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(DOI: 10.17460/PHO_2023.3_4.07)

GENDER ASPECTS OF MALE HOMELESSNESS

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a number of differences between male and female homelessness, some of which are documentable. In most developed countries, men far outnumber women. In Europe, men make up 70–80% of the homeless population (Marek, Strnad, Hotovcová, 2012). In the Czech Republic, the representation of homeless men corresponds to this figure. The census concluded that 78% of homeless people are men and only 22% are women (CSU, 2011). The same figure was also reached by the census of homeless people in large cities, which were Prague, Brno, Ostrava (Kliment, 2018). As for the age of homeless people, the largest proportion is men aged 40 to 49 years, while most women are aged 20 to 29 years (CSU, 2011).

According to the results of the census mentioned hereinabove, almost half of the homeless were single, and approximately 40% were divorced. Among women, there were fewer single people (44% of women compared to 50% of men), fewer divorced people (40% of women compared to 42% of men) and more married people (16% of married women compared to 8% of married men). The divorce rate of homeless people can be compared to the overall divorce rate in the Czech Republic in 2011, which was 46% (CSU, 2011).

Obvious homelessness is typical for men and they do not hide their condition. Women are more likely to be hidden homeless people. Women often solve their sleeping problems by staying with their parents or friends, and often return to the partner they left, especially if they have children with them. Once a woman has taken up a position on the street, she is more at risk than a man; her physical constitution

makes her more vulnerable (Kliment, 2018). It can be concluded that the number of women on the street is increasing. The most common reason for the obvious homelessness of women is the fact that women carry a psychiatric diagnosis, for example, the proportion of women with personality disorders in the homeless population is four times higher than that of men (Marek, Strnad, Hotovcová, 2012).

Another difference can be seen in the dependent behaviour of homeless people. Radimecky (2007) reports that in the general population, men are more likely to be addicted than women, by a ratio of 2:1, and the difference is even greater in the homeless population. In the case of alcohol, the overlap is expected to be even more significant, with 3.8% of men and 0.3% of women addicted in the Czech population (Sovinová, Csémy, 2010). Women, on the other hand, tend to abuse medicaments. Radimecký (2007) explains that women are more likely than men to seek medical help for health problems. It is estimated that they are prescribed medication up to three times more often than men. In contrast, men seem to have less inhibition to buy illegal drugs from street dealers. Marek, Strnad and Hotovcová (2012) mention that men's consumption of addictive substances is public, while women consume them more covertly. This may be due to the attitudes of society, which is more tolerant towards men in this respect. This fact is explained by Vobořil (2003) as a remnant of a patriarchal society that expects women to be responsible to their family, i.e., to their gender role, but also to depend on the masculine part of the population.

Differences between homeless men and women can also be seen in relation to the help offered. According to Hradecký (1996), women are more likely to seek help and to be grateful for it. Men are often seen as problematic or involuntary clients. Men perceive their downfall as a personal failure and struggle with feelings of guilt. They see accepting help from others as a sign of weakness. They are convinced that they must get off the streets through their own efforts. Refusal of help is also related to the activities of close persons. Accepting help from friends and family is even perceived by men as more stigmatizing than receiving help from an unknown aid worker. A woman in distress seeks help and protection and a man feels that he has to help himself. However, social assistance is still likely to be accepted by homeless people, Kliment (2018) reports that in large cities up to 60% of the homeless population use some form of social service.

Homeless people are generally more likely to have a tendency towards criminal activity and associated experience of imprisonment. This is usually property crime and fraud resulting from material deprivation and reduced ability to regulate behaviour. Sometimes this activity is associated with the effects of drug and alcohol use. It is a fact that non-payment of child support is also a common crime. (Vágnerová, Marek, Czémy 2018). Violent crime is particularly the domain of men. The fact that men are more likely to commit crime than women is evidenced by the fact that 91% of homeless people in prison facilities are men (VÚPSV, 2019). Women are more likely to turn to prostitution as an alternative source of income to prevent them from falling into the streets or to help them better manage life on the streets.

Most homeless men do not live in a partnership with a woman; rather, they tend to associate with other men. However, the question is whether this is an expression of their free will, given the earlier mentioned proportion of homeless women among the homeless. Within groups in which there is mutual solidarity, individuals can support each other in terms of meeting their basic physiological needs, but also their need for security and sociability. The existence of homeless individuals as solitaries is rather the exception. Homeless people, as already mentioned, are more likely to commit crimes, but also significantly more likely to be victims of such actions, where in a group they are better able to protect themselves from possible attacks (Kliment, 2018).

If a couple is formed between a man and a woman, then a gender division of roles can be observed. For homeless men, living in a couple is a sign of prestige; this fact increases their status in the homeless community. There is an assumption that a woman chooses a man endowed with power. Sources of power in the homeless community may stem from physical superiority, social capital that facilitates the acquisition of livelihood resources, and from the knowledge and skills to implement one's own livelihood practices. Women often speak of the need to enter into such relationships in order to gain protection. The man takes on the responsibility for providing a place to sleep, securing funds, and providing food. The woman is in charge of taking care of the sleeping arrangements, furthermore, she prepares and arranges meals for both of them, and serves to satisfy the sexual needs of her partner (Mikulasek 2010).

2. DIFFERENCES REGARDING HOMELESS MEN AND WOMEN AS EXPRESSED BY RESPONDENTS FROM THE HOMELESS POPULATION

Gender differences were most prominent in the respondents' statements concerning the strategies of action chosen in the context of life on the street, partly in the description of barriers to returning to the majority society.

2.1 A general view of the male and female roles

The analysis of the interviews shows that the same gender stereotypes are present in the homeless community as in the majority society, and in some ways, they seem to be even more pronounced. The woman is generally perceived as weaker, in need of protection, is found to be more responsible compared to the man, and her role is to take care of the man, the family and the shared household. The man is then the breadwinner, providing for and protecting the wife and family, is perceived as stronger, more active, more dominant, and less likely to show his feelings.

Patrick: Well, a woman is definitely not to be touched, right. Women are not to be hit. Well, a man should just, like, work and a woman should clean for him.

Hynek: A woman takes care of the food. And the rest of it, you know what... Keeping clean. The man, he's the breadwinner first, right. He's supposed to take

care of the family, take care of the wife. Work hard to keep them well. No pain, no gain. That was, is and will be a man's job in every age, in every regime.

Based on gender stereotypes which assume that the two actors behave differently, homeless men and women are then evaluated differently, both by mainstream society and by homeless men themselves. Society is more tolerant towards men.

Richard: *When I see an unkempt woman, and a drunk woman at that, I see people getting offended, just that she stinks, how can she as a woman and all that. Whereas when they see the guy, yeah, he stinks and all that, yeah, but they don't really address it anymore. The woman's always looked at like she's gonna take care of the family and stuff. That she's more responsible.*

Being on the streets carries higher risks for women, who are perceived as weaker from a gender perspective.

Hynek: *The woman's weaker, isn't she. A man doesn't get mugged on the street, a woman gets mugged by anyone.*

2.2 Dependent behaviour

Alcohol abuse can be a cause of homelessness as well as a reaction to the onset of this difficult life situation.

Hynek: *I started drinking. But like drinking! That's a litre and a half of liquor a day.*

Patrick: *I'll get up. I need a drink. Or at least I have to have an „O“ (probably an alcohol-based window cleaner).*

Living on the streets brings with it a loss of social control. There is no longer any pressure from society, no demands are placed on the person.

Hynek: *So what, I'm drunk, nobody's told me off, so why wouldn't I.*

In addition to alcohol, other psychoactive substances can be used which can lead to addiction.

Igor: *I was more curious to see what it was like to try it. I tried it, didn't I, and I kind of fell into it, well, like when I remember what we were doing for days, it was just drugs, right, cooking drugs and stuff.*

Women also tend to use psychoactive substances:

Peter: *I'm not saying that my boyfriend and I didn't buy beer when we were living together. But we always got up every morning and worked it off... I guess I'd throw the alcohol into it (the cause of the addiction). Because after all, then in that partnership it's so quarrelsome and different... Alcohol, that's how I started to deal with it, unfortunately. I used to be addicted to drugs, but I didn't want to go back to that. So, I fell more into the alcohol thing.*

2.3 Use of the help offered

There is a widespread perception among homeless men that women are more likely than men to integrate into mainstream society if they are interested in doing so. This is due both to their lower representation in the homeless population,

and probably also to more accessible institutional provision (e.g., residential services for women and mothers with children, community centres for women, etc.).

Richard: *There are more men on that street than women, percentage-wise, so the women have a better chance. And then the women have a better chance of getting off the street than the men. Because of the fact that there are a lot of charities. There's not as many for the guys. I don't know, like if the woman wants to, I think she's more likely to get off the street than a guy.*

The attitude of helping professionals and other members of the majority society may also be different, as they are more responsive to cooperating women than to often hostile men.

According to homeless men, the higher chances of getting off the streets are already a result of gender itself. A woman, for example, precisely because she is perceived as weaker and in need of protection, is more likely to find a partner outside the homeless community who can provide for her.

Hynek: *I don't get it, the women on the street. She must be a complete idiot, because even if a guy throws her out or stops liking her, if she's a woman, she can have another one in twenty minutes.*

Men's lower chances of fitting into mainstream society are not only due to the structures of society itself, which may be more inclined to help women in need, but also to the subjective barriers most men face, which are rooted in gender stereotypes that are deeply embedded in their identity. As already mentioned, the man is supposed to provide for the family, he is tough, active, rational, resilient, and not easily vulnerable. Homeless men believe they have failed in their masculine role. They are ashamed of the situation they are in and many find it very difficult to ask for help – they find it as weakness.

Hynek: *I wouldn't come to anyone like that and say I need help. Like that, literally. No one's allowed to see that I'm feeling bad right now.*

It is often a sense of humiliation that prevents them from using the available sources of help, whether in the form of helping institutions, family, or friends. They are convinced that they have to help themselves.

Peter: *That was just not an option. Such a shame, humiliation, just to be seen like that (by my family), the way I live.*

Hynek: *Asking someone for food, that's just no way. It's better to take care of yourself than to be grateful to someone afterwards. I just figured I didn't need help.*

Some men also avoid contact with their families because of fears of expressing their own feelings, which they would not be able to control.

Hynek: *Well, but I would have to, I don't know, breathe it out for a week (contact with my family), then I would probably start drinking again, because I wouldn't go there sober.*

Homeless men who are clients of social services may have a need to work with a man. They believe that they will find more understanding with a helping professional of the same sex, they feel more trust towards him.

Hynek: *A guy is more tolerant towards a guy, and secondly, he knows what the guy needs. Just because he's a guy and he knows it, right. The woman, she's like that, she wants to help, but she doesn't know with what.*

2.4 Coexistence within the homeless population

Men have a differently represented need to form a relationship with a woman. Relationships between homeless men and women are often based on pragmatic reasons. The man usually protects the woman; in return, the woman can provide sex and be a source of financial resources.

Hynek: *I know a few women who found men in order not to live with them, but to have the men to look after.*

However, this division of roles is not the rule. A woman can also be an important emotional support for a man.

Patrick: *You're not on your own, you know, you can lean on somebody, like, well, when you're on your own, it's kind of weird, you know. I took care of her, and she helped me too, you know. I was always hurting, like injured for example and she helped me, didn't she. I certainly wouldn't send her begging. I just wouldn't. It's just not done.*

Many men, however, reject a relationship with a homeless woman, often because of declared bad experiences.

Martin: *It's generally all hookers that hang around here. I can't do that. Because they're only drawn to dope or booze, it just doesn't go anywhere. You've seen it, I've only been dragged down by her.*

A relationship with a woman outside the homeless community is unimaginable for many men. They believe that they must first resolve their current situation, then only they can build a relationship with a woman.

Igor: *Nothing, now I can't have any partnership because I have nothing to offer, right. And I don't want any woman off the street.*

Some men see the idea of a relationship while they are on the street as an additional burden.

Richard: *So, I'm alone, I'm basically solving my own problems and not yet solving somebody else's problems. I don't know, although two is probably better than one. But it's definitely not now.*

Homeless men often form groups of men with similar life stories, forming close relationships and spending time together.

Hynek: *There were seven of us in the group, just guys. So, we were all, or most of us were divorced, we were all pissed off at the girls and the whole world, so like throw a girl in our midst and we'd tear her to pieces.*

3. CONCLUSION

The research confirmed the different perception of the role of homeless men and women from the perspective of individual respondents. The homeless man

perceives the woman as weak, easily vulnerable, with limited autonomy, but also more responsible. The man perceives himself as strong, independent, rational, who has to be able to take care of himself, and possibly take a woman into his protection. This is most evident in the attitude of homeless men towards any help that is offered to them. It could be said that the man is firmly in thrall to his gender role. He perceives himself as a failure, unable to find housing or having lost it, his livelihood options are limited and he is unable to break out of this situation on his own, which further reduces his perception of himself as an autonomous individual. Shame prevents him from turning to his natural social networks (family, friends) for help, and often from forming a supportive partner relationship, as well as from using available social services. As for his tendency not to use all the possibilities of social services, homeless men rationalise this by stating that homeless women are favoured over men, and are provided with more opportunities for help, which does not correspond to reality. Men seem to lack the self-reflection that if they took a more welcoming attitude towards those helping them and the help offered, they would receive a greater degree of assistance. Men fear that if they accept the help offered, then they would be confirming their failure in the male role. This should be taken into account in the process of helping homeless men. They themselves advocate for their case to be handled by a man, fearing that they would be misunderstood by the helping woman. The fact that a strong man is forced to accept help from a woman who is generally perceived as the one who should be helped may also play a role. The helper should be aware of the homeless man's perception of his social decline, as well as his failed attempts to resolve his case satisfactorily; the issue should be communicated to him respectfully, as a partial regression in his life trajectory. The homeless man should be offered guidance in the process of re-establishing contact with his natural environment, as well as with potential professional help providers. Accompaniment should be supportive, as these are the first steps out of his state of learned helplessness. The small successes experienced can then start centripetal processes towards the core of society. The eventual change should not be in leaps and bounds, communicating the depth of the individual's life slump, but should be spread over many incremental, realistically achievable steps.

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Gender aspects of male homelessness

Summary

Aim: The text focuses on the differences between male and female homelessness in the Czech Republic. Homeless men exhibit different characteristics in some respects compared to homeless women, and the above also applies to their chosen strategies of action in the context of living on the streets. Firstly, the known facts concerning the observed differences are presented in this paper in order to subsequently identify them in the statements of individual respondents.

Methods: The data are collected through semi-structured interviews with homeless men. A total of 7 male respondents were contacted, and additionally 2 homeless women to illustrate the topic under study.

Results: Attention was focused on the reasons that led to the interviewees becoming homeless, as well as on practices related to living on the streets and finally on possible barriers that prevent them from returning to the centre of society.

Conclusions: The text is intended to lead to an understanding of the perspectives of homeless men that may be a barrier to help from society. At the end of the text, several recommendations are put forward which could help in the process of providing assistance.

Keywords: homelessness, characteristics of the homeless population, characteristics of homeless men.