

Introduction and summary of Research – Edith England

What about women? An exploration of the impact of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 on women's homelessness

My research is currently in the process of being published and originates in my PhD thesis which is currently under embargo. I would like to share copies of the published research as it becomes available. In the interim, this document provides an interim overview of my research and findings, and points to how better availability of data would improve evidence-gathering in this area.

The key points are:

1. Resources have been directed away from forms of homelessness where women predominate. The homelessness system prior to the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 prioritised safe, secure accommodation for those most in need. In practice, women were the primary beneficiaries of this approach. Following the Act, resources have increasingly been directed away from forms of homelessness experienced primarily by women (family homelessness, homelessness following domestic abuse) to those in which single men are especially represented.
2. The private rented sector is less suited to women's housing needs. The ways in which resources are distributed within the homelessness system mean that women are less likely to be among their beneficiaries. A focus upon resolution through obtaining private sector housing especially disadvantages women due to both a shortage of suitable, affordable accommodation and their greater financial precarity.
3. The private rented sector is relatively inaccessible to women. The introduction of a requirement that those seeking assistance under the Act must co-operate with the local authority breaks the previous link between need and assistance. Looking for private rented properties presents practical difficulties, especially for those with children. A lack of 'joined

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up' service provision left women who disengaged from inappropriate specialist services, especially domestic abuse support services, excluded from homelessness services.

4. Administrative data collection needs to capture gender of all applicants in the household. A lack of consistent administrative data collection on gender compromises the extent to which the impact of changing legislation upon women can be adequately assessed.

This briefing draws upon doctoral research with 72 applicants and 64 workers within the Welsh homelessness system. Data was collected between December 2017 and January 2020. This research demonstrates that Housing (Wales) Act 2014 despite being an apparently progressive piece of legislation, appears to worsen the situation for women facing homelessness. It forces applicants to use the private rented sector, which inherently disadvantages women due to their greater financial precarity. It represents a move from focus on mitigating the impacts of homelessness for a small group considered especially vulnerable – among them those who have dependent children and those who have experienced domestic abuse - toward a more universal approach which extends help to all those becoming or at imminent risk of homelessness, but focuses that help on assistance on engagement with the private renting sector, which is often less suitable for women.

Resources direction away from women's homelessness.

Homelessness is a growing concern for states internationally. The UK historically had an internationally unique approach to addressing homelessness, which afforded those considered at particular risk because of becoming homeless the right to state provided housing¹. Women have historically been the primary beneficiaries of this approach due to their prevalence in two groups recognised as especially high risk of homelessness: parents with dependent children, and those who

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have become homeless because of domestic abuse. This additional protection goes some way toward addressing the structural inequalities – legal, bureaucratic, societal, and economic – which place women at greater risk of housing precarity². It is also important to recognise that women’s experiences of homelessness are often distinct. Their housing precarity leads them to remain in violent relationships, dangerous living situations, and to engage in activities such as survival sex work. This different patterning of women’s homelessness has been linked to a primary focus within the homelessness sector on forms of homelessness in which men are prevalent³.

The Housing (Wales) Act 2014 explicitly expands homelessness provision, primarily through increasing resources directed to those unlikely to be eligible for social housing. This is compounded by a gender-based shift in direction of resources, with funding now largely targeted at projects (such as Housing First, Assertive Outreach and Rapid Rehousing) which disproportionately assist single homeless, and hence predominantly male, applicants.

The private rented sector is less suited to women’s housing needs

In the current homelessness system, as in the welfare state, conditions of engagement upon which continued access to assistance depends are closely linked to participation in competitive economic markets⁴. With the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, this created a functional requirement that those applying to local authorities for assistance should first attempt to resolve their own homelessness within the private rented sector. This is especially significant in moving away from an approach where women who had become homeless, often because of traumatic experiences, could rely upon housing security for an extended period, via social housing.

² For instance, women are less likely to own their own home, or to be on tenancy agreements in their own right, meaning that their housing security is more likely to be dependent upon maintenance of a relationship with a male partner.

³ Shelters and other homelessness services are often especially unsafe for women, they do not tend to use them, rather turning to other dangerous survival-based strategies. Their consequent lack of visibility within services then creates a cycle which produces underfunding of services.

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The Welsh private rented sector, like that of the UK, has attracted international criticism for its unaffordability, low standards, and short-term tenures, and offers no functional protection against direct or indirect discrimination⁵. Within the research it became apparent that women were especially disadvantaged in attempting to secure private rented accommodation for two reasons. First, their financial insecurity presented an issue: they found that landlords were very reluctant to rent to those on benefits. Second, the kinds of housing (larger, single household dwellings) that they needed tended to be more expensive, often exceeding the amount they could claim through housing subsidies such as housing benefit. It therefore offers neither an accessible nor sustainable solution for women experiencing homelessness, and substantially increases the possibility of cyclical, repeated homelessness among women. Compromised financial status arising from domestic abuse including financial coercion and control was an especially poorly understood barrier to women securing private accommodation. Further, this was compounded by the issues considered in the next system around “conditionality” – the way in which in the new approach applicants needed to demonstrate their efforts to find accommodation. Women reported that exercising choice around accommodation – rejecting accommodation because it was unsafe, inadequate for children, or compromised access to support networks – resulted in caseworkers threatening to withdraw help.

The private rented sector is relatively inaccessible to women.

The Act broke the link between safe, secure, state provided housing, and exceptional need, rather making state assistance dependent upon applicant’s perceived compliance. Yet the forms of engagement demanded were often especially difficult for women. From my research it was apparent that parents struggled to attend mandatory workshops and training aimed at improving their

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accommodation-finding skills, while visiting private rented accommodation was often functionally impossible for them. An especially clear example of how conditionality could operate to substantially reduce the help available to groups previously recognised to be in especially need of homelessness assistance can be seen in the case of those who had experienced domestic abuse. Since 1996, this group have been afforded priority access to state housing. However, because, under the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, leaving local authority-organised accommodation could count as disengagement or unreasonable failure to co-operate, leaving a refuge or other specialist service could leave an individual without access to any form of help at all. This happened to several women in the study where refuge services were either unable to meet their complex needs, or where they were felt to be insufficiently inclusive of specific protected characteristics⁶. In these situations, they lost access not only to specialist services aimed at supporting them following domestic abuse, but in most cases, homelessness services completely, which then meant that they were denied access to state-provided housing.

Administrative data does not enable the gender-based impact to be identified

My research focused on qualitative interviews with workers and applicants, which inevitably provides only a partial snapshot of the whole picture. One area in which it would be useful to extend the research would be to complement it with data analysis of how women have fared in the Welsh system. However, in contrast to the situation in England, this information is simply not available in Wales. In the interests of being able to understand better the impacts of changes and policies in the Welsh system for evidence-based policy making, and facilitate an improved equality

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impact assessment, I believe it to be vital for administrative data collecting to include a) the gender of all adults included on the application (current data collection includes gender of applicant only) b) information about pathways into homelessness. This will enable a clearer identification of the prevalence, nature and causes of women's homelessness to be developed, and through this the gendered impact of the introduction of conditionality to the homelessness system. Additionally, incorporate questions on homelessness into population surveys, especially the National Survey for Wales, would enable better understanding of how different factors interact to shape Welsh women's experiences of, and vulnerability to, homelessness.

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