



An Introduction to **HOUSING FIRST & WOMEN**

WHAT IS HOUSING FIRST & WOMEN?

The Housing First model is an innovative approach to re-housing that focuses on giving safe, affordable, independent living without pre-conditions to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. It stands in contrast to traditional homelessness services, because it does not require users to demonstrate they are 'housing ready' – meaning they have to prove they are able to live independently or with only low levels of support – before they can access stable housing.

Rather, people in Housing First are given a high degree of control over the support and treatment they receive, including whether or not to use different support services.

In Europe, all Housing First adaptations are based on the 8 Core Principles of the Housing First model, which are fundamental to any effective Housing First service delivery.

CORE PRINCIPLES OF HOUSING FIRST



Housing is a Human Right



Choice and Control for Service Users



Separation of Housing and Treatment



Recovery Orientation



Harm Reduction



Active engagement without coercion



Flexible Support for as long as is Required



Person Centered Planning

Why do women need adapted Housing First services?

All Housing First services are based on the 8 Core Principles of Housing First. However, some groups of service users have specific additional needs that Housing First services should take into account when providing suitable accommodation and support.

Women are an example of these groups, since women who experience homelessness encounter a number of specific challenges. Women have different paths into and out of homelessness and a significant number have histories of violence, trauma, and abuse - both prior to and during their

experiences of being homeless, including being particularly vulnerable to exploitation. They are more likely to be part of the 'hidden homeless', since they tend to conceal their gender and rely on informal arrangements, such as staying with friends, relatives, and/or acquaintances. Additionally, some women may be accompanied by children or wish to be reunited with their children in the course of their tenancy. Housing First services should be adapted for women by providing an environment where tenants can feel safe and - if applicable - live with their family.

Gender-based violence and violence against women

The European Commission defines gender-based violence (GBV) as 'violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately.'

Violence against women is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in

- physical harm,
- sexual harm,
- psychological,
- or economic harm
- or suffering to women.'

GBV can include, but is not limited to

- domestic violence (DV) includes all acts of physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence that occur within the family, domestic unit, or between current or former intimate partners.
- sex-based harassment
- female genital mutilation (FGM)
- forced marriage
- online violence

For more information: https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-based-violence/what-gender-based-violence_en

A gendered approach to homelessness

DID YOU KNOW?

Gender is one aspect of difference in the paths to lived experiences of homelessness. Many women and LGBTIQ+ people face experiences of vulnerability, abuse and/or exclusion directly related to their gender or sexuality which compound the challenges and complexities of experiencing homelessness. This introductory guide looks at experiences common to women in general, regardless of their background or other aspects of their identities appropriate to someone's needs.

Gender-based violence (GBV) also plays an essential role in women's experience of homelessness. When a victim of gender-based (including domestic) violence, women often find themselves in the position of having to choose between becoming homeless or staying with their aggressor, which exposes them to repeated violence. Homeless

women who suffer from other conditions (mental health issues, problematic drug use) are less likely to receive recovery support for their experience of GBV and the resulting trauma, which can significantly limit their ability to recover swiftly and to find new purpose in their lives.

Another important factor to note is that mothers are a growing demographic among people experiencing homelessness. In the context of family homelessness, the family unit is most commonly (though not exclusively) composed of a single mother and her children - who may or may not be in the mother's care. Yet in many cases, traditional service structures are still designed for men and lack the resources to accommodate the different needs of women, whether as individual clients or mothers with children. There is therefore a need for gender sensitivity in the homelessness sector. If we wish to end women's homelessness, and use Housing First as a tool to reach that target, we need to define the specific needs of women and adjust the services provided based on these needs.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How does women's gender affect their experience of homelessness?

Women often have a very different experience of homelessness from men, mainly because they represent a vulnerable group in the homeless population. Research has shown that experience of domestic violence and abuse is near universal among women who become homeless. Domestic abuse is a gendered experience - homeless women are more likely to have experienced domestic abuse and vulnerable to experiencing further abuse than their male counterparts.

What's more, homelessness services such as shelters are often modelled around the needs of men, failing to address women's diverse needs.

CASE STUDY: Housing First für Frauen (Berlin, Germany)

While building trust can take time, friendly relationships can and do develop. In the case of the Housing First for Women (Housing First für Frauen) project in Berlin, one service user referred to her support worker as a "friend", stating that she could "always call her and she is always there for me to help me".

For more information about the project, please see: Evaluation of the Model Project 'Housing First for Women Berlin': Second

Think for example of how difficult it is for homeless women to take care of themselves on the streets during their menstrual cycle. Some Housing First services, such as *Housing First für Frauen* in Berlin provide additional bathrooms, hygiene and children's facilities in their offices to help women and children meet some of these needs.

Why are specialist and gender-responsive support services especially important in Housing First and Women?

Women joining a Housing First service might have complex and specific needs - such as mental health issues and/or addictions - exacerbated by their experience of GBV, exploitation, or abuse. As a consequence, these women might carry the weight of considerable trauma with them and may struggle to feel engaged in support and/or build trust with care workers. Pre-engagement work is especially important, as these women need to take the time to build relationships with (and gain trust of) the people around them. Patience, sensitivity to trauma, and being non-judgmental of their life experiences is key to a successful relationship. For some clients, it may be especially important for them to only work with all-women support and care teams.

Equally significant are physical health needs that are particularly relevant to women, such as gynaecological care, certain forms of cancer which are more common in women (such as breast, colorectal, endometrial, lung, cervical, skin, and ovarian cancers), endometriosis, as well as changes in healthcare needs during later stages of life, such as menopause. Unaddressed health issues and complex needs are typically most intensive in the first year of being supported by a Housing First service and it's important to bring doctors around the table to work with women, to help get them to take an informed, consenting, assertive, proactive approach to their healthcare.

CASE STUDY: Threshold Housing First Pilot (Manchester, UK)

Project staff in this pilot linked women with a history of domestic violence to specialist domestic violence services, securing some of the tenants' homes with alarms. One housing provider was linked to the police, so they would know that the place is a known domestic violence address and intervene when needed.

For more information about the project, please see: *The Threshold Housing First Pilot for Women with an Offending History: The First Two Years*

Depending on the particular needs of individual women, not all of these specialist services may be available within the Housing First service itself, so it is equally important that Housing First services have good relationships and strong links with support services that are also available outside of their organisation to which they can connect clients, as appropriate.

Why should standard Housing First services be adapted for women?

Women experience homelessness differently than men, mainly because of their different needs (they are more likely to be accompanied by children) and pathways into homelessness (GBV, domestic violence, abuse, etc.). A gendered approach to homelessness should be employed when housing women in a Housing First service. This might translate for example into training workers in domestic abuse and sexual violence support, or complex trauma-informed care. This would allow service workers to better relate to the women they assist, and help them build strong relationships based on trust.

Are there specific types of expertise or other services that need to be involved when supporting women in Housing First?

Alongside the types of expertise that feature in any Housing First support team, Housing First teams working with women need to also develop resources and work with protection systems for victims of gender violence as well as childcare systems. For example, young mothers may need support as parents, not just in terms of childcare but also in developing parental skills and other domestic skills, including managing household finances.

Additionally, young women may sometimes feel safer living with other women. However, needs change over time and with age so, as with any Housing First approach, the Core Principle of individualised, person-centric care should always be front-of-mind and respected.

It may be useful to have expertise in the support teams in developing formal protocols around shared care and identifying service user needs. On a case-by-case basis, support teams should identify who is best placed to help the woman using the Housing First service, and find ways to create a 'village of support' around them.

DID YOU KNOW?

Housing First teams may also need psychological support.

Housing First workers and teams need access to good psychological reflective practice and support as working with women around subjects such as domestic and sexual violence and abuse can also be hard on teams and can create vicarious trauma.

Housing First services also need to consider a wider variety of types of housing and the flexibility for women tenants to move if they feel unsafe, especially if they have previously experienced abuse and there may be a likelihood of the perpetrator identifying and approaching their home. For example, the Westminster VAWG Housing First is the first Housing First service in England where the support is delivered by a specialist women's service provider. This model works really well, but if the provider isn't a women's specialist they should make sure that teams are well trained around domestic abuse etc. and have good links with local specialist women's services. This can be especially important in instances where women choose to remain in relationships with abusive partners and providing safeguarding support can be especially challenging.

What about the perpetrators of abuse against women using a Housing First service?

In order to protect women, it is also important and necessary to engage with their partners. Especially if the woman chooses to continue a relationship with a person who has emotionally, physically, or sexually abused them.

When women choose to remain in relationships with their perpetrators and in these scenarios it can be difficult for providers to safeguard their wellbeing. This is one of the reasons there is such a need for an innovative housing model that allows women to move easily and matches women to properties based on their safety and support.

What is needed to prevent women from (re-)experiencing homelessness?

When it comes to homelessness, prevention is critical to reducing the number of women who experience homelessness in their lifetimes.

From a service perspective, preventing eviction is especially important when working with families, particularly when it comes to preventing intergenerational homelessness. People who experience homelessness for the first time at a young age are more likely to have further experiences of homelessness in later life. It's critical to help children who are born into homelessness, or who experience homelessness at a young age, by identifying their situation and intervening as soon as possible.

Some young women are more likely to become homeless due to change in circumstances or instability in their backgrounds. For example, some women transition to Housing First from institutional systems and Housing First & Youth services. Working with women who have been rejected by other homeless and domestic violence protection services is a crucial service provided by Housing First.

Early identification is important to intervene before an experience of homelessness occurs, as well as taking whatever steps are possible to shorten wait times to access housing

How does Housing First provide a safe environment for women at risk?

Because women are very often victims of violence or abuse, they might be homeless because they are fleeing a violent partner, or because someone has taken their financial means - such as rent money or savings - from them. They are more likely to experience further abuse on the streets as, in some countries, women are perceived as a minority in the context of homelessness and a more vulnerable group than men. Some may be accompanied by children, and therefore need a safe space to use as a base to get back on their feet. Housing First provides safe, affordable, and independent housing as well as support services to help women gain back control over their lives.

Where the client is also a mother, as far as possible, there should also be an option for these women to be accompanied by, or reunited with, their children, so the Housing First service hosting them should provide an environment where the whole family can live together.

Can Housing First services help reunite women who have experienced homelessness with their children?

The majority of women supported by Housing First services in England are not accompanied by children and those who are mothers have typically had their children removed from their care by social services to live with relatives, be fostered, or adopted. For many of these women, being reunited with children and having them come to live with them isn't an option. 11 out of 20 women supported by the Westminster VAWG Housing First project had children, and all of them had been removed from their care.

The process of helping women recover children who have been taken into custody by social services may vary from country-to-country. In the experience of AIRES in the municipality of Madrid, 40% of women using Housing First services are living with their children again. Reunification typically happens 3-4 years after a woman enters the Housing First service, but then housing needs change. A one bedroom apartment may be fine in the beginning, but once a family is reunited, they will need access to larger units.

References & Related Reading:

1. Guide for developing effective gender-responsive support and solutions for women experiencing homelessness. (FEANTSA, 2021)
2. Housing First & Women: Case Studies from Across Europe. (FEANTSA & Housing First Europe Hub, 2022)
3. Granfelt, R., & Turunen, S. (2021). Women on the Border between Home and Homelessness: Analysing Worker-Client Relationship. *Social Inclusion*, 9(3), 223-233.
4. Housing First for Women Experiencing VAWG Toolkit. (Homeless Link)
5. DAHA Whole Housing Approach Toolkit (Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance)
6. Quilgars, D., & Pleace, N. (2017). The Threshold Housing First Pilot for Women with an Offending History: The First Two Years.
7. Housing First for Women means Safety First – Pilvi Azeem (Blog, Housing First Europe Hub)
8. Why it's important to have a gendered approach to Housing First - Louisa Steele (Homeless Link)
9. St. Mungo's (2018) Women and Rough Sleeping: A Critical Review of Current Research and Methodology.
10. Westminster VAWG Housing First service second year evaluation

● THE HOUSING FIRST EUROPE HUB

The Housing First Europe Hub is a partnership of housing providers, foundations, governments, national platforms, cities, national government ministries, and experts working together to promote the scaling up of Housing First as an effective systemic response to homelessness across Europe.

We support this effort through:

TRAINING: for Housing First service providers, cities, governments, housing providers, etc.

PARTNERSHIP NETWORK: we work with our partners to advocate for and support the implementation of Housing First as a means to transform exist-

ing housing and homelessness systems to focus on ending and preventing homelessness across Europe. We also support national and regional Housing First networks as they share practice and knowledge for scaling up Housing First.

RESEARCH: as Housing First is strongly evidence-based, ongoing research is crucial to the innovation and improvement of the approach.

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: where practitioners can exchange knowledge and experiences with one another to help improve outcomes for service users.

● Interested in joining the Housing First Europe Hub as a partner?

Partners should agree to commit to the core principles of Housing First, as set out in the Housing First Europe Guide, and be engaged in or working towards scaling up Housing First in their community. Partners have access to all Hub services including:

- All communication including the website and newsletter;
- The option to include their logo on the Hub website;
- The opportunity to co-produce tools with the Hub through participation in work clusters;
- Access to Train-the-Trainer courses and other activities;
- Invitation to all events, workshops etc., organised around the annual Steering Group meeting.

For questions, or to apply to become a partner of the Housing First Europe Hub, please feel free to reach out to one of our Programme Coordinators:

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