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**Gendering the Right to Housing in the City:
Homeless Female Lone Parents in Post-Olympics, Austerity East London**

Paul Watt

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 neo-liberal 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.

Key words: Right to the city; Homelessness; Austerity; Female lone parents; Olympic Games

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.

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 (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 & 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 et al., 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.

Context

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

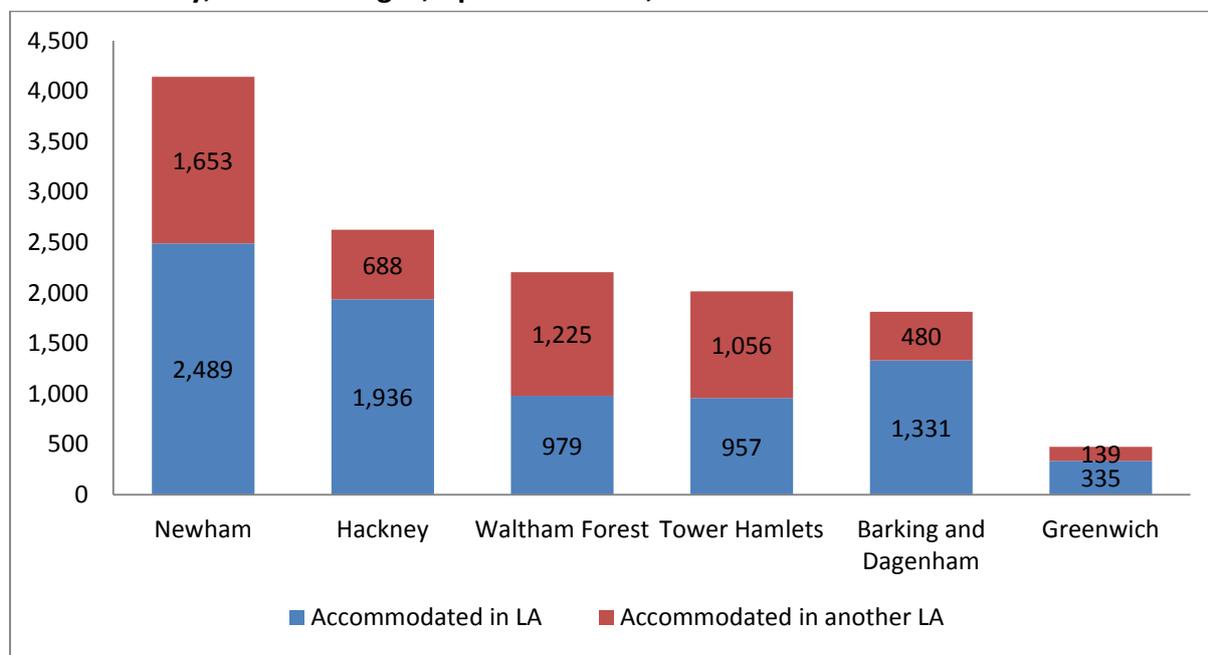
relation to housing (Bernstock, 2014; Cohen & Watt, 2017; Kennelly, 2016; Shelter, 2013; Thompson et al., 2017). Newham and Waltham Forest have both recorded recent above London average increases in house prices and private rents (Evening Standard, 2016; Watt & Bernstock, 2017) which have worsened housing 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)ⁱ 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). Figure 1 below shows data for TA location by the six Host Boroughs (DCLG, 2016). Newham has the largest number of households (4,142) living in TA in the city, and also the highest number placed out-of-borough – 1,653 (40% of its total). Waltham Forest has fewer out-of-

borough TA numbers (1,225) than Newham, but one of largest percentages in London at 56%.

Figure 1. Households in temporary accommodation located in local authority and another local authority, Host Boroughs, April-June 2016, N



Source: DCLG, 2016

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 1,653 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 households outside London during 2012, but this went up to 244 in 2015 (Newham Recorder, 2016b). From April-June 2014, Newham made 42 placements outside the capital and Waltham Forest made 17, i.e. the second and eight largest in London (Inside Housing, 2015b).

As noted above, the Host Boroughs have been subject to profound austerity urbanism processes, notably deep reductions in per capita local government spending power (Fitzgerald & Lupton, 2015: 588). However, one cannot read off austerity urbanism from overall funding cuts without examining how local councils are managing their commitments to welfare provision and other public services, not least of which is public/social rental housing. Given the latter's role in accommodating women and especially female-headed, lone-parent families (Vickery, 2012), its size and allocation criteria are vital issues in terms of meeting women's housing needs.

Government cuts to social housing subsidies are, of course, largely responsible for the aggregate reduction in public/social housing in London, including East London (Bernstock, 2014). Nevertheless, local councils' own policies vis-à-vis planning and regeneration also make a considerable difference to what type of housing is provided locally and for whom, and councils have some degree of discretion in this regard. Both Newham and Waltham Forest Councils have pursued neoliberal local state strategies heavily dependent on large-scale private residential redevelopment which amounts to state-led gentrification (Watt, 2013). As part of this, neither council has vigorously pursued social housing provision through the local planning system in relation to new private housing developments, while their council estate regeneration schemes have tended to involve *net reductions* in the availability of social tenancies (see *inter alia* Bernstock, 2014; BBC News, 2015; Chakraborty, 2015; East London & West Essex Guardian, 2015b; Newham Recorder, 2016a; Watt, 2013; Watt & Bernstock, 2017).

In terms of allocations, the Coalition Government, via the Localism Act 2011, gave local authorities greater discretion in how they managed their social housing waiting lists (Bevan, 2014). This has had two effects. First, 126 authorities in England used the Localism Act powers to change their allocations policy resulting in over 113,000 applicants being struck off waiting lists (Inside Housing, 2014). Two councils that have gone further than most are Waltham Forest and Newham: the former used the new powers to cut 11,925 applicants off its waiting list, the largest reduction in England, while Newham sliced 5,000 off its list, the eighth largest reduction (Inside Housing, 2014). Not only did Waltham Forest and Newham councils cut their waiting lists, but they rebalanced them towards prioritising those

applicants in paid employment and ex-members of the armed forces, albeit that Newham did this sooner (London Borough of Newham, 2012) than Waltham Forest (East London & West Essex Guardian, 2015a).

This prioritisation has had considerable, albeit under-appreciated, gendered effects. Newham and Waltham Forests' housing allocations' policies effectively discriminate against women who have a small presence in the armed forces and are also less likely than men to be in paid employment, not least because of caring responsibilities. Not only do men have a long-standing advantage in the private housing market because of their higher earnings and greater labour market participation (Watson & Austerberry, 1986; Vickery, 2012), but the recent social housing changes also advantage them.

Table 1. Households with dependent children in temporary accommodation in Newham, Waltham Forest and London, 2012-16

	2012, Q1	2016, Q3	N increase 2012-16	% increase 2012-16
Newham	1,520	3,026	1,506	99
Waltham Forest	1,037	1,972	935	90
Total London	28,113	43,820	15,707	56

Source: DCLG (accessed from Shelter Housing Databank, April 4th 2017, http://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/housing_databank)

Official data for Newham and Waltham Forest suggests that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of households with dependent children living in TA in these two boroughs since the first quarter of 2012, i.e. just before the 2012 Games, as seen in Table 1. What is striking about Table 1 is how the percentage increases for both Newham (99%) and Waltham Forest (90%) are way above the London average of 56%. Given that national-level data show that female lone parents made up 63% of all households with dependent children in TA in Q3, 2016 (DCLG, 2017; author's calculation), it is clear that this group are disproportionately bearing the brunt of recent housing and welfare policy shifts in East London, as we explore further below in the qualitative research findings.

Methods

This paper is based on two qualitative research projects involving interviews and participant observation with homeless East Londoners (see Watt & Bernstock, 2017, for more findings from these projects). The first project focused on over 70 young people living at the 'Hostel', a temporary supported housing unit in Newham (Kennelly, 2016). Reference is made here to interviews undertaken at the Hostel with five young mothers (18-24 years of age) from 2011-13.

The second project (2015-17) is critical ethnographic research on homelessness in East London, including those who have been rehoused in TA outside their East London borough, in some cases outside the city to the Rest of the South East (ROSE). This includes Boundary House which was being used as TA by several London councils; this is a block of studio flats located in Welwyn Garden City (WGC), 25 miles north of London, which was originally used as nursing accommodation. The author conducted interviews and had conversations with around 30 Boundary House residents and ex-residents, many of whom had small children as Figure 2 suggests. This paper draws on twelve interviews undertaken with female lone parent residents and ex-residents of Boundary House. Nearly all had been rehoused from either Newham or Waltham Forest, where they had either grown up or had lived for many years, although one interviewee came from Tower Hamlets. All three borough councils are Labour-controlled. Newham council ceased using Boundary House as TA in early 2016 and by summer 2016 it appeared that most of its residents were from Waltham Forest. In addition to the Boundary House research, I also refer to an interview with a female lone parent living in TA in Newham who had experienced an out-of-borough relocation within London. The 13 lone parent interviewees from this second project were aged 20-42, with most in their mid-20s.

Figure 2. Entrance hall at Boundary House, Welwyn Garden City, December 2015



Photo © Paul Watt

The majority of the total 18 interviewees were from BME backgrounds, mainly Black British; others were White British plus one White East European. Most mothers had dependent children, often of pre-school age, although a few were pregnant.ⁱⁱ Only a minority were employed, although nearly all had paid work experience prior to motherhood, typically in low-paid service and administration work. Their qualification levels ranged from graduates to those with few qualifications. The emphasis in this paper is analysing the housing histories of the interviewees (Tomas & Dittmar, 1995), including their experiences of applying to local authorities as homeless.

Becoming homeless

The women gave three main reasons for approaching the council as homeless: family disputes, domestic violence and evictions from the PRS. The most common reason given by the younger women who had left the paternal home was disputes with parents, step-parents and siblings. Tiffany (White British, 2011)ⁱⁱⁱ described leaving her mum's overcrowded council house in Newham as a result of domestic arguments.

"I left my mum's house because I fell pregnant with my first child, well my only child at the moment but I fell pregnant with him, I was 16 going on 17, my mum has seven kids, in a four bed house and I'm pregnant, so it was a bit crowded. It was a lot of arguments, there was stress and everything so she asked me to leave".

Becoming pregnant could itself bring fraught domestic relations to some kind of crisis point, as in Tiffany's case. Some mentioned how their parents or siblings had strict moral codes which the women had 'transgressed' by becoming pregnant: "I was at my Mum's and there's like a little rule, like when you got pregnant you got to find your way in the world, that's it" (Angelica, Black British, 2012).

Material class inequalities structure housing decision making and homelessness (Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016). It's therefore sociologically important not to interpret family disputes within analytical frameworks which regard the women – or their families – as somehow psychologically or culturally 'deficient'. In such a markedly unequal city as London, the wealthy over-accumulate bedrooms whereas the poor have to squeeze themselves into small homes with insufficient numbers of bedrooms (Dorling, 2014), a squeezing which results in overcrowding and domestic tensions as experienced by the women in this study. As with Tiffany, overcrowding often underpinned the young women's exit from the family home. Rebecca (Mixed Race, 2012) reported how she had to leave her Mum's council house once she became pregnant: "she couldn't have me in her house, she's only got a two-bedroom house as it is, and there's me and my two other sisters, so the house just isn't big enough". Being 'kicked out' was therefore not a simple result of parental disapproval, but also stemmed from structurally inadequate housing. Adriana (Black British, 2015) "was kicked out of my Mum's house in [...], it was overcrowded. I was living there with my Mum,

my sister, brother and his girlfriend and their baby”. Overcrowding actually worsened in the Host Boroughs during 2001-11 inter-censal period (Watt & Bernstock, 2017). According to the 2011 Census, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest are three of the five most overcrowded local authorities in the country (ONS, 2014a). Overcrowding also disproportionately impacts on BME groups, including in Newham and Waltham Forest (ONS, 2014b). Domestic arguments and cultural norms around pregnancy are therefore enacted within specific housing constraints including the all too frequent lack of adequate domestic space, as affects these multi-ethnic, working-class women.

Aside from domestic arguments, three women approached the council as homeless because they left their male partners as a result of domestic violence. As Warrington (2001) notes, domestic violence is the most common form of violent crime against women in England and Wales and also results in many thousands of women and children being forced to leave their homes each year.

A third reason the women gave for becoming homeless was being evicted from their previous accommodation, either by a private or housing association landlord. The end of assured shorthold tenancies (AST) in the PRS has been a growing cause of homelessness, such that 40% of homeless acceptances in London from July-September 2016 resulted from the end of an AST (Wilson & Barton, 2016: 7). East London is indeed an epicentre for such housing precarity including some of the highest landlord and mortgage repossession claims rates in the country, with Newham the worst and Waltham Forest the fifth worst (Shelter, 2014b: 7).

Applying to the council as homeless

All the lone parents were in ‘priority need’ under housing legislation because they either had dependent children or were pregnant (Alden, 2015; Vickery, 2012). Becoming homeless was an understandably stressful process for them. While a few mentioned sympathetic local authority housing officials, the more common narrative was of routine distressful encounters with such officials; “people are stressed out as it is and then they speak to you in a way which makes you feel worse” (Fahima, British Asian, 2016).

When the women applied as homeless to the local authority, being made 'offers you cannot refuse' was a near-universal theme in their housing histories. Offers of TA typically involved the women having to either view the property shortly after being offered it on the same or following day, or even being told that "you've got to take it or lose it" (Adele, Black British, 2016). After leaving her mother's home, Samantha (Black British, 2015) stayed with friends and relatives – sofa surfing – a common experience among the East London mothers. Recognising this as unsatisfactory, Samantha contacted the council who offered her a house in a South Coast town around 70 miles from London: "I was just like 'yay a two bedroom house', of course I'm going to go, yes I don't even know where Hastings is but I am going". Despite her initial enthusiasm, Samantha was dismayed by how far Hastings was from London when she went there and even more so by the condition of the house which, "wasn't suitable at all, like when I was going up the stairs they were like all wobbly and it was them spiral kind of stairs that are scary, I was thinking 'how am I going to carry shopping and a new-born up them stairs like that?'" Samantha went back to the housing office and described what happened once she refused the Hastings' property.

"I wouldn't leave and it was closing time, so they had to close and I was just sitting there with my child. The security [guard] was trying to get me out and I said 'no I am not going anywhere', and then they said 'we are going to call the police then', so I said 'OK I am just going to sit here' because I didn't really believe them. I was really upset. 'Well where do you expect me to go?', like I don't know what to do and I have got a four month old, I am just going to sit here, I am not going to go anywhere, and they called the police on me and I mean like six big policemen, and they was like 'we are going to have to take your baby because you are going to get arrested for trespassing'. I was like 'OK fine I'll leave then, I don't want you to just take my baby like that'. So I had to leave and I just went back to my sister's house".

Samantha was being potentially criminalised for her desperate efforts to access suitable housing with the incipient threat of having her child taken from her. Samantha's homeless case was closed and, after a brief period staying with her sister, she went back to live at her mother's house. It was while she was there that her case was inexplicably reopened at

which point she was offered TA in WGC, but on the basis that she had to accept it without viewing it.

According to the women's housing histories, not accepting an offer, no matter how unsuitable it might be, would result in them having made themselves 'intentionally homeless' whereby the council would have no further statutory duty to assist them (see Hardy & Gillespie, 2016). Following eviction by a private landlord, Adriana returned to the council as homeless and this time was told she would have to go to TA on the South Coast.

"Oh my God, I broke down in the housing office, I was crying and screaming, I couldn't take it. I was begging them, I pleaded and pleaded and pleaded. They said if you don't take it, you will have made yourself intentionally homeless – 'you have to go to Bexhill or Birmingham or Manchester, these are the only options we have at this time', it's not just me, it's everyone. The woman said to me that I'm lucky that I got offered Bexhill and not Birmingham. I am happy it's not Birmingham, but this [East London] is where I was raised".

Sade (Black British, 2015) queried this Kafkaesque language: "how does someone make themselves intentionally homeless, with a child?" The use of such conditionality is associated with stringent welfare gatekeeping, especially in areas with resource pressures (Alden, 2015) such as East London. Adriana noticed a change during the five years she had been dealing with housing officials who had originally "seemed sympathetic" and the "security guards were joking", but that "now it's just 'we can't help you' and the security guards are 'we cannot let you in the building'". Such changes suggest a tightening of the homeless criteria under austerity urbanism conditions (Alden, 2015).

Austerity, as with neoliberalism in general, is not enacted via the mere *withdrawal* of state welfare support in classical liberal fashion. Instead, the homeless application process, as filtered via austerity urbanism, is less indicative of a supportive welfare state and instead reflects a punitive, coercive state whereby lone parents are routinely positioned as part of the 'undeserving poor', a stigmatising discourse which ties in with hegemonic mass media representations (Tyler, 2013). Such coercion is not of course monopolised by female

mothers, as seen in the criminalisation of male rough sleepers (Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016). Nevertheless, the mother's responsibility for their children, as well as themselves, adds an extra dimension of desperation to their accounts.

Legal representation was not something I directly asked about during the interviews, but it is something which emerged from the women's housing histories. Several reported hiring lawyers to assist their homeless application cases, and this included situations where, against all the odds, they refused TA offers. This is suggestive of the increasingly adversarial nature of homeless provision under austerity pressures in which resource gatekeeping can even take precedence over legality, as Alden (2015) has identified.

Safety, space and the gendered right to the city

One of the key aspects of a gendered right to the city is that women should feel safe and secure, both in public spaces and in their own homes (Buckingham, 2010; Fenster, 2005). However, the mother's safety was jeopardised by their experiences of living in TA where they had to share communal areas with strangers, including men who could be intimidating and even violent. Kobena (Black African, 2016) described how she and her children had been placed in a temporary house in her home borough, along with two single people, one of whom was a male "tenant with drugs and stuff". One evening, this man had mislaid his keys and demanded Kobena let him in: "the guy came banging on the door, knocking, knocking on my window, the guy keeps on swearing at me". Eventually he forced himself through her window and into her room, and later that evening he caused a fire in the communal kitchen. Amran (Black African, 2015) reported a similarly distressing experience in the out-of-borough TA where she was rehoused after she was 'kicked out' of her brother's over-crowded house.

"They [council] put me in a hostel in Wandsworth [South London], it had a unit for mentally ill people, then they had an addict unit and they only had me and someone else who had a baby, so I was pregnant at the time and someone else had a baby that was downstairs. During that time, I was frightened all the time, people would come up to me and say 'do you have ...?', people that were on drugs and stuff and

asking 'have you got any medication you can give me?', and I'm like 'no I'm pregnant, I'm not going to get anything anyway'. And then most of the time people were smoking cannabis outside in the corridor, so it wasn't really good for my health, there was bed bugs, there was damp and I just had to put up with it because I was homeless, they're not going to review it or anything, but thank God I was only there for six weeks and they placed me in a B&B in [East London]. Same thing with that place, people breaking in".

Because of "all that stress I was going through", Amran had a difficult birth, her baby was ill and she herself suffered from mental ill-health issues. Several women mentioned they had mental health problems, including that these resulted from or were exacerbated by their dire housing circumstances (Hardy & Gillespie, 2016). In cases such as Amran's and Kobena's, the women's TA experiences blurred the lines of public and private space by transforming their supposedly safe domestic space into an unsafe semi-public space (Buckingham, 2010; Fenster, 2005). Lack of safety was also a prominent theme among the mothers in WGC. In summer 2015, two women mentioned how the front door was broken and the side door was open, as my observations confirmed. Such lack of security was an ongoing issue, as Adele recounted a year later.

"I couldn't leave my pushchair downstairs because people just steal it. First of all the entrance door is not locked, there's always a side entrance so anyone can just enter the building. I know a couple of people whose pushchairs got thieved so I have to carry my pushchair all the time. I'm on the 3rd floor so all the time I have to carry my pushchair up and down, up and down". (Adele, Black British, 2016)

Rhianna (Black British, 2016) was only too well aware of the gendered inadequacy of Boundary House: "this place is not made for single mothers, there's no lift and I'm on the top floor, I have to carry food and the buggy up three flights of stairs with shopping".

Trapped beyond the city limits

As Buckingham (2010: 60) argues, “Proximity to the quotidian uses of the city is most important for women, considering the greater variety of their needs and roles within the city”, including caring for their children and the elderly, as well as being engaged in paid labour. Having easy access to the city and its spaces and resources is vital for women, but especially for working-class women with children who rely heavily on informal support networks and even more so under austerity conditions (McKenzie, 2015). In the case of the East London female lone parents, their actual or potential relocation beyond the city limits downgraded, or threatened to downgrade, their capacity to function effectively as mothers, carers, friends, students and paid workers. Isolation was a recurrent theme among those relocated outside London because they were so far from their families and support networks.

“I don’t have no partner here, I don’t have no friends here, just the people here [in Boundary House]” (Rhianna).

“When you’re alone, it gets isolating, I’ve no friends or family here. My Mum [in East London] couldn’t come up to visit me because she works full time. I’d like to be in an environment near my family, my Mum and my Nan” (Ashley, White British, 2016).

Like Rhianna and Ashley, virtually all the Boundary House mothers wanted to return ‘back home’ to East London and their extended families. The sense of being trapped in alien, unfamiliar territory could be psychologically overwhelming.

“I feel trapped, I don’t know how to get out of this place”. (Naomi, Black British, 2016).

“I just find it shocking they can do this to people. I feel ill here, I feel prisoners have got more freedom. I’m here 24/7, I’m on my own, I have no support here”. (Fahima).

“They [council] forced us to move here and now we’re trapped here”. (Rhianna)

The women's capacity to care for their children was undermined by being located outside the city. Some recounted how their children had specialist health needs which required regular costly and lengthy journeys to London. Being located away from London also meant they had to put their employment and educational ambitions on hold. Adele had dropped out of university in London when she became pregnant, but despite wanting to return, her present location vitiated against this. Jobs in London were also hard to sustain because of transport and childcare issues which resulted in additional frustration: "I don't like being on benefits, I'm bored, I've always worked" (Rhianna). The women were only too well aware of the manifold stigmatisation of lone mothers in the mass media (Tyler, 2013): "oh my God, that's it, 'benefit mums' [TV programme], it doesn't show the true picture of what's happening" (Adriana). The true picture was a relentless daily struggle, exacerbated by the cramped nature of their one-room flats in which up to four people have to live, cook, eat, play and sleep (Figure 3); mould and/or infestation were also issues in some flats (see also Belgrave, 2016).

Figure 3. Studio flat for mother and three children, Welwyn Garden City, June 2015



Photo © Paul Watt

A few women managed to make the journey back to London to do paid work or study. However, this was only practicable because they could rely on relatives and friends in London who could assist them with childcare and even put them up overnight. In order to combat her sense of isolation, Ashley obtained a part-time job at a supermarket in East London. On her morning-shift day, Ashley left her flat at 5.00 a.m. to walk to the train station, and then took her son to nursery before she went to work at 9.00 a.m. However, this demanding travel regime proved too stressful so Ashley switched to staying with relatives the night before her morning shift. Kobena was a student and similarly relied on relatives for childcare and overnight stays: “if I hadn’t had my sister, I would have dropped the course because I couldn’t have done it”.

If the women’s daily use of the city was hampered by their location beyond the city limits, a relevant factor is public transportation: “it is through safe, affordable and extensive means for mobility that women may fully exercise their rights to a safe city” (Buckingham, 2010: 59). As indicated above, daily travel for work or education was extremely difficult, and this was enhanced by transport issues. Hardly any mothers had access to a car and hence were reliant on public transport. Since they were all on low incomes they could not afford to make the expensive journey back to London very often. This was worsened since Boundary House was two miles from the railway station which meant either walking or taking a bus or taxi there.

The women at WGC had been living there for periods ranging from a few weeks to nearly four years. They were told by housing officials that they had little chance of returning to London in the immediate future which exacerbated their sense of feeling trapped. One way back to the city was via renting in the expensive and insecure PRS, although this meant giving up their homeless application. Adriana eventually did this, which meant she was closer to her East London extended family. However Adriana had previously experienced evictions from the PRS, as had several other mothers, and this was also one of the reasons she had approached the council as homeless. The PRS-homeless nexus is strengthening, as discussed above (Wilson & Barton, 2016), and is indicative of the wider unsuitability of the PRS for housing families: “greater involvement of the private sector will only serve to

increase the likelihood of homelessness recurring” (Bevan, 2014: 974). The women themselves were only too well aware that the PRS was a poor substitute for social housing.

“I used to live with my sister, so it was always private landlord. But when you have kids you don't want to live in private sector. That's what I was telling Naomi. I know she wants to move out of there [Boundary House], but then to go back into another private sector in a year or two's time when the landlord wants back his property, you have to be coming back to the council again. That's wrong! Why you going to put someone in private sector? He's [housing official] trying to shift all them to private sector. What about giving them a council property?” (Jade)

Being pressurised into the PRS by housing officials was a common theme. This reflects neoliberal governmentality logics whereby market housing is portrayed as the aspirational ‘norm’. This normalisation of market housing was spurred via the Localism Act 2011 whereby councils can discharge their homeless obligations into the PRS (Bevan, 2014). The notion that the market is the only acceptable housing provider in town has bitten deeply into how expectations are framed in austerity East London, as this extract from a council letter indicates.^{iv}

“Boundary House is offered as temporary accommodation. The intention is that residents will move into private sector accommodation when properties become available. [...] All residents are free to find their own accommodation and we will support them if they find a suitable and affordable property, by speaking to landlords and securing a deposit on their behalf if necessary”.

Homeless mothers, under conditions of austerity, are therefore being reprogrammed into seeing themselves as the ‘undeserving poor’ who are unworthy of social rental housing (Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016; Vickery, 2012). This situation differs from earlier periods when most homeless women could still realistically expect to access social housing, albeit far from easily, even in London (Malos & Hague, 1997; Watson & Austerberry, 1986; Watt, 2001).

'Race' and safety in suburbia

'Race relations' have notably improved in East London since the 1970s when it was a centre of far right political activity, such that 21st century "Newham's super-diversity creates a distinctive environment for community cohesion" (Harriss, 2006: 28; LSE Housing and Communities, 2014). What therefore are the racialised impacts of the women being displaced from the relatively safe space of multi-ethnic East London into the whiter, suburban outer London boroughs and the ROSE (Millington, 2011; Watt et al., 2014)? This issue only emerged during two interviews, but is nevertheless not insignificant for the women so concerned. After living at Boundary House for nearly two years, Jade (Black British, 2016) and her children were rehoused to TA in an outer London borough which is far less ethnically diverse than either Waltham Forest or Newham, and has also witnessed a recent surge in racist and religious hate crimes. Jade herself received racist abuse.

"It's horrible because I get a lot of abuse round there ... loads of people shout at me, I get junkie people knocking on my door shouting at me at night and my kids and stuff like that. And I'm like the only black person that lives around there, so you get a lot of people and they watch me a lot as well".

When Jade reported the above, she described the local authority's response: "if you can't live there, just go private". Amran had a similar less than sympathetic official response following her visit to see TA property near Basildon in Essex, 30 miles from London.

"When I was there, I was racially abused by a lot of people. On the bus [from Basildon], there were a few parents with their children moving their children away from me and the kids were making comments like, 'black person' and the whole area is unaware that there are basically people that exist that are not white to be honest, that there are people out there who are not the same. And then when I got off the bus, I was kinda lost in the area and a bunch of kids standing about, screaming out, the N word and telling me to F' off and calling me names, 'you animal, look at you', making pig noises and stuff like that. I went to view the property, the property was nice, any place right now would be nice house-wise, but not exactly in that area because I don't feel safe and because it brought back memories from when I was

younger. When I first moved into [East London], the area wasn't exactly multicultural at the time and I went through a lot of bullying when I was younger".

Amran was visibly Muslim; she wore a headscarf and as such was a potential target for Islamophobia. Her fears and anxieties are not unfounded. Compared to present-day multi-ethnic East London where Amran felt at home, Basildon has a large number of UKIP voters and was recently a British National Party stronghold (UK Polling Report, 2016). Despite relating her experiences to housing officials, Amran said they insisted that she *had* to take the Basildon property:

"I said it's not exactly [suitable] ... especially in the month of Ramadan, that we're all fasting, I need to be close to my family, I need to be close to mosques and to practise my religion, and they [officials] said that the accommodation they'd offered is reasonable and if you don't want to take it, you're going to be made to be homeless".

Amran rejected the Basildon offer and at the time of the interview was nervously awaiting a decision regarding her rehousing.

Conclusion

The post Olympics' legacy has largely failed to address the manifold housing needs of East London's low-income population (Bernstock, 2014; Thompson et al., 2017; Watt & Bernstock, 2017). Material housing conditions, such as overcrowding, have even got worse, while at the same time expensive luxury apartments are proliferating for affluent incomers. The lone parents in this study cannot afford the accelerating private rents or house prices in post Olympics' East London and understandably prefer to access the diminishing pool of social rental housing which is still relatively secure and affordable. Their capacity to do so has, however, been reduced as a result of welfare cuts and restructuring – austerity urbanism with a gendered slant. Through normalising market housing, failing to maximise new social housing provision, depleting council estates, cutting waiting lists and prioritising those in paid employment, Newham and Waltham Forest councils have de facto contributed towards the mothers' reduced capacity to realistically access social housing.

We have seen above how the women's right to the city has been eroded along gendered lines of safety, everyday mobility and being less able to access the city's resources. They have been cut-adrift from the multiple constituent dimensions of the right to the city, all of which hold special significance for female lone parents with caring responsibilities – from a safe and secure domestic space, from their support networks and from familiar urban neighbourhoods. They also felt abandoned by public housing agencies whose rationale under austerity urbanism has shifted away from welfare support to the punitive sorting of the deserving from the undeserving poor.

While moving to suburban outer London and the ROSE is typically regarded as the geographical expression of an upwardly mobile, aspirational lifestyle (Watt et al., 2014), such a spatial trajectory has very different connotations for those who – like the working-class lone parents in this study – lack the requisite income and private transport resources to facilitate a suburban, middle-class lifestyle. Instead, the lone parents experienced suburbia as entrapment in an unfamiliar, inhospitable place, and one which is moreover potentially unsafe, especially for those from BME backgrounds. This loss of physical presence and centrality is key to how the right to the city is gendered as well as classed; a loss which deeply affects working-class lone parents. Instead of a right to the city, the women's homelessness experiences involve a dystopian 'un-merry-go-round' of enforced mobility, insecurity and anxiety. Their experiences are not so much of a straightforward linear displacement process – a one-off shift from one place to another (Slater, 2009) – but instead involve enforced, semi-permanent residential mobility amounting to a nomadic state of homelessness.

The qualitative research findings reported here are not of course statistically representative. Nevertheless, it is striking that recent research by Hardy & Gillespie (2016) based on a much larger sample of the homeless in Newham (two-thirds of whom are female) has produced very similar findings to the ones reported here in relation to chronic insecurity, negative health effects and out-of-borough placements. Nearly three-fifths of their 67 respondents had either been offered housing outside the borough or told to look for it themselves,

suggesting that “out of borough offers are now systemic in Newham” (Hardy & Gillespie, 2016: 8; see also Newham Recorder, 2016b).

Homelessness and systemic relocation are not *monopolised* by female lone parents. Nevertheless, what has happened in post Olympics’ East London under austerity urbanism is a *re-shuffling* of shrinking social housing resources towards the deserving poor – notably ‘respectable’ workers – a re-shuffling which marginalises poor, female lone parents as well as unemployed single men. The displacement of the former outside their boroughs of origin and even beyond the city limits represents an important part of the austerity-based erosion of BME and white working-class Londoners’ right to the city. This erosion has prompted an emergence of housing campaigns, notably Focus E15 which formed around a group of young lone mothers who were threatened with eviction from a TA unit in Stratford (Watt, 2016). Instead of dutifully accepting their allotted neoliberal subjectivities as ‘underserving poor’, the mothers and their supporters mounted a high-profile ‘social housing not social cleansing’ campaign which resulted in the mothers being successfully re-housed in East London near their support networks. In summer 2016, women from Boundary House protested at East London housing offices alongside Focus E15 campaigners (Focus E15, 2016), suggesting that gender and class solidarities are being activated by women in their struggles to reclaim collective rights to the city.

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Notes

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

ⁱⁱ One interviewee was married, but for complex reasons her husband did not always live with her.

ⁱⁱⁱ Each interviewee is identified at the first quotation by a pseudonym, their ethnic identity and year of interview.

^{iv} Several interviewees shared their official correspondence with me.