

Safety by experience:
Women's experiences

St Mungo's
Ending homelessness
Rebuilding lives

**STANDING
TOGETHER**
against domestic abuse

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This summary highlights the voices of women who have experienced homelessness. It covers their experiences of living without a home, violence and abuse; and how they navigate safety while homeless and in services. The information below comes from interviews and group sessions conducted with 16 women as part of the Safety by Experience Project.

Safety by Experience is a partnership project between Standing Together and St Mungo's, funded by Homeless Link's Ending Women's Homelessness Fund. The project's aim was to find out more about the experiences of women living in homelessness services whose lives have been impacted by violence and abuse, create guidance and resources that can be used across sectors, and ultimately ensure that women feel safer and better supported.

Women's experiences of homelessness and of violence and abuse

During the Safety by Experience project women with experiences of homelessness were asked to talk about their experiences of homelessness, and violence and abuse.

There were three key aspects of women's experiences of homelessness. Firstly, a lack of safety. Women described feeling vulnerable, scared, and constantly at risk of violence while homeless. One woman explained: "feelings of fear and being scared were pretty much what we had to carry all the time". A second key aspect of women's experiences of homelessness was feeling alone, lonely and lost: "Sometimes you lose hope. Most of the time you do your best to keep hope, because in this situation only hope will keep you alive". A third theme described by the women was physical discomfort. They described being hungry, cold, miserable and unable to sleep while on the streets.

The women interviewed described a range of experiences of violence and abuse while sleeping rough and while living in homeless shelters. A key type of abuse described was domestic abuse (emotional and physical) which women described experiencing both before and during homelessness. When women experienced domestic abuse before experiencing homelessness they described it as a contributory factor in their homelessness experience. Women also described experiencing other forms of physical violence. Sometimes this was from members of the public who picked on or sought out fights with those sleeping rough. Women also described experiencing violence from other homeless people, mainly men. Men also posed a significant threat to women's safety due to the risk of sexual harassment and exploitation. Women described experiencing predatory behaviour from men, particularly those interested in sex, and changes they made to their behaviour to try and protect themselves. One woman told us: "Men, they come to you easily and so I always make sure I am invisible". Other experiences of violence and abuse included violence experienced through prostitution, sexual violence, coerced drug use, modern slavery, and abuse at the hands of security guards or the police.

Women's experiences could be intensified by discrimination such as racism, classism, transphobia and homophobia. Women described that their experiences of discrimination could be part of the reason they experienced homelessness in the first place. They also described experiencing discrimination whilst sleeping rough. One woman when asked if she had experienced discrimination said "Sometimes racism [...] because some people are really nasty [...] Especially if people are on their own, they tend to pick, pick pick. You know, because we're vulnerable at the end of the day." Time spent in homelessness services could also involve experiences of discrimination, particularly racism. One woman described experiencing differential treatment in services because of her ethnicity "I see some woman on staff, if I wasn't the same background as them you can feel them less nice to you, they don't even talk to you, they don't even help you". However, women also explained that a lot of the discrimination they experienced was due to being a woman and homeless, rather than due to other characteristics.

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Service user

How women keep themselves safe

The women spoken to by Safety By Experience were asked to explain what strategies they used to keep themselves safe.

One of the key considerations women used was the **space** they were in. They described avoiding spaces that felt unsafe whether this was because there were a lot of rowdy people there, or because the space was too isolated. Spaces that they described as safe were well lit and either public for instance A&E waiting rooms, churches or McDonald's; or hidden places to sleep such as bin sheds, stairways or back gardens. Women also described keeping moving to keep safe, particularly where this kept them away from people they felt were dangerous such as past abusers or other homeless people. This could involve moving to different areas, or keeping on the move within a local area. Some of the women also described using services as a way to access safe space, though services could also be seen as unsafe particularly due to sexual harassment from men "I could feel the look of the men on me, the pressure, and I could feel even the sexual pressure and I was like, 'Okay, I have to make a decent decision. I'll stay here for two hours and then go.'"

Women paid close attention to the **people** they were around to keep themselves safe. They described losing their trust and so keeping people at a distance. This involved strategies such as restricting the people they mix with; not sharing much information with others; not lending or borrowing money; and treating new people with caution. The inverse of this strategy was women finding people they could trust. This included people in the same situation as them; female members of the public; men who did not have expectations of sex; and some officials such as train staff, and police (though there was some disagreement about whether the police were safe). As part of this strategy women emphasised the need to use their support network. This included ensuring friends and family know where they are and can be in contact, being honest with support workers and engaging with individuals in services.

Other strategies women used included managing their appearance for instance looking 'presentable', avoiding 'provocative' clothing, or dressing like a boy. Women also tried to keep alert, for instance: avoiding drink or drugs that put their guard down; avoiding sleep; not responding to provocation and knowing their limits for instance when they could or couldn't run from danger. They also took care to keep their money, documents and belongings safe. Lastly women described the need to maintain hope despite their situation, which some accessed through their faith.

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(Night shelters are) ...better than the street but some of them, most of the men, they go there, so there's more men than women. I could feel the look of the men on me, the pressure, and I could feel even the sexual pressure and I was like, 'Okay, I have to make a decent decision. I'll stay here for two hours and then go.

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Service user

Women's experiences of services

The women described a number of factors that affect their safety when in services. Women described the support and availability of staff as helping them feel safe. This was particularly the case where they were able to build relationships with staff, and staff took protective actions such as door guarding. However the actions of staff could also reduce women's safety. This could be the case when there was a lack of respect for women's confidentiality; if staff were inexperienced in supporting women with trauma; or if women felt dismissed or ignored by staff.

Another factor in women's safety in services was the **other service users**. Other service users could provide a support network for the women, and a sense of comradery. One woman described the atmosphere in a service as like "staying at a friend's house" as everyone was in the same situation. However, the behaviour of others in services could also make women feel less safe. The women described issues such as drug use, other services users experiencing mental health issues, theft, and aggressive behaviour. "There are some people that go in people's rooms and steal, so I always lock my door even though the toilets are, like, three steps away."

The **building** women received services in also had an impact on their safety. Factors that increased women's safety included feeling secure in the building. This could be achieved by keeping the building secure using cameras, an electronic gate or bars on the windows. "You can't just walk in, you've got to sign yourself in and sign yourself out. That's what I've done, anyway. You can't just walk into the building, because you need to have a fob, unless someone's going to try and creep you in." Women also felt safe when they had a door they could lock, or a fob for their own room. However, where services weren't well cared for, where security systems such as locks were faulty or where there was a lack of private space women felt less safe.

Women also discussed the **rules of services** and the effect these had on their safety. Women particularly valued women only services which were described as being more secure. Rules around drug and alcohol use were considered helpful by some, for instance not allowing drug paraphernalia in services. Regulating visitors, and not allowing fighting and violence also had a positive impact on women's safety. However, there were also rules that did not improve women's safety. For instance limited opening hours and the need to pay for some services. This limited women's access and led to them being in more dangerous situations. There were also issues when rules were not properly enforced, for instance when there were no warnings about workmen being present in women only spaces. However, generally the women felt that the rules in services were there for their safety.

Women described a number of issues with the **system** as a whole. Services were described as hard to navigate, especially if women are in mental distress when accessing the services. Women described needing an advocate, whether a friend or a professional, to push and challenge the system for them so they can get the help they need. Women also noted that Covid-19 made it much harder for them to access support. The different approaches to support that services had also impacted women's experiences. Even across the same organisation, sometimes women described very different approaches; some very supportive, others more focused on quick move on. There was a feeling that services do not always recognise the long process of recovery that women are on. Women also discussed wanting more support from services to develop life skills and find a job.

St Mungo's and Standing Together want to say a big thank you to the women we spoke to for sharing their experiences of homelessness, violence and abuse with us and want to highlight their strength, resilience and humour in the face of often extreme hardship. Their words and views created the framework for 'Keeping us safer: an approach for supporting homeless women experiencing multiple disadvantage', which can be accessed **here**.