BETWEEN SHELTER AND RIGHTS: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON HOUSING LAWS AND POLICIES IN AUSTRIA

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Abstract

This thesis explores housing legislation and policy frameworks respond to adequate housing for unhoused women. The core puzzle asks how Austrian housing policies recognize and address the gender-specific needs of women experiencing homelessness, especially in terms of safety, privacy, accessibility, and trauma-informed support. Guided by an intersectional feminist perspective, I combine a thematic analysis of national and Viennese housing laws, strategy papers, and NGO reports with qualitative fieldwork. The empirical backbone consists of semi-structured interviews with social workers, who implement or critique these policies on the ground, complemented by case studies of existing key programmes. The findings suggest that although the country has made progress in recognizing homelessness as a human rights issue, there remains a disparity in the implementation and experience of policies across different levels of gender, personal identity, social class, nationality, and so forth. Bureaucratic residency rules, fragmented support silos, and a focus on visible street homelessness systematically exclude women, particularly migrants and survivors of domestic violence, whose homelessness is more often "hidden" in precarious or unsafe arrangements. It calls for a holistic approach that not only addresses the immediate needs of homeless women but also tackles the underlying social and economic factors contributing to their homelessness.

Key words: female homelessness, hidden homelessness, social housing, domestic violence and homelessness, policy implementation gaps.

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Introduction

For almost a year before leaving Russia, I worked as a social worker for a non-governmental, non-profit organization in Saint Petersburg. Through the professional lens of fieldwork, it became evident how insufficient policies address problems at the state level. Even at the organizational level, women were not recognized as a separate group in need of targeted support. Any special assistance for women depended on the individual initiative of certain employees but was not institutionalized at the policy level. I aim to explore how this issue is approached and discussed within the Austrian context, focusing on both the existing policy frameworks and the people who are working directly with homelessness.

I believe that this thesis can fill a significant gap in research related to Austria, homelessness, and women. I focus on the experiences of the most marginalized women, such as refugees, LGBT individuals, and migrant women. Although homelessness has been widely studied, much of the existing literature and policy continues to reflect a male-centered perspective. As a result, the specific challenges women face, such as domestic violence, legal status, or menstruation, often go unaddressed. By combining feminist theory with policy analysis and qualitative interviews, this research highlights the voices and needs of women who are frequently excluded from both statistics and support systems. The aim is to draw attention to these overlooked realities and contribute to the development of more inclusive and gender-sensitive housing policies in Austria.

Research question

This thesis will examine how housing policies in Austria recognize and address the specific gendered needs of women experiencing homelessness through the lens of gender-sensitive policy analysis. I want to examine the gap between Austrian housing policies and

their outcomes for homeless women. My research questions are: How do Austrian housing policies recognize and address the specific needs of women experiencing homelessness? What are specific needs and experiences of homeless women in Austria, with the focus on safety, privacy, accessibility and trauma-informed support? How do Austrian housing policies and support organizations reflect feminist perspectives?

Theoretical Framework

Homelessness is a complex and interdisciplinary issue, making it challenging to establish a universally accepted definition. There is still ongoing debate surrounding the term "homelessness" and what can be considered as the state of being homeless. Scholars and policymakers have proposed various approaches to define homelessness, reflecting different conceptual, cultural, and policy perspectives. Initially, discussions around the term began with the assertion that a "homeless" person is someone living in extremely impoverished neighbourhoods, in tents, or even uninhabitable rooms, often lacking social connections (Blumberg, Shipley, and Shandler 1973). Skid Row and Its Alternatives is a foundational study portrayed the “homelessness and misery”, treating homelessness as a distinct social condition afflicting disaffiliated individuals on society’s margins, rather than just an extension of poverty or deviance. By documenting the lived reality of people who sleep rough, this work helped put homelessness on the policy map.

Since the 1980s, feminist scholars have been rethinking male-oriented definitions of homelessness by expanding the concept to include women's experiences, such as losing housing due to domestic violence and forms of “hidden” homelessness. This shift marked a significant turning point in understanding homelessness through a more comprehensive and gender-sensitive lens. Homelessness is not limited to poor living conditions, such as residing in tents or sleeping in parks; it also includes insecure housing situations, such as domestic violence-induced housing loss or gendered poverty (Watson 1984, 65). In her article, Sophie

Watson critiques the official definitions of "homelessness" that dominated policy at the time. She argues that these definitions exclude many women's realities, as they often experience homelessness in less visible forms, such as staying temporarily with friends or living in unsafe housing situations. Watson's approach highlights how housing policies and definitions have historically been designed around male experiences, overlooking women made homeless by domestic circumstances or economic dependency. This critique is further developed in the work of Watson and Helene Austerberry (1986), who show how postwar housing systems, structured around the nuclear family model, systematically marginalized single women and ignored gender-specific causes of housing insecurity. By introducing the concept of "hidden homelessness" and emphasizing that many women become effectively homeless while still living in dependent or unsafe housing arrangements, they laid the groundwork for a broader, gender-sensitive understanding of homelessness. Their work links gender roles, family structures, and housing policy, setting an agenda for subsequent research into the feminization of poverty and the need for women-specific housing support. It also firmly established that homelessness is not gender-neutral but is shaped by social structures that have long assumed women to be dependents in male-headed households. Building on these feminist analyses, researchers such as Golden (1992) and Casey, Goudie, and Reeve (2008) emphasize that female homelessness cannot be understood solely as a lack of shelter but must be seen as a structural issue deeply intertwined with gendered inequalities. Golden's early work highlighted the ways in which women's experiences of homelessness had long been marginalized within broader homelessness discourse, while Casey and colleagues examined how traditional gender roles, economic disadvantages, and systemic biases shape women's vulnerabilities and limit the kinds of support they receive. Their work underscores the need for policy frameworks that reflect women's lived realities and structural challenges, rather than reinforcing normative expectations of femininity and domesticity. Similarly, Passaro's ethnographic research in New

York reveals that while women are underrepresented in street homelessness statistics, many live in precarious or abusive domestic conditions, due to social expectations that women "belong in the home" (1996). She demonstrates that access to shelter often depends on women conforming to traditional roles of motherhood and femininity, making those who do not fit these norms more likely to be excluded from support. Expanding on this, Wardhaugh (1999) introduces the concept of being "homeless at home," emphasizing that the absence of physical shelter is not the only – or even the most relevant – indicator of homelessness for women. Unsafe or oppressive domestic environments can constitute homelessness, even when legal definitions fail to recognize them as such. Together, these feminist contributions highlight the need for intersectional and gender-sensitive frameworks that account for the hidden, relational, and symbolic dimensions of women's homelessness.

The conservative perspective on understanding homelessness has also emerged, straightforwardly defining this condition: if a person sleeps without any form of shelter on the street, they can be considered homeless. Peter Rossi made comprehensive research of modern homelessness in the United States (Rossi, 1989). Rossi emphasized that being homeless is not only about lack of shelter and that, but about a state without family and friends. He nevertheless advocated for the clear definition of homelessness – focusing on people without a permanent nighttime residence. He draws the difference between homelessness and precariously housed for research and policy purposes. This approach means excluding those in unstable housing, such as people staying temporarily with friends or remaining in unsafe family situations due to abuse, from official homelessness counts, a practice that disproportionately impacts women. The author's examination of the "new homeless" phenomenon, which emerged during the 1980s and comprised younger adults and families (as opposed to the older skid-row men of the past), revealed that shifts in housing markets and social policy were pivotal factors in driving the homelessness.

While Rossi's framework emphasizes a narrow, operational definition of homelessness for policy precision, more recent scholarship has moved toward broader, multidimensional approaches. One influential example is the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS), developed to capture the complex realities of housing deprivation across legal, physical, and social domains.[1] Developed by FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless[2], ETHOS is a transnational framework designed to support dialogue, research, and policymaking on homelessness across Europe. Instead of standardising national definitions, ETHOS provides a shared conceptual language by classifying homelessness into four main categories: rooflessness, houselessness, insecure housing, and inadequate housing. These are further divided into thirteen operational categories used for mapping, monitoring, and evaluating housing exclusion. This broader framework highlights the complex and often hidden dimensions of homelessness. Amore, Baker, and Howden-Chapman (2011) critically examine this typology in their article "The ETHOS Definition and Classification of Homelessness: An Analysis". ETHOS has been widely praised as one of the most conceptually grounded definitions of homelessness. Amore et al. note that ETHOS is "one of the few definitions of homelessness that is conceptually based," with a theoretical foundation more thoroughly explained than any other. In the analysis, however, Amore and colleagues critically evaluate ETHOS, pointing out ambiguities and gaps in its classification system. They propose a refined framework to improve conceptual clarity and measurement consistency, for instance, ensuring that criteria distinguish between current homelessness and mere risk of homelessness. This work's impact has been to push the field toward greater rigor and consistency in defining homelessness across disciplines. By improving

[1] FEANTSA (European Federation of National Associations Working with the Homeless). 2024. *ETHOS – European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion.* Brussels: FEANTSA. Accessed May 3, 2025. https://www.feantsa.org.

[2] FEANTSA, "What Is FEANTSA?" accessed April 10, 2025, https://www.feantsa.org/en/about-us/what-is-feantsa.

the definition of homelessness, with the help of experts in sociology and public policy, the authors show that our understanding of homelessness can change over time. They argue that having clear definitions is important for comparing data and creating effective policies across countries. While acknowledging the value of various existing approaches to defining and analysing homelessness, this study adopts a feminist perspective as its primary analytical lens due to its inclusive and intersectional focus. A feminist framework allows for a deeper understanding of how homelessness is experienced differently based on overlapping identities and structural inequalities. In the context of Austria, particular attention is paid to the compounded vulnerabilities faced by homeless women, barriers related to German language proficiency, citizenship status, ethnicity, gender identity, and socio-economic dependency. These intersecting factors often remain invisible in mainstream policy definitions and can restrict access to housing and social support. Research indicates that the lack of gender-sensitive housing policies exacerbate these disparities by failing to address the specific needs of homeless women, such as safety, privacy, and trauma-informed care (Hopper, Bassuk, and Olivet, 2010). At the same time, ETHOS provides a comprehensive framework that incorporates legal, physical, and social dimensions of housing exclusion, which is valuable for identifying forms of 'hidden homelessness' that disproportionately affect women. By combining a feminist perspective with the ETHOS definition, this research seeks to examine how national housing frameworks can better reflect the lived realities of women experiencing homelessness in Austria, and how policies can be improved to ensure inclusivity and gender sensitivity.

As I mentioned before, the concept of hidden homelessness is particularly relevant in understanding female homelessness. Unlike men, homeless women are more likely to reside in temporary or unsafe housing arrangements to avoid the stigma and risks associated with visible homelessness (Smith 1998, 1999; Watson 1999; Watson and Austerberry 1986). This hidden

aspect contributes to women being underrepresented in homelessness statistics and reinforces their marginalization in policy frameworks designed primarily around visible homelessness. However, as May, Cloke, and Johnsen (2007) argue, while hidden homelessness reveals the gendered nature of housing precarity, it is equally important not to overlook more visible forms of homelessness. Many women do experience street homelessness and visible housing deprivation, often moving between visible and hidden states. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of female homelessness must account for both its concealed and visible manifestations, recognizing the full range of experiences and vulnerabilities.

Homelessness is a key economic issue of inequality even in the most developed countries of the Global North. The data shows the persistent existence of homelessness across Europe, where only Scandinavian countries show some exceptions (Domergue et al. 2015). The primary solution we tend to see in response to homelessness is the use of large communal shelters as a tool for relief (O'Sullivan 2016). It is becoming evident that 'shelterization' is not a sufficiently sustainable response to homelessness, and the provision of housing proves to be more sustainable in this regard. The right to adequate housing stands is part of human rights, particularly when viewed through social and economic lenses. One of the most discussed solutions to homelessness is housing, so in my research I would like to explore how gender and homelessness impact on housing policies in Austria.

Addressing female homelessness in Austria requires policies that explicitly acknowledge intersectional factors such as gender-based violence, economic dependence, and migrant status, as well as structural barriers including affordable housing shortages and insufficient support services, ensuring women's direct representation and participation in policy-making and public discussions on social inclusion. This study explores how Austria's social and cultural context – particularly prevailing gender roles and expectations – influences these policies. I tried to pay

special attention to the situation of refugee and migrant women, who often face compounded intersectional discrimination due to legal status, language barriers, racial discrimination, and limited access to support services. The thesis further examines the interaction between state welfare mechanisms and non-governmental support systems, evaluating how their combined responses shape the effectiveness of interventions targeting female homelessness, particularly for those at the intersection of gender, migration, and social exclusion.

Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the complex and gendered dimensions of female homelessness in Austria. Given the deeply personal, context-dependent, and often hidden nature of women's experiences with homelessness, qualitative methods are particularly well suited to uncovering the nuanced intersections of policy, identity, and lived experiences. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how structural and institutional factors shape the realities of homeless women. Through a combination of interviews, case studies, and policy analysis, this research seeks to capture both individual narratives and the broader policy environment in which those narratives unfold.

- Qualitative research methodology:

  Interviews: Conduct interviews with policy makers, social workers, and other stakeholders.

- Policy and NGO Support Analysis: Perform a detailed thematic analysis of Austrian housing policies and NGO support systems. This involves examining government policy documents, official reports, and critically evaluating how NGOs contribute to policy implementation, advocacy, and practical interventions targeting homeless women. The analysis focuses on understanding the strengths and limitations of these

NGO-led support mechanisms, highlighting their gaps within broader governmental strategies.

The analysis of policies involves close examination of policy documents, government reports, and relevant legislation. A thematic analysis approach is used to identify recurring patterns, silences, and assumptions within these texts, particularly those that affect women in precarious housing situations (Herzog, Handke, and Hitters 2017, Ritchie and Spencer 1994). By comparing the content and structure of Austrian housing policy to feminist critiques and existing literature on gendered homelessness, the research aims to uncover structural gaps and limitations. This method provides a critical foundation for assessing the gender sensitivity of current policy frameworks and for proposing more inclusive, equitable housing interventions.

Conducting interviews and speaking directly with those who work daily on implementing policies into practice are very important parts of my research. These conversations help reveal where the key problems within these policies lie. Speaking with social workers and other relevant professionals will shed light on the gaps in the system, showing which people are being left behind and how support is failing to reach them. These insights are essential for developing more gender-sensitive and effective housing policies.

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 1 offers a critical analysis of Austria's housing and social welfare policies. Chapter 2 presents empirical findings from qualitative interviews.

Chapter 1: The Austrian Policy Landscape

Homelessness in Austria affects a diverse population, but women remain significantly underrepresented in both statistics and policy responses. According to Statistik Austria, a total of 20,573 people were recorded as homeless or housing-insecure in 2023. Of these, 6,574 were women, approximately 32%, a proportion that represents a large segment of the homeless population and clearly demonstrates the need for gender-specific policy interventions. Notably, 11% of all homeless individuals were young adults aged between 18 and 24, underscoring the importance of age-sensitive approaches. Vienna is home to 55% of all registered homeless people in Austria (approximately 11,400 individuals), making it the country's primary urban context for housing exclusion (Statistik Austria 2023). In my view, this concentration provides a strong rationale for conducting a locally focused analysis. For this reason, the present study concentrates on Vienna as a case study to examine how gendered homelessness is addressed, or overlooked, within local and national housing systems.

Recent public discourse in Austria, particularly from leading NGOs such as *neunerhaus*, has emphasized the urgent need to recognize and respond to the gendered dimensions of homelessness, especially the phenomenon of *hidden homelessness*, which disproportionately affects women (neunerhaus 2025a). Women experiencing homelessness often avoid street-based visibility by staying temporarily with acquaintances, enduring unsafe or violent domestic conditions, or remaining in precarious, dependent situations that keep them out of official statistics and institutional visibility. Traditional homelessness services in Austria have largely been designed with male users in mind, which leaves many women feeling unsafe or unwelcome in mixed-gender shelters and discourages them from seeking support. *Neunerhaus* notes that women-specific services, rapid access to secure and affordable housing, and trauma-informed, age- and need-sensitive support structures are essential to reaching these populations. With women making up nearly one-third of all registered homeless individuals in Austria

(Statistik Austria 2024), and likely many more unregistered cases, there is a growing recognition among service providers of the need for targeted interventions (Vienna.at. 2023). While this tendency exists, support remains insufficient for certain groups, particularly for women, whose specific vulnerabilities and forms of housing exclusion are still not adequately addressed (ecoi.net 2023, Amnesty International 2024). This thesis takes this institutional knowledge as a starting point to examine how gendered dimensions of homelessness are addressed or neglected in Austrian housing policy, and what structural barriers may prevent women from accessing the support they need, with particular attention given to the role and effectiveness of NGOs' responses and interventions.

Decentralized Policy Response: Unlike other countries, Austria historically had no single national homelessness strategy, as social services are largely managed at the municipal level (OECD 2023). Each of the nine provinces and cities, including Vienna, established its own homelessness programmes and emergency shelters. However, in 2021, Austria signed the Lisbon Declaration, thereby committing to the goal of eliminating homelessness by the year 2030 (BMSGPK 2024). Given Austria's decentralized approach to homelessness, non-governmental organizations become crucial instruments in bridging gaps left by formal legislation. NGOs employ diverse outreach strategies, including targeted information campaigns, multilingual counseling services, and partnerships with community centers, to inform and support women who might otherwise remain unaware of their rights and available resources. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of NGO outreach efforts varies significantly across marginalized groups. Interviews conducted with social workers, detailed in the subsequent chapter, further emphasize that women with migration backgrounds or limited German proficiency face considerable barriers when navigating bureaucratic processes. Consequently, existing NGO strategies, although essential, often fall short of fully addressing these intersectional vulnerabilities, thereby perpetuating disparities in access to housing assistance.

It is important to highlight the collaboration between the public and private/non-profit sectors, which is a distinctive feature of Austria's homelessness support system. The government relies on NGOs to deliver services and provides significant funding to those NGOs. In Vienna, for example, most homeless shelters and counseling centers are funded by the city through FSW but run by organizations like Caritas, Volkshilfe, or the Red Cross (Diebäcker et al. 2022).

Measures and Strategies of the City of Vienna to Combat Homelessness: The City of Vienna has a comprehensive support network for homeless and housing insecure individuals, anchored in the Fonds Soziales Wien (FSW). In cooperation with numerous partner organizations, Vienna's homelessness services provide counseling, support, as well as appropriate sleeping and housing arrangements, with the aim of achieving long-term housing solutions and enabling those affected to lead as independent a life as possible (Fonds Soziales Wien, 2025). In the next part, I would like to give an overview of what kind of support services already exist in Vienna, which long-term strategies and legal rules are there, which institutions are involved, and what new developments are happening right now. The aim of this section is to take a closer look at what is currently being done at the policy level specifically for women experiencing homelessness, and to explore how gender-specific needs and circumstances are considered within these frameworks. By doing so, I hope to understand not only the intentions behind existing measures, but also how effectively they respond to the complex realities faced by unhoused women.

Services Provided by Vienna's Homeless Assistance System

Vienna's Homeless Assistance (Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe, WWH) presents a broad range of low-threshold services that are officially aimed at reducing the impact of homelessness in the city. While the scope of programs and facilities appears extensive on paper, in practice, access and effectiveness can vary significantly depending on individual

circumstances. Certain structural barriers, such as bureaucratic requirements, limited capacity, or lack of gender-sensitive approaches, may prevent some groups, particularly women and marginalized individuals, from fully benefiting from the support that is offered (Diebäcker et al. 2022, 26). The main programs and facilities include:

***Homeless Services in Vienna: Day Centers, Street Work, and Emergency Accommodation*:** Vienna offers a multi-level support system for homeless and housing-insecure individuals. Day centers provide protected spaces where people can rest, cook, wash their clothes, shower, and safely store their belongings. Professional staff are available to offer information, counseling, and referrals to further services (Fonds Soziales Wien 2024a). Mobile street outreach teams also play an important role by approaching homeless individuals in public spaces and informing them about available services (Fonds Soziales Wien 2024a). These contact points are open to all homeless and housing-insecure individuals in Vienna, and their use is free of charge.

A key development in Vienna's approach has been the transformation of traditional night shelters into 24-hour emergency accommodations known as *Chancenhäuser*. These facilities offer immediate access to safe overnight stays for up to three months without any prerequisites. They serve homeless adults – including couples and women with children – and provide continuous social work support focused on developing long-term housing solutions (Fonds Soziales Wien 2024b). This model largely replaced earlier night shelters: by 2019, all major night shelters (except winter-specific accommodations) were closed following the creation of approximately 650 *Chancenhaus* places. Admission to a *Chancenhaus* is possible through referrals from the Caritas P7 counseling center, day centers, or street outreach teams. Stays are typically free or require only a minimal contribution.

***Assisted Living and Transitional Housing*:** For individuals in need of long-term support, Vienna offers transitional housing facilities and various forms of assisted living. In these

housing units or shared accommodations, formerly homeless individuals find a protected environment and continuous social-pedagogical support, helping them prepare for independent living in their own apartment (Obdach Wien 2024a; Obdach Wien 2024b). Access to such placements usually requires an official referral from homelessness services, confirming that the person qualifies for support (Obdach Wien 2024c). Some facilities are designed for specific target groups – for example, *Chancenhaus Obdach Favorita* 24-hour emergency accommodation only for women (Obdach Wien 2024b), or *Obdach Arndtstraße* for families and single parents in supported apartments (Obdach Wien 2024d). In addition, a follow-up support team helps residents maintain their housing and prevent repeated homelessness by helping with rent arrears, administrative procedures, and other daily life challenges.

Healthcare Services for Homeless People: Vienna ensures that homeless individuals have access to essential medical care. For example, *Caritas* operates the *Louise Bus*, a mobile medical unit that provides basic and emergency healthcare to people experiencing homelessness (Fonds Soziales Wien 2024c). The NGO *neunerhaus* offers a dedicated general practice and dental clinic for homeless and housing-insecure patients. Additionally, projects such as *"Go on! login!"* provide health-promoting and physical activity programs for people affected by poverty, isolation, or social exclusion (Fonds Soziales Wien 2024d). All of these services are free of charge and open to anyone in need, without prerequisites (Fonds Soziales Wien 2024e).

***Winter Assistance Programme*:** to ensure that no one has to remain on the streets during the coldest months of the year, the City of Vienna significantly expands its services every winter. From the end of October to the end of April, approximately 1,000 additional overnight places are provided in special winter shelters (*Winternotquartiere*) (Fonds Soziales Wien 2024f). These shelters are open 24 hours a day and not only offer warm sleeping places but also provide daytime accommodation and meals (Fonds Soziales Wien 2024f). In addition, the

city's regular day centers are supplemented during the winter season by several *Wärmestuben* – heated daytime spaces where individuals can warm up and rest (Fonds Soziales Wien 2024g). Winter shelters are open to all homeless and housing-insecure individuals, regardless of their country of origin or legal status (Fonds Soziales Wien 2024h). Referrals for winter accommodation are made through the Caritas P7 counseling center, through specialized counseling services for homeless EU citizens (e.g., social and return counseling), or via the day centers (Fonds Soziales Wien 2024i). In emergency cases, citizens can notify outreach teams using the *Kältetelefon* or the *KälteApp*, allowing street workers to provide rapid assistance to people in need (Fonds Soziales Wien 2024j).

(Note: In addition to these core services, there are other forms of assistance, for example, special emergency shelters for individuals who are not entitled to regular social benefits. One such example is *Haus VinziPort*, operated by the Vinzenzgemeinschaft, which is open to EU citizen while third party nationals are excluded. These services are largely funded by donations and complement the public basic provision.)

Strategies for the Long-Term Reduction of Homelessness

In addition to providing immediate support, Vienna pursues the goal of reducing and ultimately overcoming homelessness in the long term. At the core of this approach is a paradigm shift in homelessness services toward *Housing First* and preventive strategies.

Housing First Principles: Instead of the traditional step-based model ("from emergency shelter to transitional housing to a permanent apartment"), Vienna is increasingly adopting the *Housing First* approach. In this model, homeless individuals are immediately provided with their own apartment – without preconditions – and receive mobile support as needed, rather than having to "earn" the right to housing. Originally developed in the United States, Housing First has been piloted in Vienna since 2012 and is now successfully implemented by several social organisations (Hammer 2023). Evaluations have shown that Housing First achieves a

very high level of housing stability: around 92% of households retain their housing even after support ends and remain permanently housed (Hammer 2023). By mid-2022, the organization neunerhaus alone had provided a total of 234 Housing First apartments, giving 522 formerly homeless individuals – among them 232 children – immediate access to stable housing (Hammer 2023). These projects are financially supported by the City of Vienna through the Vienna Social Fund (FSW). The effectiveness of the model is also reflected in the current strategic shift of Vienna's homelessness services, which now increasingly focus on Housing First and mobile housing support (Hammer 2023). This means that support is provided in the individuals' own homes rather than primarily in institutions – a model that promotes independence and integration. Housing First has become a central element of Vienna's strategy to end homelessness.

Expansion of Long-Term Housing Opportunities: Closely linked to the Housing First approach is the creation of affordable housing for people affected by homelessness. Vienna is generally well-positioned due to its large sector of social housing (municipal buildings and subsidized apartments). However, enough apartments must also be made available specifically for formerly homeless individuals. The Chancenhäuser and supported housing facilities offered by the Vienna Homelessness Assistance (WWH) serve as steppingstones, but the goal is integration into the regular housing market. For this reason, the city is developing projects to ease the transition into mainstream housing – for example, through cooperation with non-profit housing associations or the establishment of a Social Housing Administration that rents apartments to individuals who are otherwise difficult to place. This model is similar to neunerimmo, a limited liability company founded by the NGO neunerhaus, which acts as a bridge between the real estate market and social service providers (Hammer 2023).

While Housing First is not a gender-specific model by design, its implementation in Austria has demonstrated significant potential in addressing the specific needs of homeless

women. For instance, within the federal initiative *Housing First Austria – Arriving Home*, over 60% of adult beneficiaries were women (Innovation in Politics Institute 2024), many of whom had previously experienced *hidden homelessness*. This outcome suggests that Housing First, when embedded in a broader framework of social support and accessible housing, can serve as an effective strategy for reaching marginalized groups that are typically overlooked, such as women and single mothers. The model's flexibility, combined with mobile, individualized support, allows it to respond sensitively to diverse life situations, including those shaped by gender-based violence or caregiving responsibilities. Consequently, Vienna's adoption and expansion of Housing First not only contributes to housing stability but also enhances the inclusivity and equity of its homelessness policies.

***Preventing the Loss of Housing*:** A key strategic area is the prevention of housing loss before homelessness occurs. For many years, Vienna has operated a prevention programme through FAWOS (Fachstelle für Wohnungssicherung), the city's specialist service for tenancy protection. FAWOS provides counselling to tenants facing rent arrears or eviction notices and can arrange short-term financial assistance. In this way, impending evictions are averted before individuals are pushed into homelessness. The impact of this programme is substantial: a study by the Vienna University of Economics and Business estimated the social return of FAWOS in 2021 at over €87 million, with operating costs of under €1 million (Volkshilfe Wien 2021, MeinBezirk 2024). Each eviction prevented not only avoids significant follow-up costs (such as emergency shelter, healthcare expenses, etc.) but also spares individuals considerable personal suffering. For this reason, eviction prevention efforts are being further strengthened. In the political debate, there are proposals to require property management companies to involve social counselling services as soon as rent arrears occur. Prevention is the most efficient form of homelessness assistance (Evans, Phillips, and Ruffini 2019).

***Support Services for Specific Target Groups*:** Long-term reduction of homelessness also requires addressing complex and multifaceted problems. Many homeless individuals suffer from mental health conditions or substance use disorders. In response, Vienna increasingly focuses on integrated care models (case management) and low-threshold health and addiction services (e.g., addiction streetwork, psychosocial support in emergency shelters). Tailored solutions have been developed for certain groups, such as the *Housing First for Women* project, which targets homeless women with experiences of violence, and special transitional housing programs for young people leaving youth welfare services to prevent street homelessness among care leavers. These targeted strategies aim to prevent particularly vulnerable individuals from ending up on the streets.

In summary, Vienna pursues a combined strategy: on the one hand, providing immediate assistance and a winter guarantee ("no one should have to freeze to death"), and on the other hand, focusing on Housing First and eviction prevention to sustainably reduce the number of people affected. This approach also aligns with international best practices: for example, Finland has significantly reduced homelessness through the Housing First model, serving as an important example for Vienna (BAWO, 2020).

Legal framework (federal government and state of Vienna)

Measures to combat homelessness are significantly influenced by social welfare and housing legislation at both the federal and state levels. Particularly important in this context are social assistance/minimum income schemes and the basic services provided for refugees.

The Living and Housing Cost Compensation Act (Lebenshaltungs- und Wohnkosten-Ausgleichs-Gesetz, LWA-G 2025) is a policy specifically adopted by Austria to prevent homelessness through targeted financial assistance. However, the effectiveness of these outreach efforts varies significantly across different groups of marginalized women, reflecting

the varied eligibility criteria and support mechanisms outlined in Austria's current legislation (LWA-G 2025, § 2 and § 5). Indeed, certain marginalized groups, such as women without stable residency status or sufficient proof of address, are implicitly or explicitly excluded from accessing these benefits (LWA-G 2025, § 2). Interviews with social workers, presented in the subsequent chapter, further substantiate that women with migration backgrounds, limited German language skills, face significant barriers in navigating bureaucratic processes. This evidence suggests that existing outreach strategies fail to sufficiently address these intersectional vulnerabilities, thereby reinforcing existing disparities in access to housing assistance.

The 2024 evaluation of the Wohnschirm program highlights a broader pattern in Austrian housing policy: the absence of a gender-sensitive lens in both implementation and review. (Bundesministerium für Soziales 2024). The 2024 directive issued by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Social Affairs outlines the continuation and expansion of the Wohnschirm program, which provides inflation-related support to prevent evictions and ensure access to housing and energy. Effective from January 1, 2025, the policy offers one-time financial aid for rent arrears or energy debts, combined with social work support. It targets low-income households at risk of homelessness or utility disconnection, aiming to stabilize housing situations and avoid the social and economic costs of eviction. The directive also emphasizes subsidiarity, support is only granted when no other aid is available, and tasks certified counseling organizations with application processing and client support. Although the report provides detailed analysis of administrative processes, access pathways, and the functioning of cooperation structures, it does not include any gender-disaggregated data or specific reference to women as a target group. This omission is particularly notable given that Wohnschirm is designed to support individuals in precarious housing situations, conditions that disproportionately affect women, especially those experiencing domestic violence, informal housing arrangements, or dependent

residency statuses. The program's focus on formal eligibility criteria, such as entitlement to Mindestsicherung, further limits access for many women, particularly migrants and undocumented persons who often fall outside these regulatory boundaries. The evaluation's technocratic framing reinforces one of the key arguments of this thesis: that policy tools in Austria tend to prioritize administrative coherence over intersectional vulnerability. As such, Wohnschirm exemplifies how mainstream homelessness interventions risk overlooking hidden homelessness and the specific needs of women unless gendered experiences are deliberately integrated into design, outreach, and evaluation processes.

***Social Assistance/Minimum Income Scheme*:** in Austria, individuals without their own income can receive social assistance (formerly known as needs-based minimum income). This support system is defined by federal law but implemented and financed by the individual federal states. In 2019, the Social Assistance Framework Act (Sozialhilfe-Grundsatzgesetz, SH-GG) was introduced with the aim of establishing uniform framework conditions (BMSGPK 2024). Among other things, it introduced caps for multi-person households and requirements for German language proficiency. However, some of these provisions were found to be unconstitutional, for example, the Constitutional Court overturned the proposed maximum rates for children as well as the linkage of full benefits to language skills (Verfassungsgerichtshof 2020). It was also ruled that federal states may not grant additional housing needs exclusively as benefits in kind (e.g., only direct rent payments instead of cash benefits). Until then, Vienna had operated under the "Viennese Minimum Income Scheme," which in some cases provided higher benefits than those set by the new federal framework. For example, Vienna covered 75% of the reference rate per person for couples, whereas the federal law allowed only 70%. This deviation was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in 2023 (ORF 2023). Vienna has recently adjusted its minimum income legislation but continues to seek more generous solutions within the limits of what is permitted. Minimum

income support is crucial for many homeless individuals, as it enables them to cover housing costs and basic living expenses. In 2023, the monthly minimum standard for minimum income support in Vienna amounted to €1,053.64 for single individuals (including the housing component), approximately €790 for each member of a couple, and €284 per child. In addition, Vienna offers the possibility of receiving supplementary housing allowances (Stadt Wien 2024). However, minimum income support is only available to individuals who are formally eligible – EU citizens without sufficient residency duration or people without secure residency status are often excluded. Vienna attempts to bridge this gap through its own funding (e.g., the Winter Package) and through services offered by NGOs. Nevertheless, individuals without social entitlements remain particularly vulnerable to homelessness. Social experts, including Amnesty International and BAWO, criticize that the right to housing is not legally guaranteed in Austria and call for improvements to the legal framework. However, minimum income support is only available to individuals who are formally eligible – EU citizens without sufficient residency duration or people without secure residency status are often excluded. Vienna attempts to bridge this gap through its own funding (e.g., the Winter Package) and through services offered by NGOs. Nevertheless, individuals without social entitlements remain particularly vulnerable to homelessness. Social experts, including Amnesty International and BAWO, criticize that the right to housing is not legally guaranteed in Austria and call for improvements to the legal framework (Hammer 2023, 18).

***Homelessness Assistance Legislation in Vienna*:** There is no specific state law solely dedicated to homelessness assistance in Vienna; services are financed through funding agreements within the broader framework of social assistance. The Vienna Social Fund (FSW) acts as an outsourced administrative body on behalf of the City of Vienna. At the municipal level, however, several regulations support homelessness policy. For example, Vienna has implemented a Cold Weather Protection Plan in the form of an ordinance, which

sets out emergency response measures for extreme temperatures. The city also enforces specific housing regulations, such as the rule that municipal housing is only allocated to individuals with at least two years of primary residence in Vienna. While this promotes social stability, it also limits access for new arrivals. For recognized refugees, the city offers the *Wohnschirm* programme, which supports independent housing through financial aid for deposits, furnishings, and initial expenses (Wohnschirm 2025).

Instead of a dedicated legal framework for homelessness services, Vienna relies on a system of subsidy agreements under the social assistance and minimum income laws. These agreements are coordinated by the FSW, which allocates funding from the city's social budget to a range of service providers, such as Caritas, Volkshilfe, the Vienna Red Cross, and neunerhaus. The agreement model allows for flexibility and adaptation to changing needs but also requires regular oversight, reporting, and adherence to quality standards. Funding structures and allocations are documented in the FSW's annual funding reports and in Vienna's broader social reports. (Fonds Soziales Wien 2024v, neunerhaus 2015v). This approach clarifies that while services are not enshrined in law, they are formalized through regulated contractual partnerships.

At the federal level, the Basic Provision Act (*Grundversorgungsgesetz*, GVG) regulates the care of asylum seekers and certain other groups (e.g., displaced persons with temporary protection status). Asylum seekers do not have access to minimum income support but instead receive basic provision benefits, which are co-financed by the federal government and the provinces. In Vienna, the FSW coordinates refugee assistance: asylum seekers are either accommodated in organised shelters where meals are provided, or, if privately housed, they receive a financial basic provision allowance (to cover rental and basic living expenses). In all cases, access to healthcare is also ensured. However, the level of these benefits is relatively low compared to minimum income support – currently, a single asylum seeker

living in private accommodation in Vienna receives around €215 per month for living expenses and €155 in housing support (as of 2023, source: City of Vienna). Given these low amounts and the prohibition on employment during the asylum process, asylum seekers are hardly able to finance housing independently without additional support. Vienna therefore aims to prevent homelessness among asylum seekers by providing a sufficient number of shelter places. Nevertheless, if a refugee loses access to basic provision (e.g., through disqualification), they can be accommodated through the *Winter Package*, but otherwise they often fall into a gap in the system. NGOs such as *Caritas* attempt to fill this gap by offering special emergency shelters (e.g., *Haus Amadou* for refugees and migrants outside the basic provision system (Caritas Wien 2025a). In general, refugees in Vienna are advised to contact the Basic Care Advice Centre run by the FSW (Stadt Wien "Grundversorgung für Flüchtlinge" 2024). The separation between homelessness services and refugee assistance is an intentional organisational decision – there is a parallel accommodation system for refugees (often in communal shelters) designed to specifically address their distinct needs (Stadt Wien 2024b).

In summary, the legal framework establishes the basis for financial support and accommodation: federal laws regulate social assistance and the provision of services to asylum seekers, while Vienna implements and supplements these regulations. Current debates focus on making these laws compliant with human rights standards – for example, aid organisations are calling for an enforceable right to housing and an adjustment of social assistance so that no one falls through the cracks. Within its available scope, the City of Vienna strives to provide more generous support (such as the continued provision of housing subsidies, which were not included in the federal framework).

Involved Institutions and Their Responsibilities

In this section, I would like to describe how various institutions collaborate to combat homelessness in Vienna. The main actors and their respective roles are as follows:

The FSW is a non-profit limited liability company (GmbH) outsourced by the city, responsible for planning, funding, and organizing social services. In the area of homelessness assistance, the FSW acts as a central coordinating hub: it finances facilities (such as emergency shelters, transitional housing, counseling, etc.) through public funds and ensures their coordination (Fonds Soziales Wien 2025). Strategically, the FSW continuously develops new concepts (e.g., the introduction of *Chancenhäuser* in 2018/19) and evaluates their effectiveness. Practically, through its subsidiary Obdach Wien GmbH, the FSW itself operates several facilities, including *Chancenhäuser* such as Obdach Favorita and Wurlitzergasse (Obdach Wien 2025). Municipal Department 40 (Social Affairs) is officially responsible for minimum income and social assistance and collaborates closely with the FSW. For instance, MA40 decides on individual applications, while the FSW provides the actual services. In short, the city government (Social Affairs Department) sets the budget and policy framework, while the FSW operates as the implementing body for homelessness assistance in Vienna.

Federal Working Group on Homelessness (BAWO): The BAWO is the national umbrella organization for homelessness support services in Austria. It unites over 170 organizations, including Caritas, Volkshilfe, Diakonie, neunerhaus, and many others, and acts as a networking and professional forum. BAWO produces research studies, organizes professional conferences, and conducts lobbying with political and administrative bodies to advance national strategies. While BAWO is not operationally active in Vienna, local member organizations coordinate their efforts through it. One example of BAWO's role is the project “Housing First Austria – Arriving Home”, funded by the Ministry of Social Affairs from 2021–2024 and coordinated by

BAWO. Through this project, Housing First apartments were provided across Austria in cooperation with 12 social organizations and 50 non-profit housing developers (FEANTSA 2021). In Vienna, BAWO closely collaborates with the FSW and NGOs and represents their interests at the federal level.

The practical operation of many facilities is managed by major non-profit organizations. In Vienna, these include Caritas, Volkshilfe, Diakonie, the Red Cross, St. Vincent Associations, and specialized associations such as neunerhaus, Wiener Wohnen, and Flüchtlingsprojekt Ute Bock, among others. They operate emergency shelters, day centers, counseling centers, transitional housing, and Housing First programs, mostly commissioned and financed by the Vienna Social Fund (FSW). For example, Caritas Vienna runs several facilities, including the emergency shelter *Gruft*, the counseling center P7 – Vienna Service for the Homeless (a central information and referral point) (Fonds Soziales Wien 2025), day centers (such as *Inigo*), mother-child houses, and winter emergency shelters. Volkshilfe Vienna manages the women's housing project *Hafen* (for homeless women who have experienced violence) and, together with the FSW, operates the specialist unit FAWOS for eviction prevention. Neunerhaus has established transitional housing as well as medical facilities (general medical practice, veterinary practice for the homeless) and has been a pioneer of Housing First in Vienna. Many of these organizations are members of BAWO and collaborate within the Vienna Homelessness Assistance network. Although their funding is primarily public, NGOs also contribute through donations and voluntary engagement – clearly visible, for example, in the volunteers at *Gruft* or the numerous donation drives.

Housing providers also play a role – particularly Wiener Wohnen (the administration of municipal housing) and non-profit housing associations. They provide housing units, for example, within the framework of the Housing First program (most Housing First apartments

originate from the housing stock of non-profit providers) (Sozialministerium 2024, Halbartschlager et al. 2012). In the interaction of these institutions, Vienna fulfils its social responsibility: public authorities, non-profit organisations, and civil society work in partnership. This integrated network is often regarded as exemplary in the German-speaking world.

Current developments and discussions

In 2024 and 2025, homelessness has returned to the forefront of public and political debate in Vienna and across Austria. In this section, I would like to describe some of the key trends and current policy initiatives that reflect a shift in how homelessness is being understood and addressed:

***Rising Case Numbers Due to Inflation*:** After the number of homeless individuals in Vienna remained relatively stable or slightly declined between 2017 and 2020, it has been rising again since 2021 (neunerhaus, 2023). The main reasons are the economic consequences of multiple crises, namely the COVID-19 pandemic, high inflation, and sharp increases in energy and rental costs. According to *Statistik Austria*, 20,573 people were officially registered as homeless or housing-insecure across Austria in 2023, an increase of 4% compared to 2022, and the highest figure since data collection began. Approximately 55% of these individuals (around 11,400) live in Vienna (Statistik Austria 2024a). The significant rise in living and housing costs is leading to more evictions: "Exploding rents, rising prices, and high living costs" have driven up the number of housing loss cases, warns Vienna Green Party leader Judith Pühringer (Stadt Wien 2024a). Homeless services are feeling the pressure; emergency shelters are experiencing higher occupancy throughout the year. At the same time, visible homelessness has become more prevalent in certain areas, such as around Praterstern and metro stations – prompting concern among residents and district politicians (MeinBezirk 2024).

***EU 2030 Goal and Urban Policy Strategies*:** At the EU level, Member States committed in 2021 to ending homelessness by 2030 through the Lisbon Declaration. This ambitious target has been taken up by policymakers in Vienna. In June 2024, the opposition Green Party of Vienna presented a six-point plan to make Vienna the first "homelessness-free" metropolis in Europe (MeinBezirk 2024a). Their proposals include a massive expansion of Housing First, a significant increase in affordable housing, an annual quota for new municipal housing units (up to 2,500 additional units), and subsidised apartments (up to 5,000 more). They also call for a robust vacancy tax on privately owned unused housing. Specifically, the Greens propose reserving a portion of new housing developments for people experiencing homelessness and prioritising social housing in zoning decisions. Furthermore, eviction prevention should be expanded citywide and institutionalised. Non-executive City Councillor Pühringer emphasised that "Homelessness assistance in Vienna is successful thanks to its 'Housing First' approach – only through access to one's own apartment can people regain their dignity" (Stadt Wien 2024a). The governing city coalition (SPÖ/NEOS) has also expressed general support for the 2030 target and highlights steps already taken (Stadt Wien 2025n).

***Year-Round Emergency Accommodation ("Summer Package")*:** An important current debate concerns service gaps in emergency accommodation during the summer months. While the principle "no one should have to sleep on the street in winter" remains widely accepted, significantly fewer emergency shelter places are available outside the winter season – particularly for homeless EU citizens without access to social benefits. As early as 2019, a coalition of civil society actors and NGOs called for the introduction of a "Summer Package," meaning a year-round guarantee of shelter for all homeless individuals (Hammer 2023, 16). This initiative highlights the fact that basic humanitarian standards should not apply only on freezing winter nights but must be upheld throughout the year. In 2022,

Vienna-based social organisations submitted a concrete proposal to the city outlining how a 365-day emergency accommodation model could be implemented (Unterlerchner et al. 2022; Hammer 2023, 16).

***Nationwide Initiative to Combat Homelessness*:** Encouragingly, there has recently been increased engagement at the federal level in Austria. At the end of 2024, the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs launched a permanent Housing First programme. The previously pilot-based initiative *"zuhause ankommen"*, which has provided housing to over 1,800 individuals since 2021, is now being made permanent (BMSGPK 2024). By 2026, around 1,200 additional housing units for formerly homeless individuals are planned, potentially benefiting approximately 2,500 people with stable housing. The federal government is allocating €20 million for this programme and has embedded its implementation in law. Operational responsibility lies with the newly established *Housing First Austria* association, a branch of the national homelessness network BAWO, in cooperation with cities and housing developers. The programme also directly benefits Vienna, as it increases the number of publicly funded housing units and social support services available in the city. In parallel, the federal government has increased funding for housing subsidies (notably through the *Wohnschirm* programme) and is discussing further measures as part of a National Action Plan to Combat Homelessness. Homelessness is therefore now recognised as a national political concern, whereas it had previously been viewed primarily as the responsibility of Austria's federal states. With national parliamentary elections scheduled for 2025, BAWO is calling on all political parties to make binding commitments to continue this strategy (BAWO 2024).

Conclusion

Vienna addresses homelessness through a multifaceted approach that combines emergency assistance, Housing First, prevention, and broader social policy measures. Despite

having what is widely considered the most comprehensive support system in Austria – more extensive than in any other city – recent developments such as inflation and migration present new challenges. In response, the city has expanded capacities and introduced new service models. At the same time, political debates increasingly revolve around long-term visions such as a "Vienna without homelessness," aligning with the European Union's 2030 target. Whether this goal can be achieved depends on numerous factors, not least the provision of sufficient affordable housing. What is clear, however, is that coordinated efforts by all relevant actors: city government, federal authorities, NGOs, and housing providers – will be essential for achieving a sustainable reduction in homelessness. Vienna possesses the necessary tools and institutional experience; the coming years will show whether these ambitious strategies yield results. Initial successes, such as the high retention rate of Housing First tenants in Vienna, offer cautious optimism (Hammer 2023, 16; Stadt Wien 2024).

Also, the analysis of Austria's housing and homelessness policies reveals a significant structural blind spot: the needs of women experiencing hidden homelessness are largely unaddressed. While Vienna offers a comparatively dense network of services, most policy frameworks remain centered on visible, street-based homelessness, typically associated with men. As a result, women who avoid emergency shelters for reasons of safety, stigma, or dependency often fall outside the scope of available support. Migrants are particularly missing from policy considerations, and women without secure or permanent residency documents frequently find themselves excluded from most forms of assistance. These women are often unable to access shelters, social housing, or even basic social services, placing them in extremely precarious situations. The lack of targeted, trauma-informed, and gender-specific provisions contributes to their continued invisibility in both statistics and services. Without deliberate policy adjustments that recognise the unique realities of hidden homelessness—

including those shaped by gender, migration status, and legal precarity—current systems risk reinforcing the very exclusion they aim to resolve.

Chapter 2: Empirical Findings From Qualitative Interviews

In this chapter I want to discuss insights from the series of qualitative interviews conducted with professionals working in the field of homelessness and social support in Austria. The aim was to understand how gender-specific challenges are perceived by those working in the field, to explore how existing policies are experienced and implemented in practice, and to identify any gaps or additional support that frontline workers might require to effectively address women's needs. Interviews were conducted with staff members from a range of organizations that work either directly with unhoused people or with groups affected by intersecting forms of marginalization. These included:

- Caritas Wien – P7 Wiener Service für Wohnungslose (initial crisis support and referral services)
- Frauen*Hafen by Volkshilfe Wien (transitional housing project for women)
- ARGE SIE – Frauenberatung Linz (gender-sensitive services for unhoused women)
- LEFÖ (support for migrant women and survivors of traffiking)
- lilawohnt (female housing project in Innsbruck)
- Chancenhaus Obdach Favorita (24-hour emergency accommodation only for women)
- Caritas Tageszentrum (day center providing low-threshold support and basic services for people experiencing homelessness).
- Samariterbundes Haus R3 (long-term, supervised accommodation for women, men, and couples)

The interviews took place between April and June 2025, either online or in person, and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Participants included social workers, counselors, project coordinators, and organizational directors. Their perspectives offer valuable insights into how gender, housing, migration, violence, and systemic inequality intersect in the lived realities of the women they support.

Legal and Structural Barriers to Housing

Social workers consistently identified legal and structural barriers that prevent women from accessing stable housing. This works both ways, meaning that initially, access to affordable housing markets and social housing is available primarily to those who are already in a more privileged bureaucratic position. This is identified as one of the main reasons for female homelessness in Vienna. The barriers to accessing social housing were a major concern. For example, in some regions of Austria, it is necessary to live for up to six years before being eligible for subsidized housing. This long waiting period pushes many into the private rental market, which is characterized not only by unaffordable prices but also by more unstable conditions due to numerous requirements imposed by landlords.

Most importantly, women who at some point cannot afford to rent privately also cannot enter the assistance and housing system. Legal residency status and bureaucratic eligibility criteria emerge as major barriers. For instance, women who lack a permanent residence permit or long-term local registration often cannot access Austria's social housing or welfare support systems. One practitioner explains that "to access the social housing of Vienna... you have to have permanent residence or... Austrian nationality. If you don't have that, it is really hard to access the social housing system" and since many migrant women lack this status, "that is really hard to access." Many housing services are limited to those with permanent residency or Austrian/EU citizenship, but even EU citizens can fall through the cracks – without an

unlimited residence permit or sufficient work history, they may be denied social benefits and housing assistance. Likewise, to stay in Vienna's municipal homeless shelters, women must qualify for social benefits (unemployment or welfare payments). If a woman "just came here from an EU country and [hasn't] lived long enough in Vienna... they don't have an income and they cannot claim social... housing" – in such cases, "they unfortunately have to move out after two weeks" – these are the conditions of the Chancenhäuser. Mostly, women who cannot receive assistance as "homeless" usually cannot work either because the are in the lack of proper documents, often creating a vicious cycle.

Even when government housing exists, strict local residency rules and inflexible criteria undermine its accessibility for women in crisis. Public housing in Austria is administered at the city or town level, each with its own residency requirements. In Innsbruck, "people have to be registered in Innsbruck for four years" to qualify for city housing, whereas in a nearby town "you have to live ten years" to be eligible. A social worker explains that for someone who moved to a new area (for example, to escape abuse or seek work), "they have a long waiting period" before they can get into subsidized housing. "For many people, state housing is not possible even though there is quite a lot [available]", she notes, due to these residency rules. Such policies, while perhaps intended to prioritize local residents, end up excluding women who urgently need rehousing, such as domestic violence survivors who must relocate. As a result, women are often pushed into the precarious private rental market, where they face short lease contracts and potential repeat homelessness. Practitioners report that even when their clients secure a private flat, it's typically a temporary three-year lease "and then what happens after three years? We don't know", one says, noting that "often we see women after three years being in the same situation again, that they don't have a place to live". This cycle reveals a policy gap between the intention of providing "transition" housing and the reality that no long-term solution materializes. As one interviewee put it, many women have endured "years and

years of insecure housing situations" and placing them only into another short-term arrangement simply delays, rather than prevents, a return to instability.

The gendered dimension of these challenges disproportionately affects women, a point consistently emphasized by the social workers I interviewed. Women frequently receive residency permits dependent on their husband's employment status and often do not have their own independent source of income. As a result, their vulnerability is compounded, leading to both economic and bureaucratic dependence. This reliance limits their agency and places them in precarious positions, especially in cases of domestic violence, family breakdown, or sudden loss of the spouse's employment. Consequently, women's homelessness is not only linked to broader economic vulnerability but also significantly tied to restrictive migration and residency policies that fail to account for gender-specific risks and needs.

Social workers lament that women who "don't meet the requirements" for public assistance or housing often disappear "somewhere in the underground," since "for them it's really difficult to find support." This underscores a grim reality: current laws and policies exclude many migrant or non-citizen women, leaving them with no safety net and forcing them into hidden homelessness. Women migrants (including EU migrant workers, refugees, and trafficking survivors) often face exclusion from housing support due to their legal status. One practitioner recalled that until 2013 there wasn't "a single homeless shelter" officially open to non-Austrians – a policy gap that only began to close after homeless people and students protested, forcing an NGO (Caritas) to open an emergency shelter funded by donations. (Eventually, the city took over funding in 2017.) This example illustrates how policy intentions lagged behind needs: without public pressure, authorities "looking only after the financial part" were not interested in expanding services to non-citizens.

The existing system of assistance appears to revolve primarily around individuals who have paid what seems to be "enough" taxes, though there is no official standard for what constitutes "enough." Instead, this perception creates rigid hierarchy rather than universal accessibility. This situation is largely because most organizations aiding rely predominantly on funding from the City of Vienna. Organizations such as Caritas, which receive significant funding through donations, have more flexibility and can therefore implement projects that are more migrant-friendly. Other organizations, such as Frauen*Hafen, receive funding from various sources but often face the drawback that living within their programs can be quite costly (Volkshilfe Wien 2024). This financial structure inadvertently deepens socioeconomic inequalities, disproportionately impacting vulnerable groups, especially women and marginalized communities, reinforcing systemic barriers rather than dismantling them.

Another structural barrier identified by social workers is the bureaucratic complexity of accessing to aid. Clients must navigate extensive paperwork to obtain social benefits or housing, for instance, applicants for basic income support ("social money") must reapply annually with numerous documents, demonstrating ongoing job-seeking efforts even if medically unfit to work. Authorities frequently question these medical limitations, placing an additional burden on individuals and practitioners who must assist with forms and appeals.

Most of my informants highlight that limited access to social housing and high housing costs in the private rental market are among the main causes of homelessness. Municipal housing applications involve "a very long and difficult form" and stringent eligibility criteria regarding citizenship or residency status. Such administrative hurdles disproportionately impact women, who often face language barriers or trauma-related difficulties advocating for themselves. Those lacking access to social support also lose access to social housing, subsequently being unable even to enter shelters, reinforcing a cycle where the homelessness assistance system addresses consequences rather than underlying causes. A counselor working

with migrant women observed, even those who secure an apartment struggle to "keep it because they don't earn that much and the rent is really high in Vienna." Informants emphasized that the barriers to social housing and affordable private housing disproportionately impact vulnerable groups, particularly women and migrants, exacerbating existing social inequalities. They noted that this structural gap creates precarious situations, where individuals often face prolonged or repeated episodes of homelessness. Furthermore, without addressing the root causes, such as economic vulnerability, insufficient income support, restrictive residency criteria, and inadequate social services – the assistance system remains primarily reactive, repeatedly responding to immediate crises rather than providing sustainable long-term solutions.

It is worth noting that Vienna, and Austria more broadly, serves as a positive example of resource distribution compared to neighboring countries. Thanks to initiatives like the Winter Package and the Housing First program, Vienna provides a relatively high number of shelter and housing places. Nevertheless, informants consistently emphasized that available resources remain insufficient to meet the growing demand. They all mentioned that demand far exceeds supply in many programs. One worker explained that after emergency shelter, the "next level" is to apply for city social housing, but "the problem is that the waiting times are very long," often 6 to 12 months for an allocation. During those months, women and families may remain in limbo. Emergency accommodations are also limited, especially in summer, when Vienna's policy "Winter Package" is closed, but the demand is the same. In summer, capacity drops dramatically. This confirms a key point discussed in Chapter 1: that during the summer months, shelter capacity in Vienna significantly decreases in about 800–1000 extra shelter beds, leaving many without access to emergency accommodation. A P7 social worker noted that many people end up without shelter in summertime because there are simply "too few places to sleep". Homeless individuals often have to line up at one facility when it opens and cannot

reach another in time if the first is full, since all fill up quickly each evening. This central shortage forces painful choices and leaves some unaccommodated despite the intent to provide shelter. Beyond emergency beds, long-term housing options are scant. One interviewee running a transitional housing project for women acknowledged they maintain a waiting list and could "immediately open up a second house" given the demand – a testament to how limited current capacity is. Simply put, there are not enough affordable flats or shelter spots available, a structural reality that undercuts every policy promise of housing for all.

The shortage of resources is evident not only in the limited availability of housing and shelter spaces but also in the insufficient number of social workers. Budget cuts have affected the sector, and instead of expanding staff during periods of increased demand, layoffs often occur. Vienna's policymakers have "agreed... to never worsen the service" (i.e. not to cut the existing 38-bed capacity), "however, it could be that staff... don't get a raise... or that we don't offer so much money for supervision [or] team days". I believe that these budget cuts can be connected to the rightward shift in Austrian politics and this connection acknowledged by some social workers during interviews. People were reluctant to speak openly about these issues, frequently stating that they were not permitted to disclose specific details, but the reality is that underfunding forces trade-offs – often cutting the very "extras" (like staff training, mental health activities, outings) that make a program holistic and effective for women. The intention of the city to maintain services is there, but without increased investment it cannot improve or expand them to meet women's needs. I could see a big example of that during my day at the Caritas Day center. There, approximately 70–80% of clients speak neither German nor English fluently, yet most of the staff are only proficient in these two languages.

One of the most pressing and frequently mentioned challenges for homeless migrant women in Austria is the language barrier. This issue is multifaceted: it affects access to information, complicates communication with institutions, reduces chances of securing

housing and employment, and deepens social isolation. These observations are supported by international research. As Carmichael et al. (2023) note in their cross-country qualitative study on access to healthcare for people experiencing homelessness, language barriers pose a major challenge in countries like Austria and Greece, where many homeless individuals are migrants or refugees. In Austria, for example, healthcare workers reported having to rely on cleaning staff or even children to facilitate communication with homeless patients, often resulting in miscommunication and inadequate care (Carmichael et al. 2023, 7). Moreover, segregation by language is often reproduced within the support infrastructure itself. As another social worker pointed out: "Women who don't speak German are often placed in the same emergency shelters. They stay among themselves, hear only their own language — that doesn't help them to arrive [in Austria]." The language barrier isn't just a personal problem — it's a structural issue built into how housing and support services are set up. To solve it, more is needed than just translated forms. There should be a more central and coordinated effort to improve communication, integration, and fair access to support.

One of the key findings so far is the critical importance of inter-organizational collaboration, especially between NGOs supporting different vulnerable groups such as migrants and unhoused women. This cooperation becomes particularly significant when individuals do not meet the eligibility criteria for support at one institution and must be referred to another. However, social workers highlight a notable gap: the absence of a unified, centralized system clearly outlining the responsibilities and services provided by various organizations. While existing collaborations often operate effectively through informal, longstanding horizontal networks, staff members frequently lack comprehensive knowledge about other potentially relevant organizations. Strengthening these networks by creating centralized communication and cooperation mechanisms could significantly improve service efficiency and accessibility. Consequently, establishing formal channels of collaboration and

coordination represents a promising policy direction to address systemic gaps and enhance support for vulnerable populations.

Finally, the interviews highlight that legal protections and policy intentions often don't translate into housing security on the ground. One stark example is Austria's domestic violence eviction law, which allows authorities to remove an abusive partner from the home. In theory, this policy aims to protect women's right to stay in their own homes. In practice, however, it can leave women in a financial bind. A social worker describes this as a "missing link": "there is a law which says the aggressor has to leave the apartment... but then who pays the rent?". If the husband is removed, "the woman is not working because she stays at home with the children or she doesn't have documents" and suddenly has no means to cover the rent. There is "no... help for that" gap in the system. It can take months to sort out divorce proceedings or obtain child support in court, during which time the family may fall into arrears or even face eviction. Thus, the well-intended law to protect women from violence isn't accompanied by economic safeguards, and the outcome can be women and children becoming homeless despite the policy's intentions.

Gender-Specific Challenges Faced by Unhoused Women

The lived experiences of homeless women, as described by practitioners, demonstrate that women's pathways into homelessness and their needs in homelessness are distinct from men's, rooted deeply in gender-based inequality. A recurring theme in the interviews is that domestic or gender-based violence is the single most common precursor to women's homelessness. One social worker estimates "most of the women we work with... have experienced domestic violence, either in their childhood or later in partnerships". Another notes that "the main reasons [for female homelessness] I would still say is domestic and family

violence, but also... poverty and economic disadvantages, and mental health issues". Unlike the stereotypical chronically homeless man "with the big beard... in a park," women rarely end up sleeping rough in visible public spaces. Instead, women often experience "hidden" homelessness – they may couch-surf or stay in "codependent situations" (e.g. remain with an abusive partner or exchange sex for shelter) rather than go to the streets. This reflects both personal safety strategies and societal stigma: as one interviewee explains, "female homelessness in general is seen as something shameful in society", so women will go to great lengths to avoid the label of "homeless". They are often "more ashamed to admit that they have no place to stay," sometimes enduring exploitative or dangerous living arrangements just to avoid the shelter or the street. One practitioner observed that it "takes longer for women to admit that they have difficulties finding an apartment", because of this shame and fear.

Economic abuse and dependency are key gendered factors that emerged from the interviews. Many homeless women, especially those fleeing violent relationships, have been financially controlled or impoverished by their abusers. A social worker from a long-term housing project for survivors notes that "especially for women who are survivors of violence, [one important factor] is financial difficulties. Often they were not allowed or able to work before... They have no savings. Often they have no connections [no family or friends to stay with]". Furthermore, women who are mothers face additional hurdles that men typically do not. If a mother becomes homeless, she must worry about child protection services intervening. As one interviewee bluntly states, women fear that "if they don't have an apartment, they will lose the children – which is correct" in many instances. Practitioners note that most women in their long-term housing programs have children with them, and many of these families are large (three or four children), which makes finding an affordable apartment exceedingly difficult.

Another significant theme is the high prevalence of mental health and substance abuse challenges among homeless women, often linked to past trauma. Several practitioners stress

that “female homelessness manifests differently” in part because women have a “higher need for psychological or psychiatric support”. Many clients suffer from PTSD, depression, or anxiety rooted in abuse or childhood neglect. One interviewee pointed out that women who have experienced trauma “don’t receive adequate medical support... the women are not supported enough to heal, and then they develop post-traumatic disorders, which makes it hard to sustain on the working market [and] in housing”. Unaddressed mental health issues can precipitate a downward spiral – for example, a woman might lose her job or be unable to manage her tenancy during a mental health crisis, thus becoming homeless. Social workers also report a rise in substance dependencies among their female clients in recent years, citing “way more [women] addicted to some substance – whether alcohol or drugs – that’s also higher” now than in the past. They attribute some of this increase to broader social issues (one mentions a “polarization in society... more right-wing” climate correlating with “more gender-based violence” and complex cases). Yet, historically, services were not designed with these gendered trauma needs in mind. It has taken time for the homelessness sector to recognize that women require specialized support (e.g. trauma-informed care, safety from male predation, mental health services), not just a bed.

Recent studies reinforce these observations. Rogers and Evans (2023) argue that trauma-informed, person-centered care models are crucial for effectively supporting people experiencing both homelessness and mental illness, particularly women. Their research stresses the need for flexible, peer-based services designed with lived experience in mind, which can address complex, intersecting vulnerabilities. Similarly, David et al. (2015) highlight that safety, trust, and gender-specific support are essential components of effective mental health services for homeless women, advocating for systems built around women's psychological and emotional needs rather than generic service provision. Interviews conducted for this study clearly demonstrate the lack of accessible and adequate psychological support within

homelessness services in Austria. One interviewee noted that their center can only offer a visiting counselor a few hours a month for women, and they have no psychologist on staff. Referrals to external therapy or psychiatric care are made, but those often involve long waiting periods and demand that the woman be proactive and "fit enough to go there" on her own. These findings suggest that the current lack of accessible psychological care services is not merely an oversight but a structural gap, one that must be addressed through both funding and policy reforms prioritizing trauma-informed, gender-sensitive mental health support.

Crucially, the need for women-only services and safe spaces is a thread running through all the interviews. Practitioners universally acknowledge that "mixed-gender institutions" or generic shelters often fail women. Women avoid mixed shelters because "it's not secure for them at all... not secure to sleep in a hall with 50 men", some of whom may be aggressive. One respondent recounted that until the 1990s, even experts assumed "there are no homeless women" simply because women weren't showing up in the (male-dominated) shelters. In reality, women were out there – but hiding or tolerating abuse – until the first women-only shelter in Vienna opened and "it was filled... within the first days. Then they realized, wait, there is a big demand". Today, however, gender-specific services remain scarce. In Vienna, a city of nearly two million, the interviewee notes that "there are only two facilities... just for women"[3] (one 24/7 housing service and one daytime drop-in center) and "very little gender-specific services" overall. This gap illustrates a discrepancy between policy assumptions and women's reality: Policy-makers long presumed that homeless services were "one size fits all," but women's safety and privacy needs call for women-centric models. Social workers in women-only programs highlight how much more effectively they can engage their clients.

[3] This is not entirely accurate, especially when considering shelters for women affected by domestic violence, of which there are currently a sufficient number. However, most of these shelters declined to give me interviews, stating that "domestic violence is not a homelessness issue." As becomes clear from my interviews with social workers in the homelessness sector, these issues are in fact interconnected. This refusal is telling; it highlights, among other things, how strongly the concept of homelessness remains stigmatized.

They employ all-female staff trained in issues like domestic violence and "dependencies in relationships". They also observe social differences: homeless women tend to be "very often very isolated" and hesitant to trust others, whereas homeless men more readily form peer groups in shelters or on the street. A trauma- informed, women-only environment can gradually rebuild trust and community for these women. From a feminist perspective, the lack of sufficient women-specific shelters and the historic invisibility of homeless women both stem from gender-blind policy approaches. Only recently have practitioners been able to demonstrate that women's homelessness was not absent – it was ignored.

Funding Shortfalls and Gaps Between Policy Intentions and Outcomes

Some interviews reveal a clear disconnect at times between policy intentions and on-the-ground outcomes, often due to funding shortfalls or flawed implementation. One prominent example is Vienna's recent adoption of a "Housing First" approach. In principle, Housing First aims to move homeless individuals directly into permanent housing (instead of through gradual steps), on the assumption that having a home will provide stability from which other issues can be addressed. The intention is empowering; immediate housing without preconditions, emphasizing client choice and autonomy. In practice, however, the interviews suggest serious implementation gaps. A social worker described how the city phased out the old step-by-step shelter system in favor of Housing First, but "there are not enough apartments" available for it to work as designed. With too few units, the result is that many formerly homeless people end up clustered in quasi-temporary facilities (like the interviewee's own project) which "serves as [Housing First] apartments" due to lack of alternatives. This undermines the original concept of scattered, independent housing. Moreover, the support services meant to accompany Housing First placements often fall short. Officially, an NGO caseworker should assess each person's capabilities – e.g. can they manage rent and live autonomously? – and tailor the housing solution accordingly. "They should do it," the social worker said of this preparatory

process, “but in reality, they don’t do it.” In the rush to place people into flats, proper assessment and “clarification” of needs are skipped. The outcome can be disastrous: individuals who aren’t ready for completely independent living get tossed into it and receive little follow-up support. The practitioner gave a vivid illustration of the cycle that ensues: a client is placed into an apartment and “after half a year, he didn’t pay any rent... they need to move out, they are on the street again. And then again.” Instead of stability, the person experiences a repeat trauma of losing housing. “This sounds great, and it is great, but the problem [with only doing that] is... maybe [people] receive the next traumatizing bad experience,” he explained, noting that losing one’s apartment is itself a trauma that compounds their original homelessness. Although the Housing First model aims to provide lasting housing with supportive services, this ideal often falls short in practice due to limited housing availability and insufficient support. Interviews reveal a key contradiction: while client autonomy is prioritized, the lack of guidance can lead to housing failure, further undermining that autonomy. Social workers on the front line witness these unintended consequences, suggesting that the implementation of Housing First in Vienna has gaps between the theory (rapid rehousing with support) and the reality (limited housing units, inadequate support, and thus revolving-door evictions). Of course, further investigation of this issue would require more interviews with those working directly within the Housing First program. Unfortunately, I was unable to conduct these interviews, as the staff declined due to high workloads, once again highlighting the lack of sufficient resources. But we see from other studies that Housing First still remains an inaccessible luxury for the majority of people in Vienna (Amnesty International 2022, 48). Also, I believe it is important to consider how the situation is perceived by “shelters” workers and to understand the challenges they face.

Another contradiction between policy intent and outcome: the intent is to honor independence and not be intrusive, but the outcome is that without outreach some vulnerable

people decline to a life-threatening extent. The staff feel compelled to bend the rules ("offer our help more directly") to prevent tragedy. One extreme case involved a woman who refused any help and kept living in squalor; only when her apartment hygiene violated tenancy rules could the team "forcefully" intervene – but even then, she avoided treatment until she was hospitalized at the brink of death. This prompted painful reflection among the team about whether respecting her free will was appropriate, or if more assertive intervention was warranted. Such cases expose a policy gap: guidelines say one thing (respect choice), but on the ground, workers must navigate ethical gray areas to protect their clients' well-being. It suggests that formal policy has not fully resolved how to support those with severe mental health or addiction issues in housing – a tension between client autonomy and duty of care. At the same time, one might argue that this very gap is inevitable, or even necessary, as such nuanced, case-specific decisions cannot be easily codified within rigid policy frameworks.

Another glaring gap between policy and practice is how "universal" social support systems can fail women due to narrow eligibility rules or siloed implementation. As I discussed previously, social welfare benefits and public housing in Austria come with residency, citizenship, or income documentation requirements that many homeless women cannot meet. A participant working with migrant women advocates for changing such rules, arguing "I don't think that residency should be [a requirement]... It should be okay if you have a [temporary] residence, whatever. And... income or nationality... should not be [barriers]" to getting housing help. Her experience counselling non-citizen women is that needing permanent residence or high formal income pushes women into precarious situations. She even notes that she is "quite happy that in the last 15 years it changed a lot" in some areas. For example, some shelters in Vienna have started allowing women to bring their pets – a small but meaningful shift, as this can significantly support one's emotional well-being. There has also been progress in creating more spaces for people with disabilities. However,

fully accessible shelter options remain limited, and many facilities are still not adequately equipped to meet the needs of women with physical or mental disabilities. The same counselor points out that “accessibility... is really a missing thing in Vienna”. She shares a story of a wheelchair-using woman in a homeless shelter where “they’re really nice and they try everything... they have a ramp... but the toilet is not accessible”, leaving the client in an undignified situation. Here again, policy intentions (inclusion, equal access) clash with practical outcomes, suggesting a lack of funding or oversight to ensure even basic accessibility standards.

The division between homelessness services and domestic violence services is another structural gap highlighted by practitioners – one that leads to policy blind spots. Several interviewees noted that government funding and attention is stronger for domestic violence shelters (Frauenhäuser) than for homeless shelters targeting women. Society often sees a "battered woman" as someone who deserves help, but forgets that if she for example isn't ready to ask for it, she can end up homeless. “People would rather look at women affected by violence... than homeless women. But the one thing usually goes into the other,” one practitioner observed, adding “I think the government does way more for [domestic violence] than for gender-specific homelessness services”. This siloed approach means policies address domestic violence in isolation (through short-term shelters and legal protections) without ensuring long-term housing solutions for those survivors. Indeed, a staff member at a transitional housing program recounted that “in reality, the two groups are not that different” – women coming from domestic violence agencies and women coming from homeless agencies “all have experiences of violence... They just didn’t manage to go to a Frauenhaus for some reason”. In other words, many chronically homeless women are de facto domestic violence victims who slipped through the policy cracks. While the policy intention in each silo may be noble (protect women from violence; reduce homelessness), the outcome is that a woman who

doesn't fit neatly into one category can end up with no support at all. Practitioners call for more integrated approaches – for instance, some mentioned advocating politically for faster access to permanent housing for women with children. These efforts indicate that at least some on the ground are trying to bridge the gap between "shelter" and "rights" – between emergency refuge and the fundamental right to housing.

Participants note that emergency housing and support services for migrant women are not evenly spread across Vienna. One social worker observed that "most of the emergency shelters and services are concentrated in just a few districts, like the 15th or 10th, where a lot of migrants live". This indicates a clustering of resources in high-migrant areas, rather than a city-wide distribution. This clustering can lead to negative perceptions of those neighborhoods. A staff member from LEFÖ explained that certain districts get labeled as *"ghettos"* because *"all the shelters and migrant families are there"*. In other words, the high concentration of services and migrant residents in one place often causes outsiders to stigmatize the entire district as a problem area. Another challenge highlighted by social workers is the distance between assigned housing and the women's daily lives. A social worker recounted a case where a mother *"was placed in the 22nd district while her children's school was on the other side of the city,"* forcing the family into long daily commutes. Such placements far from familiar areas and support networks disrupt the women's work routines and their children's schooling, adding significant stress to their lives. Finally, multiple interviewees stressed that women have very little agency in the housing placement process. In the P7 housing support service interview, the staff explained that clients *"have no real choice about which district they'll live in – they are assigned wherever a spot is free"*. The women must accept the accommodation offered to them, even if it's far from their workplace, their children's school, or their social support network, underscoring the lack of real choice in location.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the lived realities of homelessness for women in Austria, particularly in Vienna, through the lens of qualitative interviews with social workers, counselors, and NGO staff. While Vienna offers more comprehensive services than many European cities, the persistence of structural, legal, and bureaucratic barriers prevents equitable access.

One of the most consistent findings is that homelessness is not experienced equally: women, especially migrant women, face unique and compounding vulnerabilities that are not adequately addressed by mainstream housing policies. Legal residency requirements, rigid eligibility rules, and local bureaucratic criteria often exclude women from accessing both social housing and emergency shelters. For many, especially those without a permanent residence permit or a stable income, the result is a cycle of hidden homelessness, where they remain invisible to the system and unsupported by formal services. Even flagship initiatives like Housing First, while progressive in theory, often suffer in practice due to a lack of housing stock and support services. The contradiction between policy ideals and their implementation is especially evident here: although the program promises autonomy and stability, insufficient follow-up care and limited apartment availability mean that many women cycle back into homelessness after temporary placements. Practitioners emphasize that the model's success depends not only on housing availability, but also on consistent, long-term engagement and appropriate assessment of needs.

Violence, both past and ongoing, emerged as a central theme in the interviews. Domestic violence is frequently the trigger for homelessness among women, yet the policy response remains fragmented. Domestic violence services and homelessness services operate in parallel silos, rarely coordinating long-term solutions. A woman fleeing abuse may find temporary

protection but not a pathway to sustainable housing. This gap between legal protection and material support exposes the limitations of well-intended but disconnected policy frameworks. The language barrier also functions as a systemic obstacle, particularly for migrant women. It hinders access to services, complicates interactions with bureaucracy, and contributes to social isolation.

The lack of gender-specific, trauma-informed care is another critical concern. Despite recent advancements in Vienna's homelessness services, such as the expansion of Housing First and increased investment in municipal support systems, there remains a noticeable absence of trauma-informed care standards in policy design and implementation. This gap becomes particularly evident when policies are evaluated through a gendered lens. As numerous studies have shown, women experiencing homelessness are disproportionately affected by trauma, including intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation, and childhood abuse (Milaney et al. 2020). These experiences often intersect with structural vulnerabilities such as poverty, migration status, and care responsibilities. Yet, current policies in Vienna focus primarily on housing delivery and emergency response, with limited integration of mental health care, emotional safety, or long-term psychosocial support tailored to trauma survivors. The analysis in this thesis reveals that existing frameworks tend to rely on generalized models of support — ones that do not adequately account for the specific needs of women. A broader implementation of trauma-informed and gender-specific care principles would not only enhance the effectiveness of interventions, but also align local practice with international research on best practices for supporting homeless women. Without such integration, policies risk reproducing the very forms of exclusion and harm they aim to alleviate.

Moreover, the findings highlight deep inequalities in how services are funded, distributed, and accessed. Most homelessness services rely on funding from the City of Vienna, which means that organizations with more flexible or diverse funding streams (such as Caritas)

can offer more inclusive services, while others remain constrained. Shelter and housing options are unequally distributed across districts, limiting client agency and creating geographic concentrations of marginalization. Women have little say in where they are housed, which can further disrupt their social ties, access to schools, or work opportunities.

Conclusion

I believe that homelessness is a deeply gendered issue. Despite the predominance of men in homelessness statistics, it is precisely the conservative approach that prevents policies from including those who are most vulnerable. My central research question asked how Austrian housing policies recognize and address the specific gendered needs of women experiencing homelessness. Over the course of this research, my understanding of that puzzle evolved significantly. Initially, I suspected that Austria's robust welfare system might already be accounting for women's needs, but through a feminist lens and interviews I learned that many gender-specific issues remain overlooked. My research questions explicitly considered issues of safety, privacy, accessibility, and trauma-informed support for homeless women file, and I discovered that these dimensions had been largely missing from mainstream policy considerations. The thesis revealed that homelessness is not a gender-neutral experience. Women, especially migrant women, often remain invisible in the system, living in "hidden" homelessness rather than on the street. Strict residency rules and bureaucratic barriers frequently exclude them from social housing or shelters, leaving those without stable status trapped in cycles of couch-surfing or unsafe arrangements. By redefining homelessness as a product of gendered social structures, Watson (1984) set the stage for seeing homelessness as an issue of both housing and patriarchal power. This perspective influenced subsequent research and policy to start recognizing factors like domestic violence and divorce as causes of homelessness. Social workers consistently emphasized that female homelessness in Vienna is shaped by complex intersections of exposures: migration background, trauma, health, caregiving roles, and legal status among them. However, these intersections are often not adequately reflected in existing policies.

Another insight was the link between domestic violence and homelessness. Many women become homeless as a direct result of fleeing abuse, yet I found that domestic violence services and homelessness services in Austria operate in parallel silos. A woman might find emergency shelter from violence but then face a dead-end in terms of long-term housing. This gap between providing immediate shelter and ensuring a stable home highlighted a core theme of the thesis: the need to bridge short-term relief and long-term rights. Interviewees noted that insufficient housing stock and support in these programs meant some women cycled back into homelessness despite good intentions.

The arguments developed in this thesis matter for both policy and scholarship. On a policy level, they underscore that addressing homelessness without a gender lens will leave glaring gaps. Housing policies that ignore gender differences risk perpetuating inequity, whereas a gender-sensitive approach can make interventions more fair and effective by reaching those who would otherwise be left out. This is fundamentally an issue of social justice: ensuring the right to housing is truly universal requires recognizing and removing the extra barriers that people can face. In terms of academic contribution, this research helps fill a notable gap in the Austrian context. Homelessness research and policy in Austria have rarely focused on women's experiences, often defaulting to a male-centered view. By shining a spotlight on women, including refugees, migrants, and other marginalized groups, I hope, the thesis broadens the conversation and brings new voices into view.

Emphasizing the need for trauma-informed care pushes the discourse beyond just providing shelter, toward ensuring that services truly help women heal and regain stability. These insights urge policymakers and advocates to think differently: to view homelessness not just as the absence of a home, but as a symptom of structural and personal injustices that demand a holistic, gender-responsive approach. Moreover, I believe that more effort should be

placed on preventing homelessness, such as addressing the declining accessibility of social housing, rather than solely responding to its consequences.

Suggestions for Further Research

I would seek out perspectives that were less central in this thesis. In particular, talking directly with women who have experienced homelessness would be a crucial next step to complement the professional viewpoints. I would also pursue the thread I could not follow due to time and access constraints: interviewing staff (and clients) of programs like Housing First to understand their challenges and successes in depth. Additionally, it would be valuable to study the impact of any new policy initiatives, such as Austria's emerging national homelessness strategy, to see whether they implement the gender-sensitive approach argued for here. Additionally, examining the plight of specific subgroups, such as older homeless women or individuals with substance abuse issues, would provide a more granular understanding of needs that might require tailored interventions.

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