

There's a relative paucity of research on women's homelessness in Poland. Also in Europe and North America there's lack of sufficient research in the area. Still, it has been shown that women's homelessness is shaped by gendered images and discourses. Lack of "home", and often also lack of family, is understood as much more than just lack of shelter, and this means different perception of homeless women and men. Cultural and operational definitions of homelessness are socially constructed in a way that both in statistics and in popular imagery homeless person is overwhelmingly seen as a male. It has been shown that women's homelessness is more "hidden and private" and that their experiences are different.

The aim of the project is to explore women's homelessness in Poland, particularly its gendered nature, women's relations with services and the dynamics of individual experiences. Acknowledging recent research on the problem in Europe, it is plausible to say that relations between homeless women, state agencies, services and community are shaped by gendered cultural images. Invisibility of women in situation of homelessness is partly explained by their reliance on family and friends' support to avoid physical homelessness. It's also a reason for women to engage or stay in sometimes abusive relationships. Furthermore women feel less secure in the public space and shelters and may try to avoid them. Women refuges and shelters for single mothers are often not included in homelessness statistics. On the other hand presence of dependent children and priority support or housing for families may secure some women from the most extreme forms of homelessness. General opinions of homeless women are shaped however by the images of women's whose children were taken into custody, by the notion of women with addictions or women "on the street".

First part of the project will consist of an exploration and a short survey of service providers and voluntary organizations in two voivodships within the context of the available data on women's homelessness in Poland. Interviews with the local welfare and shelter staff will enable to trace the relations of those services with other state agencies such as police or health care within the existing legal framework, as well as with the local government and community.

Qualitative panel study in two women's shelters will be the main part of the project. Interviews with shelter residents will reconstruct their "homelessness pathways" as well as give an opportunity for life story narratives. Interviews with the same respondents will be conducted again after one year, which will enable to trace their experiences in the previous year and capture their reflections on the past events. Focused group interviews will also be conducted with the residents, which will be an opportunity to participate in residents' discussion of the concept and meaning of "home", social role of a woman and a mother, relations with state agencies and voluntary organizations and perception of homeless women in society.

Exploration of gendered construction of the social problem of homelessness and women's experiences of pathways through homelessness will contribute to a better understanding of the processes of social exclusion, particularly in the area of housing and social policy. Project's results may challenge the methodology of collecting data on homelessness and lead to revealing some of women's 'hidden' homelessness. Giving voice to the women about their needs and relations with state and social services may contribute to forming better, more equal tools in social policy.