

# How homeless women have little choice but to use sex for survival

August 13 2018, by Juliet Watson

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Women [comprise 42%](#) of Australia's homeless population. Not only do [many women become homeless due to family violence](#), homelessness can expose them to [further gendered violence](#). Research shows homeless

women [experience violence](#) – or feel vulnerable to it – in crisis accommodation, such as private rooming houses and motels, to which housing services often refer them due to the scarcity of more suitable alternatives.

For my [recently published book](#) I interviewed 15 [women](#) aged 18-25 about their experiences of managing homelessness in Melbourne. The women described how the poverty, social exclusion and physical danger that accompany homelessness required them to manage their circumstances with very few resources.

Lack of money, welfare support and social capital meant, for some, their only resource was to exchange sex for somewhere to stay.

## **Sex for a home**

When asked about their experiences, different circumstances of seeking accommodation emerged. A common thread, however, was the assumption by others that homelessness made women willing and available to transact sex for accommodation. As Hayley said: "The bad part about being homeless is that people think they can take advantage of you because you're going to do anything 'cause you're homeless. Especially guys think, 'Yeah, she's out there on the streets, she'll fuck me, she'll do me.' The way they think [of you] – as just a piece of meat."

This perception can be observed in the ["sex for rent"](#) advertisements that appear on Craig's List. These types of advertisements clearly state sex is expected as payment for accommodation. But such "contracts" aren't always obvious to women seeking shared accommodation and might not even be presented initially as a transactional arrangement.

Alice was looking for private rental accommodation while staying in a youth refuge. Her options were limited to what she could afford on

Youth Allowance. When she applied to sublet a room, she told me: "The only place that I found was with this man who I sort of had doubts about the sort of person he was and basically he didn't want me there once he found out that I had a boyfriend."

Alice was never placed in a position where she needed to seriously consider the transaction of sex for accommodation because her boyfriend then obtained student accommodation and she stayed with him.

Other women I interviewed, however, had fewer alternatives. For them, survival sex was a viable option for managing homelessness. It ranged from staying with men for a night to longer-term situations where a woman would remain in a sexual relationship to avoid becoming homeless again.

While she was sleeping rough and on her own, Hayley described "hooking up" briefly with a man also experiencing homelessness. Although he was unable to provide accommodation, Hayley stayed with him to feel safer from the violence of street-based homelessness. "This guy was just walking around and I was like, 'Oh, do you want to come with me?' I didn't want to be by myself because I was scared."

Sarah stayed in a relationship for six months longer than she wanted because her partner was providing her with somewhere to live and financial support. She told me: "I was very scared of leaving... 'cause I'd lose my house... I'd lose that. I'd lose the money... It was just 'cause I'd seen the pretty side of things. That's all it was."

## **Vulnerable to exploitation**

Women's reliance on providing sex to manage homelessness makes them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Although outsiders may consider

that they are entering into a mutually beneficial contract, this wasn't the case for the women I interviewed.

Jessie had accepted accommodation on many occasions from men she met after becoming [homeless](#) at 16. She became acutely aware of the consequences of not providing sex to these men even if no explicit arrangement had been agreed upon. She explained: "If a guy offers you a lift or a place to sleep, they're not being nice. They're just doing it because they want to have sex with you and they can see that you're vulnerable... It'd be alright for a little while. Then when it came to bedtime, or close to bedtime, I'd start getting touched and get an icky feeling that something's wrong. ... I said 'no' but still they didn't respect it, so I just had to put up with it."

Technology is now changing how women experiencing homelessness can meet men for accommodation. Welfare services are reporting that women are using [dating apps](#) such as Tinder to get temporary accommodation because they have no other options. Reports also suggest this practice [isn't limited to women](#).

Due to the hidden nature and often ill-defined boundaries of survival sex, it is difficult to regulate and therefore almost impossible to offer protection for women. This places them in highly precarious situations. Until the structural issues in our housing market are addressed, this is unlikely to change.

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