SHARED DOMESTIC ABUSE REFUGE IN THE AGE OF HOUSING FIRST

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EVOLUTION OF 'GENERIC' HOMELESSNESS RESPONSES

- **Informal → Institutionalised → Choice-based**

- Treatment first → **Housing First**

- Abstinence → **Harm reduction**

- **Separating** housing and support services

- **Reducing use of shared** and transitional forms of accommodation

- **Harms associated with hostels** and other 'congregate' accommodation

"[…] no convincing evidence that the provision of emergency accommodation, particularly large congregate shelters, for people experiencing homelessness achieves anything other than a temporary, generally unpleasant, sometimes unsafe and traumatic, respite from the elements and the provision of basic sustenance for people experiencing homelessness." (O'Sullivan et al., 2023, p. 44)

CENTRALITY OF SAFE HOUSING

DOMESTIC ABUSE

HOMELESSNESS AND POVERTY

OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do we **minimise the experiences of homelessness** for DA survivors while ensuring their safety and helping their recovery?

Why have the above discussed **de-institutionalisation trends** NOT penetrated housing services for domestic abuse survivors to the same extent as in other homelessness services?

DOMESTIC ABUSE REFUGE

I. What **role** do domestic abuse refuges currently play in England and Scotland?
II. What are the relative **strengths and weaknesses** of the refuge model today?

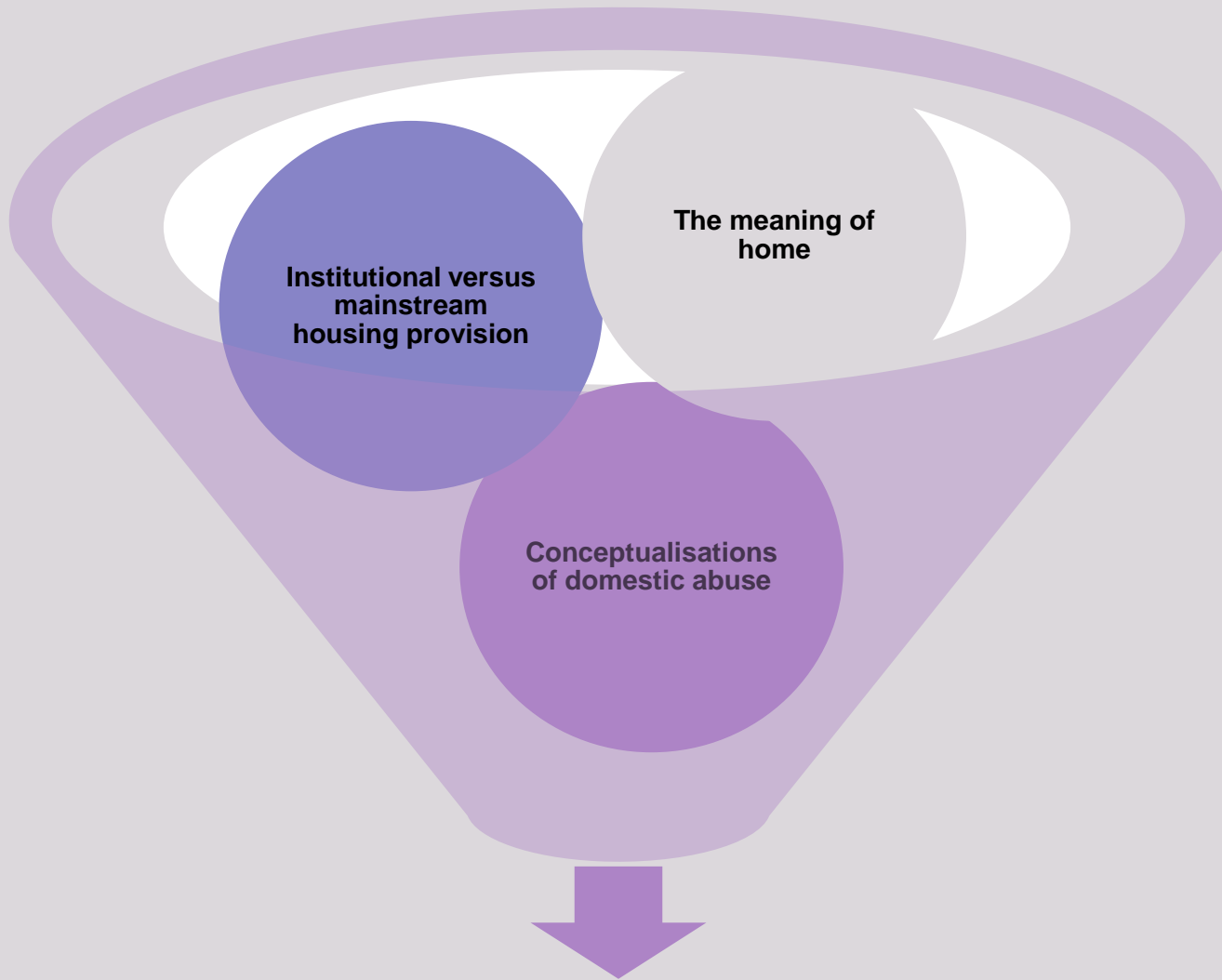# STUDY METHODS

Qualitative

Comparative

33 key informant interviews

Two service-user focus groups

Feminist informed

Institutional versus mainstream housing provision

The meaning of home

Conceptualisations of domestic abuse

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING

REFUGE DEFINITION AND ORIGINAL GOALS (U.K.)

"Refuge services are distinct from other types of emergency accommodation because residents receive a planned programme of therapeutic and practical support designed to facilitate women's recovery from experiences of domestic abuse." (Davidge et al., 2020)

→ Safe spaces physically (confidential location) and emotionally

→ Mutual support

→ Radical social change

→ Domestic abuse as a societal issue

REFUGE TYPES (U.K.)

SHARED

- the traditional form of refuge where **families share kitchens, living spaces, and/or bathrooms**

CLUSTER

- self-contained flats but congregated within the same building, with **communal space** sometimes provided

DISPERSED

- **mainstream flats** spread across an area with floating support

CRITIQUES OF SHARED AND CONGREGATE REFUGES

- **Communal** living

- Lack of **choice**, **control**, and **autonomy**

- Imposed and **stigmatised identity**

- **Inaccessible** and **exclusionary**

Same issues as any other congregate accommodation, but with certain elements even MORE harmful for domestic abuse survivors

Do homeless domestic abuse survivors really require a unique response?

"[…] the vast majority of people in society do not live communally. […] coming into a refuge […] that is becoming more and more difficult for women to do that […] it's not conducive to the way we live in the 21st century. […] **It had its day; it had its time.** It was, you know, better than living with an abuser. But we need to move with the times, and we need to make sure that people have the opportunity to recover from domestic abuse. And have to give them the dignity and privacy."

"[…] one of the worst things about abuse is your loss of yourself, yourself and your agency, that actually refuges tend to be a **really controlled environments** […] you've got very limited choices and often, with again, with the best of intentions […] keeping women safe, but also really pragmatic things, like for example in some refuges, you can't smoke. […] we're imposing rules on people that we wouldn't impose on ourselves. I think that's problematic."
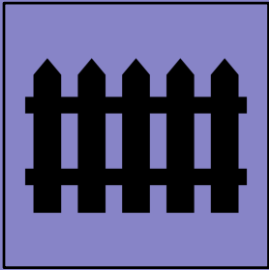
"[…] a lot of refuge accommodation is very **paternalistic** […] one of the messages [from service users] that came back was: moving out of [a] domestic abuse relationship, and then [in]to refuge was moving from one controlling relationship to another […] which I think is quite staggering news."

"I don't think we should be making choices for people. I think our responsibility […] is to maximise the choices that women have […] in some senses there's an even stronger argument for it, because the experience of violence is **not having control**, and not having choice and feeling powerless."

"[…] if you don't see yourself as a typical victim which I imagine, is pretty much the case of everyone, then that could also be […] **reinforcing the identity**, when you maybe are trying to escape that […] I would want to feel like I was living a normal life and someone […] hadn't made me change […] you know now you're in with a group of people that you don't really know; you maybe don't have anything in common with other than the fact that you've all shared a terrible experience."

"[…] the thing around mental health, substance use, complex needs, multiple disadvantage […] refuges **haven't traditionally been set up for that group**. They […] don't work with the kind of woman who has been on the streets, rough sleeping as much."
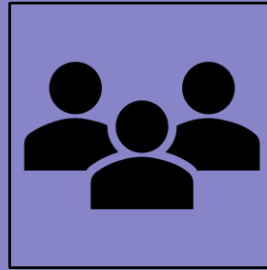
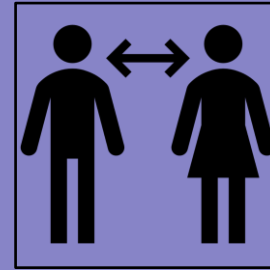# THE DEFENSE OF SHARED AND CONGREGATE REFUGES

Safety

Expert support

Peer support

Space & fresh start

Quality

"[…] the issue of safety is central to how we manage and develop a response to a survivor of domestic abuse; safety is critical, and **safety is in significant ways all about the housing itself**. I think it's sometimes more difficult to separate the support and the house entirely."

"[…] you do get security provision, it's less easy to approach those types of facilities. It's easy enough to walk up to a flat and knock on the door; much more difficult to seek out the refuge and thing is you're spotted as soon as you get there. […] and it probably will be **physically safer** than some types. It won't be universally safe, but it probably will be safer than being isolated in a flat out in the community."

"[…] it's about **processing the abuse** […] understanding where they're at […] having help to move forward, […] having help with the children who've experienced and witnessed abuse and helping the whole family […] move beyond where they're at to recovery. There's a lot of work done in refuges, which you wouldn't get if you were just in a self-contained flat. […] the valuable work done in refuges really helps women to not just flee abuse but to stay away from abusive relationships and understand the dynamics of abuse."

"[…] bring[ing] people together with an experience of domestic abuse is vital […] It will always retain the **space to bring people together**, bring women together, bring children, young people together so that they can really heal from domestic abuse, share experiences, know that they're not alone."

"[…] to know especially that she is not alone in this situation. It offers a lot of women comfort, and makes them feel less isolated as well. So I think that there is massive value in that for a lot of survivors to know that actually **it's not just an issue with me, but it is bigger than that**."

CONCLUSIONS

- Similar requirements for **privacy, autonomy, choice, and control over their living environments** as other populations experiencing homelessness

- Specific needs **for intensive, gender-informed professional and peer support,** this can be achieved without utilizing outdated shared models of accommodation

  - Shared refuge with communal facilities should be **obsolete**

  - Cluster refuge used only when it is the **woman's choice**

  - Cluster refuge could facilitate **connections and increased safety**

- Attachment to the **feminist ethos** of the original refuges, rather than the physical set-up

- Challenges of criticising an already **under-funded safety-net**, without adequate alternative solutions

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Rigorous, large-scale and in-depth **consultation with survivors of domestic abuse** about their needs and preferences as regards refuge provision
  - Particular focus on **community element**
- More comprehensive assessment of the **needs of individuals accommodated in refuge** and how these needs change over time
- Better data on breakdown between **different refuge types** in the U.K. and elsewhere
- Further research in an **international context**
- Testing of **'transitional' models**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
in your country…

1 Do domestic abuse survivors' **housing needs differ** from those of other people at risk of homelessness?

2 What is the role of the **shared or communal element** in domestic abuse housing services? Is it **desirable/appropriate** to have such elements?

3 Have the overall **service needs** of domestic abuse survivors changed over time?

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