

## Making Women's Homelessness Visible Through Visual Voices

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After declining for several years, homelessness in Finland has started to increase again over the past two years, including among women. This shift raises concern among experts, especially as women's homelessness often remains hidden.

In Finland, women make up around one fifth of all people experiencing homelessness. While long-term trends have been positive, the recent increase highlights ongoing challenges. The statistics also fail to fully capture women's situations: many avoid sleeping rough and instead stay temporarily with friends, acquaintances, or in unsafe living arrangements where their sense of security is fragile.

Research and development work in Finland shows that women's homelessness is closely linked to insecurity, violence, and shame. Women often experience hidden homelessness, moving from place to place and sometimes relying on relationships that may expose them to exploitation or abuse.

The European Erasmus+ project *Women's Visual Voices* builds on this understanding. It uses participatory visual methods, enabling women with lived experience and staff working in supported housing units to document their everyday environments and feelings of safety through images and storytelling. This approach brings forward perspectives that are often missing from statistics and policy discussions.

The project highlights the many ways in which the safety of women experiencing homelessness can be improved. Dedicated, women-only supported housing is not always possible to provide, but even small actions can make a meaningful difference to both safety and the sense of security.

The project also underlines a key message: homelessness is not only about lacking a home, but about constantly navigating safety, deciding where it is safe to stay, who to trust, and how to avoid harm. For many women, invisibility becomes a survival strategy.

By sharing these stories locally through exhibitions and community engagement, Visual Voices aims to raise awareness and encourage more gender-sensitive responses. Making women's experiences visible is an essential step toward creating safer and more inclusive solutions to homelessness.

One concrete example from the project has been the organisation of women's evenings at a low-threshold meeting



place. These spaces offer a safer environment where women can connect, share experiences, and access support without barriers.

The first meeting was organised to see how many participants would attend and to explore what kind of activities women would like. This year, the meetings continued with our expert-by-experience team. At the first gathering, 12 women attended, showing a clear need for this kind of group. Many participants shared that they spend a lot of time alone, and that the group provided valuable social contact. They especially appreciated not having to explain their situation.

Together, we discussed and collected ideas for future activities. In the next meeting, nine women participated in a shared meal. After eating, the discussion naturally turned to their life situations, and we agreed to start supporting two women with their housing situations. They expressed great relief in realizing that something could be done.

Before the summer holidays, the group planned a trip to a nearby island. This experience suggests that an open, participant-led approach works well: instead of predefined themes, meaningful topics emerge through spending time together and engaging in activities that women themselves choose.

