

SEE HER

Making the
invisible visible



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Foreword

by WISH President - Crystal Hicks

Ever since I was little I've known what it feels like to be a girl in a man's world. At primary school, I remember edging onto the boys' patch of playground turf with my best friend, desperate to join the lunchtime football game. The boys were smart - they let us take turns in goal. And throughout my life, I've met men with that same spirit: allies, advocates, friends who recognised that the world wasn't built for women - and wanted to change that. The good guys. And we need them, now more than ever.

One housing colleague changed my life when she told me to read *Invisible Women* by Caroline Criado-Perez. That book uncovered the gender data gap bias baked into every corner of society: work, transport, medicine. And I thought - what about housing?

Becoming WISH President gave me the platform to ask that question. To shine a light on whether a gender data gap exists in social housing, and what happens when we flip the lens - when we design and decide to work with women in mind. The 'See Her' campaign is the culmination of that work.

I am incredibly proud to launch this toolkit, created in collaboration with Daniel and the brilliant team at Trust Social. Daniel - you've been a legend. Your energy, commitment, and willingness to become a true ally of this cause has made the difference.

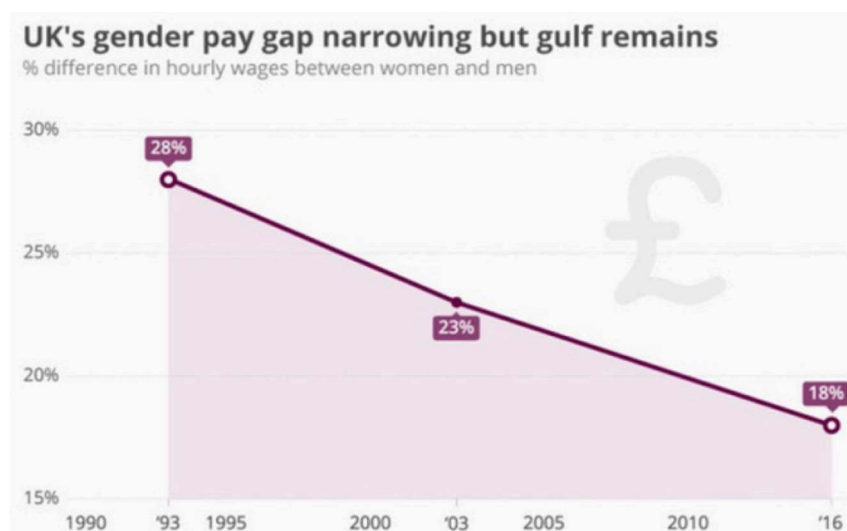
This resource is designed to inspire and to equip. To help every corner of the housing sector 'See Her' - in data, in design, in decisions. And I believe it can change the game.

To all my sisters working in and living in social housing: Keep speaking up. Keep being heard. Your voice matters, you deserve to be seen.



The Problem - Women are invisible

Women perform 75% of unpaid care which includes looking after children and the elderly. The unequal burden of care often leads to women working part-time at a much higher rate than men - 42% of women versus 11% of men. These two factors are interconnected, as unpaid care responsibilities often push women toward part-time employment, which in turn can contribute to the gender pay gap and limit their career opportunities.



'Is women's unpaid undervalued because we don't see it - or invisible because we don't value it?

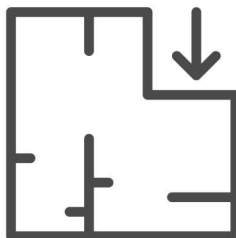


Temperature Bias: Offices are often set to a male-centric thermal standard, leading to women feeling colder and experiencing more thermal discomfort.



Ergonomic Mismatch: Standard office furniture, particularly chairs, is typically sized for the average male body, increasing the risk of pain and musculoskeletal issues for women

Lighting Sensitivity: The bright uniform lighting common in offices may not align with women's preferences, potentially causing eye strain, headaches and general discomfort.



Privacy and Security Concerns: Open-plan designs with extensive use of glass and a lack of private spaces can create feelings of being exposed and insecure, disproportionately affecting women.

Acoustic Discomfort: High noise levels in open offices can be more distracting for women, leading to difficulty concentrating and increased stress.



Let us tell you a story...

Senior figure within the industry

As a female director within social housing, the recent shift away from agile working towards a rigid 'back to office' policy has had a deeply negative impact on my professional and personal wellbeing. When I accepted my role, the agreement was that I would be office-based for two days per week, allowing me to manage a sustainable work life balance. However, this has now increased to three and sometimes four days a week, with little consideration of individual circumstances.

My commute is a 200-mile round trip. The additional travel days have significantly increased my working hours, left me physically and mentally exhausted and created an unnecessary financial burden.

The erosion of flexibility directly undermines my ability to perform at my best and is particularly harmful to women like myself who are navigating the menopause. The lack of flexibility and consideration around health and wellbeing is demoralising and regressive.

The policy also disproportionately affects women with caring responsibilities, who are more likely to depend on agile working arrangements to balance their professional and personal commitments. It contradicts the principle that performance should be based on output and impact, not presence in a physical office. A focus on presenteeism over productivity reflects outdated thinking and fails to support a modern and diverse workforce.

The policy feels inherently sexist and backward. By sidelining the needs of senior women and others who thrive under agile conditions, it risks excluding talented professionals from leadership roles and reinforces the structural inequalities that already exist in the workplace.

True inclusion means designing work environments that support, not penalise, difference. The current approach does the opposite, narrowing the pipeline of female talent and undermining efforts to build an equitable and future-focussed organisation.



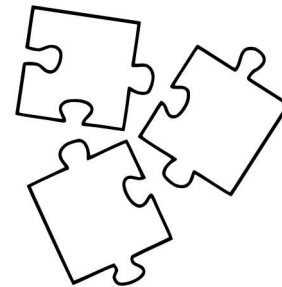
Issues facing women in work – some guiding principles

Promoting inclusive and supportive environments



Flexibility is Equity: Prioritise outcomes over hours. Allow for flexible working arrangements to accommodate diverse needs.

One size doesn't fit all: Adjust roles and responsibilities to diverse skills and needs. Recognise and support different career paths

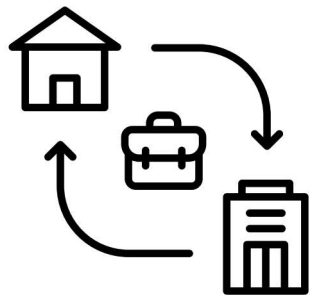


Wellbeing First: Ditch presenteeism mindsets. Provide mental health resources and support systems.

In a survey of over 2,300 UK adults, 69% of employees perceived female remote workers as more productive than their male counterparts.

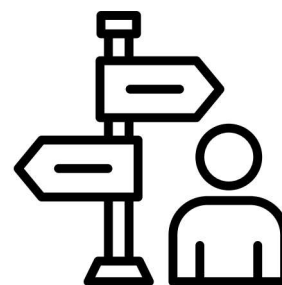


Top Tips for an equitable workplace



Conduct Gender Impact Assessments on Hybrid Working Policies: Ensure that flexible and hybrid work arrangements are designed to promote, not hinder, career progression for all employees.

Launch Returner Programmes Post Career Breaks: Support employees returning to the workplace after a career break, such as for parental or caregiving leave, with structured programmes to help them re-integrate.



Embed Flexible Hours/Job Sharing into Job Design: Proactively design roles to be flexible from the outset, including options like job-sharing, compressed hours, and flexible start and finish times .



Train Managers on Equitable Hybrid Supervision: Equip managers with the skills to lead and evaluate teams fairly, regardless of their location, and prevent 'proximity bias'.



'The most difficult thing is the decision to act. The rest is merely tenacity'
Amelia Earhart



Women as Tenants

Women, especially mothers and caregivers, often have unique housing needs that traditional services may not fully address.

Creating a truly supportive environment requires a thoughtful and empathetic approach, one that puts safety, flexibility, and trauma-informed care at the forefront.

By understanding and proactively responding to these specific needs, housing providers can ensure all women feel secure, respected and empowered in their homes and communities.



Let us tell you a story... A Tenant's Experience

My story. It's not easy to share but it matters. Because stories like mine are often invisible in housing conversations especially when it comes to women.

I'm a survivor of domestic abuse: at one point, I was living in a women's refuge with three small children. Scared and unsure of what would come next. But even there, in a space that was meant to be safe, I experienced further abuse and judgement from peers. I had nowhere else to go. Eventually, I returned to my parents home. It wasn't ideal, but it was safer than where we'd been.

After a difficult court case, I regained access to the home I'd once shared with my partner to find the property had been remortgaged without my knowledge and my name had been used for debts that I didn't even know existed. I had no option but to declare bankruptcy and my home was repossessed.

I turned to my local council for help and was met with suspicion. I was asked invasive questions about my relationship. I was warned that if my ex-partner was ever seen near any property I was offered, I'd be evicted and given nothing else. There was no support, no understanding of the abuse I had endured. No trauma-informed care, just bureaucracy and blame.

Eventually I found a private rented property, it was unsafe and in dreadful condition, but we made it a home, until it became infested with rats. My daughter contracted Weil's disease, a serious infection caused by exposure to rat urine, and she ended up in hospital. I couldn't put my children at risk again. I refused to return and sought support from children's services, it was only then that we were given a secure property.

That home became our foundation, our chance to rebuild. From there, I returned to education, completed a degree, and started looking for work. I began working in the homeless sector and began to understand the power of lived experience.

But even in this 'safe' home, the landscape kept shifting. Originally council housing, my tenancy was transferred to ISOS Housing through a stock transfer. Later, ISOS merged with other organisations to become Karbon Homes. These were massive changes with little communication and no real support to understand what it meant for tenants like me.

When Karbon Homes advertised for board trainees, I applied and I was successful. I began to understand more on how social housing works and the importance of a tenants voice in the board room. We need to start seeing housing through a gendered lens, because women's homelessness looks different.

It's often hidden. It's shaped by abuse, financial control and the struggle to protect children. It doesn't always look like rough sleeping. It looks like sleeping on a friends sofa, staying too long in unsafe relationships, or being stuck in overcrowded homes. It's temporary housing. It's unsuitable housing. It's dangerous housing. And often, it's no housing at all.

Even when women do make it into social housing, they're not always seen, they may not be homeless anymore but they're still unsafe. Still navigating the trauma of abuse, poverty, debt they did not create, and systems that weren't designed for them. Many women are 'housed' but not heard, not understood, not safe.

Women face unique, gender-biased barriers in housing. Domestic abuse is the leading cause of homelessness for women in the UK. Many women are financially excluded, unable to access rent, credit, or mortgages due to abuse or economic control. Women are more likely to be the primary carers for children, which limits their housing options and flexibility. The threat of losing custody can keep women in unsafe housing or even with abusive partners.

And once they're in social housing, many fear eviction because housing providers sometimes punish, rather than protect women if abusers show up again.

These barriers are not hypothetical. They're real. I've lived them and so have thousands of women.



Guiding Principles - A New Approach to Women's Housing



Recognise invisible labour and trauma histories:

Our services must acknowledge the unpaid work and past trauma many women carry. We need to offer flexible, trauma-informed care that responds to these realities without causing further harm.

Prioritise Safety - Both physical and emotional.

A home must be a sanctuary. This means creating secure environments and training staff to provide respectful and non-judgmental support so women feel safe.



Include women as core users, not niche groups.

We need to stop designing services as one-size-fits all and instead put women's unique needs at the heart of our housing solutions.

'The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go and not be questioned'

Maya Angelou, poet and activist.



Top tips for improving housing services for women



Ensure reception/hotlines are accessible and inclusive: the first point of contact is crucial. Making sure reception areas and hotlines are welcoming, accessible and inclusive of women's specific needs can significantly improve their experience and encourage them to seek help.



Provide trauma-informed training for staff: Many women in housing contexts may have experienced trauma. Training staff to be trauma-informed ensures they can provide compassionate, sensitive and effective support without causing further harm.

Track service use and satisfaction by gender. This helps to identify any disparities in how different genders access and experience housing services. By analysing this data, organisations can better tailor their support to meet the specific needs of women.



Offer rent-flex plans aligned to caring cycles: Women are often primary caregivers and their income and time may be impacted by caring responsibilities. Offering flexible rent plans that align with these cycles can help prevent arrears and homelessness.

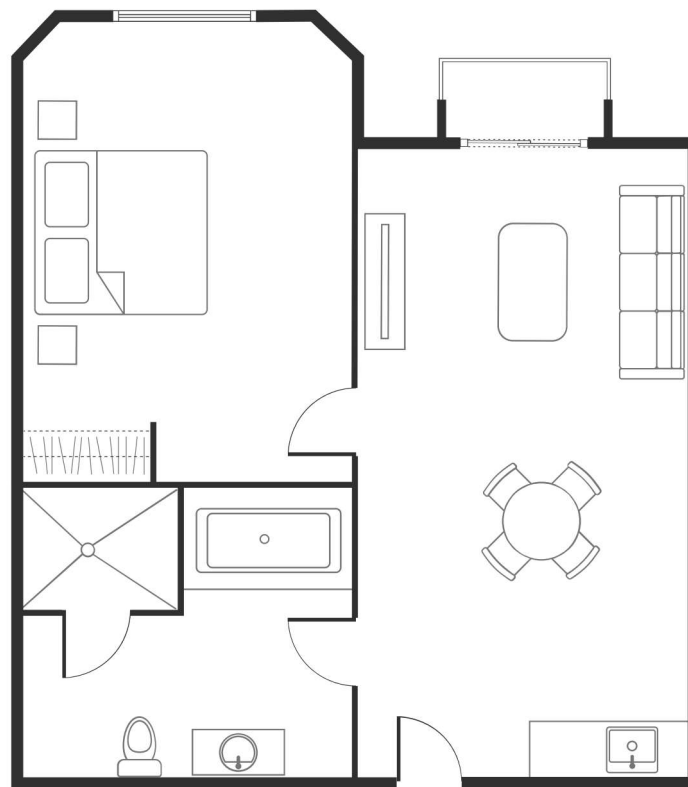




Our Homes: Designing Well for Women

Homes are so much more than just places to live; they are the backdrops for our lives. For many women, homes function as workspaces, care environments and crucial safety zones.

Despite this, the design and building standards for residential spaces often fail to consider the unique needs and experiences of women. This oversight can lead to homes that are less efficient, less comfortable, and less supportive of the diverse roles women play every day.



'A well designed social housing scheme should also promote long-term wellbeing, community resilience and environmental sustainability'



Guiding principles for designing homes for women

Start from lived experience - not assumption

The Challenge

Historically, residential design has been based on an assumed 'default user' who often doesn't reflect the reality of women's lives. This can lead to a disconnect between the intended function of a space and how it is actually used. For example, a 'show kitchen' may look pristine, but a real kitchen for women balancing work, childcare and meal preparation requires a layout that supports multi-tasking and efficiency.

The Principle

The design process must be grounded in the authentic, diverse and often complex daily lives of women. This means understanding their routines, their challenges, and their aspirations for their homes. A home isn't just a place of rest; it's a workplace, a school, a caregiving hub and a place for self-care.



Guiding principles for designing homes for women

Engage women in co-design processes

The Challenge

Design is too often a top-down process, with decisions made by architects, developers, and policymakers who may not share the lived experiences of end-users. This results in homes that are not truly responsive to the needs of the community.

The Principle

Involve women at every stage of the design process, from initial concept to final execution. This co-design approach, a collaborative partnership between designers and community members, ensures that the final product is not only functional, but also empowering. This could take the form of workshops, focus groups, or even digital platforms where women can share ideas and vote on design features.



Guiding principles for designing homes for women

Question 'neutral' design standards

The Challenge

Many established design standards are presented as universal, but they often perpetuate a male-centric bias. This is evident in everything from the height of kitchen countertops (often too high for the average woman) to safety standards that fail to account for women's specific concerns about feeling secure.

The Principle

Challenge the status quo by critically examining existing design standards. Ask who they were created for and who they might exclude. Advocate for new, more inclusive standards that consider a wider range of body types, mobility and security needs.



Top tips for gender responsive design

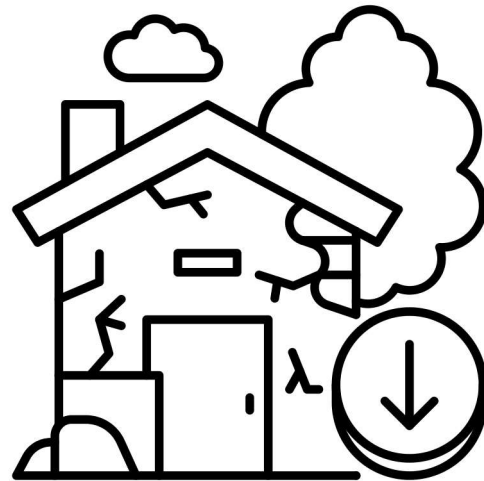
Before

Designs are approved based on blue prints and assumed use.

Entryways are often poorly lit or have blind spots, creating a feeling of vulnerability, particularly for women returning home alone at night.

Rooms are designed with a single, rigid purpose - e.g. the 'dining room', or the 'guest room'.

Standard kitchen counters, sinks and storage are built to an average height that may be uncomfortable or inaccessible for many women



After

Actively seek feedback from women living in these homes. Use surveys, interviews and focus groups to understand how spaces are actually used, what works and what doesn't.

Integrate bright, motion-activated lighting, clear sight lines and smart access controls into the initial design.

Design spaces that are inherently flexible. Use sliding partitions, built-in convertible furniture and strategic layouts to allow rooms to easily transform into a home office, to a playroom or a quiet retreat.

Incorporate adjustable or varied-height countertops, accessible storage solutions and ergonomic layouts.





Women as Tenants – what more can we do?

Avoiding gender-data bias

Disaggregate Data

Instead of collecting general data, break it down by gender, age, ethnicity, and other relevant factors. This allows for a clearer view of how different groups are impacted and helps prevent important trends from being obscured by broad averages.

Conduct Gender-Impact Checks

Before a project proceeds, perform a formal review to evaluate its potential effects on both women and men. This structured approach helps identify and address potential biases from the outset.

Challenge ‘default user’ assumptions

Actively question the intended user of a product, policy or space. Acknowledge that the ‘neutral’ or ‘average’ user is often based on male-centric norms, and make a conscious effort to understand the needs of women and other diverse groups.



Women as Tenants – what more can we do?

Good Practice

Publish Performance by Gender

Be transparent about project and initiative outcomes by reporting on their specific impact on women. This public accountability promotes continuous improvement and highlights areas in need of progress.

Schedule Regular Gender Audits

Conduct periodic, in-depth reviews of internal processes, from project design to hiring to identify and correct systemic gender biases. These audits should be comprehensive and led by an independent and dedicated team.

Partner with WISH and Local Women’s Networks

Collaborate with organisations that deeply understand women’s needs in the housing sector. These partnerships offer invaluable insights, facilitate co-design, and ensure our work genuinely serves the community.



Media Links and Further Reading

Media Links

If I Had One Wish – Podcast Series

Join host Crystal Hicks in conversation with inspirational and powerful women in Social Housing. [Click here](#) for our YouTube Channel or available from wherever you get your podcasts.

Website Resources through Women in Social Housing

<https://www.wishnetwork.org/about/wish-resources>

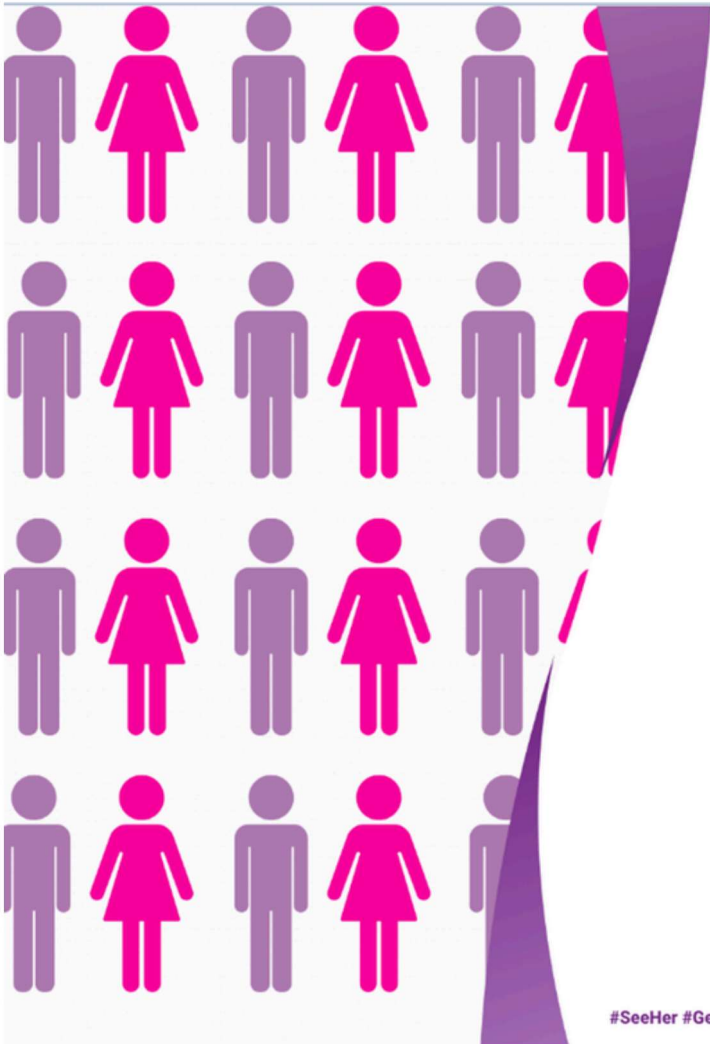
Further External Reading

[A design guide for Older Women’s housing from Monash University](#)

[Creating Places that work for Women and Girls from The Greater London Authority](#)

[The Women’s Budget Group – Housing and Physical Infrastructure](#)

[Women’s Housing Forum – Research and Advocacy on Women’s Housing Needs in the UK](#)



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