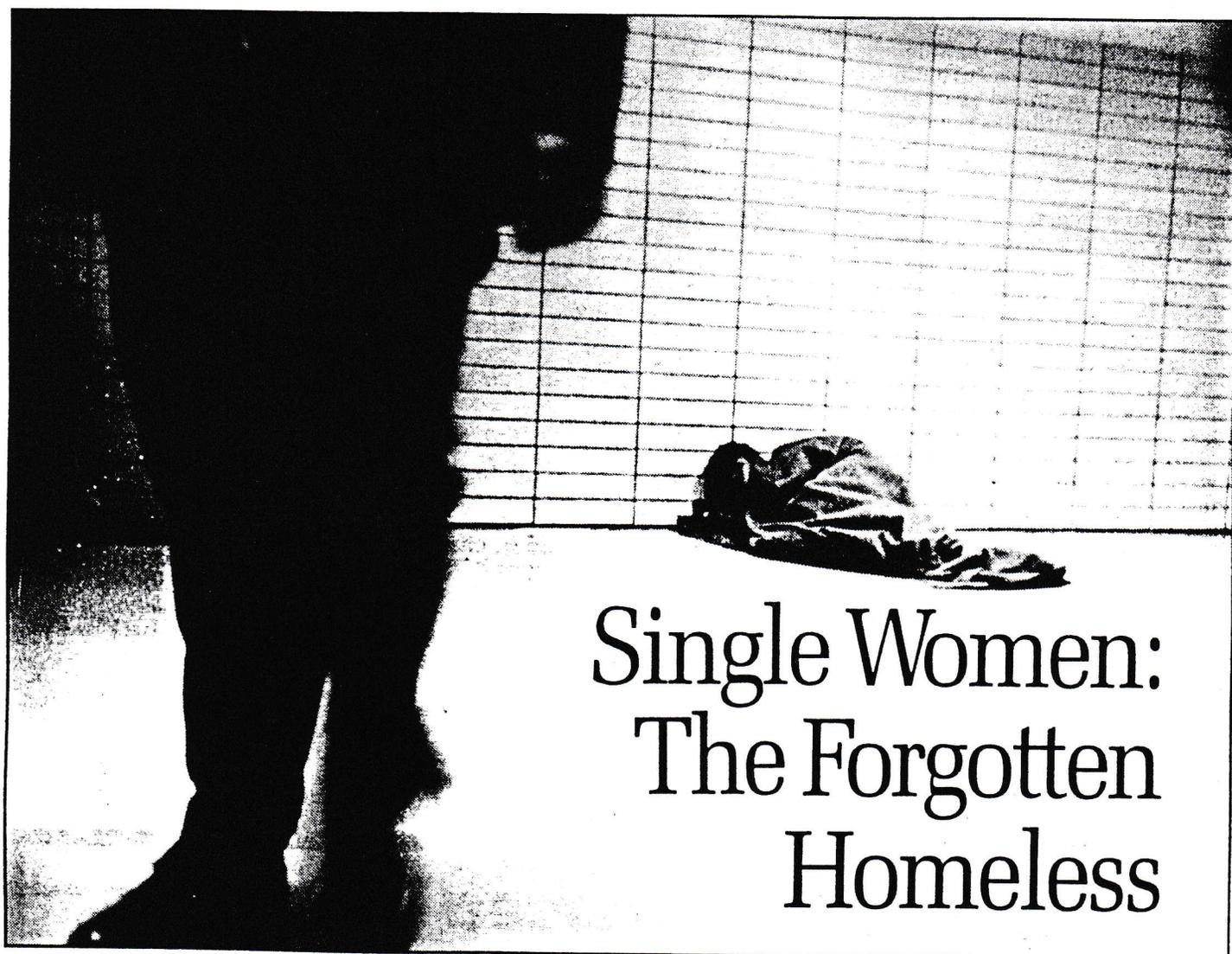


FEATURE



Single Women: The Forgotten Homeless

PAULA ALLEN

BY STEPHANIE GOLDEN

Around 1850, London journalist Henry Mayhew interviewed a 33-year-old woman at a private shelter for the homeless. Deserted by her husband and penniless, she made very little money with her skill in dressmaking. "Within the last six weeks," she told Mayhew, "I have earned scarcely anything. About October last I was obliged to sell my things to pay off my rent and get myself something to eat." She tried another lodging, but had to leave when she couldn't afford the rent.

"I went and made shift with a friend by lying down on the boards, beside her children. . . At last my friend and her husband didn't like to have people about in the room where they slept; and besides, I was so poor I was obliged to beg a bit of what they

had, and they was so poor they couldn't afford to spare it to me. . . at last I was obliged to leave, and walk about the streets. . . When I leave here I don't know what I shall do, for I have so parted with my things that I ain't respectable enough to go after needlework, and they do look at you so."

Homelessness is not a new phenomenon in Western society — it has existed on a huge scale for centuries. And homeless women, though they have been less visible than homeless men, also have a long history. Thus the young woman quoted above could be speaking today of women's low wages and of "doubling up" in a desperate attempt to avoid the street.

In fact, many homeless women today follow the same route as

Mayhew's informant, except that instead of coming into shelters from the street, more and more are coming straight from doubling up situations with friends or relatives. New York City's drastic loss of low income housing means that once they lose their own housing, many women are unable to find a new place. As the woman in 1850 discovered, doubling up is only a temporary solution.

But beyond lack of housing, low wages and lack of jobs — especially for minority women — contemporary homeless women still must contend with a subtle response to their sexuality and identity as women, which — as it has for centuries — affects the way they are thought of and treated by the city and the public alike.

In researching the history of home-



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Single women may be the most invisible of the homeless. City services fail to meet their needs, and the women are often blamed for their plight.

less women, it becomes clear that their experience is different from that of homeless men, not only because their wages are lower but because they create a different reaction in people's minds. Homeless women have always been defined primarily in terms of their sexuality — that is, in terms of whom they belonged to in their function as wife or mother — whereas for homeless men the primary issue was that they did not work. Therefore, no clear conceptual category has existed for women alone. As a result, they have either tended to slip into invisibility or evoked unease and hostility since they belonged to and were controlled by no one.

Two Systems

New York City has two different shelter programs for women, depending on whether they have children with them: the single-adult shelters and the hotels. For good reason, the terrible conditions in the hotels have received much publicity; but the women in the shelters, who because of this division represent only a small fraction of the total number of homeless, have "received less public attention," as Human Resources Administration Commissioner William Grinker put it recently.

As a result, many needs of the women in the shelters have been disregarded. Moreover, residues of old attitudes toward female sexuality create additional difficulties for them both outside and inside the shelter system.

Last October, the City Council Committee on Women and the Select Committee on the Homeless held the first hearing to focus specifically on women's shelters. Council Member Miriam Friedlander, chair of the Committee on Women, initiated the hearings because she was concerned with allegations that the shelters fail to provide for the kinds of problems homeless women face.

Today, there is no official difference in policy for men and women in the city's shelter program, in contrast with the years before 1980, when it was much more difficult for women to get into the women's shelter than for men to get into the men's shelter. But, Friedlander declared, "If there's an equality of policy, there's a lack of

sensitivity to the special problems of women."

Women, she said, have a greater need for counseling and support services. They need more privacy — an issue whose importance is barely recognized — and they need to maintain cleanliness and health, which is emphasized in women's upbringing. Friedlander also noted accusations of violence against women by male shelter staff and security guards, saying that "the particular sensitivity of women to violence, which takes the form of rape and battering in their previous experience, needs to be taken into account" in the shelter program.

"Women are a particularly vulnerable group," Colleen McDonald, director of the 24-hour drop-in Olivieri Center for homeless women, testified at the hearings. Not only are they more easily physically victimized than men of the same age, they are raped, and they can get pregnant.

For example, a woman in her 20s who spent months out on the street, coming to the private Dwelling Place shelter only for meals and delousing, told a staff member that she couldn't help the way she was living, that she went around in circles and lived like an animal. After much effort, the staff obtained a disability check and a room at an SRO for her. But men lived there too, and she did not remain because, being young and attractive, she did not feel safe.

The prevalence of rape is underscored by Beth Gorrie, associate director of the Coalition for the Homeless, who described a group of women, aged 35 to 65, sitting together in a residence swapping rape stories. Almost everyone had one. "In order to survive, those women had built a pain threshold about sexual assault," said Gorrie. At the same time, many women — having been brutalized so often — are more fearful than men of the shelters.

McDonald, who reaches out especially to the fearful, more psychiatrically impaired women who will not go to city shelters, says life on the street is harder for women than for men. There are not only the fears of physical violence, but small indignities that bear harder on them — such as having to relieve themselves in public. A man can perform this act more efficiently and hide it relatively



Olivieri client relaxes at drop-in center: Director Colleen McDonald says single homeless women face a much harder life on the street than homeless men.

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easily, saving himself some pride. Men are also used to less privacy, McDonald pointed out: for example stalls in men's restrooms frequently lack doors.

But for women, privacy assumes great significance in the struggle to maintain the basic integrity of the self. McDonald stressed the importance of a story told by Council Member Abraham Gerges, chair of the Select Committee on the Homeless. Visiting a large women's shelter, he had spoken to an old woman who asked for a shower curtain because she was embarrassed to take a shower in front of all the other residents. Such seemingly small issues may lead homeless women to avoid shelters, remaining on the street where they feel less violated.

McDonald sees Olivieri's role as not only providing basic services but giving women "some sense of themselves back. I don't get that (need) as much from men." Men, she thinks, have a sense of identity that women don't start out with — more expectations of themselves — and, despite drugs and mental illness, can deal better with being homeless. But in this paternalistic society set up to take care of women, they become used to being taken care of and need more support.

McDonald has found that women need reassurance and encourage-

ment even on the very basic level of believing they have a right to make any simple statement about their feelings or opinion. With constant assistance and encouragement geared to each woman's particular needs — for help in managing money, psychiatric care, or just a support system, these women can return to permanent housing.

Friedlander too stressed the value of programs that "understand the need to be the bridge between the street and the road back."

Unfounded

HRA claims that the charge of insensitivity to women's needs is unfounded. "I hadn't heard that criticism before," said HRA spokeswoman Suzanne Trazoff, asserting that she had in fact heard "the opposite." She also disputed the idea that women had less sense of self. "Anybody who's homeless is faced with tremendous problems, and to say that men have fewer problems or less difficulty coping — I find that unusual."

Even the practical differences involved in being female carry psychological effects, since that unease toward femaleness still runs like a current just underneath the surface. A homeless woman once described the ordeal of having her period on the street. Any woman can imagine the potential for agonizing humilia-

"People tend to think homeless women are crazy or they would have a man looking after them," says McDonald.

tion, and the source of the agony is precisely the charged feelings that surround women's sexual functions.

In the 19th century, many were concerned about homeless women because — as Mary Higgs, a Christian missionary who ran a shelter for homeless women in London, put it — "a floating population of women" posed a grave "moral danger" to society. That danger was "decay of manhood and the family." In the same spirit, American private charities at that time served only women judged "worthy," an adjective that applied primarily to their sexual behavior.

Later, state welfare programs imposed "man-in-the-house" rules to regulate the sexuality of poor women. Such attitudes continue, though muted, in current reactions to homeless women.

"Find A Good Man"

Homeless people of both sexes often are blamed for their condition, but the extent to which that blame is loaded with sexual connotations in the case of women is astonishing. Colleen McDonald described the constant need to educate the male staff at Olivieri. "They have difficulty understanding why women are homeless," she said, especially when the women are young and attractive. The men assume that if only a woman could "find a good man," she would be all right, and they tend to see themselves in the role of savior.

Further, McDonald said, the men tend to discriminate between younger, more attractive and older women, paying more attention to the younger ones. Although not blatant, this behavior has sexual overtones that can only reinforce the women's vulnerabilities within the larger dynamic that made them feel so helpless to begin with. "We keep our staff very aware," McDonald said, "but if it's still like this in our small shelter, just imagine what the large ones are like. I'm not surprised that there have been accusations of sexual assault."

Guards in some city shelters have been accused of sexual abuse, but Commissioner Grinker said those guards were dismissed, and female guards are being hired to avoid this problem. In addition, according to Trazoff, HRA has changed the process for contracting with security services from competitive bidding, which re-

quired it to take the lowest bidder, to a request-for-proposal process that will allow HRA to award contracts based on quality of service.

The assumption of some security guards that homeless women are fair game is shared by men outside the shelter system. For example, many workers in the fur district surrounding the Olivieri shelter make sexual advances to the women because they are homeless. "They feel the women belong to them because they're on the streets," said McDonald. "They pay no attention to any boundaries with them." While a woman who looks homeless is harassed, businesswo-

Again history is repeating itself: While for centuries moralists regarded prostitution as flaws in women's character, for the women themselves it usually has been strictly an economic proposition. When in the 16th century Martin Luther closed the brothels in the Reformed cities of Germany, the prostitutes of Strasbourg presented a petition stating that they followed their trade only in order to make a living and asking for other work to replace it.

And in 1905 Mary Higgs told a British government committee investigating vagrancy that the reason



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A woman alone:
Almost 1,300 single women spend their nights in city shelters. No one knows how many live on the street or in train and subway stations.

men and shoppers are left alone.

The issue is complicated by the fact that — as they have since biblical times — many homeless women turn to prostitution to survive. According to McDonald, this exists on two levels. First, there are women who are homeless and prostitutes by profession, and say so frankly. On the other hand, women who would never dream of calling themselves prostitutes will engage in sex for money because they want to buy coffee, cigarettes or other necessities. As soon as these women get their entitlements and have a check coming, however, they stop.

there were so many fewer women vagrants than men was that many turned to prostitution to avoid becoming destitute. "The harlot," she concluded, "is the female tramp." The Olivieri women who stop trading sex for money as soon as they have an income are only doing the same.

What else can they do? Homeless men can get money by begging on the subway or washing windshields (essentially a form of begging, like selling matches was in the 19th century), but few women beg on the subway, probably because the kind of assertiveness required to trumpet one's hard luck tale over and over to dis-

Gorrie described a group of women sitting together in a residence swapping rape stories.

gusted, disapproving strangers is much more foreign to most women than to most men.

This difference is also manifest in another aspect of homelessness. In his writings, Mayhew did not describe any people displaying signs of insanity. That was because since the 17th century, "mad" people had been locked away in asylums. They remained so until deinstitutionalization, beginning in the 1960s, released them to the streets.

Grinker quotes figures from a study of the single-adult shelter population carried out by the New York State Psychiatric Institute, which "estimated that 40 percent of the female shelter population exhibited evidence of mental health problems, compared to 25 percent for the men."

Friedlander and others disputes these figures. Those who make such judgments, she said, "tend to see women as psychiatric cases more than men for the same behavior. In my experience women are better able to cope with problems they face and are the last ones to go to a shelter. They keep juggling to meet their needs as long as they can. Only desperation sends them to a shelter — that's why fewer women are there than men."

But Dr. Elmer Streuning, the director of the study, believes that little, if any, bias is reflected in these figures. The assessments, he explained, were done by experienced, thoroughly trained interviewers of diverse ethnic groups, and many fluent in Spanish. About half of those who interviewed women were women themselves, and the same procedures were used for both groups.

Streuning said the discrepancy in the figures does not necessarily mean that women have more problems than men — an assumption that is easy to make when the figures are quoted out of context. For one thing, homeless women, unlike men, are being sent to two places — the shelters, where the study was done, and the hotels. Almost nothing is known about the mental and physical health of the women in the hotels; they may be in better shape, and the 40 percent figure may not be representative of homeless women in general.

Second, he said, the difference is more likely to represent how men and women tend to express their pro-



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Bridge between the street and the road back:
Women at the Olivieri Center find an environment and services that help guide them back to permanent housing.

blems, rather than how many problems they have. While women reported more symptoms of serious mental disorder, men reported more problems with drugs and alcohol. The institute's most recent data indicate that men report twice as many hospital admissions for substance abuse as women, while women report more psychiatric hospitalizations.

Assuming that this study is unbiased, it is important to remember the sociocultural context within which such an evaluation is made: the greater stigma attached to being mentally ill than to being drunk, the socialization that has taught women to be passive and dependent rather than belligerent. Is "mental illness" in such a context necessarily an expression of something wrong only with the woman?

Not to mention the effects simply of being on the street, or in a threatening, unpleasant environment like a city shelter. Workers in private shelters have found that after a woman comes in off the street, gets some rest, sees the medical team, and gets used to the supportive environment of the shelter, many of her psychiatric symptoms vanish. "It's hard to document mental illness," McDonald remarked.

It is a mistake to blame homelessness on mental illness, as many still do. Most homeless women are not crazy "bag ladies" who refuse shel-

ters because of their fierce independence. They are almost always happy to come off the street into a non-threatening, supportive environment. Joyce Brown-Billie Boggs' "right to live on the street" is more properly a right not to be ground through the mill of a brutal social "service" system. The idea that someone chooses to starve and freeze on the sidewalk is nonsense. What she chooses is to preserve her dignity and the core of her self, at great costs, from a system that would destroy them.

If the entire social dynamic is ignored, it is too easy to jump to conclusions that homeless women are responsible for their plight. As McDonald noted, "People tend to think homeless women are crazy or they would have a man looking after them." "There's a tendency to blame the woman anyway — she brings it on herself," Friedlander declared. "The woman who enticed the man who raped her. The woman who refused to go to social services. Look at what it got her, she brought it on herself."

Ancient notions remain with us, putting homeless women in a particularly equivocal position. It is time to stop blaming the victim and look at the real causes of homelessness. □

Stephanie Golden is completing a book on homeless women.