

Women and homelessness: group intervention from a gender and intersectional perspective in Spain

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Abstract


Women experiencing homelessness often rendered invisible, face specific challenges such as gender-based violence and the lack of resources tailored to their needs, typically designed from an androcentric perspective. Group intervention emerges as a potentially effective methodology to enhance the well-being and development of these women in residential resources. This study aims to explore women's perceptions of these interventions' benefits and evaluate the professionals' assessment. A qualitative approach was used, involving interviews with ten professionals and ten women participating in a Santa Cruz de Tenerife project. Results show improvements in emotional well-being and self-esteem, as well as the creation of support networks, enabling participants to tackle their difficulties and develop new life expectations. Professionals value the creation supportive environments and recommend replicating these programs in other contexts. It is concluded that group interventions are adequate for women's empowerment and social reintegration, and a specialized and adaptable approach is necessary to address their complex realities. However, improvements such as increasing the frequency and variety of activities are recommended.

Keywords: Woman; Homelessness; Residential center; Androcentrism; Group intervention; Social exclusion; Social reintegration.

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Mujeres y sinhogarismo: intervención grupal desde la perspectiva de género e interseccionalidad en España

Resumen

Las mujeres en situación de sinhogarismo, a menudo invisibilizadas, enfrentan desafíos específicos como la violencia de género y la falta de recursos adaptados a sus necesidades, generalmente diseñados desde una perspectiva androcéntrica. La intervención grupal se presenta como una metodología potencialmente efectiva para mejorar el bienestar y el desarrollo de estas mujeres en recursos residenciales. Este estudio tiene como objetivo conocer la percepción de las mujeres sobre los beneficios de estas intervenciones y evaluar la valoración de los y las profesionales implicados. Se utilizó un enfoque cualitativo, con entrevistas a diez profesionales y diez mujeres participantes en un proyecto en Santa Cruz de Tenerife. Los resultados muestran mejoras en el bienestar emocional, autoestima y la creación de redes de apoyo, permitiendo a las participantes afrontar sus dificultades y desarrollar nuevas expectativas de vida. Los y las profesionales valoran la creación de entornos solidarios y recomiendan la replicación de estos proyectos en otros contextos. Se concluye que las intervenciones grupales son efectivas para el empoderamiento y reintegración social de las mujeres, debiéndose adaptar un enfoque especializado y adaptable para abordar sus complejas realidades. No obstante, se proponen mejoras como aumentar la frecuencia y diversidad de las actividades.

Palabras clave: Mujer; Sinhogarismo; Centro alojativo; Androcentrismo; Intervención grupal; Exclusión social; Reintegración social.

Summary: 1. Introduction, 2. Methodology, 3. Findings, 3.1 Participants' Perceptions of the Benefits of Group Intervention, 3.2 Professionals' Assessments of the Advantages of Group Intervention, 4. Conclusions, 5. Bibliographic references.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of homelessness

Homelessness results from a complex interplay of individual, social, and institutional factors, making it difficult to attribute a single cause (Matulic-Domandzic *et al.*, 2024). Among the individual factors, addictions such as alcoholism and substance abuse stand out (Suárez *et al.*, 2018), as well as physical illnesses (Panadero & Pérez-Lozao Gallego, 2014) and psychological disorders (Gutwinski *et al.*, 2021), all of which increase vulnerability to social and housing exclusion (Villegas *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, breakdowns in family and social relationships, often exacerbated by violence, significantly increase the likelihood of experiencing homelessness (Espíndola *et al.*, 2020). The loss of social support is a key factor in preventing exclusion, as its deterioration can precipitate housing loss (Cabrera & Rubio, 2008).

In this regard, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) developed 2005 the ETHOS typology (European Typology on Homelessness), which offers a detailed classification of different residential situations. This system categorizes homelessness into four main conceptual categories, subdivided into thirteen operational categories, providing a comprehensive and structured overview of how individuals may be affected by housing exclusion.

Table 1. ETHOS classification.

General category	Operational category
Rooflessness 1-2	1. Living in a public space (outdoors). 2. Sleep in a night shelter and/or spend several hours daily in a public space. 3. People living in shelters and hostels for homeless individuals. 4. Women living in shelters.
Houselessness 3-7	5. People in accommodation centers for asylum seekers and migrants. 6. People scheduled for discharge from residential or institutional settings within a defined period. 7. People receiving long-term supported accommodation due to their homeless status.
Insecure Housing 8-10	8. People living under insecure tenancy agreements or without paying rent. 9. People living under the threat of eviction. 10. People living under the threat of violence from a partner or family member.
Inadequate Housing 11-13	11. People living in temporary and non-conventional structures. 12. Unfit or inappropriate housing. 13. Extreme overcrowding.

Source: European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA, 2017).

Women face greater challenges in achieving social and economic advancement, which increases their vulnerability and likelihood of experiencing poverty and discrimination (FEANTSA, 2022). This can act as a direct cause or trigger of homelessness (O'Flaherty, 2010). Traditionally, homelessness has been viewed as a male issue, rendering women in this situation largely invisible (Löfstrand & Quilgars, 2016). Research on homeless women remains limited (Matulic-Domandzic *et al.*, 2024), making it difficult to fully understand their realities (Moss &

Singh, 2015). Although data show a lower percentage of homeless women compared to men (Cáritas Diocesana de Tenerife, 2022; FEANTSA, 2022), these statistics obscure the precarious living conditions many women endure, such as informal housing, unsafe and unsanitary conditions, and constant mobility among shelter resources (Matulic-Domandzic *et al.*, 2019).

Available evidence highlights that women tend to enter homelessness through pathways different from those of men, with a network of interconnected factors underpinning their housing exclusion (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021; FEANTSA, 2022). In response to this situation, many women adopt various survival strategies, such as relying on social and family networks for support (Meadows-Oliver, 2016), seeking protection from men who are often abusive (Watson, 2016), or relocating to aid resources provided by different support networks (National Alliance to End homelessness, 2019).

Specific vulnerabilities and challenges faced by homeless women

Women experiencing homelessness face a greater number of personal vulnerabilities and are more exposed to stressful life events compared to men (Johnson *et al.*, 2017). Gender-based violence, as one of these harmful experiences, has been identified as a defining feature in the lives of homeless women (Mayock *et al.*, 2015a), often beginning in childhood (FEANTSA, 2022; Vázquez & Panadero, 2019) and extending throughout their lives (Vázquez & Panadero, 2019). The impact of victimization processes, such as gender-based violence and other forms of abuse, affects women differently, intensifying their risk of housing exclusion (Rodríguez-Moreno *et al.*, 2021).

Homeless women show a higher prevalence of risk factors such as mental illness, childhood sexual abuse, and intimate partner violence (Jonker *et al.*, 2012). These experiences frequently lead to post-traumatic stress disorders, increasing their vulnerability while being homeless (Maguire & Semancik, 2016). Furthermore, they are more likely to be victims of sexual and domestic violence and to develop mental health conditions and addictions compared to socially integrated women (McCallum, 2019). While living on the streets, they are especially susceptible to physical violence, sexual abuse, and rape (Moss & Singh, 2015), which further worsens their situation, hinders access to services, and exposes them to recurring cycles of victimization.

Resources and services for homeless women

Shelters and care services for homeless individuals are typically designed with men in mind (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018; Moss & Singh, 2015), discouraging many women from using them, as these spaces are often male-dominated (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021). As a result, many homeless women resort to hidden places to survive (Mayock *et al.*, 2015a). These resources frequently exhibit sexist approaches, causing some women to avoid them out of fear of negative consequences (Bretherton *et al.*, 2016). At various stages of homelessness, women often do not

receive adequate support from formal services (Mayock & Sheridan, 2012). They are more likely to access services specifically designed for them, such as women-only facilities or methodologies like Housing First (Bretherton *et al.*, 2016). However, these resources do not always guarantee the resolution of homelessness, perpetuating vulnerability and hindering effective reintegration (Vázquez *et al.*, 2019).

Services for women who are victims of gender-based violence and those for homeless women have traditionally been divided into two separate systems (Baptista, 2010). It has become evident that many shelters specifically for victims of gender-based violence often exclude women with mental health issues (Netto *et al.*, 2009), substance use disorders, or those exhibiting antisocial or disruptive behavior (Mayock *et al.*, 2015b). As a result, many vulnerable women with support needs do not receive appropriate care, placing them at greater risk and leading them to be served by general homelessness services that lack specialization in this area (Mayock *et al.*, 2016).

Nonetheless, services targeted at homeless women have had a positive impact in some instances, offering spaces that promote interaction and empowerment (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021). Many of these women show resilience and initiative in overcoming homelessness and confronting the stigma and prejudice associated with their situation (Löfstrand & Quilgars, 2016). When services are responsive to their needs and expectations, women tend to engage more actively in their development (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021). Compassionate, respectful, humane treatment and genuine professional interest are crucial to building trust and fostering care (Biederman & Nichols, 2014).

Group interventions as a support strategy

Adopting a gender perspective is essential for designing more inclusive and equitable intervention models (Matulic-Domandzic *et al.*, 2019). Group intervention has proven effective in addressing various issues. In the case of people experiencing homelessness, it has contributed to the reduction of alcohol consumption and has promoted self-protection using methods to prevent sexually transmitted infections (Tucker *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, sharing substance use experiences in a group setting facilitates reflection, empowers participants, and encourages the reconsideration of other harmful substance use (Holland *et al.*, 2003).

Group intervention projects aimed at victims of gender-based violence can be an effective option for women experiencing homelessness (Llulluma-Álvarez *et al.*, 2016). These women, who have suffered profound trauma due to violence and abuse, require support to face their situations (FEANTSA, 2007). A study on group interventions focused on the self-esteem of women who are victims of gender-based violence suggests that this approach serves as a preventive measure, helping to strengthen their rights, assertiveness, and skills to break cycles of abuse (Santandreu-Oliver *et al.*, 2014).

Group interventions play a key role in the social reconnection of people experiencing homelessness, helping to reduce isolation and combat stigma. These support groups foster trusting relationships and positive bonds, facilitating reintegration into society and enhancing personal safety (Peña-Valderrama, 2023). These interventions also help develop social skills and build meaningful connections with others (Knight, 2017). Participation in open groups further contributes to learning and skills development across multiple areas (Wilder *et al.*, 2018). A study conducted in Italy with thirteen women in a shelter revealed that participants stopped feeling isolated and rejected, instead perceiving the space as safe and valuing the social connections formed (Marzana *et al.*, 2023). Physical activity-based interventions have also demonstrated benefits for these women's physical and mental health (Dawes *et al.*, 2023; Norton *et al.*, 2020).

Gender and intersectional perspectives

Homelessness among women involves specific dynamics that require an intersectional approach and a gender perspective for proper understanding and intervention (Puente-Guerrero, 2022). A gender perspective makes it possible to analyze how structural inequalities affect women and men differently, shaping their access to resources and opportunities (Collins, 2009). In this regard, female homelessness cannot be understood without considering gender-based violence, socially assigned caregiving roles, and the specific barriers women face in contexts of housing exclusion (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021; Matulic-Domandzic *et al.*, 2019). At the same time, intersectionality—understood as the overlapping and interconnection of multiple systems of oppression—is essential to understanding how factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, and migration status shape diverse experiences of homelessness (Rubio-Guzmán *et al.*, 2024). These approaches are crucial to avoid the invisibilization of homeless women and to design intervention strategies that address their needs (Mayock & Bretherton, 2016). In this study, both perspectives guide the analysis of group intervention to support and empower women experiencing homelessness (Puente-Guerrero, 2022).

Group intervention project “El Patio de mi Casa”

Since 2021, the Comprehensive Care Service for Homeless People of Santa Cruz de Tenerife (SIAPSH) has been implementing a pioneering initiative at the Municipal Shelter Center (hereinafter, CMA), its central accommodation facility. This project, titled “El Patio de mi Casa,” is aimed at women experiencing homelessness and seeks to promote their social inclusion and well-being through group intervention, all from a woman-centered, collaborative approach. It is an open group in which not only women currently housed in the center can participate, but also those who have previously used the facility, achieved social integration, and wish to maintain their connection with the group, as well as women currently living on the streets. Sessions are held every two to three weeks, depending on the needs identified by the professionals responsible for the intervention and the scheduled activities for each period. Each session involves a variable group of 15 to 25 women. The sessions are designed to strengthen self-esteem, develop social

skills, foster personal growth and autonomy, and facilitate the creation and reinforcement of informal support networks and solidarity among women. Key topics addressed include gender-based violence prevention, self-care, and health promotion, to enhance social functioning and empower participants in different areas of their lives, thereby contributing to their social inclusion. However, a comprehensive evaluation of the program's benefits has not yet been conducted. It highlights the need for research that provides empirical evidence of its effectiveness and informs future initiatives in this and other contexts.

Objetives

This study aims to determine the benefits of group intervention for women experiencing homelessness, based on the following specific objectives:

- To explore the perceptions of women experiencing homelessness regarding the benefits derived from their participation in group intervention.
- To analyze professionals' assessments of the advantages of group intervention for women in situations of homelessness.

2. Methodology

Desing

A qualitative pre-experimental approach with exploratory and descriptive aims was adopted. This cross-sectional study is based on interviews conducted at a single point in time to gather the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023), which enabled an in-depth exploration of group interventions' experiences and perceived benefits, identifying recurring patterns and themes in the narratives of both the women experiencing homelessness and the professionals working with them.

Participants

The sample was selected through convenience sampling, choosing participants based on their ability, willingness to participate, and relevance to the study objectives. The study included ten professionals from SIAPSH and ten women experiencing homelessness who participated in the group intervention project "El Patio de Mi Casa." Inclusion criteria for professionals required training in social fields and at least one year of experience working in the field of homelessness. For the women, it was necessary to be capable of participating without being under the influence of toxic substances or showing significant cognitive impairment or mental health decompensation. Participants were selected exclusively from SIAPSH, the only facility implementing this pioneering group intervention project for people experiencing homelessness in Santa Cruz de Tenerife. Since the intervention occurs at this center, its professionals have direct

knowledge of the project dynamics and the participants' realities, allowing for a more contextualized and in-depth analysis of the experience.

The following table presents the characteristics of the professionals interviewed:

Table 2. Characteristics of professionals.

Code	Age	Profession	Years of Experience	Years of Experience with Homeless People	Years at SIAPSH
Professional 1	48	Social Worker	Over 20 years	8–10 years	8–10 years
Professional 2	43	Social Integrator	5–10 years	5–7 years	5–7 years
Professional 3	45	Social Worker	Over 20 years	11–13 years	5–7 years
Professional 4	47	Social Worker	Over 20 years	11–13 years	11–13 years
Professional 5	35	Social Worker	10–15 years	5–7 years	5–7 years
Professional 6	31	Social Integrator	10–15 years	2–4 years	2–4 years
Professional 7	50	Social Worker	Over 20 years	8–10 years	8–10 years
Professional 8	31	Social Integrator	5–10 years	8–10 years	8–10 years
Professional 9	38	Social Worker	15–20 years	8–10 years	8–10 years
Professional 10	42	Social Worker	10–15 years	11–13 years	8–10 years

Source: Author's elaboration.

The sample includes seven social work professionals and three social integration professionals. The average age of the professionals is 41 years, with a standard deviation of 6.93. More than half of the social workers have over 20 years of general experience, with an average of 10 years working with homeless people. At SIAPSH, 57.1% have between 8 and 10 years of experience, while 66.7% of the social integration professionals have between 5 and 10 years of professional experience, and between 2 and 10 years working at this service.

The following table presents the characteristics of the women participants in the study:

Table 3. Characteristics of the women participants.

Code	Age	Nationality	Previous Housing Situation	Time Homeless	Time at Center
Participant 1	56	Venezuelan	Family home	0–1 year	0–1 year
Participant 2	32	Colombian	Hostel	0–1 year	0–1 year
Participant 3	60	Portuguese	Family home	1–5 years	1–5 years
Participant 4	65	Cuban	Shared housing	5–10 years	5–10 years
Participant 5	37	Spanish	Public space	1–5 years	1–5 years
Participant 6	59	Spanish	Shared housing	0–1 year	0–1 year
Participant 7	57	Spanish	Family home	1–5 years	1–5 years
Participant 8	65	Spanish	Rented housing	5–10 years	1–5 years
Participant 9	68	Spanish	Family home	1–5 years	0–1 year
Participant 10	46	German	Shared housing	0–1 year	0–1 year

Source: Author's elaboration.

The average age is 54.5 years, with a standard deviation of 12.23. Five women were of Spanish nationality, and five were foreign nationals. Regarding their previous housing situation before entering the CMA, the most common was living in a family home (where they resided with relatives), with four women reporting this. Additionally, five women had been residing in the CMA for less than one year.

Instruments

Data was collected through 20 individual interviews, using two structured interview guides developed based on the existing literature and the research and professional experience of the study's authors. One guide was designed for professionals (Appendix I), and another for the women participants (Appendix II), allowing for coverage of all key topics while enabling more profound exploration of emerging themes. To ensure the guides were appropriate to the study's objectives and the nature of this type of intervention, they were reviewed by two researchers with expertise in the field. In addition, feedback was sought from the professional responsible for designing the intervention and two other professionals involved in the initiative since its inception, thus ensuring a higher level of relevance and alignment. All reviewers agreed that the instruments were well suited to the research aims.

The interviews with professional staff were structured in two sections. The first collected sociodemographic data and information about their professional background, while the second explored their perceptions of the effectiveness of the intervention with the women participants. The interviews with the women experiencing homelessness were divided into three sections: sociodemographic information, experience of homelessness and relationship with the resource; nature and impact of the group intervention; and perceived benefits of their participation. All interviews were conducted in person at SIAPSH. The average duration was 34 minutes for professionals and 20 minutes for the women participants.

Procedure

Authorization was obtained from the Municipal Institute of Social Assistance of the Santa Cruz de Tenerife City Council. Subsequently, a meeting was held with the head of the Reception Unit, the center coordinator, and the social worker who designed the "El Patio de Mi Casa" project, during which the research objectives were presented and the dates for the individual interviews were scheduled. An interview guide was developed based on the literature, and it was evaluated by two doctoral experts and reviewed by professionals from SIAPSH to ensure its suitability for the research context. Finally, professionals involved in the project or with direct knowledge of it, who had not participated in the review process of the interview guide, were selected to participate in the study.

Before the interviews, and in collaboration with the professional responsible for the group intervention, 15 women experiencing homelessness were selected. Of these, 14 agreed to participate in the interviews, and after applying the inclusion criteria, 10 were included in the final sample. The interviews were conducted in person and scheduled on different days to accommodate the availability of both the women and the professionals involved in the group intervention.

After completing the interviews, data analysis began following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2023), using the *Atlas.ti* software. The thematic analysis was carried out in six stages. First, the transcripts were read repeatedly to identify initial patterns. Next, systematic coding was conducted to generate codes that captured meaningful units. These codes were then grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed to ensure internal consistency. Subsequently, the themes were defined and named to reflect their core meaning and relationship to the data. Finally, a detailed report was prepared, presenting the themes and their interconnections, supported by data excerpts and critical reflections linking the findings to the existing literature.

Analytical categories

The following table presents the categories and subcategories of analysis derived from the interviews addressing the first objective:

Table 4. Categories and subcategories for exploration.

Category	Subcategory	Description
1. Experience of the intervention	1.1. Perception of the intervention	Impressions and feelings of the participants after the sessions.
	1.2. Perceived support	A sense of belonging and emotional support is experienced during the group sessions.
	1.3. Perceived changes	Transformations in behavior, decision-making, confidence, and self-esteem.
2. Vision for the future	2.1. Coping with difficulties	Development of strategies and support to overcome current challenges.
	2.2. Expectations	Consideration of new plans and personal goal setting following the intervention.
	2.3. Motivation	Enthusiasm for continued participation in the sessions.
	2.4. Perceived usefulness	Perception of the usefulness of the group approach for other women in similar situations.
	2.5. Suggestions	Recommendations for improving the project based on the participants' experiences.

Source: Author's elaboration.

In addition, the analysis of interviews with professionals regarding their evaluation of the group intervention, about the second objective, is categorized as shown in the following table:



Table 5. Categories and subcategories to explore.

Categories	subcategories	Description
1. Perception of the intervention	1.1. Creation of a supportive and solidarity-based environment	Assessment of the effectiveness of the group intervention in creating a safe and emotionally supportive space for women.
	1.2. Observed changes after participation	Significant changes in participants' behavior, self-esteem, and confidence contributed to the group sessions.
2. Evaluation of the intervention	2.1. Role in social reintegration	Perceived effectiveness of the group intervention in promoting social reintegration and building a more stable, long-term life.
	2.2. Applicability in other centers and/or target groups	Feasibility of implementing the intervention in other shelters and its potential benefits for other vulnerable groups of women.
	2.3. Perceived benefits for participants	Professional perspectives on women's experiences and opinions, identifying the intervention's most valued and practical aspects.

Source: Author's elaboration.

Ethical considerations

The research was conducted following ethical principles. All participants were informed about the objectives, procedures, and voluntary nature of their participation. Written informed consent was obtained, ensuring their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were protected using codes instead of names. The study was approved following evaluation by the Ethics and Animal Welfare Committee of the University of La Laguna, the legal advisory department of the Honorable City Council of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, and the project's managing entity, thereby obtaining the necessary permissions to carry out the research.

3. Findings

3.1 Participants' perceptions of the benefits of group intervention

Results regarding the experience of the intervention

All participants reported a positive experience with their involvement in "El Patio de mi Casa". One participant stated: "[...] I loved it, [...] because I learned many things, and I now understand the experiences of other women who have also had a tough time [...]" (Participant 9, personal communication, April 30, 2024). Another participant highlighted how her perception of the sessions changed once she began attending regularly: "[...] at first it seemed boring, like something I did not have to attend [...]" but then, when you are in the conversation, listening [...] one topic leads to another, and you get hooked" (Participant 1, personal communication, April 26, 2024). Half of the participants emphasized their gratitude and the importance of the group intervention facilitator for their engagement in the sessions: "[...] I always felt very supported [...]. Also, she is outstanding, she knows how to manage the situation and help the women adapt" (Participant 9, personal communication, April 30, 2024).

Regarding the personal meaning of the intervention, the women described it as a space for learning, personal growth, emotional safety, and freedom to express themselves and share experiences. They referred to the importance of this space as one conducive to acquiring knowledge. One participant said: “[...] I can learn things I did not know before [...]” (Participant 6, personal communication, May 4, 2024). Others viewed the intervention as a space for personal development: “[...] for me, it represents the strength and resilience of the women here [...]” (Participant 10, personal communication, April 30, 2024), as well as a place to express their thoughts and emotions: “[...] that is what El Patio de mi Casa is – where we all talk about how we feel or ask for opinions on what we can improve and who we want to become” (Participant 2, personal communication, April 26, 2024). The perception of the intervention as a safe space also stood out. One participant shared:

[...] The other day I had abdominal pain, but I said, 'I have to go because I cannot let them down' [...] I sat down, and the pain went away [...] I feel the anguish of some people, the lack of affection in others, the fear – it all comes together in that space [...] it is very valuable [...]
(Participant 9, personal communication, April 30, 2024)

Moreover, all participants felt comfortable and part of a community during the meetings. One of them shared: “[...] you feel comfortable sharing a coffee and laughing, even if you are having a bad day – they cheer you up” (Participant 1, personal communication, April 26, 2024). The women also reported a strong sense of connection with each other, as illustrated by one participant's comment: “[...] when you have a problem, you know you can count on someone” (Participant 2, personal communication, April 26, 2024). Regarding the support perceived during the sessions, all participants reported receiving emotional support from other group members. One participant emphasized the welcoming atmosphere: “[...] we welcome everyone, even the new ones – we have supported each other [...]” (Participant 6, personal communication, May 4, 2024). Another described how the group made efforts to include a member who had difficulty speaking Spanish: “[...] they have tried to learn English to talk to me [...]” (Participant 10, personal communication, April 30, 2024). The support extended beyond the group sessions: “[...] I have shared personal things with some of them, and I felt supported and listened to [...]” (Participant 6, personal communication, May 4, 2024).

Participation in the group also led to behavioral and attitudinal changes, often tied to the development of norms and mutual respect: “[...] most of us from the module go to El Patio de mi Casa, so we already distinguish ourselves, and we have set some rules [...]” (Participant 2, personal communication, April 26, 2024). Eight women described perceivable changes in how they acted in different situations. One stated: “[...] I have drawn conclusions about how I have behaved at certain times, and how that does not lead to anything good” (Participant 4, personal communication, May 2, 2024). Two interviewees mentioned abandoning harmful behaviors due to their participation: “[...] I once tried cocaine, but my mindset gradually changed and I stopped drinking and using [...]” (Participant 5, personal communication, May 4, 2024). Additionally,

three women mentioned changing how they perceived their peers and gaining a better understanding of their actions. One of them shared: “[...] that helped me stop thinking she had a personal problem with me, and I now understand that she is dealing with serious issues and expresses them in ways that affect others [...]” (Participant 2, personal communication, April 26, 2024).

Results regarding future outlook

Concerning the future outlook on the group intervention, participants shared their views on the usefulness of the sessions for coping with daily challenges, their future expectations following participation, their motivation to continue attending, the perceived value of the intervention for other women in similar situations, and suggestions for improvement. In most cases, participants stated that the emotional support and strong network experienced during the sessions contributed to their ability to handle difficult situations in everyday life. One participant explained: “[...] you get to know other people, and it becomes easier to ask for help when you need it [...] it is good not to feel alone and to see that others have problems just like or even worse than yours” (Participant 10, personal communication, April 30, 2024). Regarding expectations, seven women reported that the group intervention helped them consider long-term plans that they had not previously contemplated: “[...] the process has steps, so you kind of have the right to be guided [...] you can get that from one of the professionals here or even other users who have already gone through it and share the information with you” (Participant 10, personal communication, April 30, 2024).

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Some women spoke of goals they had previously considered unattainable, as expressed by one participant: “[...] I just left the shelter, thanks to El Patio and the person I met there – I have been able to improve my life” (Participant 3, personal communication, May 2, 2024). Four participants also referred to other women who had achieved the same goal they now pursue. One stated: “[...] I want to live independently like some of the women who come to El Patio” (Participant 8, personal communication, May 8, 2024). Two others expressed the idea of sharing housing with other group members. One of them shared: “[...] if I could move out and rent a place with another woman from the group, I would love that” (Participant 7, personal communication, May 4, 2024). All the women reported being motivated to continue attending the group, even when facing challenges. One participant explained: “[...] sometimes I work outside the center, but when there is a Patio session, I get excited and go” (Participant 4, personal communication, May 2, 2024).

The usefulness of the group intervention was confirmed through participants' testimonies. They stated that it would be helpful for other women who are new to the center. One participant noted: “[...] for those who are new here, El Patio helps them get familiar with how things work, how to navigate the system, and how life is here” (Participant 4, personal communication, May 2, 2024). Other women emphasized the importance of creating a support group. One said: “[...]”

when you first arrive, it feels like a prison—having the support of other women can be helpful” (Participant 5, personal communication, May 4, 2024). Another participant highlighted the importance of community: “[...] we are alone here, and we need a group where we can all support each other [...]” (Participant 2, personal communication, April 26, 2024). One woman reaffirmed the usefulness of the intervention in helping achieve personal goals: “[...] if you want to change your situation [...] you have to listen to the professional and set goals” (Participant 3, personal communication, May 2, 2024).

Regarding suggestions for improvement, three women stated that the intervention requires no changes. However, seven women proposed several suggestions to enhance the effectiveness of the sessions, as shown in the following table:

Table 6. Improvement proposals.

Proposal	Quotes from Participants
Improvement of material resources	“[...] more chairs or armchairs so we can be more comfortable” (Participant 9, personal communication, April 30, 2024).
Greater involvement of participants	“[...] I wish more women would come—that is the only thing—so we could form a stronger group. Those of us who attend should engage [...] it is hard because women come and go, but I believe the more women there are, the more we learn and grow from each other” (Participant 2, personal communication, April 26, 2024).
Innovative activities	“[...] going out to eat, to the movies, things like that so that we can share with other women—not always just talking about our problems, but also clearing our minds” (Participant 5, personal communication, May 4, 2024).
Increased session frequency	“[...] maybe we could meet more often” (Participant 6, personal communication, May 4, 2024).

Source: Author's elaboration

3.2 Professionals' assessments of the advantages of group intervention

Results regarding the perception of the intervention

All professionals confirmed the formation of support and solidarity groups among the women participating in the group intervention. One professional noted indirect evidence of mutual support among the women: “[...] when we leave, you can hear them talking about El Patio, and you realize that it is one hundred percent positive for them” (Professional 7, personal communication, April 24, 2024). Seven professionals reported improved behavior among participants, which in turn led to stronger mutual support among women sharing the same living module: “[...] we have a person with memory loss [...] they help her remember laundry times, when to change the sheets, when to do certain things [...] the other women support her” (Professional 6, personal communication, May 10, 2024).

At the same time, three professionals observed the formation of informal support groups among the women to achieve common goals: “[...] they form support groups to look for housing

or go together to medical appointments or documentation procedures [...]” (Professional 4, personal communication, April 27, 2024). A shift from an individualistic to a more collective mindset was also observed. As one professional noted: “[...] the women no longer have such an individualistic outlook [...]” (Professional 10, personal communication, April 23, 2024). Three professionals reported that the women themselves often encourage newcomers to attend the sessions:

[...] women who are new and have not participated in the workshop or just come occasionally to request a place are often told by others: 'Hey, there is a Patio session on this day –you should come and check it out' [...] (Professional 5, personal communication, May 4, 2024)

In addition, the professionals emphasized a noticeable decrease in incidents within the women's living modules: “[...] incidents in the women's modules have dropped considerably [...]” (Professional 1, personal communication, May 4, 2024). Two professionals highlighted the development of a sense of sisterhood among participants: “[...] sisterhood has developed among them [...] I would say 99% at this point” (Professional 7, personal communication, May 24, 2024). Another professional shared:

[...] they used to say things like, 'Hey, the other day her boyfriend was yelling at her, but she was also kind of provoking it...' [...] but as they participated more in the workshop, those comments disappear because they develop much more empathy among themselves. (Professional 5, personal communication, May 4, 2024)

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All professionals noted significant changes in participants' behaviors and attitudes: “[...] some of them have alcohol problems and stop drinking when they start coming [...] they were in such poor health that I did not think they would be interested in El Patio, but they are” (Professional 7, personal communication, May 24, 2024). Four professionals highlighted women's empowerment, allowing them to take actions they previously avoided. One professional remarked: “[...] they discover that in the garden you can speak and express your opinion, and no one will judge you [...] they did not realize it before because they came from a patriarchal system that never let them do that” (Professional 3, personal communication, May 9, 2024).

All professionals emphasized positive changes in self-esteem and self-confidence. One stated: “[...] many women come in with low self-esteem, and as they [...] strengthen their relationships with the other women [...], they build stronger bonds, which helps them feel better” (Professional 6, personal communication, May 10, 2024). Another noted increased confidence in taking on new challenges that once seemed impossible: “[...] they start to rebuild their life projects—when they first arrive, they have no hope of recovery or improvement, whether in health or in building healthy relationships with others [...]” (Professional 10, personal communication, April 23, 2024). Three professionals also highlighted a positive impact on personal care among some women, who previously gave it little importance: “[...] with time and

participation, they start washing their faces, wearing clean clothes instead of yesterday's, combing their hair, putting on makeup if they want to [...]" (Professional 5, personal communication, May 4, 2024).

Results regarding the evaluation of the intervention

All interviewed professionals confirmed the group intervention's effectiveness in supporting the women participants' social reintegration and long-term stability. One professional stated: "[...] it helps them develop their social skills, which are linked to personal talent and competence [...]" (Professional 2, personal communication, May 4, 2024). They also shared examples of women who, thanks to the group intervention, have achieved goals related to social reintegration.

Moreover, all professionals agreed on the feasibility of implementing this type of group intervention in other centers working with women experiencing homelessness. One professional explained: "[...] in this population, there are many unmet needs [...] dependency on a man [...] you are forced to endure violence, not only in the streets but also at home [...]" (Professional 5, personal communication, May 4, 2024). Likewise, all professionals believed the intervention could benefit other groups of vulnerable women: "[...] working with a group of women to break down all those stigmas and prejudices would be extremely valuable [...]" (Professional 10, personal communication, April 23, 2024).

From a professional perspective, eight interviewees emphasized that the women were aware of the benefits of the intervention: "[...] many women, when they come to apply for assistance, tell me how important this has been for them" (Professional 4, personal communication, April 27, 2024). One professional mentioned the interest some women show in knowing when the next session will be: "[...] this shows that they are becoming aware of important aspects [...]" (Professional 3, personal communication, May 9, 2024).

The results of this study highlight the relevance of group interventions for women experiencing homelessness, pointing to improvements in emotional well-being and social skills. The participants valued the safe space that allowed them to share experiences, learn from others, and feel a sense of belonging. These findings are consistent with previous research (Llulluma-Álvarez *et al.*, 2016; Marzana *et al.*, 2023), which emphasized that such interventions combat loneliness and promote support networks essential to overcoming homelessness. Mutual support and a sense of community are key to empowering women and better addressing the challenges of social exclusion.

The group intervention had a positive impact on participants' self-perception. Women reported improvements in self-esteem and the development of long-term goals that had previously seemed unattainable. This is critical, as homelessness in women is often linked to the

loss of identity and self-confidence (Bretherton & Mayock, 2021). The results suggest that the intervention mitigates the immediate effects of homelessness and transforms how women see themselves, helping them set realistic goals and achieve greater emotional and social stability.

Professionals praised the creation of a supportive and solidarity-based environment among participants, noting its importance for women who have experienced abuse or social exclusion (Mayock *et al.*, 2015a). They also emphasized the need to replicate similar projects in other contexts and to adapt them to vulnerable groups, given the lack of specialized resources for homeless women, a recurrent barrier in their care (FEANTSA, 2022; Matulic-Domandzic *et al.*, 2024). In addition, they reported positive changes in participants' behavior and attitudes, fostering sisterhood and reducing conflicts within the residential modules.

Despite these positive results, both participants and professionals identified areas for improvement. Suggestions included increasing the frequency of sessions and incorporating innovative activities to boost engagement and maximize the project's impact. They also emphasized the importance of follow-up to reinforce autonomy and prevent service dependency, enabling women to remain connected to the group after social reintegration (Galán-Sanantonio *et al.*, 2022; Sherwin, 2021). Significant barriers were also identified for women with mental health issues or addictions, which hinder their recovery (FEANTSA, 2022; Matulic-Domandzic *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, continued progress is needed in developing strategies that align with an intersectional approach to the care of homeless women (Rubio-Guzmán *et al.*, 2024), promoting measures that ensure access to initiatives of this kind, designed through a gender-sensitive lens (Collins, 2009; Puente-Guerrero, 2022).

Limitations and future research directions

This study faces a major limitation related to the lack of detailed and up-to-date data on group interventions targeting this population, which restricts the depth of the analysis and limits the scope of the conclusions. Additionally, the absence of formal evaluations of these interventions made it difficult to measure their impact accurately. Another significant challenge was the complexity of coordinating interviews, due to the limited availability of participants and professional staff. Despite these limitations, the study provides a valuable preliminary insight into group interventions with women experiencing homelessness an area that remains underexplored. The findings offer helpful information for professionals working with this population, providing guidance that may be essential for future research and developing more effective intervention approaches.

4. Conclusions

The study participants experienced significant benefits from the group intervention, particularly regarding emotional and personal well-being. They valued the group as a safe space



to express emotions, share experiences, and acquire new skills. Mutual support and a sense of belonging were essential for their personal growth. The intervention also fostered the development of meaningful bonds, promoted norms of coexistence, and led to positive behavioral changes, such as mutual respect and self-reflection. Emotional support from peers and professionals was key to facing challenges, improving outlooks, and increasing motivation to participate.

Moreover, participants recognized the potential of the group intervention to benefit other women in similar situations, emphasizing its value as a support and reintegration resource. However, they suggested several improvements to optimize the project, including providing more material resources, increasing participant engagement, diversifying activities, and increasing session frequency. These suggestions reflect the need for a more dynamic and flexible approach to sustain participants' interest and enhance the intervention's positive outcomes.

From the professionals' perspective, the group intervention has been essential in creating support and solidarity networks among the women. This interactive space has significantly improved coexistence within the center, reduced conflicts, and promoted a more cohesive environment. Professionals observed substantial behavioral improvements among the participants, who now show greater willingness to collaborate, facilitating daily life at the center. Additionally, the intervention has effectively contributed to developing social skills crucial for social reintegration, enabling many women to build healthier relationships and move toward a more independent life.

Finally, professionals confirmed the project's effectiveness in promoting long-term stability among participants, highlighting how the bonds created during group sessions have supported their transition toward greater autonomy. The positive impact of this approach suggests that the group intervention model can be successfully replicated in other contexts, extending its benefits to vulnerable populations facing similar challenges.

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Authors' Contribution statement

José Manuel Díaz-González: conceptualization, project administration, software, writing (original draft), formal analysis, investigation, methodology, validation, writing (review and editing); Jennifer Hernández-Martín: resource acquisition, resource management, data curation, supervision, visualization, validation, writing (review and editing).



Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to the writing or publication of this article.

Ethical considerations

The authors declare that there are no ethical concerns to report regarding the writing and publication of this article.

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