

## **Home space, gender and activism: the visible and the invisible in austere times**

### **Abstract**

This paper argues for the centrality of the home in understanding both the impacts of 'austerity' in the UK, but also potential activist responses. The article focuses on gendered forms of activism, particularly among low income women. Empirical material is drawn from research with women in different contexts, a network of migrant women in London and a group of community activists in Stoke on Trent, in order to identify three particular registers of home-based and, by extension, community activism, including notions of 'the everyday', 'the inbetween' and experiences of trauma. There is also a brief discussion of housing activism in contemporary London in order to explore how such analysis might be applied to other forms of organising. There is a call for more sustained consideration of these often hidden forms of activism from researchers in understanding, as well as intervening in, the dynamics of contemporary social policy and governance.

**Key words:** austerity, community, everyday life, home, women

### **Introduction: Home, gender and radical politics**

In 1980, Dolores Hayden wrote an article entitled 'What would a non-sexist city be like?' In it she calls for 'a new paradigm of the home, the neighbourhood and the city' (168), which she suggests could be achieved through new housing typologies that enable the sharing of domestic and neighbourhourly duties and spaces within and across households, and across conventional divisions of labour . From the perspective of 36 years later, aspects of her propositions seem strikingly outdated, from the assumptions she makes about the (nuclear and conventional) families and households in which women might be living, to the faith in the built environment and material design to transform social relations. However, of interest here is not so much the details of her propositions, but rather her vision of forms of feminist activism and citizenship which do not reject *the home* as a site of women's oppression (although this is highlighted) but rather seeks to transform it, to use the home space as the locus and catalyst for a wider transformative politics. She calls for the establishment of small organisations called HOMES, which stand for Homemakers Organizations for a More Egalitarian Society.

This article explore the idea that the contemporary political moment, which I discuss in relation to the UK, and in relation to the notion of 'austerity', is also one in which there are potentials for wider transformative politics to emerge from the home space. This is partly because political, economic and associated policy changes in themselves entail intensified everyday struggles for many households, around food, housing and material poverty, thus meaning that domestic lives become the sites in which these changes are felt and potentially reworked (Hall, 2015). Furthermore as the UK experiences cuts to local public services, structures of community association and collective action are either coming to an end (Needham, 2014) or are being undertaken in more privatised and fragmented ways, more closely tied to domestic lives and spaces. In what follows I develop this idea, focusing on the enduringly gendered nature of domestic spaces and identities. I propose that rather than focusing on an analysis of *public and private spheres* and the lines between them, as has been a mainstay of much feminist analysis of the home (Davidoff, 2003), that a

productive line of enquiry at the current moment is to consider the lines between the *visible* and the *invisible*. This focus can both illuminate the nature of the politics at stake and suggest possibilities for powerful forms of action and activism.

In the first part of the paper literature and concepts which form the basis for further discussion are set out. These are firstly propositions around the idea of the home space as politicised and gendered. I then discuss the nature of austerity, and the idea that austerity produces a particularly gendered and home-centred set of experiences. Following this I discuss whether these experiences might include expressions of citizenship and collective action, drawing on literature on women's local organising and its relationship to domestic spheres. The next sections of the paper present material from two sets of fieldwork with different groups of low income women community activists, based in London and Stoke-on-Trent, whose practices could be seen as based on the home and domestic realm, to explore some of the common features of their forms of activism. The article finishes with reflections on emergent housing activism in contemporary London, and the extent to which this might also be understood within a similar framework.

### **The politics of home space**

As other papers in this themed section make clear, the home occupies a terrain which is both utterly everyday and banal, perhaps the primary scene of 'everyday life', but also a powerful and symbolic set of imaginings, desires and identifications, both on an individual and collective level. What might be thought of as imaginative geographies of home may or may not map onto dwelling places at different points of the life course (Mallett, 2004). Home has of course been seen as the primary scene of women's oppression within much feminist analysis. Its realisation has been seen to depend on the subordination of women's own desires and projects, and exclusion from a public realm, as well as a place potentially of fear and violence. Home as an ideal has therefore pointed to ideals of bounded, exclusionary, purified spaces and identities, particularly for women (Brickell, 2012).

However, in her famous essay, 'On House and Home' Iris Marion Young (2005) disagrees with this critical analysis to an extent and points out that home as an ideal also expresses

uniquely 'human values' of 'preservation, safety, individuation and privacy', values that have 'enormous critical political potential'. Nonetheless she also tells a more troubling narrative about home through the story of her mother, her refusal to do housework, and how she was treated by an authoritarian state welfare system and the social milieu of suburban New Jersey in the 1950s, with their untidy house leading to her mother being incarcerated for neglect. Young's essay in its form as well as its argument revolves around issues of the public and the private: one way in which the home becomes 'public' is through its imaginings in oppressive social policy and welfare governance, yet its enduringly 'private' nature also enables it to be a space of agency on some level.

As already noted therefore, the home clearly play a key role within a fundamental conceptual division within feminist analysis: between public and private spheres. Whilst the home is a site of personal and intimate identities it is also unavoidably cut-through with wider economic, social, political, cultural dynamics and relations of power, which concern gender, but also age and generation, race and ethnicity, state power and intervention, and the value of different kinds of work and care (Blunt, 2005). Much analysis has successfully made the personal 'political', or shown how politics extends into the home.

Whilst recognising the importance of this analysis, this paper begins from a different stance: of the need to extend 'the home', in all its complexity and ambivalence, into the spaces more conventionally occupied by politics (Brickell, 2012) or the public. In developing this argument, I make the case for an understanding of *visibility* and *invisibility* as a different set of boundaries at play, inflected by emergent cultural and political forms such as online media and a context where the personal might be seen to in some ways already saturate politics (Warner, 2014). Of course, a consideration of visibility and invisibility raises questions of whose viewpoints are being considered, and the issues of power and hierarchy at stake in this will be explored in the paper.

Also of relevance in this paper is the related notion of 'community'. Community has often been seen as a kind of extension of home, a collectivity of homes on a material, symbolic and political level (Valentine, 2014). Many of the same sets of conceptual dynamics discussed around the home apply to community too, of its status both as lived experience and imagined ideal, and of a gendered sphere dependent on women's labour and often

functioning as a bounded, exclusionary space (Joseph, 2002). Without rejecting these important critiques, in this paper I similarly also consider the spaces of community as potentially productive and creative (Rose, 1997), particularly as the spheres in which women's domestic experiences and subjectivities might begin to become part of arenas of more collective action and experience (Jupp 2014). Again I will explore the need to consider these spheres in particular ways in light of the current political moment, discussed in the section below.

### **Austerity and gender**

The notion of 'austerity' has been used both by politicians and critical commentators to analyse the nature of the political and economic present in the UK and other national contexts. It points to both experiences of increased economic hardship and precarity, and government measures to reduce expenditure, particularly on welfare and social policy programmes. In a useful analysis, Clarke and Newman (2012) suggest its power as a discourse, 'the alchemy of austerity', revealing its potential to reframe problems and potentially secure consent for far-reaching cuts to the welfare state. As this and other articles written soon after the Conservative-led UK coalition government came to power attest (e.g. Levitas, 2012), there was a sense that 'austerity' would become a widespread policy rationale. However, in the years since the publication of these analyses, it is evident that austerity is becoming less prominent and visible as a concept in public political discourse, and this is not because the experiences of poverty and dynamics of policy it points to have waned. Rather, perhaps, its 'magic' (Clarke and Newman, 2012) has not been powerful enough to smooth over the differentiated impacts of austerity on an increasingly unequal society nor to summon up a sense of national solidarity around this in the way evoked by its post-war incarnation (Brammall, 2013). Instead, the powerful discourse that *has* secured widespread consent has been the 'othering' within media and policy discourses of those most impacted by economic insecurity and welfare cuts (Tyler, 2013). Rather than summoning up a collective experience, the notion of 'we are all in this together', this vision individualises, fragments and separates.

Yet given the fact that experiences of austerity are actually quite widespread, and not confined to the most marginalised in society, it is worth considering other explanations for its increasing invisibility. As already noted, of particular interest here is the sense that austerity 'hits' at the level of the body, the family and domestic sphere, the household and home. Whilst cuts to services such as the NHS (Hunter 2016) and education involve collective imaginations and experiences, welfare cuts and poverty affecting everyday lives may not summon up the same kinds of collective responses. The spaces and places at stake are essentially privatised, and to wider public discourses, often invisible realms. Austerity has been responded to therefore via everyday forms of coping and 'resilience' (Hall 2015). Clayton et al (2015) interviewed those affected by austerity in their working lives in the voluntary sector in the North East of England and showed how job losses and cuts were absorbed and coped with, often at great personal cost to well-being, with strategies such as crying on the way home from work.

It is therefore also apparent that austerity 'hits' at the level of a gendered realm, where women have conventionally undertaken much of the everyday work of coping and getting by. Indeed there has been considerable analysis of the differential economic impacts of austerity measures on women (eg MacLeavy, 2011). However, of more concern here is the gendered nature of qualitative experiences of austerity. For example (Capellini et al 2014) undertook research on women and shopping in austerity, focusing on middle-class Italian women. Their research presents a picture of women as 'managers of austerity', in terms of budgeting, planning, and how food is shopped for and prepared. They identify gendered practices of thrift and sacrifice. Importantly these are not evoked as part of a collective mood, as suggested by previous versions of austerity, but rather in a privatised way that is often made deliberately invisible to those outside the household.

## **Gendered activism**

Within this situation, therefore, of everyday coping and managing austerity within privatised, domestic spheres, is it possible to imagine more politicised responses, more agentic expressions of citizenship? Whilst recognising the oppressive nature of home space for women in a range of ways, within the body of this article I consider whether particularly gendered expressions of citizenship, emanating from women's forms of home-based or community organising, might be identified and seen as important at this moment.

The question of whether gendered forms of localised citizenship can be identified is not a new one. However, with one or two exceptions (eg Howard, 2014) it could be argued that this issue has been little discussed within academia, media or policy discourses in more recent years. In exploring this literature below I draw attention to some of the reasons for this increasing invisibility of women's local organising, even as it potentially becomes more pertinent and relevant to the contemporary political and economic moment.

Much of the existing literature on women and local activism springs from an American context (see England this volume): reasons for this might include stronger traditions of 'community organising', both from an academic and practice-based perspective. These traditions in themselves could be seen as stemming from a situation both of identity-based politics, especially around racialized poverty in American cities, and also different expectations of the welfare state in providing for disadvantaged communities. However it is apparent that many of the models of welfare now being promoted within UK government policy stem from US models and approaches (McKee, 2015). It therefore seems appropriate to consider the relevance of these experiences and analysis to an analysis of UK austerity.

Indeed, more specifically, much analysis of US women's local organising is concerned with organising around public (what in the UK would be called 'social') housing, an area also of particular concern with a contemporary UK context, as discussed further below. A recent historical account of community organising around public housing in San Francisco (Howard 2014), draws attention to women's key roles in sustaining forms of community activism which have secured new rights and resources for the housing areas. At the centre of these forms of activism, Howard identifies 'affective activism', based on relationships and community building at a micro, everyday level of the home and household, consisting for example of sharing childcare arrangements and organising meals together. As discussed

elsewhere (Jupp 2012), such forms of activism are often over-looked in both academic and other commentaries, because of their low-key and apparently non-confrontational nature, consisting of embodied practices based on care, intergenerational exchange, everyday coping and support in home spaces and beyond. Nonetheless as this and other analysis (Martin et al 2007) suggests, such forms of low-key and banal local engagement can form the basis for powerful forms of collective action and transformation.

A further sense in which women's local activism has become less visible is in relation to policy and practice, the extent to which gender provides a framework for practical action and support. As also discussed elsewhere (Jupp 2014), changing structures of policy and practice can be seen to have made gendered, specifically women-focused forms of local organising increasingly invisible in recent years, perhaps paradoxically given an increased media profile for feminist organising of some kinds. Services and support for women's groups or women-centred activities have been particular victims of cuts to voluntary sector and local government funding (Vacchelli et al 2015). Just as race has been seen as effectively made invisible by policy (Craig, 2013), so too gender has often been glossed over, even in areas of social policy such as 'parenting' which have strongly gendered implications and take place within home space. This should be seen as not simply a case of gender being written out of policy but rather gendered issues and labour being taken in, or co-opted into governance regimes. For example, Newman (2012) shows how a generation of women who were working in women-focused services and campaigning moved into policy and professional roles, in the process perhaps leaving behind their explicitly gendered approaches. This dynamic is apparent in the case studies of women discussed below.

Underlying both these sets of issues is a sense of the theoretical and also empirical challenges of grappling with the category of 'women', and the dangers of 'essentialism' it suggests. Wendy Brown (2003) writes 'the identity that bore women's studies into being has dissolved yet oddly has not dissolved the field itself'. Within the terrain of urban studies, 'class' continues to often be the defining form of difference and division of power under scrutiny. In the examples already mentioned, and in the further examples that follow, class is clearly present and powerful; alongside ethnicity, age and generation,



residence, place attachment and more, and there are therefore questions to consider about where gender is placed within an understanding of identity and politics.

The issues considered above outline an increasing invisibility (from certain perspectives) around forms of local activism and gender, in relation to the nature of the activism under consideration, around the lack of explicitly gendered services and policy, and around underlying gender categories. These issues form a set of questions and issues which will be held in play rather than resolved when considering this terrain.

### **Approaching women's activism within austerity**

This section of the paper introduces case studies of two groups of low income women with whom I have recently undertaken research on community activism within contexts of austerity. Neither of them were explicitly undertaking women's organising, nor were exclusive to women, nor were explicitly based on questions of the home or housing. However both groups were focused on 'disadvantaged' neighbourhoods and localities in different ways, and had specific relationships to policy and governance in their localities. Both groups also met in domestic spaces as well as other locations.

The groups of women involved were very different, especially in relation to ethnicity, location and focus of organisations. Their responses to austerity and to their local situations were clearly not just gendered but could also be thought of as 'intersectional', relating to migration, poverty and even home life itself (see Bassel and Emejulu 2014). However rather than tracing the different axes of identity involved, I wish to show how both groups of women draw on registers of the home, and modes of women-centred organising which are illuminating. In this I am following Wendy Brown's suggestions of the need for forms of feminist analysis which 'are not programmatic, but are incitational in thought and impulse' (2003, 14). By bringing together this material I am not seeking to make assertions about all women and all forms of local activism, but rather to open up issues and questions to consider.

The first piece of research was with a group of migrant women who worked for a social enterprise in London: they were employed to undertake 'school inclusion work' with

parents in diverse London primary schools. The women came from a diverse range of backgrounds including Latin America, Turkey, Somalia, and were a range of ages. As discussed below, their work involves making social connections with newly arrived migrant families at the schools (in practice targeting mothers) and running activities within schools such as coffee mornings and craft sessions. However, as will be shown, they worked in ways that went beyond the paid inclusion work to broader forms of involvement within their 'communities' (this term was used in various ways by the women), and identified themselves as 'community activists'. This need for broader forms of involvement was felt to be becoming more acute as other support services were cut and also pressures of migration from other parts of Europe undergoing austerity (eg Spain). During 2014 I undertook a three hour discussion group with around 20 women and then subsequently undertook depth interviews with four of them. The discussion group involved making 'maps' of their communities and forms of activism, followed by a discussion of community, gender, austerity and the nature of activism. The interviews took a 'life history' approach to discussing the women's experiences of community activism and how it intersected with other aspects of their lives. Pseudonyms are used for names here.

The other group of women I discuss below involved two resident groups based on two housing estates (that I give pseudonyms of Riverlands and Southfields) in Stoke-on-Trent, UK. Both groups called themselves 'Resident Community Associations' and were originally based in ordinary houses on the estates, although the Southfields group has moved to a new purpose built community centre during the time I have been researching with them. Both groups began in order to provide a voice for local residents and to run social activities for them. Again, the groups work in a way which goes beyond their 'official' remit to undertake a wide range of community-based work, including projects and everyday activities with different age groups, representing the voices of residents at meetings and forums and putting on events and celebrations. Unlike the school inclusion workers, there were not solely women involved, however the groups were dominated by women. All women involved in these groups were volunteers. The material below comes primarily from research done in 2013 when I undertook sustained depth interviews with two residents, who were at the centre of their groups, and effectively their leaders, whom I call Sandra and Jill. During the interviews I asked them to reflect on both their life courses and policy

changes and how these had shaped their experiences of local activism. My analysis of these interviews is also shaped by previous research in the neighbourhoods (see Jupp 2008 ), which involved repeated interviews with these two women.

In the analysis that follows I draw common themes out of the two pieces of research, focusing on questions of gendered activism, governance, the home and austerity, as well as questions of the lines between the visible and the invisible.

### **Everyday activism**

As Howard (2014) argues in her analysis of ‘affective activism’ in San Francisco, it was apparent that much of the ‘work’ undertaken by the school inclusion workers was emotional, based on domestic and home-based practices and capacities, and might be invisible to the social enterprise employing them and the schools in which they were worked. Sonia, originally from Turkey, explained it like this:

Our job, first thing is you are building a friendship. Then trust between parents and us, it comes afterwards. We spend time together: weeks, months, maybe years: *then* we can push women to do something else.

For women charged with making other parents and families feel included in school life, it is striking that the ‘job’ involved was seen as both more low-key and long term (building friendships over years) but also more ambitious, in terms of enabling ‘women to do something else’, than would be officially recognised . This ‘something else’ was envisaged in terms of empowerment and self determination for women newly arrived in an unfamiliar country and context. Successful outcomes of these relationships were discussed by Sonia through the example of a woman who had gone on to be employed in a school, and by another worker, Ana, in terms of increased awareness of women’s rights and responding assertively to domestic violence and oppression.

During the workshop, the women worked collectively on descriptions of what they did to help others in their ‘communities’. The activities listed were a mix of emotional and affective labour, and practical, domestic-based tasks, for example being patient, being

friendly and kind, developing trust, getting to know people 'on their level', as well as collecting children from school, gardening, cooking, housework, socialising, chatting to neighbours, looking after pets. Ana, originally from Columbia, and Nadifa from Somalia, also spoke particularly about translation as a crucial practice undertaken to enable other women to access services and get by in London. It was mentioned that translation services had previously been provided by funded groups or organisations, and were now more likely to be provided by them on an informal basis.

Indeed to place these practices more squarely within a context of austerity, I suggest that at a time of increased economic pressure, then such everyday work is more crucial, both because of cuts to other services, and because of material pressures on home lives around basic issues such as food and shelter. In relation to the resident-activists in Stoke-on-Trent, there was a marked sense of a retreat away from the campaigning and perhaps more visible forms of 'activism' being undertaken in my earlier round of research. Sandra from Riverlands told me

The agenda used to be, for example, traffic calming, people were worried about kids getting knocked over, now it's just, there's not going to be food in their bellies. The social and economic situation of households is so bad now, we can't really address anything else.

In response to this shift in the needs of residents, the Riverlands group had begun a food distribution project working with a larger charity to provide low cost food parcels to residents. This shift in their practices into the more everyday and domestic realm of food, whilst clearly fulfilling an important role in the community, was seen by Sandra as taking them away from addressing the wider problems and issues that might fall into more 'public' forms of politics:

The problem with ours, the food redistribution project is a sticking plaster. It's never going to be anything more than a sticking plaster...it will alleviate an immediate need and that's all it does.

Taking a more central role within sustaining households at a time of welfare cuts also had the effect that the group themselves became a target for people's feelings about their wider situations and struggles:

As more and more things are withdrawn from people they get despondent, disheartened and apathetic. Now they will either walk away or they will become angry, and expect us to provide all the things that were provided by the statutory services but we're not there to do.

Indeed it was noticeable in returning to the neighbourhoods that many of the services and infrastructure of support for residents that had been present in my earlier research were no longer present.

Overall, therefore it was clear that both groups of women could be seen to be undertaking the kinds of everyday or 'affective' activism identified in previous analyses of women and local activism or citizenship (Howard 2014, Martin et al 2007). This was based on forms of emotional and practical support, and in the case of the Riverlands group, the provision of food to families. In some ways this made the work undertaken by the groups central and 'visible' within the lives of the families or individuals they were supporting. As the quote above shows, the Riverlands group were acting as a kind of 'front line' of service provision and in the process becoming a target for residents' wider feelings about austerity. On the other hand such labour was less 'visible' to authorities and other arenas of policy and practice than other forms of activism, highlighting some of the problematics of everyday, home-based forms of activism. These forms of activism could also be seen as precisely those that have a clear fit with a social policy agenda that involves cuts to welfare and frontline services. Although 'the Big Society' idea (Levitas, 2012) has been largely dropped in current social policy discourse, there remains a sense of community action being called on to fill these gaps in state services, without providing wider political challenges. This is clearly not a new dynamic but has been intensified under austerity conditions.

## The inbetween

However, in the next two sections of this analysis I suggest that such observations do not provide a complete picture of the activism practices and politics at stake. There is potential for such home-based activism to also do what Fincher and Panelli (2001) call 'jumping scales', moving between different spheres and arenas of politics and citizenship. For both sets of women, the 'work' that they were doing sits between and among conventional borders of home life and beyond, public and private, visible and invisible. Both groups of women also work at the intersections of policy and governance and everyday life. When I asked Sonia, one of the school inclusion workers, about how she disentangles her friendships and personal emotional commitments with her 'work' she said:

You can't draw the line, you just do it constantly... especially if you were helped yourself before you want to give things back

Although as already indicated, such emotional proximity has the potential to pull women into very material support work, it also means that women are necessarily occupying 'in-between' positions, spanning different kinds of work and action. Ana told me that she was more able to differentiate between her various kinds of 'work':

I have different roles, different hats I put on: chair, governor, school inclusion worker, friend, mother

However the women narrated these movements, they could be seen as doing what Newman (2012) has called 'border work', creatively working the edges of different arenas of power and experience, within and beyond governance and policy. In relation to the women in Stoke, both Sandra and Jill spoke about their own experiences as mothers as crucial to their involvement in community projects, which in turn also propelled their involvement in other spheres of politics, such as the local media and council meetings. During earlier ethnographic work (Jupp 2012) I often witnessed their presence in more formal city-wide meetings and arenas of decision-making. Their contributions could often be viewed as 'out-of-place' and disruptive, talking about everyday struggles and questions of material poverty and safety in spheres dominated by more technical forms of policy discourse. Such contributions made visible the everyday lives of families in their neighbourhoods.

Indeed, whilst both sets of women were involved with forms of 'community' activism, the nature of these communities was necessarily complex. In London, the women were involved in overlapping spheres of community, including in the localities of their homes, across groups of migrants from the same countries or regions or speaking the same languages, and around the schools in which they worked. During the discussion group, the women mentioned their smartphones and uses of social media as crucial to navigating these communities. One of the women remarked, 'my phone is at the centre of everything', and they spoke in particular about their uses of messaging apps such as WhatsApp both to connect with other women locally and with family and friends in their countries of origin. They also spoke about using Facebook and other social media to discuss wider issues of concern, for example to do with women's health. Such use of online media, which I discuss further in relation to housing activism below, could be seen as an emergent set of dynamics for local activists of different kinds, offering potent if unstable arenas for collective actions and identifications (Gerbaudo, 2012), connecting home spaces with different communities and publics.

Rather than seeing these groups of women's activism as therefore bounded by the scale of the household or a narrow view of local community, the women were always moving between different roles, despite the centrality of everyday and embodied practices. Via these inbetween positions their everyday practices and commitments could be transformed or made visible in unexpected ways.

### **Trauma and the lifecourse**

The perspectives and experiences of these women could therefore have a disruptive and destabilising quality when made visible in different arenas, for example sharing residents' embodied experiences of hunger at a council meeting (see Jupp 2008). These expressions of citizenship are therefore very different from those that might be imagined within normative visions of political discourse (Young, 2002). In interviewing both sets of activists, the importance of experiences of rupture and different forms of material and emotional suffering as key starting points for activism is striking. Indeed in considering the relationships between home lives and gendered forms of organising and citizenship, a third

set of issues can be seen as the idea of personal *trauma* as an organising dynamic both as a spur to activism and as the concerns of activism.

The notion of trauma stems from psychoanalysis and it is not my intention to fully explore it here. I am using the term broadly to point to the sense of experiences that fragment the self, and cannot easily be integrated into the subject (see Davidson 2016). For the group of migrant women, it was the experience of migration that was often described in these terms:

When I came here [*London*], my life, it ended. Then my new life started again.

(Sonia)

This experience also intersected with the experiences of becoming a mother and looking after a small child or children at home in an unfamiliar culture.

When my daughter was young it was difficult, a very difficult time. I didn't know anyone. Then slowly, slowly I began to meet other people (Ana)

For both these women, it was these experiences, and their recovery from forms of personal trauma in their home lives that formed the catalyst for, and spur to activism and engagement. For Sandra and Jill, the connections between personal trauma and local engagement were even more immediate:

Then I lost my job, and became depressed... I don't know what I would have done... I always say that the RA [*residents' association*] saved my life (Jill)

Sandra had also begun to become involved with the group following illness and the need to leave her job. Such dynamics move beyond notions of the lines between the public and private or the personal and political to a more unstable and fragmented set of entanglements and identifications. For example, a number of the other women in the Westfields group had also experienced mental health problems, and part of the focus of the group had been in supporting members to 'gain confidence' and move forwards positively from difficult home lives and experiences.



## Home and housing activism in contemporary London

So far I have outlined three registers of home-centred activism that can be discerned as gendered and specifically inflected by a context of austerity. These are around everyday coping and connections as a currency of activism; around occupying in-between and border positions; and around trauma and dramatic change as both a spur and a motif of activism. In bringing together material from two very different groups of women, I suggest that there is a value in drawing connections between women operating in different contexts and grappling with different sets of material issues. The registers of activism they employ point to both enduring and emergent ways in which marginalised women might enter arenas of politics and governance. By way of conclusion, I now turn to briefly discuss emergent housing activism among young women in London in the face of the current housing crisis. In so doing I show how the concepts that emerged from my analysis above can be explored in relation to other groups too.

The issue of housing clearly has a particularly strong relationship to questions of home (see Wilkinson, this issue). 'Housing' clearly crosses boundaries between the private and the public: whilst the domestic sphere has conventionally been thought about as private, housing within policy and within politics frames it as a matter of public concern. However as argued across the paper, another way to consider the housing would be via the notion of the visible and invisible. People's housing situation may not be just hidden, behind closed doors, but more broadly hidden from arenas of politics and policy because of the everyday coping strategies which increasingly come into play within a context of austerity, as already discussed. The notion of 'invisible homelessness' (Reeve and Batty 2011) has been used within housing policy to describe people living in informal or unregulated living arrangements, particularly relevant in contemporary London. It is not possible to provide an analysis of the current London housing crisis here, but the reduction of housing benefits and social housing intersecting with an explosion of house prices has resulted in an intensification of the crisis of affordability and availability of housing for those on low or middle incomes (Elmer and Denning 2016). The effective collapse of social housing provision can be seen as social cleansing, or indeed just the impossibility of publically provided housing in a city which has allowed global neoliberal economics to dictate housing provision (McKee 2015). However stark this process, it nonetheless remains invisible to much public

scrutiny, partly because of the material fact that for those with (relatively) secure housing, such a crisis is not apparent. The politics of housing, therefore is fragmented and divisive, and as already discussed, does not speak to a broadly collective experience in the way that, for example, debates about the NHS or schools might do (Hunter, 2016).

Emerging from this situation though, there have been recent attempts at activism which make visible the stark choices and struggles of those caught up in this crisis. Probably the most high profile of these movements has been a group of young women known as the 'Focus E15 Mums' (Watt, 2016), who were evicted from their foyer accommodation for young mothers, and offered housing outside of the borough which the women saw as 'home'. Without discussing their practices in detail, I would suggest that the gendered and home-based registers of activism discussed in this article can be discerned in their approaches, from a rooting in everyday and material concerns, emanating from a context of trauma, but also showing a remarkable ability to 'jump scales' and bring individual experiences into new kinds of public or visible domains. For example the group have used online media and visual documentation extensively, as well as undertaking performative activism such as setting up a children's birthday party in a luxury 'show home' being promoted by the housing association by whom they were evicted (Watt 2016).

Another example, which has also had media exposure to a lesser extent, circulates around the situation of one family in East London, whose daughter, Daisy-May Hudson, decided to document their experiences in a film called *HalfWay Home* (Foster, 2015), which she began filming after the family were evicted from their (relatively affordable) privately rented accommodation. Such evictions are also an increasingly common feature of the current housing crisis (Elmer and Denning, 2016). The film documents Daisy's family – herself, her mother and younger sister, over a year of being homeless in East London, moving between hostels, and the huge stresses and uncertainties of their dealings with the council.

Over 90 minutes the film captures the intimate details of the family's domestic lives in temporary accommodation. We see Daisy's mum and sister repetitively washing, cooking, bathing, getting dressed, doing the laundry, all the while speaking to Daisy about their feelings about housing and their situation. Faces are often almost squashed into the camera, every tear and frown captured in wincing close-up. The film conveys vulnerability

and helplessness, frustration and trauma, as the women speak repeatedly about 'locking away' or pushing away their feelings in order to survive emotionally.

The film therefore exemplifies the kinds of gendered tropes of home-based activism under discussion, emanating from everyday domestic lives and the struggles of getting by, as well as clearly traumatic experiences. I would suggest that the cinematography itself has a gendered quality, and literally makes visible aspects of homelessness which fall into the category of 'hidden' discussed above. Through its circulation in a range of forms of online and offline media, the film has been shown to politicians, campaigning groups and local officials, as well as wider publics. Daisy and her family's experiences have therefore become positioned at the borders of personal lives and wider politics. At the public screening when I viewed it, officials from the London Borough were present, and one of them commented that the family's experience was not representative in so much as they were eventually housed in the borough (due to a legal challenge relating to the ways in which the council dispensed its duties to them), and might therefore be seen as 'lucky' compared to others.

## **Conclusions**

Ending on this example, of one young woman's family and her activism practices, brings the wider issues discussed in this paper into focus. It demonstrates the potential potency of the gendered activism practices that might emerge from home space within a context of austerity. These practices involve material struggles and ways of getting by, trauma, but also the kinds of border work which enable these struggles to connect with wider arenas of politics and decision making. Nonetheless, in relation to the last example, screened in the run up to the passing of a new piece of housing legislation widely seen as exacerbating the crisis, (Kerslake, 2016), the success of this and other similar practices should not be overstated given that the housing bill has now been passed. In relation to the other women discussed in this paper, at the time of writing, the migrant parents network continues to expand, as does one of the community groups (Westfields), both of whom have formed powerful alliances with local agencies and organisations. The other community group (Riverlands) has closed because of a loss of capacity of those able to support them locally.

This raises questions about vulnerability, precarity and the extent to which these forms of activism enable marginalised women more broadly to make material gains around the situations in which they find themselves. Is making visible the politics of the home ultimately empowering or exposing? Do disadvantaged women find themselves able to enter politics on their own terms, or do they end up standing in for aspects of wider political debates that may not ultimately benefit them? This raises questions about the fraught lines between public and private, visible and invisible, and individual and collective forms of action. For the concerned middle-class viewer, engaging with 'Halfway Home' (or other media representations of austerity and poverty) may feel like a way to engage in solidarity with disadvantaged women, yet may not enable a wider view of the political and economic contexts and forms of governance which have shaped these experiences. Varley (2015) argues that low income women often end up being 'over-determined' in both academic and wider political debates, either victims or agentic heroines, and that this glosses over the complexities of their lives.

Indeed it can be argued that political and policy debates are now increasingly emotionalised (Jupp et al, 2016), linked to social media in particular (Gerbaudo, 2012), with opportunities for 'jumping scales' between the intimacies of home space and potent if unstable arenas of global media debate. To return to the example with which this paper begun, if Hayden was writing her proposals now, it is highly likely that her gendered alliances of 'homemakers' would be developed online. This context clearly presents both opportunities and problematics for activists. Certainly there is a need for new kinds of attention to these practices in understanding how citizenship and collective agency might be expressed under contemporary conditions of austerity.

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