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Gendering the right to housing in the city: Homeless female lone parents in post-Olympics, austerity East London

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses how gender, housing, austerity and the right to the city inter-relate with reference to female lone parents from East London, the site of the 2012 Olympic Games. In so doing, the paper draws upon qualitative research undertaken with lone parent mothers living in temporary accommodation. The women's housing experiences are embedded within a deepening of neoliberal welfare cutbacks and restructuring under what Peck (2012) has called 'austerity urbanism'. Although the mother's lives are based in East London where they have extended family and where many of them grew up, they have either been moved, or face the prospect of being moved, out of the area and even beyond the city limits into suburban South East England. Rather than basking in the much trumpeted 2012 Games regeneration 'legacy', these women's right to live in East London, close to their support networks, is being eroded.

1. Introduction

Originating with Henri Lefebvre in the late 1960s, the 'right to the city' has caught the imagination of critical urban scholars and activists (Harvey, 2008; Sugranyes & Mathivet, 2010). Lefebvre's right to the city has, however, tended to marginalise gender issues (Buckingham, 2010; Fenster, 2005; Purcell, 2002). This paper addresses this marginalisation by foregrounding the gendered aspects of housing provision and experiences of homeless female lone parents in East London, the site of the 2012 Olympic Games. The *raison d'être* for this sporting mega-event was not to simply stage the Games, but to create a lasting 'legacy' by regenerating East London for the benefit of its residents (Cohen & Watt, 2017). However, the impacts of such mega-events cannot be neatly disentangled from current austerity policies whereby large-scale welfare retrenchments have particularly affected deprived areas and groups such as lone-parent families (Greer Murphy, 2017). As Mooney et al. (2015: 911) have argued in relation to the Glasgow's 2014 Commonwealth Games, "we need to explore the relationship between such events and the impacts of wider government policies in disadvantaged areas delivered in a post-crash, 'post-welfare' era of austerity".

In assessing the 2012 London Olympic Games legacy in relation to gender, austerity and the right to the city, the paper draws on research undertaken with homeless female lone parents living in temporary accommodation located in East London and also beyond the city limits in suburban South East England. Nearly all the women originated from the two Olympic 'Host Boroughs' of Newham and Waltham Forest, and

it is these two boroughs which are the main focus of the paper.

2. The right to the city, gender, housing and austerity urbanism

Being "physically present in the space of the city" (Purcell, 2002: 103) is crucial for understanding Lefebvre's right to the city. Presence and centrality are also emphasised by Millington (2011: 10; original emphasis) in his interpretation of Lefebvre: "exclusion from the centre is evidence of the denial of the 'right to the city' – a 'superior right' concerned with *inhabiting* the city, rather than owning part of it or being allowed to work or contribute to decisions there". The importance of centrality and residing *in* the city – not in its peripheral hinterlands – means that one of the most substantive issues within any right to the city analysis should be the role played by housing in alternatively facilitating or erasing the capacity of lower-class inhabitants to live in the inner urban core (Harvey, 2008; Sugranyes & Mathivet, 2010; Madden & Marcuse, 2016). This spatial emphasis is especially relevant given the prevalence of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2008) strategies under contemporary neoliberalisation whereby poor inner-city inhabitants are dispossessed of their homes as the land becomes increasingly valuable for real estate development, as has indeed happened in East London (Watt, 2013; Bernstock, 2014). Enforced relocation of the poor – displacement i.e. "what happens when forces outside the household make living there impossible, hazardous or unaffordable" (Hartman, cited in Slater, 2009) – is becoming increasingly common place as a result of accumulation by dispossession, state-led gentrification and austerity welfare 'reforms', not least in London

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(Hodkinson & Essen, 2015; Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Watt & Minton, 2016).

Those collective rights to the city which Lefebvre and Harvey valorise are being recalibrated in a *downward direction* and this especially applies to access to public/social rental housing (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). This recalibration is accelerated by what Jamie Peck (2012) has called ‘austerity urbanism’, involving deep welfare cuts in post-crash US cities, the latest twist in the neoliberalisation saga. While Peck’s focus is the US, austerity urbanism is readily apparent in British cities where cuts to public services are having the greatest impact on the most deprived urban areas (Greer Murphy, 2017; McKenzie, 2015; Mooney et al., 2015). This includes East London boroughs such as Newham, Waltham Forest and Tower Hamlets (Fitzgerald & Lupton, 2015) – those same boroughs which hosted the 2012 Olympic Games.

Which urban inhabitants are the subjects of the right to the city? Lefebvre tended to prioritise the working class in classical Marxist fashion but, as Purcell (2002) argues, this demotes the significance of challenging the patriarchal city, the racist city, etc. Fenster (2005) and Buckingham (2010) have argued that the right to the city has had little scrutiny from a feminist/gender perspective. Both critics stress how fear of violence in women’s everyday use of public space plays an important part in the gendering of the right to the city and this is influenced by public infrastructure issues especially transportation. Buckingham (2010: 59) notes further how housing is “the most important aspect when considering habitat within the city” since it facilitates women’s capacity to use the proximate city on a daily basis, including pursuing their typically multiple roles as carers, paid workers, etc.

Feminist approaches aimed at understanding and challenging the gendered exclusionary nature of housing policy and housing markets have been prominent since the 1980s (Malos & Hague, 1997; Tomas & Dittmar, 1995; Vickery, 2012; Watson & Austerberry, 1986; Warrington, 2001). While there has been some policy recognition of the importance of specific feminist-inspired housing issues, for example with reference to domestic violence (Malos & Hague, 1997), many of the housing-related disadvantages women face, which Watson and Austerberry (1986) raised three decades ago, remain all too real in contemporary Britain (Vickery, 2012). This is especially the case for BME and white working-class women living in inner-city areas who have historically been most dependent upon public/social housing provision (McKenzie, 2015; Vickery, 2012). It is also precisely this latter element of the British welfare state which has been the most rolled back as a result of decades of neoliberal housing and urban policies (Hodkinson, Watt, & Mooney, 2013; Watt & Minton, 2016).

We know in general terms that austerity generates intersecting gendered and spatial inequalities including in relation to housing (Greer Murphy, 2017; Vickery, 2012). What is less clearly understood is how gender, housing, austerity and the right to the city inter-relate within specific urban contexts and at a deeper experiential level. By focussing on homeless female lone parents in East London, this paper provides such analytical depth by marrying political economy concerns with poverty, class and austerity urbanism together with the gendering of housing and space – in other words, *gendering the right to housing in the city*. The paper also aims to contribute towards “moving from the view of homelessness as an extraordinary malfunction [of individuals] to a position embedded within the wider dynamics of contemporary inequality” (Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016: 278), and in so doing to locate homelessness within neoliberal governmental strategies including austerity.

3. Context

3.1. Post-Olympics, East London

The six East London ‘Host Boroughs’ (now ‘Growth Boroughs’) of Barking and Dagenham, Greenwich, Hackney, Newham, Tower

Hamlets and Waltham Forest formed the spatial locus of the Summer 2012 Olympic Games. These boroughs are more deprived than the rest of London and also contain large BME populations which include long-established Black British and British Asian communities alongside recent migrants (Bernstock, 2014; LSE Housing and Communities, 2014).

Earlier rounds of regeneration, particularly the redevelopment of the Docklands area, have had spectacular physical effects and helped transform East London into a major hub for the city’s finance-oriented, post-industrial economy. Nevertheless, scepticism remains over how far such regeneration has benefitted East London’s multi-ethnic, working-class population, and similar criticisms have been made of the avowed 2012 Olympics’ legacy, not least in relation to housing (Bernstock, 2014; Cohen & Watt, 2017; Kennelly, 2016; Shelter, 2013; Thompson et al., 2017). Newham and Waltham Forest have both recorded recent above London average increases in house prices and private rents (Evening Standard, 2016; Watt & Bernstock, 2017) which have worsened housing affordability for existing local residents. At the same time, much of the nominally ‘affordable housing’ in Post-Olympics’ East London – intermediate rental and shared ownership – is anything but affordable for low and average-income East Londoners (Shelter, 2013; Watt & Bernstock, 2017). That housing which is genuinely affordable and relatively secure – council (public) and housing association ‘social renting’ – has not expanded sufficiently to meet East London’s chronic housing needs (Bernstock, 2014; Watt & Bernstock, 2017).

A raft of central government imposed welfare and housing ‘reforms’ and austerity cutbacks – the housing benefit (HB) cap, introduction of the bedroom tax, cuts to local housing allowance (LHA)¹ in the private rental sector (PRS) (Powell, 2015) – have furthermore contributed towards the dramatic increase in numbers living in temporary accommodation (TA) in London (Rugg, 2016; Shelter, 2014a). London councils are more and more turning to the PRS to provide TA for their homeless populations, a move which was facilitated by councils being allowed to discharge their homelessness duties in the PRS as a result of the Localism Act 2011 (Bevan, 2014; Rugg, 2016). London councils, both Labour-controlled as well as Conservative-controlled, are increasingly displacing homeless households to ‘out-of-borough’ TA in cheaper areas both within and outside London (Shelter, 2013, 2014a; Wilson & Barton, 2016). In April–June 2016, 18,700 (37%) of the 52,820 London households in TA were relocated to another borough (DCLG, 2016; author’s calculations). Such displacement forms part of multi-layered ‘social cleansing’ processes whereby the ‘undeserving poor’ and even some middle-income groups are being pressurised out of their homes and neighbourhoods (Watt & Minton, 2016).

While London-wide TA homeless trends are deteriorating, they are doing so at a faster rate in East London boroughs such as Newham and Waltham Forest (Watt & Bernstock, 2017). Fig. 1 below shows data for TA location by the six Host Boroughs (DCLG, 2016). Newham has the largest number of households (4142) living in TA in the city, and also the highest number placed out-of-borough – 1653 (40% of its total). Waltham Forest has fewer out-of-borough TA numbers (1225) than Newham, but one of largest percentages in London at 56%.

The number of households rehoused in TA outside of London are far smaller than aggregate out-of-borough placements, but have nevertheless increased dramatically (BBC News, 2017; Inside Housing, 2015a, 2015b; London Councils, 2014); they more than doubled from 637 in 2012/13 to 1653 in 2014/15 (Inside Housing, 2015a). As more affluent West London boroughs export their homeless populations to traditionally cheaper areas such as East London, so the latter is facing stiffer competition for private sector TA and hence its local authorities are displacing more people outside the city (Inside Housing, 2015a; Powell, 2015). Recent data shows that Newham rehoused 27 house-

¹ LHA is ‘the regime for administering HB [Housing Benefit] in the private rented sector’ (Powell, 2015: 321).

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