

## **“A shelter is not a home”: Voices of homeless women in the City of Tshwane”**

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## **1. Extracts from the narratives of homeless women in City of Tshwane**

*'We are all different and we come from somewhere'; 'we all have families'; 'the government or people who are in charge should help people that are homeless to find their families – help them find their roots where they come from'; 'reconnect them to their families so as to reduce homelessness'; 'if we have people who can speak on our behalf ... to our families they will understand to accept us back so that we can go back home because not all of us are rejected by our families'; 'some of us, we can't go back home because of low self-esteem'.*

## **2. Introduction**

In many cities worldwide, shelters for the homeless are seen as a means to an end but not as the end of homelessness (Novac et al., 2009; Fotheringham et al., 2014). Hence, these shelters are part of transitional housing programmes in some countries (Fotheringham et al., 2014) and these programmes are seen by different organisations and bodies as bridging or transitional measures between emergency and permanent housing provision (Novac et al., 2009). Shelters for the homeless vary depending on the intention of their provision, the populations they serve, the services they provide and the expected outcomes (Novac et al., 2009). Accordingly, there are different types of shelters in Tshwane, of which only two are intended specifically for women and young women.

Like other cities, Tshwane is concerned about the escalation of homelessness, which is viewed as a global problem (UNEP/UNESCO, 2013). The causes of this escalation are multiple and complex, cut across different areas and can emerge at any time in all walks of life (Mago et al., 2013). It is estimated that there are 5000 homeless street people in Tshwane (Van Zuydam, 2014) of which a large number are undocumented immigrants and refugees. The City of Tshwane metro, home to one of the capital cities of South Africa, is experiencing an influx of poor and unemployed people from the rural areas of South Africa and neighbouring African countries who come to the city in the hope of securing employment.

In response to a request by the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality (CoT) for the development of evidence-based measures geared to address homelessness, an

interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research team was established to investigate how best to address street homelessness in Tshwane. The research team identified four pillars for exploring this homelessness, namely: (1) conceptual/theoretical perspectives of homelessness, (2) narratives and experiences of homeless and former homeless people, particularly women, (3) documentation of current practices to curb homelessness in the city, and (4) policies that address homelessness in City of Tshwane. This article focuses on the second pillar of this project, which was to capture the voices and experiences of homeless and former homeless women living in CoT and to present the results of the study conducted. A factor that was taken into account was that homeless women were not always visible on the streets because they often lived with men who had places to stay.

### **3. Poverty and homelessness: The feminist school of thought**

This section discusses the views of different feminist schools on poverty, which ultimately results in the homelessness of women. In discussing the different strands of feminism, a better understanding of women homelessness as a broader poverty issue and its entanglements can be reached (Cross & Seager, 2010); Brah & Phoenix, 2013)

In general, it can be stated that homelessness is a product of poverty and that men and women are affected by it differently (Wenzel et al., 2000). In the case of women, homelessness is more complex due to the multiple roles that women play in traditional nuclear families (Wenzel et al., 2000; Özbilgin et al., 2011) especially when considering the consequences of unpaid work through domestic labour as women are not paid for the domestic work they do, they can easily fall into poverty. In traditional nuclear families women bear the major responsibility for child rearing and family care for which they are not paid (Özbilgin et al., 2011).

Different feminist schools of thought have different perspectives on homelessness as one of the consequences of poverty (Brah & Phoenix, 2013) According to liberal feminism, in a society that encourages equality, every individual should be provided with the basic living conditions, for example affordable housing, that will allow them to live in a positive environment. As primary family carers in such a society, women will be given preference when allocating services such as housing. Conversely, the

belief of Marxist feminism is that unless the economic structures of the entire society change there will be inequality and, as designed by the capitalist economic system, women will always be at the bottom of the ladder (Brah & Phoenix 2013)

However, radical feminists are of the opinion that inequality, which disadvantages women, cannot be ascribed only to the capitalist economic system, but that it is the result of an economic system, be it capitalist, socialist or communist. From the radical feminist perspective, inequality and its consequences result from a man-centred system that subjects women to marginalisation, discrimination and inequitable treatment (Tang et al., 2015). On the other hand, cultural feminists believe that women experience inequality and poverty due to the suppression in society of distinctive female qualities, experiences and values (Vincent & Braun, 2013). According to socialist feminism, which incorporates both Marxist and radical feminist perspectives, gender equality requires the elimination of both patriarchy and capitalism in a society (Cudd, 2015). Yet another strand of feminism is Afrocentric feminism, which, like multicultural feminism, believes that reality is mediated by social, political, economic and cultural factors. Afrocentric feminism, which provides the basis for this study, takes these factors, especially the role of positive aspects of African culture in the lives of African women, into account. In this study, the opinion is subscribed to that the intention of Afrocentric feminism is to discard the oppressive aspect of African culture and embrace the liberatory ones (Tamale, 2008; Nnaemeka, 2014). Hence, in this study, Afrocentric feminism provided a space for homeless women to express their experiences regarding their homelessness. When Afrocentric feminism is used as a lens it provides a 'bigger picture' of the consequences of poverty for women, which include not only their health but also general social ills that have long-term effects, such as homelessness (Browne & Tarlier, 2008).

Different feminists define the concept of home differently and most disagree with the definition that a home is a safe space with a line that separates the inside from the outside of the house (Kaika, 2004). Nevertheless, the discourses around home as a safe place still dominate in the literature. For example, Kaika (2004) defines a home as a place where there is no fear and anxiety, where social, political and natural processes are not endorsed and where one enjoys an autonomous and independent

existence. Moore (2000) regard a home as a positive place where one experiences joy and protection. Contrary to these definitions, according to Afrocentricity a home is a continental construct (relating to Africa) and its definition includes both positive and negative attributes. For example, Ndlovu (2010) defines a home as a place in the universe where two main events happen: birth and death. Hence, reference is made to a home as a place where one's umbilical cord was buried and a place where one's ancestors were buried (Ndlovu, 2010).

#### **4. Research methods**

##### **4.1 Setting and participants**

The eight participants in this study were purposively sampled from women who lived/had lived in shelters in Tshwane. Participants were from one shelter in the CoT. They shared the living space at the shelter but each had her own room. These women were associated with each other across generations and cultures: their common denominator was their homelessness and not their age, ethnicity, background or social status. Of the sample, one woman was white and seven were black, of which three were from South Africa and two from neighbouring African countries.

##### **4.2 Procedure and ethical issues**

The required procedures were followed in obtaining ethical clearance for this study from the Faculty of Health Sciences of the relevant tertiary institution. The research project, of which the principal investigator was one of the three authors of this article, was implemented with the approval of the Community Oriented Primary Care Research Unit (protocol 102/2011). Permission was sought and obtained from the Ethics Committee of the relevant University to access homeless shelter in the city, and the participants identified and signed a form giving their informed consent to take part in the study. Before data generation commenced the researchers went through the leaflet containing information about the study and the research questions with all the participants. The identified participants requested that the question 'How best can homeless people be assisted' be addressed in a focus-group discussion. The other questions were addressed in individual in-depth interviews. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning participants numbers/codes to ensure their privacy given the sensitivity of the topics discussed during the individual in-depth interviews.

All the criteria related to trustworthiness, namely, credibility, transferability, conformability and consistency, were adhered to.

### **4.3 Data generation procedures**

A qualitative research approach was used with the intention of capturing the lived experiences of homeless women from different shelters in the city. Data was collected through one focus-group discussion and eight individual in-depth interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded for later verbatim transcription. Both the focus group discussion and in-depth interviews produced narratives on the diverse experiences of women who were homeless and lived in shelters in Tshwane. Narratives were seen as the embodiments of people and as embedded within the stream of their experiences. The captured narratives uncovered homelessness in women as the phenomenon of interest (Bailey & Tilley, 2002) Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Caine & Estafen, 2011). Additionally, narratives elicited the inner views of participants on homelessness in women as lived by them. A narrative reflective process grows out of narrative inquiry, which provokes creative reflective tools such as storytelling, metaphors and conversations (Schwind et al., 2012). Through their narratives participants generated a relational knowing that deepened and revealed new patterns of being and of becoming homeless.

### **4.4 Data analyses**

The researchers did verbatim transcriptions of the generated narratives and used the six phases of thematic analysis developed by Braun & Clark (2006). First, the researchers read the data transcripts several times to familiarise themselves with the data and they then analysed the data inductively based on the emerging themes. Through these procedures many storylines were identified, but the one that captured the researchers' attention was 'shelter was not a home'. It was clear that although shelters provided homeless women with hope and protection, especially while they waited for the government to give them alternative housing, they still did not regard a shelter as a home. The participants in this study expressed different views about what a shelter for the homeless was, the circumstances they endured while living in these shelters and their wishes to escape from and survive their homeless situations.

## **5. Themes and story lines**

The following themes and storylines emerged from analysing the verbatim transcripts of the participants' narratives: A shelter was a half-way home; Restrictive and protective regulations were in place in shelters for the homeless; Hope – a matter of survival.

In reporting on the said themes and storylines, excerpts from participants' narratives will be quoted verbatim with the intention of allowing the participants to speak for themselves.

### **5.1 A shelter was a half-way home**

Shelters for the homeless provide a number of amenities depending on what or who these shelters are intended for. Some provide basic living amenities, which include food, a bed, safety and access to washrooms, showers, laundry machines and sanitary napkins (Mago et al., 2013).

One of the participants commented as follows on her perception of a shelter for the homeless:

'This place [shelter] is a half-way home; though some of us, we tend to relax in this place because it gives everything for free, so most of the women tend to relax and do not want to move out. Once you stay here and you relax, it will be hard for you to get out of this place. For me [it] is more like a comfort zone, you know.'

The participant quoted above had been in the shelter for less than six months. Her definite opinion was that a shelter was a transitional place intended to give a homeless person a start in life and not to give that person a stable home. She indicated that at her shelter they were provided with everything from basic needs up to educational needs. Nevertheless, these amenities should be considered as temporary methods to enable people to rebuild their lives and relearn life skills. Through the processes of rebuilding and relearning homeless women are given the hope that they will escape homelessness one day. Other participants concurred with the view that a shelter for the homeless was a place of transition. For example, one participant said: '[I see] this place [shelter] as a stepping stone that can give a

homeless person a start'. This participant also pointed out that shelters for the homeless had restrictive and protective regulations.

## **5.2 Shelters had restrictive and protective regulations**

The shelters in Tshwane have restrictive regulations for control purposes and for the protection of the residents and property. However, some of these restrictions are not in line with the intention of giving shelter to the homeless. For example, one of the participants shared the story of how her child had been removed from her care while she had been undergoing mental observation:

'I was taken for mental observation while at the centre; my child was removed and placed in a children's shelter. So now I am looking for job, like a proper job and a place to stay, so they say ... I can't [get] my child back if I do not have work and a proper place to stay, so I am looking ... Because ... I left here [shelter], before I went to hospital, it was not nice.'

As is evident from the above narrative, the participant regarded the action taken as a restrictive and not a protective measure. Sometimes the restrictive rules of shelters made it impossible for women to live in peace as one would in a 'real' home environment. It seemed that the women, who were the primary carers in their families, continued to endure the difficulties and restrictive rules in the shelters in the hope of eventually being reunited with their families and living in a normal home set-up. Below are the remarks of some of the participants:

'I do not have a good background from home. [While in a shelter] you have to watch your steps, what you are saying and what you are doing. Diet-wise: take note that where there is poverty there is a lot of sickness. The meals are not adequate [for such cases].'

'As long as you follow the regulations around, this place is fine.'

'All what you need to do is to keep to yourself to stay safe.'

However, these restrictions are also meant to protect the residents. One participant in the study agreed with this:

"[I see] this place [shelter] as a stepping stone that can give a homeless person a start and protection".

The participant felt that being at the shelter provided her with a home and some form



of protection

### **5.3 Hope – as a matter of survival**

When people have hope, they are able to keep going regardless of what life dishes out. If people have hope they can find meaning, begin to see a future and cope with losses and other life challenges. To attest to this one participant said:

'The shelter has a message of hope; you are encouraged to be a woman. ...  
Social workers are doing a good job to give us hope.'

Other participants said the following:

'My hope and motivation is from God because I pray a lot for sustenance from God.'

'I am isolated here by everyone but, despite that, I believe in God and I want to live for my child.'

'This shelter is a stepping stone for me and I live on prayer and the love of my kids. I also hope to get a job for the future.'

According to the participants they were motivated to live and have hope as they envisaged being reconnected with their families at their homes. Furthermore, despite their homelessness these women still hoped for a "piece of elusive job" (line in poem 'Homelessness' by Mahlangu, 1994 quoted in Olufemi, 2000). In addition to the hope the women had, they also had the support of staff members and this strengthened their hope that they would escape from homelessness in due course. The sense of hope expressed by homeless women, particularly regarding their future, should serve as an incentive for early interventions to capture and use their hope to motivate them to escape from their homelessness (Boydell et al., 2000).

## **6. Discussion of results**

The concept of home is experienced and interpreted subjectively (Parsell et al., 2013). According to the homeless women who participated in this study, a shelter was a place of safety. Those who were not South Africans saw the country as their new home, but despite this the shelter they lived in would never be equivalent to a home even though it provided safety. Scholars, such as Moore (2000), affirm that a home is a place of joy and protection, but Brickell (2012) argues that the meaning of

a home: has been complicated by negativeness and undecided feelings. Moore (2000:210) expounds that a 'home is not just a concrete word but an abstract signifier of a wide set of associations and metaphorical meanings such as happiness, belonging and a process of self-fulfilment'.

Contrary to the positive ideas some of the participants had about a home, some feminist scholars posit that a home is not always the safe place it is supposed to be. For example, Parsell et al. (2013) state that a home can be an environment characterised by control. Many women become homeless because they flee from the violence of partners, spouses and other family members. When relationships in a home are violent, the environment disallows positive socio-psychological experiences and prevents women from making proper decisions about their lives and those of their children. Watson (2016) is of the opinion that everyday experiences of the reality of violence are gender based, leaving women vulnerable and homeless. This is similar to the findings in this study where women left their original homes and landed in the shelter. Parsell et al. (2013) and McCormick (2014) point out that people feel relaxed and at home when they have control over their personal space and privacy, unlike when they are in restrictive and protective spaces. Similarly, the participants in the study expressed concern about some of the rules and regulations in the shelters that controlled their lives. Mention was made of the rule that mentally disturbed women were not accepted in specific shelters. Note can be taken of the view of Shinn and Bassuk (2004) that many homeless people are likely to be mentally disturbed in some way due to the post-traumatic stress they experienced when becoming homeless. The shelters for the homeless where the study was conducted did not take in some categories of women, for example, those with grown-up boys, those who were mentally disturbed and those who were students or were looking for jobs. Some researchers, for instance, Tutty et al. (2014), support restrictions at shelters. They add that shelters give women temporary, but not stable or adequate, accommodation where they can stay for days or weeks because of shelter rules and policies. The women at these shelter often feel hopeless and as if they do not belong. At this shelter, very sick women had been referred to hospital and their children had been sent to places of safety as an intermediary measure (Gauteng Department of Social Development, 2012). According to Tsemberis & Eisenberg (2000), service providers experience enormous difficulties dealing

homeless mentally ill persons who live on the streets. In the current study, mention was made of a mentally disturbed resident who had been sent for observation and whose child was taken to a children's shelter as a measure of protection. The mother experienced this action as restrictive.

One of the themes that emerged in the current study was that homeless women needed to have hope in order to survive. Yohani & Larsen (2009) define hope as the ability to envision a future in which one can participate. They add that hope lives in the heart and encourages resilience and faith, which make it possible for people to bounce back during adversity and in uncertain circumstances. In the current study it was found that participants prayed and hoped that they would be reunited with their families in the future and would escape from their homeless situation. Snodgrass (2014, who conducted a study on spirituality and homelessness, asserts that hope and motivation are part of the experiences of homelessness and that homeless people depend on different sources, such as God, friends and counsellors, to give them hope and motivate them. The current study confirmed the finding of Snodgrass (2014) that the homeless who believe in God experience an intimacy with God and the feeling that through God their paths will be revealed. With reference to the definition of hope by Miller (2007:13) as 'a state of being characterised by an anticipation of a continued good state, an improved state or a release from a perceived entrapment', the current study found that participants continued to have hope and to pray that they would be reconnected with their families and that their future would change for the better.

In support of the importance of hope and motivation, the participants at the shelters reported that the positive social relationships they had with other residents meant a lot to them (Smith, 1994). Confirming the findings of Tutty et al. (2014), the participants' narratives suggested that homeless women accessed shelters to receive social assistance and also to give hope to others who came from abusive relationships. Shelters enhance women's journeys to being appropriately housed.

## **7. Concluding remarks and recommendations**

Homelessness affects men and women differently, and the many homeless women are testimony to the effects of the patriarchal systems in many societies (Klodawsky,

2009). The causes of homelessness have been found to be contextual as they differ from city to city and country to country (Seager & Tamasane, 2010). In Canadian urban areas, housing is a socio-developmental issue and it is not gender neutral (Browne & Tarlier: 2008) this is similar to the South African context. Homelessness can also be laid at the door of homes that are often not units of harmony but potential places of struggle and conflict (Olwig & Young, 1997 and Badgett & Folbre, 1999 as cited in Brickell, 2012). Socialist feminists affirm that a home is a site of oppression and patriarchal domination of women, and for this reason some women end up being homeless (Mallett, 2004). Women are often affected disproportionately by instability, especially in countries such as South Africa, and there is a link between homelessness, poverty and women's low status (which is embedded in development policies). Women have the right to enjoy equal status when it comes to housing issues, and housing development should be guided by well-founded policies.

Homeless women stay in shelters knowing that these shelters are not pathways out of homelessness but give them temporary accommodation until they can escape from homelessness. Homeless women who live in shelters continue to hope that someday they will no longer be homeless. This hope assists them to deal with difficult situations, such as the restrictive rules of shelters.

Homeless women remain a hidden population worldwide. This is especially the case in African cultures as African communities usually take care of their people who are in need. Shelters are transitional measures to give homeless women a chance to live with dignity as they give them access to services and support (Klodawsky, 2009) but there is a need to improve people's economic status to provide a permanent pathway out of homelessness. Another pathway out of homelessness, in particular in an African context, is to reconnect homeless women with their families, even though these families might have caused the women's homelessness in the first place.

To conclude: the homelessness of women is multidimensional and complex and could give rise to multi-faceted social problems. In the poem 'Homelessness' by Mahlangu (1994) (as cited in Olufemi 2000: 228), the never-ending cycle of women's homelessness is portrayed in the words, 'Homelessness ... is dreaming of a big house but extending a plastic shack and giving birth to a baby that joins the street

kids'. By implication, if women's homelessness is not addressed in the early stages of homelessness we could be faced with the challenge of having a homeless society as children will be born on the street and will live there for the rest of their lives.

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