A WOMAN'S PLACE: WOMEN AND HOSTEL PROVISION IN LONDON

THE LILITH PROJECT 2005
The Lilith project was established in 2002 as a pan-London, second tier, violence against women (VAW) agency managed by Eaves Housing for Women. The project is funded by the Association of London Government and the Home Office and has a remit to raise awareness of VAW, capacity build within the VAW sector, lobby government, share best practice and develop as a centre of expertise around VAW issues. Lilith co-ordinate networks on Sexual Violence (SVAAN) and BME agencies working on VAW in London (the Kalabash forum).

Lilith research issues of VAW with the aim of promoting best practice among agencies, and making changes to the everyday lives of women.

Eaves Housing for Women provide supported accommodation for vulnerable women; women with substance misuse issues, offending histories or mental health problems; women who have survived childhood sexual abuse or domestic violence; women who have been trafficked into the UK for the purpose of prostitution.

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The information in this publication is correct to the best of our knowledge.
For many women, their experience of violence and abuse has led directly to homelessness or has been a major contributory factor. We know this from research, we know this from Eaves Housing for Women’s experience of working with women for 30 years, we know this because women tell us everyday.

It is important that service providers for homeless women do not ignore this. The Lilith project has analysed the policies and procedures concerning various forms of violence against women (VAW) from a range of hostels across London. The results are essential reading for all housing service providers, Supporting People teams, hostel staff, and policymakers.

Our research shows that many of the hostels in London had no policies at all for supporting women who have survived sexual or domestic violence or women involved in prostitution. Understandings of issues rooted in surviving violence or abuse, such as self harm and eating disorders, were poor, sometimes dangerously so. According to some hostel policies, women who are being harassed in hostels can “stay in their rooms and lock the door.”

This needs to change. Challenging VAW and supporting women who have survived violence is everybody’s responsibility, including all providers of supported housing.

Denise Marshall
Chief Executive
Eaves Housing for Women
INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is not seen as a gendered problem. The dominant public perception of a homeless person is of a man with drug or alcohol dependency who sleeps rough on the streets.

However, in 2003 between 77,000 and 95,000 women identified as homeless, a number equivalent to the population of a city the size of Bath. Homeless women are invisible to the public eye.

SLIPPING THROUGH THE CRACKS: HOMELESS WOMEN

Homelessness is increasing, with Government figures for 2005 showing a 7% rise in homeless households from 2004. There are nearly 100,000 “temporary” households waiting to move into suitable accommodation, an increase of approximately 9% since 2003.

The number of people living in hostel accommodation and women’s refuges has increased by approximately 8%. There are 380,000 people sleeping in hostels, floors and squats, 25% of whom are women. More than 17,000 of these women are homeless as a result of domestic violence.

In the eyes of society women are associated with the home because of their roles as mothers and carers; research shows that this causes many homeless women to experience acute emotional distress and feelings of dislocation.

Women who become homeless are rarely found on the streets. They are hidden from sight and consequently from support, funding or assistance. Many women are the ‘hidden homeless’ - those who do not have a permanent home, but who are not defined as homeless for the following reasons:

- They are perceived to have ‘willingly’ given up housing by leaving an abusive partner. Domestic violence is cited by over 63% of women as a primary reason for homelessness.
- A history of substance misuse or mental health problems which has necessitated periods in residential care.
- Experienced a relationship breakdown, this can include separation, bereavement, fleeing childhood sexual violence, or fleeing abuse.
- Staying long term with friends.
- Not legally recognised as a resident in the UK.
- Under 18 and therefore unable to hold a tenancy.
- Residing in institutions such as prisons, long term residential care, or in the armed forces.
- Housed in accommodation such as temporary housing or bed & breakfast.


2. Office for Public Management: Homelessness. Statutory Homelessness: Households in priority need accepted by local authorities 2005


NOTHING GOING ON BUT THE RENT:
WOMEN & HOUSING OPTIONS

Ann married young and moved in with her in-laws. The stress of this led to her separating from her husband and she then found herself pregnant and homeless. "I rented privately but in my last house the landlord sold up, leaving me with nowhere to go. I went to the council, but they told me that not only had my name been taken off the list years ago but that I had made myself intentionally homeless."

"I was told it would take six months maximum to get me rehoused, but we were there [at a homelessness reception centre] for 17 months. I couldn’t afford to work, because the rent was over £90 a week and I would have lost my housing benefit. We were living in one room and sharing a toilet and bathroom with the other residents."

Julie Bindel: ‘When a house is not a home’, The Guardian 18/06/04

Homeless women are less likely than men to be able to find housing through renting or buying property. Typically women are paid 24% less than men, and part time female workers, who make up a large part of the workforce, are paid up to 50% less than their male colleagues. As a consequence, women are less likely to be able to afford to rent or own their own property.

This economic inequality also has an impact on women’s options for renting accommodation in the private sector. Only 18% of overall private rented lettings are made to tenants who receive Housing Benefit, yet women are the majority of Housing Benefit recipients and represent a large proportion of low income households in the UK. Early parenthood is a barrier to economic survival – if a young woman becomes a teenage mother, she is 20% less likely to own a property. Single women are at greater risk of sinking into poverty than single men.

A 2002 survey of older women by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation cited bereavement, divorce and poor pension provision as factors contributing to the low income and homelessness of older women. Women over 50 are often on a low income, which can adversely affect their access to accommodation.

According to the Equal Opportunities Commission, women make up 80% of the part-time employment labour force, undertaking shift work, non-unionised work or short term contracts, and on average earn 40% less than men doing the same work. Part-time workers often do not receive employment benefits such as sick leave or paid holiday. If the worker is also a carer, she risks losing income when her children or dependents are ill.

Women escaping domestic violence and living in refuges or other temporary accommodation often need time to recover from abuse-related trauma before returning to paid employment. Becoming homeless can result in people being unable to apply for a job because of the stigma of having ‘no fixed abode’.

6 BBC News ‘Gender pay gap wider than thought’ 1/6/2004
7 http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_housing/documents/page/odpm_house_027532.hcsp
8 BBC News, ‘Young mothers face housing woes’, 14/09/2004
9 Bardasi E & Jenkins, S.P: Work History and Income in Later Life, Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2002
10 Equal Opportunities Commission: Brain Drain 2005
11 Although under the Part-Time workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment Regulations 2000 this should not be the case
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STAYING SAFE:
WOMEN, HOMELESSNESS & VIOLENCE

Libby (30) was often too scared to visit her own flat. Her violent ex-partner used to come to the door and break in, threatening to kill her. Instead she mainly slept on the street. Libby was one of the “hidden homeless”, not roofless, technically-speaking, and therefore not a government statistic. She had been asking her local authority to move her somewhere safer but had got nowhere.

Julie Bindel: ‘When a house is not a home’, The Guardian 18/06/04

The street is a dangerous place for a woman to be. 40% of rough sleepers have suffered injuries and harassment whilst street sleeping, with this violence often being inflicted by members of the public. “A woman sleeping rough has little protection.

Of the 1 in 10 women who are estimated to be sleeping rough, 25% will be under 25 years old and 50% will be over 39 years old. These women do not sleep in doorways, preferring to remain hidden for their own safety. Many will have experienced sexual or domestic violence, with over half of older female rough sleepers citing domestic violence as a factor in their homelessness. 

Furthermore, a 2001 study by Potteries Housing Association found that 93% of street homeless women sold sex to fund substance addictions. Over 70% of these women had experienced violence which had caused their homelessness. 

Women sleeping rough are at risk of sexual violence, prostitution, exploitation and abuse. Few women choose to sleep rough but are driven to it, because of fears about their treatment in hostels or night shelters, or because they simply have nowhere else to go.

11 Libby (30) was often too scared to visit her own flat. Her violent ex-partner used to come to the door and break in, threatening to kill her. Instead she mainly slept on the street. Libby was one of the “hidden homeless”, not roofless, technically-speaking, and therefore not a government statistic. She had been asking her local authority to move her somewhere safer but had got nowhere.

12 Jones, A: Out of Sight, Out of Mind? The Experiences of Homeless Women Crisis 1999

13 St Mungo’s: 50:50 the Biggest Survey Ever 2005

14 Moss, J and King, S: Prostitution: How women sleep rough Potteries Housing 2001

15 Jones, A: Out of Sight, Out of Mind? The Experiences of Homeless Women Crisis 1999

16 Reeves, K, Robinson, D and Coward, S Hidden Homelessness: The Invisible City Sheffield Hallam University 2004

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SOFA SURFING:
ALTERNATIVES TO THE STREET

‘Sofa surfing’ is an informal term used for those who are homeless, but sleep on floors or sofas at friends or relatives homes, moving on when they are no longer welcome. Homelessness organisation Crisis believes that sofa surfing is the route taken by most women to avoid sleeping on the streets, as they are apparently more adept at fitting around their host’s life and accessing support networks. 

However, a woman who sofa surfs is at additional risk of being exploited or exposed to sexual violence. Dependency on the host for the accommodation leaves women in a position where it is difficult to refuse sexual demands, and women may therefore be coerced into swapping sex or selling sex in order to maintain a roof over their heads.

8774 Eaves hostel Reportv2  7/2/06  14:04  Page 11
There are currently around 460 hostels in London, offering over 15,000 bed spaces. The majority of hostels are men-only, with 150 (just under 1/3 of the total) claiming to be women only. However, over one third of ‘women only’ hostels admit that 5% to 92% of their service users are men. In reality, there are only 3,807 women only bed spaces across London. Eaves Housing for Women provide 20% of the long term housing scheme provision for women in London.

The term ‘hostel provision’ encompasses a range of accommodation. A woman accessing the system may share a room, a house or a dormitory. If she is in a mixed hostel, she might be sharing washing facilities with male service users. It may not be possible to have her own front door key.

The needs and demographics of service users are diverse. The London Hostels Directory lists accommodation available to 16 to 80 year olds. The potential risks posed to vulnerable young women being housed with older men are often not highlighted in mixed sex generic hostels.

There is minimal hostel provision for women who have complex needs, for example mental illness and a history of sexual violence; offending and domestic violence; substance misuse and self harm, yet there is anecdotal evidence that these issues affect homeless women. There are few hostels offering in-house specialised support for women who have experienced sexual or domestic violence. Whilst supporting service users’ immediate physical needs, the underlying causes of her homelessness, such as a history of violence or abuse, may not be addressed.

The purpose of supported housing is to enable women to re-enter the community. London’s hostel network is currently working at near-capacity because service users living in the hostels are not able to access the resources they need to live independently.

Domestic violence is the single most common reported reason for homelessness and the majority of domestic violence incidents are perpetrated against women. Since homelessness legislation first began to address the needs of women leaving violent men in the 1970s, the dominance of traditional family ideology in policymaking has meant that women without children have been overlooked in provision. The Homelessness Act 2002 widened the definition of violence to identify violence or threats of violence as conditions for ‘priority need’ and should enable more vulnerable single women to access safe housing. The reality is patchy and under-resourced provision.

Refuge provision for single women is affected by the difficulties in accessing move on accommodation. Surveys have shown that only 43% - 68% of authorities routinely accept single women escaping domestic violence as ‘vulnerable’ and London boroughs are least likely to do so.20 Without evidence of ‘additional needs’, single women are often not considered by local authorities to be vulnerable - despite being technically eligible for housing under the legislation. This creates bed blocking in refuges where single women cannot move on and remain occupying spaces for unacceptably long periods of time. Given a shortage of refuge space and unsympathetic reactions from housing departments, it is not surprising that single women fleeing violence fall into the limbo between ‘rooflessness’ and ‘homelessness’, staying with friends and remaining invisible.

40% of women who are homeless are single, without children and have few support needs. (Crisis: Statistics about Homelessness 2003)

WOMEN’S REFUGES

SINGLE MIXED HOSTELS IN LONDON

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http://www.jrf.org/knowledge/findings/housing/H127.asp
20 Kenny, D and Saviman, D. The Provision of Accommodation and Support for Households Experiencing Domestic Violence in England OUPM 2002
21 Blood, I. Older women and domestic violence Help the aged 2004

London Hostels Directory 2005
The Lilith project

A survey of more than two hundred projects that provide services for women in London was conducted. The survey gathered information on the exact nature of the services provided, and asked a series of questions about the policies and procedures in place to protect and assist female service users. Any perceived gaps in service provision, either identified by project workers or service users, are noted in the conclusion and recommendations.

Organisations with expertise around violence against women issues were consulted, including:
- The Women’s Resource Centre
- POPPY project
- Eaves Women’s Aid
- Women and Girls Network
- IMKAAN
- The Greater London Domestic Violence Project
- the nia project
- FORWARD

These organisations support women who have experienced sexual violence, prostitution, trafficking, domestic violence, homelessness, insecure immigration status, substance misuse, harassment, mental health issues, teenage pregnancy, and childhood sexual abuse.

A proportion of the data was gathered by secondary research using Lexis Nexis and other websites, academic journals such as Housing Theory and Society, Journal of Housing and Community Development, Journal of Housing for the Elderly, and newspaper features and articles on the topic of single homelessness. Newspaper reports and other materials were examined for information on smaller charities and informal services (such as faith groups) who offer support to homeless women.

METHODOLOGY

With the background on women and homelessness in mind, the Lilith project conducted a comprehensive survey to ascertain whether London’s mixed single homeless hostels are adequately equipped to provide services to women who have experienced violence, harassment or abuse.

The report aims to:
- Explore current policies and procedures in relation to women living in hostel accommodation
- Highlight examples of good practice that could be adopted by the hostels sector
- Identify practices that are failing to meet women’s needs
- Produce recommendations for minimum standards of training, service planning and delivery for homeless women.

Improved and appropriately targeted services would increase safety for homeless or roofless women. It is hoped that this survey will be useful to organisations that deal with women with housing issues, as well as providing an overview of existing services and identifying gaps where these services need to be developed.

AIMS & OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY
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THE SURVEY

In order to elicit the widest possible response, the survey was sent to 330 mixed gender hostels across London.

Of these:
- 10% were completed and returned
- 10% of the hostels contacted declined to complete the survey because they had since become men only, due to low service take-up by women
- Approximately 5% of returned questionnaires contained comments added by the recipient, stating that the forms had not been completed because support staff did not consider a survey of homeless women to be a priority, as it would detract from the problems faced by homeless men

SURVEY RESULTS

Women represent 1 in every 3 hostel residents in mixed homeless hostels

Referrals
In order to analyse hostel referral procedures, the survey asked participants to:
- List their referral providers
- Outline available women only areas
- Identify languages used by hostel service users.

The largest percentages of referrals were from Social Services, advice agencies and women making a self-referral. This reinforces existing knowledge that women who become homeless initially approach their local authority or try to find alternative lodgings rather than moving directly onto the streets. Referrals by Social Services, (which account for 39% of the referral providers) advice agencies (35%) or the police (9%) indicate that there is a likelihood that some form of violence that has precipitated the woman’s homelessness. The referrals from the police represent women who are victims of domestic or sexual violence and feel unable to return to their homes. These women are often referred to hostels if there are no spaces in refuges for single women.

Clearly finding women somewhere to stay is an urgent priority, but it can be counter-productive to refer women to accommodation where there is a risk that she will suffer further abuse, i.e. in mixed hostels. Women in mixed hostels are particularly vulnerable if there are no policies or procedures in place to deal with sexual abuse and aggression in the hostel they are placed in.
Language Provision

Many hostels are able to offer literature such as applications and policies in a limited number of languages. However, respondents to the survey indicated that upwards of 20 different languages are spoken by hostel service users, with an average of 5 languages being spoken in any one hostel. This can pose serious communication problems for women entering the service, creating an unintelligible, intimidating and threatening environment. Hostel workers routinely identify language barriers as a common frustration which impacts negatively upon their ability to work with their service users. For women whose first language is not English, interpreting services must be provided in order to facilitate participation in therapeutic programmes.

Languages Spoken by service users in hostels - from survey respondents

Respondents listed more than 20 languages used by service users.

The survey also highlighted that women rarely access dedicated homelessness advice agencies, and mixed sex services record a much lower take-up by women than by men. However women-only general advice services such as the London Irish Women’s Centre record a high number of housing and welfare advice requests, with as many as 41% of new client requests concerning either housing or welfare. The main reason for this seems to be a lack of awareness about safety. Many advice agencies in London run drop-ins between 6 and 9 pm. This is not always a safe time for a woman to be queuing in the street outside a homelessness advice centre. These services do not address the specific needs of homeless women, and so many women approach the hostel directly (accounting for 30% of referrals in the survey findings) or are forced to sleep rough, ask a stranger for help, or swap sex for shelter.

This lack of gender awareness continues within the hostel. 51% of the respondents to the survey admitted they had no spaces designated solely for women, despite evidence from Violence Against Women (VAW) organisations that women escaping violence benefit hugely from having the security of a safe space. At the time of writing women represented 30-50% of the hostel residents, underlining the need for a women-only space in a predominantly male environment.

52% of survey respondents have no women-only spaces in their hostels other than bathrooms

\[22\] Croft-White, C and Parry-Crooke, G: Can't See, Won’t See: Revealing the Housing and Support Needs of Single Homeless Women in Central London, Housing Corporation, 2000
Policies & Procedures in Single Mixed Sex Hostels

Protection from abuse - Supporting People

7.12 The Adult Placement Scheme should have a policy for safeguarding vulnerable service users from physical, financial or material, psychological or sexual abuse, neglect, discriminatory abuse or self-harm, or inhumane or degrading treatment through deliberate intent, negligence or ignorance.

7.13 There should be robust procedures for responding to suspicion or evidence of abuse or neglect (including whistle blowing) to ensure the safety and protection of service users.

http://www.spkweb.org.uk/files/030712%20Adult%20place.png

In 2003 the Government launched its Supporting People initiative, which replaced Transitional Housing Benefit funding for supported housing provision such as hostels, housing schemes and refuges. The Supporting People programme requires service providers to reach prescribed standards of quality, including the development and implementation of policies and procedures in the following areas:

Needs Assessment & Support Planning
Service Users should have support plans based on an up to date assessment of need. The process of developing needs and risk assessments should place users’ views at the centre, be managed by skilled staff and involve carers and/or other professionals if service users wish.

Health & Safety
The security, health and safety of all individual service users and staff are protected.

Protection from Abuse
The right of service users to be protected from abuse is safeguarded.

Fair access, diversity and inclusion
Commitment to the values of diversity and inclusion and to the practice of equal opportunity (including accessibility in its widest sense), and the needs of black and minority ethnic service users are appropriately met.

As part of the survey, service providers were asked about their organisation’s policies and procedures on protecting clients from abuse. The following examples represent a selection of responses.

Equal Opportunities & Protection from Abuse

“Your questionnaire focuses a lot on policy, but policies are not everything. You can still support residents without a load of policies.”

Survey respondent

Equal Opportunities appear to be anything but equal if the survey responses are indicative of the hostels sector. Several respondents answered that one Equal Opportunities policy was designed to cover any sexual or domestic violence situation, whether it occurred at the hostel or prior to the tenant’s arrival, and regardless whether it involved staff or service users.

27% of respondents were unable to clarify their policies, or simply answered that they knew of none. The only form of VAW that was widely understood or mentioned was domestic violence.

Although all organisations claimed to implement an Equal Opportunities policy, when asked for examples only 63% could provide them. However, over 50% of the respondents that could give examples of Equal Opportunities policy stated that copies of the policy were available to all residents, and that there was swift staff intervention in cases of harassment.

Approximately 20% of respondents sent copies of their policies with their questionnaires. The quality of the policies varied widely, from provision of a basic Equal Opportunities policy that was expected to cover all VAW issues, to one hostel providing copies of policies on domestic violence, harassment.

92% of hostels who responded to the questionnaire had no policies on violence against women.

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POLICIES SUPPORTING WOMEN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED HARASSMENT

and a range of abuse, though it did not provide information on how successfully these policies were implemented.

Hostel staff did not usually receive training on sexual violence. 23% of respondents admitted to having no training at their workplace at all. 5% were in the process of implementing Protection from Abuse training, but sexual violence and VAW issues in general were not explicitly mentioned.

The range of responses indicated that while a minority of hostels have developed policies and procedures on VAW, the majority of hostels do not recognise VAW issues as an obstacle to women achieving equality of opportunity, and would benefit from awareness-raising on the topic as well as the development of measures to protect women from abuse.

Respondents were proactive in acknowledging training as integral to improving services. However, almost 25% of organisations have no training in place to support staff in hostels. Although some organisations did have excellent training programmes, including information on supporting women who self harm and/or have eating disorders, child custody issues, and the effects of sexual violence, the majority of hostels still focus on training which addresses the ‘dealing with aggressive male residents’ model.

Training in Equal Opportunities, Diversity and Protection from Abuse is now becoming more of a priority for hostel staff. However, training appears to be limited to general work in supporting tenants. This should be supplemented by a London-wide training programme for hostels concentrating on providing effective and culturally appropriate support for women who have experienced violence.

When asked about available outreach projects for domestic violence, sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse:
- 65% said that they did not liaise with any
- 4% did not know of any
- 5% claimed that there were no outreach services in the local area at all
- Only 28% had links with external support services.

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As part of the Supporting People requirement on Protection from Abuse, all hostels have to demonstrate that they have a functioning procedure to protect service users from harassment by staff or residents. As an analysis of policies offered by hostels showed there is a range of strategies to cope with complaints of harassment. One hostel claimed that women who were more likely to be harassed in the hostel tended to be young and have limited social skills.

Example of Good Practice

Staff in-hostel are required to deal with harassment cases sensitively and confidentially. Where needed a translator should be made available to victims.

Women who have been victims of harassment should have the right to be interviewed by a female officer. Any additional support requirements of the complainant must be established at the outset. In all cases a member of staff should be allocated to the victim. In some cases a more formal support or advice may be necessary e.g. victim support, community groups, counselling services, advice agencies.

Hostel policy

This is an example of good practice. By providing a female worker the hostel is demonstrating gender sensitivity, and by accessing external agencies, the woman is not only assured that her concerns are being taken seriously, but will be supported by specialist services.
Policies Requiring Revision/Improvement

Current policy and practice could be improved by aiding staff members and residents to understand the complex nature of sexual violence. Training should be provided on definitions of abuse and neglect, and staff should be trained on how to recognise and challenge violent behaviour by residents.

The priority for a woman accessing hostel accommodation is safety and sanctuary. She needs to feel confident that she has access to support within the hostel, and to external specialist services. Many hostels do acknowledge that they have duties of care other than merely housing, which include attending to the emotional and psychological welfare of the residents. However, some of the hostels do not seem to recognise that previous (and current) experiences of violence and abuse are integral to the women’s support needs.

Several policies seemed to place disproportionate emphasis on the physical well-being of the resident, bearing in mind the high levels of mental health problems suffered by people who experience long-term homelessness and women who have experienced abuse. This hostel fails to address the needs of the resident experiencing harassment.

Residents who are the victims of minor sexual harassment are advised to make it clear to their harasser that the behaviour is unacceptable and must stop. If a resident is unable to do this verbally then a written request, explaining the distress which the behaviour is causing, and handed to the harasser, may be effective. Where the informal remedy fails or where serious harassment occurs, residents are advised to bring a formal complaint to the hostel managers.

Hostel policy

These examples from different agencies place too much responsibility upon the victim of harassment and increase the risk of further harassment. They provide no guidance for situations where victims feel unable or unwilling to discuss the harassment in public or through therapeutic intervention. For instance, a woman who has been sexually harassed by a male resident may find directly challenging her aggressor in a public space too intimidating.

Links with external agencies should be encouraged to ensure that service users have access to a range of support systems that can offer advice on specific issues. As hostels are often under-resourced, the wider voluntary sector can be used to strengthen the expertise offered by hostel staff.

In any incidence of violence, or disclosure of previous violence, hostels should implement confidentiality. The safety of the woman should be prioritised above all else. The Supporting People programme requires providers to include risk assessments within all residents’ support plans, which should be periodically reviewed. The findings from this survey suggest that personal safety awareness should also be integrated into residents’ induction programmes.

Any act of violence or aggressive behaviour by residents or their visitors will not be tolerated in the hostel. The police will be called and the hostel will take action to evict the party responsible.

Hostel policy

- Grievances are discussed in the community meeting.
  If the grievance is not resolved in the community meeting it should then be discussed with the hostel manager.
- This would be discussed in group therapy (with the victim and aggressor).

Hostel policy

This example does not consider the vulnerability of women who may have historical or current experiences of abuse, retaliating against an aggressor with violence, incidences of bullying, or issues of mental health.
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Examples of good practice

The intention of a domestic violence policy is to protect the victim, encourage her to disclose the abuse, and make the perpetrator accountable for his actions.

Procedures adopted by respondents to incidences of domestic violence:
1. Contact the local Women’s Aid.
2. Any resident fleeing domestic violence is put on a vulnerable list and closely monitored.
3. Visitors are carefully monitored and issues of support are raised in keyworking.

The average time between domestic violence incidents that lead to homelessness and actually becoming homeless is about nine years. Research supported by Women’s Aid found that women endure an average of 35 separate incidents of domestic violence before leaving home. Therefore, any new resident who has experienced domestic violence will require intensive support. Raising issues in regular keywork sessions encourage the service user to be proactive in seeking support, and can help the service user identify specific problems she may be experiencing as a result of the abuse. This approach can only be effective if the hostel space is safe and secure.

A robust policy of zero tolerance to violence or aggression by partners in the hostel is necessary to make women safe.

Policies supporting women who have experienced domestic violence

Domestic violence is the most common reason for women’s homelessness. Single homeless women who have experienced domestic violence often feel unsafe in multi-occupancy properties such as hostels, which have minimal security measures. Unlike the refuge network, the addresses of hostel accommodation are available to all members of the public.

The survey asked hostels if they currently accommodated any women who had been made homeless due to domestic violence.

Numbers of women who had experienced domestic violence housed in the hostels ranged from 5% to 48%. When asked how they supported service users, hostels appeared to adopt a range of measures. One hostel said that if both partners lived at the hostel and cohabited, the abusive partner would be evicted and his tenancy would be given to his partner. Another policy involved accessing emergency accommodation for the victim elsewhere, or accessing outside services. However, few hostels have a formalised domestic violence policy.

You concentrate too much on women. What about male residents?
Survey respondent

Don’t Know
33%
Yes
27%
No
40%

Do you currently house any women who have been made homeless due to domestic violence?

You concentrate too much on women. What about male residents?

Do you currently house any women who have been made homeless due to domestic violence?

- Jones, A: Out of Sight, Out of Mind? The experiences of homeless women, Crisis, 1999
The Lilith project

It is impossible to estimate how many homeless women living in London hostels are or have been assaulted or raped, but Crisis reports that 40% of young women who become homeless have experienced sexual assault in their lives. It is therefore extremely likely that any mixed hostel in London will house a woman who has been raped or sexually assaulted in her lifetime.

The majority of hostel respondents had no separate policies for situations where sexual assault occurs on the premises, or for responding to trauma as a result of sexual assault. All responses emphasised supporting the resident as the key issue, although strategies varied.

Of the 8% of organisations that have dedicated policies on VAW, most focused on domestic violence. This resulted in less targeted support for women who have experienced sexual violence.

Local police officers often do not have a strategy to assist a victim of sexual assault who is temporarily homeless. The refuge system is often unable to provide bed spaces, as its remit is restricted to women escaping domestic violence.

POLICIES SUPPORTING WOMEN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Responses to the survey question 'what can be done to improve service provision for women who have experienced domestic violence?':

1. Use of harassment policies to reduce aggression from the male residents towards the females.
2. We don’t know.
3. We don’t have domestic violence policies or procedures, but we do have procedures about aggression.
4. No formalised policy.
5. All women’s bedrooms are fitted with a panic button.
6. No violence or aggression is tolerated in the hostel.

There is no clear, consistent policy on domestic violence among the hostels surveyed, partly it would seem because there are no clear procedures within the organisation on dealing with this issue.

Policies on domestic violence or any other incidences of violence, harassment or abuse should encourage links to be made with local police to aid the reporting of crime against residents. Staff should be encouraged to organise a representative to regularly attend their borough’s domestic violence forum meetings, work closely with local refuges and outreach services and share policy updates.

Only 4% of respondents had a formal policy around sexual violence.

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Of the 8% of organisations that have dedicated policies on VAW, most focused on domestic violence. This resulted in less targeted support for women who have experienced sexual violence.

13% claimed that they had never housed any service users who had been sexually assaulted or raped. At one hostel, procedures on sexual violence were only applied if the incident took place in the hostel itself. Another organisation reported that women who had been sexually abused received more harassment than other tenants, but did not act upon this observation, even though it clearly indicated a need for an effective harassment policy.

Local police officers often do not have a strategy to assist a victim of sexual assault who is temporarily homeless. The refuge system is often unable to provide bed spaces, as its remit is restricted to women escaping domestic violence.

Crisis: Statistics about Homelessness 2003
The ideal environment to house women who have experienced sexual violence is a women-only space which can offer therapeutic support. Many homeless women may benefit from rape screening questions and treatment interventions at an early stage of residency. 27

Historic under-investment in sexual violence support services has resulted in patchy service provision, making it difficult for hostels outside the boroughs of specialised rape trauma centres to support residents effectively. There are limited voluntary sector services in London supporting women with experiences of historic and current sexual violence, and three Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) offering medical and crisis care for victims of recent assaults.

Examples of Good Practice

Our organisation provides support to all of our clients that experience or have experienced trauma, we can support the client emotionally but also practically, getting them in touch with the appropriate authorities. We also seek to help clients explore trauma in therapy.

Survey respondents

Over 60% of hostels offered some level of keyworking service, including one-to-one support plans and signposting residents to specialist agencies. However, the keyworking was not framed within a clear procedure for supporting residents who had disclosed experiences of sexual violence.

Examples of Policies That Could Be Improved

The Lilith project

This policy shows a commitment by the hostel to take the woman’s complaint seriously. However, it is important to note that only 6% of sexual assault victims choose to report to the police, 28 so the resident should not be forced or coerced into doing this if she wishes not to.

The policy could be improved by specifying that the ‘support’ mentioned can be provided by a local agency that has expertise in supporting women who have experienced sexual violence. The policy would then offer some choice to the resident in how much and what kind of support she wishes to receive.

Examples of Policies That Could Be Improved

“This response illustrates the confusion that exists around VAW, based on the assumption that sexual violence and domestic violence are interchangeable exclusive experiences, despite the links that have been uncovered and publicised by domestic violence agencies. Throughout the survey process, there was an unwillingness to accept that sexual violence occurs in hostels, and often hostility that the quality of care and security available at the hostel appeared to be questioned. This was coupled with a lack of clarity about what sexual violence means, and its long term effects."

Survey respondent

27 Goodman, LA Dutton, MA Harris, M: Episodically Homeless Women with Serious Mental Illness: Prevalence of Physical and Sexual Assault, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 1995

The Lilith project

In common with victims of rape, many survivors of childhood sexual abuse do not report their experiences, and can suffer from trauma-linked health problems. The survey uncovered a lack of training around complex issues such as child sexual abuse and self-harm and specific training around dual diagnosis substance abuse as a reaction to antecedent abuse.

Dealing with the issues relating to child sexual abuse is complex and requires expertise. Hostel staff cannot be expected to offer the same level of support as specialised services. Of the hostels that responded to the survey, 22% claimed to have never housed service users who have experienced childhood sexual violence, and only 26% had a policy for this situation.

Examples of Good Practice

Residents can go to their rooms and lock the door.

Hostel policy.

If the assault occurs on-site, a victim-centred approach should be adopted in terms of recording details of the allegations and reviewing risk assessments. Hostels should never house perpetrators who have committed violent and/or sexual crimes alongside female residents. Confidentiality of disclosure should be made clear, ideally as part of a zero tolerance approach to VAW.

POLICIES SUPPORTING WOMEN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED CHILDHOOD SEXUAL VIOLENCE

40% of young women who become homeless have experienced sexual abuse in childhood or adolescence.

Crisis: Statistics about Homelessness 2003

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Examples of Good Practice

Emotional support provided by a specially-trained worker in-hostel with access to external counselling.

Hostel policy.

This policy is a good example of how to support service users quickly with convenient therapeutic support.

McCauley, D. et al: Clinical characteristics of women with a history of childhood abuse: unhealed wounds, John Hopkins University School of Medicine, 2004
The Lilith project

Women involved in prostitution are likely to suffer from a range of physical and mental health problems, but often find accessing support and services difficult. A number of hostels in London are located in areas where there are high levels of on-street prostitution such as Paddington and Kings Cross. Research shows that vulnerable women living in proximity to such areas may drift into street prostitution or find themselves being pimped. Women who are involved in street prostitution experience high levels of homelessness and substance misuse, and accessing hostel accommodation may be the first step to exiting prostitution. Mixed sex environments could potentially house male sex offenders, which could render this group of women vulnerable to further sexual harassment and abuse.

Organisations were asked if staff had been aware of female residents either engaging in prostitution whilst in the hostels, or if residents had been involved in prostitution prior to taking up tenancy.

POLICIES SUPPORTING WOMEN WHO ARE INVOLVED IN PROSTITUTION

Women involved in prostitution are likely to suffer from a range of physical and mental health problems, but often find accessing support and services difficult. A number of hostels in London are located in areas where there are high levels of on-street prostitution such as Paddington and Kings Cross. Research shows that vulnerable women living in proximity to such areas may drift into street prostitution or find themselves being pimped. Women who are involved in street prostitution experience high levels of homelessness and substance misuse, and accessing hostel accommodation may be the first step to exiting prostitution. Mixed sex environments could potentially house male sex offenders, which could render this group of women vulnerable to further sexual harassment and abuse.

Organisations were asked if staff had been aware of female residents either engaging in prostitution whilst in the hostels, or if residents had been involved in prostitution prior to taking up tenancy.

Have you ever been aware of any of your female residents engaging in prostitution?

- Yes 53%
- No 43%
- Not during their tenancy 4%

The term ‘involved in prostitution’ is used here to reflect the phrasing of the original question. The report recognises that this may have excluded the experiences of women involved in the broader spectrum of the sex industry.

Coy, M: They went their way and I went mine: Young women and Leaving care presented at Improving Healthy Outcomes for Young People leaving Care Staffordshire October 2005
The Lilith project

One of the primary needs of women who self-harm is adequate access to medical services, including counselling. However, women who self-harm routinely report a reluctance to seek medical attention due to feelings of stigma, or previous experiences of hostility with practitioners. The survey found:

Example of Good Practice

The contract used by this particular hostel is a positive step, as it both recognises and de-stigmatises self harm. However, care must be taken not to give the resident the impression that she is obliged to disclose when she self-harms. If a resident self-harms as a result of sexual violence, a contract may force her to disclose far more than she is able to and may compromise her mental and emotional welfare.

Policies Supporting Women Who Self-Harm

One of the primary needs of women who self-harm is adequate access to medical services, including counselling. However, women who self-harm routinely report a reluctance to seek medical attention due to feelings of stigma, or previous experiences of hostility with practitioners. The survey found:

- 68% of hostels have no policy around self-harm
- 30% of respondents considered the issue of self-harm to be part of the Supporting People Protection from Abuse policies
- 15% of hostels claimed to adapt their risk assessment strategies ‘where necessary’ for those who self-harm
- Only 17% of hostels have any kind of formalised self-harm policy
- Only one organisation provided specific training around self-harm, focussing on anger management, mental health issues and adult protection.

Policies That Could Be Improved

This policy is dangerous and discriminatory, as it is based on an assumption that other service users (and staff) will not treat the women who are in involved in prostitution in a hostile manner, or subject her to sexual harassment or assault, and also breaks confidentiality procedures in denying the resident a right to privacy.

Ask the service user engaging in prostitution to be open about it with other service users.

POLICIES SUPPORTING WOMEN WHO SELF-HARM

As the diagram shows, over half of the hostels who responded were aware of some residents’ involvement in prostitution. When asked how they approached and supported women who were exiting prostitution, or who were currently working in the sex industry, the hostels offered varied responses, for example:

- Explore the dynamics in the community and support the client to find reasons behind prostitution
- Encourage women to link to trusted specialist organisation
- Ensure the service user’s safety; discuss sexual health and make sure she can access regular check-ups
- Discuss with service user in key work, then involve Care Manager if situation continues.

Hostel policies

These policies are good examples of strategic planning for service users. Prostitution is discussed in a way that does not make value judgements of the women involved, and should serve to assist staff to support women wishing to exit. It is important that service users are aware that they will be assisted, rather than stigmatised if they disclose their involvement in prostitution whilst living at the hostel.

In 40% of the hostels interviewed, engaging in prostitution in-hostel would represent a break in tenancy according to hostel rules, but the majority of hostels surveyed were more focused in supporting the woman involved than enforcing punitive measures.

Several hostels made attempts to link with local outreach projects for service users involved in prostitution, particularly in relation to sexual health care. One organisation also noted that women who engaged in prostitution tended to be harassed more within the hostel, and was looking at introducing measures to combat this.

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Ask the service user engaging in prostitution to be open about it with other service users.
Examples of Policies That Could Be Improved

When asked whether any of their female service users responded to trauma through self-harm and how this was dealt with, some respondents gave conflicting information. Several organisations claimed that they had never housed any women who self-harmed, despite research estimating that 1 in 12 young women self-harm.

 Responses included:

- We have never come across this
- We are sensitive
- We use the risk assessment policy
- We are not a medical service.

No hostels responded regarding risks to the health of the resident or staff attending her. Workers must be trained in universal protective measures to prevent infection by blood-borne viruses. 

**All policies on self harm should put the woman first.** Self-harm is an intensely private experience, and the woman involved may not be ready to share her reasons for doing so. Practical support from staff is to be encouraged. A high quality of training around the issues of self harm is essential for staff, so that any signs of self-harm can be addressed in a holistic approach and the underlying issues can be discussed.

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We do not perform first aid, but offer the tenant a phone to call an ambulance and offer first aid equipment so that she can attend to herself.

This policy demonstrates a very practical approach to self harm, and allows the woman some privacy to attend to her wounds rather than forcing her to make her self-harm public. However, the policy does not explain how the hostel is assisting any women who self-harm to explore the reasons why they cope in this way.

We view self-harm as a coping mechanism that may keep the person safe from doing something more serious. We would aim to adopt a harm minimisation approach whilst exploring more productive coping mechanisms.

**Hostel policy**

This policy is a good example of balancing practical strategies with a supportive approach to empower the service user.

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The Lilith project

POLICIES SUPPORTING WOMEN WHO HAVE EATING DISORDERS

A significant number of homeless women suffer from eating disorders. Many women who develop eating disorders have a history of sexual abuse and manifest control over their food intake as a way of imposing psychological self-control. As both of these issues feature in many homeless women’s experiences, it is likely that hostel staff will encounter women with an eating disorder.

Women who access hostels may be malnourished and will need support in developing and maintaining healthy eating plans. Schemes where mealtimes are highly regulated are punitive towards women who need flexible options in order to eat healthily.

Eating disorders have a negative effect on women’s general health and well being. Because it affects the ability to build up body heat, this can be particularly dangerous for rough sleepers. A service user who shows signs of disordered eating, such as frequent vomiting or extreme weight loss, should be referred to a GP as soon as possible. Ideally a local multidisciplinary team on a specialised Eating Disorders Unit should be involved in her support.

Examples of Good Practice

26% of respondents were reluctant to engage with the question of supporting women with eating disorders. One organisation had a formalised policy. The remaining organisations were happy to provide information on this issue, but the majority of hostels interviewed had no written policy guidelines of how to deal with the problem.

Responses to supporting a resident with an eating disorder:
- Identify support needs and offer counselling as appropriate.
- Therapy for residents with emotional problems.
- Try to identify the behaviour trigger.
- Regular monitoring (food diaries, interventions).

If a service user is unwilling to accept support for her eating disorder, the hostel staff may be limited in terms of the advice they can offer. Staff members need to be given access to training in order to understand the complexities of the conditions that cause such disorders.
The report shows that the provision for women experiencing violence in hostels is underdeveloped, effectively putting women at needless risk. The report also recognises a willingness on the part of the hostels to improve their services for women.

The recommendations of the report centre on increased education of VAW issues, increased partnership working with the women’s sector, and the speedy implementation of robust VAW policies to ensure that hostels are adequately prepared to provide gender-appropriate support to women using their service.

**General**
- Training and policies around VAW to be implemented.
- Translation and advocacy service to be made available.

**Referral process**
- Specific questions on VAW to be integrated into referral processes.
- Women approaching referral services to be signposted to specialist services as quickly as possible.
- Referral agencies to sign up to a hostel monitoring scheme, and agree to refer to hostels with VAW policies where possible.
- More women-only referral and advice centres, or designated women-only hours offered at mixed services.
- Referral centres recording low take-up of female service users to be ‘audited’ by women’s organisations to improve their safety and accessibility for service users.
- Referral services to extend services for women outside current priority needs groups.

**Hostel induction**
- All hostels who accommodate women to set aside women only space.
- Hostel staff to be trained in gendered approaches to prevent women service users having to adapt to male environments.
- Hostels to access external language and culture-specific community and women’s support groups to assist service users who have difficulties communicating with staff in English.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Induction package to include essential numbers for VAW support agencies.
- All service users to be made aware of their rights within the hostel in case of violence or harassment.
- All women to be allocated a keyworker with knowledge of VAW issues.

**Policy and Procedure**
- Protection from Abuse policies to include gender-specific abuses.
- All staff and service users to be made aware of the Protection from Abuse Policy and how it can be used effectively.
- Hostels to improve networking with local agencies who can offer expertise such as rape crisis organisations.

**Harassment**
- A clear definition of harassment provided.
- Treatment of harassment to be victim-centred.
- Clear procedures to follow in cases of harassment, including reinforcing assurance that victims are believed, and offering confidential support.
- Hostels to signpost harassment victims to appropriate agencies.
- Hostel staff to have access to harassment policies.
- Anti-harassment strategies should be reviewed regularly in consultation with service users.

**Domestic violence**
- Induction procedures to include ‘signposts’ to external domestic violence agencies and assurances that disclosures by service users will be treated appropriately.
- Regular keyworking in an appropriate environment to support the service user in identifying abusive behaviour.
- Each hostel to nominate one staff member to attend local domestic violence fora.
- Hostels to implement policy of zero tolerance towards violence.
- Local Community Safety Unit officers to visit hostels.
The Lilith project

Sexual violence
- All hostels to implement immediate policies on sexual violence.
- Hostels to offer confidential support for residents who have experienced sexual violence.
- Staff to be aware that women who have experienced sexual violence may be at risk of increased harassment.
- Hostels to offer access to confidential counselling and advocacy (provided by local agencies).
- Hostels to offer survivors of sexual violence support to report incidents to the Police.
- If sexual violence occurs in-hostel, a victim-centred approach should be taken, with the understanding that violence is a serious offence.

Childhood sexual abuse
- Hostels to signpost women who have disclosed childhood sexual abuse into specialist support services.
- Training to be offered to staff around supporting women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, and supporting women who offend or misuse substances in response to antecedent abuse.

Prostitution and sexual exploitation
- Hostels to act sensitively and confidentially if given information that a female service user is working in prostitution, particularly if this jeopardises her tenancy.
- Awareness training to be given to staff around prostitution and exit strategies.
- Hostels to monitor service users to prevent harassment or exploitation.
- Women wishing to exit prostitution to be linked in to appropriate services.
- Women who are working or have worked in prostitution to be allocated keyworker with expertise in this field and offered sexual healthcare.
- Hostels to make it clear that punitive action will not be taken against women found to be engaging in prostitution.

Self-harm
- Training to be offered to staff around self-harm as a gendered issue.
- First-aid kits to be given to women who have self-harmed, along with advice in keeping wounds clean and uninfected.
- Policies to cover staff safety when assisting a service user who has harmed herself.
- Hostels to offer secondary strategies to help service users to reduce self-destructive behaviour.
- Access to counselling/support.

Eating disorders
- Any woman who discloses an eating disorder to be linked in with local borough eating disorders clinics.
- Hostel staff to be given specialist training to support women who have eating disorders.
- Hostels to offer external agencies for counselling.
- Hostels to include healthy eating in life skills planning.
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