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**''Housing is a human right. Here to stay, here to fight'': Resisting housing displacement through gendered, legal and tenured activism**

### *Introduction*

Recent years have seen housing displacement become increasingly commonplace across the globe, including in the Global North. Particularly since the 1980s, neoliberal ideologies have reconstituted the meaning of housing, from predominately the provision of home and shelter, to a financialised source of profit (Aalbers, 2016). This marketisation of housing is reflected in, for example, now-embedded understandings of homeownership as the aspirational tenure, and property investment as a sound financial strategy for both individuals and corporations. This reframing of housing's very purpose has subsequently catalysed a range of processes that contribute to housing displacement. These include, but are not limited to, gentrification and 'urban regeneration' projects that displace lower-income communities, the mass privatisation of social housing stock, and increasingly punitive welfare systems that financially constrain society's most vulnerable.

It is therefore unsurprising that in this context grassroots activism has developed a multifaceted portfolio of resistance that seeks to reject the increasing normalisation of housing displacement. This chapter draws on a range of methods utilised by communities in various locations around the world to resist and subvert housing displacement. I focus on three methods in particular. Firstly, using examples from Phnom Penh and East London, I explore the ways in which women's presumed natural

attachment to the home is utilised as a gendered method of highlighting housing injustice. Secondly, I focus on methods of resistance to housing displacement that focus on interactions with the law. Using examples from a squatter settlement in New Delhi and social media groups in the UK, I explore the ways in which people for whom the law usually acts as a marginalising force is repurposed as a means of protection from displacement. Both sections highlight the ways in which modes that usually exacerbate oppression and vulnerability, such as the control of women through the domestic sphere, or the marginalisation of those considered to be illegal subjects, are subverted as means of empowerment and agency in the fight against housing displacement.

Thirdly and finally, the chapter examines methods of resistance to housing displacement that seek to fundamentally rework and rethink normative neoliberal constructions of homeownership as the ideal form of tenure. I do so through discussion of squatting and co-housing communities in Copenhagen and Leeds.

This threefold set of examples highlight that, in a time where housing displacement is becoming ever-more normative across a wide range of contexts, resistance has taken increasingly creative forms. Whilst privatisation, speculation and forced evictions continue to displace people and communities across the world, the importance of secure housing equally continues to be central to activists' fight for a more equitable world.

### Gender performativity and housing activism

Housing and home have long been narrativised as gendered space: a site best placed for women to enact their assumed 'natural' roles as mothers and home-makers (Blunt and Dowling, 2006). This 'mutual identification of the woman, the mother and the home' (Morley, 2000: 63) has historically embedded the oppression of women through the social, cultural, political, and in some cases legal, denial of their rights to life outside of the domestic sphere. This has been concurrent with the dismissal of domestic work (housework, child-rearing, and so on) as having less socio-economic worth than paid labour outside of the home (Oakley, 1974; Mainardi, 1975).

It therefore follows that housing displacement and forced eviction is not a gender-neutral phenomenon. Rather, such processes disproportionately affect women (Brickell et al, 2017; Ryan, 2017; Watt, 2018). This is due in part to factors relating to expectations of women as primarily responsible for the home and family, and mothers being less likely to be in paid employment due to such caring responsibilities (Fernandez Arrigoitia, 2017; Watt, 2018). However, in the face of increasing housing displacement and forced eviction across the world, women activists have subverted these gendered expectations of their role in the home, utilising traditional assumptions that narrativise women as mothers and homemakers as a performative tool for resisting housing displacement.

For example, Katherine Brickell's (2014) research with women activists in Cambodia revealed the ways in which women protesting the demolition of their homes in the Boeung Kak Lake region of Phnom Penh deployed gendered strategies of resistance. The Boeung Kak Lake (BKL) region of Cambodia's capital consisted of neighbourhoods reliant on harvesting and fishing industries provided by the lake's resources. In 2007 the lake area was leased for ninety-nine years from the Municipality of Phnom Penh to a Chinese-backed private development company. Over the past decade, the lake has been drained and thousands of locals evicted from their homes to make way for a high-end private development.

The resultant displacement was controversial in its sweeping destruction of both the lake and its surrounding neighbourhoods without public consultation, and the regular use of violence against local residents. In response to the brutal eviction of residents and their subsequent displacement across Phnom Penh, a grassroots activist movement, led by the women of BKL, emerged, whereby wives, mothers, and other female activists fronted a nonviolent social action campaign. Women's central role in resisting displacement in this context was rationalised partly on a practical basis, as a means of reducing violent responses from the municipality and developers and limiting disruption to local men's incomes. However, the campaign was also understood explicitly as a ''women's struggle'' due to Cambodian women's traditional responsibilities relating to sustaining a stable and secure home life (Brickell, 2014). As Brickell recounts, BKL activists drew upon their traditional connection to home as wives and mothers using a number of strategies, for example by wearing models of

houses, nests, and other imagery associated with the home during protests that alluded to ''...the loss of habitat and warmth once provisioned through BKL homes'' (Brickell, 2014: 1265). Other tactics included stripping to their underwear outside the Cambodian parliament as a symbolic expression of their being stripped of their housing rights, and relatedly their increased exposure and vulnerability brought about by displacement. Although redevelopment and displacement continued in the region, the women activists of BKL nonetheless accrued wide levels of national media attention, bringing to light the injustice of their displacement, a fact which would likely have gone unnoticed were it not for their gendered displays of resistance.

In the UK context, gendered performativity as a method of resisting housing displacement has been utilised by the well-documented London-based activist group Focus E15. The group originally consisted of homeless single mothers housed in a hostel in the East London borough of Newham. When in 2013 the hostel began evicting tenants due to public funding cuts, residents were told that they would be moved as far from London as Birmingham and Hull, miles from their jobs, their children's schools and family networks. In response, the soon-to-be evicted group set up their campaign and protested regularly outside Newham Council's offices. The group gained high levels of local, and eventually national, media coverage which eventually led to their being rehoused in Newham rather than elsewhere (Watt, 2016). In the wake of this victory, Focus E15 became involved in housing activism more broadly, and the group has become ubiquitous in the struggle against gentrification and displacement in London. The group run a weekly street stall, organise protests and public meetings, and their chant ''Housing is a human right. Here to stay, here to fight'' has become a well-known call for housing justice in and beyond the capital.

In September 2014, they engaged in their most well-known and widely publicised direct- action campaign, occupying a disused block of flats on the Carpenter's Estate in Stratford, East London (close to the site of London's Olympic Park). The block had been earmarked for demolition in order to make way for a new University College London (UCL) campus as part of wider regeneration plans in the area. However, despite the collapse of the UCL contract (in part due to the controversy surrounding the planned evictions), Newham Council continued to decant residents from perfectly functional social housing under the auspices that regeneration of the site would eventually occur

(Watt, 2013). As a response to this, empty flats on the estate were opened by Focus E15 and used as a social centre, hosting a daily programme of events including workshops, classes and performances. The two-week occupation had some success, leading to the partial re-opening of the flats for people in priority housing need (Watt, 2016).

Although their membership now extends beyond that of single mothers, and their current campaigns are far-reaching across different elements of the housing crisis, the Focus E15 collective remain most well-known as a gendered group. Their position within the popular imaginary as young single mothers being evicted and threatened with displacement across the country has proved a large factor in their popularity and influence. Through fore-fronting their position as young mothers without a home to raise their children, Focus E15 became symbolic of gendered housing precarity and displacement in London.

The strategies used by the BKL activists and Focus E15 mobilised gender norms, in two disparate cultural contexts, to act as a means of shaming those responsible for housing displacement. They did so by making public the ways in which such displacement actively strips away women's access to domestic life.  Such methods directed responsibility towards government and corporate actors whose decision-making has put at risk groups deemed to be particularly in need of housing and home: women, and most notably mothers and homemakers. Both the BKL activists and Focus E15 are therefore clear examples of the ways in which modes of oppression themselves, in this case gendered oppression and assumptions relating to women's place in the home, can be subverted as a tool of resistance to housing displacement.


*Reconstructing the law as a tool of resistance*


Legal frameworks are often utilised by the state and other bodies of governance as a means of enacting housing displacement and dispossession. This is due in part to legal knowledge and professional support in countering housing displacement regularly being out of reach, financially and socially, for those most vulnerable to eviction and dispossession. This is exacerbated by national legal systems and loopholes that often protect the most powerful stakeholders in relation to property, via for example tax

breaks for landlords, and wider legal cultures that prioritise the rights of property owners above rights to home or shelter (Forrest and Hirayama, 2014). The law, then, tends to be understood as a barrier, rather than an aid, to resisting housing displacement. As Hubbard and Lees note in relation to legal geographies scholarship, ''there is a view that there is a fundamental disconnect between progressive publics and the state, and that the law tends to support extractive, exclusionary and coercive state policies'' (Hubbard and Lees, 2018: 9).

And yet, just as the law is utilised to instil urban spatial injustice and facilitate housing displacement, it can also provide important entry points for activists to reclaim their rights to housing and home. Similarly to the ways in which women activists utilised traditional assumptions relating to gender and the home in their activism strategies, the law, too, is reworked and repurposed by activists resisting housing displacement. This chapter draws out two examples, of a New Delhi squatter settlement and an online community in the UK, to demonstrate the varied ways in which resistance is enacted through the reworking of legal frameworks by those at the sharp end of housing law.

Ayona Datta's research with residents of a squatter settlement on the periphery of New Delhi highlights the ways in which people living in illegal settlements are exceptionalised through law: rendered illegal subjects in need of control and containment through a force of law (Datta, 2012; Derrida, 1992). For them, the law is not an abstract notion, but a material and cultural violence that they must confront on a daily basis. This everyday force of law occurs for example through the continuous threat of demolition of residents' homes, and their status as illegal subjects limiting their access to legal housing (Datta, 2012).

In order to negotiate this everyday violence of law, settlement residents have developed ways of utilising legal frameworks to protect themselves as best they can from displacement and dismissal. Like the women activists of BKL and Newham, the Delhi settlers sought to rework the very structures that made them vulnerable to displacement in the first place. For example, Datta traces the ways in which squatters use their legal exceptionalism to recontextualise the law for their benefit. One method places emphasis on laws and policies pertaining to positive discrimination within the Indian Constitution. For example, residents used their lower-caste, low-income, and/or tribal status to legitimise, through legal frameworks, their need to be resettled in formal

housing. This was enacted through referencing elements of the Indian Constitution that promote positive discrimination for marginalised groups. As Datta notes, ''the legal subjecthood embodied in the constitution as fundamental rights, as low-castes, or as women has now become the only political resource towards making claims to shelter'' (Datta, 2012: 26). Another iteration of this strategy was residents' connections to and work with NGOs. Links to such organisations were in part a means of legitimising residents as political actors, a performance of legal knowledge and collective action that contributes to residents' moral claims to a legal home if and when large-scale resettlement finally occurs (Datta, 2012). The actions of the Delhi squatters are therefore an example of when those vulnerable to displacement through their position as illegal and marginalised subjects attempt to utilise these same vulnerabilities as a legal argument for their protection.

Whilst the squatters documented in Datta's research repurposed the law to frame themselves as having a right to a legal home when resettled, in different contexts legal spheres have been used to demand a 'right to remain' in order to resist housing displacement altogether. In the UK, for example, this can be seen through legal activism relating to the 'bedroom tax'.

The bedroom tax was introduced in England and Wales in 2013 by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010-15) in 2012 as an element of the Welfare Reform Act, a series of legislative and policy measures that overhauled the country's welfare system. Borne out of the aftermath of financial recession and the emergence of a social, political and economic discourse centred on austerity rhetoric, the Act introduced a suite of policies that penalised people in receipt of benefits, further entrenching the stigmatisation of those most likely to be in need of financial support, such as disabled and low-income people (Nowicki, 2017; 2018).

The housing component of the Welfare Act, officially termed the 'removal of the spare room subsidy', but known colloquially as the bedroom tax, applies to social (council or housing association) tenants in receipt of housing benefit in the UK (but excluding Scotland). Since April 2013 (2017 in Northern Ireland), if a social tenant is deemed to have one or more 'spare' bedroom in their home (according to government guidelines), then the amount of housing benefit they are entitled to is reduced (by 14% for one 'spare' bedroom, or 25% for two or more). Ostensibly a solution to issues of

overcrowding and under-occupation in the social housing sector, and a method of reducing the national welfare deficit, the bedroom tax has disproportionately affected people living with mental and physical disabilities, who often need extra room to store mobility or medical equipment, or need to sleep in a separate bedroom from their partner due to their condition (Moffatt et al, 2016). Displacement, and the threat of displacement, occurs through eviction as a consequence of rising rent arrears where tenants are no longer able to keep up with rent payments due to cuts to their housing benefit (Nowicki, 2017).

Resisting housing displacement in this context is inhibited by the bedroom tax both affecting people disproportionately likely to have mobility issues, and the widespread impact the policy has had on geographically disparate communities across the UK. This has in turn impacted the ways in which those opposed to the policy have shaped their resistive strategies. Social media in particular has provided an invaluable means of legal knowledge exchange and resistance among tenants affected by the bedroom tax. For example, Facebook groups have been established as a way of not only sharing grievances regarding the policy's impact, but to actively encourage resistance through the exchange and cultivation of legal knowledge. This occurs through people posting details of their specific circumstances on the group pages and asking other members for advice regarding how they might appeal their local authority's decision to implement the bedroom tax. For example, many people often post queries relating to the size and shapes of their rooms, looking for advice on the eligibility of launching an appeal on the basis that what their local authority has deemed a 'spare bedroom' is legally too small to be classed as such. Other group members respond by posting previous disputes that claimants have won on this basis in order to help members build their own case. Using amalgamated knowledge of tribunal decisions around bedroom tax appeal cases, group members encourage one another to take legal action and appeal local authority decisions. Here, an everyday method of communication is utilised to access legal knowledge that many people might otherwise find difficult to access. Social media therefore acts as a site through which resistance to the bedroom tax can be sought and rights to remain (Hubbard and Lees, 2018) in their homes re-established.

In both of the examples outlined above, the legal structures so often used to evict and displace vulnerable people are reworked to serve the purposes of those at threat of

displacement. Although occurring in different social, cultural and legal contexts, both instances highlight the importance of understanding the nuanced potential of legal spheres as a means of protecting vulnerable communities from housing displacement.

***Resistance for the long-term? Challenging normative constructions of tenure***

The third and final strategy of resistance to housing displacement discussed in this chapter focuses on challenges to normative neoliberal constructions of tenure. The section examines the ways in which activists seek to break away from presiding narratives of housing as a financial asset above and beyond its function as home (Aalbers, 2016). Unlike the previous two sets of examples, the methods utilised here are less a subversion of oppressive practices, and more a direct challenge to normative tenure conditions that contribute to increased housing displacement. Specifically, I highlight two, connected, methods of resisting displacement through alternative home-making that defy the financialisation of housing: squatting and co-operative housing.

Particularly in the Global North context, housing displacement has been underpinned by neoliberal logics that over the past several decades have promoted an agenda of the hyper-privatisation of housing (Jarvis, 2013). This has in part led to the mass privatisation of social housing stock in many countries, and the displacement of communities from their neighbourhoods through processes such as gentrification and 'urban regeneration' policies that capitalise on the monetary value of inner-city neighbourhoods at the expense of their usually working-class residents (see for example Lees, 2000; Hamnett, 2003; Minton, 2017). Housing and household formations that do not comply with the framing of housing as a profitable entity, rather than an invaluable element of human wellbeing, are subsequently dismissed and delegitimised (Minton, 2017). Political, social and cultural narratives promote the derision of non-normative tenures, through for example now long-entrenched conceptions of social tenants and those in receipt of welfare provision more widely as 'benefits scroungers' and 'welfare queens' (Tyler, 2013; Hancock, 2004). And yet, there is much in the way of housing activism that seeks to resist displacement through challenging these very notions of housing as financialised product. Activist methods such as squatting in part

call for a return to understanding housing as a site of potential collectivisation and care rather than individual profiteering.

Squatting movements and collectives have, throughout history and across a range of geographical contexts, been at the forefront of this non-compliance with housing as a financial good. Particularly in the European context, squatters regularly posit themselves as challenging housing precarity, property speculation and the increasingly displacing effects of urban regeneration schemes (Vasudevan, 2017; Reeve, 2009). As Vasudevan notes, "the history of urban squatting has always been closely connected to housing insecurity and the efforts of ordinary people to secure their own right to housing and the basic fundamentals of survival." (2017: 239).

Resisting housing displacement through squatting varies widely in scale and scope. Squatting movements operate on a range of scales, from the occupation of single buildings, to the establishment of entire autonomous squatted neighbourhoods. Copenhagen's Freetown Christiania is perhaps the most well-known example of large-scale squatting in the Western context. A former military barracks, Christiania was squatted in the early 1970s as a response to a lack of affordable housing. The neighbourhood's approximately 1,000 residents have over the past four decades developed their own set of rules, separate from Danish law, including an absence of privately-owned property (Jarvis, 2013). Although no longer technically squatted, as a deal with the Danish state in 2012 enabled residents to collectively purchase the neighbourhood, squatting's anti-capitalist principles continue to be central to Christiania's ethos. This continued commitment to providing an alternative to housing tenure that centres on ownership and profitability was cemented by the inclusion of a clause in the 2012 deal whereby residents have a right to occupy, but not buy or sell property in the neighbourhood. In this way, the residents of Christiania have continued to enact policies of 'degrowth', focusing on affordability and community, and "human relations over market relations" (Jarvis, 2018; 2017) placing it in direct opposition to normative constructions of what constitutes a successful housing system.

The legitimisation of the area through the 2012 deal enabled the community to both directly protect themselves from housing displacement, and more broadly challenge normative understandings of housing markets (Jarvis, 2013). Christiania, then, is not

only a successful example of resistance to housing displacement because of its eventual legitimisation, but perhaps more importantly it is evidence that normative models of housing tenure and markets centred on profitability can be overthrown. In short, that it is possible to live in secure housing free from the threats of displacement and eviction that the financialisation of housing has so deeply entrenched and normalised (Aalbers, 2016).

Another important, and related, method of resisting housing displacement through the establishment of secure and equitable tenure is that of co-housing. Co-housing schemes seek to work outside of top-down, elite-led models of change, producing grassroots, post-capitalist forms of housing (Chatterton, 2016; Jarvis et al, 2016). These models are designed in part to disintegrate the now-normative threat of housing displacement by ensuring residents themselves are the lead decision-makers regarding their housing and communities. Unlike normative neoliberal market-oriented forms of housing tenure, co-housing principles are re-oriented towards an 'urban commons' (Kornberger and Borch, 2015; Chatterton, 2016; Bunce, 2016). For example, LILAC, a co-operative development in Leeds in the north of England, operates through what is referred to as a 'mutual homeownership scheme' whereby each member has a lease providing them with a democratic stake in the scheme. Residents pay an equity share in the development based on their income, rather than on any valuation of their property (LILAC, 2018). This enables the scheme to remain affordable for lower-income residents and removes the threat of housing displacement. Residents are embedded in their housing and neighbourhoods, rather than disposable subjects under threat of displacement should they lose their jobs or be evicted from their homes by developers or landlords seeking higher rental incomes.

Relatedly, in recent years there has also been a growing international interest in another form of co-housing, community land trusts (CLT). In recent decades CLTs have been developed in a range of countries, including the USA, Kenya and the UK (Moore and McKee, 2012). CLTs focus on empowering and granting agency to local communities regarding their housing needs through the democratic management of assets. CLTs' aims include suppressing property and land values by retaining a portion of equity from any sales, keeping housing affordable no matter how many times it is sold, and regardless of local housing markets (Moore and McKee, 2012; Bunce, 2016).

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The rapid growth of CLTs (for example, half of the CLTs in existence in the USA in 2012 were founded after 2000) (Moore and McKee, 2012), has in large part been catalysed by growing housing unaffordability, rising insecurity of tenure and increases in displacement-inducing processes such as gentrification. For example, in the UK, the East London Community Land Trust, London's first CLT, is developing community-led regeneration plans on the site of a former hospital in Tower Hamlets, an area that would ordinarily be classed as an area of high financial value (Bunce, 2016).

Although not a new concept, the growing interest in and commitment to co-housing models in part highlights a heightened sense of urgency and grassroots desire to rethink and rework normative housing systems. Whilst squatting is regularly hampered by its increasing illegality in many countries, including the UK and the Netherlands (Vasudevan, 2017; Reeve, 2015), co-housing efforts seek to circumvent this by carving out space for secure tenures and the maintenance of communities under threat of displacement through legally and politically legitimate means. Whilst there are certainly issues with co-housing models, most notably in relation to their relatively small scale and the large time and financial commitments required to establish such developments, they nonetheless pose an opportunity for the provision of long-term, sustainable solutions to housing displacement.

### *Conclusions*

This chapter has sought to highlight the multifaceted ways in which resistance to housing displacement is enacted and performed by an equally wide-ranging group of people. From Cambodia to Copenhagen, Newham to New Delhi, vulnerable communities are developing an array of creative methods in order to protect their homes.

The aim of this chapter, then, has not been to provide a comprehensive overview of all housing activism, but rather to highlight the multifaceted nature of resistance to and subversion of housing injustice. In the case of the resistance methods that utilised gendered and legal frameworks, the very structures often used to oppress, displace and erase people from their homes and neighbourhoods were reformulated as ways in

which to resist these violent acts. And in relation to the examples of squatting and co-housing movements in the final section of the chapter, one of the root causes of increased housing displacement, the financialisation of housing, is itself being challenged, and alternatives eked out.

However, despite the continued and wide-ranging efforts of activists and communities, the threat of housing displacement remains a normative, everyday experience for many. It is only through the continued dedication and creativity of those seeking to resist such displacement that affordable, sustainable, and equitable forms of housing will infiltrate mainstream housing markets in the long-term.

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