# Violence against women and homelessness

**Executive summary** 

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#### Content note

This report contains content that may be distressing to some readers, including detailed accounts of physical and sexual violence (including rape), self-harm, miscarriage, and suicidal thoughts or attempts.

# **Executive Summary**

# Key findings

- Women faced violence and abuse from a range of perpetrators including intimate partners, family members, strangers, and paramilitary groups and often endured multiple forms of abuse across different life stages.
- Intimate partner violence was particularly widespread, involving psychological abuse, coercive control, intimidation and threat, financial abuse, physical assault, and/or sexual violence. This created a complex web of entrapment that made it extremely difficult for women to seek help or escape.
- Abusers engaged in pervasive surveillance and controlling behaviours to severely limit women's independence, isolating them from support networks and resources. Feelings of isolation were particularly acute for women living in rural areas.
- The systematic loss of financial assets and housing to abusers severely undermined women's ability to regain control or leave abusive situations. Diminished economic independence compounded women's vulnerability.
- Women experienced significant health consequences caused by violence, including chronic pain, severe injuries, acute anxiety, depression, trauma, and/or suicidal thoughts, with mental health struggles having a profound impact on their daily lives.
- Many were forced to leave their homes due to abuse, resulting in homelessness and the loss
  of personal belongings, even when they held legal tenancy or ownership rights. Postseparation harassment often necessitated that women flee again, leading to repeat
  episodes of homelessness.
- Despite seeking protection, women were often failed by inconsistent police responses and difficulties in securing and enforcing protection orders. This left them exposed to ongoing abuse and feeling that abusers could act with impunity.
- Perpetrators used the legal system to maintain control, exploiting the limitations of legal orders, and dragging women through prolonged court battles that drained their financial resources and forced them to relive trauma repeatedly. Child contact arrangements were also exploited, placing additional burden on mothers.
- Temporary accommodation such as B&Bs and hostels often failed to provide safety and support, thereby exposing women to further violence, harassment, and substance misuse, especially in mixed-gender facilities. These environments frequently re-traumatised women, leaving them vulnerable to the same dangers they had sought to escape.
- Women with substance use issues were especially underserved, excluded from mainstream services and forced into precarious situations like using night shelters, sleeping rough, and/or exchanging sex for shelter. This exposed women to further violence, creating a vicious cycle of violence-related trauma, trauma-related substance use, and substance-use related homelessness.

 Some women experienced the devastating loss of their children due to instability caused by abuse or homelessness. This separation profoundly impacted their mental health, increasing anxiety, depression, and/or substance use, while the lack of post-removal support left them isolated, retraumatised, and further entangled in cycles of harm.

# Background

Northern Ireland has lagged behind Great Britain in developing a dedicated strategy to address violence against women and girls. However, in 2021, The Executive Office recognised the urgent need for a strategic approach and initiated a programme of research. Following a public consultation process, a draft Strategic Framework and Action Plan was developed, culminating in the launch of an inaugural strategy and initial two-year delivery plan in 2024. These strategic initiatives have brought to light the critical intersection between violence against women and other forms of social exclusion, including homelessness.

The relationship between violence and homelessness is especially pronounced for women, where one often serves as both cause and consequence of the other. Despite increasing recognition of this connection, there is limited evidence on the specific nature and impact of these intersecting issues in Northern Ireland, especially when factors such as geographic location and social disadvantage are taken into account. This research sought to address gaps in existing knowledge regarding the precise nature and impacts of these intersecting experiences, with an emphasis on understanding women's experiences, identifying best practice, and informing policy.

#### Methods

The research was guided by the following questions:

- What are the causes and impacts of violence and homelessness among women?
- What are women's experiences of support services?
- How can responses to women facing violence and homelessness be developed to improve outcomes for those affected?

A qualitative approach was chosen to allow for in-depth exploration. Fieldwork was conducted in three main phases: first, one-to-one interviews and focus groups with 34 women with lived experience of violence and homelessness across five geographic areas in Northern Ireland were conducted. These areas included urban and rural locations, with participants drawn from various subpopulations, and including those with more complex needs. Women participated in timeline-based interviews, facilitated by prompt cards, which provided structure while allowing them to discuss their experiences at a depth and pace of their choosing.

In the second phase, five focus groups were conducted with 23 frontline workers from support services, again across Northern Ireland, including women's refuges, homeless hostels, substance use and housing advice services. These discussions used vignettes - hypothetical yet realistic scenarios - as a tool to explore sensitive topics, gaps in service provision, and ideas for improving responses.

The third and final phase involved semi-structured interviews with 10 key stakeholders, including policymakers and senior managers, to gather strategic insights on effective support

for women and identify barriers to service improvement. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic coding to identify patterns and differences in experiences across participant groups.

#### **Experiences of Violence**

The women in this study experienced various forms of violence, with intimate partner abuse dominating, affecting 31 of 34 participants. Many endured multiple forms of violence from various perpetrators. Nearly half (15 of 34) experienced parental abuse, with some also facing violence from children, peers, strangers and/or paramilitary groups. Psychological abuse was universal, while coercive control (30), physical violence (27), and financial abuse (26) were also widespread. Almost two-thirds of participants reported rape or sexual assault (21), and some experienced sexual exploitation (9), paramilitary threat (3), and/or human trafficking (2).

For many, intimate partner-perpetrated physical and sexual abuse typically emerged months or years in, once strong emotional bonds and practical ties (e.g. shared homes or children) had formed. Prior to physical abuse, subtle coercive tactics such as isolation and monitoring emerged and increased very gradually in a way that 'normalised' the abuse. This slow and incremental onset of abuse made it harder for women to seek help or leave.

All participants reported psychological abuse from partners, involving persistent and often vicious verbal degradation and humiliation that deeply impacted their mental health. The subtle, insidious nature of psychological abuse, often framed as the woman's fault, made it hard for women to recognise and act. Most women experienced intense monitoring by partners, who controlled their movements, interactions, and choices. This surveillance, often framed as protective, isolated women from support and eroded their autonomy. Financial abuse was a further pervasive form of control. Abusers restricted access to money, enforced dependence, and withheld earnings. Abusers also incurred debts in women's names or stole from them, leaving many struggling financially.

Many women described living in constant fear, controlled by menacing behaviour and threats, including death threats. For many, this fear was heightened by inadequate legal protections and, for some, the terror of abusers with paramilitary ties. Physical violence was common, typically escalating in severity over time, and was for some life-threatening. Women reported beatings, strangulation, stabbings and/or confinement against their will, leaving them with lasting injuries and deep psychological trauma. Some also experienced violence from extended family or, less commonly, strangers. For several, exposure to violence started in childhood.

Some women described being raped after refusing intimate partner sex, being subject to humiliating sexual assaults, and/or coerced into sex for contact with children. Childhood abuse by male relatives was also reported, with severe and lasting impacts on self-worth. Stranger assaults, though less common, were devastating and often met with disbelief or blame from other people. A few women also endured sexual exploitation and trafficking, with profoundly traumatising affects.

# Housing challenges associated with violence

The violence women in this study endured had severe impacts on their housing security. Only one was able to keep her home. Some women left home suddenly after severe violence and never returned. Others were coerced out over time, left due to an assumed lack of tenancy

rights, and/or felt powerless to make the abuser leave. Even those with clear tenancy rights faced lengthy and costly legal battles, with the resultant financial strain making it difficult to retain their homes. Job loss, often due to the abuser's interference or the effects of trauma, worsened this housing insecurity.

Although a few women rapidly accessed social housing or secured a private rented tenancy after having left their home, most women struggled to secure stable housing due to long social housing waitlists and/or financial barriers to private renting. Post-separation abuse meant many women remained unsafe and vulnerable to homelessness for prolonged periods. Some were subjected to ongoing harassment, stalking, and/or surveillance perpetrated by a former partner that forced them to relocate, often multiple times, including between B&Bs, hostels, refuges and/or friend and family's homes. For mothers, these issues were compounded as abusers exploited child contact to perpetrate post-separation abuse. Women reported severe anxiety, disruption and fear because of this form of abuse, making it extremely difficult for them to rebuild their lives, retain jobs, and/or establish stable housing.

Beyond intimate partner violence, several women reported fleeing abuse from parents or carers, leading to homelessness in their teenage years and establishing a pattern of housing instability into adulthood. Others faced homelessness due to threats from paramilitary groups or local communities, with women who use substances particularly affected. Although less common, these threats led to sudden and terrifying forced displacement, uprooting women from their homes and communities in acutely traumatic ways. A perceived lack of protection from the police served to increase feelings of acute vulnerability in these cases.

Two additional factors significantly impacted housing stability. First, the removal of children from women's custody not only had severe emotional consequences on those affected, but also directly impacted housing, as they were forced to leave larger social homes or faced unaffordable rent due to reduced benefit entitlements. Second, imprisonment also contributed to housing loss due to policies requiring homes to be returned to landlords for sentences over six months, while others exited prison to find their homes vandalised or repossessed.

#### Other impacts of violence

The women in this study experienced severe physical health impacts from violence, such as chronic pain, neurological disorders, and serious injuries, which often had long-term effects. For some, pre-existing health issues and disability meant they were dependent on abusers, who were sometimes also their caregivers, heightening their sense of isolation and vulnerability.

The mental health impacts were profound and enduring. Survivors frequently reported feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy, often describing themselves as "broken" and stripped of selfworth. Trauma led to severe anxiety, depression, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, with most linking their diagnoses to the abuse they endured. Flashbacks and sleep disturbances were common, with post-separation abuse worsening these issues. Many felt responsible for the violence perpetrated against them and struggled with self-blame. For some, the cumulative effects on mental health led to suicidal thoughts.

Substance use emerged as a core coping mechanism for some in dealing with the symptoms of trauma, although this often led to dependence and/or further deteriorations in mental health. Substance use also contributed to housing instability, resulting in job loss, family breakdown, and for some, threats from paramilitary groups and drug dealers. Exposure to drugs in homeless

settings made avoiding substance use nearly impossible, often leading to an escalation in consumption. These settings also exposed women to further violence, creating a vicious cycle of violence-related trauma, trauma-related substance use, and substance-use related homelessness.

Violence also severely impacted women's ability to care for their children, as trauma and financial abuse left many struggling emotionally and financially. Some women voluntarily placed their children in kinship care, while for others, child removal was involuntary. The loss of children compounded women's existing trauma, with many feeling that they had "failed as mothers" by staying too long in abusive relationships and/or using substances to cope. This drove them deeper into despair and self-loathing, and in many cases further increased substance use.

### **Experiences of homelessness**

On average, women reported six different homelessness experiences. Amongst these, sofa surfing was common, with women relying on informal networks of family or friends for shelter. While women used this option both during abusive relationships (as a form of respite) and immediately after leaving, they did not always recognise it as homelessness. Sofa surfing came with significant challenges, such as experiencing shame, strained relationships, overcrowding, and feeling highly indebted and/or vulnerable to hosts.

Short-term B&B stays were common, with 22 of 34 women reporting such experiences. B&Bs typically offered single rooms with very minimal cooking facilities or support services. Conditions were often unsafe, with reports of violence, harassment, and drug use commonplace. Stays in homeless hostels were also common, with 21 of 34 women having used them. While some appreciated supportive staff, others found hostel rules overly strict and/or infantilising; this was especially true for those seeking independence after coercive relationships. Drug exposure was frequent, and mixed-gender hostels led to further exposure to gender-based violence and abuse. Some women felt so unsafe in B&B and hostel settings that they preferred sleeping rough.

Of the 34 women with lived experience, 20 had used refuge services, often following police or hospital intervention. Refuges offered crucial support, helping women rebuild self-esteem and better understand intimate partner abuse. However, the communal environment, shared facilities, and high resident turnover were challenging, especially for those with children. Privacy was limited, and stigma around refuge living left many feeling isolated.

Half the women reported stays in self-contained temporary housing, typically following periods of sofa surfing and/or stays in congregate settings, with all preferring it for the privacy it offered. However, poor conditions or remote locations sometimes created difficulties, especially for those with children.

Nearly half (15 of 34) had stayed in night shelters which operated on a daily self-referral basis with no guaranteed beds for consecutive nights. This uncertainty, combined with exposure to chaotic and sometimes unsafe daytime drop-in centres, led to anxiety, fear, and exhaustion. Strict rules required women to take their belongings with them throughout the day, with one woman losing employment due to the instability of night shelter living.

Rough sleeping was common, with women sleeping outdoors, in transport stations, cafés, or disused buildings. Of the 34 women, 20 reported at least one such form of rough sleeping.

Some chose this option to avoid unsafe congregate accommodation. However, rough sleeping also came with persistent fear, leaving women physically and emotionally drained, and also exposed them to further violence and harm. To escape the streets, some women exchanged sex for shelter, often under extreme duress. These exchanges left severe psychological impacts, with some leading to prolonged exposure to violence, exploitation and/or trafficking.

Many women experienced a continuous cycle of homelessness, moving through B&Bs, hostels, night shelters, and sofa surfing, driven by post-separation abuse and/or repeat victimisation due to a lack of safe housing options. Some had faced this cycle of homelessness since childhood.

# Accessing justice

Women faced very significant barriers when seeking protection from violence. Many struggled to contact services safely, often using covert methods to avoid detection by their abusers. Trauma and fear hindered full disclosure when they did seek help, often requiring multiple interactions with services to build trust. Engaging with services invariably increased the risk of escalating violence from their abuser. The period during and following separation was noted as particularly dangerous for women, with current responses often inadequate to manage this heightened risk.

Fear of retaliation hindered many women from involving the police. Several reported positive experiences where police officers took proactive steps to ensure their safety, with this more likely following physical assault and where the perpetrator was already known to police. However, many women encountered dismissive or unsympathetic officers and reported that their circumstances were downplayed or that police sympathies lay with their abusers. Frontline workers expressed similar concerns, including police insensitivity to trauma, and in some cases victim-blaming attitudes - particularly towards women with more complex needs, such as substance use, or criminal convictions - eroding trust, fuelling feelings of helplessness, and shutting down routes to justice.

Women faced significant challenges when engaged with the criminal justice system, particularly those who were homeless or affected by substance use. Many reported feeling discouraged from pursuing cases against their abusers, and the small number who did faced protracted court delays, procedural complexities, and acute emotional distress, often leading them to regret seeking legal recourse. Women felt that the justice system failed to fully consider trauma-related behaviours, homelessness, or contexts of self-defence, which were taken to undermine their credibility as witnesses or, in some cases, led to their criminalisation. Key stakeholders stressed that the justice system's current structure deepens the marginalisation of homeless women, and women who use substances, whose specific needs are frequently overlooked.

Women also turned to civil courts to seek protection, but this process was typically fraught with challenge. Occupation orders were difficult to obtain due to high evidential requirements, meaning that most women were unable to establish safe residence in their own homes. Non-molestation orders, though crucial to homelessness prevention, were also difficult to obtain. Where they were, gaps in enforcement and understanding of orders left women subject to ongoing abuse. Perpetrators exploited legal limitations, continuing harassment just outside the bounds of restrictions, and inadequate enforcement - such as slow police responses or lack of action on breaches - exacerbated risk, leading to repeated victimisation, and with that homelessness. This lack of consistent enforcement emboldened abusers, undermining the protective intent of these legal measures.

Women with children reported challenges navigating family courts, particularly with regards to child contact arrangements. Several women's situations were turned around by fair and understanding judges, but such positive outcomes were rarely reported. Most women described prolonged legal battles that took a deep financial toll and left them feeling unheard and that their concerns for their children's safety had been dismissed. Some reported perplexing and troubling contradictions in the system, whereby they were urged by social services to leave abusive relationships to protect their children but were later required by courts to facilitate child contact with the abuser. Frontline workers criticised the system for allowing perpetrators to manipulate court processes as a form of post-separation abuse. This was worsened by a lack of awareness about legal-aid waivers for domestic abuse victims, which could alleviate some of the financial burden of ongoing legal proceedings.

Solicitors played a crucial role in supporting women facing abuse, sometimes securing protection through non-molestation orders and child contact arrangements that could help restore their sense of safety and empowerment. However, many women struggled to find effective representation and women expressed concern that some solicitors prioritise financial gain over justice, with lengthy cases adding to their emotional and financial strain.

#### Accessing help and support

Women experiencing violence most often relied on family and friends as their initial support network, finding crucial emotional and financial help that could be instrumental in escaping abuse. However, barriers such as isolation, abuser control, shame, and/or cultural norms hindered some women from seeking such help. They also reported that friends and family often felt uncertain about how best to support them, fearing that they may inadvertently worsen the situation.

Social services played a critical role by alerting some women to risks from violent partners yet fear of child removal and prior negative interactions with social workers often deterred engagement. Women reported that abusers often increased control when social services intervened, thereby exacerbating their situations.

Access to mental health and substance use support was considered vital, yet many women faced long wait times and a lack of trauma-informed care. The absence of dual diagnosis services catering for women experiencing both mental health and substance use issues left a particularly critical gap. Healthcare workers, particularly in emergency and hospital settings, sometimes played a pivotal role in identifying and supporting disclosure of abuse and connecting women with necessary services, but consistency was lacking.

Navigating the complex landscape of housing, social services, and health services often required women to repeatedly disclose their trauma, yet access to necessary support often remained elusive, leaving many feeling disillusioned and unsupported. Women who successfully accessed consistent, empathetic support – especially with attending appointments, helping navigate systems, and providing a non-judgmental space to talk - reported more positive outcomes.

#### Conclusion

The women in this study experienced abuse from multiple perpetrators throughout their lives, with intimate partners, family members, strangers, and groups contributing to a cycle of

violence that was often continuous and overlapping. Intimate partner violence was particularly pervasive, encompassing psychological manipulation, financial control, physical assaults, and/or sexual violence. These forms of abuse were isolating and destabilising, creating a complex web of control that limited women's ability to seek help or escape. Abusers employed surveillance and control tactics that severed women from support networks and depleted their financial and housing resources, leaving them economically dependent and trapped in abusive situations.

Women who managed to leave abusive partners often encountered significant barriers in the criminal and civil justice systems, where inconsistent responses and lax enforcement of protection orders left them vulnerable to further abuse. Legal processes were frequently manipulated by perpetrators to maintain control, with child contact arrangements in particular used to perpetuate post-separation abuse. This lack of robust legal support not only exposed women to ongoing violence but also destabilised their housing, often leading to homelessness. Women's efforts to secure safe accommodation were hindered by insufficient access to affordable housing and the inadequate nature of much temporary accommodation, which were often unsafe, mixed-gender, and traumatising environments. Women with substance use issues were particularly underserved, frequently placed in precarious situations that exacerbated their trauma, health and housing challenges. These systemic failures compounded the impacts of violence, entrenching women in cycles of housing insecurity and homelessness.

#### Recommendations

The Department of Justice should: Strengthen protections for women facing violence by ensuring rapid police responses, accessible protection orders that allow women to remain safely in their homes, safeguards against abuse of the legal system by perpetrators, increased access to legal representation, and streamlined legal processes to reduce retraumatisation and fully recognise the complexity of abuse.

The Department for Communities should: Make housing security a priority in preventing violence by revising existing strategic frameworks to highlight the link between violence and homelessness, consider legislative developments that would allow for a shared public duty in preventing homelessness, and enhance housing associations' role in helping survivors maintain safe, suitable housing.

**The Northern Ireland Housing Executive should:** Develop strategies to prevent homelessness among women affected by violence by expanding access to preventative measures like the Sanctuary Scheme, increasing safe and self-contained temporary accommodation, and providing housing models like Housing First to support women with complex needs.

**Social Services should:** Provide ongoing support to women whose children have been taken into care, assisting them throughout and after the process to reduce further trauma.

**All services should:** Embed trauma-informed, gender-informed, and housing-informed practices by mandating training, offering culturally sensitive support that respects minoritised ethnic communities, addressing the unique challenges of rural women, and ensuring responses that facilitate disclosure, avoid retraumatisation, and prevent homelessness.



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