
“My Momma, She Strong”. Stories of Female ‘Managers of Evictions’ in the US and Poland

➤ **Abstract** *This article is an extended review of two recent books: Matthew Desmond’s “Evicted. Poverty and Profit in the American City” and Beata Siemieniako’s “Reprywatyzując Polskę. Historia wielkiego przekrętu” [Reprivatizing Poland. History of a Great Scam]. The books are especially useful to reflect on some of the gender issues of eviction. The two divergent contexts of the US and Poland show dissimilar cities, different social relations and legal frameworks, but all stories are embedded in analogous neoliberal socio-economic conditions that make the weakest suffer most to the benefit of unscrupulous landlords or entrepreneurs. It seems that the implicit gender dimension shown in these stories is not only a matter of women (especially mothers) being more vulnerable, but also that women bear an unequal burden, manage the situations, and take responsibility for their families. Women fight legal battles, call charities, borrow money, store belongings, search for accommodation. It seems that it is an untold story in many European contexts, and that there is a need of giving face and voice to the European ‘managers of evictions’ and a need for gender-sensitive ethnographies on housing exclusion.*

➤ **Keywords** *Eviction, ethnography, coping strategies, gender, reprivatisation*

Eviction is one of the common elements of pathways to homelessness. Comparative research on evictions is difficult due to varying regulations and hard to obtain data (FEANTSA, 2018). Eviction is not only a legal procedure or a simple removal from housing; it may also be a form of violence, breach of privacy, and a “traumatic rejection” (Desmond, 2016, p.298). It puts enormous financial and psychological strain on households. Two recent books containing stories of evicted tenants have gained wide attention.

“Evicted. Poverty and Profit in the American City”

The ethnographic account of the post-2008 real estate crisis in Milwaukee, Wisconsin by Matthew Desmond has received positive reviews and several prizes. “Evicted” is an American type of ethnography-reportage. Since Nels Anderson’s “Hobo” from 1923, ethnographic accounts of American homelessness gain the interest not only of poverty researchers, especially reports of homeless people living on the streets: Snow and Anderson’s “Down on their Luck” (1993), Gowan’s “Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders” (2010), Duneier’s “Sidewalk” (1999). Deprived neighbourhoods are also of popular interest, for instance: Venkatesh’s “American Project” (2000) gave an insight on coping strategies, informal economies, and everyday lives of America’s most underprivileged. From a European perspective, these accounts seem to describe a ruthless, brutal world; the extent of misery, grime, despair and fear seems almost incredible (at least on this scale) in European welfare states.

By giving voice and face, by telling a story, these monographs have perhaps more impact on the image of homelessness than robust, quantitative sociological research. Desmond’s highly praised book was published eight years after the collapse of the real estate market and gives a first-hand account of a handful of families and their struggle with derelict housing and evictions in Milwaukee. We learn about white inhabitants of the South Side’s trailer park and the North Side’s black families, as well as their landlords.

Arleen, Doreen and Others

The book is divided in three parts. In the first part, tenants struggle to pay their rents; in the second, they face eviction; and finally, we learn what happens afterwards. The families’ stories are not straightforward however, and in reality, they could be considered homeless throughout the different pathways described in the book. They have been evicted previously, they have been in and out of shelters, living in cars, on the streets, at friends and family.

In North Side Milwaukee we meet Arleen. She has two boys, the younger one with severe asthma problems. Arleen's three older children are in care. Arleen, with her family, is evicted on one of the coldest days of the winter. She stays in an apartment with a young girl out of care, Crystal, who turns to selling sex to make ends meet. Arleen then goes to a shelter so that she can be eligible for Red Cross funds to pay for her storage (Desmond, 2016, p.210). The ninetieth landlord she calls finally accepts her, but soon she is forced to leave this "nice" apartment. She is in and out of precarious, run-down places around the city. In fact, having children does not shield her from evictions, but rather exposes her to it (Desmond, 2016, p.287).

Doreen has five children, a couple of grandchildren, and one of her daughters is pregnant. Another family with three children moves in next door. The youngest baby dies in a fire that breaks out in the run-down house. Doreen gets so depressed by the conditions in her house that she stops cooking and cleaning, she is repulsed by her home because she has no control over it, yet the family has to pay most of their income for it. Such a "home is sucking their energy" (Desmond, 2016, p.258).

Vanetta, another of Crystal's roommates, has three children, but when her work hours were cut and she couldn't make rent, and her electricity was about to be cut off, she took part in an armed robbery and ended up in prison.

Down south on the white side of the city live Pam and Ned, with four daughters and a fifth on the way. They are evicted from a trailer park, and Ned loses his undocumented work as a car mechanic. First, they place their older daughters at some friends, then they move to a hotel for \$50 per night, live for a month at another friend's house, until they find a place to rent in spite their previous convictions, evictions and small children. Their asset however is that they are white.

There are also male characters like Lamar who lost his legs due to frostbite when, high on crack, he fell asleep in an abandoned building. He is taking care of his two sons as well as a bunch of other neighbourhood children. There's Scott, a gay male nurse, addicted to all kinds of medication and drugs. He is evicted from the trailer park, and after a couple years of living in a shelter and at friends', he finally gets 'clean'. Even during his recovery, he occasionally stays on the streets, as he cannot afford both methadone and rent. Finally he is offered a charity-subsidized permanent apartment. This is the only "positive" ending story in the book.

Many of the families in "Evicted" live on Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and 70-80% of it or sometimes even more, goes to the landlord. Evictions are portrayed as very violent procedures. Tenants often don't know the date of their eviction. The moving teams are accompanied by two armed sheriffs (Desmond, 2016, p.115). Most tenants don't show up in court, sometimes they are not notified (the summons goes to a previous address), sometimes they are scared, they have work to do or

children to take care of, but mostly there's nothing they can gain by going there. Power imbalances are clear at the courtroom in Milwaukee, where the tenants are black women and the landlords' lawyers wear "pinstripe suits and power ties" (Desmond, 2016, p.96).

Evictions and Gender

In spite of these stories of female tenants, gender is not explicitly addressed in Desmond's book, or in any other of the above-mentioned ethnographies on homelessness. Elliot Liebow's (1993) "Tell Them Who I Am" monograph of women's homelessness shelters stands out as one of the very few sound ethnographic accounts of women's homelessness. Women's experiences of homelessness appear also, for instance, in Passaro (1996) and Jasinski *et al.* (2010), but they are more focused on personal narratives and eviction is not a main theme of those accounts.

However, we know that eviction is an experience of many women-maintained households and that women "manage" crisis situations in families. In Europe, data on the composition of evicted households is collected in only 15 out of 28 EU Member States. From this incomplete data, it is evident that men are at higher risk of eviction. Single people, mostly men, represent between 50% and 71% of all evicted households. Lone parents, primarily mothers, comprise between 19% and 27% of households facing evictions (FEANTSA, 2018, p.93).

"Reprivatizing Poland. History of a Great Scam"

Gender issues also emerge only implicitly in a monograph on the reprivatisation of housing stock in Poland by Beata Siemieniako. In contrast to Desmond's ethnography, Siemieniako's book is an explanation of the historical and legal conditions that resulted in corrupt practices of reprivatisation of the housing stock at the expense of tenants in Poland.

Privatisation of property has been an issue in all of the post-socialist countries since the 1990s. The Polish government however still has not legally solved the problem. The extent of scandalous reprivatisation of the housing stock in Warsaw was brought fully to light in 2015, with the publication of a series of articles in the daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* and afterwards a book by journalists Iwona Szpala and Małgorzata Zubik (2017). Recently it has become one of the most politically hot topics. In Siemieniako's book we read about alarming and corrupt cases, whereby courts agreed to return properties based on bogus claims. On the tenants' side, evictions even lead to suicide (Siemieniako, 2017, p.189) and the murder of a tenants' activist, Jolanta Brzeska. There are also accounts of the daily struggle of tenants

like Gosia, a single mother of four children, whose dwelling is damp, mouldy and the only source of heat is a wooden stove (Siemieniako, 2017, pp.181-182). Or 70-year old Ala, whose rent rose by 500% in the last 5 years, and her apartment reaches only 7 degrees Celsius in wintertime (Siemieniako, 2017, p.47). There are many other women who struggle with their everyday lives but also fight legal battles against evictions.

As a lawyer working with tenants, Siemieniako also observes that women “manage” the eviction process and fight the eviction orders. According to her, it is because women feel more desperate and responsible for their families; because women more often form households without an adult male (older women, single mothers); and also because they are able to combine housework with going to welfare offices, institutions, taking care of paper work, lawyers, advisors and so on (Siemieniako, 2017, p.218).

Desmond, on the other hand, observes that inner city neighbourhoods and communities, as well as families, have been damaged to a point where no collective resistance like a rent strike is possible. Also, poor tenants themselves perceive evictions as individual failures of their neighbours (Desmond, 2016, p.180). In the Polish case of reprivatization, often many tenants from the same building are affected at the same time, the enemy is much more concrete and the main addressee is the city hall, which makes collective action more likely.

Aside from the corrupt nature of some of Warsaw’s restitutions, tenants often had no prior knowledge of privatization of their dwellings, they had to face skyrocketing rents and struggle with new owners’ extreme means by which they tried to push the tenants out, including: stalking, threats, cutting off water, heating, constant renovations causing noise, flooding, taking roofs off, installing a pigeon house in the attic and many more.

What is interesting is that the tenants who fight for their housing are almost exclusively women; both in individual cases as well as in tenants’ organizations. Another Polish story on evictions concerns a “Mothers’ strike” in the city of Wałbrzych in 2008 (Siemieniako, 2017, p.209). The city’s economy was hit hard by the closure of the coal mines. New enterprises that took advantage of the city’s tax breaks hired people almost exclusively on short-term contracts with no benefits. Single mothers “unlawfully” occupied vacant (and heavily dilapidated) dwellings because they had no other options. The city tried to force them to vacate the buildings by cutting off water, gas and electricity. The women fought back with a hunger strike and occupation of the city hall (Strajk Matek, 2011). The strike met with critique as it involved small children and pregnant women.

At present, Warsaw's tenants' organization (Warszawskie Stowarzyszenie Lokatorów) is fighting a battle against high heating costs. Mostly, female tenants are speaking up. They talk about dealing with unheated and damp dwellings, about electric heating that is tripling housing costs. One of the tenants, Maria, says in a radio interview that it is so cold in her apartment that she sleeps and washes in the kitchen. Iwona, another tenant, a mother of four, walks two kilometers every other day with two huge bags of wet laundry to dry it somewhere else, because her dwelling is too damp (Radio dla Ciebie, 2018).

Are women more willing or more desperate to come forward and speak out? Are their stories more likely to be heard and thus used by organizations and the media? Are there more women than men in such situations? Or are they actually the ones who finally have to deal with mould blacking the walls, and cooking dinner with the gas cut off?

Feminization of poverty

"Feminization of poverty", a concept first introduced by Diana Pearce in the late 1970s, means not only that women are poorer than men; but also that the whole system of gender imbalance in productive and reproductive work leads to the "feminization" of poor household headship. Other consequences of female poverty are isolation, loneliness, lack of institutional support, and feelings of shame (Daly and Rake, 2003). Naming the phenomenon made it more visible and initiated many studies on the gendered nature of poverty. In homelessness studies however a gender approach is much less apparent (Bretherton and Mayock, 2016).

Ruth Lister coined a concept of "managers of poverty", for women who bear an unequal burden of destitution. It relates both to the structural feminization of poverty, as well as to coping strategies on an individual level. In Polish sociology, Elżbieta Tarkowska was a big supporter of this concept that appeared especially in small-scale qualitative studies among poor households. In these studies, not only are financial resources taken into account, but also time resources and reproductive work (Tarkowska, 2002). In deprived households, it is usually women's responsibility to make ends meet: they cook dinner from scraps, they save money by walking to a faraway store for discount products, they collect scrap wood, they mend clothes, prepare preserves, sell and barter things, they borrow money and pay them back; they engage in informal work, and get in contact with charities and institutions to receive benefits. Women "intensify house work", they cope daily with poverty, and they cope also with shame and responsibility (Tarkowska, 2002).

Managers of Evictions

Examples in both books show that women are also in charge of coping with evictions as “heads” of households whether they have a partner or not. They often take on the burden of a legal battle, paper work, managing money, searching for help, storing things, searching for a new place, and deciding on where to place children and animals.

A common strategy of families in Milwaukee is not to pay the last rent if eviction is inevitable, to save up the money and be able to move (or buy new pair of shoes for a child). Women manage foodstamps (sell or swap them), bring food from charities, manage the little cash they have, and decide what to do with a tax refund or any additional resources that may come. Still, as Arleen would put it, “poverty could pile on; living it often meant steering through gnarled thickets of interconnected misfortunes and trying not to go crazy” (Desmond, 2016, p.285-286).

Women also make seemingly illogical choices in the face of complete lack of resources, which unfortunately makes middle class observers as well as other poor people reinforce stereotypes of the irrationality of poor people. Lorraine, another trailer park inhabitant, facing eviction from her brother’s trailer, to where she moved secretly, made herself a lobster dinner spending a whole month’s worth of food stamps (Desmond, 2016, p.219). She threw the money away because she was poor and not the other way around. Saving was useless because she had so little. Crystal also regularly put some cash in the offering basket at her church (Desmond, 2016, p.246).

Studies repeatedly find that women avoid homelessness through utilising their family and social networks, doubling up and couch surfing (Baptista, 2010; Löfstrand and Quilgars, 2016). In Desmond’s book, women’s networks are already strained. They learn not to ask too often, as family members’ resources are also severely limited. They save up these networks for true emergencies and evictions do not qualify as such (Desmond, 2016, p.158). Lorraine’s siblings struggle themselves and she does not want to strain family relations with requests. Also, a pastor refused to help Lorraine because “poor people spend money foolishly” (Desmond, 2016, p.127). When Pam and Ned got evicted, Ned “refused to call his family [...] Ned called home to brag but rarely to ask. So Pam worked her phone, calling almost everyone she knew and even churches” (Desmond, 2016, p.228).

With family resources being so limited, it is more often that “strangers brushed up against each other” and help each other in an emergency (Desmond, 2016, p.161). That’s how Arleen stayed with Crystal and how Crystal shared an apartment with Vanetta for a while.

Whatever the circumstances, the mother of the family is responsible for the family to stay afloat and to keep everyone's spirits high. "My momma, she strong", says Natasha, the pregnant daughter of Doreen: "and she's got us out of way worse situations than this. I mean from shelters, livin' on the street, churches, cars. I got a lot of faith in my momma. Yeah, we've been on the street a few times, but my momma, she always had it" (Desmond, 2016, p.77).

Evictions and Domestic Violence

Another gender dimension of evictions is linked to domestic violence. The largely absent partners of women portrayed in "Evicted" are nevertheless present in the way women fear to call 911. Bothering the police may be used against the tenant and speed-up eviction. The costs for emergency calls may penalize landlords, who may receive a "nuisance citation".

Similarly, in Poland the regulations of removing the perpetrator from premises are not enforced and women fear to file cases, due to lengthy, exhausting and often humiliating trials. According to the Ministry of Justice, in 2015 in just over 2,000 cases, courts agreed to the removal of the accused from the home, while about 75,000 new "blue cards" indicating new domestic violence cases are registered by the police each year. The problem is that court orders take time, during which the parties are often forced to share a dwelling.

Common neoliberal context

Deindustrialization of the city centre and the loss of mainly black jobs in cities of the American Rust Belt are comparable to the deindustrialization of post-socialist cities like the Polish Wałbrzych. Geography of advantage and disadvantage (Desmond, 2016, p.89) is most apparent in American cities where race intersects with poverty. The "small act of screening" (collecting background information about prospective tenant's income, credit evaluation, eviction and criminal record) and other landlords' practices create not only segregated areas, but also a situation where rents are relatively higher in dilapidated housing and poorest tenants have no choice but to put up with terrible conditions. In fact, the worst properties bring the biggest returns. Housing has become a business, with professional property owners buying up foreclosed properties. In Milwaukee, a city of 600,000 inhabitants, 16,000 people are evicted per year. Desmond estimates that the scale of other forced removals without a court order is double that number. Three in four evicted tenants are black; of those black evicted tenants 75% are women. In fact, one out of every 17 black women is evicted through the court system in Milwaukee in a year (Desmond 2016, pp.97-98). One in five black women in Milwaukee has experienced eviction in her lifetime (Desmond 2016, p.299). Evictions put social relations, education and whole neighbourhoods under strain, people lose possessions, jobs,

and move to poorer and more violent neighbourhoods, while at the same time being denied access to public housing.

Siemieniako claims that the overall socio-economic context made “wild reprivatisation” possible. It was the neoliberal conviction about the “sacred right of ownership” and the perception that tenants are demanding, lazy and dishonest (Siemieniako, 2017, p.95). In reprivatized buildings, tenants are treated as objects, and called “meat filling” or “flesh insertions” to the building (Siemieniako, 2017, p.145). According to the Ministry of Justice, between 20,000 and 30,000 new cases for vacating dwellings are delivered in a year, yet there are just under 9,000 evictions carried out annually in Poland in recent years. About one third of those rulings did not secure the tenant’s right to a social dwelling. About 70% of evictions are from the municipal stock. The extent of locking people out of homes on the private rental market is unknown. There is also no data on the composition of evicted households.

Landladies and Landlords

Women are on both ends of the evictions; they are both tenants and landladies. They have the power to accept and reject prospective tenants, they can fix a clogged toilet and replace a broken window, or not; they have discretion on whether and when to evict, they can make the eviction even more painful and costly or they can let the family stay, double up with another household, and work off the arrears.

Obviously, landlords care for their own profits and the housing market is only one part of a larger system of exploitation of the poorest inhabitants, such as moving companies, storage facilities, loan sharks, and pawnshops. There are also brokers, like Belinda, working as a “representative payee” managing the finances of SSI recipients. People like her guarantee steady income to the landlords and act as middleman in case of problems. They charge a monthly fee of \$37 per client. Belinda had 230 clients (Desmond, 2016, pp.61-62). Some landlords also like people with vouchers that cover the difference between 30% of tenants’ income and “Fair Market Rent” calculated for the whole city. It actually means they can raise rents in deteriorated housing.

Relations between tenants and landlords aren’t easy. Desmond suggests that female tenants are more likely to avoid landlords when they fall behind with the rent by “ducking and dodging”. Whereas men are more likely to confront a landlord, and work off the rent. In his view, it is because of the gendered guide to interaction: women should not display anger or aggression (Desmond, 2016, p.129). It may contradict the concept of women as managers of evictions, but on the other hand there are many examples in the book that show women’s struggles to do everything they can to stay. And in some cases they have to confront another woman, like

Shareena, the landlady in the North Side Milwaukee, who “deals with people”, while her husband “dealt with messes” (for instance when a tenant’s boyfriend was shot dead) (Desmond, 2016, p.15).

Conclusion

“Evicted” is a fascinating ethnography. Matthew Desmond is almost invisible in the stories, however he does describe how he lived in a trailer park on the South Side and followed the people throughout their struggles. In “Evicted” there is commentary on the housing market, legal proceedings of evictions, history of American racial segregation and more interspersed in the text, and there are also rich references in endnotes. In the epilogue, the author takes a stand writing not only about consequences of evictions on the individual level, which were illustrated in the book, he also gives some recommendations. It is hard not to agree with his suggestion that decent housing should be considered a universal right, or that there should be publicly funded legal services for tenants. Further, Desmond suggests that the American voucher program should cover all poor families. In his opinion, that would balance landlords’ gains and tenants’ burden. Of course discrimination against voucher holders would have to be made illegal. He seems quite optimistic should these recommendations be followed: “homelessness would almost disappear” (Desmond, 2016, p.308).

No ethnography on evictions has been published in Poland yet, but Siemieniako’s book points to the breadth of the subject. By way of ethnographies, we could reveal and give voice to the women and men who struggle daily on the verge of homelessness, and thus remain largely unseen by homelessness statistics and their stories watered-down in general statistics on precarious or insecure housing. Ethnographies, however cannot fall short of explanations and stop at shocking accounts about maggots in sinks and sagged ceilings.

Intersectional approaches to dimensions of exclusion could be powerful tools to explain the way evictions are experienced and managed and could provide an analytical framework for the ethnographic account. One of the most often cited fragment from Desmond’s book points precisely to this intersection of race, gender and poverty: “If incarceration had come to define the lives of men from impoverished black neighbourhoods, eviction was shaping the lives of women. Poor black men were locked up. Poor black women were locked out” (Desmond, 2016, p.98).

But it is only when we meet Arleen, Doreen, Lamar, Scott and their children, that we learn what eviction looks like. When we face the stories of Maria and Iwona from Warsaw, Marta and the anonymous mothers from Wałbrzych, we may understand what it feels like to be constantly harassed in one’s own home. We also need to

meet Tobin and Shereena, the landlords from Milwaukee, the officials in the Warsaw's city hall and "reprivatisation entrepreneurs" like Marek M., to see that poverty is not just low income, poor jobs and bad luck, but to understand it as an unequal relationship. These books let us see the housing market as one that is not just walls or lack of thereof, but also as a system that creates power imbalance, poverty and despair.

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