

Women Are Shouting in Silence: Women's Voices from Lisbon

by Dalma Fabian

A few months have passed since we have last visited Lisbon Portugal in the framework of our ongoing Women's Voices Project. In January, we have been warmly hosted by SOMOS and CRESCER and representatives of project partner organizations took part in a 5-day training. During the training we have shared with each other the visual voices that were produced in different project countries and developed ideas on how to use them in our advocacy work.



What made the experience in Lisbon particularly special was the participation of the women of SOMOS in all the activities during that week. We did everything together with them, and their contribution shaped the direction of our discussions and ideas. They brought important perspectives, enthusiasm and a strong commitment to collective advocacy and activism. Their experiences, ideas and perspectives were shaping what we were doing together.

Since then, exhibitions of the visual voices have been held in several countries with more to come. A selection of visual voices has now travelled to Lisbon to feature in the 20th European Research conference on Homelessness in Lisbon hosted by the FEANTSA Research Observatory. We agreed that it is very important to bring this knowledge created by women with lived experience to the attention of researchers and practitioners attending the conference. Their contribution shows that lived experience is an expertise, and it is important to integrate them into any research on women's homelessness.

When discussing the exhibition with members of SOMOS, Elda, Louisa and Ana expressed interest in organising a talk for participants of the research conference. They wanted to share their experiences in the project and about the work of SOMOs and explain why the involvement of people with lived experience matters. We have decided to set up a panel discussion to give them opportunity to speak about what mattered to them, in their own words.

They have very quickly decided on the title: "Women are shouting in silence". They explained that silence can communicate a lot and called for professionals to better listen without making assumptions or speaking for them. On the day, it was exciting to be in the auditorium of the university on a stage which felt huge. But we have created a safe environment and the women spoke confidently on the stage. Ana, Louisa and Elda are a great trio and supporting and encouraging each other throughout the discussion. The power of peer support has become tangible in the room.



They shared experiences of homelessness and explained how in their lives, it was peers that made a difference and helped them find a way out of homelessness. This experience of solidarity and mutual support was one of the reasons they founded SOMOS: to advocate for themselves and for other

women in situation of homelessness. SOMOS is a unique example of a peer-led organization that is founded and shaped by women with lived experience of homelessness.

As part of the panel, Elda, Ana and Louisa have selected five photos from the visual voices that spoke most strongly to their experience of homelessness and lack of safety.

One photo talked about how when living on the street your life is in a backpack that becomes your home and you carry them on your shoulder.

Another photo described how homelessness takes away so much: “When we have nothing, that nothing is a lot”. This message speaks for itself.

A third photo described how even a small place – all women are now in Housing First projects - feels like a castle when you can finally call it a home, and you hold your key in your hand. Another photo showed a full fridge and described the feeling of having choices again after homelessness took away so much of their dignity and autonomy.

The final photo’s title is “We are what we carry in our soul”. It describes how this experience will stay forever with them and teaches them. What is remarkable is how these women have turned these experiences into activism to challenge inequalities, violence and social injustice. They have joined forces to stand up for their rights and for the rights of other women.

The panel was an inspiring example of what can happen when women with lived experience are given the space to speak for themselves, share their knowledge and make their voice heard.

The discussion moved the audience and resulted in many follow-up conversations immediately afterwards. The voices of Elda, Louisa and Ana and their message behind “Women are shouting in silence” will continue to inspire others to listen to them, to recognise their knowledge and ensure they have meaningful role in shaping research, policies and practices that affect their lives.

