



Where are the women? Supporting women with multiple needs

Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs

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This briefing provides an overview of some of the key reasons why women are a 'hidden population' among those with multiple needs and the particular issues and barriers they face. It signposts a number of useful sources of information on the topic and outlines some potential solutions. The briefing is produced as part of the evaluation and learning programme of the Big Lottery Fund's [Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs initiative](#).

Introduction

The Fulfilling Lives (Multiple Needs) initiative is working to improve support for people affected by two or more of homelessness, substance misuse, offending and mental ill-health in 12 areas of England. Our recent evaluation report¹ found that a third of all programme beneficiaries are female.

This is roughly in line with what we know from other research on people with multiple needs. The Lankelly Chase Foundation's 'Hard Edges' report² is one of the most robust attempts to provide a statistical profile of people affected by homelessness, substance misuse and offending. Their findings indicate that while around 59 per cent of people experiencing homelessness only are female, when other types of disadvantage are taken into account the figure reduces substantially. Just 22 per cent of those affected by substance misuse and offending as well as homelessness are female. The findings confirm previous research³ that suggests that multiple needs is a 'predominantly male phenomenon'.

The perception from Fulfilling Lives (Multiple Needs) projects is that there are many women who experience multiple disadvantage but that they can be harder to reach; they are said to be less visible to services and may be hidden from statistics. In this paper we provide an overview of some of the reasons for this and the particular issues faced by women with multiple needs.



Women are under-represented in statistics

Part of this may relate to the way multiple needs is defined and measured. Domestic violence is not one of the four areas of need that are used by the Fulfilling Lives (Multiple Needs) programme. However, there is a high degree of overlap for women with substance misuse, mental ill-health and domestic violence.⁴ We explore this further below. The Hard Edges report excluded mental ill-health from the analysis due to the absence of a suitable dataset to draw on. This could also partly explain the lower proportion of women in the estimates.

Women who are homeless are very conscious of their own personal safety and vulnerability and are known to actively avoid hostels and known rough sleeping spots. A 2015 study in Brighton by Homeless Link⁵ found that women were more likely to stay out of sight and move around at night to reduce their visibility when sleeping on the streets due to their vulnerability. Research carried out in 2006 by Crisis⁶ found that women were more likely to be informally accommodated by friends than live in hostels. Observations of Fulfilling Lives (Multiple Needs) project staff support this.¹ As a result, women are more likely to be under-represented in homelessness statistics based on rough sleeper counts or hostel usage.

Women are more likely to be affected by domestic violence and abuse



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Women are far more likely to be affected by domestic violence and abuse. [Agenda](#), the alliance for women and girls at risk, recently published their Hidden Hurt report on violence, abuse and disadvantage experienced by women.⁷ The study found that women are twice as likely as men to experience interpersonal violence and abuse and that about 1 in 20 women have experienced extensive physical and sexual violence and abuse across their life course.

Fear may affect the ability of women to seek help. The [LWA](#) (Living without abuse) website states that domestic violence has more repeat victims than any other crime - on average there will be 35 assaults before a victim calls the police. Fear is often cited as a primary reason for not reporting abuse sooner. Refuge and Women's Aid conducted a survey which found that 70 per cent of respondents said that if they knew someone was experiencing domestic violence they should call a domestic violence helpline. However, when asked what they would do if experiencing abuse themselves:

Only 58% would do this (call a domestic violence helpline), with this figure dropping to 45% and 35% respectively in the youngest age groups.⁸

Domestic violence is linked to other forms of disadvantage

The Hidden Hurt study goes on to report that:

Women with extensive experience of physical and sexual violence are far more likely to experience disadvantage in many other areas of their lives, including disability and ill health, substance dependence, poverty and debt, poor living conditions, homelessness and discrimination.⁷

Other studies also show that experience of sexual assault and violence or abuse from a partner is prevalent among women with multiple needs. The Multiple Exclusion Homelessness research project found that many service users reported traumatic experiences such as sexual or physical abuse. Experience of sexual assault and/or abuse was heavily concentrated amongst female respondents.⁹ Crisis surveyed 480 single homeless people in 2014 and found that 61 per cent of women had experienced violence or abuse from a partner (compared to 13 per cent of men).¹⁰

Fear of having no home if they leave a perpetrator can often be a contributory factor for not reporting domestic abuse. Domestic violence is also often an immediate cause of homelessness amongst women.⁶ Fulfilling Lives (Multiple Needs) staff observe that in order to stay off the streets women may be forced into other vulnerable positions, such as co-dependant relationships:

[Housing is the biggest issue and] you see clients being resourceful because they have to do... but [also] being made vulnerable because they are in sexual relationships so that they are housed. That then leads onto other dynamics around their substance misuse... a lot of sofa surfing, people being in squats.

Women with multiple needs are also more likely to be involved in prostitution. St.Mungo's report that homeless women are significantly more likely than homeless men to be involved in prostitution – around a quarter of their female clients have been involved in prostitution compared to 2 per cent of their male clients.¹¹ A study by Eaves linked experiences of childhood violence to involvement in prostitution, finding that 72 per cent of women they interviewed



who were involved in prostitution had experienced violence as a child.¹² Among Fulfilling Lives (Multiple Needs) beneficiaries, women were far more likely to report sex work as a source of income.¹

Children are often involved too

Women are more likely to have parental responsibilities and most lone parents are women.⁴ SafeLives (a national charity dedicated to ending domestic abuse) estimate that there are 130,000 children living in high-risk domestic abuse households.¹³ Fear of losing their children is cited as a key reason why women with complex needs not to seek support.¹¹ An EU study on women rough sleepers found that in the UK, 65 per cent of women interviewed had children who were not currently in their care.¹⁴ Women who have had children removed from their care, in some cases multiple times, require specialist support to cope with this loss. The [Pause](#) project has been set up to address this specific need.

Women experience particular forms of mental ill health

The Mental Health Foundation states that while men and women are both affected by mental health problems, in England women are more likely to have a common mental health problem and are almost twice as likely to be diagnosed with anxiety disorders.¹⁵ There is evidence of a link between mental health issues and women's experience of homelessness. The Multiple Exclusion Homelessness study explored different types of multiple needs and found that those experiencing mental health problems and homelessness were disproportionately female.⁹ The 2014 Crisis survey found that 64 per cent of women reported mental ill health compared to 46 per cent of men.¹⁰ Homeless Link's health needs audit of 3,550 people found higher levels of diagnosed mental health conditions among women (47 per cent compared to 43 per cent of men).¹⁶

Shame and stigma can be a barrier

In their report on women with multiple needs *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*, St Mungo's report that women tend to enter homelessness and other services at a later stage than men.¹¹ The stigma and shame associated with multiple needs can mean women are less likely to ask for help and this can be a barrier to recovery. Shame and stigma around multiple needs can also be a particular issue for people from some BME groups.⁴ Further research into this is currently being undertaken by the peer researchers on the *Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs* evaluation.



Possible solutions and current approaches

Gender specific services

In order to help and support women with multiple needs it is critical to address their fear and safety concerns. A range of reports exploring the needs of women with multiple needs agree that gender specific services are required to meet women's particular needs.^{11, 17} The Hidden Hurt report concludes that:

*'Gender neutral' services often fail to respond to the different experiences of violence, abuse and other disadvantages in the lives of women and men and as such are far less likely to meet women's needs.*⁷

However, as result of being under-represented in statistics (see above) commissioners may be unaware of the scale of need. For example, analysis of Homeless UK (HUK) data revealed that in August 2015 there were only 88 women-only homeless accommodation projects operating in England with a combined total of 1,535 bed spaces.¹⁸

One-stop shops

The [Lancashire Women's Centre](#) provides a gendered approach to the one-stop shop. It focuses on providing women only spaces that offer holistic support all under one roof. The Centre is open to all women, not just those with multiple needs. Consequently, women accessing the centre are not defined by the services they need to access and this helps overcome stigma. The centre offers an open-door policy which allows women to drop-in at any time. By not having fixed appointment times women can access services when it is convenient, and safe, for them to do so. The centre also provides peer support. The Centre sees that peer support is beneficial in unlocking women's assets and developing positive and supportive relationships that help with their progression.

Therapeutic and trauma informed care

Given the prevalence of trauma and abuse among women with multiple needs, it is important to offer therapeutic and trauma informed care. The [South East Partnership](#) are using therapeutic approaches as part of their Fulfilling Lives (Multiple Needs) project. They also provide specialist women's workers. For further information, see the case study on the South East Partnership, produced as part of the Fulfilling Lives (Multiple Needs) evaluation.¹⁹

Service user involvement/peer support

Peer support and service user involvement is often seen as critical in engaging women with multiple needs. However, appropriate opportunities and support for women to engage can be lacking. This was the focus of [AVA](#)'s (Against Violence and Abuse) seminar in July 2016 'Voices of Experience: Best Practice in Service User Involvement for Women Facing Multiple Disadvantage'.²⁰



Members of the [National Expert Citizens' Group](#) (NECG), all of whom have lived experience of multiple needs, suggest that a stepped approach that allows individuals to get involved at their own pace alongside their personal development could be effective. Allowing women the space and time to develop the necessary confidence and self-esteem to participate was felt to be critical. An example of a possible phased approach is outlined below.

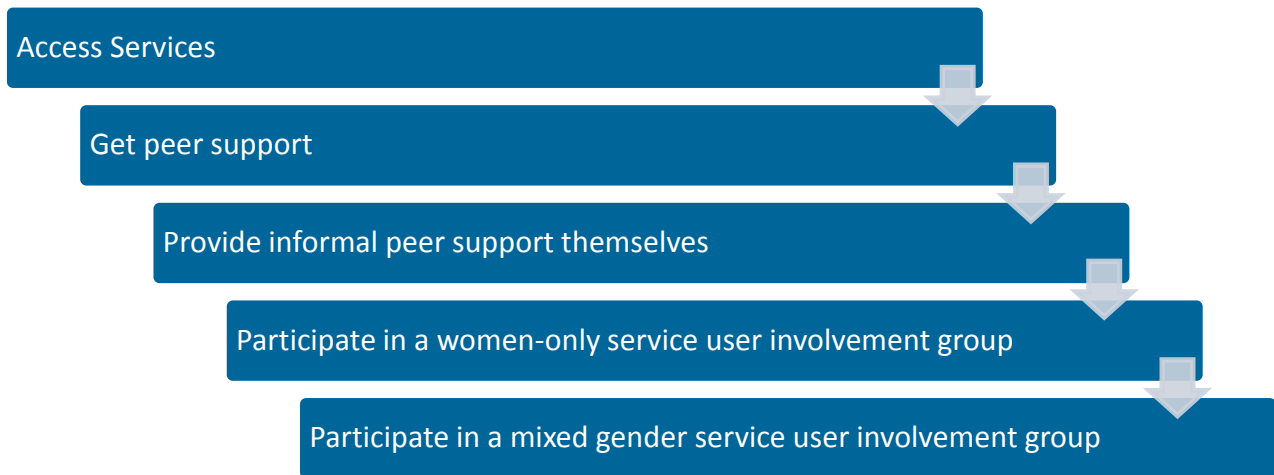


Figure 1: Phased approach to obtaining female service user involvement in service design and delivery

Fulfilling Lives organisations that have adopted a phased approach to service user engagement include:

- [Fulfilling Lives Newcastle Gateshead](#) – currently have their first female chair of their service user involvement group. For more information contact: Donna Douglas: ebechair@fulfillinglives-ng.org.uk
- [Opportunity Nottingham](#) – are currently seeking to set up a women-only service user group. For more information contact Sandra Morgan: Sandra.morgan@opportunitynottingham.co.uk
- Shelter, as part of the [Inspiring Change Manchester](#), have set up their own women-only service user group. For more information contact: Tabatha Obrien-Butcher on Tabatha.Obrien-Butcher@shelter.org.uk

Useful websites

Agenda Alliance for Women & Girls at Risk weareagenda.org

Living Without Abuse www.lwa.org.uk

Pause www.pause.org.uk

Lancashire Women's Centres www.womenscentre.org



South East Partnership <http://www.bht.org.uk/services/fulfilling-lives/>

AVA (Against Violence and Abuse) <http://avaproject.org.uk/>

National Expert Citizens' Group <https://www.facebook.com/NECGUK/?fref=ts>

Fulfilling Lives Newcastle Gateshead <http://www.fulfillinglives-ng.org.uk/>

Opportunity Nottingham <http://www.opportunitynottingham.co.uk/>

Inspiring Change Manchester <http://inspiringchangemanchester.shelter.org.uk/>

Useful reports and sources referenced in this briefing

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³ Fitzpatrick, S. Bramley G. and Johnsen, S. (2013) 'Pathways into multiple exclusion homelessness in seven UK cities'. *Urban Studies*, 50 (1): 148-168.

⁴ Rosengard, A. Laing, I. Ridley, J. and Hunter, S. (2007) *A Literature Review on Multiple and Complex Needs* Scottish Executive Social Research <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/163153/0044343.pdf>

⁵ Homeless Link (2015) *Repeat homelessness in Brighton: Picture the Change* Homeless Link <http://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Picture%20the%20Change.Repeat%20Homelessness%20in%20Brighton.pdf>

⁶ Reeve, K. Casey, R. and Goudie, R. (2006) *Homeless women: still being failed yet striving to survive* Crisis [http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/Crisis Homeless Women 2006 full report.pdf](http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/Crisis%20Homeless%20Women%202006%20full%20report.pdf)

⁷ Scott, S. and McManus, S. (2016) *Hidden Hurt: Violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women* Agenda Alliance for Women & Girls at Risk <http://weareagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Hidden-Hurt-full-report1.pdf>

⁸ Refuge (2016) *A third of women don't know where to go to get support for domestic violence* <http://www.refuge.org.uk/2013/03/05/a-third-of-women-dont-know-where-to-go-to-get-support-for-domestic-violence/>



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- ¹² Bindel, J. Brown, L. Easton, H. Matthews R. and Reynolds L. (2013) *Breaking down the barriers: a study of how women exit prostitution*. Eaves and London South Bank University <http://i1.cmsfiles.com/eaves/2012/11/Breaking-down-the-barriers-a37d80.pdf>
- ¹³ SafeLives (2015) *Getting it right first time* <http://www.caada.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Getting%20it%20right%20first%20time%20-%20complete%20report.pdf>
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- ¹⁶ Homeless Link *Health Needs Audit – explore the data* www.homeless.org.uk/facts/homelessness-in-numbers/health-needs-audit-explore-data
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