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'smart' cities, where decision-making is reliant on closed systems of decision-making, dictated by invisible machinery of big data, and narrow interpretations of same.

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Women, Vulnerabilities and Welfare Service Systems, Routledge Advances in Social work

Kuronen, M. | Virokannas, E., & Salovaara, U.

Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2021.

The retrenchment of welfare systems across the Western world has become a central area of concern for social policy scholars critical of neoliberal welfare ideology and its disdain for collective responsibility and 'dependence' on state support. However, while the experiences of people on the margins are given some prominence in the academic debates, an explicitly gendered perspective is still largely absent.

Women, vulnerabilities and welfare service systems is an edited collection which foregrounds the experiences of marginalised and 'vulnerable' women and their interactions with welfare service systems. Crucially, the authors share a critical approach to the concept of vulnerability, which is understood not as an individual or group characteristic, but as situational and fluid, and something that is (re)produced by social structures—and often by the welfare systems themselves. Through the course of the 11 substantive chapters, an explicitly gendered understanding of vulnerability is developed, as well as insight into how involvement with welfare systems is gendered in itself.

The collection is divided into three parts. In 'Part 1: Welfare service systems (not) responding to vulnerable situations of women', an excellent introduction is followed by a chapter focused on marginalised women in the United Kingdom and their experiences of 'vulnerability'. Through an engagement with the concept of vulnerability and the way it can be used as a tool to exclude, control, and divert attention from the structural causes of social problems, the chapter provides an interesting and nuanced discussion, introducing themes which become increasingly familiar as the book progresses.

The quality of the chapters is somewhat uneven, particularly with regards to the (reporting of) empirical research on which findings are based. At times the language is awkward, as a result perhaps of translation, but an issue nonetheless when it comes to the reporting of women's own experiences and narratives, given that the nuances of

language are particularly important in such qualitative research. However, in general, the breadth of the primary research, conducted across six countries, is one of the major strengths of this collection.

The distinction between chapters in Part 1 and 'Part 2: Women's encounters with the welfare service system', feels slightly arbitrary, and some of the chapters in one section would not have seemed out of place in the other. 'Part 3: Contradictions of informal support' on the other hand, further deepens our understanding of how the inadequacy of welfare systems compounds women's vulnerable situations and gives us insight into the informal support strategies employed by the women, which can be at once a means to practise their agency, and a result of the oppressive structures which provide the context for their lives. Part 3 begins with an excellent chapter which deals with the complexities of survival sex work, the exchange of sex for material resources, and the line between these and sexual exploitation and rape. As the author concludes, "[i]t is the narrowing structure of opportunities available to low-income women and especially mothers—as part of the accelerating adoption of neoliberal socioeconomic policy—which compels them to apply oppressive survival strategies in order to obtain material resources" (Chapter 10, p. 135).

The book aimed to show that even though the vulnerable life situations of the women, and the welfare systems with which they are interacting, differ, the women nonetheless had many shared experiences as service users. Furthermore, it sought to make visible the service gaps through which women in vulnerable circumstances often fall. Collectively the authors fulfilled these stated objectives, showing how vulnerability is produced and reproduced by welfare service systems that fail to acknowledge the complexity of women's vulnerable situations; by professionals, practitioners, and systems which (mis)interpret and (mis)represent the women's survival and coping strategies.

The concluding remarks seem rather thin and fail to give much in the way of specific recommendations for change. Arguably, however, the most important takeaway message from this edited collection is the pressing and dire need for substantial and sustained investment in holistic, integrated, and gender-sensitive welfare systems. Although this is not a novel conclusion for scholars across social work and social policy, the research presented in this book adds significant weight to the importance and urgency of this need.

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The divisive state of social policy: The 'bedroom tax,' austerity and housing insecurity

Kelly Bogue

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The controversial 'bedroom tax,' or what officially was called 'the under-occupancy penalty,' was a substantial reduction of Housing Benefit imposed on UK council house tenants, who were deemed to have one or more