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No Room of Her Own: Women's Stories of Homelessness, Life, Death and Resistance

New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 218 pp. \$28.00.

The book by Helleger represents an important contribution to our understanding of women's homelessness as it incorporates the stories of fifteen women who experience(d) homelessness in Seattle as well as a sound critical analysis of the historical and structural conditions that shape(d) the lives of these homeless women in modern America. The voices and perspectives of these women dominate this comprehensive and in-depth picture of homelessness, which is carefully and thoughtfully framed by the author's lucid and engaged discussion of the underlying social structures that 'successfully' operate to produce, maintain and exacerbate homelessness among women in the US.

From a European perspective, this book is essential reading for all those who are interested in exploring the nature of women's vulnerability to homelessness and the factors underlying their exposure to the risk of homelessness. Although the reality portrayed by the author is contextually framed by recent US history and politics, by policy developments, and by underlying social and cultural beliefs, the critical insights provided into the multiple challenges to women's resources and their ability to manage the risks of homelessness are in many respects common to women's pathways into, through and out of homelessness in the European context.

Increasing levels of poverty and inequality, financial and economic deregulation, the reduced availability of affordable housing, the criminalisation of homelessness, and the relationship between gender-based violence and homelessness are some examples of the relevant structural causalities lying behind the stories of these Seattle women but which also shape the lives and stories of homeless women across European cities – structural causalities that are thus common to the EU and the US.

The first chapter provides a useful and comprehensive overview of the contextual, theoretical and methodological frameworks used to ensure an 'informed hearing' of the voices of the women interviewed.

Informed by her personal experience working in homelessness services in Seattle, the author starts by clearly expressing her motivations and choices regarding the desire to explore the oral histories of these women, giving them “the space to represent their lives”. The author’s choice to carry out extensive interviews of homeless women with experience in civic and political participation challenges the dominant perception of homeless people as people with severe and persistent mental health problems, incapable of active participation or of reflecting on their own situation and trajectories. At the same time, the author’s choice to move away from mainstream methodological options in the design of the biographical approach to the experience of women’s homelessness has unveiled hidden aspects of women’s intellectual interests and of their political and historical understanding of social realities. These rare and hidden features of homeless women’s perspectives are obviously linked to the author’s intentional choice to hear the voices of a specific group of homeless women.

This introductory chapter also explores mainstream media and public discourses and perceptions on homelessness in the United States, specifically with regard to chronic homelessness. Evidence-based research (Culhane and Kuhn, 1998; Culhane, 2008) indicates that people who are chronically homeless account for a relatively small group of the homeless population in the US, which is otherwise composed mostly of poor people with low support needs, who entered homelessness after losing housing temporarily as a result of episodes of unemployment and family breakdown, but who then rapidly exited homelessness. Although this transitional form of homelessness accounts for the majority of the situations of homelessness in the US, the dominant social perceptions of the phenomenon and homelessness policies do not necessarily correspond to this reality (Culhane, 2008).

It is difficult to compare this evidence to the situation in most EU member states, given the different definitions of homelessness found across the EU (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010). However, recent EU research (Pleace *et al.*, 2011) has shown that by most local and national definitions across EU member states, people living rough and people in emergency accommodation are considered homeless. Moreover, the same research highlights the way in which perceptions among social housing providers of homeless people as a group with high support needs group and that present challenging behaviour may constitute an obstacle to social housing access.

Housing policies and access to housing in the US also come under analysis in this introduction to the stories of these fifteen homeless women in Seattle. The lack of affordable housing, inequality patterns arising from the operation of the labour market, the urban regeneration processes expelling the ‘urban poor’, residual social

benefits, 'grotesque' housing allocation systems, and the consequences and responses to the current economic crisis are some of the structural roots of homelessness outlined by the author.

An examination of the use of criminal justice systems in managing homelessness presents an interesting portrait of the selectivity processes that target specific groups of the population, e.g. the poor, the homeless, and people of colour. This criminalisation of homeless people has been discussed in other studies (O'Sullivan, 2012), in which it is argued that the 'punitive turn', often said to have arisen from an Americanisation of homeless policies in Europe, should be interpreted with caution, given the importance of local contexts and policies and the still predominant social inclusion focus of most homelessness policies across Europe. The narratives collated by the author in the book vividly and bluntly illustrate how these processes actually affect people's lives and how their consequences last over time, representing a denial of their most basic human rights and their dignity. Often, these institutional incarceration processes include not only jails, but mental health or juvenile institutions, among others.

The experience of gender-related risks and coping strategies are amongst the most powerful episodes of these women's accounts of suffering and struggle. The introductory chapter addresses these gender-related structural forces and the way in which they contribute to the 'hidden dimension' of homelessness among women. Reviews of research on women and homelessness in Europe (Edgar and Doherty, 2001; Baptista, 2010) had already examined some of the frameworks for women's homelessness and its gendered nature, and identified some of the persisting gaps. The prevalence and intensity of domestic violence narratives – which are strongly and extensively voiced by these women – and their links with women's homelessness should compel us to explore further this interconnection from a comparative, international perspective. The fact that the extensive presence of gender-related violence, particularly domestic violence, in the women's biographies is not matched by a deeper theoretical framework may be related to the research and evidence based gaps referred to above.

The introductory chapter includes two final sections: a methodology section and a section on the author's first Women in Black vigil.

The methodology section provides a thorough description and explanation of the methodological choices made, namely the selection of the women to interview, the locations chosen, the different steps taken (from the preparation of interviews to the editing process), and the ethical concerns related to the whole process, from collecting the stories to publicly exposing them. One aspect that stands out from

the description of, and critical reflection on the methodology adopted is the presence of two underlying assumptions that permeate the biographical approach undertaken to women's experience of homelessness: first, the adoption of a strengths-based approach focussing on the women's strengths and survival skills; and second, the role given to the experiential knowledge of these fifteen women as a vital source in the analysis undertaken.

The section on the author's first Women in Black vigil sets the context for the author's renewed decision to seek out the stories of women actively involved in political and civic participation on homelessness issues in Seattle. This introductory narrative of the vigil, following a specific dramatic event, sets the scene for the particular way in which the author collates and connects the stories of these women, letting their voices come through.

'Mama Pam', Annamarie, Elizabeth, 'Sweet Pea', Debra, Anitra, Roxane, Loann, Mona, Jessie, 'Marie', Janice, 'Flower', Arnette and Marlowe are the homeless women that offer their names to the fifteen chapters of this book. Based on the extended interviews gathered over the course of more than fifteen years, each of these fifteen chapters provides an intense and coherent narrative of each woman's story. At the beginning of each chapter the author includes an essential introduction, where the reader is given an historical contextualization of the narrative that follows, as well as other important contextual information vital for the interpretation of the woman's biography (e.g. perceptions of homelessness, organizational and professional practices, community work activism, the role of social services, racist and other discriminatory attitudes). Furthermore, this introduction to each chapter incorporates some background information on the author's relationship with each interviewee and unveils the women's empowered interaction with the writing of the book.

The information provided by the author on the background of each of the women and on the interviewing process, together with the vivid and disturbing accounts of the women's lives, engages the reader in a journey through women's experiences of homelessness in the US. This journey leads us through the individual and family stories of the women, and through their encounters with poverty, unemployment, eviction, poor education, family and intimate partner violence, abandonment, sexual abuse, physical and mental illness, imprisonment and prostitution, drug addiction and street violence. But the narratives also voice their struggle, their resilience, their achievements, their hope and their dreams.

By interweaving the women's narratives with the complex historical contexts and societal structures in place, the author's biographical approach clearly contributes to our understanding of the complex interactions between different levels of structural, relationship and personal factors in women's experiences of the 'home-to-homelessness continuum' (Watson and Austerberry, 1986).

The book concludes with a plea for remembrance and a call for action. The author uses some of the interviewees' own statements to recall that people experiencing homelessness are facing the violation of a wide range of human rights, including access to safe and adequate housing, to an adequate standard of living, to health care, to social security and to education. Although enshrined and protected by a number of international human rights treaties, these human rights are under severe and continued attack. The author argues that in the USA's class-divided, strongly unequal and neoliberal society, it seems more and more difficult to find room for the dreams of Marlowe, Janice or Debra for dignity, peace and justice. The author's description of the long and twisted path followed by two Seattle grass-root organisations, which defend the rights of women and homeless women, to install a public memorial – The Tree of Life – in honour of the city's homeless dead is an outstanding example of the ongoing marginalisation of the homeless population and the erosion of their memories in the historical context of the modern city's expulsion of its most vulnerable inhabitants.

The Afterword is an updated account of the author's ethical concerns regarding the active participation of the women in the narrative process, seeking to acknowledge their informed agreement for disclosing their biographies. But it is also a tribute to the struggles and successes of these women, and a testimony to the importance of creating bonds in making the necessary political and societal transformations to address marginalisation and social exclusion in a meaningful way.

Overall, *No Room of Her Own* is a vibrant analysis of women's homelessness experiences and trajectories in the US, where individual stories meet historical and societal forces as well as the different constructions of homelessness that have a strong impact on the women's capacity to face risks, to take up opportunities and to exercise choice and make decisions. This book will be of interest to readers inside or outside the US, given the human dimension of the narratives presented but also the explicit concern with developing explanatory frameworks for our understanding of women's homelessness in western societies.

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