

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gender(ed) Pathways and Exits Out of ‘Street’ Homelessness in Tshwane, South Africa?: A Transformative Social Policy Perspective

Newman Tekwa¹ 

Abstract

While homelessness remains a gendered experience, the latest census data from the South African Statistical Agency (StatsSA), focusing solely on rooflessness and emergency shelters, indicates that, in the last census decade, the homeless population in the City of Tshwane increased by over 60%, from 6,244 in 2010 to 10,029 in 2022. Though lacking a gender perspective, analyses by the same agency revealed that in Tshwane, 29.9% of the people experiencing homelessness were female. Tshwane also has the highest number of people experiencing homelessness at the national level. This is set against a background in which the *Pathways out of Homelessness* project marked its 10th anniversary in August 2024. Born out of public outcry, *Pathways out of Homelessness* is a collaborative research project between a local government, academic institutions and civil society organisations in the City of Tshwane, aimed at finding lasting solutions and pathways out of homelessness in the city. Using a gendered lens framed within a transformative social policy framework, this paper interrogates *Pathways out of Homelessness*' exclusive focus on 'street' homelessness, vis-à-vis surging homeless populations. Findings from the study indicate that a lack of understanding of gendered pathways in and out of homelessness in South Africa, coupled with the mainstream focus on 'street' homelessness and homeless shelters, explains why the city is losing ground in addressing homelessness.

Keywords: Homelessness • Gender pathways • Transformative social policy • Pathways out of Homelessness project • City of Tshwane • South Africa

1 Correspondence author: Newman Tekwa (PhD, Post-Doctoral Researcher), University of South Africa (UNISA), College of Graduate Studies, South African Research Chair in Social Policy, City of Tshwane, South Africa, Email: tekwana@unisa.ac.za, tekwaneyman@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-0248-7073

To cite this article: Tekwa, N. (2024). Gender(ed) Pathways and Exits Out of ‘Street’ Homelessness in Tshwane, South Africa?: A Transformative Social Policy Perspective. *Istanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi*, 44, 589-608. <https://doi.org/10.26650/SJ.2024.44.2.0685>

With homelessness remaining a gendered experience, the latest census data from the South African Statistical Agency (StatsSA) indicates that the homeless population in the City of Tshwane increased by over 60 % in the last census decade. According to the Statistics South Africa 2022 census report, the number of people experiencing homelessness in the city surged from 6244 in 2010 to 10029 people in 2022. The statistical agency's findings support the observations made by De Beer and Vally (2020, p. 88), who argued that the number of people experiencing homelessness in the City of Tshwane is far from decreasing. As a social policy issue, Statistics South Africa (2022, p.61) describes the risk of experiencing homelessness as representing the most acute form of social and economic deprivation. In particular, women's experiences of hidden homelessness represent a form of advanced marginality (Casey 2001). In South Africa, as elsewhere, national and local level policy responses to homelessness and efforts geared towards finding sustainable exit pathways have always been impeded by the lack of accurate and up-to-date gendered homelessness statistical data. While the recently completed South Africa's 2022 national census represents a marked improvement on homelessness counts from previous years, the recommendation to exclusively focus on primary (roofless) and secondary (shelter) homelessness makes the national exercise highly gendered (Statistics South Africa 2024, p. 61). The unavailability of gender data on homelessness in South Africa persists until the time when the Statistical Agency adopts a more gender-sensitive approach to homelessness enumeration than what presently applies. Consequently, the national exercise concluded that "males are predominantly homeless *in South Africa* compared to their female counterparts" (Statistics South Africa 2022, p.62). Emphasis is mine; see also De Beer and Vally 2017, p. 385). These latest statistics indicate that a total of 55,719 people are experiencing homelessness nationally, from which 29.1% are females, translating to 16,667 women experiencing homelessness. Whether justifying a focus on 'street' homelessness, 79.9 % of people experiencing homelessness in South Africa are 'roofless', translating to 44,512 people, with the remaining 20.1 % in the shelters amounting to 11,207 people experiencing homelessness. While a higher percentage of women experiencing homelessness are within the shelters at 32.7 % and translating to approximately 12,804 women, 29.2 % of people experiencing 'rooflessness' in South Africa are female approximately 3,586 women. Despite the mainstream male focus on street homelessness and emergency homelessness shelters, women are visibly represented in significant numbers (Perrier 2020).

While the Gauteng province, where the City of Tshwane and Johannesburg are located, recorded the highest share of the homeless population at the national level at 45.6 %, the City of Tshwane Metropolitan area, where this research is based, recorded the highest proportion of people experiencing homelessness in the country at 18.1 %, which translates to 10029 people experiencing homelessness in 2022. While this is a conservative figure due to the male-focus in the national homelessness enumeration,

out of the 10,085 people experiencing homelessness in the City of Tshwane, 29.9 % are females, translating to approximately 2,925 women experiencing homelessness in the City of Tshwane. Despite the lack of accurate data to benchmark, the general trend indicate an increase from the previous years, a trend likely to persist if no fundamental shifts occur in the approaches in which homelessness is researched, recorded and the resultant policy responses. Besides, homelessness had traditionally occupied a peripheral policy priority in the City of Tshwane.¹ Number 1 Struben Street until to date, constitutes the only City owned emergence homelessness shelter for a total population of 10,085 people presently experiencing homelessness in the City (Statistics South Africa 2022: 63). In 2014, over 600 people resided at the old and overcrowded shelter because of both natural increase and new entrants added daily (De Beer 2015, p. 2). The group comprised the frail, the elderly, and those living with chronic psycho-social illnesses, including mothers with babies (De Beer 2015, p. 2).

Due to the inhumane conditions at the only City-owned homelessness shelter, in May 2014, the City issued a letter of notice instructing all residents at the shelter to vacate the place within one day to facilitate renovations at the premises (De Beer and Vally 2017, p. 385). The eviction notice created an immediate challenge for the socially and economically disadvantaged group, including women and children who were forced to find alternative accommodation at such a short notice, if not going onto the streets (De Beer and Vally 2017, p. 385). Even though the order was subsequently reversed following a public outcry, the event, which highlighted the tip of an iceberg relating to the enormous homelessness challenge in the City, led to the formation of the *Pathways out of Homelessness* project in September 2014 (De Beer and Vally 2017, p. 385; De Beer and Vally 2020, p. 77; Moloko-Phiri, Mogale and Hugo 2017, p. 1). The *Pathways out of Homelessness* is a collaborative research project comprises a local government, represented by the City of Tshwane, two major academic institutions in Pretoria and civil society organisations represented by the Tshwane Homelessness Forum (THF),² including researchers and individuals with lived experiences of homelessness (De Beer and Vally 2020, p. 78; De Beer and Vally 2017, p. 378; Moloko-Phiri et al. 2027, p. 1). The set objectives of the *Tshwane Pathways out of Homelessness* project established at the initial meeting and agreed by all parties to the collaborative research included conducting research on homelessness in the City of Tshwane (De Beer and Vally 2017, p. 385; De Beer 2015, p.2). This was in addition to reviewing the city's existing policy documents on homelessness and providing policy recommendations. Apart from conducting a homelessness summit to bring together all players in the homelessness sector, including people with lived experiences of

1 The City of Tshwane is the Metropolitan Municipality to which Pretoria also belongs. It is the administrative capital of the Republic of South Africa.

2 The Tshwane Homelessness Forum is a stakeholder forum consisting of non-profit organisations, researchers and the homeless and former homeless individuals and City officials.

homelessness, one of the envisaged outputs of the *Pathways out of Homelessness project* included a draft strategy and policy document on homelessness for the city (De Beer and Vally 2017, p. 386; Moloko-Phiri et al. 2017, p. 1; De Beer 2015).

After six months of participatory research, the collaboration culminated in the hosting of the first ever Homelessness Summit in the City of Tshwane from May 25 to 26, 2015 (De Beer and Vally 2020, p. 79). While the presentation of a research report and draft policy in July 2015 marked key milestones of the *Pathways out of Homelessness project*, most importantly the 10th of October 2015 saw the signing of a social contract between a local government, academic institutions and civil society organisations to end and find pathways out of homelessness in the City of Tshwane (De Beer and Vally 2020, p. 79). This was followed by adopting the Tshwane Homelessness Policy in August 2019. The *Pathways out of Homelessness* is presently in its third Phase with Phase II having started in January 2018 and ended in 2020 (De Beer and Vally 2020, p. 79). With a focus on documenting evidence to inform policy decisions on pathways out of homelessness in the City of Tshwane, three pillars or approaches constituted the *Pathways out of Homelessness project* (Moloko-Phiri 2017, p. 1). These included firstly, documenting existing practices. Second, narrating lived experiences, which also included women's narratives on homelessness in the City of Tshwane (see Moloko-Phiri, et al. 2017). The third pillar focused on appraising current and related homelessness policy documents and drafting a homelessness policy for the City (Moloko-Phiri et al. 2017, p.1; De Beer and Vally 2017, p. 390). Dubbed a research-based methodology to inform public policy, the *Pathways out of Homelessness project* asserted that engagement in policy making and the technical analysis of policy documents were fundamental and constituent parts in seeking sustainable pathways out of homelessness (De Beer and Vally 2017, p. 391). While the collaborative research project is one of its kind and highly commendable, particularly from a global South context, *Pathways out of Homelessness* decided to focus on 'street' homelessness (De Beer and Vally 2017, p. 386; De Beer 2015, p. 5; Tenai and Mbewu 2020, p. 2). This decision, according to the argument presented in the project's documents, builds on previous research on homelessness in South Africa, which also had an exclusive focus on street homelessness (De Beer and Vally 2017, p. 388; De Beer and Vally 2020, p. 77; Tenai and Mbewu 2020, p. 2). De Beer and Vally (2017, p. 388) define street homelessness as referring to all living without any form of shelter on the street, pavements, bushes, city parks or other vacant urban spaces (see also De Beer 2015, p. 5; Tenai and Mbewu 2020, p. 2). The *Pathways out of Homelessness project* argues that its definition of homelessness is much broader compared to the one used in previous research on homelessness in South Africa by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) (De Beer and Vally 2017, p.388; De Beer 2015, p. 3). Concomitantly, *Pathways out of Homelessness* emphasised the provision of shelters and related services in addition to understanding trajectories into homelessness and assisting people find their way out of homelessness

(De Beer and Vally 2020, p. 78). With an overarching objective of using a gender transformative social policy lens to critique the exclusive focus on 'street' homelessness by the *Tshwane Pathways out of Homelessness* project and the identification of actionable policy strategies for improvement, the following research questions guided the research study.

- What are the key gendered experiences, challenges and pathways in and out of homelessness faced by women experiencing homelessness in the City of Tshwane *Pathways out of Homelessness* project?
- To what extent does an exclusive focus on 'street' homelessness and homelessness 'shelters' by the *Pathways out of Homelessness* project an impediment to finding gender-specific and sustainable pathways in and out of homelessness in Tshwane?
- What gender-specific innovative and transformative social policy approaches are recommended for the *Pathways out of Homelessness* project to effectively address exit strategies out of homelessness for women experiencing homelessness in the City?

Methods and Materials

The paper adopts a qualitative review of the literature in addition to document analysis of published and unpublished outputs of the *Pathways out of Homelessness* project in the City of Tshwane, including a draft policy and strategy document on homelessness in the City. Much of the literature on *Pathways out of Homelessness* project are outputs by researchers working on various themes on the project and covered materials from 2015 to present. The nature of the materials included reports, conference proceedings and a collection of articles published in *Development Southern Africa*, 2017. These constituted the main documents analysed. These were complemented by a draft policy document produced in 2015, the actual homelessness policy entitled '*Street Homelessness Policy for the City of Tshwane 2017*' and the South African census report 2022. Also consulted was the South African national strategic plan on gender-based violence and femicide. The information was retrieved from google search engines using the following search words: gender, homelessness, City of Tshwane, transformative social policy, pathways out of homelessness, South Africa. The literature on South Africa was complemented with international literature where international best practices were drawn to provide recommendations. Much of the data was retrieved by note writing from which emerging themes were extracted with a particular focus on gendered pathways in and out of homelessness as guided by the research questions. Thematic analysis was applied to sort out the emerging themes from the South African literature on homelessness. It is from these themes that the results presented in the

discussion section were extracted. While there is much literature on homelessness in South Africa, the inclusion and exclusion criteria included applying a gender lens on homelessness and more so on the pathways out of homelessness project.

Literature Review

Homelessness is increasingly recognised as a significant global crisis, intensified by rising human precarity and economic instability (De Beer & Vally, 2020, p. 77; Dogan, 2021, p. 144). While this is so, feminist research on homelessness continues to highlight the extent to which mainstream research on homelessness remains steeply male focused with gendered experiences continuing to elude researchers and policymakers alike (Engender, 2020, p. 1; Mostowska & Debska, 2020, p. 53; Johnson, Ribar and Zhu, 2017, 1). The increasing homelessness crisis and persistent male-centric policy responses remain particularly acute for women, who were found by Casey (2001) to constitute approximately 70 % of homeless households worldwide. This increased visibility of homeless women and their families observed in various contexts across the world calls for a gender-specific focus on women's pathways in and out of homelessness. Within the South African context, Perrier (2022) noted similar trends with women experiencing traditionally male forms of homelessness on the increase within the City of Tshwane (see also Olufemi 2000 for a discussion on feminisation of poverty and an increase in street homelessness in South Africa). Beyond South Africa, Dogan (2021, p. 149 citing Rossi, 1990) in a paper focusing on stereotyping and prejudices in policymaking highlighted significant increases in homelessness among women and families in Turkey. This background necessitates a proper understanding of the unique pathways into homelessness for women to develop effective gender-responsive social policies and identify effective exit strategies out of homelessness for this group.

Women's Experiences and Gendered Pathways into Homelessness

Feminist research on homelessness has long highlighted specific gendered pathways into homelessness for women often missed in mainstream research (Bretherton and Pleace, 2024, 1; Engender, 2020, p. 12; Pophaim & Peacock, 2021, p. 79; Tenai & Mbewu, 2020, p. 7; Dogan, 2021, p. 150). Top among these gendered pathways and one primary precipitating factor into homelessness for many women relates to domestic violence—both a cause and consequence of female homelessness (Hargrave, et al. 2024, 1; Engender, 2020, p. 12; Pophaim & Peacock, 2021, p. 79; Tenai & Mbewu, 2020, p. 7; Dogan, 2021, p. 150; Mostowska & Debska, 2020, p. 53). According to feminist research in various contexts from around the world, the need to escape abusive situations often forces women to leave their homes as the homelessness route provides a faster and more straightforward approach (Homelessness Australia, 2024, 1; Engender,

2020, p. 12; Pophaim & Peacock, 2021, p. 79; Tenai & Mbewu, 2020, p. 7; Dogan, 2021, p. 150). While this is so and highlighting the 'hidden forms of homelessness' for women, the scholars differentiated women's and men's pathways into homelessness. Noteworthy, while many men may go straight onto the street, women, due to several gender-specific characteristics of their homelessness including the possibility of accompanying children, initially move in with friends, relatives and acquaintances as concealed households (Bretherton 2017, 4; Mayock and Sheridan 2020, 19; Savage 2016, 43). Feminist research highlights that it is only after exhausting all forms of informal social support available to them that women appear on the street as homeless (Bretherton (2017, p. 2). In the South African context, Moloko-Phiri et al., (2017, p. 10) indicated that many women become homeless due to violence from their partner or family members (see also De Beer, 2015, p. 24). The observations of Moloko-Phiri et al., (2017) are recently corroborated by analyses of the recent census count in South Africa, listing the top five main reasons for homelessness by sex (Statistics South Africa 2022, p. 65). Highlighting the high rates of gender-based violence in South Africa, on average 'arguments with family' contributed to 17 % of homelessness in the country. A gender analysis revealed that this figure is higher at 20.3 % for women relative to 17.0 % for men (Statistics South Africa, 2022, 65). Domestic violence remains one gendered pathway into homelessness for women across the world and in South Africa—a cause mainstream research is yet to adequately highlight in its research and policy responses on homelessness (Engender, 2020, p. 12; Pophaim & Peacock, 2021, p. 79; Tenai & Mbewu, 2020, p. 7; Dogan, 2021, p. 150). These findings are corroborated by research in other contexts. Bretherton and Pleace (2024, 5) focusing on the needs of homeless women using homelessness services in London found a strong intersection between domestic violence and women's homelessness. Hargrave et al., (2024, 1), in a study on inter-partner violence and homelessness highlighted the extent to which the latter constitutes a 'survival strategy' for women experiencing violence in California. Calvo, et al. (2024, 13) in a paper focusing on the prevalence and nature of violence against women experiencing homelessness made similar observations in Spain. In Australia, domestic violence was similarly found to be the leading pathway into homelessness for women (Homelessness Australia 2024, 1; see also Housing First 2024 for women homelessness in Europe).

Interlinked to domestic violence and homelessness is women's economic vulnerability and dependence (Engender, 2020, p. 6; Tenai & Mbewu, 2020, p. 2; Casey, 2001; Pophaim & Peacock, 2021, p. 79). The male-bread winner model comes with the gendered expectation that men should earn an income to support the family while women contribute to the household work of caring for children (De Beer and Vally 2021, p. 19). By implication, women become economically dependent on the male breadwinner, and in the event of a family dispute, the women and children often lose income support, increasing their vulnerability to homelessness (Hargrave, Moore,

Adhiningrat, Perry and Kushel, 2024, 2). Apart from their economic dependence, women often occupy precarious positions in the labour market as they engage in part-time, low-paid or unstable employment while managing unpaid care responsibilities (Engender, 2020, p. 6; Tenai & Mbewu, 2020, p. 2; Casey, 2001). As the COVID-19 experience highlighted, such economic segregation increases women's economic vulnerability, thus increasing their risk of homelessness in the event of family disputes (Hargrave et al., 2024, 3). Consequently, many are unable to afford own rented housing and spend a large portion of their income on rent, further exacerbating their vulnerability. Consequently, a disproportionate number of women depend on social housing relative to their male counterparts (Engender (2020, p. 6). Within the South African context, Statistics South Africa, in its recent census report provided limelight on some of the gendered pathways into homelessness for women in the country. Relatedly, in its analysis of the top five main causes of homelessness in the country, 'loss of or no job or income' topped the list of the primary causes of homelessness in South Africa (Statistics South Africa 2022, p. 65). This percentage showed no significant difference by gender with 41.6 % for women and 41.3 % for men, highlighting the significance of economic factors in influencing pathways into homelessness in South Africa, including that for women. An analysis of the 'ability to afford accommodation' dimension revealed a higher percentage of women experiencing homelessness, indicating that they cannot not afford own accommodation at 10.9 % relative to 7.4 % for their male counterparts. Further afield, in a study on homelessness and domestic and family violence, Homelessness Australia (2024, 1) documented the extent to which a lack of financial support not only makes a woman unable to leave a violent partner, but forces them to return to them when they had initially tried homelessness as a survival strategy. This perpetuates a gendered vicious cycle of vulnerability to homelessness and victimisation in which women's loss of safe and secure housing can further expose them to violence and exploitation (Engender, 2020, p. 6; Tenai & Mbewu, 2020, p. 7; Casey, 2001; Dogan, 2021, p. 150). While the question of why and how women become homeless is seldom addressed in research or policy discussions, the above highlights the importance of understanding not only the broader economic and social constraints that leave women dependent on male partners but also other economic vulnerabilities for women (Engender, 2020, p. 12; Casey, 2001). Failure to investigate and take cognisance of these underlying gender issues results in interventionist strategies that inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities.

Highlighting the complexity and gendered nature of female homelessness, it is often intertwined with managing unpaid care responsibility (Engender, 2020, p. 6; Tenai & Mbewu, 2020, p. 2; Casey, 2001). As often highlighted by feminist scholars, women experiencing homelessness are more likely than men to have dependent children, complicating their homeless situations (Engender, 2020, p. 10; Moloko-Phiri et al., 2017, p. 3). This makes women's experiences and pathways into homelessness unique

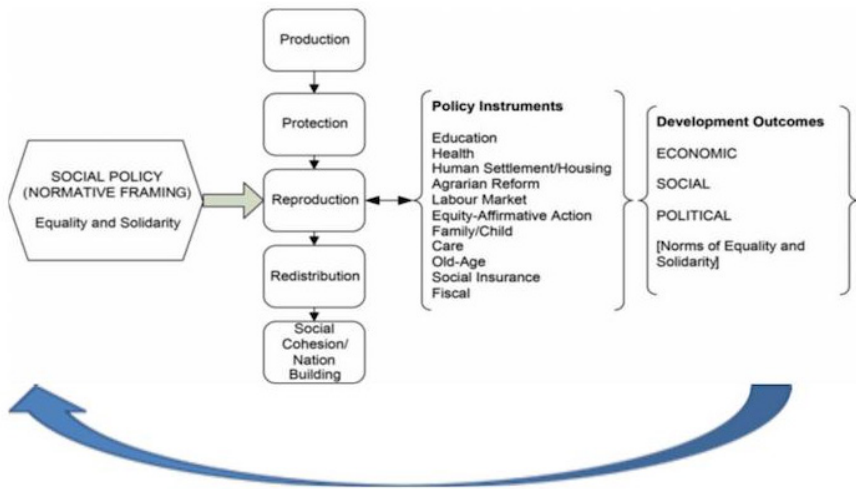
and requires no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing the nature of their pathways in and out of homelessness (Engender, 2020, p. 4; Mostowska & Debska, 2020, p. 53). Within the predominant male shelter response to homelessness, such a lack of understanding of female homelessness creates additional barriers to their exit pathways out of homelessness. In the South African case, Moloko-Phiri et al., (2017, p. 3) highlight the impact of shelters on women and children. The narratives documented by the authors highlighted the extent to which the removal of children from mothers can disrupt the familial bonding and stability, making it difficult for these women to experience normalcy, which is critical for their recovery and finding pathways out of homelessness. This mother-child separation approach typical of emergence shelter strategies revealed profound emotional distress related to anxiety over their children's safety, wellbeing, education and future (Moloko-Phiri et al., 2017, p. 12; Engender, 2020, p. 12). These concerns further complicate their ability to secure stable housing, as the stress of their circumstances can hinder their capacity to effectively navigate the challenges of homelessness. The interconnectedness of women's and children's homelessness, while it poses significant challenges, indicates shortcomings in the predominant male-centred provision of homeless shelters not only in South Africa but the world over. As argued by feminist scholars, the mother-child separation in the mainstream shelter response to homelessness is based on gendered assumptions of single homeless women often subsumed under male homelessness (Engender 2020, p. 10; Moloko-Phiri et al. 2017, p. 12). In a study of the needs of women using homelessness services in London, Bretherton and Pleace (2024, 7) indicated the extent to which 'women are damaged' by systems that fail to take cognisance of their gender-specific needs by forcing them to fit within existing male-centred approaches to homelessness. Additionally, the risk that comes with failure to address women's homelessness leads to intergenerational homelessness as children born into homelessness remain trapped in a cycle of poverty and instability (Moloko-Phiri et al., 2017, p. 12). This scenario raises critical concerns about the societal implications of unresolved gendered homelessness.

The ensuing discussion highlights the gendered systemic and structural inequalities characterising contemporary society that are persistently missing in mainstream policy research on homelessness, with advocacy for gender-sensitive policy responses to female homelessness remaining an important feminist political agenda. Briefly, the next section outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework informing the research study.

Conceptual Framework: The Transformative Social Policy Perspective

Housing and homelessness as social policy areas require an explicit gender-transformative perspective, as women's pathways in and out of homelessness are distinct from those of men (Engender 2020: 1). With its origins in the United Nations

Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) flagship programme, *Social Policy in Development Contexts*, the TSP framework highlights the multi-tasks and developmental role of social policy (Mkandawire 2004; UNRISD 2010). TSP, Figure 1, is underpinned by norms of equality and solidarity with the overarching objective to enhance the productive capacities of individuals, households, and communities; activate the redistribution of resources across classes, gender, race, generations, caste, and other social identities including across life cycles and spatial geographies. This is in addition to performing prophylactic social protection, social reproduction, nation-building and social cohesion functions (UNRISD 2010; Mkandawire 2004; Adesina 2009, 2011). The transformative social policy approach provides an important framework for designing gender-responsive pathways out of homelessness.



Source: Adesina (2011: 463).

Figure 1. Transformative Social Policy Framework, Norms, Instruments and Functions

Within the TSP framework, housing is one policy instrument critical for attaining sustainable economic, social, and political development outcomes in which no one is left behind. Combined with family policies, particularly publicly provided childcare facilities, the transformative social policy approach provides an important starting point to expect how gendered and family homelessness can be tackled effectively through the housing continuum approach. Additionally, the transformative approach enables policy makers not only to focus on the protective functions of a homelessness policy but also to ensure that the productive capacities of people experiencing homelessness, including women, are attended to through employment-enhancing interventions such as skills training. As argued by feminist scholars, while the individual circumstances that led to homelessness are important, the difference lies in understanding that it is when people

lack or are excluded from the resources (human, social, material, or financial capital) to negate the effects of individually experienced negative events that they fall into homelessness (see Pophaim and Peacock 2021, p. 79; Savage 2016 cited in Engender 2020, p. 4). Framed within the transformative social policy approach, the following section provides a critique of the Pathways out of Homelessness project in the City of Tshwane with the overall objective of identifying actionable strategies for improvement.

Discussion

The narrow lens through which the phenomenon of homelessness is conceptualised in South Africa, particularly the focus on 'rooflessness'—the absence of a physical shelter—remains problematic in efforts towards finding sustainable exit pathways out of homelessness for women experiencing homelessness. This is exemplified by the *Pathways out of Homelessness* project in the City of Tshwane, including the approaches adopted by the National Statistical Agency, which not only shape national statistics but also reinforce male-centred monolithic approaches to homelessness. The decision by the *Pathways out of Homelessness* project in the City of Tshwane to exclusively focus on 'street' homelessness (De Beer and Vally 2017, p. 388; De Beer and Vally 2020, p. 77; Tenai and Mbewu 2020, p. 2) makes approaches to homelessness in the city problematic and highly gendered. This is reflected in the definition of homelessness in the *Pathways out of Homelessness* project, which was subsequently incorporated in the City's homelessness policy document. The 32-page *Street Homelessness Policy for the City of Tshwane* 2017—one of the outputs from the *Pathways out of Homelessness* project—Part 4.1 reads as “for the purpose of this policy document, street homeless people are regarded as all those people who live on the streets (on pavements, under bridges, in bushes next to rivers or spruits).” The policy document proceeds to emphasise that it exclusively “focuses on street homelessness and not on people living in informal settlements or sub-standard housing (*Street Homelessness Policy for the City of Tshwane* 2017, Part 4.1). Such gendered definitional problems have a concomitant effect not only in making homelessness synonymous with male forms of homelessness but also in making invisible female experiences of homelessness and influencing how exit strategies are formulated (Hicks 2023, p. 4; Du Toit 2010, p. 133). The emphasis on traditional definitions of homelessness by the *Pathways out of Homelessness* project and the *Street Homelessness for the City of Tshwane* policy limits the policy options available to address the highlighted gendered complex and multi-faceted pathways in and out of homelessness. As persistently stressed by feminist scholars, this narrow focus contributes not only to a misrepresentation of the homeless population but also systematically marginalises women's experiences and perpetuates a male-centric narrative in exit strategies out of homelessness. While Moloko-Phiri et al. (2017) in a paper titled “‘A Shelter is not a home.’ *Voices of Homeless Women in the City of Tshwane*,” documented women's experiences of homelessness within the *Pathways*

out of Homelessness project, the deliberate decision to narrow definitions to ‘street’ homelessness is ‘political.’ Novac et al. (1996 cited in Engender 2020, p. 7), argued that sometimes women’s narratives may be gathered but fail to enter the analytic and explanatory account, ending up not represented in the final homelessness policy due to unequal power relations. In spite of the highlighted inadequacy of shelters to address the needs of women experiencing homelessness, by Moloko-Phiri (2017), this narrative never found its way into the *Street Homelessness Policy for the City of Tshwane*. From a gender perspective to pathways in and out of homelessness, this serves not only to reduce the perceived size of the problem in the City but also diminishes the urgency of policy actors to address the needs of those who fall outside the traditional parameters (Austerbury 1986, cited in Engender, 2020, p. 8) I argue that from a feminist perspective of homelessness, this must be challenged as it has implications of setting a precedent.

Pathways Gendered ‘Street’ Homelessness and ‘Shelter’ Policy Responses

Pathways out of Homelessness focus on ‘street’ homelessness corresponds to the gendered ‘shelter’ policy responses outlined in the *Street Homelessness Policy for the City of Tshwane* 2017 policy document. Part 7 of the policy document outlines the plan of action placing a premium on transit centres that provide emergency overnight accommodation with some tailor-made for specific groups. With social housing placed as the third priority, the underlying logic to addressing homelessness reflects no fundamental shift from the 19th century Poor Laws in sharp contrast to the statutory homelessness system characterised by enforceable legal right to housing (Fitzpatrick, Johnsen and Watts, 2012, 3). While shelters provide temporary accommodation, from a gender perspective they often do not serve as effective pathways out of homelessness for women since they exacerbate feelings of vulnerability and fear, particularly for women escaping abusive relationships, hindering their quick recovery from homelessness (Moloko-Phiri et al., 2017, p. 12; see also Engender, 2020, p. 4; Pophaim & Peacock, 2021, p. 79). It has long been argued that an exclusive focus on homelessness shelters as the sole policy response miss women’s gendered experiences of homelessness as the approach falls short of meeting the needs of women fleeing domestic violence, including those accompanied by children (Bretherton 2017, 4; Mayock and Sheridan 2020, 19; Savage 2016, 43). The preceding discussion highlights gender-blindness within the *Tshwane Pathways out of Homelessness* project and its *resultant City of Tshwane Homelessness Policy* of 2017. Beyond this, what is critical is the identification of actionable policy strategies key to improving policy approaches to homelessness in the South African administrative Capital of Tshwane.

Towards Gender Exit Pathway out of Homelessness in South Africa

The recognition of homelessness as a gendered experience calls for tailor-made gender transformative and responsive policy interventions that incorporate the multi-

faceted and complex female homelessness experiences. Women's multiple roles, including unpaid domestic work and caregiving responsibilities, their gendered experience of domestic violence and economic dependence often shape their pathways in and out of homelessness, yet they remain absent from policy discussions (Moloko-Phiri et al. (2017, p. 2; Engender, 2020, p. 4).

Gender-based Violence, Safety and Women's Exits from Homelessness

Rather than solely focusing on the provision of shelters, in a context characterised by high prevalence of gender-based violence such as South Africa, a more holistic approach towards the prevention and handling domestic violence cases effectively becomes paramount as a preventative measure to gendered pathways into homelessness for women (Calvo et al., 2023, 13). While South Africa is commended for the establishment of the National Strategic Plan on Gender Based Violence and Femicide (GBVF), unsurprisingly this important 132-page policy document remains steeped in provision of shelters and interim housing to address issues of gender-based violence identified in the 2024 census report as the second primary cause of female homelessness (Republic of South Africa 2020, 77). I argue that such an approach remains inadequate and gendered. South Africans can learn from the Australian best practice holistic approach to gendered pathways in and out of homelessness reflected in the Australian National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (2022-2032) (Homelessness Australia 2024, 1). In contrast to the provision of shelters and interim housing, the policy document recognised the link between access to safe, affordable and accessible housing and its ambition to end violence against women and girls as inextricable (Homelessness Australia 2024, 1). In the same vein, the 'Safe at Home' project in Australia provides support to enable women and children to remain safe at home and have the perpetrator of violence leave the home, providing an immediate path to safe housing without experiencing homelessness (Homelessness Australia 2024, 10). This must be supported by policies and programmes that centre violence and homelessness prevention, including male support groups targeted at redefining masculinities and reducing violence (Calvo, et al., 2023, 13; Hargrave, et al., 2024, 3).

The above constitutes strategies that can be done before a woman becomes homeless, increased support remains key for survivors currently experiencing homelessness (Hargrave, et al., 2024, 3). While Turkey is experimenting with specialised women's 'guest houses' to provide shelter for women at risk of domestic violence, Housing First approaches have been found to be more effective (Housing First 2024, 5). This specialised approach prioritises getting survivors housed immediately as a means of both promoting safety and stability and assisting women experiencing homelessness due to domestic violence to come back onto their feet (Hargrave, et al., 2024, 15). Housing First, an innovative human rights-based approach to re-housing, focuses on

providing safe, affordable, independent living without pre-conditions to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless (Housing First 2024, 4). Its 8 principles represent a significant departure from the traditional approaches to homelessness. It is the cutting-edge and gender-transformative social policy approach to housing that embraces the multiple protective, productive, redistributive and social reproductive tasks of social policy to meet the multi-faceted and complex needs of women experiencing homelessness. Categorising housing as a legally enforceable human right, Housing First represents one social policy instrument within the transformative social policy framework to tackle the structural causes of violence against women and children (Engender 2020, p. 16; Pophaim and Peacock 2021, p. 79; Tenai and Mbewu 2020, p. 7; Casey 2001). This contrasts with the charity-based segmented approaches characteristic of the male-centred shelter system currently dominating approaches to homelessness in South Africa.

Related to the issue of violence, safety is central and a significant concern for women and children experiencing homelessness who viewed safety in a homeless shelter as no different from the abusive home they would have left (Hargrave et al. 2024, 1). Many women report feeling unsafe in shelters, which can become spaces of vulnerability rather than refuge (Engender, 2020, p. 16). Women often face harassment and fear of violence, further complicating their ability to recover from homelessness. The high rates of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa exacerbate these challenges, making shelters and transitional housing services inappropriate as policy approaches to address women's pathways in and out of homelessness (Engender, 2020, p. 16; Casey, 2001). From a gender perspective, there is a need for a paradigm shift on how shelters are perceived and operated in South Africa. The Housing First approach yet to feature in South African discussions on pathways in and out of homelessness provides an environment where tenants, including women and children experiencing homelessness can feel safe and is a proven policy option to address complex needs that can assist women find pathways out of homelessness.

Economic Factors and Gendered Pathways Out of Homelessness in South Africa

Economic factors such as lost job, no job or income ranked top among the reasons for homelessness in South Africa with no significant difference across genders, 41.3 % for males and 41.6 % for females (Statistics South Africa 2022, 65). These economic factors interact with other factors, including intimate partner violence (IPV) found by Hargrave et al., (2024, 10) to increase the risk for homelessness, especially for survivors with limited financial resources. From a gendered perspective, improving the economic status of women experiencing homelessness is a crucial long-term and sustainable pathway out of homelessness. Merely providing a temporary homelessness shelter does not address the underlying economic issues that contribute to female homelessness

(Moloko-Phiri et al., 2020, p. 12; Casey, 2001). There is a need for gender-transformative policies that enhance the productive capacities of individuals, empowering them economically through job training, financial literacy programmes, and access to stable employment opportunities (see Olufemi 2000, 233; Reeve 2018, 167). Drawing from women's narratives captured by Moloko-Phiri (2017, 7), for many women, finding a job was highlighted as one plausible pathway to assist them find their own feet and out of the shelters. Financial independence for women brought by their own income enables them to afford their own accommodation rather than descending into homelessness. This supports findings by the South African statistical agency that 'cannot afford accommodation' is among the top five reasons for homelessness in the country with the percentage higher for females at 10.9 % relative to 7.9 % for men (Statistical South Africa, 2022, 65; see also Du Toit 2010, 211). The above strategies were found to be effective in another context. For instance, survivors of IPV in California reported that a modest financial support in the form of a housing voucher could have averted their homelessness as it would have kept them housed for at least 2 years (Hargrave et al., 2024, 3). Similarly, such income support makes renting affordable as financial difficulties and housing affordability were found to be among the major drivers of homelessness for women in Australia (Homelessness Australia 2024, 10). Housing First approaches, which do not require users to prove that they are able to live independently or with low levels of support before they can access housing, represent possible policy lessons available for policy makers in South Africa to learn from (Housing First 2024, 4).

Women's Unpaid Care Work and Exits from Homelessness

The multi-faceted nature of women's homelessness makes traditional approaches of shelters designed for men an inadequate solution to address their challenge (Housing First 2024, 5; Engender 2020, p. 16; Pophaim and Peacock 2021, p. 79; Tenai and Mbewu 2020, p. 2). Offering comprehensive care and tailor-made support and resource connection appropriate to the specific needs of women experiencing homelessness proved to be effective (Calvo et al. 2023, 1). The fear of losing custody of children remains central to women experiencing homelessness, with the latter expressing the desire for permanent housing as opposed to shelters (Hargrave et al. 2024, 10). Interventions to end women's homelessness, such as the Housing First, are adaptable to women either as individual clients or as a mother with children, enabling them to live with their family (Housing First 2024, 5). The Westminster Violence Against Women and Girls Housing First project in London provides an example to learn from (Housing First 2024, 7). The project is specifically designed for women who have experienced any form of violence and have children that have been removed from them and put in other care but returned to live with their parents as a family. These services have combined not only childcare support but also parental and domestic

skills, including how to manage household finances, particularly for young mothers (Housing First 2024, 5). Policymakers in South Africa can draw from these examples of well-functioning homelessness-oriented practices for effective pathways out of homelessness for women. Such approaches recognise the interconnectedness of women's and children's homelessness that is missing in current approaches to homelessness in South Africa (Moloko-Phiri et al., 2017, p. 12). Family policies, particularly public provision of childcare, remain a key component within the transformative social policy framework as they free women of the care burden and assist them to look for full-time employment without the constraints imposed on them by care duties. This contributes to the reduction of women's economic dependence and their economic vulnerability in situations of repetitive domestic violence and the attainment of SDG 5 on gender equality (Engender 2020, p. 12; Pophaim and Peacock 2021, p. 79; Tenai and Mbewu 2020, p. 7; Dogan 2021, p. 150).

Gendered Pathways out of Homelessness and the Housing First Approach

The Housing First approach is still a relatively new concept in the South African context. Representing an innovative evidence-based approach to providing housing without preconditions to individuals who are at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness (Hargrave et al. 2024, 15; Housing First 2024, 4), the approach represents a significant departure from the traditional homelessness services and holds great potential to provide sustainable pathways out of homelessness for women and children experiencing homelessness in the South Africa. Drawing from its long history of increasing support for settled housing through Housing First, the larger traditional homelessness shelters are no longer a major feature of homelessness services in the UK (Bretherton and Pleace, 2024, 6). This provides critical lessons for South Africa in its quest to find a sustainable policy approach to the ever-increasing homelessness challenge alongside its gendered dimensions. Rather than temporarily accommodating people in shelters, the strength of the Housing First approach lies in its immediate provision of housing with secure tenure to people experiencing homelessness and can easily be adaptable to specific needs, for example the needs of homeless mothers in the company of children (Housing First 2024, 5). As noted by Atherton and Nicholls (2008, 289), while the Housing First approach may not be adopted wholesale to the South African context, its ability to be tailored to meet the local context makes it an attractive strategy South African policy makers can experiment as a strategy to find sustainable pathways out of homelessness, particularly for women.

Conclusion

Homelessness remains a gendered experience, and women's homelessness, including their pathways in and out of homelessness, continue to be a neglected subject relative

to men. This is reflected in the definitions used, which persistently focus on male experiences of homelessness, with policy responses turning a blind eye to female forms of homelessness. Using a qualitative literature analysis, this paper sought to place at the centre the neglected issues in policy research and analysis on gendered pathways in and out of homelessness, enabling policy makers to design gender-responsive homelessness policies.

Key findings from the study show a persistent reliance on outdated homelessness and housing theories, which continue to sabotage 21st century attempts to address homelessness. A gendered analysis of the *Pathways out of Homelessness* Project in the City of Tshwane revealed a lack of understanding of gendered pathways in and out of homelessness in South African policy responses with an exclusive focus on 'streets' and homeless 'shelters'. This explains why the city is losing ground in addressing homelessness. Neglected dimensions of gendered pathways into homelessness for women include the effects of gender-based violence, female economic dependence, and the intertwining of women's and children's homelessness.

These critical dimensions for understanding women's pathways into homelessness are all missing in the "Street Homelessness Policy for the City of Tshwane 2017" policy document. Consequently, the designed strategies to address homelessness in the city, which have an exclusive focus on homeless shelters, are inadequate and inappropriate for assisting women in finding pathways out of homelessness. The provided critique of the current shelter policies underscores the necessity for a gendered approach that prioritises women's needs. As pathways to homelessness are complex and deeply gendered, this calls for a critical examination of existing definitions and policies.

The persistent focus on rooflessness and male-centred narratives not only obscures the realities faced by women but also perpetuates their invisibility in homelessness discourse. To effectively address homelessness, it is imperative that we adopt a more inclusive understanding that recognises the diverse experiences of women. By integrating women's voices into policy development and prioritising gender-specific services, stakeholders can create more effective interventions that facilitate exits from homelessness. Furthermore, a holistic, transformative social policy approach encompassing economic empowerment, safety, and family support is essential for addressing the root causes of homelessness and promoting long-term stability for women and their families.

With gender-based violence occupying a central position in women's pathways into homelessness, policy measures targeted at its prevention and effective handling are key in reducing women's loss of a home. Survivors need access to safe, affordable, and accessible housing to rebuild their lives out of homelessness. Emergency shelters fail to address these gendered needs. On the other hand, male support groups and

programmes targeting the redefinition of masculinity constitute key complementary programmes to reduce female homelessness in the City of Tshwane.

Relating to female economic dependence, modest financial support such as housing vouchers was found to be effective in preventing women with children from losing their homes and falling into homelessness. The City of Tshwane can experiment with these support measures to assist homeless women in the city beyond the social grants provided by the government. Complementary support critical to assist women experiencing homelessness relate to relief from unpaid care work, such as the provision of childcare support, to enable women with children to find work and support their families independently.

While still a new concept in South Africa, the above family support services are best provided through a Housing First approach, which prioritises immediate access to permanent housing for individuals at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness. Housing First, a cutting-edge approach to housing, can be adapted to women's specific needs, with the potential to effectively address gendered pathways in and out of homelessness in the City of Tshwane. As a new concept, more research is needed to understand the extent to which this approach can be adapted to local conditions in South Africa. Findings from this research have policy and practical relevance not only to South Africa but also to many other developing contexts where homelessness and its gendered dimensions remain neglected policy areas.

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to my supervisor, Professor Jimi Adesina, for providing the space that made this research possible. Additional thanks go to Professor Kanyisile Mbatha, my engaged scholarship manager.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Grant Support: This research is partly supported by the Engaged Scholarship Research Fund at the University of South Africa focusing on homelessness.

References

- Adesina, J. (2009). Social policy in sub-Saharan Africa: a glance in the rear-view mirror, *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 18(1), pp. 37-51.
- Adesina, J. (2011). Beyond the social protection paradigm: Social policy in Africa's development, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 32(4), pp. 454-470
- Atherton, I and Nicholls, C. M. (2008) Housing First' as a means of addressing multiple needs and homelessness, *European Journal of Homelessness*, Volume 2, December 2008, pp. 289-302. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/9549404.pdf>. Accessed 21 November 2024.
- Bretherton, J. (2017). Reconsidering Gender in Homelessness, *European Journal of Homelessness* 11(1), pp. 1-21.
- Bretherton, J. and Pleace, N. 2024. The Needs of Women Using Homelessness Services: The Results of Collaborative Research in London, *Social Sciences* 13: 347. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13070347>

- Casey, S. (2001). 'Snakes and Ladders: Women's Pathways Into and Out of Homeless' in Eardley, T. Bradbury, B. *Competing Visions: Refereed Proceedings of the National Social Policy Conference 2001*, SPRC Report 1/02, Kensington: Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales. 75-90
- City of Tshwane. 2017. *Street Homelessness Policy for the City of Tshwane*. Pretoria, South Africa.
- Calvo, F, Watts, B, Panadero, S, Giralt, C, Rived-Ocaña, M & Carbonell, X 2022, 'The Prevalence and Nature of Violence Against Women Experiencing Homelessness: A Quantitative Study', *Violence Against Women*, vol.28, no. 6-7, pp. 1464-1482. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012211022780>
- Colvin, K. (2023). Understanding Homelessness as a Gendered Issue, *Parity* 36(6), pp. 63-64
- De Beer, S and Vally, R. (2015). Pathways out of homelessness. *Research Report City of Tshwane 2015*, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.
- De Beer, S. and Vally, R. (2017) (Finding) pathways out of homelessness: An engaged, trans-disciplinary collaborative in the City of Tshwane, *Development Southern Africa* 34(4), pp. 385–398. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2017.1319261>
- Dogan, Y. B. (2021). Stereotyping, Prejudice and Policymaking: Managing Homelessness in Istanbul, *European Journal of Homelessness*, 15(2), pp. 143-169.
- Du Toit, J. L. (2010). Local Metropolitan Government Responses to Homelessness in South Africa, *Development Southern Africa* 27 (1), pp. 111–28. doi:10.1080/03768350903519390.
- Engender. (2020). *Gender, Housing and Homelessness: A Literature Review*. Engender (2020).
- Hargrave, A., Moore, T., Adhiningrat, S., Perry, E., Kushel, M. (2024). Towards Safety: Understanding Intimate Partner Violence and Homelessness in the California State-wide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness. <https://homelessness.ucsf.edu/sites/default/files/2024-01/IPV%20Report%202024.pdf> Accessed November 18, 2024.
- Hicks, S. K. (2023). Critical Thinking About Policy: Intersectional Feminist Policy Analysis in Use, *The Policy Science Association of Ritsumeikan University* 31(1), pp. 1-16.
- Homelessness Australia. (2024). *Homelessness and Domestic and Family Violence: State of the Response Report*. <https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IWD-2024-3.pdf>. Accessed 18 November 2024.
- Housing First. (2022). *An introduction to Housing First and Women*. <https://housingfirsteurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/HousingFirstWomen-2.pdf>. Accessed 21 November 2024.
- Johnson, G., Ribar, D. C. and Zhu, A. (2017). *Women's Homelessness: International Evidence on Causes, Consequences, Coping and Policies (March 3, 2017)*. Melbourne Institute Working Paper No. 7/17, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2927811> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2927811>
- Mayock, P., and Sheridan, S. (2020). Women Negotiating Power and Control as they 'Journey' through Homelessness: A Feminist Post-structuralist Perspective, *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(2), pp. 17-47.
- Mkandawire, T. (2004). 'Introduction. Social policy in a development context. In Mkandawire, T. (Ed). *Social policy in a development context*. Basingstoke: UNRISD/Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-33.
- Moloko-Phiri, S. Salaminah, Mogale, R. S. and Hugo, J. (2017). A Shelter Is Not a Home': Voices of Homeless Women in the City of Tshwane., *Development Southern Africa* 34 (4), pp. 439–49. doi:10.1080/0376835X.2017.1318048.

- Mostowska, M. and Debska, K. (2020). Where was I going after my divorce? Gendered Family Housing Pathways and Women Homelessness in Poland, *European Journal of Homelessness* 14(2), 49-73.
- Olufemi, O. 2000. Feminisation of Poverty among the Street Homeless Women in South Africa, *Development Southern Africa* 17 (2), pp. 221–34. doi:10.1080/713661399.
- Perrier, R. (2022). “Homelessness Within a Policy Vacuum.” *Voice of Local Government*, July 2022 Edition. https://issuu.com/sundaytimesza/docs/salga_issue39/s/16276985
- Pophaim, J-P. and Peacock, R. (2021). Pathways Into and Out of Homelessness: Towards A Strategic Approach to Reduce Homelessness, *Acta Criminologica: African Journal of Criminology* 32(2), pp. 68-87.
- Republic of South Africa. (2020). National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide: Human Dignity and Healing, Safety, Freedom and Equality in Our Life Time. Republic of South Africa. <https://www.justice.gov.za/vg/gbv/NSP-GBVF-FINAL-DOC-04-05.pdf>. Accessed 21 November 2024.
- Reeve, K. 2018. Women and Homelessness: Putting Gender Back on the Agenda, *People, Place & Policy Online* 11 (2018), pp. 165-174.
- Savage, M. (2016). Gendering Women’s Homelessness, *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies* 16(2), pp. 43-64 doi:10.21427/D7KB0X
- Statistics South Africa. (2022). Census 2022 Statistical Release. P0301.4. Pretoria, South Africa.
- Tenai, N. K. and Mbewu, G. N. (2020). Street Homelessness in South Africa. A Perspective from the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. *Theological Studies* 76(1), pp. 1-10.
- UNRISD. (2010). Combating poverty and inequality: structural change, social policy and politics Geneva, UNRISD (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development), [http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/\(httpAuxPages\)/92B1D5057F43149CC125779600434441/\\$file/PovRep%20\(small\).pdf](http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/(httpAuxPages)/92B1D5057F43149CC125779600434441/$file/PovRep%20(small).pdf). (Accessed 24 March 2017).