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Ortega-Alcázar, I. and Wilkinson, E. orcid.org/0000-0001-8660-622X (2021) '*I felt trapped*': young women's experiences of shared housing in austerity Britain. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 22 (9). pp. 1291-1306. ISSN: 1464-9365

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2020.1829688>

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Social & Cultural Geography* on 03/10/2020, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14649365.2020.1829688>

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'I felt trapped': young women's experiences of shared housing in austerity Britain

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Accepted for publication in Social & Cultural Geography
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2020.1829688>

Abstract

In Britain, the number of young single people living in shared accommodation is on the rise. While sharing may be positive when voluntarily chosen, those who are forced to share accommodation may have far more negative experiences. This paper examines how recent changes to the Shared Accommodation Rate of housing welfare have resulted in people having to share accommodation until the age of thirty-five. Our focus is on the experiences of young single women who are in receipt of housing benefit and are living on low or no income. The paper is based upon forty biographical interviews with people who have lived, or are living in, shared accommodation with strangers. It emphasises how, although having a roof over their heads, women living in shared accommodation often do not feel at home. Shared living resulted in domestic space being experienced not as a site of refuge, but as a place of insecurity and fear. The paper highlights how cuts to housing welfare have removed a vital infrastructure of care, leaving some young women in a position of heightened vulnerability. We hence propose that vulnerability should be conceptualised as a structural condition rather than an inherent gendered disposition.

Introduction

Since the economic downturn of 2008, Britain has undergone a period of sustained austerity measures. The Welfare Reform Act of 2012 marked a drastic retrenchment of the welfare state, and housing welfare was subject to a number of stringent reforms such as maximum caps, freezes on rates, and the 'bedroom tax' (Hamnett, 2014; Hodkinson & Robbins, 2013). Consequently, this period of austerity resulted in heightened housing insecurity for many. In this paper we highlight how cuts to housing welfare have served to intensify the vulnerability of often already precariously positioned people. Secure housing provides a vital infrastructure of care (Power & Mee, 2020), and when housing welfare is cut 'vulnerability comes to the fore' (Butler, 2016, p. 15). Accordingly, we propose that vulnerability should be conceptualised as a structural condition rather than some sort of inherent fragility (see Brown, 2015). For as Butler (2016, p. 25) notes, 'vulnerability is not a subjective disposition, but a relation to a field of objects, forces ... that impinge upon or affect us in some way'.

In this paper, we examine how the capacity to construct a secure sense of home can be impeded during a period of economic insecurity (Harris et al., 2019; Jupp et al., 2019). A secure place to call home is vital to a persons' sense of ontological security (Easthope, 2004; Hiscock et al., 2001), yet this security has been severely undermined through recent welfare reforms. However, it is important to note that during this period of austerity, policy makers continued to position the familial home as an idealized space of nurture and care, as responsibility for care was discursively transferred from the state to the family (Franklin, 2019; Wilkinson, 2013). Thus, as Nowicki (2018, p. 649) notes, in austerity Britain, the government simultaneously stressed a vision of 'homeliness and homemaking at the centre of citizenship construction', whilst at the same time introducing 'housing policies that contribute to class-based acts of home *un*making' (see also Baxter & Brickell, 2014). Hence these policy narratives around the importance of home-making and homeliness

conceal the stark inequalities that people face when trying to access secure housing. Furthermore, this discursive idealisation of the family-home as the key site in which care should take place, overlooks the fact that many people do not have these infrastructures of familial care to draw upon in times of need. As we shall go on to outline, those who fall outside of normative visions of familial-domesticity, such as young single people, single migrant workers, and those without dependents, become positioned as solely in need of *housing*, rather than a stable place to call *home*. For many then, the ability to construct a secure sense of home is becoming increasingly precarious, as welfare reforms and spiralling rental costs have placed many people in conditions of heightened vulnerability.

In this paper we build upon existing work that has examined how the current 'housing crisis', and the neoliberal austerity measures that accompany it, have had an uneven impact on already marginalized groups (Carr et al., 2018; Durbin et al., 2017; Sandhu & Stephenson, 2015; Watt, 2018). Our focus is on the impact that housing welfare reform has had upon young women's experiences of housing and home. Our research looks specifically at the lives of young women (aged under 35) who do not have legally dependent children. Women without dependents are largely invisible in discussions around women's housing insecurity and homelessness (with most policies and campaigns focusing on the livelihoods of women with children). Our research contends that women without dependents can be left in a structural position of heightened insecurity, falling outside of normative ideals of welfare deservingness and 'housing need'.

Our work focuses specifically on the experiences of young women who have had to move into shared accommodation with strangers as a result of cuts to their housing welfare. While sharing with strangers clearly creates increased vulnerabilities for all, are there particular issues that young female sharers face? Drawing upon qualitative interview-based data, we examine some of the adverse impacts that living in shared accommodation with strangers has had upon the everyday lives of young women. The paper that follows is divided into four sections. We begin by providing an overview of the policy context of our research, before moving on to situate the paper within literature on gender, home, and homelessness. The following two analysis sections examine how young women in this study experienced living in shared accommodation: looking firstly at issues of insecurity and fear, and secondly experiences of loneliness and isolation. We contend that whilst still having a roof over their heads, young women living in shared accommodation often do not feel at home. Shared living is experienced as detrimental to these young women's sense of ontological security, and often places them in a position of increased vulnerability. Throughout the paper we highlight how gender intersects with other structures of marginalization to shape the ways in which women experience shared accommodation with strangers.

Unfair shares? The consequences of the new Shared Accommodation Rate

The focus of our paper is on one particular policy change, which has resulted in younger adults having no choice but to share accommodation with strangers. In 2012, the Conservative-led coalition government announced that the Shared Accommodation Rate would be increased from 25 to 35, effectively changing the definition of who counts as a young adult in housing policy (Cole et al., 2016). This rate limited the amount of housing welfare that single people could claim to that of a single room in a shared house, whereas previously they could claim for a self-contained property. This resulted in drastic cuts to housing welfare for a number of young people, and in certain geographic locations these cuts were particularly significant, for example, in all boroughs of London housing welfare was cut in half (Beatty et al., 2014; Fenton, 2011). This meant that young people who were in receipt of housing benefit often had no choice but to share with strangers, move back with family or friends, or turn to homelessness charities for support.

The changed age-threshold for the Shared Accommodation Rate was grounded upon the assumption that it is both fair and viable to expect young people aged under-35 to live in shared accommodation. The Department for Work and Pensions used the increasingly common practice of sharing amongst students and young professionals as evidence to make a case that shared accommodation is a now just a normal step in a young person's housing trajectory (Department for Work and Pensions, 2011). Young sharers were positioned as part of what has been termed 'generation rent' and 'generation share', where more and more young people are spending longer periods of their lives living in shared rented accommodation as they are unable to afford owner-occupation (Clapham et al., 2014; Hoolachan et al., 2017; Maalsen, 2020). Policy discourse hence served to normalize the precarity of shared living amongst young adults.

Our research contends that the problem with this reasoning is that it conflates the experience of sharing amongst young professionals, or relatively affluent young people remaining within the parental home to save money for eventual home ownership, with that of precariously positioned people living at the lowest level of the housing market (Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcázar, 2017). This, we argue, is a dangerous conflation, as it obscures the starkly different experiences that young people have whilst living in shared accommodation. While some young people may have a relatively positive experience of shared living, many others will not. What we argue then, is that social difference and inequality should be central to these debates around the suitability of shared housing for young single adults. The key question to be asked then, is who is sharing with whom and under what conditions? Policies such as the changes to the Shared Accommodation Rate speak of 'young people' as a homogenous group, and thus overlook the vast inequalities that exist between young adults (for example, in terms of socio-economic class, gender, race, disability). We hence argue that the language of 'generation rent' and 'generation share' often overlooks the ways in which shared rented accommodation is experienced differently amongst young people, and often these discussions fail to take into account issues of inequality and existing structural vulnerabilities.

What difference then does difference make, and how might the Shared Accommodation Rate leave young women in a position of heightened vulnerability? It is well noted how women have been disproportionately impacted by austerity measures, particularly women of colour and women on low-incomes (Pearson, 2019; Sandhu & Stephenson, 2015). However, in their Equality Impact Assessment on the Shared Accommodation Rate, the government concluded that women would not be disproportionately affected by the age-threshold, noting that '[a]s this policy is aimed at younger claimants without children most of those affected are men' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2011, p. 7). Data from 2010 highlighted that most of the claimants on the Shared Accommodation Rate were men, with men making up an estimated 72% of people affected by this policy (ibid). However, in the equalities impact assessment gender was treated as a standalone category, and there was no attempt to consider how gender might intersect with other protected characteristics – such as race or disability. Furthermore, our wider research contends that Equalities Impact Assessments cannot be based on quantitative data alone, and what is needed is more in-depth qualitative work into the everyday impacts that welfare reform has had upon marginalized groups. A key finding of our research is that the women who claim the Shared Accommodation Rate can face particular difficulties when sharing with strangers. The fact that women make up the minority of those claiming the Shared Accommodation Rate has actually led to a lack of safe and secure housing, as women are often left with no choice but to share housing with men who are strangers, which can result in women feeling unsafe in the property in which they live. We hence contend that it is vital to try and better understand women's everyday experiences of shared living amongst strangers, and to look more closely at the gendered politics of home (un)making in an age of austerity.

Gender, home and homelessness

Over the past decades there has been a growing body of literature exploring the meaning of 'home' (Blunt, 2005; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Brickell, 2012; Mallett, 2004). This literature highlights how home is more than just a physical space made of bricks and mortar, home is also an imaginative place, constructed through memories, attachments and feelings. Yet the material, emotional, personal and psychosocial factors that make a house a home are rarely considered in housing policy. Feminist geographers have highlighted how the view of 'home as haven', often contradicts the reality of many women's lived experience of home, and hence presents a masculinist understanding of domestic space (Rose, 1993, p. 53). The home is a gendered landscape that has traditionally been the site of patriarchal oppression for women, where they have been confined to reproductive and domestic labour (Bowlby et al., 1997). Stemming from this research, the home has been reconceptualized from a positive concept linked to notions of security and happiness to a more complex site of potential conflict, fear, and isolation (Blunt & Varley, 2004). Research on domestic violence has further questioned the equation of home as haven. Women who experience psychological or physical domestic abuse experience the home as a site of danger, fear and conflict (Brickell, 2014; Goldsack, 1999; Jones, 2000; Pain, 2014; Wardhaugh, 1999; Warrington, 2001).

Our research explores the impact that shared housing has on everyday home-making practices. Particularly important to us is an understanding of home as something that is shifting and complex and experienced differently by different people, and therefore gender might significantly shape a person's experience of living in shared accommodation. We examine what 'home' means to young women living in shared accommodation asking, is it possible to feel at home when living with strangers? Or does shared accommodation with strangers result in a process of home *un*making, where the household in which one lives is experienced as unhomely, insecure and unsettling? Accordingly, our work also draws upon pivotal feminist research on homelessness, which has challenged the traditional definition of homelessness as lacking a roof over one's head. Back in 1986, Sophie Watson and Helen Austerberry proposed that homelessness is a socially determined and relative concept that it is not only restricted to a situation in which a person does not have somewhere to spend the night. They suggested that homelessness ought to be understood as part of a 'home-to-homelessness continuum' (Watson & Austerberry, 1986, p. 9). Within this framework, homelessness also includes unacceptable housing situations in which people do not feel at home. For example, people may not feel at home because of over-crowded or substandard living conditions, or because of turbulent and violent relationships within the household. Watson and Austerberry's work provides an important backdrop to our work, in that they problematize the notion that homelessness ends as soon as one has a roof over one's head. Their research uncovers forms of 'concealed' homelessness such as that experienced by those facing domestic violence, or living in intolerable housing conditions. This literature hence broadens existing definitions of the 'hidden homeless' – to encompass people who do not feel at home in their accommodation.

These understandings of home and homelessness have been furthered by more recent work that has advanced this concept of being 'homeless at home' (Moore, 2007; Wardhaugh, 1999). For example, Katy Bennett's (2011) examined understandings of 'home' amongst working-class women living in privately rented or social housing in the former coalfields of East Durham in North-East England. Bennett draws upon Iris Marion Young's (1997) work on the 'normative values of home'; those that define the essential aspects that make people feel at home. For Young, these normative values include safety, individuation, privacy, and preservation. Bennett explored how, although the women she interviewed had a

place to live, they rarely felt at home as they lacked one or more of these 'normative values of home.'

Work on the 'home-to-homelessness continuum' has also been extended to consider how people may hold shifting, and often simultaneous, feelings of being both at home and homeless. Lindsey McCarthy (2018, p. 3), for example, has used Freud's concept of the 'unheimlich' as a lens through which to understand the ways in which 'the homelike' and 'the unhomely' merge'. McCarthy's research into women accessing homelessness services in the North of England outlines how the same place can be felt both as 'home' and 'unhome' at different times (McCarthy, 2018, p. 5). Her research highlights how 'home' can be created in unconventional and non-familial spaces such as the homeless hostel. Most relevant to our research is that she points to the psychosocial factors that make a particular accommodation feel like 'home' or 'un-home' and, in so doing, emphasizes the need for homelessness policies to go beyond the mere provision of a roof over someone's head. Particularly important to us is an understanding of home as something that is shifting and complex and experienced differently by different people.

Our research takes this literature on gender, home and homelessness as a point of departure in our examination of the experiences of young women living in shared accommodation, questioning whether young women feel at home when living with strangers. Our paper challenges binary understandings of home and homelessness by looking at the experiences of young women who receive housing welfare and have a roof over their heads but nevertheless often feel that they do not have a home. In this paper, we examine how a secure sense of home is destabilised in a period of economic uncertainty, and how wider structural changes to housing policy impact upon people's everyday practices of home-making. Most pertinently, our research provides a critical examination of how housing insecurity and processes of home *un*making can intensify existing structural vulnerabilities. We argue that changes to housing welfare policy have resulted in heightened vulnerability for women who would often already be classed as 'vulnerable', such as those who have experienced domestic abuse, or those who have mental health problems. Accordingly, in this paper we do not draw upon a paternalistic framework that sees women as somehow inherently fragile and vulnerable, instead we outline how wider structures and norms have placed women into this position of heightened vulnerability.

Methods

Between 2015 and 2018 we conducted 40 biographical interviews with young people who were currently, or had previously been, in receipt of the Shared Accommodation Rate. Participants were aged between 18–35, and out of this sample 60% were women. Participants were recruited through posters and flyers in community spaces and advice centres, and through various gate-keepers who provide support to particular groups. Participants in the study came from across England and Wales. In this paper, we draw upon interviews carried out with women that have lived in, or are currently living in shared accommodation. Many of the women interviewed would be described as having 'chaotic' housing pathways, moving between periods of insecure rented accommodation, hostels, and periods of 'sofa-surfing' with friends or family (see Clapham et al., 2014). Most of those interviewed were unemployed or on zero hours short term employment contracts, several had strained relationships with their parents or carers, many spoke of mental and physical health issues, and a number had experienced domestic abuse. Whenever possible, interviews took place within the participants' home, but due to the precarious housing situation of many of the interviewees we also conducted some interviews in public spaces. During each interview we started by asking participants to tell us about the different homes they had lived in up until the accommodation they were living in now. We then moved on to

talk about their current housing situation. We concluded the interviews with a discussion around the meaning of home and their aspirations for the future homes in which they hope to live. This biographical approach allowed us to gain a richer understanding of people's complex housing pathways, enabling us to gather not just a snapshot of a person's current housing situation, but their longer housing history and how this has shaped their current experiences.

Stranger danger? Living with insecurity and fear

If housing is to be thought of as an 'infrastructure of care' (Power & Mee, 2020), then in what ways does shared accommodation with strangers limit or curtail this capacity for care? How might both the materialities and lived experiences of shared accommodation be conceptualised as detrimental to women's security and wellbeing? Something that came through very strongly in our interviews is that for women, shared living with strangers can often result in domestic space being experienced not as a site of refuge or sanctuary, but as a place of insecurity and fear (see Blunt & Varley, 2004). An important characteristic of the housing available at the Shared Accommodation Rate is that tenants have no control over who they share with – their gender, age, lifestyle, etc. Women are expected to find their own accommodation in the open private rental market; there is no matching of people, no risk assessment. Living with strangers is what characterizes shared accommodation for young welfare claimants. This is further compounded by the high turnaround of people on short-term rental contracts, resulting in the social dynamics of the household being in a constant state of flux. As a result, the share house becomes experienced as an insecure and unhomely space, living alongside strangers can serve to intensify feelings of apprehension and vulnerability (Green & McCarthy, 2015).

When asked to describe what home meant to them, the women we interviewed all spoke about safety. Home was described by all as a place where one can feel at ease, where one can feel safe. These understandings of safety were entwined with experiences of privacy, as safety entails having control over a place and thereby the ability to restrict access to others (see Malos & Hague, 1997; Parsell, 2012). The issue of safety and privacy is well illustrated through the experience of Emma, a white woman in her late twenties who found herself homeless after losing her job. Before living in shared accommodation Emma had been living on her own in a privately rented flat in a large city in the midlands. She describes this as one of the best times in her life as she had a job she enjoyed and enough money to allow her to live independently. All this changed abruptly after a dispute at work resulted in the loss of her job. With no savings, and without the option of going back to live with her parents, Emma soon realized she would have nowhere to live by the end of the month. She turned to the council for support and was told that she could either be placed in a hostel or claim housing welfare on the Shared Accommodation Rate. She recounts her experiences of living in shared accommodation and her feelings of insecurity:

One of my housemates is an ex-alcoholic, when he came here, initially it was just me in the house ... he literally came in the second day, drunk. Female, in a house, on her own with a man that is forty-eight, quite tall, quite strong, coming in drunk, not knowing what he is like, what to expect ... that was scary.

The Shared Accommodation Rate varies according to where a person makes a claim, with the country being divided into Broad Rental Market Areas, which have different rates of housing benefit. Emma tells us how this resulted in her having to leave her home town, and move to a smaller town some 30 miles away. She explained that the housing she could afford in her home town on the Shared Accommodation Rate would have been even more dire and dangerous. Displaced from the town in which she lived, Emma lost her support

network adding to her sense of being at risk and leaving her with no social capital to draw upon. Here, cuts to housing welfare have resulted in Emma being forced into a position of heightened vulnerability, isolated from her networks of care and support. To the question of whether she feels at home in the shared house she replied:

At home do you get somebody banging on the bathroom door telling you to get out? No. Do you get food poisoning in your own house? Do you get people, you know, knocking on your windows at stupid amounts of time? No.

When asked to define what home means to her, Emma painted a picture of a safe, cosy place, where she can be herself and where there are no disturbances. 'Home' she says is living 'with people that I want to live with, not that I *have* to live with'. The room she now lives in provides a roof over her head but does not provide any of the fundamental things she associates with being at home, it lacks any of the 'normative values of home' (Young, 1997). Emma describes the shared house in which she lives as a 'scary' place, one where she feels uneasy and potentially at risk. This lack of control over who lives in the house, renders it unsafe and leaves her feeling homeless in her own home.

Women's experiences of shared accommodation were often shaped by their past experiences, such as a history of domestic abuse, mental health issues or substance abuse (see Malos & Hague, 1997). Our research contends that living in 'stranger shares' heightens the precarity of often already vulnerable women. Yet here, we are not conceptualising these women as somehow inherently fragile, instead what we are interested in is how wider structures and norms have placed these women in a position of heightened vulnerability (see Butler, 2016). Take for example the story of Alice, who grew up in a city in Wales. At age fifteen Alice was kicked out of her house and began a long-period of sofa surfing with friends. During this time Alice began to struggle with substance abuse. In an attempt to improve her situation Alice travelled to Scotland where she moved in with her partner after finding out she was pregnant. Soon she became a subject to domestic violence, and with her months old baby, had to flee her home and return to Wales. After another difficult period of sofa surfing and living in refuges Alice moved into her own place with a new partner with whom she had a second child. For some time she managed to overcome her addiction and had a somewhat stable life. Yet as a result of financial stress Alice fell back into substance abuse, broke up with her partner and was made to handover her children to social services. Being homeless, single, with no legal dependents, and under 35 meant she was now only eligible to claim housing benefit for shared accommodation. She was trapped in a situation whereby she could not claim for a self-contained flat because her children no longer lived with her, but could not get her children back because she lived in shared accommodation. With no other option Alice moved into a shared property in a large city in Wales where she grew up. In spite of her background of domestic abuse, the only room she could find was in a shared house with strangers of whom three were men. Of this experience Alice recalls:

I mean I think of myself as a really strong-willed person that wouldn't let people intimidate me, but I did, I felt intimidated with the people who were living there and the people who were calling to the house ... Somebody went in my room and robbed my phone and my wallet just days after moving in there ... your home is supposed to be your sanctuary where you feel safe ... it was soul destroying because, you know ... you're supposed to be able to come home and close your door and lock the outside world out ... And it just wasn't like that because for one I didn't even like going back there. It was horrible.

Alice does not see herself as vulnerable, she depicts herself as 'strong-willed', tough, a fighter. Yet the shared house in which she is forced to live begins to chip away at this confidence, her daily encounters with the other tenants leave her feeling intimidated and unsafe.

The experience of Ifeoma, a black woman in her mid-twenties, provides another illustration of how living in a 'stranger share' can put already vulnerable women at risk. However, again, like Alice, Ifeoma does not position herself as vulnerable, quite the opposite. She recounts a life story of constant hardship, but narrates it through the language of strength and survival. Ifeoma speaks of how the only room she could afford on the Shared Accommodation Rate was in a three-storey shared house in South-East London, with fifteen other people. She recounts that the people living in her shared house were unemployed, suffering with mental health problems, and substance abuse. Ifeoma speaks of how she felt unsafe in her own home. She tells us that she felt that she was constantly being watched, her post was being stolen, and her housemates were increasingly abusive towards her. Eventually, the abuse started to become physical. Ifeoma speaks of how she felt 'trapped'. The situation escalated and Ifeoma decided to call the police who told her that she needed to 'get out'. She was put in touch with an organization that supports women who have been subject to domestic abuse and was immediately placed in a refuge in North-East London, at a considerable distance from her friends, family and work. So again, like Alice, these cuts to housing welfare had resulted in Ifeoma becoming cut off from important support networks, thus placing her in a position of heightened vulnerability.

Ifeoma later found out that her ex-partner had been paying her housemates to spy on her, to watch her and cause her physical harm. She lived in the refuge for almost a year. In the refuge she felt safe and started piecing her life back together. The refuge became a place of connection and relative stability (echoing McCarthy's (2018) work on how 'unhomely' spaces can take on home-like qualities; see also Speer's (2017) important work on the creation of 'home' in homeless encampments). In time, Ifeoma had to leave the refuge but the only housing that she was entitled to was shared accommodation. With no other option, she had to move once again into a shared house. Ifeoma stresses that she felt her particular circumstances were not taken into consideration.

... coming from a refuge and everything I was hoping that okay at least I could get something that's a bit more private like, you know? Just, every minute just being flung into a shared house and no one's taken into consideration everything that I'd been through, the whole point in why I've had to leave home ... no one was listening. It was just this was the rules, this is what the government says, this is what you're entitled to. There wasn't no 'well do you know what actually? She's suffered ... she basically is a like young carer so she has to deal with mental illness. She's then suffered abuse when she was put first into a shared house. She's then had to go to live in a women's refuge ... Like no one's took nothing into consideration. It was the government, the government, the government, the council, the government, the council, the government ...

Ifeoma describes her encounters with an uncaring and bureaucratic state, a system that does not fully take into consideration her complex past life experiences. Ifeoma was frustrated that the housing officers were unable to understand why shared accommodation would be detrimental to her safety and wellbeing. The 'rules' of who is entitled to what were felt to be inflexible, frontline staff are portrayed as uncaring, not responding to the needs of those who are facing housing insecurity. In the eyes of the council Ifeoma had been housed, they had provided her with a roof over her head so she was deemed to no longer be vulnerable. Yet as her story highlights, shared living with strangers serves to heighten her vulnerability, and while she may be housed, she still cannot feel *at home*.

The lonely household? Feelings of isolation whilst living in shared housing

Shared living with strangers resulted in many of the women we interviewed feeling as if they had no control over their domestic space, home often became a 'scary' place that needed to

be avoided, rather than as a site of sanctuary and respite. This lack of control over domestic space however, did not just result in having no say about who they were sharing with, but also a lack of control over who they could invite into the shared house. Linked to the issue of privacy and safety our research suggests that a key requirement of home is that it enables the development of positive loving relationships. It is important to emphasize here that this does not necessarily mean equating home with heteronormative notions of the family. When talking about what home meant to them and the kind of home they hoped for in the future the women we interviewed talked about a place in which they could invite friends and family over, where they could have their pets, where they could live with their partners or invite them when they so wished, and where they could live with their children or feel comfortable about having them over (these findings are echoed by Peled & Muzicant, 2008; Parsell, 2012). Living in shared accommodation represents the absence of this ideal, and can make it difficult to maintain the social networks that can provide vital infrastructures of care and support. Common themes in our interviews are loneliness and isolation; not being allowed to have loved ones living in or visiting their shared house; feeling that their shared house is not appropriate for inviting people to stay. Here, both the material design of the shared house, and the social configuration of the household, were seen as a barrier to maintaining close relationships. Most of our research participants were living in shared accommodation that had traditionally been designed to accommodate the nuclear family, but were now being used to house as many sharers as possible, resulting in many large and overcrowded households (see also, Nasreen & Ruming, 2020). As a result, most living spaces had been turned into bedrooms, and many of the bedrooms had been subdivided to create small single rooms. The design of the shared house hence limits the possibilities of finding connections amongst sharers, as there is little if any common shared space. Moreover, it also means that there is often a lack of physical space for tenants to invite guests (Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcázar, 2019). The materialities of the shared house were felt to result in increased social isolation, which lead to the property being experienced as an unhomely space.

Abina and Susy's stories reveal how this aspect of living in shared accommodation can have a significantly detrimental impact on women's wellbeing. This isolation and the lack of space to maintain social networks compounded their position of vulnerability. Abina was born in West Africa and moved to London at a very young age where she lived with relatives. The year before the interview, in her early twenties, Abina moved out of the family home as the relationship with her relatives had become very strained. Due to her age Abina was only eligible to claim housing welfare at the Shared Accommodation Rate. She describes her shared house as a 'very lonely place', inhabited by people of whom she knows little and with whom she has little interaction. A place where 'everyone keeps to themselves' and 'when somebody moves out you don't have any control about who's moving in.' She explains that she had mental health issues before moving into the shared house but that 'they weren't bad and they weren't really diagnosed, and it was like liveable and it was manageable'. However, she tells us that since living in the shared house her mental health has been on a downward spiral. She recalls how last year she reached her lowest point and had several mental breakdowns. On four different occasions she had to call an ambulance for herself as her mind 'shut down', she felt like she couldn't think, she repeated words and even pulled her own hair out. She tells us how she felt like her mind 'was melting' and although she lived in a house with many other people she had no one to look after her. Abina defines home as a safe place 'where you are surrounded by people who make you feel warm'. Living in shared accommodation with strangers does not feel like home:

... it's just a means to an end before you can get to that place that you can call your home. That's basically how every single person who lives in that place looks at it ... they're working as hard as they can to get out of that place.

Shared accommodation is seen as a temporary stop gap, a place from which people are desperate to move on. This sense of insecurity and impermanence resulted in heightened vulnerability for these women, leaving them unable to put down the secure roots needed for maintaining social networks of care and support.

Many of the women we interviewed spoke of how housing insecurity and shared living makes maintaining key relationships difficult. Take for example the story of Susy, who became homeless for the first time in her mid-teens when she had to leave her parental home after struggling with her experience as an adopted child. This was followed by a long period of sofa surfing, living in hostels and sleeping rough in a mid-size town located within the Greater London Urban Area. When Susy finally got help from the local authority she was first placed in sheltered accommodation and then, after giving birth to her only child, was given a flat in a housing association. In this flat, Susy tells us how she lived the best years of her life looking after her child. When mould and lack of maintenance to the property started affecting her child's health Susy complained and later decided to stop paying her rent in protest. The housing association responded by evicting her. She then lost custody of her child and then had another long period of sofa surfing and living on the streets. As Susy describes it, in the long time she has been homeless she 'went through it all', 'it has all been absolute hell'. A few months before the interview Susy accessed housing support, but because she is in her early thirties and her child does not live with her, she only qualified for the Shared Accommodation Rate. She now lives in a room in a shared house managed by an organization in a town thirty miles northwest of London. But, in spite of having a room over her head and generally feeling safe, Susy does not feel at home. She is not allowed to have her child visit her or stay overnight, and the same applies for her partner – who is homeless and sleeping rough – as well as to the dogs they own together.

I'm in that position where I'm so grateful to have a roof over my head and to be inside safe and warm for the winter, but I'm so angry and resentful that none of the help that I've received is suitable for me and my child.

She explains that she is not allowed to have visitors or animals. So her son, boyfriend and her dogs cannot visit her even for a short time.

Here I am with a home and there's him in a tent with the animals, pissing it down with rain last night and I'm sat indoors in the warm. Like, you know, it does put a lot of strain on our relationship ... I can't live with my partner, I can't have the dogs with me either. I don't have permission for the dogs to be on the property. So my partner's homeless with our dogs, my son's miles away with his dad who doesn't talk to me ...

Susy has a roof over her head and is finally safe, but the place she lives in stands in the way of her meaningful relationships. Though significantly better off than she was before, Susy continues to feel that the place she lives in is not 'home':

Home is happiness, home is comfort, home is feeling secure and knowing that the people that you want to have around you, you can have around you and you can do it securely and safely and close the door and tell everyone else to go away. That is home.

For Susy, a sense of 'feeling at home' was intrinsically connected with intimacy and personal relationships. Yet the shared accommodation in which she lives is experienced as an obstacle that limits her capacity to maintain a relationship with her partner and son, thus increasing Susy's sense of isolation and heightening her vulnerability. Shared living with strangers is a clear barrier for Susy's capacity to live a liveable life.

Conclusion

Our research contends that living in 'stranger shares' can increase the vulnerability of often already vulnerable women. While women may not make up the majority of welfare claimants impacted by the changed age-threshold for housing welfare, this does not mean that there are not specific challenges that young women face while sharing with strangers. As our research has outlined, women who live in shared accommodation as a result of the Shared Accommodation Rate are often multiply marginalized: some have a history of domestic abuse and many struggle with mental health issues. Gender and other sources of inequality hence shape how women experience shared housing, yet these are not fully taken into consideration by policy makers. Having experienced domestic abuse or having mental health issues does not make young women automatically exempt from the Shared Accommodation Rate. As our work illustrates, women often feel that their particular circumstances are not taken into account. In the current context of austerity, the housing support available for single young people is limited to getting them 'off the streets' and providing 'a roof over their heads'. Yet our research has stressed the importance of listening to women's everyday experiences and understandings of what makes a house a home.

We argue that providing a home for often vulnerable young women requires a more complex understanding of home/homelessness and of the ways in which gender shapes women's experiences of their home environments. Even though they have a roof over their heads, the young women we interviewed often did not feel at home when living in shared accommodation with strangers. The young women we interviewed often define 'home' in opposition to their actual housing situation. They describe it as a place where one can feel safe, where one can be oneself, a place to unwind and feel at ease, a place close to family and friends and a place to which friends and family can be invited. Living in shared accommodation stands in a great contrast to these notions of home. Far from being a safe haven their house becomes a place to be avoided, a place of discomfort, fear and loneliness. In some cases, young women not only feel unsafe and intimidated in their own homes, they can also find themselves subject to violence and abuse by the strangers with whom they share a house. This lack of control over domestic space, serves not just as a permeable boundary to keep unwanted others out, it can also result in loved ones not being able to enter these shared houses. As a result, although they have a roof over their heads women living in shared accommodation often feel homeless at home.

Understanding the psychosocial factors that make a particular accommodation feel like 'home' or 'un-home' (McCarthy, 2018) is crucial so that young and potentially vulnerable young women are properly housed and don't find themselves feeling 'trapped' in the accommodation in which they live. Ultimately then, we contend that shared living with strangers heightens vulnerabilities for these often already marginalized young women. Throughout the paper we have stressed that vulnerability is not an inherent condition, instead we have outlined how vulnerability is structural. We have charted how vulnerability is heightened through a multitude of structures and agents, such as welfare reform and housing policy, cuts to mental health services, the materiality of the shared home, and stringent rules from landlords. These vulnerabilities are further compounded through heteronormative ideals around the lifecourse and welfare deservingness, and a wider culture of patriarchy and violence against women. These, amongst many others, compound to heighten vulnerabilities for those women living in stranger shares as a result of welfare reform.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under Grant ES/L010569/1.