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A importância da ecologia humana para a compreensão das mulheres em situação de sem-abrigo

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THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN ECOLOGY TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

A IMPORTÂNCIA DA ECOLOGIA HUMANA PARA A COMPREENSÃO DAS MULHERES EM SITUAÇÃO DE SEM-ABRIGO

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Abstract

This article draws on part of my research on women's homelessness, which was conducted for my PhD in human ecology, to explain the importance of a human ecological lens for a broader understanding of this phenomenon. Specifically, the article highlights the usefulness of an overarching ecological approach for a fuller understanding of women's homelessness in theoretical and empirical terms. Moreover, based on some research findings, it is argued that an ecological approach, combined with a life course perspective, which guided an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of participants' biographical data, enabled a more complete understanding of these women's lives and how their homelessness came about. Overall, the relevance of this article lies in the adoption of an ecological view of women's homelessness, which contributes to a more holistic knowledge of this under-researched subject.

Keywords: human ecology; ecological approach; life course perspective; women's homelessness

Resumo

Este artigo mobiliza parte de uma investigação sobre mulheres em situação de sem-abrigo – conduzida no âmbito do meu doutoramento em ecologia humana – com vista a explicar a relevância da disciplina para uma compreensão mais ampla sobre este fenómeno. O artigo sublinha a utilidade de uma abordagem ecológica para um entendimento mais completo sobre as mulheres em situação de sem-abrigo do ponto de vista teórico e empírico. Além disso, com base nalguns resultados do estudo, discute-se o papel desempenhado pela abordagem ecológica e pela perspectiva de curso de vida, que guiaram uma análise compreensiva e em profundidade das biografias das participantes, gerando um conhecimento mais abrangente sobre as causas da situação de sem-abrigo destas mulheres. A mais-valia deste artigo consiste na adoção de uma visão ecológica sobre as mulheres em situação de sem-abrigo, contribuindo para um conhecimento mais holístico sobre este tema pouco conhecido.

Palavras-chave: ecologia humana; abordagem ecológica; perspectiva de curso de vida; mulheres em situação de sem-abrigo

1. INTRODUCTION

Human ecology can be regarded as a scientific discipline that studies the relationships and interdependencies between human beings and the multilevel environments in which they are situated, for example in physical, social and cultural terms (Carvalho, 2007; Pires & Craveiro, 2010). Human

ecology accommodates the complexity, uncertainty, dynamism and antinomy of the issues under study (Carvalho, 2007). Moreover, human ecology enables and emphasizes the analysis of a given situation through different viewpoints, encompassing a diversity of perspectives, agents, sectors and their interrelatedness. This generates a deep and comprehensive knowledge and provides a holistic picture

of the situation (Ávila-Pires, 2007; Pires & Craveiro, 2010). Many different topics can be studied through a human ecological lens and may be addressed through diversified concepts, multi-theoretical perspectives and various research approaches (Carvalho, 2007; Hens & Susanne, n.d.).

This article aims to discuss the importance of a human ecological lens for a more holistic understanding of women's homelessness, based on the research project dedicated to this theme that I have conducted for my PhD. The abovementioned characteristics of human ecology make it particularly suitable to guide a research project on this topic. This is because homelessness in general, and women's homelessness in particular, are complex, multifaceted, nuanced and dynamic phenomena, involving multiple, intersecting causes and consequences (individual and structural). This requires a multilevel analysis and a wider contextualization, for example in cultural, socioeconomic and political terms (e.g., Bretherton & Mayock, 2021; Toro et al., 1991). Research on homelessness benefits from a mixed, multi-disciplinary approach capable of enhancing its theoretical development and capturing the lived experience of homeless persons (Pleace, 2016), as in the case of this research project. Moreover, there are many, poorly documented issues related to homelessness and women's homelessness at national and international level (e.g., Bretherton & Mayock, 2021; Pleace, 2016). Therefore, an in-depth and all-encompassing exploration of this topic through the lens of human ecology is paramount.

This article is organized as follows. It opens by overviewing multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinarity within human ecology. Following this, homelessness and women's homelessness are briefly discussed with regard to definitions and some key features. Part of the research on women's homelessness that I have conducted is presented next, focusing on its objectives, methodology and some research findings in order to illustrate the usefulness of an ecological approach for a more in-depth examination of this subject and how a combination of theoretical perspectives applied to participants' biographical data enhanced a fuller understanding of the causes of these women's homelessness. The article concludes with a few relevant considerations.

2. HUMAN ECOLOGY AND MULTI-, INTER-, AND TRANS-DISCIPLINARITY

The academic debate on multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinarity is vast and complex and exceeds the scope of this article, but it is important to briefly reflect on a few aspects linked to my research project. Multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinarity largely emerged from the need to address increasingly complex problems that cannot be adequately exa-

mined and solved by single disciplines providing specialized and fragmented knowledge (Choi & Pak, 2006). These terms concern varying ways or degrees of relationships among different disciplines. Succinctly, multi-disciplinarity involves adding non-integrated contributions from various disciplines that keep to their boundaries. Inter-disciplinarity refers to a greater level of interaction and collaboration between different disciplines; there is a blurring of disciplinary boundaries through complementary views and integration of knowledge, perspectives and methods from various disciplines. Finally, trans-disciplinarity represents the deepest level of disciplinary interaction, involving an amalgamation and unification of different disciplines, views and approaches; it transcends disciplinary boundaries, includes non-academic stakeholders in knowledge production, and looks at the dynamics of systems as a whole. Multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinarity can be regarded as a *continuum* with a growing level of disciplinary connection and integration (Choi & Pak, 2006; Pombo, 2008).

Human ecology has been described as multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and/or trans-disciplinary (e.g., Carvalho, 2007; Pires & Craveiro, 2010). Irrespective of this apparent lack of consensus, it can be argued that human ecology is situated along the *continuum* of multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinarity by virtue of its characteristics, the nature of the issues examined and the use of a diversity of approaches (Hens & Susanne, n.d.). From a pragmatic stance, the positioning of human ecology along this *continuum* (whether associating, integrating or merging knowledge, perspectives or approaches from different disciplines) essentially highlights its global vision (Ávila-Pires, 2007; Hens & Susanne, n.d.). This pragmatic view is consistent with that applied to my research on human ecology's multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinarity. Lastly, it is worth noting that multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinarity do not necessarily imply teamwork since they can also be attributes of the work of an individual scientist or a research project (e.g., Rasmussen & Arler, 2010), as in the case of my study.

3. HOMELESSNESS AND WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

There is no consensual and global definition of homelessness in academia, policymaking or service provision. The narrower and least controversial definition refers to rooflessness, which means being literally without a roof over one's head. This is the most visible manifestation of homelessness but the scope of the phenomenon is wider and more nuanced. The European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) is an approach to defining and classifying homelessness which

is broader in nature insofar as it includes a wider range of living situations that are considered as homelessness or housing exclusion. According to ETHOS, homelessness includes rooflessness (e.g., living in public space) and houselessness (e.g., living in temporary accommodation for homeless people). Housing exclusion involves insecure housing (e.g., living temporarily with family or friends due to a lack of housing) and inadequate housing (e.g., occupying a dwelling unfit for habitation). By expanding the concept of homelessness and establishing the categories of homelessness and housing exclusion, ETHOS includes a larger set of living arrangements where people without stable housing can be found (Busch-Geertsema, 2010).

Globally, homelessness literature has given less attention to homeless women in comparison with homeless men. The first overall picture of women's homelessness across Europe was published in 2001 and a considerable gap in gender-specific research on homelessness was recognized at the time (Edgar & Doherty, 2001). In spite of a growing body of evidence around gendered perspectives of homelessness in some countries (e.g., England, Ireland), all the dimensions of women's homelessness remain under-researched across Europe (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021). Gender must be considered in the analysis and understanding of homelessness because it can be associated with differentiated tendencies in causation and experiences. For example, in terms of causation, there is evidence of a mutually reinforcing relationship between women's homelessness and domestic violence. In terms of experiences, hidden homelessness is commonly reported among women, which means that they often rely on informal living arrangements such as squats or staying temporarily with family and friends due to a lack of housing (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021; Edgar & Doherty, 2001; Mayock & Sheridan, 2012). Since hidden homeless situations are provided informally, rather than by services, these women are frequently invisible to the homeless support system (Mayock & Sheridan, 2012).

In fact, invisibility is a key feature of women's homelessness, which can be explained by several factors in addition to their reliance on informal support. Firstly, women are under-represented in homelessness counts and statistics, partially because there is a prevailing use of narrow definitions of homelessness, focused on rooflessness and homelessness accommodation, where they are less likely to be found. Even though the precise scale of women's homelessness in Europe is unknown at present, it is acknowledged that broader definitions of homelessness are more likely to capture a greater proportion of women among the homeless population (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021). Secondly, the historiography of homeless women explains part of

their invisibility in light of the prevailing ideologies of femininity. Throughout history, women without housing did not fit social expectations as they were outside of female normative spaces, roles and categories (i.e., nurturing roles associated with the family within the home's private realm). Their lack of housing has not been conceptualized and recognized as homelessness, rather it has been responded to by ignoring, denying or criminalizing the experience, and has remained silenced and hidden from the public view (e.g., Oudshoorn et al., 2018). Thirdly, women's invisibility can be related to their avoidance of rooflessness or their attempts to maintain low visibility while sleeping rough, namely for safety reasons (e.g., Reeve et al., 2006). Fourthly, women have been prioritized for support by services and have used facilities not designed for homeless people and which are not accessible to men (e.g., convents, accommodation for young mothers), making them less visible among the homeless population. Finally, academia can reinforce and perpetuate the invisibility of homeless women by relying on the homeless service sector (where women are less likely to be found than men) or failing to explore in depth the circumstances of homeless women (e.g., Oudshoorn et al., 2018). My research on women's homelessness counteracted this trend in academia. In fact, this research attempted to produce an all-encompassing analysis of women's homelessness and made a deliberate effort to expand the study's reach beyond the most visible forms of homelessness. This was achieved by adopting the ETHOS definition in order to capture a wider set of living arrangements where women without stable housing can be found (e.g., Bretherton & Mayock, 2021).

4. RESEARCH ON WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS

4.1. Research background and objectives

In Portugal, little is known about the lives of women who experience homelessness, since existing studies (e.g., Martins, 2017) mostly provide descriptive data such as sociodemographic details and living situations of homeless women. Only a few master's theses dedicated to women's homelessness (e.g., Barros, 2010) adopt a more comprehensive view of this phenomenon but the samples are small, which raises concern about the generalizability of the findings. To my knowledge, my doctoral dissertation was the first dedicated to women's homelessness in Portugal. This research was exploratory in nature and, broadly speaking, aimed to extend knowledge and understanding of women's homelessness through a detailed exploration of the life histories and experiences of women confronting homelessness and housing exclusion.

The research attempted to fill some gaps in the Portuguese literature on women's homelessness, including its causes, the trajectories and experiences of homeless women, their interactions with support services and their negotiation of homelessness and identity-related concerns. This article focuses on the causes of women's homelessness.

4.2. Research methodology

4.2.1. Overview of the research project

This qualitative study approached the subject under consideration on theoretical and empirical levels. The theoretical contribution was based on an extensive literature review and documental analysis, as discussed below. The empirical contribution was based on lengthy fieldwork (October 2015 - April 2018) in which biographical interviews and ethnographic approaches were used to collect data from 34 adult women experiencing homelessness or housing exclusion. The informed consent of each participant was obtained. Access to and recruitment of participants occurred independently and through several organizations. The study took place in the Northern part of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, specifically in the municipalities of Lisbon, Cascais, Amadora and Sintra.

4.2.2. Ecological approach and life course perspective

This research was conducted within the realm of human ecology and used an ecological approach as an overarching line of thought to guide the whole research (Richard et al., 2011). An ecological approach takes into consideration the interactions and interdependencies between individuals and the contexts or environments in which they are embedded (Richard et al., 2011; Toro et al., 1991). These environments are regarded in their broadest sense, encompassing cultural beliefs, social norms, economic trends, policies and support services, among others (Toro et al., 1991). The use of an ecological approach to the study of homelessness emphasizes the transactions between homeless individuals and their multilevel environments including, for example, informal networks, living arrangements, service provision and housing affordability. Given the complex and multiple causes and experiences of homelessness, this holistic approach is valuable for a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon (Haber & Toro, 2004; Toro et al., 1991).

From an ecological approach, a broad contextualization of (women's) homelessness is crucial for understanding the current state of the phenomenon (Toro et al., 1991). In keeping with an ecological approach, an extensive literature review and documental analysis were performed, comprising

the statistical portrait and the historical, cultural, socioeconomic, political, housing and organizational context of this phenomenon. Women's homelessness was addressed from these viewpoints in a complementary manner, using a wide range of sources, such as studies from several disciplines (e.g., sociology, geography, history, anthropology, psychology, economics) and fields of research (e.g., gender, poverty, housing), as well as official reports, policy orientations and legislation on women's homelessness and related areas (e.g., domestic violence).

The use of diversified sources and disciplinary lenses enabled me to delve into several aspects of women's homelessness to gain a clearer understanding of its complex and multifaceted nature and to approach this phenomenon thoroughly and with critical thinking. This has contributed to a shift in my view of women's homelessness towards a broader picture and to guide some methodological options. For example, it was crucial to examine the invisibility of homeless women from different angles, as briefly discussed earlier, because this allowed me to better understand the contexts and nuances of their low visibility and the need to expand the study's reach beyond the most visible forms of homelessness. This has resulted in a greater effort to find new avenues for accessing and recruiting participants on a broader spectrum of settings besides homeless services. A renewed approach to recruitment was thus conducted, including new rounds of contacts with various services such as parochial centres and services concentrated on domestic violence. In the end, this approach led to the inclusion of a diversity of experiences of homelessness and housing exclusion among the study's participants that would otherwise have remained concealed, contributing to a more nuanced and complete understanding of this phenomenon.

The ecological approach is overly generic as it focuses on recognizing and describing "the complexity of social phenomena in context" (Haber & Toro, 2004, p. 145). Therefore, more operational, theoretical perspectives were needed in this research. Given the complex and multifaceted nature of homelessness, no single theory can encapsulate the whole of the phenomenon (Ravenhill, 2008). A combination of theoretical perspectives was used in order to provide a theoretically informed insight into various aspects of women's homelessness in a complementary manner. Among the theories underpinning the research (e.g., life course perspective, strengths-based approach, identity work framework), only the life course perspective will be discussed due to its relevance for exploring the causes of women's homelessness that are addressed in this article.

The life course perspective provides theoretical guidance for the contextualized study of human lives by focusing on the relationships between the

individual, the passing of time and the multilevel environment in which the individual is situated (Elder et al., 2003). This framework is thus aligned with human ecology and the ecological approach permeating this research (Carvalho, 2007; Richard et al., 2011). From a life course perspective, human lives are continuous and ongoing processes in which early life events and circumstances have long-term outcomes (Hutchison, 2011) and the realms of individuals' lives, such as family, education, work and health are seen as interdependent spheres impinging simultaneously on life trajectories (Hendricks, 2012). This framework takes into account the wider environments in which life courses unfold (including historical, socioeconomic and geographic contexts), the relevance of social interactions and their positive and negative influences on life trajectories and the role of human agency throughout the life course (referring to the choices and actions taken by individuals within the opportunities and constraints of a given historical, cultural and social context) (Elder et al., 2003; Hendricks, 2012; Hutchison, 2011).

Research on homelessness guided by a life course perspective emphasizes that homelessness is a process combining different factors in several dimensions of life that occur over time and have lifelong and interlinked consequences, hence the importance of analysing the trajectories of homeless persons from childhood (e.g., Kennedy et al., 2010). In Portugal, little research attention has been given to the early lives of homeless women and, to my knowledge, no previous study has adopted the life course perspective to the analysis of women's homelessness. In this research, the life course perspective highlighted the need to examine participants' lives from childhood (which is a key feature for a more comprehensive understanding of women's homelessness). Furthermore, it contributed to expanding the scarce evidence on the development of women's homelessness in Portugal from a more holistic perspective, as shown below.

4.2.3. *Biographical interviewing*

The adoption of an ecological approach to the study of homelessness requires the use of research methods capable of addressing the interactions between homeless persons and the multilevel environments in which they are embedded (Toro et al., 1991). Both methods of data collection used in this research can contribute to this endeavour, but the following discussion is limited to just a few aspects of biographical interviewing due to lack of space.

The biographical interview is a qualitative method for collecting in-depth information about people's lives (Atkinson, 2002), enabling the capture of how life experiences unfold within their broader contexts (Ravenhill, 2008). This method reveals

the links connecting several parts of a person's life, from childhood to adulthood, highlighting changes and sequences of events over a lifetime (Atkinson, 2002). Moreover, biographies draw attention to the various dimensions of human existence and elucidate how they interconnect and influence the course of life trajectories (Torri & Tosi, 2004). In this sense, biographical interviewing is a valuable method to collect data for further analysis guided by the life course perspective. Furthermore, in line with an ecological approach, biographical interviews are suitable to contextualize the factors driving homelessness and gain a deeper understanding of how homelessness unfolds in someone's life, embracing the complex, evolving and multifaceted nature of this phenomenon (e.g., Mayock & Sheridan, 2012; Torri & Tosi, 2004).

4.3. *Discussion of some research findings*

In keeping with this study's life course perspective, attention was given to the participants' early life experiences and biographical data allowed the examination of several events and circumstances in these women's early lives, their broad contextualization and their perceived consequences in the short-term and long-term (Atkinson, 2002). Consistent with previous national and international research (e.g., Barros, 2010; Kennedy et al., 2010; Reeve et al., 2006), for most of the participants, accounts of childhood and adolescence involved events and circumstances that they depicted as difficult, distressing or traumatic (e.g., family loss, conflict and detachment, witnessing domestic violence in the family home, multiple forms of neglect, abuse and violence), which typically occurred in broader contexts of poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage. In addition, a few participants first experienced homelessness as adolescents leaving the family home to escape unhomely and sometimes dangerous environments, marked by strained relationships with family members and/or tense, unsupportive, neglectful or violent experiences. These women's homelessness in early life was invariably related to the circumstances of their families of origin, highlighting that family was the primary and closest context in which they were embedded in their early lives (Hutchison, 2011; Kennedy et al., 2010). Their early experiences of homelessness were compounded by a lack of any material or emotional support from family members and remained almost hidden from the service sector. In spite of being particularly vulnerable due to their young age and traumatic childhoods (Reeve et al., 2006), these women's situations and needs at that time remained largely concealed and unattended at the level of formal and informal support.

These experiences exposed those involved to adversity and disadvantage from an early age and

somehow contributed to their later homelessness. For example, leaving the family home prematurely negatively impacted their family safety net and deprived them of several resources and skills (such as education) necessary for them to become self-sufficient adults, as reported in some literature (e.g., Kennedy et al., 2010; Ravenhill, 2008). In fact, those who left the family home in their teenage years (as well as many other participants) dropped out of school prematurely, which can be interpreted as a “critical shift in their trajectory” (Kennedy et al., 2010, p. 1745) because educational attainment holds the potential for ameliorating the effects of early disadvantage. There is evidence suggesting an association between women’s low educational attainment and disadvantage in the labour market. Low educational attainment can be related to job precarity, high unemployment rates, low wages and more exits from the labour market due to family chores (e.g., Sagnier et al., 2019). Most participants in this study described a weak, unstable, precarious, low-qualified and poorly paid integration in the labour market, contributing to their lifelong poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage. Income poverty is one of the major structural factors hindering women’s ability to access and maintain independent housing, contributing to their vulnerability to homelessness (e.g., Edgar & Doherty, 2001). In summary, participants’ biographical data, which were examined through the lens of the life course perspective, revealed that participants’ “structural location” (Hendricks, 2012, p. 227) played a key role in their paths into homelessness, particularly regarding their low educational attainment, disadvantaged integration in the labour market and precarious financial situation.

Moreover, the study’s life course perspective and biographical data enabled the identification of particular events and circumstances that lead to women’s homelessness and elucidated more fully how they were situated in each life history and wider contexts. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Ravenhill, 2008; Reeve et al., 2006), the triggers of participants’ homelessness were, in fact, underpinned by complex and intersecting events and circumstances which evolved over time and culminated in their homelessness. For example, the break-up of intimate relationships and experiences of domestic violence brought about some participants’ homelessness within broader contexts, including: women’s weak or non-existent labour market participation; economic precariousness; heavy reliance on their partners in financial, material and/or housing terms; lack of income to afford housing; social isolation and lack of supportive informal networks; and negative emotional and psychological impacts of domestic violence. These findings are consistent with some research that highlights the precarious socioeconomic

position and the “multiple oppressive contexts that characterize the gendered experiences of women who are enmeshed in homeless and domestic violence trajectories” (Mayock et al., 2016, p. 131).

Another example of a path into homelessness among the study’s participants was related to eviction and the risk of eviction. Similar to McDonald (2011), the findings of this study revealed that a more complete understanding of the experience of eviction requires an analysis of how it unfolds over time and its relation to other realms of people’s lives (e.g., work, family life) and socioeconomic and policy contexts. For the study’s participants, eviction or the threat of eviction were mainly related to rent arrears but the processes underpinning rent arrears were diversified. These women described overlapping events and circumstances which evolved over time and culminated in eviction or threat of eviction and subsequent homelessness, including adversities and turning points involving their closest relationships (e.g., death of a parent who was the sole source of income in households relying on retirement pensions of older family members, a family member failing to make rental payments); formation of single person and lone-parent households relying on a sole income; a host of obstacles undermining labour market participation (e.g., domestic and caring roles and responsibilities, low educational attainment, older age, lack of a driving license, reduced job offers in small towns); unemployment; inadequate social protection (e.g., low social welfare payments); and lack of financial resources to access and maintain housing independently. Furthermore, these events and circumstances must be framed within a broader context of policy and service provision in this field. In this regard, these participants’ histories revealed inefficiencies in terms of preventing evictions and supporting individuals who are about to be evicted. These findings resonate with reports indicating that the provision of preventative measures for households at risk of homelessness and formal support for individuals who have been evicted are very limited in Portugal (e.g., Kenna et al., 2016).

These research findings illustrate the usefulness of an overarching ecological approach, combined with a life course perspective, both applied to biographical data, for a comprehensive exploration of the complex, multilevel and interlinked factors, events and circumstances that led to homelessness among the study’s participants. The salience of difficult, distressing and traumatic experiences in participants’ early lives and the analysis of their wider contexts and outcomes emphasized the need to examine homeless women’s lives from childhood and to consider the lifelong and compounding effects of adversities and disadvantages over the life course (e.g., Kennedy et al., 2010; Ravenhill, 2008). Moreover, these findings exposed the many and varied

ways in which participants' housing trajectories were impacted by other realms of their lives, including family and broader social relationships as well as educational, work and financial trajectories (Elder et al., 2003; Hutchison, 2011). These women's social relationships, particularly with their families of origin and intimate partners, greatly influenced their housing situations and paths into homelessness through different avenues (e.g., lack of family support, family members failing to make rental payments, break-up of an intimate relationship, domestic violence). Furthermore, a broader contextualization of women's life trajectories allowed for the understanding of the key role played by income poverty and a disadvantaged socioeconomic status in their vulnerability to homelessness (e.g., Edgar & Doherty, 2001). Finally, acknowledging the multilevel environments in which these women were situated also uncovered the influence of policies and service provision in shaping their housing trajectories and paths into homelessness (e.g., Toro et al., 1991). In summary, the use of an ecological approach and a life course perspective applied to biographical data enabled a broad, integrated and more complete understanding of how homelessness came about among the study's participants, as intended in any research conducted through the lens of human ecology (Ávila-Pires, 2007; Hens & Susanne, n.d.).

5. CONCLUSION

Human ecology enables an all-encompassing vision of the situations under study and is appropriate to guide research on women's homelessness given its complex, evolving and multifaceted nature. My research on women's homelessness was informed by an overarching ecological approach, which enhanced a multilevel contextualization and a more complete, theoretical understanding and empirical exploration of this phenomenon. The ecological approach combined with the life course perspective guided an in-depth analysis of the biographical data of the study's participants, leading to an integrated and fuller knowledge about the causes of their homelessness. The long-term effects of adversities and disadvantages from an early age and the impacts of several realms of these women's lives (e.g., family, education, work) on their housing trajectories and paths into homelessness were acknowledged. Moreover, these women's inability to access and maintain housing was influenced by their income poverty and precarious socioeconomic status, and by inadequacy or inefficiency at policy and service provision levels. Ultimately, approaching women's homelessness and its causes from a human ecological perspective has contributed to the expansion of the scarce evidence about this issue in Portugal in a valuable and more holistic way.

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Conflict of interest

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Author's contribution

The author declares that she is responsible for the conceptualization and writing - original draft, revision and editing - of this work.

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