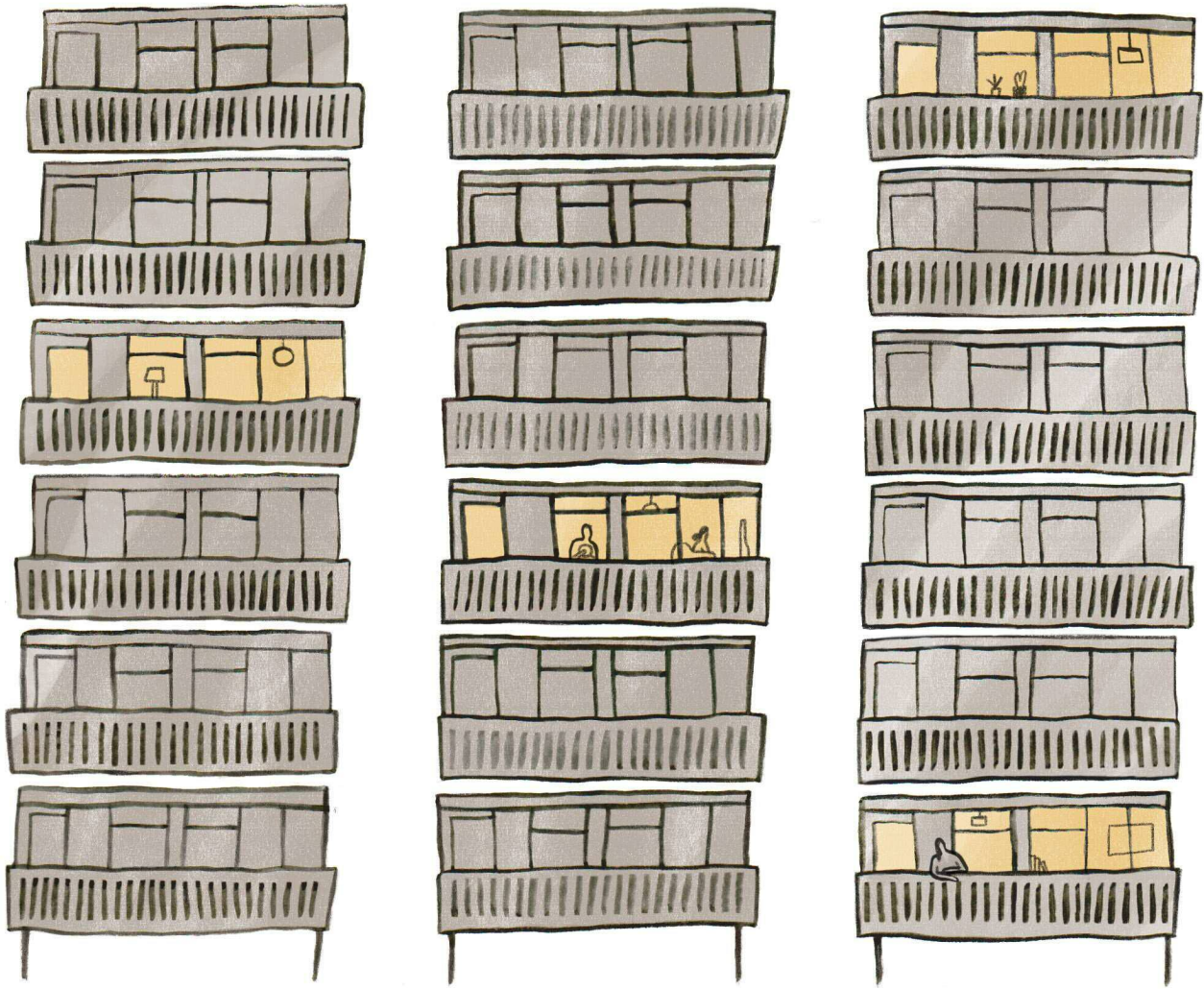
Based on discussions at the event, the following section contributes to a gendered understanding of homelessness by highlighting the relationship between the safety of women who are homeless and the context of intersecting crises in Manchester.

It was highlighted at the event that the government definition of rough sleeping does not align with women's experiences of homelessness due to its focus on visible forms of rough sleeping, such as bedding down in public spaces.

However, women often move around more than men while rough sleeping due to concerns for their own safety. For example, by sleeping in a hospital toilet or walking around all night rather than bedding down in one place.

It is therefore likely that women are not fully represented in data on homelessness, such as census data, and are left out of definitions of rough sleeping that determine who is eligible for statutory support.

The panellists at the event reported seeing an increase in women who are street homeless in Manchester as recently as the last few weeks (April-May 2023). MASH, a charity supporting women sex workers,



has developed a remit to work with homeless female sex workers in Manchester who are more likely to experience violence and other crimes (MASH, 2022).

Manchester Women's Aid, a charity supporting women and children affected by domestic and sexual abuse, has also developed two new services to support women who are fleeing violence and experiencing homelessness. The discussion below incorporates a focus on domestic abuse due to the close connection between this issue and women's homelessness.

4.1

WOMEN'S ACCESS TO HOUSING

For women experiencing homelessness in Manchester, challenges surrounding access to housing are exacerbated by intersecting crises.

Due to the demand for housing vastly outstripping the supply, many women experiencing homelessness in Manchester are placed in temporary accommodation, such as hostels and B&Bs, where they can remain for extended periods of time.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 made changes to homelessness legislation to give priority to survivors of domestic abuse (NHAS, 2021), but due to the lack of housing and refuge spaces in Manchester, women who present as homeless because of domestic abuse can also be placed in temporary accommodation.

Conditions of austerity and the housing crisis leave local authorities with limited resources, and it was highlighted at the event that the needs of women who are experiencing homelessness are not being met within an overwhelmed housing system. For example, attendees of the event described how women can be required to move into temporary accommodation at very short notice and their allocated accommodation can be in an area they are unfamiliar with, far away from their kin networks.

The detrimental impact of this system on children was also noted, with frequent movement between accommodations requiring children to change schools, which weakens ties to the community and affects mental health. Women are struggling to meet their basic needs in temporary accommodation, with access to fresh food, cooking facilities, and laundry facilities not always being available in B&Bs and framework hotels.

The cost-of-living crisis is another challenge for women living in temporary accommodation for extended periods. Having to eat 'out' is more expensive, and some women

have reported regularly skipping meals and prioritising their children eating over themselves.

Attendees described how women's safety needs are not prioritised in Manchester's crisis-driven housing system, with women reporting feeling unsafe when placed in mixed-gender temporary accommodation. Women can be placed into accommodation with men who have criminal records, such as domestic violence perpetrators and sex offenders, creating a significant risk to women's safety. The lack of women-only temporary accommodation has therefore been highlighted as a critical issue of women's safety in Manchester.

Women who decide for safety reasons that they do not want to stay in the accommodation allocated to them can have their housing duty taken away, meaning the local authority no longer has a duty to house them. Some women have described feeling safer on the streets than in temporary accommodation and have returned to rough sleeping.

Women's experiences in temporary accommodation have been described as re-traumatising, presenting risks to safety for women with complex needs, such as the risk of relapse for women with a history of substance dependency. Shelter's (2019) report also highlights the negative impact being 'stuck in limbo' in temporary accommodation can have on women who are waiting for settled housing.

The safety of transgender women requires consideration and action as spaces within the housing system, including temporary accommodation, are not always inclusive. Attendees noted that this then places the burden of responsibility on transgender women for their own safety.

In the face of overwhelming demand for housing there is a focus on moving women on from refuges and other forms of temporary accommodation' by Manchester's local authorities. However, to support women's safety it is essential that women are moved into accommodation that suits their needs.

The lack of social housing in Manchester means women are being pushed into the PRS, including women with complex needs for whom independent tenancies are not suitable.

Some housing services are combatting the unaffordability of the PRS by paying a top-up for women's rent, but this is only for a limited time,

with little being done to address what will happen to women when this period is over. Women being 'moved on' into unsuitable tenancies because of the housing crisis can result in homelessness.

Manchester's current housing system does not place high importance on women's safety, impacting women's physical, emotional, and mental well-being.

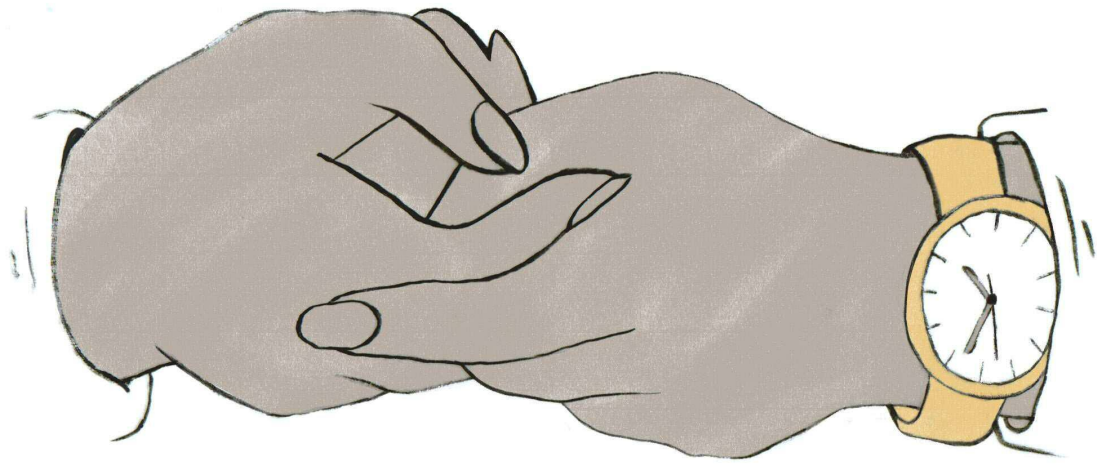
The challenges women have in accessing safe and appropriate accommodation in Manchester highlighted in this section, have led to accusations that the current system is setting women up to fail.

Panellists reported that there has been an escalation in safeguarding referrals and that staff in the voluntary sector are burning out.

While women's needs are not recognised in the housing sector, staff in the voluntary sector who are trying to make sure these needs are met, feel like they are firefighting.

For organisations working to support the safety of women who are experiencing homelessness and have no recourse to public funds (NRPF), intersecting inequalities produce additional challenges.





4.2 WOMEN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS WITH NO RECOURSE TO PUBLIC FUNDS

The NRPF rule is imposed upon people 'subject to immigration control', which includes undocumented migrants and most migrants with limited leave to remain (Dickinson and Rosen, 2020). The condition prevents access to local authority housing assistance and most welfare benefits (ibid.).

Lack of access to secure and affordable housing has been highlighted as the biggest barrier for women with NRPF leaving a situation where they face gender-based violence (Ferguson and Wilsher, 2021).

Immigration status creates additional barriers to escaping abuse, and it was highlighted by attendees that many women with NRPF experience deprivation and homelessness while in abusive relationships (Safety4Sisters, n.d.). The isolation of women by perpetrators in this way is supported by hostile policies and legislation in the UK, as well as the exclusion of women with NRPF from

policies such as the Domestic Abuse Act and Victims Bill.

Attendees described how women fleeing domestic abuse with NRPF cannot access Housing Benefit, which is often used to pay for refuge spaces. The lack of support available to help women with NRPF to find accommodation has been exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis, which has produced an increased demand for refuge spaces in Manchester.

Migrant women with NRPF who are homeless because of abusive relationships, are turned away from both voluntary and statutory services that do not have the duty and/or resources to help. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Safety4Sisters (n.d.) saw demand double, with 100 percent of women referred to their service having initially been refused refuge space due to the NRPF condition.

In these circumstances, women with NRPF have limited options, such as homelessness or returning to their abuser.

Although there is now a 'domestic violence rule' that allows survivors of domestic abuse to apply for indefinite leave to remain, this only applies to those on a spousal visa, leaving women experiencing domestic abuse on other types of visas, such as student visas, without access to support (Rights of Women, 2017). The lack of support available to migrant women with NRPF who are experiencing homelessness leaves them at the edges of exclusion.

While waiting for a decision on asylum cases from the Home Office, women will be placed in the same system of temporary accommodation described in the previous section, and therefore experience the same risks to safety.

Section 95 of Asylum Support grants women £45 a week to survive on, which has been highlighted as inadequate for meeting women's needs, particularly in the context of the rising cost-of-living in the UK. Once a decision has been made on an asylum case, women are given 28 days to leave temporary accommodation, which is often an inadequate period in which to access any social security payments or to find work (London Councils, n.d.).

Additionally, it is unlikely that women will meet the basic requirements to access the PRS, such as having enough money for a deposit (London Councils, n.d.). This exposes asylum seeking women to exploitation, homelessness, and destitution.

4.3

HOMELESS WOMEN'S ACCESS TO SERVICES

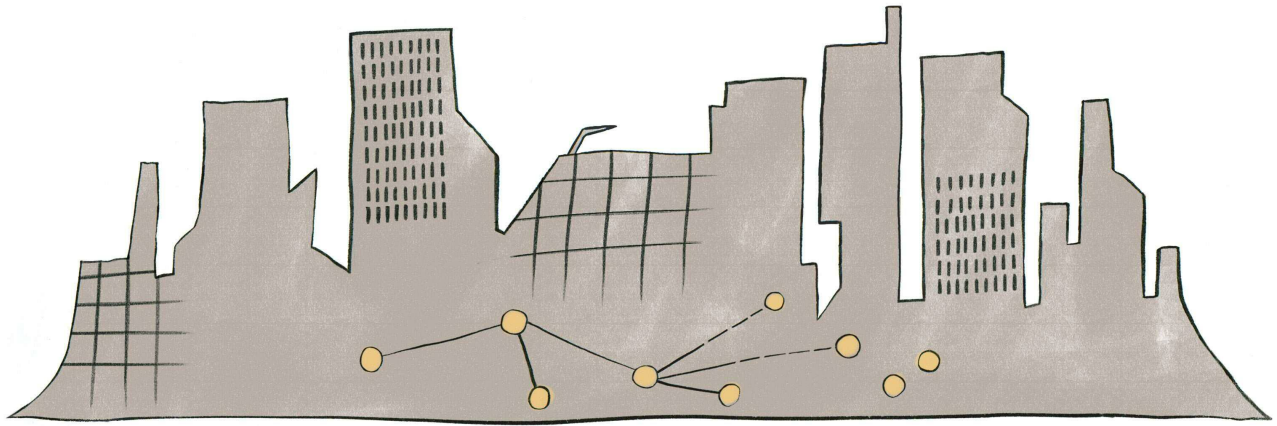
Our event revealed how women can be reluctant to access services when experiencing homelessness and domestic abuse. Austerity measures have led to significant cuts to support services, with the consequent shutting down or restriction of services leaving women with fewer places to turn (Shelter, 2019).

Barriers to accessing services can prevent women who are experiencing homelessness from speaking out when they need support, thereby compromising their safety. Housing services in Manchester, such as Housing Solutions, are overwhelmed and under-resourced in the context of austerity and intersecting crises, and this can lead to women being placed on long waiting lists and having negative experiences.

In what could be seen as an attempt to manage demand, services are turning women away who do not meet an informal 'threshold' for support.

Voluntary services are then having to devote time to helping women connect with statutory services they have lost trust in, and high caseloads in both statutory and non-statutory services are placing immense pressure on staff.

Inadequate police responses to women reporting domestic abuse were also highlighted as a factor



preventing women from accessing support. A reluctance to report violence to the police can leave women in unsafe situations. The failure of services and systems to meet the needs of women who are most at risk is not due to a lack of care or concern, but ultimately comes down to a lack of resources because of austerity cuts (Sander-McDonagh and Neville, 2017).

Nevertheless, addressing barriers to statutory support is a priority in a context of austerity and intersecting crises that leaves women increasingly dependent on the state. The role of charitable organisations in the UK's welfare state was originally a supplementary service for those whose needs are not met by statutory services (McGovern, 2017).

However, as the welfare state recedes in the UK under conditions of austerity (Sanders-McDonagh, Neville and Solas, 2016), there is an increased demand on the voluntary sector's services to meet women's safety needs.

This is an issue as cuts have also been made to domestic violence refuges

and women's services under austerity in the UK (Sanders-McDonagh, Neville and Solas, 2016). Services supporting women's safety in Manchester are experiencing significant funding challenges.

A lack of sufficient funding is a key challenge for both statutory and non-statutory service providers due to local authority budget cuts in Manchester. The funding that is available is often short-term and therefore not sustainable.

Organisations emphasised that short-term intervention for supporting women who have experienced violence and homelessness is inadequate, and that long-term work is highly beneficial for women affected by multiple disadvantages.

Short-term funding also leads to a lack of consistency in services, with changes to funding sometimes meaning alterations to projects' names and workers. This creates issues for both women accessing services and those working within them. Working across services is essential for supporting women's

safety while experiencing homelessness, and services work better when they communicate with each other. For multi-agency working to be improved, sustained funding and a shared approach is needed across the services supporting women's safety, including specialist women's services (AVA, 2021).

Cuts to funding under austerity place women's organisations in a difficult position of competing for scarce resources in local commissioning processes (Brah, Szeman and Gedalof, 2015). There is little designated funding for by-and-for specialist services working with women that the state does not or will not reach (Jones et al., 2015), such as women with NRPF.

Organisations such as WAST do not receive any funding from the local authority, and the public donations and support from other services that is relied upon to support asylum-seeking women are being eroded by the cost-of-living crisis.

Services such as foodbanks and clothing charities are withdrawing their support to WAST due to their own resource constraints. WAST is an essential service that provides a space of safety and community for asylum-seeking women in Manchester, but the organisation is increasingly struggling due to limited resources.

Safety4Sisters, a specialist service working with black and minoritised

women with NRPF who have experienced violence, also reported the impact of increased costs of living on keeping essential services such as refuges running.

Women from ethnic minority backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to cuts to public services due to the way in which gender inequalities intersect with and compound racial inequalities (Reis, 2018), making increased funding to specialist support services a priority for women's safety in the context of austerity.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This report has highlighted the key challenges organisations supporting the safety of women experiencing homelessness in Manchester are facing in the context of austerity and intersecting crises. These challenges revolve around women's access to housing and access to services.

The lack of affordable and social housing in Manchester has been highlighted as an issue of women's safety, yet women's safety-related needs are not recognised by the housing sector. A lack of awareness and understanding of the relationship between women's safety and housing creates gaps in provision that impact the most vulnerable and deepens socio-economic inequalities.

An example is the marginalisation of women with NRPF from conversations, policy, and legislation on the cost-of-living and

homelessness that directly impacts their safety.

As called for by the Women's Homelessness Involvement Group (WHIG) in Manchester, policy on housing and homelessness must be more inclusive and informed by those with lived experience (WHIG, n.d.). The provision of women-only temporary accommodation, including for women with lower-level needs, is a priority for women's safety at the local level.

The lack of resources and funding available to services supporting women's safety, including housing services, was also highlighted as a key challenge. Gaps in funding must be addressed to ensure that specialist services can continue to keep marginalised and vulnerable women safe.

The combination of under-resourcing and the increased demand on services produced by austerity, the cost-of-living, and the housing crisis is also having an impact on the staff working in these services. Staff are increasingly dedicating time to help women tackle the barriers they are facing in accessing other struggling services and feel like they are constantly 'firefighting' to keep women safe.

As the context of austerity and intersecting crises increases the demand on services while reducing the funding and resources available to them, staff feel like work is

increasingly becoming about helping women survive rather than thrive. Increased, sustainable funding is needed to support the services and individuals that are keeping women safe.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ADVOCACY

All women's voices need to be heard for housing and homelessness policy to be inclusive; women with lived experience should be co-designing policy. Consultation with women and women's organisations should be undertaken by policymakers prior to changes in housing and homelessness policy to ensure that the impact of these changes on women has been fully considered.

It was suggested at the event that a consultation and community building activity that includes local government and relevant stakeholders could be a useful way to generate this kind of conversation and awareness in Manchester.

2. PRIORITISING WOMEN'S SAFETY

Organisations can come together to advocate for housing to be recognised as an issue of women's safety, and to argue for the national supply of social housing to be increased (Shelter, 2019).

The lack of support available to women in temporary accommodation is a critical issue. Staff in temporary accommodation, as well as any

other professionals likely to support victims and survivors of domestic abuse (Shelter, 2019), should receive appropriate training to ensure that they understand women's complex and safety-related needs.

To support women's safety while experiencing homelessness, there must be increased funding for gender-specific accommodation and specialist support services from the government. This must include support and accommodation that addresses the needs of transwomen.

Trauma-informed policies and guidance on appropriate housing for women fleeing domestic abuse can also be developed by local authorities to support women's safety. Action must be taken to prevent women becoming homeless because of domestic abuse.

3. SUPPORTING WOMEN MOVING OUT OF TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

To ensure that women can safely move on from temporary accommodation, local rents should be reviewed, rent caps in the PRS considered, and the discrimination women experience from landlords in the PRS addressed. Landlords should be legally required to accept housing benefit if women are directed to the PRS by local authorities.

More information needs to be provided for women moving on from temporary accommodation, including migrant and asylum-seeking

women who are granted leave to remain and given limited time to find accommodation. Ensuring that women who have been granted leave to remain are empowered through supporting processes such as getting into education and employment was also highlighted as a response that promotes women's long-term physical, emotional and mental well-being.

4. SERVICE VISIBILITY

Action must be taken to address the challenges women are facing in accessing the services that can support their safety, including housing services. Negative experiences can prevent women from speaking out when they need help, meaning welcoming services are extremely important for women's safety.

Ensuring services are visible to women, offering face-to-face support and advice, and mitigating language barriers, can help to guarantee that women experiencing homelessness are able to access the support and services they need to stay safe.

5. SUPPORTING COMPLEX AND DIVERSE NEEDS

Action must be taken to address the challenges women from marginalised groups face in accessing services, such as women with NRPF. 'One size fits all' approaches to supporting the safety of women overlooks the complex and diverse needs and concerns within this category. The use of "champions" for marginalised

groups in housing services could be an option for ensuring the needs of these groups are recognised. Increasing the knowledge of trauma-informed working solutions is also essential for improving women's experiences of and access to services. A culture of equality should be embedded in all services to address the current gaps in provision that deepen inequalities between women.

6. MULTI-AGENCY WORKING

Women will often access multiple services to support their safety at one time, making collaborative and multi-agency working essential for ensuring that women's needs are being met.

However, a lack of funding and resources in one service can impact the ability of other services to meet women's safety-related needs. Identifying the gaps in funding and support in Manchester and increasing the government funding available to both statutory and non-statutory services are priorities for supporting women's safety in the context of intersecting crises.

Funding partnerships between services with different specialisms would enable wrap around support to be provided to women with multiple needs.

Increased collaboration between services, such as those working with women who are experiencing homelessness, those working with survivors of domestic abuse, and those supporting women with

NRPF, would also help ensure that understandings of and responses to women's safety are inclusive.

A list of the services in Manchester's women's sector can be found in the Appendices of the report 'Mapping of Local Support for Women in Manchester' (Ferguson and Wilsher, 2021).

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