

WEN Café: Women and the Right to Adequate Housing

27th May 2021

Summary of discussion

Chair: Catherine Fookes, Director, WEN Wales

Speakers:

Alicja Zalesinska, Director, Tai Pawb

Samsunear Ali, Head of National Services, BAWSO

Ruth Power, CEO, Shelter Cymru

In May's WEN Café the panel discussed what is meant by the right to adequate housing, and its importance for women.

- Prompted by the Grenfell tragedy, Tai Pawb launched a feasibility report on how a right to adequate housing could be introduced in Wales. A safe, accessible, affordable place to live is crucial to health, eradicating poverty, and essential to human survival.
- Housing issues are gendered issues – housing cost is one of the top four factors of poverty in this country, and as we know, women are more likely to be in poverty.
- Housing insecurity can particularly hit single mothers. More families and children are now living in the private rented sector, where security of tenure is an issue. Women are more likely to claim housing benefit and to suffer from Sex For Rent exploitation.
- Recent Welsh Government data on homelessness is not disaggregated by gender but needs to be. 6000 people are currently in temporary accommodation and homeless. 51 people are rough sleeping.
- 60% of Shelter Cymru service users are women – women are overrepresented.
- Shelter Cymru data from 2020 showed 141 women who were street homeless, 21 women sleeping in a car, 450 women hidden homeless (staying with friends/relatives, sofa surfing etc.)
- BAWSO supports women under immigration control who have No Recourse to Public Funds and cannot access housing. These women are in a very vulnerable position. In recent years more than 50% of the women BAWSO supports have this status.
- During the pandemic services have been closed, processes for housing benefits have been slower, refugees have been quarantined. As we come out of lockdown, there are spikes in women seeking support, but there are not enough spaces available.
- Welsh Government have had a scheme with empty hotel rooms and bed and breakfasts made available, but these have been mainly filled with general homelessness victims and not domestic abuse victims because of the risk factor.
- Asylum seekers are often put into mass accommodation – this is not the best place for vulnerable and traumatised women, who are then expected to share shower facilities with men.
- The public discourse on homelessness can be dominated by rough sleeping, which is predominantly male, so people often have a certain image in their minds of homelessness. This is misleading and unhelpful as it underplays the extent to which homelessness and housing need is an issue for women.
- The gender pay gap is a significant factor for women with regards to housing. On average when buying property women must borrow 15 times their salary, whereas men borrow 10 times their salary. Women in the private rented sector spend 55% of their income on housing, with men spending just under 20% less. 60% of people claiming housing benefit are women. Things like the bedroom tax have a

disproportionate impact on women because they are more heavily dependent on housing benefit.

- Women's caring responsibilities often frame their experience of homelessness. Single parents are overwhelmingly female and have lower incomes compared to two-parent households. Single parent households are also less likely to have a secure or safe home.
- Homelessness looks and feels different for women. Hidden homelessness is more of an issue. The safety factor is an issue on the streets, in hostels, in temporary accommodation and all kinds of shared accommodation. Shelter Cymru work with numerous women who have been subjected to multiple sexual assaults in shared accommodation.
- Another feature of Shelter Cymru's casework is women who have been offered money off their rent in return for sex. There are still posted ads offering accommodation in return for sex, putting women who are desperate for accommodation in an incredibly vulnerable position.
- Back the Bill is a campaign run by Tai Pawb, Shelter Cymru, and Chartered Institute of Housing. They have drafted a bill that would enshrine the right to housing into Welsh law and are calling on the Welsh Government to implement this.
- Samsunear wants to see an alternative model that allows choice for vulnerable women and takes into account individual need. More refuge space and secure, sustainable funding is needed.
- There is a lack of accessible housing to meet the needs of disabled people.
- A fundamental shift is needed from a system based on gatekeeping, to one based on enabling people to access adequate housing. The current system works to deliver good financial returns for some but fails to deliver good homes for all.

Policy solutions

- Disaggregate homelessness and housing insecurity data by gender and other protected characteristics
- Back the Bill – enshrine the right to adequate housing in Welsh law
- Secure and sustainable funding for specialist services
- Put housing and the housing emergency at the heart of Covid recovery and the process of building back better and fairer
- Increase the stock of affordable housing for women
- Invest in the prevention of violence against women and girls
- Recognise adequate housing as a fundamental human right.