



Spotlight #5: Episode 2

Podcast Transcript

Filling the gaps: why trauma informed and gender responsive services are necessary for women experiencing homelessness.

Spotlights is a series of online events and publications focusing on a particular group of victim and survivors who are often hidden from services. As a part of our Spotlight on homelessness and domestic abuse, my colleague Deidre has met with Dr. Lucy Allwright from Against Violence and Abuse (AVA). In her role as a project manager at AVA, Lucy aims to improve the response by refuges and emergency housing providers to women experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantages. In her interview, Lucy shares the insights she's gained from speaking to homeless survivors of domestic abuse, and some of the vital changes that we must make to better support the women who are often hidden from services.

Key:

I = Interviewer

L = Lucy

I: Hi Lucy, thank you for joining me today to talk about homelessness and domestic abuse.

L: Thanks very much for inviting us.

I: You're welcome. Can you start out by telling me about the project that you've been working on at against violence and abuse?

L: Yeah. We have been working on a project that was funded by Trust for London to improve homelessness responses to the women facing multiple disadvantage and in particular we're supporting refuges who support that group of women. But we're also looking at housing providers, in particular hostel responses. It emerged for two reasons. One, we did a piece of research with Solace Women's Aid and we looked what sort of support refuges we able to provide. We found that women with particular mental health needs, or particular substance use were being turned away from refuges and actually that's been borne out more recently by Women's Aid research, No Woman Turned Away which has found similar things. And then it also came from doing work with St. Mungo's, who'd done work, a piece of research called Rebuilding Shattered Lives. It was a big piece of work that found that there were large numbers of homeless women who'd experienced domestic violence and homeless services weren't up to scratch in supporting that group. This piece of work is to kind of try and fill in some of those gaps. It's particularly around mental health and substance use and how we can improve responses. It's that broader context of that group of women are likely to struggle to access appropriate accommodation, so they're at risk of homelessness.

I: Okay and why did the project choose to look particularly at women's experiences rather than women and men's experiences?

L: I think in particular if you're thinking about the context of homelessness and homelessness services, historically they've been services that have been designed for men. The nature of men's homelessness looks different to women's homelessness. Women will often present with having different experiences and when St. Mungo's started looking at it they found that there was no women's strategy. There was no clear approach about what women needed or what support needs they might have. Actually they found that women were having some worse outcomes when they're accessing their services. It seemed really important that we had a gendered lense on this and said there's clear services for men's homelessness, but what's happening with women's homelessness? Why are we not able to support this group? We also know that some of the systems, particularly around rough sleeping, just won't pick up on women's homelessness, so women tend to wander if they're rough sleeping. They tend to go into shops, takeaways, A & E, police stations, so things like street outreach teams will go out and they will count people who are bedded down. Women don't bed down so actually there's also something about we don't know the extent of homelessness for women, particularly rough sleeping women.

I: So they were creating responses for the people that they saw were homeless and they were seeing men as homeless?

L: Yes.

I: And not seeing women as homeless.

L: They're not seeing the women as homeless and it seemed really important that we started to say actually how do we support women? What is it that women need in this context?

I: Okay and in looking at how women experience homelessness, why have you chosen to particularly look at women who are experiencing multiple disadvantages?

L: Sure, I think there's a broader issue about women. There needs to be a response for all women who are fleeing violence and we know that domestic violence is a major contributor to women's homelessness, but actually what AVA have historically done is look at filling in the gap. There are some good services, refuges that specialist women's organisations who have been out there for years doing some of this work around supporting women. We want to fill in the gaps and say okay, sometimes women are being turned away from those services. What more can be done? I think it also taps into some broader stuff around actually this group of people who face multiple disadvantage, who are facing substance use, facing mental health, sometimes an offending history, childhood trauma. Actually they're facing a lot of inequality and it's really important to ask what should support look like for that group? How can we make sure that everyone has access to the same good quality services?

I: Okay so there's a lot of refuges out there, for instance, that cannot cater to these women's needs and often times they're turned away.

L: Yeah, exactly, particularly with refuges. That's why we're working with refuges. Interestingly when you do start doing some work with refuges one, they'll find that actually there's more women in their service with these experiences but they hadn't picked up on it 'cause they didn't know to ask on it. Sometimes women are coming through but they've been scared to disclose their experiences so we're creating an environment where women can talk about what help they need. But also I think it's just making refuges realise that actually the impact of violence on a woman often means that some of these things come up. They might be using substances to cope. They might be experiencing PTSD and trauma and it's also about saying to refuges, you can really do this work. I think it's

about helping the women's sector reflect on its existing skills as well. It's two fold, it's filling the gaps but also saying you do this work.

I: Yeah, and you can improve on it and just consider all these other circumstances that a woman might be in.

L: Exactly.

I: I know that a part of your research, you spoke directly to a lot of survivors who have these experiences. What were they telling you? What did you learn from them?

L: As part of the project I think I've interviewed ten women now. One was in a refuge, two were working with homeless services, two were in a Housing First model and four in a women's only hostel. It's particularly women who'd experienced DV that weren't maybe accessing domestic violence services. We asked them some questions about their experiences of homelessness as a woman, how they were treated by homelessness services, how effective they were at providing support, what made them feel safe. And also we asked them what would you need if you were in charge of this whole system? What would you need? Some really interesting themes came out. All the women described experiencing domestic and sexual violence. What they also described was shifting from experiencing domestic violence maybe in accommodation to escaping that and then facing harassment and further forms of violence against women on the streets or when they encountered services being targeted by other people in those services. There's this sense that safety is really unachievable for this group, it's like constant fear.

I: So you're escaping one form of violence and then you encounter another form.

L: Absolutely, and what one woman said you don't feel safe, in fact you feel really vulnerable. It's just waiting and you're the target. There's this sense that it feels overwhelmingly inescapable I think, homelessness and it's really overwhelming. Other women talked about the degree to which domestic violence services were located in a notion of home. The very idea of escaping domestic violence is you're fleeing a home space; you're fleeing the domestic space but what about women who form relationships in hostels? What about women who form relationships on the streets? The systems don't describe their experiences of domestic violence. They're in a coercive, controlling relationship, but when you flee that thing what do you flee to? You're not escaping your home space.

I: No.

L: In some situations, they were talking about how their abusive partners were controlling them but providing a broader protection from other forms of violence and harassment. There's this horrible double bind where you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't and the real uncertainty about how you get help. And then equally when you maybe present a service you've reached a stage where you're maybe self-medicating with substances or you've been involved in prostitution or you've had a perceived mental health breakdown and you present as that thing, so then you're just picked up as that. But you're carrying the shadow of the abuse with you.

I: I see, yeah.

L: That's when we're thinking about multiple disadvantage, you think about the amount of layers of stuff that women have faced and if you're looking for holistic service, that sense about what gets prioritised here. It's really, really tough for women I think.

I: It looks like a woman may go into a refuge because of domestic abuse and they might not recognise those experiences. Or a woman may go to the homeless unit and then they find

that they're presenting for one reason but again they don't see the multitude of other issues there. And I'm guessing they might then get put into a type of accommodation that puts them further at risk.

L: Absolutely and there were instances where people talked about being in mixed hostels and facing harassment from men in the hostel. Sex is common. It's from staff on the desk and they talked about there being no sense of building relationships sometimes in those spaces. You didn't know who you could trust at any point so relationships were a huge theme actually and the need to build effective relationships. The four women I interviewed who were living in the women's only hostel, I think that hostel was doing a really good job at actually kind of building relationships between the workers and those that they were supporting. It was really interesting how much the women valued those relationships as part of recovery from abuse. But they also talked about when you form a relationship with a worker the sense of ongoing loss, because you know that worker might leave and how that doesn't get mediated. Even when you're getting the support that's working for you, there's a sense that relationship's gonna be broken. Again, the trust issue is always there. How can I trust that the system is gonna support me? Because it's gonna be taken away from me. I think it's really tough.

Another thing that came out from some of the women was that they started to feel like, particularly women who've rough slept and had multiple experiences of rough sleeping, going without accommodation, that workers expected them to face violence and it was normalised.

I: Right.

L: And actually a couple of the workers admitted that to me. They said this is their daily reality, this is normal and one woman said, and it was really powerful, she said you never get used to being attacked. It hurts every single time and the psychological impact and there's no help and no one cares. I think the other thing that I've really learnt from talking to people facing such complexity is that workers are facing that complexity too and there's not enough done to how you mediate that relationship. I think if we're thinking about what women want and need, a holistic service has to be about what does it feel like for someone who's constantly experiencing violence and abuse? And what does it feel like to be the person that's holding them? There needs to be so much more work done on those relationships.

I: Yeah.

L: I think it's really tough for both sets of people and everyone's trying.

I: And you come into any job with your own set of ideas and stereotypes and a lot of those things get brought to light in the work that you do. But it's probably something I've never thought about but you think a woman in her own home with her child, her children, getting abused by her husband, her partner, whoever you think that's horrific, that's uncalled for. She needs to get out of it but there's this sense of that's what happens on the street. That's what happens to women. It does become normalised.

L: Yeah and I was so grateful for that woman saying it's not normal for me though. It still hurts.

I: Yeah, it still horrendous every single time.

L: Every time and you find ways to cope. You might disassociate, you might, and she had taken quite a lot of substances and you think well, sure.

I: Of course you do.

L: What else would you do in that situation?

I: Yeah, yeah. One of the things I know from my experience is a lot of refuges having women come into it based on the premise that they stop using, that they stop drinking and it feels like quite an unrealistic expectation of women.

L: I think if that's been the thing that you're using to manage and you've not been put in a space where you've been given alternative coping mechanisms and other strategies to self soothe, other stuff strategies to manage if you're disassociating or if you're experiencing flashbacks or if you can't sleep. Because when you sit in a room alone at night you remember those things, then actually asking someone to remove that things is really problematic. I think abstinence made base models for women aren't effective unless work's done before to look at the violence, the trauma, the abuse. If there's scope to talk about your experiences so that you can put things in place to manage that. I think in. Some refuges will have substance [unclear 14:24] and it wouldn't surprise me if there's more use of substances in refuges that's hidden because people are afraid. Because there's a lot of stigma around substance use still, huge amounts and there's a lot of shame that women describe carrying with them.

Actually in all the interviews women talked about showing the stigma. One woman said it was like carrying around a heavy suitcase with her everywhere. I thought that was such a vivid description and everything that she had to describe about her life for her felt shameful. On the other side of that I think sometimes when we focus on all those stigmas and all those barriers we sometimes forget the resilience and the resources and the power and the strength and the fact that women have survived. I think that's another thing that I learnt in those interviews. One woman said we keep getting asked to talk about all this negative stuff but I'm still alive.

I: Yeah.

L: There's something about us remembering resilience as well. I think it's really important.

I: Yeah and not automatically associating their coping mechanisms with negativity

L: Yeah and under really tough situations sometimes, yeah.

I: so we talk a lot about multiple disadvantages and what role that plays in homelessness but also in how professionals should better respond to them. Where does domestic abuse come into that? Is it on equal par with all those other experiences or do you feel it has a more prominent role within their experience?

L: We know that there's high rates of domestic violence amongst women who are homelessness. St. Mungo's found 35% who rough sleep is, having spoken to the women's strategy lead, she thinks is probably higher, but it's not necessarily the presenting issue. I think that women will have faced violence and that impacts on their experiences and views of the world. The shadow of that violence is carried with them. I think it might be that they present with a substance use issue, it might be that they present with a mental health breakdown but I think the experience of trauma, the experience of violated relationships is one that is really prominent. I think that really came out in the interviews actually, the violation of relationships. I think that's at the core when we're thinking about women facing multiple disadvantage. Because when relationships are violated so much comes along with it. Sometimes it's being led by where that person is at. Nelson's Trust is doing some really interesting work in trauma informed working practise with women and they're finding very high rates of violence and abuse and trauma amongst that group. Now the woman presenting would say the primary issue is substance use and that's fine. But when you get down to it it's that relationship violation has led to that situation.

Maybe they've developed physical addictions to substances which need some work but actually the work can't happen without the rebuilding of relationships and trust and feelings of safety and emotional security. I think the common thread is really kind of experiences of trauma and for services to think about how they can work in trauma informed way. So understanding the impact of trauma on a person and how they might respond to that understanding the trauma of trauma on a worker and how they might respond to that and what that means for how you build a relationship with someone.

I: One of the other questions is that you're working with women who are homeless. They're experiencing violence. They have multiple disadvantages and to me, they would meet both categories of being highly vulnerable and in priority need. Why then do they continually find themselves to be homeless?

L: Sometimes they're not asked about the abuse, so it's not identified. Actually often they will be identified as priority need but it's actually they're put into spaces that don't work for them. It might be that because of what's going on they're not then able to maintain a tenancy. If that woman had been put into housing and given some wrap around support could she have maintained that tenancy? Housing First models, St. Mungo's have been doing some Housing First pilots. Some of the Fulfilling Lives areas are doing wrap around support with people in housing that looks a bit like that and actually they're helping people to maintain tenancy. There's something about getting people in the right accommodation with the right support. Other times they might be put in a mixed hostel or they might be put in temporary accommodation and actually if we think back to everything I've said about relationship violation, about not feeling safe, then it's also about that accommodation's not been suitable for that person.

I: Quite re-traumatising.

L: It's quite re-traumatising.

I: It makes them quite vulnerable to further abuse.

L: Yeah, absolutely because people may target them or may use them unfortunately. Not always I think. As I said you'll speak to women where there's huge amounts of resilience but it's just, yeah, finding the right spaces and I think having some holistic wrap around support is really important to get people to help them maintain some of those tenancies.

I: It's not just about them providing them with a space to temporarily live in? It's about a space that's appropriate otherwise they cannot stay there and no one should be.

L: And actually some of the women in the women's hospital I interviewed, they'd been found a priority need, they'd been put in the hostel and they said I feel safe here, I've got a roof over my head but I don't know the longer term situation for me. I think that's very hard thing as well. It's kind of I'm here but I'm not in a home.

I: No.

L: It's temporary, and it's very tiring. One woman said I can't even think about getting a job. I can't even think about doing other things because this is just so overwhelming that I don't have a home space. I don't feel like I have an identity 'cause I don't have a home. I'm placeless, I'm rootless.

I: Yeah and you can't build anything around that, job, community, friendships, anything.

L: Exactly, it's really tough and she said, one woman I spoke to, she was a pharmacist and she did have a job but she said you can't invite anyone back to the hostel. You can't cook dinner for a friend. It's embarrassing to tell them where you live so there's also something about that, another thing to add to your suitcase of shame. And she'd fled violence, she'd had experienced a mental health breakdown as a result of that and she felt entirely like it was her fault.

What were some of the things that women you spoke to particularly said would be a positive change for them?

L: Women's only services, more of them.

I: Okay.

L: I think it's interesting that I interviewed some women that had been in mixed hostels and I interviewed women who'd been in women's only services and some people say oh it's fine being in a mixed space, but actually every woman in the women's only service said I really value being here. There's things to work out. Actually one woman was a lesbian and she said I've been in an abusive relationship with women so it's not just about, but she said there was something about a sense of safety in that space and a sense that people got it. I think more women's only services are really important.

I: ? That would be for women who aren't always presenting as experiencing domestic abuse? 'Cause if you prevent with domestic abuse lots of times you are put in women only space. That needs to be considered for women who present in other ways.

L: Yeah, I think if you're gonna be put in a hostel at all then actually having women's only hostels is really valuable. There's stuff that needs to be worked out.

I: Definitely.

L: And you're creating a shared living space but I sense that people get it. One woman talked about how confusing it was for her to have to deal with a multitude of services. She says when you're in trauma it's confusing. You're vulnerable, you need one place and you can't find your way elsewhere. It's like being in a maze with a blindfold on and she said that if you're in that maze you just want one tannoy open telling you where to go. You don't want a tannoy being like go to substance use service, now go to mental health service, now go to the DV service. She said you want one exit and you want one loud voice telling you how to get to it. But right now she said she felt like she was just in the middle of this maze trying to get out again. And there were ten different exits and she didn't know which was the right exit for her. Women talked a lot about paperwork actually and how tiring it is to repeat your story, to have to constantly tell services what's happened, about how workers change and they don't talk to each other or bother reading notes. Interestingly one of the few holistic services does seem to be homeless services because if you're housed somewhere in a hostel they have to deal with everything else. Actually why are we not thinking more about how we can use these spaces and work together for women?

I: Having one representative giving that wrap around support.

L: Yeah, exactly.

I: Filtering in those voices.

L: Yeah, absolutely. I think that really came across strongly. A woman also talked about the lack of clarity about what services do and the uncertainty about what her role, what the expectation of her was in there. She said she'll often get to the service and they'll be like this is so-and-so and she just said they'll give you a leaflet and she said she doesn't always really understand what they did. She didn't understand what the worker was there for and she didn't understand what she had to do for them. Did she have to do something to get something? Actually she said if you have one page that said this is our service, this is what we do and as a worker this is how I support you, this is what I can't do. And at the bottom she said she would like I'm this person, this is what I've been through, this is how I'll behave if you treat me in that way. And she said it's almost like a contract.

I: An agreement, yeah.

L: An agreement between you both and real clarity and she said also revisit it each time, do you really understand what this is about? Are you okay with this? Because there's also a sense that, one woman said she'd experienced all these multiple things. She had mental health, she had substance use, she was involved in prostitution, she'd been trafficked around the UK and she was like but I'm not brain dead and you treat me like I am. You don't trust that I'd be able to engage with you and you don't treat me as an equal.

Lastly, what would be your one piece of advice for any professional who might be supporting a woman who's experiencing violence, who's experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantages?

L: think about relationship building, there's a lot of focus on filling out the form, on crisis management, on your service culture. And I understand that you're gonna have to do some of that but actually can you make someone a cup of tea? Can you offer them something to eat? If someone's hungry it's gonna be harder for them to engage and I've said a lot about relationship violation. If you can start from a place of trust and if you can be open and honest about your role, that's the most important thing. People don't wanna be worked for, they want to be worked with. Someone, a brilliant woman called Paula Harriett who works for Revolving Doors said after being done to, it's very empowering to be done with. I just think if we start working from that basis and thinking about the degree to which, this isn't about us providing a service. This is about us working with someone and looking at how we can support them and think that's what people really want. People find it confusing to constantly fill out paperwork so if you can, find ways around that. Understand trauma, understand trauma impact in you as well and really take time to look after yourself.

I think worker self-care is not spoken about enough and if you're looking after yourself then you can better be there to work with someone else. If you don't feel like you're able to manage the trauma impact on you that's not your fault. That says something about the system in which we're inhabiting but not knowing the consequences of that for you can mean that it's hard to form relationships. I think that's what people need and be clear about what you can do and be honest about the limitations of what you can do.

I: It sounds like trusting, honest relationships that you reflect on.

I: Great, okay, thanks very much for talking to me, it's been really interesting.

L: Thank you very much for and yeah, talking to AVA.

I: Great. Okay, has it been recording? Thirty-eight minutes.

Thank you for listening. If you'd like to find out more about SafeLives Spotlight on domestic abuse and homelessness, go to our website [SafeLives.org.uk](https://www.safelives.org.uk) where we will be uploading content every week from different experts from the 7th August through the 15th Sept. You can sign up for the webinar on the 22nd August at 11am by joining the SafeLives Community Plateford and going to events. And we want to hear from you-we need your views, experiences and practice tips, so join the conversation on Twitter with the hashtag #SafeAtHome and get involved on the SafeLives Community.