A Report Exploring Provision for Homeless Women in Liverpool
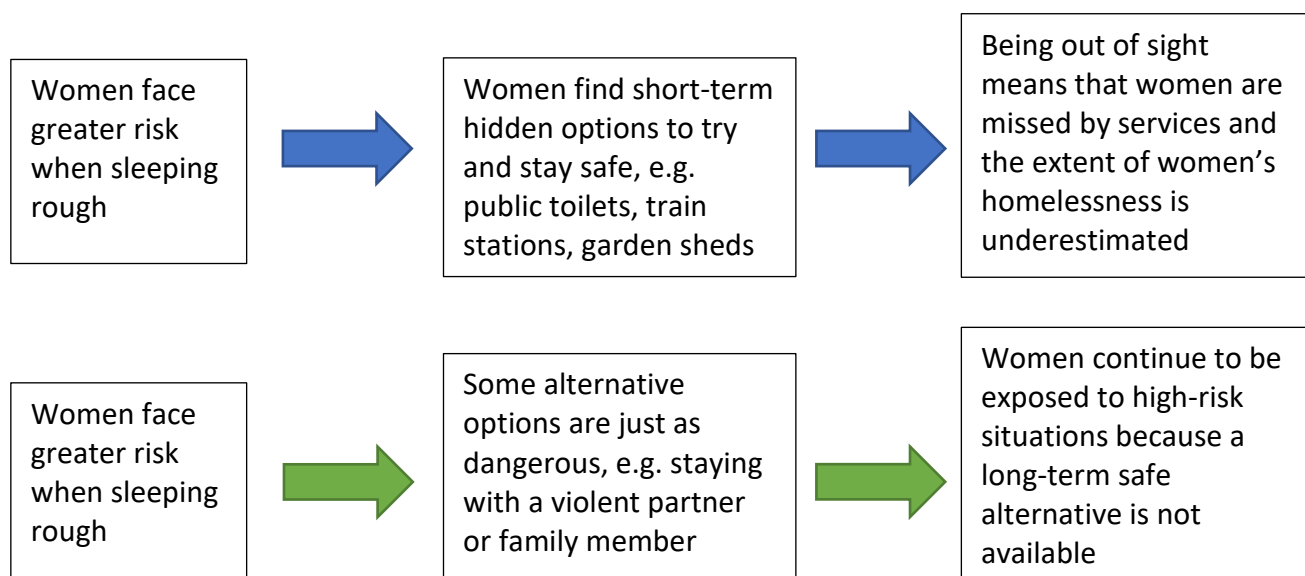
This report is being written in order to connect people who work within the homelessness sector and have a shared interest in the wellbeing of homeless and vulnerably-housed women. This report is intended to highlight the importance of a gender-informed approach to provision for people experiencing homelessness and may be added to or altered in the future to support the funding of novel provision for homeless women in Liverpool.

What do we know about the experiences of homeless women in the UK?
In the ten years leading up to 2018, an overall increase in rough sleeping of more than 250 percent was observed, which included a rise in the number of women sleeping rough (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2020). While there appeared to be some levelling off of rough sleeping rates in 2019, it is clear that that these figures do not represent the full extent of homelessness in the United Kingdom (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018; Fitzpatrick et al., 2019). The 'Everyone In' initiative supported a decrease in rough sleeping in response to Covid-19. However, long-term resource and planning will be required to sustain this. The socioeconomic impact of the pandemic and its effects on the root causes of homelessness will also need serious consideration (Boobis & Albanese, 2020).
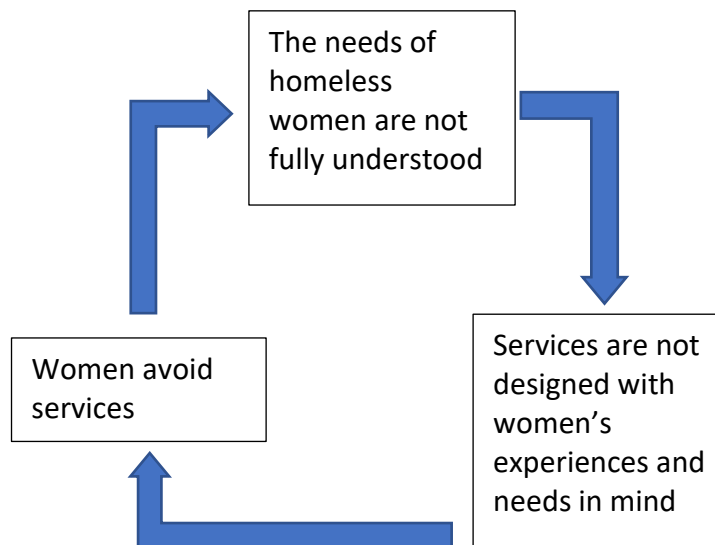
There are indications that women are more likely to try and avoid rough sleeping compared to men, opting for a range of alternative options, the circumstances of which are often unsafe and retraumatising. For example, women may stay with or return to an abusive partner, highlighting both the significance of the danger faced by women on the streets and the lack of effective provision for women facing domestic violence (Women's Aid Federation England, 2017). When women do sleep rough, they tend to adopt particular tactics to remain hidden, in an attempt to stay out of harm's way; for example, sleeping in out of sight locations, such as public toilets and train stations, or adopting strategies such as continuously moving during the night or attempting to conceal their gender if they bed down (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018). These varied and at times extreme methods of survival are reflective of the magnitude of the danger that rough sleeping presents to women. While women attempt to conceal themselves from danger, they may also be inadvertently concealing themselves from recognition in rough sleeping statistics, as well as from potential support services. Therefore, while Homeless Link (2017) report that an estimated 14% of rough sleepers are women, they also acknowledge that this is likely to be an underestimation of the true figure.

Taking these experiences together, a vicious cycle can exist for women, who become stuck between the increased risk of sleeping rough compared to their male counterparts, and the risks that come with available 'hidden' situations (e.g. risk of gender-based violence and abuse; Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

| Women face greater risk when sleeping rough | → | Women find short-term hidden options to try and stay safe, e.g. public toilets, train stations, garden sheds | → | Being out of sight means that women are missed by services and the extent of women's homelessness is underestimated |

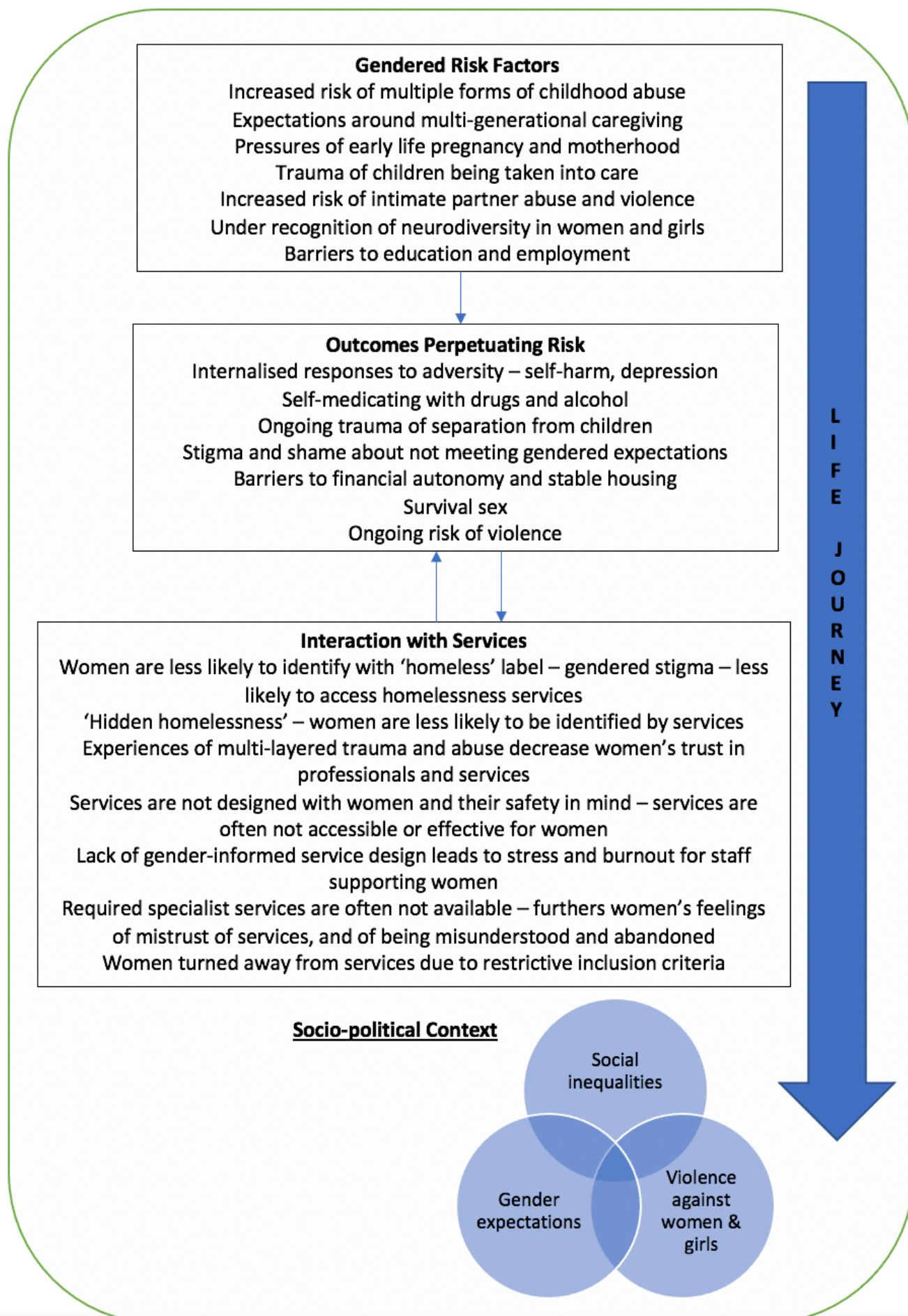| Women face greater risk when sleeping rough | → | Some alternative options are just as dangerous, e.g. staying with a violent partner or family member | → | Women continue to be exposed to high-risk situations because a long-term safe alternative is not available |

Recent research attempting to understand the true extent of homelessness has embraced a critical approach, questioning some of the current definitions of homelessness, as well as the methodologies used to estimate its prevalence. Bretherton and Pleace (2018) compiled a critical review of current research and methodology, looking at this through the lens of women's experiences. Their findings make it clear that the current methods used to estimate homelessness in the UK are not effective in capturing what homelessness looks like for women. For example, street-counts are one commonly employed method, in which rough sleeping is counted by looking for people who are bedded down, targeting known 'hot spot' areas. Therefore, when women are attempting to remain out of sight and away from these known areas, they are being missed in recorded figures. In addition to this, the UK has a particular emphasis on rough sleeping, adopting a somewhat narrow focus on this in comparison to other counties, meaning that people experiencing homelessness in a variety of other situations are discounted, such as those in shelters, in hostels, or those who are squatting or 'sofa surfing'. This focus on being physically seen to be sleeping rough stands contrast to women's own definitions of homelessness, which tend to centre around the absence of physical security, having security of tenure, and access to private space (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

It can be said that because people do not expect women's homelessness to exist on the scale that it does, less effort is made to understand it and to provide the services required to support women, as has been acknowledged in the governments rough sleeping strategy (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2018). This creates another cycle whereby services are not designed with women in mind and thus, women do not feel able to access support services (Reeve, Casey & Goudie, 2006; Homeless Link, 2017).

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The design and delivery of services have instead typically been informed by experiences more typical of male rough sleepers (Homeless Link, 2017). Services which are not designed with women's safety and experience of trauma in mind often do not have a full appreciation of the importance of women's only spaces and of a gender-informed approach to working with women. Mixed gender services are often avoided by women due to histories of domestic violence and sexual assault, as well as ongoing risks of a similar nature. In these environments it is often not possible for women to find the safety they need in order to begin their journey of recovery from trauma (St Mungo's, 2014). Bretherton & Pleace (2018) report that experiences of domestic violence were near-universal amongst their sample of homeless women. Furthermore, St Mungo's found that for one third of the women that they worked with, domestic violence was a trigger for homelessness, compared to 8% of men (St Mungo's, 2014).

Gendered Risk Factors
Increased risk of multiple forms of childhood abuse
Expectations around multi-generational caregiving
Pressures of early life pregnancy and motherhood
Trauma of children being taken into care
Increased risk of intimate partner abuse and violence
Under recognition of neurodiversity in women and girls
Barriers to education and employment

Outcomes Perpetuating Risk
Internalised responses to adversity – self-harm, depression
Self-medicating with drugs and alcohol
Ongoing trauma of separation from children
Stigma and shame about not meeting gendered expectations
Barriers to financial autonomy and stable housing
Survival sex
Ongoing risk of violence

Interaction with Services
Women are less likely to identify with 'homeless' label – gendered stigma – less likely to access homelessness services
'Hidden homelessness' – women are less likely to be identified by services
Experiences of multi-layered trauma and abuse decrease women's trust in professionals and services
Services are not designed with women and their safety in mind – services are often not accessible or effective for women
Lack of gender-informed service design leads to stress and burnout for staff supporting women
Required specialist services are often not available – furthers women's feelings of mistrust of services, and of being misunderstood and abandoned
Women turned away from services due to restrictive inclusion criteria

Socio-political Context

Social inequalities

Gender expectations

Violence against women & girls

L I F E   J O U R N E Y

Understanding how women experience homelessness differently
Gendered differences in homelessness are multi-layered and complex. Differences in women's experiences have been noted in relation to triggers for homelessness, lived experience of homelessness, factors perpetuating homelessness, and in interactions with services. While homeless women are not a homogenous group, an attempt has been made to summarise some of these common patterns of gendered experiences below:

Gendered Risk Factors
There are a number of factors which place women in particular at risk of becoming homeless. These gendered risks begin in childhood, with greater reported incidents of childhood abuse in girls (ONS, 2020), including an increased likelihood of experiencing multiple forms of abuse (Dierkhising et al, 2018). Increased risk of abuse and violence in the home continues into adulthood, with one in four women experiencing domestic abuse at some point in their lives (Council of Europe, 2002). Domestic abuse is known to be an especially prominent contributing factor towards homelessness in women (Homeless Link, 2017; St Mungo's, 2014). In many cases, there are multiple barriers to women being able to safely leave abusive relationships, including financial dependency on partners and lack of provision of suitable refuge accommodation (Women's Aid, 2017), meaning women often have to endure abusive relationships for years (Women's Aid, 2013). The point of separation is a particularly high-risk period for women fleeing domestic violence, with a large proportion of homicides taking place in the first year following separation (Femicide Census, 2017). Women experiencing homelessness as a result of domestic violence are therefore in desperate need of timely specialist support.

The expectations placed on women as caregivers can also put them under an unmanageable amount of pressure, particularly given the cuts to benefits and support services experienced during austerity measures. It has been well documented that austerity related cuts have disproportionately disadvantaged women and their dependents (Quaid, 2018; Reis, 2018). This has also been cited as a key contributing factor to women's homelessness (Homeless Link, 2017).

While it can be helpful to consider the different areas of disadvantage likely to impact women, it is important to note that the most vulnerable women in society tend to be those who are experiencing multiple types of disadvantage simultaneously (McNeish & Scott, 2014). Disadvantages experienced due to gender intersect with other forms of inequality, such as poverty and race. For example, women who experience poverty are more likely to enter motherhood at a young age and to experience lone parenthood. These scenarios can present particular challenges given the previously mentioned cuts to governmental support, as well as limited available accommodation options suitable for a mother and children at risk of homelessness (Bimpson et al., 2020; Blanden et al., 2006). Furthermore, ethnic minority

women are more likely to experience poverty due to systemic discrimination and employment inequalities (Parliamentary Group on Race and Community, 2014).

Outcomes Perpetuating Risk

Women at risk of and experiencing homelessness can be negatively affected by societal expectations of womanhood. Women may not identify with the 'homeless' label, or may feel shame if they do, due to not feeling their experiences fit with society's expectations around femininity, motherhood, and maintaining a home. This gendered stigma can act as a barrier to accessing services and to recovery (St Mungo's, 2014).

Relationships with family, especially children, often hold great significance in the lives of women who are homeless (Homeless Link, 2017). St Mungo's reported more than half of the homeless women they were working with were mothers, with 79% of these women having had children taken into care. The impact of separation from children is another common trauma experience for women who are homelessness, often having a devastating effect on wellbeing (St Mungo's, 2014). Despite this, there is a lack of flexibility in relation to supporting women who are able to have contact with children to maintain this, as well as a lack of advice and advocacy surrounding the issue of separation from children, leaving women who are mothers feeling misunderstood and isolated (Homeless Link, 2017). This is a clear perpetuating factor blocking women's journeys out of homelessness.

The effects of trauma continue long after the traumatic event itself. Experiences of sexual and physical violence and separation from children affect how women see themselves and the world around them. Trauma erodes the internal resources needed to cope with life's challenges and often comes with an internalised sense of guilt and failure. It is therefore not surprising that women experiencing homelessness have such high levels of mental health need (St Mungo's, 2014). Women are more likely to have internalised responses to adversity (e.g. self-harm, depression) in comparison to men, which can make their distress less visible. Women who cope in less traditionally gendered ways (e.g. substance use, violence) may end up in the criminal justice system, where they may receive a more punitive response because they are viewed as flouting gender norms (McNeish & Scott, 2014). The outcomes of trauma, therefore, end up perpetuating further trauma experiences, creating a vicious cycle of distress and instability.

What Does This Mean for Provision?

First and foremost, awareness and understanding of women's homelessness must be improved, along with recognition of this issue as a high priority public health need. To do this, more research into women's homelessness will be required, as well as improved methodologies for identifying women's homelessness. Services should also look towards

considering the specific experiences of women in terms of their outcome measures (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

It is not good enough to expect women to simply fit into services which have been designed primarily with men in mind. Many women experiencing homelessness struggle to access support services where men are present, given the common experience of male perpetrated violence and abuse. Women often feel safer and are therefore more effectively supported in women's only projects or in support services which have dedicated women's only space (Homeless Link, 2017; St Mungo's, 2014). When surveyed, women have also largely expressed a preference for female staff (St Mungo's, 2014). In keeping with this, services should be designed in a trauma informed manner and staff should have sufficient training to deliver gendered support which holds in mind the unique experiences and mental health outcomes of women (Homeless Link, 2017). While a gendered approach is essential for high quality care for women experiencing homelessness, this is not a homogenous group and services should also work to understand each individual and their specific needs, keeping a trauma informed approach in place while doing so. Services should be aiming to create Psychologically Informed Environments (PIEs) with reflective practice, an individualised approach, and a learning culture as part of their core values (No One Left Out, 2015).

Given the invisibility of women's experiences of homelessness, it is likely that by the time women reach services, their lives will have already been on a negative trajectory for some time, with potential missed opportunities to intervene. This can be viewed in two ways in terms of provision. Firstly, it should be recognised that women experiencing homelessness are likely to have multiple and complex needs by the time they are identified as needing support. Strong partnership working between services is therefore necessary to support women effectively, as their needs are unlikely to be adequately addressed by any single agency alone (Homeless Link, 2017). Secondly, there is clear indication for increased work around prevention and early intervention in terms of the factors that put girls and women at particular risk. This was a key message within the government's Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (2016). Measures may include, but are not limited to early years parenting support, primary school based emotional and social interventions, and comprehensive sex and relationship education (McNeish & Scott, 2014).

Unfortunately, cuts to benefits and support services mean the type of specialist input highlighted as being necessary above has been on a declining rather than an increasing trajectory (Reis, 2018). In addition, the increasing incidence of domestic violence during the Covid-19 pandemic means demand for support has also increased (ONS, 2020). Therefore, women experiencing homelessness are currently presented with inadequate specialist services to meet their needs. Research has documented women's experience of feeling an expectation to 'prove' their homelessness, as well as a sense of blame and shame around experiences such as domestic violence, drug use, and sex work (Bretherton & Pleace, 2019).

These experiences act as significant barriers to support and recovery. When women do not feel heard and understood by services, this can feed into beliefs that others cannot be trusted to provide support, keeping women stuck in the cycle of homelessness.

Centring in on Specific Issues: Sex Work

As will be clear from the report thus far, women experiencing homelessness are not a homogenous group. The lives of homeless women are incredibly varied both in terms of the factors that have led to homelessness and the ways in which women survive being homeless.

Homeless women engaging in street-based sex work can face particularly high levels of marginalisation and often require specialist support and accommodation, although this kind of specialist help can be hard to come by. Although sex working is not exclusive to women, they are significantly more likely to be engaging in sex work. For example, St Mungo's reported that 25% of the women they were supporting had been involved in sex work, compared to 2% of men (St Mungos, 2014).

Generally, sex work is defined the exchange of sexual labour or performance for money or goods (Overs, 2002). For women experiencing homelessness, the term 'survival sex' or 'transactional sex' is often used. This reflects the exchange of sex in return for basic necessities, such as accommodation and food. Survival sex can therefore be seen as a gendered individual solution to the structural problem of homelessness. Research indicates that homeless women experience an expectation from men that they will provide sex as a commodity in exchange for basic necessities (Watson, 2011), as well as experiencing alarmingly high levels of rape and sexual assault as part of their day-to-day existence (Hudson et al., 2010). Research into the experiences of homeless women has documented cases wherein women engage in survival sex partly due to a realisation that they would experience rape and sexual assault as part of their lives regardless. Other women spoke about entering an intimate relationship as a form of protection from other men. However, sometimes these relationships were also violent but were viewed as the lesser of two evils (Watson, 2011).

Shelter (2004) produced a document reviewing a number of specialist accommodation providers for homeless women engaging in sex work. This documented highlighted that this type of specialist provision is absent across most of the country, with a few exceptions which they sought to learn from. Some of the key recommendations from this document are listed below:

- There should be a multitude of specialist accommodation options to support women who continue to engage in sex work, as well as women who wish to exit sex working, which take into account the wide range of needs in this population, rather than a 'one size fits all' approach.
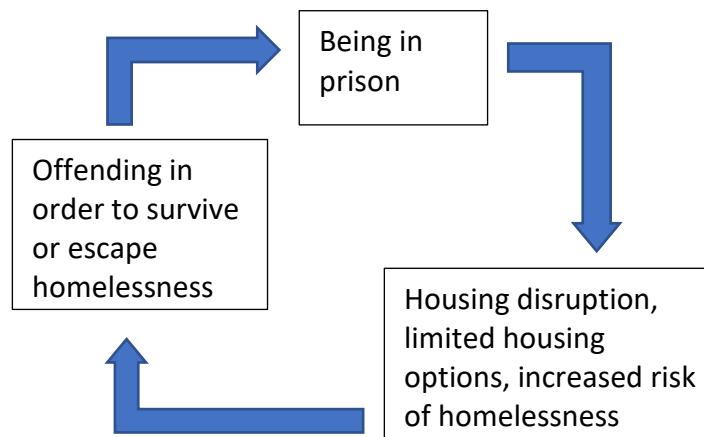
- The housing needs of women engaging in sex work must be recognised, along with acknowledgement that a large proportion of street-based sex workers are finding themselves sleeping on the streets or in unstable accommodation.
- There must be recognition that a key area of support for many homeless women engaging in sex work is around drug treatment and support with addiction.
- It is important to recognise that enforcement-based policing of sex working often achieves little more than displacing homeless women, making it more difficult for women to access the support that they need.
- More research into this particular area of hidden homelessness is needed.
- Finally, this report highlights the severity of the consequences of homelessness for female sex workers, meaning urgent change is required. These consequences include early mortality, violence, rape, and mental illness.

There are also policy level changes that are necessary to support women engaging in sex work. Current legislation has received criticism from sex work activist groups due to its failure to protect sex workers. Women engaging in street-based sex work take risks to avoid being detected, such as working in isolated locations and working alone. In the UK, it is a criminal offence for sex workers to work together. This leaves sex workers more vulnerable to abusive treatment and sexual violence. Selling sex outdoors is also illegal under current legislation. Homeless women who are likely to have no other option are therefore made particularly vulnerable by this legislation (Mac & Smith, 2018). There is increasing pressure to introduce what is commonly referred to as 'The Nordic Model' in the UK – a change to legislation which would criminalise the purchase of sex. While this may seem progressive at first glance, the Nordic Model has received staunch criticism from sex worker activists, who highlight that this model has been ineffective at reducing demand and has been followed by an increase in violence against sex workers in countries where it has been implemented. This can be compared to evidence indicating an increase in safety and working rights following the decriminalisation of sex work in New Zealand in 2003 (ECP, 2018). Changes to the legal framework around sex working which take a sex-worker inclusive view could serve to destigmatise women engaging in sex work, enforcing crucial improvements around safety and human rights (Graham, 2017). These changes would clearly have a positive impact on homeless women engaging in sex work given that they represent a particularly marginalised and vulnerable subgroup of the sex working community.

Centring in on Specific Issues: Women in the Criminal Justice System
There is a link between offending and homelessness. Many women lose their houses while in custody and an estimated 60% of women prisoners do not have a home to go to on release. Furthermore, women facing homeless may engage in offending out of desperation in order to get a roof over their head, even if this is a prison cell (Prison Reform Trust, 2016). In one survey, 60% of prisoners said having somewhere to live would stop them from reoffending

(Shelter, 2015). For women coming out of prison, access to safe, affordable housing for has been noted as a top priority for successful resettlement and rehabilitation (Prison Reform Trust, 2014). Unfortunately, suitable accommodation options for women are in short supply, as highlighted earlier in the report.

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  │ survive     │   │ Housing disruption,│
  │ or escape   │   │ limited housing    │
  │ homelessness│   │ options, increased │
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There are some noteworthy issues for women in particular in relation to this issue. Firstly, most women entering prison serve very short sentences, often for periods of less than six months (Prison Reform Trust, 2016). Unfortunately, these short sentences can cause serious disruption to housing, due to loss of Housing Benefits. Women serving shorter sentences also do not tend to receive the same support as those serving longer sentences (Shelter, 2015). A second issue is that women are generally imprisoned further away from their homes and local communities than men. On average, women in England and Wales are imprisoned 64 miles away from home (May et al, 2008). This can make it even more difficult for women to secure housing upon leaving prison. Women are also far more likely to be the primary carers of children and to face separation from their child because of imprisonment, resulting in poor outcomes for both mother and child (Prison Reform Trust, 2019). Finally, issues related to systemic racism mean that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. BAME women make up 11.9% of the women's population in England and Wales but 20% of the prison population (Ministry of Justice, 2019). Furthermore, Black women are 25% more likely than white women to receive a custodial sentence at crown court of convicted (Ministry of Justice, 2016).

Recommendations which would improve support for women offenders who are at risk of homelessness include (Prison Reform Trust, 2016):

- Availability of trauma-informed accommodation, designed with women's needs in mind, for women who have been released from prison

- Prisons and probation services should provide housing information and support as a core aspect of women's rehabilitation programmes.
- Taking into account the housing needs of women with children
- Ensuring imprisonment is not regarded as intentional homelessness for housing eligibility purposes.
- Investment in women's centres as a place where women can receive support around housing, financial management, employment and emotional support
- Improving joined up working between resettlement staff in prisons, offender managers and responsible officers, local authority housing departments, and third sector organisations.

Centring in on Specific Issues: LGBTQ Homelessness

Special attention is also warranted for homeless women who are part of the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer / questioning) community. The youth homeless population contains a disproportionate number of LGBTQ young people when compared to the general population. Family rejection is hypothesised to be a key driver behind this, exacerbated by conditions of poverty and family instability (e.g. familial substance misuse, parental mental health challenges, residential movement; Ecker, 2016; Robinson, 2018). Unfortunately, LGBTQ people experiencing homelessness often also feel unable to express this aspect of their identity openly within support services, due to fear of the reaction from staff and other people accessing services (Matthews et al., 2019; Shelton, 2015). This means homeless LGBTQ people can often experience repeated rejection and abuse throughout their lives, from family, professional services and society at large, negatively shaping the way they see themselves and the world around them. Furthermore, research indicates that while homeless, LGBTQ people are significantly more likely to experience violence, sexual exploitation, substance misuse, and physical and mental health problems (The Albert Kennedy Trust, 2014).

People who are 'transgender' have the experience of their gender identity being different from the sex assigned to them at birth. 'Transgender' is an umbrella term encompassing a range of identities such as 'transmen', 'transwomen', and 'non-binary' identities such as 'genderqueer' and 'gender fluid' (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014.) Trans people experiencing homelessness often face further barriers to support in comparison to other members of the LGBTQ community. While it is crucial for services to operate in a gender-informed manner, this should not be at the expense of the trans population (Shelton, 2015).

It is worth noting that trans women face especially high rates of abuse and violence (Stonewall 2018a; Stonewall 2018b). Unfortunately, the available evidence indicates that homelessness services do not currently feel accessible or safe for trans people (Shelton, 2015). While it has been suggested that trans people facing homelessness should have their needs met within trans affirming services, this kind of specialist provision is generally not yet available and

would take time to come to fruition. In the meantime, there are a number of things that homelessness services can do to make their support inclusive of trans and other LGBTQ individuals:

- Provide LGBTQ awareness training for staff teams, including trans specific content
- Staff and service users should feel empowered to challenge homophobia, biphobia and transphobia
- Ensure all service paperwork has LGBTQ options, providing adequate responses to enable service users to disclose their gender identity and sexual orientation.
- Provide opportunities for service users to disclose beyond their initial assessment. Take time to notice and work with clients who choose 'prefer not to say' options in paperwork, aiming to build a trusting and safe context for disclosure when they are ready.
- Do not pressure service users into disclosure before they are ready.
- Do not 'out' service users who are not yet fully open about their gender identity or sexual orientation.
- Ask about and use preferred pronouns.
- Consider the support that trans people might need to express their identity, for example, access to make up, shaving equipment, binders and packers.
- Make sure there are visible signs of inclusion, such as diverse imagery in posters and service documents.
- Gender segregated services should include trans people, e.g., transwomen should be able to access women's services.

Centring in on Specific Issues: Black and Minoritized Women

Homelessness among Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups is rising disproportionately. Recent government figures have shown approximately a quarter (24%) of local council homelessness applications are by people from BAME groups, even though they make up roughly a tenth (11%) of all households in England. Furthermore, the same figures revealed that Black people are disproportionately affected by homelessness compared to people of all other ethnicities, being more than three times as likely to experience homelessness (Shelter, 2020). While the reasons behind these figures are complex and multifaceted, prejudice within the lettings market has been demonstrated to be a key factor, with 40% of private landlords admitting that prejudices and stereotypes come into their letting decisions (Shelter, 2017).

Black and minoritized women who survive domestic violence face additional structural barriers in trying to access safe and suitable accommodation, often being subject to factors which keep them at ongoing high risk of homelessness. The findings of a recent report suggest that Black and minoritized women who have experienced violence at home are especially likely to be retraumatised by systems and institutions, the police and local housing authorities in particular. Furthermore, women within this population are more likely to be reliant on an

abusive partner due to isolation and unfamiliarity with UK systems, meaning they may stay in abusive households for longer periods of time, continuing to be subjected to harm (Heimer, 2019).

Cuts to refuge provision have also disproportionately affected specialist provision for Black and minoritized women (Women's Aid, 2020). A report in 2017 revealed there were only 30 specialist women's refuges by and for Black and minoritized women, 15 of which are in London (Women's Aid, 2017). Specific provision for marginalised groups is essential to ensure that services hold the specialist understanding needed to make them accessible and effective. Examples of this include staff knowledge around immigration legislation, access to staff and/or interpreters who share the same language as clients, and staff who are trained in how Black and minoritized women are affected by systemic racism. Furthermore, research indicates that Black and minoritized women most often prefer to be in a service specialised to meet their needs, partially due to experiences of discrimination within generic refuges (Heimer, 2019).

Unfortunately, there are also very few refuge spaces available to migrants with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), meaning migrant women living with a violent partner are left in an especially vulnerable position. 'No Recourse to Public Funds' is a term used to refer to people who are subject to immigration control and do not have entitlement to public housing or welfare benefits. Organisations may have concerns that choosing to support a woman with NRFP is breaking the law. However, this is not the case and there are charities which work to do exactly this. Unfortunately, many organisations are overly cautious about working with clients with NRPF due to a lack of understanding of different types of immigration status and entitlements (Homeless Link, 2020 – cited as source and for more information). Women with NRPF represent another group exposed to multi-layered marginalisation who are currently not getting their needs met by the services available within the UK.
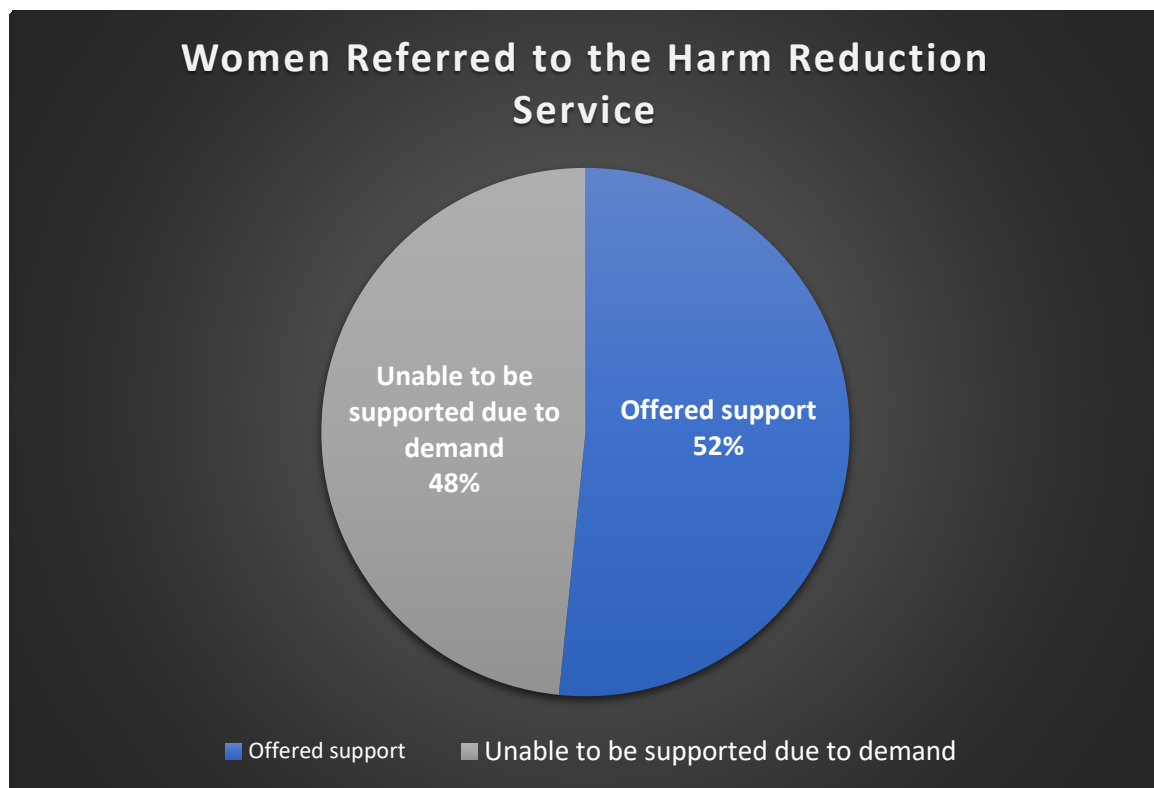
Women's Provision in Liverpool

New Start Women's Harm Reduction Service
New Start deliver an 8 bed women's only Harm Reduction Service, which aims to support women to improve their quality of life, decrease substance use, and move out of homelessness. The service does this using a trauma-aware approach, with staff receiving training in women centred working and Cognitive Analytic Therapy. The service also engages in partnership working with key stakeholders, such as local addiction and sex work support services.

In its first year of operation, the Women's Harm Reduction Service received 31 referrals, 16 of which were able to be fulfilled. This level of demand outstripped the service's capacity

almost twice over, clearly demonstrating the desire for accommodation providers which specifically address the needs of homeless women.

Women Referred to the Harm Reduction Service

Unable to be supported due to demand
48%

Offered support
52%

■ Offered support   ■ Unable to be supported due to demand

While writing this report, the author was given the opportunity to spend some time at the Women's Harm Reduction service, speaking with the staff and residents here. The women gave spontaneous positive feedback about the harm reduction hostel, naming a number of specific features which made New Start's provision positively stand out when compared to their experiences of other services. These included:

- Having bedrooms as private, safe space
- Staff who understand the needs of women
- A space which feels like a home
- Meaningful activities to engage with (although the residents also noted recent cuts to other activities that had been previously available in the wider community)

The residents particularly emphasised that the New Start harm reduction hostel was able to provide them with a sense of safety and security, which they had struggled to find with other accommodation providers. Women spoke of the fear and chaos that they felt in other services and recognised a safe home as an essential foundation on which to build recovery and progress.

The resident's feedback paralleled feedback from New Start staff about what they felt the women's harm reduction hostel does well in terms of supporting women experiencing

homelessness. One staff member summarised the support offered, saying that the harm reduction hostel is able to provide;

> *"…a safe and dignified space for females with multiple and complex needs. It provides stability, routine and a trauma-aware approach to recovery/maintenance for females experiencing substance misuse issues through providing care and support interventions in a way that is both psychologically informed and strengths based."*
> *Sean Butler, New Start*

Geneva Road Women's Hostel

Geneva Road provides temporary accommodation for single women who are homeless or at serious risk of homelessness. The service aims to support women to break the cycle of homelessness and to move into independent living.

While there was not the opportunity to gather specific feedback regarding Geneva Road within the timescale of writing this report, as another provider focusing on specifically on homeless women's needs, the author would recommend future work which seeks to understand this provision from the perspective of both residents and staff.

Whitechapel Centre

www.whitechapelcentre.co.uk/

The Whitechapel Centre is a leading homelessness charity who work with people of all genders who are sleeping rough, living in hostels or struggling to manage accommodation. The service has a specific women's worker who links women into specific women's groups in the community.

Red Umbrella Project

Red umbrella Project provides a trauma-responsive service for people who are engaged in sex work, survival sex and sexual exploitation, and who experience sexual violence and/or hate crime, both reported and unreported. The focus of the project is to combat instances of violence and crimes committed against anyone in the sex industry and bring to justice anyone perpetrating these crimes. Merseyside is the only police force in the world to treat violence against sex workers as a hate crime. With a dedicated police liaison officer, Red Umbrella works in partnership to meet the needs of this group providing; one to one support, specialist IDSVA support, casework, outreach and drop in's across Merseyside.

While Red Umbrella do not work exclusively with the homeless population, the majority of their service users are experiencing homelessness in a variety of forms, including sofa surfing and engaging in survival sex in order to secure a roof over their head, increasing vulnerability to control and coercion, and decreasing the chance of accessing support. One staff member within the Red Umbrella Project highlights that provision of suitable and safe accommodation for homeless women is a key unmet need for many of the service users they are trying to support:

"I would say that the majority of our service users have experienced complex trauma and multiple disadvantage throughout their lives. Not having a safe and secure place to live only serves to compound these issues, increase risk and push people deeper into criminality and addiction in a bid to survive.

Through my experience working with Red Umbrella for a number of years now, it is evident to me that in providing a secure base with trauma informed practice and care at the forefront can greatly increase the likelihood that women will access the relevant support and begin to address some of the complexities that keep them stuck in high risk, dangerous, and harmful situations."
Rachel Fowler, Service Manager / Specialist IDSVA

Armistead Street Service Sexual Health Outreach Team
www.merseycare.nhs.uk/our-services/liverpool/sexual-health/armistead-centre
Armistead Street promotes community-based outreach services throughout the city of Liverpool, in the streets, and in areas where people typically sex work. While their clients are neither exclusively women nor exclusively experiencing homelessness, a substantial proportion of their clients fall under this category. Armistead Street's main function centres around sexual health and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections. Armistead also works closely with Merseyside Police and the Red Umbrella Project, operating as part of an overarching support service in Liverpool tackling violence and crime against sex workers.

Armistead Street also run regular Sex Worker Practitioner Forums which operate as a shared multidisciplinary space to support and inform anyone working directly with sex workers.

With You
www.wearewithyou.org.uk/services/liverpool-central
With You is service is for people aged 18 and over, living in Liverpool and facing difficulties with drug or alcohol use. With You has recently assigned a dedicated worker who provides specific outreach for people who are sex working. With You are currently looking into the possibility of improving the accessibility of their support by providing a drop-in to enable community-prescribing.

Liverpool Vision for the Future – Recommendations

The author recognises that changes in the landscape of provision take time and are subject to a multitude of complex factors. While it seems clear that there are examples of good practice in supporting homeless women in Liverpool, it is equally clear that there are significant gaps in provision, as is unfortunately the case for cities all over the country. In seeking to improve the experiences of homeless women, services should consider:

- More women's only spaces, services and accommodation
- Staff training around how experiences of homelessness are gendered and can result in differing needs for homeless women
- Trauma-informed service models, which take into account a gender informed approach to trauma – i.e. gender informed PIE's.
- Supporting staff wellbeing with supervision and reflective practice, acknowledging the relevance of gender within these conversations
- Recognition of the impact of multi-layered disadvantage, including but not limited to:
    o LGBTQ women
    o Women who are sex working
    o Black and minoritized women
    o Refugees and asylum seekers
    o Women within the criminal justice system
    o Women with disabilities
- More services which are specialised and targeted to meet the needs of women within marginalised groups, such as those listed above.
- More involvement of experts by experience in the design and implementation of support services.
- Recognition of the important role that motherhood plays in many women's lives, along with services that are equipped to support homeless women and their children.
- Further research into the experiences of homeless women.

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