

# **Re-storying the self: a creative exploration of women rebuilding identities after homelessness**

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## Introduction:

Homelessness as a topic has been widely studied and addressed as it represents a global rising issue. OECD (2024) estimates that over 2.2 million people experience homelessness in a given year, taking into account both 'visible' (sleeping on the streets, known as rough sleeping) and 'hidden' ('sofa-surfing' or other types of temporary, non-conventional forms of housing) forms of homelessness. Studies have found that homeless people face multiple adversities, ranging from mental health disorders to a lack of basic needs (Rakus and Singleton-Jackson, 2024). However, despite being more vulnerable to the threats posed by homelessness, women are underrepresented and under-researched while being less prone to apply for or make use of formal support services (Lenta *et al.*, 2025; Rakus and Singleton-Jackson, 2024). Women tend to avoid 'literal homelessness' using informal support networks, such as 'sofa-surfing', to delay entering the formal system, however, studies show that it ends up being more harmful in the long term (McGrath *et al.* 2023). Intimate partner violence (IPV) is one of the main causes of homelessness in women, and it persists within both the informal and formal support networks (McGrath *et al.*, 2023; Rakus and Singleton-Jackson, 2024). IPV, alongside the misuse of drugs and alcohol, might create long-lasting trauma and cause mental health issues, worsening their present-day situation even further while most likely conditioning them after exiting homelessness (Guillén *et al.* 2024). Housing First is a housing-led intervention model that has been adopted as the basis for various programmes and, in some countries, formal policy frameworks; it is guided by seven core principles: the right to a home, consumer choice, separation of housing and support, flexible and long-term support, recovery orientation with harm reduction, proactive engagement, and social integration (MHCLG & DLUHC, 2024). Studies centered around Housing First have shown how intervention successfully managed, for the most part, to help with housing stability, however, these same studies also show that it lacks any meaningful impact regarding community integration and mental health (Bassi *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, despite the first Pilots of Housing First in the United Kingdom showed positive outcomes, only 29% of its clients were women (MHCLG & DLUHC, 2024).

It is at this point that academic literature stagnates. There is scarce literature on the transition from homelessness to housing, and it mostly focuses on how economically successful it was or is, at best, gender-blind. In contrast, this research project seeks to answer the following questions: How does homelessness impact women's identity formation? How does said identities influence long term housing stability and social reintegration?

## **Methodology:**

The report utilises an existing dataset obtained from narrative life story interviews with 20 women, which will be analysed using the method of I-poems alongside some sample demographic information. I-poems are a part of the Listening Guide (Gilligan, 2015), a qualitative method of analysis initially developed for psychology from a feminist perspective to challenge the dominant positivist trend. It was “designed to help researchers become attuned to the multiple and often conflicted voices of participants” (Koelsch, 2015), achieved by empowering participants’ subjective voices, thereby strengthening their stories (Dodding and Partington, 2024). Gilligan (2015) outlines three types of listening within the method. The first is the Listening of the Plot, which seeks to identify the narrative of the story. The second is the Listening of the I, where the researcher aims to understand the sense of self and agency; from this listening, the I-poems are created. Each “I-statement” is separated according to its order of appearance, after which the researcher selects which statements will form the poem. The third is the Listening for Contrapuntal Voices, which aims to highlight contradictions and provide an additional layer of analysis. Additionally, Nvivo 15 was used in order to properly identify the central themes of each interview, leading to I-poems that represent those themes more accurately. Koelsch (2015) states that the Listening Guide has been commonly used when researching marginalised groups, implying its exceptional worth when dealing with participants whose voices are normally unheard due to their opinions clashing with what is socially expected. The Listening Guide is exceptionally helpful when trying to strengthen the voices of homeless women. Nevertheless, it should be considered that despite the researcher not being able to alter the sentences nor change their order, they still hold the final say in what goes in the poem, thus, the poem is subject to the researcher’s bias, which should be accounted for when evaluating the validity of the poem.

The aim is to enhance our understanding of homelessness as a structural issue, shifting away from individualising and stigmatising narratives that often “blame” individuals for homelessness, and helping us comprehend how homelessness impacts women’s identity rebuilding. Examining women’s situations through a life story approach allows us to shed light on less frequently heard stories. This may both de-stigmatise narratives of multiple exclusion homelessness and facilitate the development of earlier, more effective interventions, thus helping not just homeless women but everyone who finds themselves in a precarious situation.

## Results:

For this section, a shortened version of the poems alongside thematic analysis will be presented. To see the full version of the poems see the annexes.

### 014 E:

...

*I got a property over here*

*I absolutely love it*

*I'm well settled*

*I've got a bath,*

*I've got a walk in shower,*

*I'm well settled,*

*I keep saying*

*"Do I have to leave?"*

*I'm leading my own life now*

*I was naughty*

*I've got to admit that it was naughty*

*I was on every drug going*

*I just took one look at my disabled son*

*I thought "what are you doing?"*

*I rattled, but I done it*

*I says well it was easy*

*I got out of the wrong crowd*

*I do it now, just stay on my own*

...

This interview had a lingering positive tone, which is attempted to be reflected in the poem. Nvivo thematic analysis confirmed the predominant positive attitude of the interviewee regarding her situation. The interviewee experienced multiple ways of abuse that lead to severe trauma, highlighted in the beginning. However, throughout both the interview and the poem there is an emphasis that she managed to turn her life around. This can be related to what Frank (2013) calls 'restitution narrative': "Restitution stories attempt to outdistance mortality by rendering the illness transitory" (p. 115). In this case, the 'illness' would be homelessness, and the storyteller (the interviewee) talks about it as a fixed problem,

highlighting its transitory property, basing herself in her newfound stability. The 'I've got' phrases are meant not only to remark what she has gained now but also is a way of reclaiming power over her own life. Abuse and homelessness are experiences that make people feel powerless, so it is especially crucial to listen to these statements to fully understand the importance of this shift in power dynamics in their lives and how this might correlate to post-homelessness stability.

**004 G:**

...

*I started hurting meself*

*I feel like shit,*

*I feel terrible.*

*I feel like, ah it's just a disaster*

*I need support.*

*I need some help.*

*I get nothing.*

*I get no fucking help.*

This interview is more negative in tone and themes, depression, anxiety, drugs and traumas are way more present. Nvivo analysis marked 'Depression and anxiety' as the predominant theme. The interviewee's first experience with drugs and any form of homelessness was at a very young age. There is a clear call for help which is emphasised at the end of the poem (the chosen extract). While the first part of the poem is a recall of her story, the tail end of it is a clear window to her state of mind at the moment of the interview. Her storytelling closely resembles the 'chaos narrative' (Frank, 2013), which is distinctive for its lack of narrative or chronological order, resulting in the story being told as the storyteller experiences it. Chaos narratives show the anxiety and vulnerability of the storyteller as they have reached a state of mind where betterment is considered impossible (Frank, 2013). Depression and anxiety are highly evident, and the mentions of self-harm further show the extent of these feelings. What is more worrying is the feeling of getting no help during her process of rehabilitation and reintegration, she feels isolated from any outside help, which is already a persisting feeling among homeless women. Most homeless people suffer from having weak relations, leading to a poor support network and isolation. If the aim is to reintegrate them into society it is crucial to not reinforce their feelings of loneliness, and one of the first steps is for the institutions to give them the attention needed.

**016 C:**

...

*I don't really come out of the house*

*I'm housebound*

*I'm a quiet person,*

*I've always been quiet*

*I don't really like going out*

*I don't really like associating with anybody*

*I have been treat off people in the past*

*I just don't know who to trust and things like that*

...

Isolation is highly relevant as a theme in both the interview and the poem. Due to this woman having learning difficulties, forming meaningful relationships was harder for her, which not only aggravates the risks of homelessness but also hinders a re-insertation into society. Despite the fact that she is not homeless anymore, there is no evidence of her trying to form a support network, which would leave her in a danger zone to easily fall back into homelessness. This case supports Bassi's et al. (2020) paper regarding how housing stability does not always translate to social reintegration and other joint approaches are needed to address said issue. Her learning difficulties also make her an easier target for other people to abuse her, in physical and mental ways. This also affects the power dynamics, as more people will believe they have a right to control her and she might lose power over her own life.

**019 D:**

...

*I got me own flat*

*I lost it*

*I was homeless then as well*

*I left*

*I couldn't stay there it was too unsafe*

*I went back on the street again,*

*I got held hostage in a flat*

*I got battered for about 2 days*

*I married him.*

*I was married once*

*I'd never do it again*

*I just got out*

...

Substance abuse and depression are easily identifiable in both the interview and the poem. Nvivo thematic analysis categorizes 'Drugs and alcohol' and 'Depression and anxiety' as the two main themes by quite a margin. The 'absolutist statements' are a clear piece of evidence on how the experiences are felt by the interviewee, conveying raw, strong emotions. Once again the storytelling resembles a chaos narrative as events are not digested or filtered before being told (Frank, 2013). A highly negative outlook on her life might be related to how she feels she is losing (or has lost) agency over it, statements such as: 'I'm sick of being tossed about', exemplify the feeling of powerlessness and impotence. Overall the poem and the interview convey that she feels overwhelmed by all that has happened, thus the 'need' to cope through the usage of drugs. Environmental factors did not help to stay sober and could even be considered the biggest factors that came into play for her to start using drugs.

**020 T:**

...

*I live in fear.*

*I mean the guy that smashed my head in,*

*I was seriously assaulted.*

*I just think he's found me*

...

*I'm normal, I'm a normal person!*

...

*I don't want to die of alcoholism.*

*I really want to work.*

*I really want to work in recovery.*

*I need to be in a very positive environment doing positive things*

The interview is very reflective and has a positive tone, through Nvivo thematic analysis it was found that 'Power' was the predominant theme. The beginning is all the ways she has lost power and/or suffered abuse, drugs and alcohol were highly present at one point of her life but at the moment of the interview she seemed to have been sober for a while. By the end of the poem she talks about what she has now, she chooses her company, what she wants to do moving forward and is how proud of her newly acquired flat she is. Those are actions that tip the balance of power back in her favour, she is regaining agency over her life and the fact that she is succeeding to some extent might be the reason for her positive outlook in comparison to other interviewees. The story telling resembles a restitution narrative because homelessness is being treated as something you can crawl back from (Frank, 2013).

## Discussion:

In the poems and interviews where the women manage to overcome the power imbalance that they have experienced (not only for being homeless but for being women) there is a more positive tone and outlook towards the future. In those where the power imbalance is never fixed and thus their sense of agency of their own lives is low, the predominant tone is negative. Despite Frank's (2013) book being focused on chronic illness it was identified how the storytelling of these women could fit either restitution or chaos narratives, suggesting how homelessness can have lasting effects (much like a chronic illness) even if stable housing is achieved. In this sense, one of the lasting effects might be the unwillingness or the struggle to integrate into their community, as many of the interviewees expressed. Not only does this result in isolated individuals but it is also a sign of instability, higher risk of relapsing into substance abuse and homelessness. We can also see how the fear can persist even when they are far removed from the perpetrator, and these lasting scars will affect how they relate with other people (mainly men). The women interviewed often expressed being overwhelmed by the situation and in most cases it's a shout for help. This should be looked into in greater detail as homeless women are on one of the lowest scales of power and, seemingly, the best way to reintegration and mental health betterment is by addressing the power imbalance that their situation entails.

According to Isaak et al. (2024), significantly more female Housing First participants reported making positive life changes than those in 'treatment as usual'. These changes range from reduced substance abuse to enhanced safety (by virtue of living in a secure domicile), however, this does not mean that every need was met. Homelessness Impact (2024) estimates that domestic abuse accounts for 25-33% of homelessness among women across the UK. In light of that, they analyzed Domestic Violence Housing First (DVHF) and found noticeable benefits of using this approach instead of simply Housing First, among said benefits there is reducing repeat abuse, depression, anxiety, and PTSD over two years (Homelessness Impact, 2024). These findings are not isolated, as a study done in North America also found evidence of the effectiveness of DVHF in promoting the safety and well-being of survivors over time, even noting mental health improvements (Sullivan et al., 2023). However, both studies agree that more funding and flexibility are needed, to give more agency to the survivor means interventions have to be more case specific and because one of the principles of housing first is long-term support, a sustained and planned funding is needed to be put in place to properly carry out the programmes as intended (Homelessness, 2024; Sullivan et al., 2023). Nevertheless, these programmes still lack a proper reintegration approach, it is seen as a byproduct of positive changes rather than an objective and medium on its own.

## **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, this report has explored homeless women's struggles after housing is secured, trying to make sense of how her experiences might be causing her issues. Similarities between the narrative types proposed by Frank (2013) and the interviews were highlighted as further research on this might shed light on how similarly homelessness can create long-lasting effects the same way a chronic illness can. Evidence suggests that traumatic events leading up to and during homelessness can cause severe cases of anxiety and depression that would limit the social integration of women, which in turn results in a poor support network and less stable housing conditions. Support and intervention programmes such as Housing First were also examined and despite its success both in North America and in the first pilots in the UK, it is evident that a more tailored approach is needed when dealing with homeless women as their needs and vulnerabilities are different from those of men. In this sense, it is recommended to support what has been working (keep the financing of Housing First), but a national level operation is still needed in the UK, and it should consider implementing a more flexible budget and multi-organizational approach (in collaboration with domestic violence organizations, for example) in order to properly meet the needs of everyone.

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## **Annexes:**

### **014 E:**

*I've been physically abused, sexually abused, verbally abused, mental torture*

*I was raped at 17, that's how I had me oldest son*

*I got raped by their dad*

*I cannot cope with this type of life anymore*

*I've tried to end my life*

*I thought why*

*I've got my kids,*

*I've got me grandkids,*

*I've got me dogs,*

*I've got me snake*

*I cannot trust men*

*I've got a lot of issues with men*

*I can't even look at a man*

*I got a property over here*

*I absolutely love it*

*I'm well settled*

*I've got a bath,*

*I've got a walk in shower,*

*I'm well settled,*

*I keep saying*

*"Do I have to leave?"*

*I'm leading my own life now*

*I was naughty*

*I've got to admit that it was naughty*

*I was on every drug going*

*I just took one look at my disabled son*

*I thought "what are you doing?"*

*I rattled, but I done it*

*I says well it was easy  
I got out of the wrong crowd  
I do it now, just stay on my own*

*I love me animals to bits*

**004 G:**

*I met a guy who was like 29  
I'd never touched drugs in me life  
I had crack  
I didn't really know what I was taking*

*I'm left with a drug addiction.  
I was stuck on heroin,  
I did leave school,  
I joined the navy*

*I had to go back to the lad who got us on drugs  
I was just sofa surfing.  
I looked terrible.  
I met me baby's dad through drugs*

*I hit 21*

*I was there for the drugs.  
I was just there for the drugs.  
I got pregnant,  
I'd already put her up for adoption*

*I tried to kill meself  
I'm still here.  
I'm getting off this shit.  
I'm making something of me life*

*I started hurting meself  
I feel like shit,  
I feel terrible.  
I feel like, ah it's just a disaster*

*I need support.  
I need some help.  
I get nothing.  
I get no fucking help.*

**016 C:**

*I called them "bastard bullies"  
I know I shouldn't have but enough was enough  
I just couldn't cope.  
I was struggling really badly*

*I don't really come out of the house  
I'm housebound  
I'm a quiet person,  
I've always been quiet*

*I don't really like going out  
I don't really like associating with anybody  
I have been treat off people in the past  
I just don't know who to trust and things like that*

*I used to get accused of going with other lads  
I used to go in the bath  
I used to get accused of playing with myself  
I could go to the toilet for a wee and get accused of playing with myself*

*I don't have anyone  
I'm a loner.  
I've got none.  
I used to have friends*

*I met Paul  
I was with for years  
I went through Holy hell with him  
I wanted to commit suicide*

*I've got learning difficulties  
I'm starting to speak up to my family,  
I tell my mam straight  
I never used to.*

**019 D:**

*I often feel suicidal.  
I'm on antidepressants for that.  
I was groomed at 9. Raped at 15. And a lot of sexual abuse.  
I was doing a lot of drink and drugs then just to cope*

*I don't know how I've coped.  
I was on Prozac and stuff.  
I had to watch them drink.  
I kept relapsing,*

*I got me own flat  
I lost it  
I was homeless then as well  
I left*

*I couldn't stay there it was too unsafe  
I went back on the street again,  
I got held hostage in a flat  
I got battered for about 2 days*

*I married him.  
I was married once  
I'd never do it again  
I just got out*

*I do shout out, I'll not tolerate it  
I got the help  
I started with different people  
I found out about here and then it's just been like a process*

*I was in hospital.  
I've OD'd.  
I felt crap  
I had to cope*

*I'm sick of being tossed about  
I know its unsafe.  
I'm not going to be happy.  
I hate going through my life story*

**020 T:**

*I was a drug addict as well as an alcoholic.  
I was couch surfing  
I'd have to get out of there because they assume that means sex  
am I being raped?  
am I fucking him so I can have somewhere to sleep?*

*I don't think women should be put in that position.  
I'll do this and you can have that.  
I'll lie naked in your backyard,  
I did that.*

*I lost a baby when I was 17  
I would be sexually active  
I've had multiple abortions.  
I never produced a child,*

*I live in fear.  
I mean the guy that smashed my head in,  
I was seriously assaulted.  
I just think he's found me*

*I've had 2 strokes during my alcohol and addictive period.  
I was a massive smoker.  
I'm a massive vaper.  
I don't want to think about it.*

*I don't see men.  
I like men,  
I'm not against men  
I'm celibate, I don't want*

*I wouldn't invite a man into my home, no  
I was very uncomfortable with two men bringing the stove up.  
I stayed in the hall.  
I've been raped.*

*I was a drunk.  
I was brought up a drunk,  
I always drank  
I was a functioning alcoholic.  
I was into cocaine, crack, and erm junk  
I was homeless.  
I was trying to get out  
I'm a junk – I'm a crackhead*

*I could scream about it, a horrible man, horrible*

*I was staying with him,  
I kept waking up with him in my room, naked  
I had never slept with this guy*

*I live in my flat  
I have a flat that's mine  
I'm really proud of it  
I love it*

*I had my face reconstructed,  
I had scaffolding on my head.  
I was, it was just horrendous.  
I was going through the surgeries*

*I'm normal, I'm a normal person!*

*I was beaten as a child by my father.  
I thought it was how someone showed that they loved you,  
I mean I just don't intend getting into a relationship  
I'm done.  
I've had enough bad ones.  
I've loved, and I've been loved back a couple of times.*

*I don't want to die of alcoholism.  
I really want to work.  
I really want to work in recovery.  
I need to be in a very positive environment doing positive things*