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Shared Domestic Abuse Refuge in the Age of Housing First: An Outdated Model?

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Abstract

Refuges are the most well-known accommodation response to domestic abuse. They initially emerged in the 1970s to provide a safe space for women seeking immediate escape from abusive partners. The original provision largely involved different households sharing accommodation and facilities, reflecting the scarcity of resources available to provide such a response, but also an ethos of feminist solidarity. Homelessness responses more broadly have begun to move away from shared forms of accommodation in light of growing evidence discrediting their effectiveness and appropriateness, but refuges for domestic abuse survivors have largely escaped this critical interrogation and instead remained supported as an essential and therapeutic model. Based on qualitative data gathered via key informant interviews in England and Scotland, this paper examines the merits and demerits of this kind of shared accommodation and reflects on whether the housing needs of domestic abuse survivors are as different from those of other groups facing homelessness as the domestic abuse sector appears to hold. We conclude that the critiques of shared and congregate living that are so persuasive as regards hostels apply with at least equal weight to refuges. Domestic abuse survivors have similar requirements for privacy, autonomy, choice, and control over their living environments as other populations experiencing or at risk of homelessness. While domestic abuse survivors may have specific needs for intensive, gender-informed professional and peer support, this can be achieved without utilizing outdated shared models of accommodation.

Keywords

Refuges; domestic abuse; homelessness; Housing First

Introduction

There is an established international trend in homelessness provision away from shared and transitional forms of accommodation with on-site support. The focus has shifted to providing faster access to self-contained, mainstream housing wherever possible (Johnsen & Teixeira, 2010; Mackie et al., 2017; Parkinson & Parsell, 2018; Wiesel & Fincher, 2009). In other areas of social care, services increasingly prioritize providing support within independent living contexts (Wiesel & Fincher, 2009). These trends highlight an increased understanding that people require and deserve secure accommodation regardless of their engagement with support services, and that collective or shared living is not most people's first choice (Johnsen & Teixeira, 2010; Parkinson & Parsell, 2018; Wiesel & Fincher, 2009).

A substantial body of research details the harms associated with hostels and other 'congregate' forms of accommodation that concentrate people experiencing homelessness together in the same building, often involving communal facilities such as kitchens and bathrooms, and sometimes even shared sleeping space (Mackie et al., 2017). These include harms to people's physical health, mental wellbeing, and social relationships, linked to the intrinsic features of such accommodation, including their congregate, surveilled, rule-boundedness, and yet unpredictable nature (McMordie, 2021; Watts & Blenkinsopp, 2022). In their summary of temporary homeless accommodation in Europe, O'Sullivan et al. (2023) argue that there is:

"[...] 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)

Housing First is the main, and best evidenced, alternative model to traditional homelessness provision, bypassing transitional 'continuum of care' and congregate accommodation-based approaches in favour of rapid access to independent flats for street homeless individuals with mental health, substance misuse, and other support needs (Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000). Within the Housing First approach, housing is viewed as a 'human right' rather than something that should be conditional on becoming 'housing ready', or used as an enticement for engaging in treatment (Tsemberis, 2010). Housing First has been consistently demonstrated to be more effective than 'treatment first' traditional models (Baxter et al., 2019; Woodhall-Melnik & Dunn, 2016). Johnsen and Teixeira (2010) highlight two key aspects of the model which contribute to these positive impacts: the use of scatter-site, mainstream accommodation instead of congregate supported housing, and the premium placed on service user choice, autonomy, and control. Housing First thus represents a move to 'deinstitutionalise' homelessness provision, and an approach to support characterised by dispersion, normalisation, and community or home-based care (Padgett et al., 2016). The Housing First and housing-led approaches are increasingly promoted across many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and European Union (EU) countries (OECD, 2024).

These deinstitutionalisation trends do not, however, appear to have penetrated housing services for domestic abuse survivors to the same extent as in other homelessness services, at least in the United Kingdom (UK). This is important because domestic abuse is a leading cause of homelessness for women (Economics, 2019; Jones et al., 2010a, 2010b; Malos & Hague, 1997; Mayock et al., 2015), and recurrent experience of domestic abuse are common among homeless women (Hutchinson et al., 2014; Mayock et al., 2015; Reis, 2019). Stable long-term housing is long recognized as a crucial factor in enabling women to make choices about their relationships, including whether to leave or return to an abusive partner (Binney et al., 1981; Morley, 2000). Equally, housing instability, a lack of resources, and fear of homelessness can significantly limit women's options and make leaving an abusive relationship more difficult. Safe and secure housing is essential in supporting women's autonomy and fundamental for 'escape' (Irving-Clarke & Henderson, 2020). Women often remain with abusive partners because they have nowhere safe to go (Austin & Smith, 2019; Binney et al., 1981; Hastings et al., 2021; Henderson, 2019; Vagi et al., 2020).

The traditional 'victim moves' approach in domestic abuse service provision assumes that survivors must leave their homes to find safety, relocating to refuges or temporary accommodation. The additional burden of displacement is on the survivor. This has been reinforced by legal and policy frameworks that historically focused on crisis intervention rather than long-term housing stability. Increased recognition of this injustice has led to emerging alternatives that prioritize survivors remaining in their own homes with security measures in place and the perpetrator being removed and held accountable. This is reflected in recent legislation in the UK, for example, the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Act 2021 and Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs).

Refuge provision represents the most well-known accommodation response to domestic abuse. Activists opened the first refuges in the UK in the early 1970s to create safe spaces physically and emotionally (Bowstead, 2019; Spinney, 2007). Communal feminist refuges worldwide followed, e.g., throughout Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States of America (USA) (McDonald & Green, 2001; Murray, 2008). A 2015 Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) report noted that all but one European country had women's shelters/refuges (Logar & Team, 2016). Alongside offering individual assistance, the refuge movement embraced an ethos of radical social change intended to challenge patriarchal structures of domination (Irving-Clarke & Henderson, 2020; Spinney, 2007; Warrington, 2003). Dobash and Dobash (2000) explain this uniquely close connection between housing and the advocacy movement:

"[t]he provision of physical space so thoroughly enmeshed in the problem itself and in the lives of women and refuge workers is fairly unique for a social movement, and it is doubtful that a movement, rather than just a provision of space, could have been developed or sustained without it." (2000, p. 199)

From the feminist perspective underpinning refuge activism, domestic abuse was seen as both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality in wider society. Thus, while the shared nature of the early refuges arose in part from practical necessity, it was also

envisaged that in these shared spaces, "women can develop more structural and collective understandings of their experiences, and resist individualising or pathologising explanations" (Bowstead, 2019, p. 12). The main difference between refuges and 'generic' temporary accommodation offered to homeless people was seen to be the specialist support provided to facilitate recovery from domestic abuse (Davidge et al., 2020). Haaken and Yragui (2003) also argue that confidential refuge locations are the "primary indicator of adherence to feminist [refuge] practices" (Haaken & Yragui, 2003, p. 56). Jonker et al. (2014) summarise what they see as the key functions of refuge: 'asylum' (safe accommodation), 'balance' (rest and recovery) and 'transition' (towards independent living) – it is interesting that this last function speaks so directly to recent debates within homelessness that have seen transitional models challenged.

Congregate spaces for survivors have therefore long been seen as instrumental to recovery and indispensable for placing individual instances of domestic abuse within a wider societal context. Nonetheless, challenges with refuge living were evident from the outset. According to Spinney (2007), "refuges were 'no picnic' (National Women's Aid Federation, circa 1975) but [...] women went to them anyway because of a lack of alternatives" (Spinney, 2007, p. 170). While refuges have escaped the kind of systematic critical challenge that homelessness transitional accommodation has faced in recent years, there has long been disquiet expressed in some quarters about the disruption involved in women and children survivors having to leave their home to enter refuge, and specific issues associated with shared refuges, such as the potential for conflict between residents (Adisa et al., 2020; Airlie, 2023; Allen et al., 2023; Haaken & Yragui, 2003; McDonald & Green, 2001; Øverlien, 2011).

Refuge provision today is more varied than in the 1970s, but traditional shared forms are still prominent in the UK (Davidge et al., 2020). A 2020 review identified three models across the 269 domestic abuse refuges operational in England at the time: the conventional model (shared or cluster), the satellite or dispersed model, and the 'Open' or 'Dutch' model, where locations are published and residents can have guests, but there is 24-hour security (Adisa et al., 2020; see also Allen et al., 2023). A database of support for domestic abuse survivors indicates that in 2022, 76% (204) of refuge services were shared house accommodation, 42% (112) self-contained (presumably cluster-site) units, and 23% (63) had dispersed accommodation (Airlie, 2023). Fitzpatrick et al. (2003), based on focus group discussions with over 60 women, argued that shared refuge should be phased out altogether as not a single service user expressed a preference for this type of provision. However, in 2019 still around one-third of refuge spaces in Scotland had shared facilities (Scottish Women's Aid, 2019).

This paper draws on interviews with well-placed key informants in both England and Scotland to assess the merits and drawbacks of shared refuge accommodation as a response to homelessness amongst survivors of domestic abuse. It contributes to the existing literature on housing responses to domestic abuse by critically examining the appropriateness of refuge provision. Having detailed the methods deployed in the study, the paper first examines whether critiques of shared forms of provision in the homelessness sector also apply to women's refuges before going on to consider

arguments in favour of preserving the shared refuge model, and in particular whether the specific needs of domestic abuse survivors warrant, or require, a more collective response. The concluding discussion draws together the threads of the argument, making the case that contentions in favour of the shared refuge model do not stand up to critical scrutiny, and it should be phased out. We argue that individualised, self-contained housing models align better with survivor choice and autonomy, as well as contemporary housing and social policy trends.

Methods

The evidence presented in this paper was collected during a larger study examining the divergent evolution of policy and practice regarding domestic abuse-caused homelessness in England and Scotland. Primary empirical work was undertaken via in-depth key informant interviews between August 2018 and September 2019. These interviews were mainly conducted in person, but a few were conducted online. These interviews were focused on national policy formation, local implementation, and the (de)merits of particular responses to domestic abuse.

Initial participants were purposively sampled based on their professional experience in strategic or leadership positions in housing or homelessness, the domestic abuse/violence against women sector (including those in the policy/community safety teams), or sanctuary scheme services (see Table 1). Additional participants were recruited via snowball sampling to enable saturation in terms of relevant professional perspectives. Most key informants were national-level actors, some operated primarily at the local level, and provided detailed insights into domestic abuse responses in their locality. In total, we interviewed 33 key informants across England and Scotland.

Table 1

Key Informant Interviewees

| Key informant expert category | Description | England | Scotland | Total |
|--|---|---------|----------|-------|
| Domestic abuse and violence against women and girls | Specialist domestic abuse services and government representatives | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| Housing and homelessness | National and local government representatives, housing organisations | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| Domestic abuse and housing | Housing specialists at domestic abuse services and domestic abuse specialists at housing services, including some with direct experience implementing sanctuary schemes | 9 | 9 | 18 |

| | | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Police and community safety | Current and former police officers, including some direct experience implementing sanctuary schemes, local authority community safety personnel | 4 | 2 | 5 |
| Total | | 14 | 19 | 33 |

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically, adhering to Braun et al.'s (2016) phases of thematic analysis: familiarisation and coding, theme development, refinement, naming, and writing up (Braun et al., 2016). Initial write-ups prompted revisiting the data to reexplore emerging themes, such as the critiques and purported benefits of refuge provision, leading to an iterative process of analysis.

Full university ethics approval was obtained via Heriot-Watt University, with particular attention paid to issues of anonymity, confidentiality, and safety given the sensitive nature of the topic. It was particularly important to use interview material in a way that would not disclose individuals' identities or the organisations that they represent.

With respect to the limitations of this study, several factors should be considered. First, while this is a qualitative study, with a relatively small overall sample size, we would contend that the breadth of professional perspectives captured enabled us to reach saturation. We observed that the same individuals were being repeatedly suggested, and the same themes and data were emerging in the interviews. These were good indicators that the range and spread of experiences were adequate for mapping and understanding the key issues and that 'saturation' had been reached.

Second, while the underlying study did include a small number of participants with direct experience of domestic abuse, this data is not included in the paper as it did not speak to the specific points on critiques and defence of refuge-focused upon here. Future research could explore these debates from the perspective of women with direct experience (see also Fitzpatrick et al., 2003). Third, the empirical research presented in this paper is limited to England and Scotland, and it is acknowledged that the broader institutional context for refuges is different in other countries, which may have implications for some parts of the argument presented below.

Findings

Critiques of Shared and Congregate Refuges

Critiques of shared refuges emerged as a strong theme within the data. Most participants saw a continued, though much smaller role for refuge provision than at present, advocating for a move to mainstream accommodation (with support) as the default. A minority were adamant that shared refuge was entirely outdated and should be entirely ended:

"[...] it has had its day" (Housing and homelessness sector)

"[...] refuge accommodation is an out-dated model" (Domestic abuse and housing sector)

For some interviewees, the perpetuation of the traditional refuge model was purely political in nature, more specifically reflecting the interests of providers and the public outcry that the decommissioning of such services may call, despite the model being perceived to be at clear odds with service user preference and interests:

[...] it would be politically very toxic for either a local authority or central government to say, 'you know what... refuge model had its day', and there's a lot of people saying it has had its day. [...] I'm a very strong feminist, I get where the refuge model comes from, I get where feminism was, I get where women were when the refuge model emerged in the 1970s; I think a lot of things have moved on, but the refuge model hasn't [...] when you speak to quite a lot of local authorities, they don't want them either. But they can't decommission them because... you can't touch it. [...] I am not convinced that the perpetuation of the refuge model is client preference. (Housing and homelessness sector)

Those critical of refuges focused on concerns which would be familiar to those critiquing homeless hostels (McMordie, 2021; Watts & Blenkinsopp, 2022), including challenges associated with the use of communal facilities, lack of autonomy and control, imposing a 'victim' identity, and the exclusionary nature of refuges. We will examine these in turn.

Communal Facilities

The most prominent criticism of refuge concerned their congregate nature, and the sharing of facilities like kitchens and bathrooms. This was seen as neither appropriate for, nor desired by survivors of domestic abuse (Fitzpatrick et al., 2003). Several key informants, including individuals closely involved with running refuges, strongly emphasised these points:

They don't want the shared facilities... they want to be able to live independently. [...] And to be honest with you, if it was me, I wouldn't want to share with somebody. (Domestic abuse and housing sector)

[...] the vast majority of people in society do not live communally. They have their own homes. When you are leaving domestic abuse and you leaving your own home behind and 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. So, it's important that we move to a different model. [...] 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. (Domestic abuse sector)

I'm sure most women if they had a choice, would choose to have their own self-contained accommodation. [...] have their own bathroom and their own kitchen and not have to share. (Domestic abuse and housing sector)

These challenges were seen to be magnified where families with children – rather than single women – are sharing space:

You've also got people with different standards, different standards of cleanliness, and different standards of how to bring up their children. It can be extremely difficult when you have eight women in there, and we have three cookers. When do you have your dinner, how do you fit it in. You know there is all sorts of things round about children from different families, you know, different times when they go to sleep, so it's impacting other children. (Domestic abuse sector)

Shared facilities were therefore viewed as outdated and undignified, failing to offer survivors the standards of privacy accorded to most other member of society, which can make it more (not less) difficult to recover from the trauma of abuse (McMordie, 2021). These perspectives closely echo debates in the homelessness sector more generally:

[...] that model of shared, large-scale hostels, shared accommodation, should no longer be an acceptable provision for vulnerable people. [People experiencing homelessness] very much tell us that they don't want to be living in shared accommodation... we have good hostel accommodation, it's very high quality, it's very well staffed, but people just don't want to live in shared provision anymore, they don't feel safe. (Domestic abuse and housing sector)

[...] it's very restrictive, and I think it's quite discriminatory to say, 'because you've experienced domestic abuse, great, we'll stick you in a hostel. [...] I think that that is something in many senses in the field of social care, housing, homelessness, we've probably moved away from, but not with women, not with domestic abuse. So why are we perpetuating 'they need something different' [...] And in terms of communal living, why would we assume that just because you've been through domestic abuse, you're more likely to want communal living? (Key informant, housing and homelessness sector)

This perspective makes clear that it is the *intrinsic* features of shared refuge provision that is problematic, rather than *contingent* features such as the quality of provision, facilities available, or staffing levels (Watts & Blenkinsopp, 2022). Others, recognising the challenges of communal living, saw the cluster model as a compromise between the need to minimise the shortcomings of congregate living while retaining the value of shared spaces:

Communal living is a very, very difficult thing to do. But to bring people together who've, with an experience of domestic abuse [...] within a building where they have their own private facilities, their own home, where routines family routines can be maintained, or established, as they've been ruined by the abusers. [But] we don't live communally... this is why we are moving to this kind of [cluster] facility, which is, you know, the kind of facility we need for the days that we live in. (Domestic abuse sector)

Lack of Autonomy and Control

Several key informants also saw refuge as being an inherently controlled environment, capable of inflicting further harm on residents. This resonates with earlier research highlighting the importance of control over one's immediate living environment, and the harms caused by a lack of this in other shared forms of homeless accommodation (Watts & Blenkinsopp, 2022). Prior studies have continued to draw attention to the strong elements of control and surveillance of clients within the refuge

system (Fauci & Goodman, 2020; Glenn & Goodman, 2015; Goodman et al., 2022). In our research, one key informant pointed out that traditional shared refuges are environments where individuals often have very little personal control, choice, or freedom over what they are permitted to do in their accommodation:

[...] 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. But actually [...] I can smoke if I want to. [...] we're imposing rules on people that we wouldn't impose on ourselves. I think that's problematic. (Domestic abuse sector)

While some of these rules may apply in mainstream private or social rental accommodation too, such as restrictions on decorating, the rules in refuge go much further – generally prohibiting having visitors, sharing its location, and often alcohol consumption. Other researchers have described an ‘oppressive dynamic’ between staff who must enforce rules in the name of resident safety and residents themselves (Glenn & Goodman, 2015; Goodman et al., 2022). Having choice and control is especially important for domestic abuse survivors whose experiences of abuse often entail a loss of control. As such, it was argued that services for domestic abuse survivors should be especially careful to return control wherever possible:

I don't think we should be making choices for people. I think our responsibility [...] is to maximise the choices that women have, and then help them get the option that's best for them. [...] 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. (Housing and homelessness sector)

A few key informants went so far as to describe refuges as sites of unjustified paternalism (Parsell & Marston, 2016):

[...] a lot of refuge accommodation is very paternalistic [...] one of the messages [from service users] that came back was: moving out of domestic abuse relationship, and then to refuge was moving from one controlling relationship to another controlling relationship, which I think is quite staggering news. (Domestic abuse sector)

[...] we are doing a disservice to people because this one size fits all, you're at risk, you're experiencing DV, you've got to go. Professionals are taking self-determinism out of women's lives. They're almost perpetuating the coercive control that perpetrators are holding over them or are exerting over them and displaying by telling them they have to uproot and go. (Domestic abuse and housing sector)

Though they did not use the term ‘paternalistic’, another key informant in England echoed this sentiment in some ways. They explained how the women’s sector has been focused on protecting women by any means possible, including breaking all ties with the perpetrator – whom they have seen as “not human”. Attitudes towards perpetrators of domestic abuse (and survivors’ relationships with them) that dominate within refuge

provision, as well as the broader women's sector, were seen to exemplify this paternalistic – and ultimately, in this participant's view – unrealistic philosophy:

[there is a] deeply ingrained cultural belief that perpetrators are not human. And that we have to protect women and remove them entirely from their perpetrator. But for me, over the years, that doesn't reflect reality. And we almost tried to put cotton wool around survivors and protect them from the perpetrator, when how the real-world works is completely different. [...] we need to be more empowering of survivors and what they want to have in this position. So it's almost like our sector's geared up in the sense, which refuge would be the [apotheosis] of this [...] What do we make of women's ability to have self-determination and choice? (Domestic abuse and housing sector)

This lack of control and autonomy is also particularly problematic when considering trauma recovery, a primary aim of refuge. Returning control is fundamental to recovery: “No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster her recovery, no matter how much it appears to be in her immediate best interest” (Herman, 1992). Irving-Clarke and Henderson (2020) posit that a central aim of early refuges was empowerment in a non-hierarchical system that explicitly prioritised “volunteers forming an ‘alliance’ with victims of abuse rather than a paternalistic relationship where the person in receipt of help feels beholden to the helper” (Irving-Clarke & Henderson, 2020, p. 31). Thus, a paternalistic refuge model can be viewed as at odds with the original ethos.

Imposing a ‘Victim’ Identity

It was further suggested by some key informants that entering refuge may also present the imposition of a narrow, or stigmatised, identity that has adverse consequences for survivors (McCarthy, 2013; Parsell, 2011). Several argued that women may not want to be among a group of other victimised individuals, see themselves as victims, or want to have that identity reinforced:

You've got people who shared sort of similar experiences, and they can talk about it and support each other. Sometimes I think that could potentially have a negative impact... if you've got somebody in a refuge who doesn't necessarily want to relive that bad experience but is surrounded by sort of sadness, and people who've also have that sort of experience [...] and talk about it constantly, is it going to [...] have a negative impact in some cases. (Police and community safety sector)

[...] 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 [...] so the idea of losing your house and losing your relationship and maybe losing your child, losing your pet, and 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. (Domestic abuse sector)

I think it's about putting services in place that don't make the woman feel that it's kind of adding to the stigma... So, I just have a bit of a question; where is it helpful to use the concept or to use the term 'refuge'. (Housing and homelessness sector)

Furthermore, the potential stigma or marginalisation attached to using refuge accommodation may act as a barrier to accessing support. A few key informants suggested this may be particularly true for younger women, who may not identify with a model they associate with a particular political movement or set of ideas they don't relate to or agree with:

[...] there's still a little bit of a view that Women's Aid is for [...] middle-aged wives and that sort of thing. And I think that's part of a legacy of being really strong and activists and things but it's maybe [...] not changed its identity over time or how it's been viewed. (Domestic abuse sector)

[younger women] can sometimes say things to us like, Women's Aid are quite off-putting, it feels like it's kind of old-school feminism, they feel they've kind of got to buy into a whole value system, which is not necessarily where they are at, they just want to get out of the violent relationship, they don't want the lecture. (Housing and homelessness sector)

When considering homelessness responses, satisfaction with accommodation is often linked with what feels like 'home'. This highlights the importance of not feeling different, 'othered', or further stigmatised in services. This translates equally to services for domestic abuse survivors.

Exclusionary Nature

Generic homelessness accommodation is often critiqued for excluding those with certain characteristics, and in particular, those with the highest and most complex needs (Johnsen & Blenkinsopp, 2024; Mackie et al., 2017; McMordie, 2021) reflecting the institutional need to police access in order to minimise risks within the congregate setting (Watts & Blenkinsopp, 2022). It is not surprising, therefore, that shared refuges often also exclude those with the highest needs:

[...] you can't get into refuge if you have very serious mental health problems, if you're a prolific offender, if you're using drugs, if you're drinking heavily. These are the women who are often suffering the worst abuse, most serious abuse, and it's like someone going to A&E and being told you're too ill to come here, so go away and have nothing. (Housing sector)

Women with complex support needs, associated with mental health problems and/or substance users, and rough sleepers deemed too chaotic for shared living, are often excluded from refuge on the basis that their presence would be too disruptive for other residents (see also Johnsen & Blenkinsopp, 2024):

[...] 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. (Domestic abuse and housing sector)

Where those with complex needs are able to access refuges, this has implications for other residents and the support model in place:

Historically, it was okay to leave families [in refuges] out of hours on their own [...] But when you have people in refuge accommodation who have addiction issues and mental health issues and they're fleeing domestic violence; that changes things. (Domestic abuse and housing sector)

Fitzpatrick et al. (2003) note that in their refuge study that, for some participants, “domestic violence seemed simply one of a myriad of problems that confronted them” which proved to be a challenge for “WA’s traditional way of working” (p. 68). Thus, there is a mismatch between the target demographic and some segments of need, including women facing challenges beyond domestic abuse. Haaken and Yragui (2003) raise a different but related point, observing that the immediate cause for entering a refuge may be abuse by one perpetrator; there are additional layers of ‘subordination’ that limit their ability to escape domestic abuse. Thus, addressing ‘merely’ the abuse, therefore, is inadequate. It is important to situate these limitations within the context of the early feminist refuge movement’s strong focus on the patriarchy, which historically paid less attention to issues of intersectionality and other economic sources of inequality, oppression, and disadvantage – such as the higher prevalence of domestic abuse among those experiencing poverty (Fahmy et al., 2016).

The defense of Shared and Congregate Refuges

Given the problematic nature of shared refuges as discussed above, the question arises whether domestic abuse survivors nonetheless have specific needs, different from those of other homeless groups, that only shared refuges can address. Perhaps, in other words, the hardships and harms identified above are a ‘necessary evil’ which must be endured in order to achieve benefits of overriding importance that shared refuges can deliver. This section considers the persuasiveness of defenses of shared refuges focused on three key postulated benefits discussed by key informants - safety, support, and breathing space.

Safety

The defence of shared refuge provision that emerged most strongly concerned their postulated capacity to provide uniquely *safe* housing that takes a woman directly out of an abusive environment as a crisis response, with a majority of key informants highlighting this element. Critically, refuges were argued by some to provide an *immediate* response to crisis when the woman or family urgently needs a safe, confidential alternative location to escape to:

[...] there are [sometimes] people on the phone who are like I’m at a phone box now and I need to go right now, where are you, I’m coming. [...] they wouldn’t tolerate a question of like, well maybe we should talk about how like maybe you could stay in your home. (Domestic abuse and housing sector)

Particularly for higher-risk victims shared refuge was often considered appropriate as it was seen to offer more safety than other provision due to its confidential location

and the ‘target hardening’ it permits (i.e. security measures in the facility, such as closed-circuit television cameras and extra secure entries to the building):

[...] 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... you're spotted as soon as you get there. [...] It won't be universally safe, but it probably will be safer than being isolated in a flat out in the community. (Housing sector)

[...] what Women's Aid would tell you is that their dispersed furnished flats are far more popular than refuge accommodation. [...] But what Women's Aid tell us is that there is very much still a need for refuge accommodation because there are some women whose either risk of domestic violence is so high, or their own emotional support needs are so high that they need somebody there, somebody else there on a 24/7 basis. (Domestic abuse and housing sector)

Some key informants felt that because the physical safety of the house itself is so central in domestic abuse cases, separating accommodation from support is more challenging, in comparison to other homelessness support services:

[...] 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. Not to say that you can't. (Housing and homelessness sector)

Regardless, refuges are not always completely secure, particularly because, despite best efforts, the anonymity of their location is guaranteed or always maintained. It was suggested that refuges may have been a safer option in the past than they are now, in part due to the rise of social media: “[...] nowadays it's not difficult to find out where those places are, regardless of what measures they take [...] they're not as perhaps, securely located now as they used to be.” (Police and community safety sector)

Further, the confidential, hidden location of traditional refuges, which has long been one of the defining characteristics of this type of provision, is increasingly under scrutiny, as it can compound isolation and a lack of connection with the community at large (Goodman et al., 2022; Haaken & Yragui, 2003).

There are also now established means of providing safe accommodation in mainstream independent accommodation, including survivors' existing home, via ‘sanctuary schemes’ or similar, whereby ‘target hardening’ measures are combined with full risk assessments and perpetrator management (Jones et al., 2010a, 2010b). Since the late 1990s sanctuary schemes in the UK have offered an alternative solution to the statutory homelessness system or refuges underpinned by a ‘survivor stays’ – as opposed to ‘victim moves’ – ethos that turns the logic of statutory homelessness or refuge-based responses on their head. Such responses are well-evidenced as providing successful, safe alternative to households by minimising disruption, giving more choices to women, increasing feelings of safety and confidence, and reducing repeat incidents of abuse (Hester & Westmarland, 2005; Jones et al., 2010a, 2010b; Martin & Levine, 2010).

Finally, another pertinent matter is safety *within* the service from others using it. The importance of women-only homelessness services was repeatedly emphasized, as

individuals felt that mixed-gender accommodation was highly problematic for survivors of abuse, especially those with additional complex needs (see also Johnsen & Blenkinsopp, 2024). However, while refuges are very often the only women-only shared accommodation options available, self-contained options of course obviate the need to share with others altogether.

Support

A second potential defence of shared refuges discussed by key informants' centres on the value of the support such provision facilitates, and in particular the blend of professional and peer support uniquely available on site within refuges. These benefits are among the core founding principles of the refuge movement in the UK and are, in essence, what differentiates a refuge from other forms of temporary accommodation, as noted above. Key informants from across multiple sectors noted the expertise of specialist domestic abuse services with their knowledge of, for example, trauma recovery, psychologically-informed environments, and dynamics of abuse. The benefits of this professional support was a powerful theme throughout the fieldwork, with key informants strongly lauding the work of the women's sector, and the concept of providing 'more than a roof' frequently mentioned. One was of the view that such work was only provided in refuge contexts:

[...] 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. (Domestic abuse and housing sector)

Alongside the specialist support from domestic abuse workers, shared refuges were also argued to facilitate support from peers (see also Warrington, 2003 and Bowstead, 2019). Refuges were founded on the belief that shared spaces for women escaping similar traumatic situations can help their recovery: the founding feminist ethos was not merely to provide shelter but to "empower women" (Ishkanian, 2014, p. 341), considered especially important given that a key tactic of abusers is isolating their partners from sources of support (Home Office, 2012).

For women moving far away due to safety reasons and who therefore may not have a support network in their new location, refuge may also help combat isolation. From a trauma recovery perspective, the opportunity for reconnection and restoration of relationships is also indispensable (Herman, 1992, 1998). Thus, many key informants argued that peer support and shared experience remain highly beneficial aspects of the model:

[...] the idea of a small house with a confidential address with women supporting each other; I think is a great solution that we need to be available. (Domestic abuse and housing sector)

bring[ing] people together with an experience of domestic abuse is vital [...] so that they can really heal from domestic abuse, share experiences, know that they're not alone. (Domestic abuse sector)

One key informant discussed her experience of women in refuge finding community, staying connected after leaving the service, assisting each other in homelessness applications, and providing support and friendship. The sense of community was also thought critical in helping highlight domestic abuse as a societal issue, not just an individual one, as noted earlier (Appelt & Kaselitz, 2002; Bowstead, 2019; Warrington, 2003):

"[...] 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. (Domestic abuse sector)

However, there was also a sense that this element of mutual support within a shared environment has lost some of its prior importance:

[...] there's a little bit more of an independence [...] people are more used to living alone now than previous generations. [...] I think the sense of women coming together and supporting each other is really strong and I hope still really important, but I feel like people are maybe a little bit more used to just doing things for themselves, or I don't know, I guess there's maybe a little less of a culture of that. (Domestic abuse sector)

In addition, some key informants were sceptical of the merits of mutual support, suggesting that these intra-refuge interactions must be managed effectively, and could in fact be detrimental to residents:

the model of putting women together who share that experience, and there's peer support, I mean I kind of get that, but... you do need to manage refuges very effectively, you can basically have a bunch of people who can pull themselves down, not lift themselves up. (Housing and homelessness sector)

It's difficult. You know I can see the benefits of being able to look to other victims for support but... I also think this potentially could have a negative impact as well. (Police and community safety sector)

Perhaps most fundamentally, however, the point was made that peer support networks, insofar as these are beneficial, could be set up with individually accommodated survivors and do not rely on a congregate model of accommodation provision for their efficacy (see also Airlie 2023):

[...] all the discussions we have about kind of supporting people to live independent lives... people want their own home... and that kind of support can come through other ways, it doesn't have to be in a kind of domestic setting" (Housing sector)

Breathing space

Finally, some key informants argued that refuges provide both a physical and emotional ‘breathing’ space and opportunities for survivors to make a ‘fresh start’. Those making this case saw such breathing space as essential to give survivors time to assess their options:

[...] the second a woman leaves, then they're encouraged to hand back the keys to their property or to make a homeless application, whereas what actually needs to happen is there should be a bit of breathing space where the woman gets good advice and support to make the right decision for her and her family. (Domestic abuse and housing sector)

This argument is reminiscent of once dominant but increasingly challenged ‘staircase models’ in the homelessness sector, which see a need for ‘transitional’ accommodation in which individuals are supported to become ‘housing ready’ before accessing mainstream accommodation (Baxter et al., 2019; Johnsen & Teixeira, 2010; Woodhall-Melnik & Dunn, 2016).

In addition, and crucially, while the contention that at least some of those experiencing the extreme trauma of domestic abuse will require a ‘breathing space’ before deciding how and when to move on may be well made, the idea that shared refuge is the necessary form that this breathing space should take is more questionable. Like the support points made above, these ‘space’ benefits could, at least in principle, be replicated within a variety of accommodation settings, and indeed in mainstream settled housing, in which, of course, there is the *option* but not a requirement for long-term residence.

Concluding discussion

This paper was prompted by the observation that the harms associated with hostels and other forms of congregate accommodation are increasingly recognised in the homelessness and housing sectors, with robust evidence attesting to the effectiveness of ‘Housing First’ approaches demonstrating the flawed assumptions underpinning ‘transitional’ models of intervention. However, shared refuges for domestic abuse survivors have to date largely escaped this challenging interrogation, even though many of the criticisms of homeless hostels – the harms associated with communal facilities, lack of control, stigmatised identities and exclusionary policies – would appear on the face of it just as valid when applied to refuges. In fact, such critiques may even be *particularly* relevant in the case of refuges as an accommodation-based response to domestic abuse, especially when rules echo the controlling environment created by a perpetrator or a paternalistic ethos stifles women’s autonomy. Those we spoke to were clear that survivors of domestic abuse have the same needs for privacy, security, control over their environment and a ‘normal’ home as any other population.

While acknowledging these challenges, some commentators nonetheless continue to see shared refuges as having a role – alongside a range of other options – within domestic abuse accommodation-based responses. We would argue, based on our analysis, that these claims do not stand up to critical scrutiny. In most respects, the benefits associated with refuges (safety, support, and breathing space) are not inherently tied to shared forms

of accommodation. It is perfectly possible for intensive, responsive professional support to be provided within independent accommodation, as has been so well demonstrated by the Housing First model (Baxter et al., 2019; Woodhall-Melnik & Dunn, 2016). Peer support can also be facilitated among those in dispersed accommodation. Moreover, we question the assumption that shared refuges are necessarily safer than independent dispersed accommodation, so long as the latter is appropriately accompanied by support, target hardening measures, and perpetrator management, as demonstrated by the success of sanctuary scheme initiatives (Jones et al., 2010a, 2010b). Finally, while some defend the idea that part of the recovery journey may best be negotiated prior to independent living, such staircase models have been so widely discredited in other areas that a very heavy burden of proof is on the women's sector to demonstrate the efficacy and benefits for domestic abuse survivors, especially given acknowledgement by those we spoke to that the majority of women would prefer to live independently, and – we would venture – would prefer to decide themselves when they are ready to 'move on'.

In our view, then, shared refuges are a historical model that may have served a critical role at a time when no other options were viable but should now be phased out or, at the very least, used only in emergency cases, and for as short a time as possible. Defenses of refuges are, we would argue, outdated, sometimes patronizing, and often appear to reflect the interests of the women's movement or provider organisations, rather than survivors' needs and preferences. However, our analysis raises a series of questions and indicates priorities for future research.

First, this paper has not considered in detail the role of cluster models of refuge provision in detail, i.e., provision that provides individual units of self-contained accommodation on a single site. This approach offers to provide the community element for survivors if it is deemed important, and/or on-site support that may be impractical and/or prohibitively expensive in accommodation across dispersed locations. Yet even the cluster model should be presented as a *choice* for survivors, not the default, since this study has found that 'forced communities' may even be harmful or stigmatising rather than healing or supportive for survivors. Indeed, in our view, choice should be a guiding principle for domestic abuse responses, as it has been within the Housing First model, and enable women to choose, for example, whether they wish to access housing close to their existing social networks or in a new area where they seek a 'fresh start'. Second and relatedly, there is an urgent need for rigorous, large-scale quantitative research and consultation with women and children survivors of domestic abuse about their needs and preferences in relation to housing and support responses, with particular attention paid to issues of transitional versus long-term/settled housing options (including support to stay in existing accommodation), the location of alternative accommodation-based responses, and the kinds of support they value (or not), including access to peer support. Such work should consider, in particular, the relative demand for shared versus cluster versus dispersed models of provision. If, as our evidence suggests, there is little, if any, demand for shared refuges (see also Fitzpatrick et al., 2003), these should be phased out entirely, and the appropriate balance between cluster and dispersed modes determined in an evidence-based way.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge that traditional shared refuge represented not only physically and emotionally safe accommodation for domestic abuse survivors, but also an emblem of the radical feminist movement. Refuges have served as material manifestations of feminist resistance to patriarchy aiming to transform an individualized problem into a collective one. The challenge for scholars, policy makers and practitioners in this field may be to help modernise the accommodation options for women and children survivors of domestic abuse without losing the feminist and social justice-inspired energy that propelled the movement in the first place.

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