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Governing homeless mothers: the unmaking of home and family

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Governing homeless mothers: the unmaking of home and family

Emma Bimpson, Sadie Parr, Kesia Reeve

Abstract

The home is a central place where women's identity as 'mother' is socially constructed and negotiated. Social policy is inexorably implicated in (re)producing these dominant visions of mothers, mothering, home-making and home. Yet, we know very little about how these same social policies are also implicated in women's loss of home. The article begins to address this evidence-gap. It draws on biographical research with homeless women to explore the ways in which key governing frameworks (associated with child protection processes, housing allocation policy and temporary accommodation provision in England) interact with women's status as mother, to shape the spaces they inhabit as home or not-home, materially and emotionally. We present data that illustrates how women's capacity to retain, make or rebuild a family home in times of crisis is significantly hampered by the policies and procedures they encounter in housing and social welfare systems.

Keywords: Homelessness, gender, maternal identity, social policy, governance, child protection.

Introduction

This special issue calls for attention to the possibilities for home-making without a home and the collection of papers included provide examples of agency and action in a context of homelessness. Our paper offers an alternative yet complementary perspective that draws attention to the ways in which the agency of homeless people to make home can be significantly curtailed by virtue of their circumstances. In order to explore how home-making can feel unattainable for homeless people, we draw on in-depth qualitative data generated through interviews with 26 homeless mothers, many of whom were living without their children.

At the outset, the research on which this paper is based was interested in how women maintain 'home' and family whilst enduring the extreme adversity of homelessness. Our interest was underpinned by a conceptualisation of home, and by extension 'home-lessness', that sees 'home' as framed by normative assumptions, expectations and cultural images about gender roles. Gendered experiences, positions, and inequities mean that women have a distinctive relationship with domestic space. They are fixed therein partly because they are (in actuality), and are conceived as (in cultural imagery) the carer or family-maker (Lofstrand and Quilgars 2016; O'Sullivan 2016; Casey *et al* 2008*;* Watson and Austerberry, 1986; Darke, 1991; Skeggs, 1997*).* For women who are mothers, then, the (private) space of 'home' becomes the primary site where 'mothering' is located and performed*.* The loss of home is therefore likely to have profound implications for 'home-making', family-making, and women's identity as 'mother'. A broad 'separate spheres' conceptualisation of home has been criticised as over simplistic (Freymond 2003; Mallet, 2004) and recent scholarship highlighting the relational nature of home amongst women also implicitly reminds us that we

should not unambiguously equate the spaces of 'domestic' and 'paid' labour with 'within' and 'without' the material 'home/house' (Alam *et al,* 2020*)*. Never the less, an intrinsic connection between the categories of 'woman', 'family' and 'home' persist, highlighting the inherently gendered nature of 'home'.[1] As our research progressed, however, it became clear that daily practices of home-making were not a part of participants' narratives. Rather, the loss of home and the systemic and structural forces that bore down on these women, preventing them from obtaining a home where they could conduct family life, predominated. For many, the absence of a space where maternal identity was acknowledged and/or where mothering could be performed mitigated against home-making. Our qualitative, exploratory approach (see below) allowed us to follow these narratives and so our research shifted away from the agency women have to make home and the micro-dynamics of family practices, to the barriers they face in doing so.

Therefore, in this paper we articulate and theorise the constraints to making home in the lives of homeless mothers. We do this with a focus on the ways in which key governing frameworks within the social welfare landscape position women as mother or, conversely, fail to do so, in ways that undermine the potential for home-making. This analytical focus represents an embryonic area of research within the housing studies literature. In part, this reflects a wider neglect of women's homelessness (Reeve, 2018), although a number of scholars have made important efforts to examine different dimensions of homelessness through a gender-sensitive lens (Bretherton, 2020; Bretherton and Pleace, 2018; Mayock et al. 2015; Casey *et al* 2008). Among other things, this has included statistical analysis of the prevalence and causes of homelessness among families headed by single parent women but also critical reflection on official measures and the sites of homelessness research, that reinforce the invisibility of women's homelessness (Pleace et al. 2008; Fitzpatrick 2005; Baptista et al. 2017; Baptista, 2010; Mayock and Bretherton 2016). Scholars have also demonstrated how gendered assumptions influence social policy and service provision in ways that construct and constrain women who become homeless (Lofstrand and Quilgars 2016; Watson and Austerberry, 1986; Darke, 1991).

Although offering a gendered understanding, this body of work on women's homelessness has hitherto rarely engaged with homeless women as *mothers.* There are notable exceptions to this, with a minority of housing academics (most from outside the UK) paying direct attention to how being a mother impacts of women's homelessness experiences. This research indicates that chronic psychological suffering is an ongoing reality for homeless mothers living apart from their children, with the stigma of 'spoilt' motherhood ever-present. Linked to this, mothering identity serves as a key factor driving mobility patterns through women's homeless journeys (Savage, 2016; Mayock et al, 2015; Dotson, 2011; Barrow and Laborde, 2008).

Additional insights can be gleaned from studies in the fields of child development, health and social care, and psychology (many conducted in the US). This research demonstrates how homelessness damages mothers' wellbeing and mental health, with a detrimental impact on their ability to do 'positive parenting' (Bradley et al, 2018; Hardy and Gillespie, 2016;

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[1] Partly in an effort to account for differential experiences within the material 'home' (house), the evolving debate within housing studies has come to emphasise the imaginative, psychological and emotional aspects of home and home-making (Blunt & Bonnerjee, 2013; Cresswell, 2004; Easthope, 2004, Gurney, 2000; McCarthy 2018; Somerville 1992)

Hausman and Hammen, 1993). Research has similarly drawn attention to how living in temporary accommodation prevents parents (usually mothers) from maintaining or developing family routines and rituals, or providing children with a safe place in which they can play and develop (Hogg et al, 2015; Shelter, 2016, 2015). Conversely, studies have also highlighted the ways in which positive aspects of parenting and adaptive behaviours have been triggered by homelessness (Bradley et al, 2018; Lindsey, 1998).

Our paper builds on these bodies of research with a focus on homeless mothers' experiences within the English housing context. It is unique in its concern with the diverse ways in which macro and micro-level governing structures, associated with child protection processes, housing allocation policy and temporary accommodation systems, operate through and on women's status as mother. These structural forces cast a long shadow in the lives of women, fundamentally shaping their home-making capabilities.

In the first part of the article we bring together the work of key academics who have been researching and affording insights on the social policy context of the last 20 years within the UK and other post-industrial capitalist nations. This work exposes the ways in which governing frameworks impact on families facing adversity and marginalised women in highly gendered ways (Davies and Krane 2006; De Bendictis, 2012; Gillies et al, 2017; Healy, 2019; Lister 2006; Morris and Featherstone, 2010; Povey, 2017). We then provide details of the research study and the methodology that informed it, before presenting salient themes from our analysis of women's understandings of their homelessness experiences. In so doing, we illustrate how structural and institutional mechanisms commonly position homeless women as either 'failed' mothers or 'non-mothers', and how making 'home' in these circumstances is virtually impossible.

Our article makes an important contribution to current knowledge and understanding on homelessness in three keys ways. Firstly, we provide original empirical understanding on women's inability to make home by virtue of the governing frameworks that constrain their agency. Secondly, in so doing, we offer an important contribution to efforts within housing studies to further gendered understandings of homelessness. Thirdly, we present a new inter-disciplinary perspective which situates an emerging research agenda on homeless mothers within pertinent theoretical and empirical understanding from the fields of housing, sociology and critical social policy.

Governing of and through mothers

Motherhood rarely comes to the fore in the specific context of homelessness research and there have been limited attempts to set the experiences of homeless women within wider critical social policy analysis. Yet, social policy is inexorably implicated in (re)producing dominant visions of mothers, mothering and home. This has created a policy landscape underpinned by binary understandings of mothers as either containers or producers of 'risk', including within the child protection system, welfare policy, criminal justice and, we would argue, housing and homelessness policy (Arthur, 2014; Jupp, 2017; Murray and Barnes, 2010). In this section, we turn our attention to work which explores the ways in which social policies impact on families and women facing adversity in highly gendered ways. Within this work, the housing circumstances of women are usually of peripheral interest, but the women subjects of research in this field are commonly the same women who find themselves

homeless. Bringing this understanding of how motherhood is embedded within social policy into housing studies does, we suggest, help to gender homelessness scholarship.

Krane has coined the term 'mother-protector' to describe the dominant construction of motherhood in social policy that firmly establishes the mother as wholly responsible for the protection of children (Krane 2003; Davies and Krane 2006) within post-industrial capitalist societies. Johnston and Swanson (2006) similarly note the pervasiveness of what Hay, in her seminal work on the ideology of motherhood, describes with similar connotations as 'intensive mothering' (Hay, 1996). More recently, specifically in the UK context, Gillies et al (2017) have pointed to a confluence of intensive parenting, attachment theory and neuroscience embedded within social policy that valorises certain types of mothers. This has led to intense scrutiny of poor women's mothering capabilities, constructing them as either responsible or morally deficient (Gillies et al, 2017; Lister, 2006; Skeggs, 2005). In turn, the home stops being a private, domestic space, and becomes a place where 'deficient' mothers are regulated by the state (Crossley, 2018, 2017; Skeggs, 1997).

This policy direction and underpinning logic has given rise to a complex and politicised relationship between poverty, (inadequate) mothering and child welfare policy (Dermott, 2012; Featherstone et al, 2019; Freymond, 2003; Gillies et al, 2017; Walsh and Douglas, 2009). This is manifest in many different ways, including class-based assessments of mothers' problems and capabilities within child welfare policy and practice. In the UK, austerity-driven cuts have entrenched poverty and limited the ability of parents to provide adequate food and shelter. Yet, explicit signifiers of 'risk' and 'neglect' are synonymous with signifiers of poverty such that what may be labelled as abusive, in which mothers are held culpable, may in fact reflect lack of income. Sparse food cupboards and inadequate seasonal clothing are two examples (Healy, 2019; Swift and Parada, 2004. cf. Gupta *et al,* 2016; Walsh and Douglas, 2009). Other harms such as substance abuse, mental health and domestic abuse are also conflated with 'conscious intentionality' within child protection policy (Bywaters et al. 2018). Framed by this dominant ideology of motherhood, behaviours with the potential to undermine caring capacity (drug or alcohol use, for example) are framed only in terms of maternal responsibility rather than deprivation, trauma or support needs.

The cultural characterization of the 'mother-protector' is so pervasive that mothers are held accountable for the actions of others who maltreat. This is seen most clearly where mothers are held responsible for the child-harming actions of abusive men, for example in situations where children are witnessing domestic violence. The male perpetrator is not blamed for harming the children by abusing their mother. Rather the mother is blamed for 'allowing' children to witness her abuse, or for introducing the abuser into their home (Featherstone, 2016; Scourfield, 2001; Hester, 2011). As Davies and Krane note, '…the protection of children from various forms of maltreatment more often than not falls on the shoulders of the mothers, regardless of the gender of the perpetrator (2006:414). In other words, vulnerability can be conflated with transgression (Brown, 2014). Mother-blame is the consequence of this process of evaluation (Davies and Krane, 2006) and paves the way for state reinforcement of the dominant ideology though the punitive regulation of women (i.e. child protection proceedings) (Maher, 1992).

Broadhurst and Mason (2017) have brought attention to the way in which mothers who have had successive children permanently removed from their care are subject to extreme punitive regulation. These women are marginalised by social policy and remain largely

'hidden', yet they bear the stigma of spoiled motherhood (Morriss, 2018). They are 'maternal outcasts'. Such responses to child welfare deny the current and future caring capacities of parents (Morriss, 2018) and, drawing on Bourdieu, Healy (2019) conceptualises this failure of the state as a problem of 'recognition'. For Povey, (2017: 272) this gives rise to an 'adversarial dynamic in parent–state relationships'. The lack of attention to mothers and their needs within the child protection system is just one example of what Broadhurst and Mason (2017) call the multiple formal and informal 'collateral consequences' of child removal (and in turn their ripple effects) that state intervention triggers. This includes *additional* 'welfare penalties' such as the loss of housing rights, as well as social and legal stigmatisation.

Whilst not wishing to undermine the importance of attention to risks as a means to safeguard children, it is the way that signifiers of risk interact with the lives of the most disadvantaged people that has been critiqued. For Dermott (2012), this is a failure to disaggregate parenting and poverty. The Inverse Intervention law highlights how families living in the most deprived local authorities are least likely to receive the care and protection that might prevent child protection proceedings (Bywaters et al. 2015). Walsh and Douglas (2009) implore, therefore, that there is a need to distinguish poverty-related neglect from abuse. In response, recent scholarship has brought an inequalities perspective to bear in an effort to shift debate from the individual (invariably the behaviour of the mother) to societal context (Featherstone *et al* 2019; Gillies et al, 2017; Bywaters *et al,* 2019; Bywaters *et al* 2015). Of particular relevance to this paper, it is argued that such a perspective can *'assess how the struggle to provide food, shelter, and warmth in the face of extreme disadvantage may undermine parenting, family relationships, and child development' (*Bywaters *et al,* 2019, p2). A simple reframing of 'variations' in intervention rates between populations as 'inequities' immediately changes the terms of the debate. It paves the way for questions about society's role in child welfare, implicitly chipping away at pejorative constructions of poor mothering.

In the remainder of the paper, we show how housing and social welfare provision - from the broad policy and legislative frameworks through to the minutiae of rules in temporary housing - shape the maternal and domestic circumstances of homeless women, perversely undermining their capacity to secure and make home, and to be the 'good mother' they are required to be.

Methods

The interview data drawn on in this paper is derived from university-funded research[2] which sought to understand the experiences of homeless women in relation to the impact of homelessness on family life. This paper focuses on the accounts of the 26 women who were mothers at the time of the research (32 women were interviewed in total for the study). The youngest was 17 and the oldest in their mid- 50's. The majority of participants were White British. The research was approved by Sheffield Hallam University's ethics committee. Interviews were fully transcribed and manually coded, based on emerging themes and the overarching research questions that arose from discussions with key stakeholders and literature reviews in the early phase of the study.

Participants were mothers of between one and six children and lived in towns and cities in the midlands and north of England. At the time of interview, 18 were living apart from at least one of their children, although most had been full-time carers of children shortly before, or at the time they became homeless. Some women's children had been adopted or placed into

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[2] It was jointly funded by Sheffield Hallam University and the Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence

foster care, and just under half were in kinship care. Nine were living with at least one of their children. All research participants were homeless at the time of their interview, with most living in temporary accommodation (including refuges, hostels and supported housing), some staying with friends or family, and one sleeping rough. However, some women had previously lived in other homelessness situations - for example eight had previously slept rough - and so the experiences they recounted were not restricted to their current living arrangements.

Participants were recruited through organisations that provide refuge and other temporary accommodation for homeless people, as well as women's support services. Trusted workers were asked to share information sheets with their clients, providing an overview of the research and inviting participation. Ongoing informed consent was afforded particular consideration due to the sensitive nature of the research subject. In order to mitigate potential risks to the well-being of the women involved, women were advised at the start of and during each interview that they could stop the interview at any time or move on to a subject that was easier to discuss.

The interviews explored very sensitive topics and we were aware that they might evoke difficult memories and emotions for participants. Therefore, the research necessitated a flexible method that would make space for those stories to emerge, but which allowed participants control over the sharing of their narratives. A focus on personal histories gave space for participants to prioritise the experiences that they viewed as most important and enabled the researchers to break with some of the negative encounters of professionals, in which they must re-tell their stories (Bretherton et al. 2013). And the interviews did reveal difficult memories and emotions. In fact, women's histories were characterised by extreme trauma, not least from experiencing shocking physical and emotional abuse in their homes and separation from children. Poverty was also a defining feature of their stories. Substance abuse and mental ill health problems, intrinsically bound up with their experience of homelessness, domestic abuse and/or separation from children were also commonplace.

Our ethical responsibility as researchers in this project was, therefore, complex. There was a fine balance between allowing women to recount their experiences while making sure they were not re-traumatised. Researchers made ongoing careful judgements that erred on the side of caution about whether to continue an interview (for example when discussing the loss of her children, one woman became distressed and the interview was brought to a close) and about how far to probe issues most relevant to the research questions. As noted in the introduction to this paper, we had intended the research to explore the micro-dynamics of home and family-making but discussion in interviews rarely settled on the daily practices of home life. We were aware that the idea of 'home' or home-making may be inherently distressing for our participants. In this context, actively pursuing discussion about the micro-dynamics of home-making during interviews felt inappropriate and unethical, given the overwhelming salience of other issues in the lives of women and their foregrounding of these challenges. Analytically, it therefore remains unclear how far this represents a conclusion from our research, and how far it is a product of cautious ethical research practice that has failed to make latent, but potentially important issues manifest. Research of this kind would benefit from an informed and consistent approach to distress appraisal in research on highly sensitive subjects. 'Trauma-informed' practice in research presents a significant opportunity for ethical and methodological development.

Governing Homeless Mothers: undermining home-making

There were significant structural and systemic factors associated with accessing housing that all the women interviewed faced and that were directly associated with their identity as mothers. In this section we examine the governing practices that worked to constrain or facilitate their ability to obtain and maintain a 'family' home when faced with homelessness.

Safeguarding children; blaming mothers

For 23 out of 26 women interviewed, domestic violence was the clear trigger for homelessness. In these cases, women's former family 'home' did not encompass the conventional idealised qualities associated with safety, care and refuge which commonly render a space 'home'. Rather, theirs were violent houses associated with extreme adversity. As emphasised by feminist and other scholars with an interest in women's experience of home (e.g. Gurney, 2020; Mayock *et al* 2016; McCarthy, 2018; Smith, 2005; Wardaugh 1999) this fact reinforces the importance of a conceptualisation of 'home' that accounts for gender differentials.

A number of women had escaped their former home in a bid to find safer accommodation for themselves and their children, but domestic violence had triggered the involvement of children's social care and the eventual removal of children. This led women to describe a pervasive mother-blaming tendency within child welfare services. They reflected on children's social care policies and professionals that positioned them as vulnerable (to harm) but also culpable for not preventing harm (to their children), with direct consequences for the maintenance of family and home. It seemed, for instance, that the importance of housing to women's capacity to care for their children in the context of domestic violence was rarely recognised. Kelly's daughter, for example, was removed at birth to avoid her being taken home to a situation of domestic violence. Kelly described a feeling of powerlessness to do anything other than return to the home she shared with her violent partner following the birth:

> He wouldn't leave my house that I'm in. I couldn't [wasn't allowed to] bring my little girl to that house cos he wouldn't leave, so there was nowhere else for me and my little girl to go to so they had to take my little girl and I had to go back to there which were absolute arse ache (Kelly)

What is interesting here is that Kelly clearly articulates her reasons for returning to her violent partner as housing-related - *there was nowhere else for me and my little girl to go*. Reflecting Healy's (2019) work on misrecognition within the child protection system, in the narratives of women under threat of having children forcibly removed, it seems their actions were 'misrecognised' as neglectful or abusive parenting ('choosing' to remain with a violent partner rather than prioritising the wellbeing of their children) rather than as housing need. As a consequence, these women invariably experienced social work/ers as punitive and felt they were being held responsible:

> …you feel like nobody's helping you and it's like it's your fault because you're not keeping your kids safe, but how can you keep your kids safe if you can't even keep yourself safe from a situation like that? That's what me family support workers said to me, when they go to court to take your kids and stuff, they don't really care about the whole situation, it's just so black and white, they see it as you're putting your kids at harm, in danger, so they blame you for it (Sandra).

The women's own narratives of motherhood were presented as at odds with those of children's social care and as one of powerlessness and doing their best within bleak circumstances:

> I did everything legally that I was supposed to do as a parent but cos they couldn't protect me [from violent ex-partner], I then had to leave, why? 'Cos if not we'll look at taking your kids.' 'What cos I can't look after them?' 'No, because you can't stop him from coming to you'. (Nadine)

The work of Featherstone *et al* (2018) is useful here. They note the way in which a 'need for help' has been converted into 'evidence of risk' in child protection policy and argue for a social model of child protection that recognises the social determinants of harm (environmental, economic and cultural barriers to caring safely for children). As with Nadine, the conversion from 'needing help' to 'perpetrating risk' is readily apparent in Nicola's account, whose children were fostered and then adopted because they were exposed to domestic violence in the home.

> It was emotional abuse they [social services] said it was, because apparently I were letting them [children] see me getting beat up all the time (Nicola)

This chimes with the findings of other studies, where women are found to have been held accountable for child 'abuse' on the grounds of having 'allowed' children to bear witness to violence perpetrated against them (Scourfield, 2001 Lapierre, 2008). In the UK, the definition of 'harm' was expanded in the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to encompass harm that arises from witnessing ill-treatment of others, resulting in increasing numbers of children being taken into care on the grounds of 'emotional abuse' (Hester, 2011). Although apparently not a recent phenomenon (Scourfield's UK study predated the change) this is an example of the way in which apparently gender neutral legislative frameworks are invested with the 'mother-protector' ideology of motherhood. This legal change results in Nicola, not her partner, being cast as the 'abusive' parent, and implicitly made responsible for the effects of domestic violence ('*I were letting them…').*

Many of the women interviewed consequently felt punished twice; once at the hands of their violent partner and then at the hands of 'the system' they felt had failed them: *I got punished twice, I got battered and my kids took off me (Marianne).* Their accounts were therefore infused with anger as they articulated the injustice of the circumstances that led to their loss of home and children. Now in a refuge where Nicola sees mothers and children, she questioned why she was not offered safe accommodation with her children.

> *"…they could have done that sooner for me, they could have moved me here with the kids and I would have had them still."*

Like Kelly (above) it is noteworthy that Nicola is describing her needs ('neglect' or 'risk') in *housing* terms (poverty or financial deprivation), suggesting that breaking her housing dependence would have prevented the need for her children to be removed. This illustrates Douglas and Walsh's (2009) observation that housing is often overlooked in child protection cases as well as demonstrating the need to distinguish abuse from poverty-related neglect and challenge the child-centred orthodoxy in children's services (Featherstone, et al 2014; Gillies et al, 2017). In these accounts we see how pervasive ideologies of motherhood infuse social care policies to work against women's efforts to maintain a safe family home.

Housing and children's social care: Conflicting welfare policies

In the accounts of the women interviewed we identified an inherent conflict between the interests of social services on the one hand, and the delivery of housing policy on the other, that undermined mothers' capacity to parent and make-home in ways that complied with social and professional expectations.

Once homeless, those separated from their children were classed as 'single' by local authority housing departments; women are generally defined as a 'family', and as having an associated right to family housing by local authorities in England if they have *dependent* (i.e. living with them) children.[3] Once defined as a 'single' person, the women interviewed were not automatically awarded priority need for housing and were only considered for housing suitable for a single person.

Many of the women interviewed for this study described how the removal of entitlement to family housing then led to permanent separation from their children. What we see here, then, is a scenario (separation from children) initially prompted by questions of maternal capability (often related to domestic violence) but perversely perpetuated by housing policy. The women were therefore left to negotiate a statutory system that does not appreciate the social and structural roots of their troubles and to do so without the resources to meet the demands of housing or child welfare professionals (Gillies, et al, 2017). This is illustrated well in Emma's account.

Emma's children were temporarily placed with her sister just before she became homeless because of rent arrears. Emma's impending homelessness was cause for concern in relation to her capacity to care, but she had also begun drinking more heavily when she realised the extent of her rent arrears and likelihood of eviction. A brief period of separation was suggested by social workers to allow Emma time to resolve her housing and alcohol problem. Now living in a hostel, having addressed her alcohol issues, she describes a situation where her in-access to suitable accommodation reinforced the separation between her and her children:

> I'm only entitled to a one bedroomed flat, so I'm going to have to convince a court to allow me to sleep on a sofa in the living room and use the bedroom for the girls, and you're already then running into problems…how can the children come back to be housed with me if I can't have a big enough house and they won't give you anywhere until the children are back, it's catch 22 (Emma)

Like Emma, Rosaline expressed deep frustration about how she might reunite with her children, allowing her to rebuild a home if all she could secure was a 1-bedroom property:

> Also one of the stipulations of maybe getting my children back is that I'd have a three bedroom house but being here as a single person you only got offered a one bedroom flat so it leaves me in a position where how am I supposed to do that? I'm not in a position to go to work because I'm really, really depressed. (Rosaline)

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[3] There is scope within the terms of the Housing Act 1996 and the 2006 Homelessness Code of Guidance to define women temporarily separated from their children as a 'family', if children are found to be 'reasonably expected to reside' with their mother but have been separated only because of a lack of suitable housing. However, local authority housing departments had not investigated these circumstances for any of the women we interviewed.

Where child protection policy had categorised these women as 'neglectful mothers' rather than 'women in need', housing policy then misrecognised them as 'single homeless women' rather than 'homeless mothers' and defined their housing needs accordingly. These women described how maternal status had not only been removed through child protection proceedings, but through housing policy. They had lost the key frameworks of 'home' and 'family' used societally to define their maternal status and self-identity. Emma illustrates this point powerfully:

> But living without them, I don't know how to 'be', cos I was just a mum, I've always just been a mum, I never had a career or anything, I was a stay at home carer and mum (Emma)

The concept of 'intentionality' in English homelessness legislation enacted further ideological, maternal and practical injury on the women in this study in ways that undermined their capacity to make home and family. People who are homeless and in priority need are only statutorily entitled to housing if they have not made themselves homeless intentionally. A number of women in this study described how, when approaching their local authority housing team, they were told that they had made themselves intentionally homeless. Often this was because women carried the burden of debt on the home left by violent partners. In some cases escalating problems of debt, mental health and substance abuse that led to or followed child removal had resulted in eviction. The women had not only been subjected to violence and/or child removal and then to eviction and homelessness, but faced further repercussions, or in (Broadhurst and Mason, 2017)) terminology a 'welfare penalty', through denial of access to permanent housing by local housing authorities:

> Yeah so they said they couldn't help me with the house cos I had to pay this debt off but I shouldn't have even had the debt (Nicola)

> I agreed to do a payment plan with [local housing office] for £35 a month but they're still bypassing me on housing so at the minute I don't know what's going on, I don't know when I'm going to get housed or if they want it paid back full before I do, but they can't expect me to pay £600 upfront (Charlie)

By rationing housing in this way, the dependency of women on unsafe or unsuitable housing situations - for which they are ultimately held accountable - is reinforced. These accounts highlight a systemic issue with the ways that local authority housing services respond to women and mothers, and reflect the findings of a recent All Party Parliamentary Group on Ending Homelessness report into homelessness and domestic abuse (Crisis, 2019).[4]

Through the concept of 'intentionality' we also see the narrative of culpability that women encountered in children's social care policy reflected in homelessness policy. Just as women had been held accountable - through the concept of 'emotional abuse' - for the actions of violent men, so homelessness policy did the same by attributing intentionality to mothers for circumstances often created by others, such as rent arrears accrued by partners, or debts on the home levied for damage caused by their violence.

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[4] While the forthcoming Domestic Abuse Bill will prevent local authorities from using the vulnerability test to withhold priority need status from women who are homeless and experiencing domestic violence, intentionality criteria may still be applied.

Governing conduct in temporary accommodation

Policies designed to keep women and children safe from violence hindered their efforts to occupy spaces and places that make home and family (Warrington, 2003). It is the norm, for example, for a woman escaping violence to be the one who leaves the family home and moves to another area for her safety. In turn, and with benevolent intent, safeguarding processes and child protection plans then prevent women from returning to the areas in which they lived. Indeed, one woman interviewed had been told she risked losing the child that remained in her care if she returned to her home town to visit her elder son (in informal kinship care), because she would be placing them all at risk from the perpetrator who lived locally. This prompted extreme frustration and anger from women, who had to leave 'home' and the local support networks therein. Here, 'home' was not just a physical house but the wider city.

> The [social services] don't want me back in [X city] but the way I see it is it's my home and all my family and everything's there and why should I have to leave my home town and change all my life. (Harriet)

Women living with their children reported feelings of isolation from family and community support networks, while women who became separated from their children during this process found it difficult to visit and maintain family connections. Participants described lengthy bus and train journeys and very limited funds to make these journeys given that they were entitled only to welfare benefits for a single person. Again, rather than receiving the material and emotional support, and care and protection they need, women risk further 'collateral consequences' (Broadhurst and Mason, 2017) should they not adequately protect their children from risk.

There are many reasons why living in temporary accommodation may not be home-like for mothers living there (discussed further below) but a welfare system that does not support familial relations felt more like a prison than a home to the women in this study. Homeless mothers felt at the mercy of a system in which the role of the police and courts in prosecuting abusive men and securing the safety of women was failing at the expense of their families.

> So we're basically on pause, this is supposed to be a clean start but we're not, we're in a prison, we didn't do anything wrong but we're the one that's trapped, we're stopped from getting on with our life, the perpetrator has got my house, got everything in the house… how much more do we need to lose? Why do they get protected and we don't? (Nadine)

While temporary housing functioned as a critical space of safety during periods of homelessness, women reported a mixture of feelings about their surroundings. Being homeless entailed loss for some women not just of home, but the ability to perform mothering 'work' and every day social and family practices that take place within and are dependent on spaces of 'home'. For example, Nadine expressed particular concern about the impact of living in a refuge on the wellbeing of her family:

> He [son] just wants to be out with mates doing whatever he needs to do, that's what he needs to be doing now. The idea was it was clean start for them to be able to be free to do that but they can't cos I can't go out and babysit him with his mates and then be with the other one. (Nadine)

Nadine's comments highlight how the temporary accommodation system, like that of CSC does not serve older children well (Healy, 2019). Harriet's older son had refused to stay at the refuge, as an unfamiliar and intimidating place and Roxanne described how she too had become separated from her older daughter, due to the cramped conditions and boredom experienced by her children at a hotel that had been offered by a local authority:

> Me daughter, she refused to stay at the hotel, so she wanted to stay with me mum and dad cos she wanted her own space and stuff (Roxanne)

Visitation rules that varied across temporary accommodation posed a particular problem. Harriet was living in a women's refuge with her baby. Living in a place where visitors were disallowed, Harriet reflected on small yet distressing ironies in her surroundings:

> I've got an eight seater table, nobody can come over and sit on that, why leave that there? - 'Look how many friends you could have to come and see you, but you're having none' (Harriet)

Women with children living elsewhere explained that, as 'non-residents', their children were classed as visitors in hostels and refuges and so subject to these rules (which varied). Sandra, who is not allowed visitors in the communal spaces, explained how vital it is to her sense of home to be able to sit in the garden with her children. The garden is therefore identified as a space where the connections and relations, the processes that support family, are made:

> It says you must have them [visitors] in your room…..it would be nice to just sit in the garden when it's sunny, kids can run around and we can have a chat like you was at home, cos this is my home at the minute (Sandra)

A different set of rules demanding constant residence in their temporary accommodation established further barriers by disallowing women to visit family. This was particularly relevant for women in refuges because they tended to live away from their families. In her interview, Hannah, for example, emphasised her distress at being separated from her mother, grandmother and sisters who lived in another city. After being told that she was not permitted to leave the refuge overnight - leaving her unable to visit her family - Hannah described feeling like she was on "lock down".

Other women interviewed in temporary housing shared their struggles with the 'house' rules (no cooking or TV after a certain time, room inspections, not visiting people in bedrooms, being allocated chores) as a loss of independence and dignity. The conditions of Iram's current accommodation, for example, require that she undertake daily 'chores', and she reported that *the second week the staff didn't even ask me if I was alright, she was more concerned about 'have you done your chore, I've not seen you cleaning'.* This was experienced as a form of infantilising women who had been primary carers of children and had managed homes, sometimes for decades. Women whose children lived with them in temporary accommodation expressed a feeling specifically of losing maternal authority. This was most apparent in relation to common rules that children must be supervised *by the mother* at all times. This denied women the maternal authority they firmly felt was theirs to decide who cared for their children, and to judge who was fit to do so. A number of women declared their age with force during interviews to emphasise their disbelief at being denied personal and maternal agency and control:

> I'm sorry, I'm 25 years old, my mum doesn't question me anything anymore, who are you to question me? (Hannah)

> I'm a 40 year old woman, this is ridiculous (Marianne)

The emphasis placed on complying with arbitrary domestic tasks as a measure of progress also manifested in other ways. Iram described the severe poverty she was experiencing, which meant using food banks and relying on family for hot meals for her daughter. After taking her daughter to her mother's for dinner, a member of staff commented that Iram needed to demonstrate her capacity to mother in independent accommodation by cooking meals herself.

> [staff] thinks I'm just a young, dumb mum, that's how I feel, how she looks at me, but I'm not dumb, I'm not stupid, I've been independent before. (Iram)

In this example we see exactly the kind of misrecognition highlighted in other research where poverty and 'bad' mothering are conflated (Swift and Prada, 2004). It is also reminiscent of the tensions and contradictions that characterise family and welfare support policies more broadly (Morris and Featherstone, 2010). On the one hand, accommodation practices seek to support women but they do so by restricting their autonomy and control to give care, and question their capacity to parent/care.

Hostels were experienced as unfamiliar 'homes' by participants not just because of the barriers, challenges and deprivations that living *within* the space of a hostels presents but because what is outside of the home is also part of the familiar and comforting places of home and family. As Nadine's comments below demonstrate, family is located not only inside the confines of a house but within wider geographies so women's attempts to maintain aspects of family life through routines and rituals were futile in the face of such profound instability and loss of the familiar:

> We're trying to put routine in place and keep it the same as what it was at home because they need it to be stable and familiar and it's not, it's about as far as you can get from it. At least at home, they're like 'where's the countryside' and it's like there is but it costs to get to it round here cos it's different, I used to get up and straight on the Yorkshire moors" (Nadine)

Other studies have similarly highlighted the discomfort, dangers and dispossession associated with living in hostels and other temporary accommodation (McCarthy 2018), and the destabilising effect of the lack of fixity on home-making (Harris *et al* 2020). Harris *et al,* for example, point to rules which emphasise temporarily within the domestic space, such as prohibited fitting of door locks and wall hangings in temporary accommodation, as producing what they refer to as home (un)making (Harris *et al* 2020). These unhomely spaces can, and for the women interviewed for our study often did, fail to provide the environments necessary to perform mothering and domestic roles that are culturally and morally ascribed, or to 'make-home'.

Conclusion

This paper reasserts the calls of feminist housing researchers that there is a pressing need to scrutinise homelessness policy and practice through a gender-sensitive lens. Likewise, within social policy studies, we suggest that scholars could better-recognise the key role that

housing policy plays in further marginalising the lives of families facing adversity. One important element of this is a theoretically informed understanding of the ways in which being a mother intersects with other individual and structural factors to shape the course of women's journeys through homelessness, including how motherhood shapes the experiences, outcomes and opportunities for family life and 'home'.

This paper is intended as a stepping off point in this endeavour; we hope to begin a necessarily inter-disciplinary debate, bringing knowledge and insight already acquired in sociological studies of social policy, with that of housing scholars. We do not suggest the findings presented here are definitive, and the study has its limitations. We recognise for instance that the voices of children, practitioners and policy makers are missing and would add another important layer of understanding. We also recognise the contribution of other scholars in housing and homelessness studies who are drawing attention to the role of gender and maternal identity in informing homelessness experiences and trajectories. Our findings draw attention to salient themes that chime with others' research and require further interrogation and explanation. Of particular relevance to this special issue was that the research data revealed far more about the impossibility, rather than the possibility, of home-making for women governed by legal, ideological and policy frameworks that undermine their maternal identity.

There are a number of specific key contributions to a future research agenda that this paper makes. First, the empirical material revealed how many of the women in our study lost their homes and their children in quick succession during periods of intense vulnerability, often including domestic violence. Their capacity to prevent these losses and to rebuild a settled family and home was then significantly hampered by the (often competing) policies and procedures they encountered in the housing and social work systems. Central to this, was the ways in which these systems failed to take adequate account of the complex circumstances within which marginalised mothers lose their home. It was often women's perceived failure to meet normative maternal expectations (provision of a safe, secure home; permanent residence with one's children) that appeared to inform policy and practice responses (e.g. intentionality in homelessness; failure to protect children from violence). For the women in our study, the concept of parental failure remained firmly at the heart of child protection processes, an ideology that served to focus attention on them and away from the violent male partners, the homelessness and the poverty that were the root source of the 'risk' posed to their children. The way in which women were positioned as 'deficient' was further consolidated within a temporary accommodation system that removed the women from the wider spaces that make home and through institutional regulations constraining their ability to perform their mothering role. In this context, women's 'journey's from violence' involved moving from one position of entrapment and control to another.

Second, our work has theoretical and conceptual significance for housing studies. In helping us to better understand the fall out for homeless mothers who are exposed to England's social governance regimes, we have utilised a conceptual scaffold that draws on key ideas and terminology within the critical literature, including that of 'maternal outcasts' (Broadhurst and Mason; Povey, 2019); (mis)recognition (Healy, 2019); 'welfare penalties' and 'collateral consequences' (Broadhurst and Mason, 2017). These perspectives are necessarily anchored, even if not explicitly so, in wider theories about how power and control are exercised and with what purpose. An avenue for future work in this field lies in explicating further the dynamic processes involved in the governance of homeless women including an

exploration of the way in which the latter is linked to wider (neoliberal) governing processes. Bourdieu's toolkit of concepts (field, capital, misrecognition) provides one way of theorising the gendered dynamics of the systems that govern women. While Skeggs seminal work on the links between gender, class and governing (which develops Bourdieu's concepts) might prove particularly instructive in helping us understand how (homeless) women are ascribed moral value.

Third, our work has policy and practice significance by furthering and informing important agendas around inequalities in child welfare. Adding further empirical weight to the work of social work and social policy scholars such as Bywater's, Featherstone and Gillies (see for example Featherstone *et al* 2019; Gillies et al, 2017; Bywaters *et al,* 2019; Bywaters *et al* 2015) our study has exposed how the adverse conditions of parenting (poverty, homelessness, domestic violence) have '*become secondary to a cultural test of successful motherhood*' (McGhee and Waterhouse, 2017 p1653), with devastating consequences for homeless mothers. Importantly, our study has inserted an appreciation of how governing frameworks in housing policy intersect with child welfare policy and practice to compound inequality and family separation. A principal observation, one that is at once so blatant, yet not fully appreciated, is the way in which homeless women's maternal identity becomes all but invisible after separation from children, and therefore the potential for mothers to be united with their children, even if not as primary caregiver, is in many ways denied by policy and legislation.

It is imperative that researchers address the current absence of empirical and conceptual understanding about this punitive policy environment and the deleterious consequences it has for mothers who, like most people, place a premium on making home and doing family. Like homelessness, injuries such as child removal or incarceration further marginalises mothers by establishing them as 'maternal outcasts' (Broadhurst and Mason, 2017; Povey, 2017). The voices of homeless mothers need to be made visible and put at the heart of this future academic debate.

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