

Abstract

Titel: A Woman's Place(s) – Images of Homelessness.

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Over the last ten years, there has been an increased interest among authorities, voluntary agencies and the media about Sweden's homeless women. The aim of this thesis is to examine *images* of homelessness in general and homeless women in particular. The theoretical and methodological point of departure is discourse analysis. Discourse concerns the production of and power to identify, define and ascribe meaning. The concept of ideology is also used – here defined as the closure of discourse, when meaning has been frozen and there is no space for alternative understandings. The purpose is to focus on the political dimensions of what might otherwise appear to be natural and neutral. Another starting point is feminist analysis. The purpose is to analyse how gender is constructed, how images of femininity and home are intertwined in the discourse on homeless women.

The empirical analysis is built on interviews with 16 women with no housing and interviews with staff at shelters. It also consists of an analysis of documents, reports and evaluations and a public opinion campaign on homeless women made by Stadsmissionen (Citymission). In the thesis it is argued that homeless women are constructed as different from both homeless men and housed women. They are viewed as having more severe problems than the former, as well as being more dependent and vulnerable than the latter. There is also a strong theme of sexual exploitation – homeless women are assumed to have succumbed to sexual abuse by men in order to keep a roof over their heads. In the shelters they are taught "women's activities", such as cooking and applying makeup. Their bodies and gender identity are also called into question. The image of the homeless woman contains a contradiction: she is described as both a victim in need of protection and an active manipulator. This "double exposure", which is typical of stereotypes in general, emerges in different contexts.

The narratives of the interviewed women with no housing express an ongoing struggle with the representation of homeless women in the dominant discourse on homelessness. In opposition to the notion that women conceal their homelessness out of shame of their behaviour it is argued that concealment should be seen as a deliberate strategy to avoid the stigma of being homeless. At the same time they do want to be recognised and accepted as individuals who have no place of their own – which for many of them is something different from being homeless. They want help to get housing and they want to be respected, with a right to privacy, and to be trusted to take care of themselves.

Keywords: Homeless, homeless women, discourse, exclusion, feminism, home, public space, social work, shelters, housing, cultural studies.