

## FEMALE HOMELESSNESS

The social relationships of homeless women

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**Abstract** Addressing a gap in literature about female homelessness, this paper analyzes the role of social relationships in the lives of homeless women. Bourdieu's theory of social capital and Granovetter's theory of social ties are used as a theoretical framework. The specific analytical focus is on social relationships with family and romantic partners and how these relationships contribute to homeless women's social capital. It was firstly found that despite family being a source of emotional and instrumental support, homeless women's limited or absent family relations represent a burden. Secondly, romantic relationships can provide support and simultaneously represent a straining factor. We conclude that social relationships to both family and romantic partners can in some cases be a source of support but most often are an additional burden to the already disadvantaged situation of homeless women.

### I Introduction

Homeless people are one of the most marginalized groups in society (Neale & Brown, 2015). Women in homelessness find themselves in an even more margin-

alized position, as women represent a minority amongst the homeless population (Mayock et al., 2015). While official numbers claim that one-fourth of the homeless population is female (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Wohnungslosenhilfe e.V., 2019), other sources claim that the unofficial number of homeless women is far larger because of the hidden nature of female homelessness (Baptista, 2010).

Homelessness generally refers to the state of not having a “permanent place of residence” (Homeless, n.d.), which appears in three different forms. Firstly, people who mostly sleep on the streets or in short-term emergency shelters are regarded as ‘roofless’. Secondly, ‘houselessness’ refers to people living in accommodations for the homeless, women’s shelters, or refugee shelters for a longer period. Thirdly, people who temporarily stay at other people’s places are considered to be in situations of ‘insecure housing’ (FEANTSA, 2017). When women experience homelessness, they are most often affected by houselessness and insecure housing, which causes their homelessness to remain hidden. These women tend to avoid support facilities and homeless shelters as long as possible and instead find shelter with family members, friends, or acquaintances, which is why their situation remains undetected for a long time (Bernard, 2010; Enders-Dragässer, 2010; Mayock et al., 2015; Sikich, 2008; Tischler et al., 2007). Female hidden homelessness thus contrasts with the more visible homelessness of men, who often sleep on the street (May et al., 2007).

Regardless of the form of houselessness, homeless women live in extremely disadvantaged situations. Limited literature suggests that homeless women are identified as an even more vulnerable population compared to other homeless populations, with unique characteristics and intensified barriers to exiting homelessness as a result of illnesses of all forms, longer careers of homelessness, older age, and work limitations (Groton & Radey, 2018; Mayock et al., 2015; Reeve et al. 2006). Literature indicates that, given the increased vulnerability of homeless women, their social networks and relationships play an integral role in their situation and their ability to exit homelessness (Groton & Radey, 2018; Oliver & Cheff, 2014). For a long time, homelessness appeared to be a male-dominated phenomenon in both the social and academic discourse – which was partly also due to the hidden nature of female homelessness (Baptista, 2010; May et al., 2007; Mayock et al., 2015). Thus, only a few studies have analyzed the social networks of homeless women (e.g., Groton & Radey, 2018; Oliver & Cheff, 2014; Reeve et al., 2006; Tischler et al., 2007).

This qualitative study contributes to the body of literature by exploring the meaning of social relationships for homeless women. Using semi-structured interviews and participant observation, we examine how social relationships contribute to, complicate, and aggravate homelessness. We therefore pose the

research question: *What is the role of social relationships in the lives of women experiencing homelessness?* The following paper first introduces a theoretical framework based on Bourdieu's theory of social capital and Granovetter's theory of social ties (Barker, 2012; Bourdieu, 2018; Gowan, 2011). After introducing the methodology and sample, we continue with the findings, presenting the two main themes emerging from the analysis. First, we found that limited or non-existent family relations can be a burden, whereas – despite the troubled nature of family relations – family can also be supportive. Second, we found that romantic relationships play a central role in women's lives, offering support while also becoming a straining factor. Ultimately, we conclude that social relationships to family and romantic partners can be a source of support, but most often are an additional burden to the already disadvantaged situation of homeless women.

## 2 Theorizing social capital and social relationships

### 2.1 Social capital

This paper adopts Bourdieu's theory of social capital as a theoretical framework. *Social capital* refers to the resources that are embedded in and accessible through relationships with others. It is not constituted by the relationships themselves; only when a relationship leads to some sort of action or resource does it become social capital. Thus, some relationships become social capital and others do not (Barker, 2012; Bourdieu, 2018). As social capital lies in the connection between people and not in the people themselves, social capital cannot be owned by people (Irwin et al., 2008). The resources to which it refers can be material goods, such as certain objects, but also immaterial goods, such as professional connections. The theory of social capital is linked to Bourdieu's concepts of *economic* and *cultural capital* and hence cannot be studied in isolation (Bourdieu, 2018). Economic capital refers to a person's monetary resources, whereas cultural capital is described as the cultural knowledge that helps a person navigate their social environment. Similar to social capital, cultural capital can be constituted by material or immaterial things; for example, an educational degree or certain behavioral norms (Bourdieu, 2018).

As the three forms of capital are strongly connected, it is possible to transfer capital from one form to another. For instance, possessing economic capital gives a person access to certain social groups and hence enables the person to acquire social and cultural capital. Having cultural capital such as education can provide access to professions that again enable the person to accumulate economic capital. In the case that economic capital is limited, social capital can be a way to still

access economic resources through the connection to others, for example in the form of a loan (Barker, 2012; Bourdieu, 2018; Calhoun, 2008; Irwin et al., 2008; Siisiäinen, 2000).

A subdivision of social capital into *bonding capital* and *bridging capital* can be made. According to Putnam, bonding capital is established between people from a similar social background, whereas bridging capital lies in relationships to people from different social groups (Irwin et al., 2008). Bridging capital to a person from another social milieu therefore has the potential to promote access to more resources than bonding capital (Gowan, 2011; Oliver & Cheff, 2014). Bonding and bridging social capital can be linked to the theory of social ties by Granovetter (Ferrante-Wallace, 2015; Gowan, 2011). According to this theory, social relationships – social ties – can be classified as either strong, weak, or absent. People have a strong tie when they are in regular personal contact and share a deep emotional connection. The tie is weak when personal contact is limited, or the relationship has the nature of that of an acquaintance. Relationships that establish bonding capital usually entail strong ties with people from the same social group, such as close friends or family. Relationships with people from different social groups, which make up bridging capital, are more likely to be weak ties (Gowan, 2011).

Furthermore, social capital can also be separated into *support* and *leverage* (Irwin et al., 2008). Reitzes et al. (2011) define social support as “the resources or benefits that people may receive from the interactions with others” (p. 275). For the scope of this paper, mainly *emotional* and *instrumental support* are of interest. Instrumental support refers to practical aspects, such as financial support or support in finding accommodation or employment, whereas emotional support encompasses the emotional connection with another person that can act as a source of empowerment, hope, and wellbeing (Reitzes et al., 2011). If social capital goes one step further than support and also facilitates problem-solving and progress, it is considered leverage. It is more likely for leverage to occur through bridging capital than bonding capital (Irwin et al., 2008).

Lastly, capital has to be studied in relation to its *field*. The field is another key concept by Bourdieu and refers to the setting in which social agents and their capital are located (Bourdieu, 2018). The way in which capital is expressed and gained, for instance, depends on the specific field. The same goes for the transfer between the different forms of capital. As the field in this research is homelessness, the following section establishes the relationship between social capital and homelessness.

## 2.2 Social capital and homelessness

Regardless of gender, economic capital and cultural capital are extremely limited for homeless people. Amongst various diverse and complex factors contributing to a person's homelessness, literature mentions little education – low cultural capital – or unemployment and financial instability – low economic capital – as reasons leading to homelessness and characterizing homeless women's situations (e.g., Baptista, 2010; Hauprich, 2018). Social capital provides important resources for every person, regardless of their circumstances, yet the fact that their economic and cultural capital is very limited renders the importance of social capital even larger for the homeless population (Groton & Radey, 2018; Irwin et al., 2008). As outlined before, it is possible to transfer social capital into economic or cultural capital and thereby still access certain resources.

For homeless women, social relationships are therefore a way to access resources such as housing, financial support, or employment. Homeless women combine support – a form of social capital – from different social networks and relationships to address their needs (Groton & Radey, 2018). Social capital, for example, has a positive effect on the chances of finding housing (Groton & Radey, 2018; Reitzes et al., 2011). Yet homeless women still have limited access to social capital and its benefits and also tend to have smaller social networks than housed people (Groton & Radey, 2018). Additionally, the people in their networks usually come from similar backgrounds and do not have significantly more resources than the women themselves. These ties thus classify as bonding capital instead of bridging capital, which is the more important form for homeless women (Irwin et al, 2008). It is, however, difficult for people in disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances to acquire bridging capital to people in other social groups or classes that could provide important leverage. Socioeconomic background thus plays an important role in the relationship between social capital and the benefits that can possibly result from social capital. Based on this, the concept of social capital and the theory of social ties are used in the following sections to explore and analyze the role and importance of social relationships in the lives of homeless women.

## 3 Methodology

As the topic of this research addresses the personal experiences and perceptions of women in regard to their social relationships, we follow an interpretivist paradigm (Gray, 2014). To collect our data, we used in-depth interviews, participant

observation, and informal conversations as methods of qualitative research (Gray, 2014). The interviews were semi-structured and lasted 60 to 80 minutes each. They aimed to gain an understanding of our participants' personal experiences and the deeper meanings they attach to their social relationships. The personal interviews were complemented by observing the participants, their acquaintances, other homeless people, and social workers in the researched field. The interviews were conducted in November and December 2019 by both researchers either in the participants' current accommodation or in a day café for homeless people in Aachen, Germany. We could, therefore, experience the interviewees in their usual environment, which allowed for an intimate atmosphere and close rapport with the interviewees. An additional source of information was interviews with twelve social workers from six different institutions for homeless people in Aachen. The social workers provided information about the aid network for the homeless in Aachen and their perceptions of the women's situations, as well as providing access to the field and potential interviewees. The sampling approach was snowball sampling, as we established the contacts with the participants through social workers (Gray, 2014).

In addition to the social workers, the sample of this study consists of four homeless women – Linda, Sarah, Nina, and Susanne – aged 39 to 66. To keep our participants' names and identities confidential, all names were changed to pseudonyms. The women reside in different homeless accommodations in Aachen, which is why they fall into different categories of homelessness. Only Susanne, who sleeps in a short-term emergency shelter, can be considered roofless (FEANTSA, 2017). The other three participants can be considered houseless because they live in temporary accommodation institutions with more supervision and guidance from social workers. Throughout the paper, we refer to all participants as 'homeless', which includes all three types of homelessness: rooflessness, houselessness, and insecure housing (FEANTSA, 2017).

In the following, we shortly introduce the background of our four participants to complement the analysis. Nina (39) first experienced homelessness in her early twenties. She grew up with a difficult family background and currently has no contact with her family. She has experienced several abusive relationships and now plans her future with her currently imprisoned ex-partner. Linda (50) has been addicted to alcohol for 14 years, which also led her into homelessness eight years ago. She also experienced domestic violence. She has a son and a strong bond with her mother and sister. Susanne (66), who is the oldest participant, is newly employed in a cleaning firm, which is quite unusual for roofless people (Hauprich, 2018). She has a strong bond with her son, who resulted from a rape by a drug dealer who later became her partner. This partner is also the rea-

son for her becoming homeless ten years ago. Lastly, Sarah (40) slightly differs from the rest of the sample since she only became homeless one-and-a-half years ago as the consequence of an illness. She is in a stable long-term relationship and is ambitious in her plans for the future.

The initial aim of this research was to explore the relationship between gender and homelessness, specifically the reasons for women's homelessness and how their situation is different from that of homeless men. As the interviews covered a wide range of topics, it became apparent that social relationships played a central role in the lives of the women. We thus shifted the focus of the research towards their social relationships and adapted the interview guide and research question accordingly. As such, this research project followed an emergent design (Gray, 2014).

There are two limitations with regard to the sample of this study. Firstly, the population of homeless women is very difficult to access. As stated before, women represent a minority within the larger homeless population and tend to remain hidden in comparison to men. Additionally, the number of homeless women overall in Aachen is rather small; it is estimated at around 300 to 500 (numbers are taken from conversations with the social workers). As this research addresses very personal and sensitive topics and some homeless women would not be able to participate in an hour-long interview due to mental and physical constraints, it was not possible to find a larger number of participants. Secondly, all interviewees in this research were found through contacts with social workers. This led to a pre-selection of the potential participants on the social workers' side. Due to these limitations, it is possible that our interviewees differ from other women we did not have access to in a way that is not under our control.

The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim in German. They were then thematically coded using English codes in the software Atlas.ti. Throughout the analysis, two main themes emerged: those of troubled family relations and the central role of romantic relationships.

## **4 Analysis**

### **4.1 Troubled family relations**

We found that family relations can be a form of support for the women, but that absent or limited relationships with family members are most often a burdening factor for the women. According to Bourdieu, the family is the foundation of social capital because that is where it is accumulated and transmitted (Barker, 2012).

For families to function as social capital, individuals must have direct contact with their families and their families must have access to valued forms of capital. The degree of these attributes highly impacts the quality of social capital a family can provide for a person. Moreover, since their support facilitates the accumulation of cultural and economic capitals, the family immensely influences which other capitals a person possesses. However, not all families can provide the same kind and degree of needed support, and therefore all families vary in the degree of social capital they provide (Barker, 2012; Padgett et al., 2008).

This becomes evident in our sample, as three participants expressed that they lacked support provided by their families. One major aspect was the lack of contact with their families. Self-evidently, if a person has no family or no contact with their family, their family cannot function as social capital (Barker, 2012). In fact, it was a great emotional burden for our participants if they only had limited or even completely absent ties to their families and hence lacked support. Sarah, for instance, had a close relationship with her family until she became homeless. After becoming homeless and living in an institution for homeless people, contact with her family declined. She explained that she was “too embarrassed” about living in a shelter to keep in touch with them. Talking about her future, however, she says it is her wish to move back to her hometown where her family still lives. Moreover, Nina states that she does not want contact with her sisters anymore because their lives are “so different”. Her sisters have families and children of their own, while Nina has been homeless for almost 20 years and lives in a homeless shelter. Her sisters’ improved family conditions, furthermore, seem to make Nina jealous. Overall, her broken family is a heavy burden on her, which clearly limits her social capital. Finally, Linda’s father and son have turned away because she is living in a shelter for the homeless. Linda explains:

*My dad used to visit me when I was living there [in another homeless shelter]. But now he just doesn't want to come that often, because I am here ... [My son] also lives in Aachen. We have a good relationship ... I will see him on Christmas Day ... and the next time on Easter.*

As she explained both cases, she teared up, which additionally underlined that she feels extremely emotionally bruised that both family members let her down when she needed them most. In the case of her son, she did not classify her relationship as problematic or disrupted; however, she only sees him twice a year even though he lives in the same city. Essentially, both her son and father stigmatize Linda for her living situation. Losing family over their homelessness was an extremely painful experience for all participants. This aligns with literature



stating that homeless people often cut ties with their families (or vice versa) for reasons of embarrassment or shame, resulting in emotional crises (Williams & Stickley, 2010). Moreover, research found that the loss of family ties impacts people's emotional well-being.

Nevertheless, even where families are disrupted, they can offer a way of coping with the situation. Research indicates that family engagement – despite home-based tensions and problems – can help individuals to cope with homelessness and to eventually exit homelessness (Groton & Radey, 2018; Mayock et al., 2015). In our sample, Linda is the only woman who currently receives support or leverage from her family. She has a strong bond with her mother, who is her key source of empowerment and hope as well as emotional support. Their emotional closeness and the fact that Linda still has regular contact with her mother seem to help her cope with her situation. She also wants to physically move closer to her mother to better take care of her. Furthermore, she said of her sister that, “without her, I would have been on the street now”. Linda's sister repeatedly organized accommodation for Linda when she was unable to do it herself. Even though most ties in a family can be classified as bonding capital, Linda's relationship with her sister – who lives in another social milieu – is a form of bridging capital. In fact, Linda receives both emotional and instrumental support from her sister. Despite her family issues, with her father and son neglecting her as mentioned above, her family is the only constant in her life amongst frequently changing friendships and living situations. Linda repeatedly asserted: “My family has got my back. My family is everything to me.” Interestingly, when talking about this “supportive” family, she only mentions her mother and sister, to whom she owes her “fortunate” situation. Only late in the interview did she start talking about her son and her father, which again emphasizes the different strengths of her ties with her family members. Although both men letting her down is a heavy emotional burden for Linda, she still emphasized how “grateful” she is for both. The fact that the walls of her room were covered with photos of all her family members (including of her father and son), and that she proudly presented them to us, underlines their role in her life. Finally, because Linda receives support and leverage from her family, she stands out not only in our sample but also compared to the literature (Groton & Radey, 2018; Mayock et al., 2015).

Generally, the family is considered the bedrock of social capital because that is where it is accumulated and transmitted (Barker, 2012). However, it is different for our participants. We conclude that while family can be a source of support, our participants have mostly weak or absent ties with family members and most participants do not receive resources of any form from their families. Consequently, our interviewees' families seldom provide a high degree of social

capital. Since the families of our participants do not function as social capital, the participants may search for other sources of support; for instance, romantic partners. Most profoundly, this absence of familial support makes the romantic relationships in their lives more important, which will be discussed in the next section.

#### 4.2 Central role of romantic relationships

We found that romantic relationships also play a central role in the lives of homeless women. Ideally, having a partner to turn to provides emotional, as well as instrumental, support, and makes the homeless situation more bearable. We identified that, when our participants were in healthy and stable relationships, their romantic relationships were one of the major sources of emotional support in their lives. One interviewee, Sarah, only became homeless one-and-a-half years ago and moved into an accommodation for homeless people together with her long-term partner. Going through homelessness together with her partner makes the situation easier for her. She emphasized that there is “no doubt that [they will] move out [of their] current accommodation into their own apartment together”. Sarah and her partner make these decisions together as equal partners. Her social worker, whom we also interviewed, framed this as “a huge advantage of Sarah when compared to the other residents in the institution.”

Another interviewee, Nina, is planning to get back together with Max, her ex-partner from 20 years ago. While Nina moved to different places in Germany and experienced abusive relationships and Max was imprisoned, the two kept in touch through letters. Nina is now planning her life together with Max after he is released from prison. It became apparent that Max is a central person in Nina’s past and present, as well as in her future life. The written correspondence with him over the years was an important emotional support for Nina. He was the person she trusted during the times when she was with her emotionally and physically abusive ex-partners. The fact that the two want to spend their future together is the main source of emotional support in Nina’s current life. Nina also plans to take in Max’s seven-year-old daughter Emma. She illustrates:

*I cannot conceive children on my own. ... Building a life with Max and Emma would be it. ... In five years, I hope in any case that I am with him. That I stay with him. ... I would like us to live in the countryside. Max and I and Emma.*

During the interview, it became apparent that Nina is extremely grateful that she – in her opinion – has the prospect of a promising future with Max and Emma, despite other factors related to her homelessness that do not seem very positive.

She proudly presented photos of them that Max had sent her from prison. The new family Nina hopes to build may also serve as a substitute for the lack of her own family, as her mother is dead and she has not been in contact with her sisters for decades. As support – emotional support in both cases discussed here – is one form of social capital, Nina and Sarah’s partners are a source of social capital in their lives. For the most part, this contributes to the mental wellbeing of both women. This positive effect of social capital on health has also been shown by multiple previous studies emphasizing the importance of social relationships (e.g., Groton & Radey, 2018; Irwin et al., 2008; Oliver & Cheff, 2014).

Contrasting with these supportive relationships, homeless women also often find themselves in dependent structures with their romantic partner. As elaborated on in the previous section, romantic partners play a central role in most homeless women’s lives and can provide important support. This can, however, turn into an overly strong focus by women on their partners. This leads to both focusing more on the man’s needs and struggles than on their own, as well as elevating the role of the man in their life to such an extent that personal happiness and well-being depend on that man. For instance, Nina generally spoke very highly of her partner Max and only briefly addressed issues she had experienced with him in the past. When the two first were a couple about 20 years ago, he cheated on her, which is why the relationship ended. Max also reportedly has a violent past towards other ex-partners and is currently imprisoned for aggravated assault. Generally, it seems as though Nina puts her own needs behind those of Max. She is willing to be the person in their relationship who earns the money for both of them. She explains, “that is okay for me, I can’t imagine him working. He is just not the type [to work].” Nina would also like to continue living in Aachen, but Max wants to move back to their hometown in order to be closer to his daughter. Now, Nina is putting her wish to remain in Aachen aside and is thus willing to make large sacrifices for her life with Max. This tendency of homeless women to idealize the romantic partner in their life was also described by a social worker:

*I think that a lot of women have this illusion that someday there will be this great man who helps them out of their misery. Sometimes they introduce me to their new partners ... Before, they tell me what a great man he is and what skills he has. Then, I meet the guy and think to myself ‘oh’.*

This dependency hints at more traditional gender roles between men and women that influence the women’s views on relationships and the role of a partner in their lives. According to one social worker, in her experience, there is a differ-

ence between men and women: “For men a relationship makes their life nicer, but for women it makes life possible”. Previous research similarly found a greater tendency of homeless women to enter a romantic relationship compared to men, which could be caused by women’s enhanced vulnerability (Reitzes et al., 2011). This contradicts the findings of Padgett et al. (2008) indicating that their sample of homeless women was less focused on romantic relationships. Their participants would have liked to be in a relationship, but their primary focus was on more substantial needs like food and shelter. Our interviewees were mostly in situations where their immediate needs for shelter and food were taken care of, which made the focus on romantic relationships possible.

Aside from this more emotional aspect of dependency, some homeless women also depend on a romantic partner in terms of practical support. Literature and social workers speak of homeless women having frequently changing romantic partners as a way to obtain housing. This is also referred to as housing prostitution. More specifically, homeless women offer a sexual relationship in return for housing from men (Bernard, 2010; Enders-Dragässer, 2010; Hauprich, 2018; Mayock et al., 2015; Sikich, 2008). Talking about male friends at whose places they stayed, our interviewees often use the term ‘mate.’ Only rarely did they refer to the men with whom they lived as ‘partners’. In many cases, judging only from what the women said, it is difficult to define the nature of the relationships they had with these ‘mates.’ It is generally difficult to draw a line between a genuine romantic relationship and housing prostitution. However, when a relationship with a man represents access to housing for a homeless woman, there is always dependency at play. As it is through the relationship that the women have access to the resource of housing, housing prostitution demonstrates how social capital is used by homeless women to address their needs.

Romantic relationships can also be an additional strain on the women’s lives. Three of the four participants reported having experienced several forms of abuse from an ex-partner, which is common amongst homeless people (Groton & Radey, 2018). Abuse can occur in the forms of physical, mental, or financial abuse (Groton & Radey, 2018). Nina, for instance, experienced all three forms of abuse in her past relationship with another homeless man. Firstly, she explained that he “constantly hit” her and that she had to go to work with a black eye several times. Secondly, Nina also experienced emotional abuse, as he controlled her social interactions, prohibited her from leaving their accommodation, and tried to forbid the written correspondence with her ex-partner Max. Furthermore, Nina was very frightened of making any mistakes that would make her abusive ex-partner angry: “He was always so picky and critical about everything. I was afraid because I never knew if I did something the way he wanted it to be.

Therefore, I didn't do anything." Besides these forms of emotional and physical abuse, her ex-partner also financially abused her. Nina was working in a department store, while her ex-partner was unemployed. She explained that she "gave all [her] money to [her] ex and he spent it on drugs. And for food and drinks but mainly on drugs. When he was grocery shopping, he always went alone and bought things for himself." His selfish spending behavior was an additional burden to Nina's unstable situation and hindered her independence from him. This relationship was an immense burden on her past and current well-being. When social workers "rescued [her] from that horror", she felt "finally free again".

Linda also experienced physical and emotional abuse from multiple romantic partners. Her most recent relationship ended with her ex-partner beating her into a two-week coma and breaking her hip. The biggest burden for her was the regret of starting the relationship with that man in the first place and the fact that she still physically suffers from the abuse. Due to her broken hip, she had at the time of the interview not left her apartment in three months. She deeply regrets being with her ex-partner, which she calls "the biggest mistake of [her] life". These negative experiences our participants had with past relationships strongly influence their current views on relationships. For instance, Susanne, the third interviewee who experienced sexual abuse, now states that she does "not need and want a man in her life anymore." She now focuses more on relationships with other people such as her son.

## 5 Conclusion

The aim of this research was to investigate the role of social relationships for women experiencing homelessness. Through qualitative interviewing, we analyzed the role and meaning of relationships with family members and romantic partners. Usually, relationships are a source of social capital providing access to resources. The people in homeless women's social networks, however, are mostly unable to provide social capital to our participants. For instance, the women's absent or limited relationships to family members most often represent a major burdening factor that worsens their mental health. Nevertheless, family relations can also be a form of emotional as well as instrumental support. Similarly, romantic relationships can be a source of support. Yet homeless women oftentimes find themselves in dependency structures with men in their lives. Additionally, abusive relationships and negative experiences have strongly burdened the women in the past and still affect them today. We conclude that our participants' social relationships influence all parts of their lives and can be

a source of support, but most often are an additional burden to their already disadvantaged situation. They can be characterized as crucial in shaping how the women's homelessness develops and what future prospects they have in regard to exiting homelessness.

The central role of social relationships identified in this paper points to implications for the aid system offering support for homeless people, and specifically to women. Social work that currently aims to help the women out of their homelessness focuses mostly on the lack of housing and the unstable financial situation. Whilst this is already an important form of support, more attention, and potentially more financial resources, should be dedicated to helping women deal with and improve their social relationships. Although there is already more research that focuses on female homelessness, future research should add to our findings by focusing on how to improve the social situation of homeless women and how the aid system can help women struggling with unsupportive or draining social networks.

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