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Homes for homeless women!

By 2030, the Housing first model will have established its position, and its principles will be assimilated as the basis for work to prevent homelessness throughout Finland. As a result of this, housing policy, especially the production of rented housing, will also always take into account vulnerable groups. Through the establishment of the Housing first principles and the experiences gained from its implementation, the themes of home and homelessness will have become an important part of housing and social policies and social work. An increasing amount of resources will be allocated every year to developing support services, and respect for housing social work will have grown substantially. Various supported housing models based on permanent rental agreements will be available, both scattered housing and communal alternatives. The specific features of women's homelessness will be understood, and these will guide housing social work among women.

This essay is structured as follows: first I briefly describe housing advice services as one of the most important forms of housing social work. After this, I focus on homelessness among women, and the housing social work related to this, through the stories of women from three generations. Finally, I present the features of housing social work carried out among women in an ideal situation, in 2030.

Housing advice services for preventing homelessness

In 2030, one of the most successful areas of Finnish homelessness work, housing advice services, will have expanded nationally to be part of housing policy-focused social service work. It will be a flexibly available service for people living in different forms of housing, including rented housing in the private sector and owner-occupied housing. Along with the expansion of housing advice services, evictions will have become extremely rare, and evictions of families with children will have ceased completely. This will have been achieved by the development of co-operation models between housing advice services and child protection services.

In 2030, Finland will actively participate in the reception of people fleeing their own countries due to catastrophes caused by climate change and from war-ridden and conflict areas. As a result of this, housing advice service work will fundamentally be multicultural work, and its significance and responsibility as part of work with immigrants will be well established. Housing advice teams will be multicultural, and the professionals will have close connections to multicultural peer support work. A housing advisor's professional competence will include basic skills in trauma work and a gender-sensitive work orientation. It will be possible to almost completely conduct preventive housing social work through housing advice services. Because of this, professionals and peer support persons working in other housing social work tasks will be able to focus on ensuring and reorganizing housing for people in extremely difficult situations, through the use of their multidisciplinary, specialized skills.

Housing social work among women burdened by psychosocial problems

In 2030, women-specific housing social work, as part of work with marginalized women, will be a target of continuous development. The feminist approach to research on women's homelessness will anchor housing social work into structural social work and housing policy, as well as into all areas of homelessness work. Housing social work will have strong connections to both psychological and social scientific research, especially social work research.

Next, using examples from three generations, I will describe women's homelessness in difficult psychosocial situations, and the focal points of the related housing social work. My points of interest are the actions taken at various times and how these actions would be taken in the ideal situation in 2030, when long-term homelessness has been eradicated and its re-emergence can be effectively prevented. The case descriptions are fictitious, but I have constructed them on the basis of stories I have heard during my research on homeless women and those who have been released from prison.

Soila, the mid-1980s

Twenty-year-old Soila entered prison in the mid-1980s; homeless, unemployed, abused, depressed, and anxious, with severe withdrawal symptoms. A stabbing had left her with a permanent disability. Soila had learnt already before school age that society had no place for people like her. Her substance abuse had begun when she was 11 years old, and she had lived alone without adult protection from the age of 15, when she left reform school. She had become mother to a baby girl when she was 18, and her daughter had been placed in a children's home as almost a newborn, after this into foster care, and then somewhere else, of which the mother had no knowledge.

After serving her prison sentence, Soila was released onto the streets of Helsinki and stayed in homeless shelters, with male acquaintances, or in the stairwells of buildings. She made several attempts to give up alcohol, went to AA meetings and entered rehab. With no housing, homeless, penniless, and defenceless, time and again, becoming free of drugs and alcohol proved impossible. Her life ended at the age of thirty, when she froze to death in the cold.

In 2030, housing would have been waiting for Soila as soon as she was released from prison. Individually tailored, intensive, long-term substance abuse treatment would have been available to her during her time in prison and immediately after. Violence and trauma work professionals would have helped her deal with the violence, abuse and rejection she had suffered at various points in her life. She would also have been helped through peer support to break away from violent relationships. She would have been helped to settle in to her own home, and support services would have been planned, in co-operation with a service centre that has a low threshold for women. She would have been welcome at the service centre regardless of her condition, at any time of day or night, and allowed to stay overnight if she so needed. Her support person would have been a woman well-experienced in peer support activities and with a background of crime and substance

abuse. A housing social work professional would have helped her with all her everyday problems, especially in rebuilding her maternal identity.

Mira, early 2000s

At the beginning of the 2000s, Mira entered the same prison as her mother Soila 20 years earlier, with her small daughter. They settled in the mother-child department, their home being a cramped cell and the play area a small yard bordered by a wall. Six months later they were allowed to transfer to the mother-child department of a minimum-security prison. Mira's greatest concern was finding a place to live after being released from prison, and another serious concern was drugs and alcohol and her substance-abusing friends, including her daughter's father. He was also in prison at the time. Just before her release, Mira and her daughter were promised municipal rented housing in a suburban area on the outskirts of the city. They only lived there for a while, as Mira succumbed to taking and selling drugs together with her daughter's father as soon as he was released. The little girl was taken into care, and Mira returned to prison, in poor physical condition and emotionally broken. She lamented her failure as a mother and blamed herself for everything possible. She was too depressed and anxious to participate in a group rehab programme and no options for individual care were available. Eight months later she walked out of the prison gates and was able to keep away from drugs for only a couple of days.

If Mira had been released from prison 25 years later in 2030, she would have been treated as a young, traumatised woman, burdened by her life experiences, who had lost custody of her child and deserved the best possible professional support to rebuild her maternal identity. Support of her mother's role would have been an integral part of rehabilitation work during her prison sentence and would have firmly included plans for housing after her release. Special attention would have been paid to ending the generational cycle of deprivation and homelessness, and the significance of the mother's homelessness and housing difficulties for the child's life would have been understood.

Rosa, 2030

Rosa is being released from minimum-security prison in 2030, aged about 30. She spent her early childhood in this same place with her mother, Mira. They had been transferred there from the prison in which her grandmother Soila had also served her sentence. Rosa's prison sentence has been spent looking after her small daughter, in psychosocial rehabilitation, and planning and arranging her release in cooperation with the housing social work people.

Rosa participated in her own rehabilitation plan even before arriving in prison. She hopes for rented accommodation in a peaceful suburban area. She knows that for decades, Finnish housing policy has been based on the principle that everyone has the right to their own home. She feels both afraid and hopeful about living alone with her child. She longs for her own space and freedom, but fears violence and loneliness. She begins to think about different housing options together with the other female inmates and her own social worker. Home and its different meanings are a central theme in the rehabilitation group and are handled both separately and together with other topics.

Rosa has heard about a small housing community in which each person has their own home, separate from the rest of the community, but in which the community's activities and services are freely available. She becomes interested in the small community, which follows an ecological lifestyle in all possible ways. The community is for women only and offers different forms of psychotherapeutic support especially designed to meet the needs of traumatized women. The community is multicultural, and its members are mothers of different ages and women with no children. Mothers who have lost custody of their children or live apart from their children for other reasons can meet their children in the privacy of the community, and receive support for rebuilding their roles as mothers. Psychotherapeutic and substance abuse rehabilitation are procured from outside the community in such a way that they can be used by either the whole community or individual dwellers. The psychotherapy and substance abuse professionals have a strong understanding of women's homelessness and marginalization.

Rosa and her daughter visit the community several times during her prison sentence and move there immediately after being released. They live in the community for almost a year, then move to their own home in a peaceful suburban area. For several years, they visit the community now and then, and Rosa participates in its development together with professionals and present and former community dwellers, as much as her studies permit. Rosa's little girl eagerly attends a nature kindergarten and wants to be a vet who cares for homeless animals when she grows up.

Housing social work in 2030

Supporting the professional growth and coping abilities of housing social work professionals is part of everyday work, and the emotional burden of outreach work, and the resulting risk of burnout and vicarious traumatization are well recognized. Diverse training and self-reflective development is available to workers, and their professional experience plays a key role in developing housing services and in homelessness prevention work in general. The development of housing social work combines professional experience and research.

Trauma work is an obvious part of housing social work among women, in which workers understand the relationship between violence and homelessness and traumatization experienced at various stages of life. One client group that requires continuous training of workers is women and their children seeking asylum in Finland, and the nature of housing social work is indeed both gender and culture sensitive. The ethical principle of housing social work is respect for incompleteness and vulnerability, and acceptance of the slow pace of the recovery process.

Housing social work is the story of the small steps on the broken path to resettling, and its related recovery. Although housing can be flexibly and adequately arranged, making a house a home is a completely separate project. Housing social work pays particular attention to the sustainability of the client relationship, the building of trust, and being present in the different situations of the client's life.

Homelessness is seen as a theme that brings together work to reduce marginalization, which also makes it one of the core areas of social work with adults. Individual services are designed together with the client, which leads to sufficiently long-term, intensive service packages, comprising

competence at both the basic and specialized level. Ecology is an important principle in housing and building a home, and is also implemented in services guaranteeing housing. Housing services always strive for stability and avoid moves and temporary housing solutions. The anchoring of women-specific and gender-sensitive work as part of work preventing marginalization continues to undergo development. Competence in psychotherapeutic work with women living in socially burdening situations receives special emphasis.