Work, Poverty and Welfare

Worksheet 7.2: Women, Children and the Cycle of Poverty

Read the passage below and answer the questions that follow

I soon realized how many issues were raised through the experiences of one woman whom I shall call Jen. 'Bad enough being stuck in this awful place you would think, now they might take the kids. If not for them, I would just end it all now. If they take them, I've nothing left to live for.' Not a statement made for effect, but a cry from the heart from a mother at the end of her tether.

Jen had done all the right things. As soon as her children disclosed that the man in whose home she was living had abused them, she fled with her children. She called the police, who helped her to contact emergency housing services, and she supported the children to make statements in order to prosecute. Social workers had assured Jen that they did not think she was complicit in the abuse and that she had acted correctly to protect her children. Her reward was a small, damp room in a squalid bed-and-breakfast hotel, miles away from the children's school and far from her few friends. The communal kitchen, toilets and bathrooms were filthy and the beds stank of urine. Other residents included people who were drinking or abusing drugs, two people recently released from prison and two young men – one of whom told her he was a 'care-leaver'. There was constant noise day and night, preventing them from sleeping well and the nearest launderette was a bus ride away. They lived on take-away food or sandwiches.

After several months, during which Jen could not always get the children's clothes clean, get them to school or provide decent food, teachers expressed concern to social services. Before long a child protection investigation was begun to assess if the children were being neglected and they were put on an 'At Risk' register. This, added to all the other stresses and strains, almost pushed Jen over the edge of depression towards suicide – but she could not tell anyone how bad she felt in case it was used against her by social services. Thankfully, the children were not removed. Now re-housed, the family live on a very rundown estate, but at least it is in the borough they come from and the children can go to school regularly.

The nightmare they went through and the difficulties they still face are firmly rooted in poverty – they had no choice of accommodation, location or the duration they had to stay there. The poor standard of housing provided now is insufficient to relieve them from facing the worst effects of poverty and the children are already marked by their experiences in insecure housing, living with the fear of being taken into care. If they had been, Jen would have lost all priority for re-housing and might never have got her children back. It is easy to think that this is an uncommon story but, sadly, it is not. Jen was just the first person to spring to mind, but it could have been any number of women I have met. Families who have lived with this know very well how close the links are between inadequate housing, homelessness and children removed into care.

Adapted from a presentation by Moraene Roberts in *Women's and Children's Poverty: Making the Links*, Women's Budget Group, 2005
The full report, which contains a number of other first-hand accounts of the experience of poverty, can be see and downloaded at www.wbg.org.uk/documents/WBGWomensandchildrenspoverty.pdf

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Questions

1. Identify and explain all the ways that the circumstances that Jen found herself in might be linked to poverty.

2. Explain carefully the links suggested 'between inadequate housing, homelessness and children removed into care' (last two lines).

3. With reference to the passage, identify and explain all the ways you can think of in which one aspect of Jen's experiences might have led her into a cycle of deprivation which was very hard to escape from.

4. To what extent do you think Jen's circumstances are a result of mainly cultural factors or mainly material factors? Explain your answer.

5. Suggest <u>three</u> ways that the welfare state might have intervened and provided help to Jen so she might have avoided the circumstances outlined in the passage.