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# – ‘WHO COUNTS AS A “WHO”?’ Homeless Women and Geographies of Misrecognition in the City of Gothenburg, Sweden

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## Abstract

*This article takes as its starting point Judith Butler’s demand for us to think through the question ‘Who counts as a “who”?’ It does this through a study of the gendered geographies of misrecognition experienced by the homeless women in the city of Gothenburg, Sweden. The article draws attention to the fact that the city accommodates homeless women in industrial areas on the outskirts of the city. It is argued here that this is an accommodation strategy which increases these women’s precarity. By giving voice to ten women in homelessness, who at the time of the interviews were temporarily accommodated in four different shelters in the city, the article seeks to contrast the city’s policies on homelessness, gender equality and urban development with these women’s lived experiences. The analysis draws on Butler’s notion of ‘frames of misrecognition’ as well as Nancy Fraser’s notion of ‘geographies of recognition’. It is argued that political frames of misrecognition work to marginalize homeless women, both socially and geographically, to the extent that some of them feel completely excluded from society. The article concludes that it is a political responsibility to urgently recognize and address this group’s lived experiences.*

## Introduction

This article seeks to draw attention to the embodied and gendered practices of misrecognition experienced by women in homelessness (Reeve, 2018; Mayock and Sheridan, 2020). It takes as a starting point the fact that the city of Gothenburg, Sweden, accommodates homeless women in industrial areas located on the outskirts of the city. It is argued here that this is an accommodation strategy that increases these women’s exposure to the risk of violence, crime and drugs, and thus works against several of the city’s policies and goals concerning gender equality and democratic, equal urban development. How is it possible, one is inclined to ask, that such accommodation strategies are enacted in a welfare state considered to be one of the most gender-equal nations in the world? The simple answer is, perhaps, that not all subjects are recognized as equal subjects—not even in Sweden.<sup>1</sup>

By drawing attention to uncomfortable ethical questions, such as the ones Judith Butler (2009) poses with their demand that we think through *whose life is grievable? What loss is no loss? Whose life is worth preserving?* this article seeks to look beneath the surface of current gender equality policies and urban development goals to identify gendered and political frames of misrecognition, that is, frameworks that

The author thanks the ten women who were interviewed for this study for sharing so much of their lived experience. Thanks also to the four interviewed managers, for providing reflections from their professional life. A warm thank you to Anna Holmqvist, formerly Head of accommodation for socially vulnerable groups, at the Social Administration in the city of Gothenburg, for being so engaged in this research. Thanks also to the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy, the article benefitted from their invitation to present the research and discuss it with them during a one-month-long research visit in 2023. Thanks to the three IJURR referees, editors, and Joshua Levy, for careful reading and constructive comments on earlier versions of this text. The research was funded by a grant from Genie - Gender Initiative for Excellence at Chalmers University of Technology.

1 This refers to Alan Pred’s (2000) influential book *Even in Sweden: racism, racialized spaces, and the popular geographical imagination*.

silence 'the question of who counts as a "who"' (Butler, 2009: 163). To illustrate how such frameworks of silencing also have a clear spatial logic attached to them, this article contributes by giving a voice to ten women who, at the time of the interviews, were homeless and being temporarily accommodated by the city of Gothenburg. It has been argued elsewhere that homeless people are rarely given a voice in urban geography research and that little is known about their experience of accommodation services (DeVerteuil *et al.*, 2009; Lancione, 2013). Even less, one can argue, is known about the gendered geographies of such services. These women's testimonies contribute to filling that gap. They illustrate what Bondi and Rose (2003) have emphasized, namely that cities are more than scenery for how gender plays out; they actively construct gender identities and other social hierarchies. In that respect, these women's testimonies also illustrate what Fraser (2008: 106) has termed 'geographies of recognition', that is, they show how the distribution of precarity in society has a spatial logic. Alongside this, these women's responses are also a powerful demand for political responsibility.

So, by connecting notions of misrecognition to women's embodied experiences of exclusion, this article seeks to lay bare the interconnectedness between space, gender and recognition. By being accommodated in industrial areas on the outskirts of the city, it is argued, these women are rendered out of sight, voiceless and subjects for whom responsibility seems to have been abdicated. The problem of misrecognition can thus be understood as linked to status hierarchies in society. It generates not only marginalization and stigmatization, but can also lead to precariousness, deprivation and gendered exploitation (Fraser, 2008).

Obviously, these ten women are far from alone. During her term as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on adequate housing (2014–20), Leilani Farha managed to draw public attention to how systemic patterns of inequality currently work to create homelessness around the world. In line with the argument brought forward in this article, she argued that 'homeless people are rendered voiceless and invisible, banished to the peripheries of cities and towns, out of sight. Their humanity and dignity are rarely considered in legislation, public policies and strategies' (UNHRC, 2016: 2). In order to challenge and undermine perceptions of homelessness as a personal failure, instead locating responsibility where it belongs (with states and municipalities), Farha proposed a three-dimensional human rights definition of homelessness. The first dimension addressed the lack of homes; the second highlighted the systemic discrimination that homeless people experience, with social exclusion and stigmatization as consequences; and the third recognized homeless people as rights holders and, thus, as potential agents of change.

In line with Farha's three-dimensional problem definition, this article understands homelessness primarily as a structural problem. Indeed, in line with Farha's first dimension, it has been stated elsewhere that the main reason for the growing number of homeless households in Sweden is a systematic housing shortage (Knutagård, 2018). In addition, legislation is forcing municipal housing companies to operate for profit, which means that many of them are no longer accepting income support as recognized income. The result is an increasing number of what is often talked about as 'structurally homeless' households, that is, households for which the main problem is exposure to a structural lack of affordable housing (The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2024).

Alongside the category of structurally homeless households, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare provides definitions of homelessness for households that, for social reasons, are not considered able to provide for their own housing. This category includes, but is not limited to, people in homelessness who struggle with addiction problems and/or mental ill-health, or people in homelessness with experiences of violence in close relationships. These households are often talked about as 'socially homeless' households. Based on the national definitions of

homelessness, two of the three largest cities in Sweden—Gothenburg and Malmö—have recently introduced tougher routines for selecting which households qualify for social assistance on the basis of acute destitution (Sandberg and Listerborn, 2023). Only socially homeless households can now get help with accommodation. This leaves many structurally homeless households with no other option than to move to another municipality, which is not easy given the major housing shortage in Sweden, or to look for housing on the black market.

This article will not delve deeper into the effects of a structural lack of affordable housing, however urgent it is. Instead, it will focus on Farha's second and third dimensions: the structural discrimination that homeless people experience, and homeless people as agents of change. Drawing primarily on Butler's concept of 'frames of misrecognition', and Fraser's concept of 'geographies of recognition', the article raises the following research questions: Which social, geographical and gendered implications of misrecognition do socially homeless women in the city of Gothenburg experience as an outcome of the way in which they have been accommodated? To what extent can these implications be understood as the differential outcomes of political frames of misrecognition? Underlying these is the broader question of who counts as a 'who' in one of the world's most gender-equal countries?

In the next section of the article, an orientation will be given for how the misrecognition of women in homelessness can be understood. In the following theoretical section, Butler's and Fraser's notions of misrecognition are introduced. There follows an empirical account of ten women's embodied experience of being temporarily accommodated by the city of Gothenburg that contrasts this account with an overview of some of the plans and policies that currently shape Gothenburg's development. The discussion section that concludes the article points out a mismatch between several of the city's ambitious goals and the lived experiences of women in homelessness. It reconnects to the research questions and draws attention to how women in homelessness experience social, geographical and gendered implications of misrecognition. It furthermore argues that recognition is differentially distributed in society through political frames of misrecognition and underlines that homeless women's lived experiences urgently need to be recognized.

### **Gendered misrecognition of women in homelessness**

For several decades, intersectional analyses have offered a powerful means to analyse how multiple categories of identification co-constitute one another, and how intersections can lead to specific forms of gendered misrecognition. The concept of intersectionality stems from critical race theory and black feminism, and is especially attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw (1991: 1244) rejected the notion of separate and essentialist categories such as race and gender and argued that black women and women of colour often become marginalized within both. She identified two different aspects of intersectionality: 'structural intersectionality', by which she drew attention to how the categories race and gender intersect and create multiple inequalities for women of colour, and 'political intersectionality', whereby she emphasized how the conflicting political agendas of these two categories have often worked to preclude political discourses with the potential to empower women of colour. Crenshaw's argument was also a powerful critique of white feminists' appropriation of concepts such as 'women' and 'gender' as if they were unitary (McCall, 2005). Today, intersectional approaches often go beyond the crosscuttings between gendered experience and race to include other identity markers, such as ethnicity, class, ability, religion, age etc. (Crenshaw, 1991; Burman, 2003; Brah and Phoenix, 2004; de los Reyes and Mulinari, 2005; McCall, 2005; Farahani, 2015; Beebejaun, 2017).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Intersectional analyses, especially in Europe, have been criticized for their tendency to privilege class over race (Carbado *et al.*, 2013; Carastathis, 2014).

All the women interviewed for the study presented here were white. Nevertheless, Crenshaw's seminal analyses of how identities intersect contribute to a deeper understanding of how homeless women can become marginalized within several intersecting categories. As this study will show, this means that women in homelessness can be exposed to multiple structural discriminations because they are both women and homeless, but also that they can be excluded from policies aimed to empower because of conflicting political discourses targeting either women or people in homelessness.

Despite the obvious connections between such intersectional identities and place, the research field on women in homelessness and intersectional geographies is still very limited. There is, however, a growing literature on feminist geographies (e.g. Valentine, 2007; Listerborn, 2014; Datta *et al.*, 2020;). Gill Valentine (2007: 19), for example, draws attention to the way power and space intersect and operate 'in systematic ways to generate hegemonic cultures that can exclude particular social groups such as women'. The ability to enact some identities over others, she argues, is both underestimated and highly contingent on power-laden spaces (Valentine, 2007). Paulina de los Reyes and Diana Mulinari (2005) underline how an intersectional approach should not only demonstrate how intersectional identities are anchored in material conditions and social processes, that is, in everyday life, but should also attempt an ideological critique and discuss how societal structures, institutions and agents are linked to each other. Several authors emphasize the need to ground such intersectional analyses in everyday practices (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; McCall, 2005; Fenster, 2006; Lancione, 2013). It has, however, been emphasized that, when it comes to the field of planning, little such knowledge survives the transfer to planning policy, as planning documents are often deliberately vague and abstract (Beebeejaun, 2017).

Some authors have approached power-laden spaces through analyses of gendered and differentially distributed rights to the city (Beebeejaun, 2017; Vacchelli and Kofman, 2018). It has been argued, though, that literature surrounding the right to the city often fails to recognize gendered misrecognition. Yasminah Beebeejaun (2017: 351), for example, draws attention to how 'the continuing neglect of gendered and embodied rights to everyday life reveals the limits of the right to the city as conventionally understood'. Others have tried to contribute to a redefinition of the concept, in order to recognize more gendered aspects, such as the ones emphasized in the following quote:

The gendered right to the city aims at widening the idea of citizenship to encompass a bundle of social, political and economic rights such as participation, access to resources, right to housing and welfare, having one's work paid for and recognized, and one's voice heard and not silenced (Vacchelli and Kofman, 2018: 2).

Misrecognition of women's right to the city stems from many different aspects, not least from societal norms. Indeed, '[a] key feature of feminist analysis of "intersectionality" is that they [*sic*] are concerned with "decentering" of the "normative subject" of feminism' (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 78). Gendered misrecognition can, for example, stem from norms regarding how, why, when and where women can move about in a city (Listerborn, 2014), but also from gendered experiences where a partner or a relative might have imposed restrictions on movements or even threatened violence. Such norms can obviously be exercised over anyone, including, but not limited to, women in homelessness.

It is known that women tend to live in hidden homelessness and use informal arrangements for a longer time than homeless men, making them consequently less likely to seek help from homelessness service providers than men (Bretherton

*et al.*, 2016). Most countries, it has been argued, therefore underestimate the number of women in homelessness (Mayock and Bretherton, 2016). One reason identified for this is that women generally try to avoid being recorded in administrative systems for homelessness, possibly because it is more stigmatizing for women than for men to be identified as homeless (Reeve, 2018). Another reason for women to avoid being registered in such systems could be the increased risk of losing custody of a child (Reeve, 2018; Mayock and Sheridan, 2020). According to Joanne Bretherton *et al.* (2016: 82), this suggests that ‘when homeless women do seek help from homelessness services, the effects of homelessness and other interrelated negative experiences may have already been considerable’. This indicates a potentially hidden, but gendered, misrecognition of homeless women.

As mentioned above, stigmatization often follows being identified as a homeless woman. Hence, several authors have emphasized the need to be cautious about how women’s homelessness is made visible and when it is recognized, as noted here:

Being portrayed as dependent, vulnerable, sexually exploited and helpless victims is stigmatizing and demeaning for homeless women, sometimes to such an extent that they may decline opportunities to access homelessness services (Löfstrand and Quilgars, 2016: 62).

Catharina Thörn (2004: 223) has, in a similar vein, drawn attention to the problematic fact that homeless women tend to be characterized in negative terms, often as prostituted, shameful and/or rootless. Paradoxically, she argues, women in homelessness are at the same time acknowledged as subjects who must take responsibility for themselves and fulfil certain expectations in order to receive societal help. According to Thörn, this paradoxical situation, which perhaps can best be understood as an intersection between different forms of misrecognition, creates feelings of distress and powerlessness among many women in homelessness; sometimes to the extent that they decline help. In much the same vein, Kirsi Juhila, Suvi Raitakari and Christopher Hall (2017: 4; see also Dahlstedt and Lalander, 2018) argue that we currently reside in ‘the era of responsabilisation’. They describe the welfare policy shift that has been implemented in recent decades. According to them, this policy shift has resulted in a transfer of responsibility from the state to individuals, who are expected to be self-responsible. Their studies point to how ‘clients at the margin of welfare services (try to) live up to the ideal of the responsible self’, while at the same time they also ‘resist this cultural expectation as impossible or unreasonable’ (*ibid.*: 6). Some clients, who typically struggle with ill-health, limited abilities, or a lack of resources, might never be able to live up to the ideal of the responsible self. They will experience recurrent failures which, according to the authors, locate ‘the clients as prime candidates for more coercive responsabilisation, rehabilitation and educational projects’ (Raitakari *et al.*, 2017: 220). According to Juhila, Raitakari and Löfstrand (2017: 16), this policy shift reflects an ‘increasing ignorance of the structural roots of problems’.

As mentioned in the introduction, Sweden has a self-image of being a largely gender-equal nation. However, Lena Martinsson *et al.* (2017: 8) argue that this self-image draws on what might best be understood as a ‘gender-equality mantra’. It is, they suggest, a mantra that is not sensitive to the power structures it produces. De los Reyes (2017: 33) conducts a similar analysis and underlines how a systematic silencing of certain groups of women has occurred in Sweden:

Growing inequalities in the living conditions of women make gender politics an arena where the emergence of hegemonic femininities is closely related to exclusionary practices and a systematic silencing of the differentiation processes that reproduce power relations among women.

Linda Sandberg and Malin Rönnblom (2016) draw attention to such exclusionary practices of gendered misrecognition. They argue that the image of the gender-equal city in Sweden has become a symbol for the open and tolerant city, but that, in reality, this only applies to the middle class. The gender perspective in these imaginaries draws primarily on the category of women, they argue, while intersectional dimensions of class, race and sexuality are seldom articulated. They conclude that Sweden's narrow perspective risks cementing current power structures, rather than opening them up for debate. Along the same lines, it has been questioned whether Swedish gender equality strategies have, in fact, liberated all women. Katarina Giritli Nygren and her co-authors (2018) have underlined how women in Sweden have been forced into a capitalist-regulated labour market with the ideological message that only paid work is truly empowering for women. In much the same vein, Irene Molina (2018) has shown how Swedish twentieth century housing policies have helped differentiate households, with the effect that social and racial residential segregation has occurred. This has helped create gendered hierarchies of misrecognition among Swedish women, between those who are included in the labour market and those who are excluded.

This section has contributed to showing how women in homelessness—in Sweden and elsewhere—are facing multiple inequalities. Much seems to indicate that injustices like the ones discussed in this section are structural and thus reproduced through political frameworks. Such frames of misrecognition keep producing privileges for some, but systematic and gendered marginalization for others.

### **The differential distribution of recognition**

In the book *Frames of War*, Judith Butler (2009), an American philosopher and gender studies scholar, poses a number of uncomfortable questions. Butler is writing in response to contemporary war, but their reasoning, which aims to problematize the differential distribution of violence and death, is also useful for understanding other forms of precariousness. More generally, it is useful for understanding how precarity is distributed and experienced by certain bodies.

According to Butler, the problem of the differential distribution of precariousness is both ontological and epistemological: ontological because the main underlying question deals with perceptions of what a life is; and epistemological because the issue of framing, through which the lives of others are apprehended, must be understood as a political construct:

the frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) are politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power. They do not unilaterally decide the conditions of appearance but their aim is nevertheless to delimit the sphere of appearance (Butler, 2009: 1).

Part of the problem, Butler (*ibid.*: 31) underlines, is that 'not everyone counts as a subject', we have to call into question 'the framework that silences the question of who counts as a "who"' (*ibid.*: 163). What is needed is a critique of norms of recognition; we need to start asking how norms operate to make some subjects easily recognizable while others are not, that is, how 'norms allocate recognition differentially' (*ibid.*: 6).

To be more specific, Butler introduces the term 'recognizability' to emphasize how recognition follows from a societal and normative process which prepares a subject for recognition. In this way, recognizability precedes the act of recognition (*ibid.*: 5). Important for the argument laid out here is that recognizability is typically shaped by societal norms and conventions, in contrast to recognition, which, according to Butler, is characterized by a scene between subjects. Hence, for subjects to be recognized, there must exist frames which provide recognizability, and for recognizability to be in place

ontological and ethical questions concerning who counts as a who in our society must be raised. This process of providing recognizability, what Butler refers to as the being of the body, is:

always given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations that have developed historically in order to maximize precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for others (*ibid.*: 2-3).

What is needed now is ‘a new bodily ontology’ (*ibid.*: 2), through which the notion of responsibility for the other can be rethought. It must draw on the capacity to reconsider the distributive character of precariousness and how it is experienced by other bodies. One way to start building such capacity, it is argued here, is by insisting on posing Butler’s ethical questions concerning who counts as a who in our societal order.

Another scholar who has delved into issues of responsibility is the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Derrida (1997), who, importantly for the argument laid out here, connects the notion of responsibility to the ability to respond. This relationship has been further developed by the South African political scientist Aletta Norval (2011), who, in a similar vein to Butler, draws attention to the differential distribution of what she terms ‘response-ability’, that is, the ability to give a response. For someone to give a response, though, there must be someone prepared to listen. In much the same vein as Butler describes recognizability as something shaped through societal norms, Norval describes ‘response-ability’ as an embodied practice. Such practices, she emphasizes, are ‘deeply embedded in existing social relations, positions of enunciation and contestations of those practices’ (Norval, 2011: 223). Drawing on the argument that ‘recognizability’ and ‘response-ability’ are differentially provided in society, through societal norms, much seems to indicate that these are resources that certain groups in society struggle to obtain. Potential consequences could be seen in practices of misrecognition, as well as the voicelessness and silencing of certain groups.

The last notion that will be highlighted in this theoretical section is Nancy Fraser’s (2008: 106) notion of ‘geographies of recognition’. Fraser is an American political scientist who is best known for having developed an approach for rethinking how injustices can intersect for social groups. She does that by introducing a three-dimensional notion of justice that incorporates the cultural dimension of ‘recognition’, the economic dimension of ‘redistribution’, and the political dimension of ‘representation’. Fraser underlines how these dimensions cannot be separated other than analytically. Just like Butler, Fraser raises the question of ‘who counts?’. For her, it primarily refers to who is included as a peer to negotiate the different notions of justice, a question that depends on political as well as geographical frames. To give an illustration of what the notion of ‘geographies of recognition’ can mean in practice, all three of Fraser’s aspects of justice will be given some attention below.

The problem of recognition is, according to Fraser, primarily linked to status hierarchies in society, and the fact that certain identities are either not recognized or are constructed in stereotypical ways. When it comes to women in social homelessness, this could, for example, be understood to generate gendered stigmatization, cultural marginalization and social subordination; aspects which might lead to misrecognition. The problem of redistribution takes its starting point in the fact that resources, such as wealth, income, occupation, health, education, but also housing, are unevenly distributed in society. The consequences of maldistribution can, according to Fraser, be seen in economic marginalization, exploitation and deprivation. For women in social homelessness, this can be understood by looking at, for example, how housing is allocated to this group, where it is located geographically and where this group is expected to reside. It can also be seen in the exploitation of some of these women’s bodies. These and other aspects of economic redistribution say something about how precariousness



is differentially distributed in society. The final problem, that of representation, has to do with political voicelessness and draws attention to inequalities stemming from situations where people are excluded from taking part as peers in decisions which affect them. For women in social homelessness, this could be understood as the extent to which they are included in societal matters that affect their living conditions, whether they are represented as a recognizable political subjects with a body and a voice. As has already been pointed out, a differential distribution of such capacities might render marginalized groups politically voiceless.

Occasionally, injustices such as the ones described above intersect in ways that threaten to exclude groups. Fraser underlines the geographical aspect of such exclusion, which in this context can mean, for example, that marginalized groups get relocated to the outskirts of the city. Hence, by connecting Butler's notion of 'frames of misrecognition' with Fraser's notion of 'geographies of recognition' this section has drawn attention to the differential distribution of recognition, as well as its spatial logic.

### Mapping the homeless margins

Following a brief discussion of methods, this section goes on to show to what extent women in homelessness in the city of Gothenburg experience misrecognition as an outcome of how they have been accommodated. It also provides an overview of some of the plans and policies on homelessness, gender equality and urban development that are in place to shape the development of the city. The aim is to contrast these political goals with the bodily and lived experiences of women in homelessness.

#### – Methods

To gather information about city-specific urban development goals and efforts to diminish homelessness, a total of 45 plans, policies, official service statements, PowerPoint presentations and other documents from the city of Gothenburg were identified and chosen for discursive reading. The purpose was to identify political goals that either confirmed or contradicted the lived experience of women in homelessness. To achieve this, 10 interviews were conducted with women in homelessness. Their specific purpose was to gather information about the lived experiences of being accommodated in four different shelters located in different parts of the city. No questions were raised about sensitive personal reasons for homelessness, such as addiction, mental ill-health or violence in close relationships. Potential candidates for interview were first approached by the management at the shelters to investigate their interest in participating. Interviewees were informed beforehand of the purpose of the research, that participation was optional, that they could opt out at any time, and that the results would be published anonymously. To provide a broader background of how women in homelessness generally are exposed to increased vulnerability, an additional four interviews were conducted with managers at these shelters. The interviews with women in homelessness took place at the shelters, while the interviews with managers were done online. All interviews lasted approximately half- to one hour and were conducted by the author in 2021. Signed consent was gathered from the interviewees. All translations into English were made by the author.<sup>3</sup>

#### – Visions of the just and gender-equal city

In Sweden, the overarching national gender goal states that women and men should have equal powers to influence society and their own lives (Länsstyrelsen, 2019). In line with this goal, the city of Gothenburg has declared that it aims to be a role model for gender-equal development and has adopted several gender-equality plans.

3 To ensure that no sensitive personal data was gathered, the study was continuously discussed with Chalmers University of Technology's data protection officer. In one of the interviews with managers, the consent was oral.

Six target areas are highlighted in the plan in place at the time of the interviews (Göteborgs stad, 2019a). Of specific relevance for this study are the two target areas ‘freedom from violence’, and ‘equal influence in urban development plans’. Regarding the first of these goals, it was underlined that the city’s preventive work should aim to change stereotypical perceptions of gender and develop a greater understanding of how destructive norms relate to masculinity and violence. Regarding the second, it was stated that women experience greater insecurity and that the city’s planning activities must set out from the knowledge of how the city’s built structures precondition life for both women and men (*ibid.*). In parallel with these gender ambitions, the city has adopted a plan for how to work against violence in close relationships (Göteborgs stad, 2021). This states that freedom from violence in close relationships is a human right and that the city will provide adults exposed to such violence with protection based on their individual needs (*ibid.*). When gender aspects are measured in the city of Gothenburg, it is clear, however, that there is still much to do. In 2019, 88% of the known cases of violence in close relationships reported to the city concerned women (Göteborgs stad, 2020f).

In the city’s plan for homelessness, which is still valid but currently being revised, it is underlined that homelessness is increasing. This is in line with the findings of the 2017 report on homelessness by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare. However, the recently published 2024 report from the same agency reports a decrease in homelessness, not least in the city of Gothenburg. This stands in contradiction, however, to the reports of NGOs working with homelessness in Gothenburg that have revealed an increasing demand for their services in recent years, pointing to the increasingly ‘hidden’ nature of actually experienced homelessness in official statistics and a rise in structurally homeless households (Stadsmissionen, 2024). The 2017 report found that the city of Gothenburg had the greatest number of homeless people in Sweden, and, moreover, that the number of women is increasing (Socialstyrelsen, 2017; see also Göteborgs stad, 2018a). Possibly as a direct consequence, the city’s plan for homelessness underlines the priority of understanding the specific vulnerability that homeless women are exposed to (Göteborgs stad, 2020b). The city has also implemented selective measures to improve the situation for homeless households which include children.<sup>4</sup>

One of the city’s goals has been to decrease homelessness by 20% for the period 2020–22, and to decrease the cost of accommodating homeless households (Göteborgs stad, 2019b; 2020b). This goal has been met; in a 2020 report indicating the number of homeless households, the city declared that the number of people in homelessness had decreased by a remarkable 26% since the year before, from slightly over 5,000 people to a little more than 3,700 people (Göteborgs stad, 2020c).<sup>5</sup> The dramatic reduction, in just one year, is argued by the city itself to be due to a number of causes, not least the fact that the city provided more apartments to homeless households in accordance with a ‘housing first’ approach, and that it was assigned fewer refugees (Gedeck and Holmqvist, 2020). An additional likely reason for the substantial decrease in homeless households is, however, the implementation, discussed earlier, of tougher routines for selecting which households qualify for social assistance in cases of acute destitution.<sup>6</sup> In a document now no longer available online, the city described the aim of the new

4 A few years ago, the city provided 600 apartments to homeless households with children, and it has, over a number of years, increasingly provided homeless households with a first housing contract.

5 It is worth noting that in another report from the city, it is stated that the number of people who lack permanent accommodation is at least 4–5 times higher than the number of people officially registered as homeless (Göteborgs stad, 2017: 221).

6 Apart from the growing number of structurally homeless households, households that are not visible in the homeless statistics consist of, for example, foreign-born people who do not have a residence permit, people who come from abroad and stay in a municipality but who are considered as lacking sufficient ‘anchorage’ in it and refugees who have been assigned to a municipality by the Swedish Migration Agency and who have been accommodated by the municipality with temporary contracts (Göteborgs stad, 2020c).

routines as being to 'decrease the risk of individuals becoming passive and remaining in temporary accommodation for longer' (Göteborgs stad, 2020e: npn). However, in other research, such a tendency has been described as a reduction of public responsibilities through recategorization (Sahlin, 2020; Sandberg and Listerborn, 2023).<sup>7</sup>

Since 2014 the city has published three inequality reports (2014, 2017 and 2023). These are thorough reports identifying and discussing different aspects of inequalities and how they are distributed geographically in the city. In the 2017 report, it was found that most inequalities had increased since they were first measured, and that the socio-economic segregation in the city had become substantial (Göteborgs stad, 2017). It was reported that for women, there is a 7.5-year difference in average life expectancy between different neighbourhoods in the city. Moreover, low-income earners in the city experience mental ill-health and lack of interpersonal trust, to a higher degree than high-income earners. The same pattern is visible when feelings of safety in outdoor areas are measured. The city concludes the report by explaining that socio-economic status, social vulnerability and discrimination together form the inhabitants' social position, and that 'it is those who have a low social position that should be prioritized in the city, when inequalities in life conditions are to be diminished' (*ibid.*: 221).<sup>8</sup> To decrease such differences in life conditions, the city council has adopted an ambitious goal, stating that the city of Gothenburg will become an equal city (Göteborgs stad, 2018c; 2020a). However, there are few considerations concerning the provision of housing in either the programme or the plan for this goal, other than the declaration that 'all inhabitants in the city should be given preconditions for suitable housing and habitat' (Göteborgs stad, 2018c: 16).

In general, many of these documents leave the reader uncertain about how the transfer to a just and gender-equal city is going to be achieved. When it comes to housing for those categorized as 'socially homeless', it is obvious that there are no reflections on how precarity is distributed differently through current strategies to accommodate homeless households in industrial areas on the outskirts of the city, nor on how such strategies might influence women differently from men.

#### – Voices from the homeless margins

For the group categorized as socially homeless, the city owns about 30 accommodation units, with approximately 1,300 places available (Gedeck and Holmqvist, 2020; Göteborgs stad, 2020f). Approximately one-third of these were, at the time of the interviews, located in industrial areas on the outskirts of the city (Nilsson, 2021).<sup>9</sup> Since then this share has diminished slightly. In addition, the city provides apartments on so-called social contracts (Göteborgs stad, 2019d; 2019e).<sup>10</sup>

Eighty-two per cent of those recorded as homeless in Gothenburg are single households, and 15% are households with children. In the latter category, violence in close relationships is given as the reason for homelessness in 44% of cases. Within this latter category, almost all households are single women with children (Göteborgs stad, 2020c). It should be emphasized that violence can be physical, sexual or psychological in nature, but the common criteria for the function of such violence are usually to control, frighten, manipulate or humiliate (Göteborgs stad, 2018b; see also

7 Given the major housing shortage in the city, it is likely that the new tougher routines for social assistance have contributed to both the displacement of homeless households and a decrease in the visibility of structurally homeless households (Göteborgs stad, 2020c; 2020d).

8 After this study was completed, the city published a newer version of this report, in which it was concluded that inequalities are continuing to increase over almost all aspects that are measured (Göteborgs stad, 2023).

9 Approximately 60% of socially homeless households stay in long-term accommodation, including apartments with municipal contracts, while 40% stay in short-term and acute accommodation, either provided by the municipality, or in hostels and campsites.

10 If a household has paid its rent in time, has looked after the apartment, and has not disturbed neighbours, a so-called social contract can be signed over to the homeless household after 18 months (Göteborgs stad, 2019e).

Löfstrand and Quilgars, 2016). Two-thirds of the total number of socially homeless households in the city of Gothenburg are struggling with either drug addiction or mental ill-health (Göteborgs stad, 2020c).

Of the ten women who were interviewed, five were accommodated in a shelter for women-only, in a central district of the city.<sup>11</sup> The other five were accommodated in three different units in an industrial area on the outskirts of the city.<sup>12</sup> In most cases those accommodated were required to spend their nights at the shelter, otherwise, they would risk losing their right to accommodation. Children were not allowed in any of these accommodations.

Of the three shelters located in an industrial area on the outskirts of the city, the women-only shelter needs some explanation, as it was mentioned by several of the interviewees (although only one of them was placed there at the time of the interview). The shelter for women only has 16 beds and is an acute and secure accommodation for women, meaning that the level of protection is meant to be extra high. However, at the time of the interviews, this accommodation was located right next to a mixed shelter. In total, these two shelters had over 90 beds. The latter accommodation was open to both men and women but hosted considerably more men than women. There was a general perception among almost all interviewees, that the collocation of these two shelters was negative. Women who were accommodated in the women-only shelter, and who spent time in the attached and enclosed outdoor courtyard, could be watched by anyone accommodated in the mixed shelter. Indeed, the mixed shelter took up two of the facades that framed the courtyard of the women-only one. Violence and crime took place at the larger shelter. Because of this, it was later closed by the Swedish Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO). For the same reason, the location of the secure women-only shelter was greatly debated in the media. After this study was completed, a political decision was taken to move the shelter to a neighbourhood in a different part of the city.

Several of the women I interviewed described situations in which they started out in fairly stable housing situations, but had, for different reasons, lost their contracts, or left their apartments when breaking up from a relationship. One woman, located in the shelter in the city centre, explained how, after leaving her apartment, she had continued to sleep in the same building, and how she somehow felt grateful to her earlier neighbours for silently letting her do so:

I still had the key to where I lived, I still had the key to the basement there. Those in the house they knew who I was, so they let me be in the basement there.

All five interviewees who, at the time of the interviews, were located at this shelter in the city centre expressed sincere gratitude for the calm and secure environment the accommodation provided, and for the great support and understanding they received from the staff. One of the women, who had a history of being accommodated in other shelters for homeless people, underlined how this shelter differed from earlier experiences. 'You are seen, and you are listened to', she said. Nevertheless, it was obvious that many of the women at this shelter felt exposed to risk from the outside and, for that reason, some of them felt insecure when moving around in the city. Several of them seemed to isolate themselves during their stay at the women-only shelter in the city centre. One woman said:

11 The women-only shelter in the city centre has 22 beds and provides drug-free accommodation for women who are 21 years old or more.

12 Inside the three shelters in the industrial area, clients are not allowed to take drugs, but some of them may have ongoing drug addictions.

I feel safe here if I'm inside. But not if I go out. Or if I go out, I have to mask myself and stuff like that, so it's very stressful ... If I have cigarettes and stuff, I stay here, so I can get inside quickly.

Some of the other women expressed similar attitudes. Many seemed to perceive risks as connected with certain districts of the city. Several also expressed a fear that if they did eventually get help to get a social contract for their own apartment, it was very likely going to be an apartment located in a suburb where rents were lower, but also where their earlier networks still existed. Some of the women stated that it would increase their exposure to the risk of violence in different ways. This could in turn, they argued, lead to a relapse into earlier habits they wanted to distance themselves from. One of the interviewees still had a first-hand contract but did not dare return to either the apartment or to work. She didn't feel safe in any part of the city, and emphasized the absurdity of how her vulnerability had been handled:

The Swedish Tax Agency approved protected personal information, but [I got] no new apartment. So, I stayed at the same address with protected information. Obviously, that's completely pointless.

This woman felt incredibly disappointed in how she had been treated before finally being accommodated at the women-only shelter in the city centre. She underlined the extremely vulnerable situation some women are in, when saying:

Women must have their voices heard. That it is taken seriously. Because this is not ok ... I have been pleading for help for months. I was minutes away from dying to get a place here.

Several of the women expressed how they did not know for how long they would be accommodated or what would happen next. One woman reported her own experience of how when one loses one's right to accommodation, one is simply passed around. Another woman said:

I do feel a little insecure. Where should I go? It's all the time this stress. Will I be extended here? What happens if I am not extended? Where shall I go then?

During the interviews, several women drew attention to the fact that they did not want to be placed in the women-only accommodation in the industrial area next to the mixed shelter, even though this was meant to be a safe and protected place for women. One woman underlined during the interviews that on several occasions, she had refused accommodation there. Another, who had been accommodated there for a month, explained that her perception was that it was seriously chaotic accommodation for a then rather young woman. She underlined how insecure she had felt during that month, due to the proximity to the much bigger mixed shelter, with its reputation for violence, drugs and what she referred to as a general lack of trust among people. When recalling her stay there, she reported that police presence at the shelter occurred on an almost daily basis:

They place you [at the women-only shelter in the industrial area]. 'Out here is where you must be'. Like, 'you can't be in town hanging out, you should be located in an industrial area' ... There is a cemetery right next to the place as well, so it is really desolate ... It was really unpleasant. And it wasn't safe. And it was not fun to go there [late at night].

This woman emphasized how she felt so deeply insecure during the month she was accommodated at the shelter that she simply decided to leave, even though she knew it meant she would lose her right to be accommodated.

Of the five women who were accommodated in shelters in the industrial area on the outskirts of the city, one was at the women-only shelter next to the mixed shelter at the time of her interview. She, too, emphasized how insecure the accommodation was for a woman:

It ought to be ... illegal for a girl to be homeless. I mean, it should be ... illegal, because you know it creates so many problems ... The Social Administration is so irresponsible. They put me in a place where they know people die. I mean, I was warned about this place when I was younger. People are not well here.

This woman's comments seem to refer to the situation as a whole, criticizing the way both the women-only and the mixed shelters were located right next to each other, far away from the city centre. She described the situation as 'some sort of segregation'. The two interviewees who were accommodated at the bigger, mixed shelter gave similar testimonies. One of them shared her perception of the general situation there:

Because a lot of crap happens here all the time, you get thrown out, you get evicted, you get your things stolen, you get into conflict with people, you are thrown out again, people argue with you, you get down, you get beaten up, you are threatened with a knife, you are threatened with death. That's how it is all the time. You are completely exhausted. Completely exhausted.

Several of the women accommodated in the industrial area had a history of sleeping rough, in cellars or refuse rooms, in commercial centres or in cars. These women more often expressed a general feeling of not being listened to. The woman cited above, who was placed at the mixed shelter, said she had stopped socializing with old friends simply because she was ashamed of her situation. 'The situation is so bad', she said, 'that I do not want to talk about it with my friends'. She expressed a systematic shuffling around between different shelters, both long-term and short-term. 'But never', she said, '[did] we reach a proper dwelling'. This woman also expressed sadness over continuously losing her belongings. People at the shelters had started to rob each other, she said, but what she was more concerned about was the fact that every time she lost her right to accommodation or was 'shuffled around' in her own words, she was only allowed to take two packages of belongings with her:

All our belongings. After all, we don't have that much money to spend from the beginning, so when you lose everything, it becomes a kind of depression.

Similar feelings of not being recognized were expressed by a woman accommodated at another shelter in the industrial area. She said: 'If you live in a shelter like this, you will be treated as what I call a C-person'. The woman above, who felt shuffled around and sad over losing her belongings, explained that she rarely went into the city centre, and added that it was a place for people with money:

Why should I hang out in town? We are poor and have no money. So what do you do in the city centre? I mean, I can't even afford to go to the toilet ... The worst thing is not being a woman. The worst thing is to be poor and a woman.

She expanded on the feeling of being both socially and geographically excluded from society by adding:

I'm in the city centre anyway. I mean, I go back and forth, but not because I have a lot to do there or participate in society in any way. Because we do very little of that. I mean, we are outside society, deeply so.

Another interviewee, also accommodated at the mixed shelter, referred to a similar situation. She said: 'I have done 15 months in one of the absolute toughest places where it can be done'. And added: 'This is the last stop, pretty much'.

### Concluding discussion

This section returns to the research questions posed in the introduction, by discussing whether women in homelessness experience social, geographical or gendered implications of misrecognition, as a result of how they have been accommodated. It concludes that such implications can be understood as an outcome of political frames of misrecognition.

The precarious situation described by many of the women interviewed in this study seems to raise questions concerning many of Gothenburg city's goals (see also Thörn, 2023). For example, it seems clear that the stated intention that women in homelessness should be approached with a greater understanding of the specific vulnerability that they, as women, are exposed to needs further attention (Göteborgs stad, 2020b), as does the ambition to prioritize those who have a low social position, when the plan is for inequalities in life conditions to be diminished in the city (Göteborgs stad, 2017). The equality report confirmed that both mental health and perceptions of security and trust are better for women in wealthier areas in the city (*ibid.*). Exclusionary practices, which differentiate between women through gendered hierarchies (Sandberg and Rönblom, 2016), seem to operate in the city. Most of the managers I interviewed confirmed that the industrial area, where three of the accommodations are located, is a place where violence, crime, the purchasing of sex and drug dealing take place. They also confirmed that rapes have occurred on the dark pathway leading from the bus station to the women-only and mixed shelters. One of the managers said she took the car and drove to the bus stop to pick up women accommodated at the shelter as often as she could, knowing that she would not have wanted to walk that way at night herself. The situation described by the ten homeless women seems to indicate that the city's ambition to be a role model of a just and gender-equal development is positive and worth striving for, but that there is a clear mismatch between these goals and the embodied everyday life situation for many of these women.

Several of the interviewees emphasized how they would rather leave a shelter where violence occurred than stay, even if it meant that they would lose their right to accommodation. This speaks to the agency these women have (Mayock and Sheridan, 2020). However, it also underlines the severely problematic aspects of locating a high-security shelter for women (who might have left their homes due to violence in close relationships) next to a mixed shelter. This can be understood as an example of what Crenshaw (1991) termed 'political intersectionality', that is, a decision aiming to empower homeless women actually doing the opposite because of conflicting political discourses. It has been underlined elsewhere that housing systems are often embedded in patriarchal assumptions (Reeve, 2018; Mayock and Sheridan, 2020). This may also be seen in the many 'unexpected sign outs', which were confirmed by one of the interviewed managers. Sometimes, this manager argued, these sign outs were due to a poor understanding within the Social Administration of these women's reasons for not always showing up for the night. This is also confirmed in other research which points to the fact that many women tend to leave services when they feel 'their right to dignity, autonomy and self-determination' is violated (Löfstrand and Quilgars, 2016: 63). The

same research drew attention to the fact that homeless women, when able to suggest improvements, often point to the need for less controlling services, and fewer barriers to access to these services (*ibid.*, 2016: 66). This is in sharp contrast to most homelessness policies, which often aim at more controlling measures through self-responsibilization (Juhila, Raitakari and Hall, 2017).

Some of the homeless women interviewed for this study not only described increased precarity and vulnerability from having been accommodated in shelters in an industrial area of the city, but also feelings of having been completely excluded from society. Indeed, the analysis has shown how political frames of misrecognition can work both socially, to sometimes ‘maximize the precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for others’ (Butler, 2009: 3), and geographically, to keep others at a distance, or out of sight, and thus ‘delimit the sphere of appearance’ (*ibid.*: 1). Consequently, much seems to indicate that some of the women interviewed in this study were exposed to misrecognition as a result of how they were accommodated. Furthermore, in those cases, it is possible to detect that political frames of misrecognition had social, geographical and gendered implications.

To conclude, this article has contributed to showing that not all subjects are recognized as equal in our current society. Seldom are women in homelessness made into recognizable subjects, in the sense of being acknowledged as political subjects. The ten women’s testimonies presented in this article do, however, form a powerful demand for change. To achieve such change will require substantial political will. It will, furthermore, require us all to think through how current frames of misrecognition distribute precarity differentially among us and continue to silence the question of who counts as a who.

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