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SUB-LETTING AND TRAPPED: ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN SHARING ACCOMMODATIONS

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Why this matter?

We often think of home as a refuge → a sanctuary where we can rest, reconnect, and feel safe. 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 organization studies.

But feminist geographers have long cautioned us against romanticizing the home. For many, especially women and migrants, the home is not a site of security, but of discipline, negotiation, and fear.

- Massey (1994) wrote, *space is never neutral.*
- Rose (1993), Blunt & Varley (2004), and Pain (2014) have shown, domestic space in particular is a political site — shaped by gender, class, and power.

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Why this matter?

The growing trend of shared accommodations as a solution to housing shortages presents unique challenges. Women in these living situations often face a complex interplay of social, economic, and psychological stressors. Understanding these challenges is critical for developing effective policies and interventions that support women in achieving stable and secure housing.

Our research aims to provide a critical examination of how housing insecurity and processes of home unmaking can intensify existing structural vulnerabilities. This builds and adds to recent work that sees vulnerability as a structural condition rather than some sort of inherent fragility.

This is of very important organizational significance as the home, the places we live in, are seen as vital infrastructures of care (Power & Mee, 2020), and are crucial to interventions that experiment with forms of social repairing (Sennet, 2012).

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Far less attention has been paid to those in informal tenure arrangements, particularly room renters without legal contracts or recognition. These tenants often remain statistically invisible and politically marginalised, caught between legal grey areas and social neglect (Fuster et al., 2022). As Vasudevan (2015) notes, informality does not imply a lack of structure, but rather the presence of unregulated, often coercive forms of ordering. In this context, exclusion is not always about displacement from the home but can take the form of *being trapped within it*.

What kind of home is this?
Who has control over it?
Who is visible within it, and who must hide?

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Methodology

50 life-story interviews with women sub-letting rooms in shared flats in Barcelona. The majority were migrants, from Latin America, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa. Recruitment was carried out through social service providers, grassroots feminist organizations, housing rights collectives, and online networks. All participants were over the age of eighteen and identified as women, including both cisgender and transgender individuals. Eligibility was based on their current experience of housing insecurity within shared domestic spaces, settings that often escape institutional visibility yet deeply shape everyday life.

Using a social-symbolic framework (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019), we analyzed their narratives across three domains:

- Material: what the physical space enables or restricts.
- Relational: the interpersonal dynamics within the household.
- Discursive: how women make sense of home, risk, and dignity.

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Reflexivity was central to our methodology. Throughout the research process, we engaged in ongoing critical reflection about our own positions, assumptions, and the power relations inherent in qualitative research.

By combining a social-symbolic approach with an ethic of feminist reflexivity, our methodology illuminates how the home, as place, practice, and promise, is not only a site of potential shelter or exclusion, but also a terrain of meaning, resistance, and everyday negotiation. In doing so, we aim to contribute to emerging debates in housing studies that centre lived experience, informal tenure, and the politics of domestic precarity.

We identified four themes that define this experience:

- Time as a trap
- Relational isolation
- Insecurity as a daily condition
- Submission as a survival strategy

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TIMES AS A TRAP

"I came for one month. It's been five years. I've never unpacked."

"*a waiting room*," "*a holding pen*," "*a place where life is paused*."

This is what Kim, Bansal, and Haugh (2018) describe as the long present — a time without progression, a state of suspended time, in which the future remains indefinitely deferred. You don't plan in the long present. You don't invest in routines. You don't decorate. You don't invite. You wait. And when you live in a long present, everything — relationships, work, motherhood — becomes harder to hold onto. Time becomes not a measure of progress, but of endurance. This impacts everything: family reunification, job searching, rest, mental health.

As one mother said: "*You don't dream in a room. You calculate.*"

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RELATIONAL ISOLATION

These rooms are shared — but not socially. We tend to imagine the home as a site of love and connection.
But for many of these women, it is a place of social and emotional restriction. Some are forbidden from receiving visitors. Others hide the existence of their children.

These stories reveal a pattern: the home as a place of "withdrawal", not connection. Of hiding, not welcoming. Some women lie about where they live. Others tell their children to remain silent. Intimacy becomes a threat — not a possibility.

I don't bring people home. I don't want them to see how I live. I'm ashamed. It's not a place for visitors.

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RELATIONAL ISOLATION

Isolation → ot just loneliness. But a deep sense of invisibility — of not being able to fully exist in the place where you live. These are women who live in shared apartments, surrounded by people — and yet they feel completely alone. They can't bring friends. They avoid conversations. They hide parts of their lives — sometimes even from themselves.

I live inside the closet. Not metaphorically — literally. I keep all my belongings in a wardrobe. I sleep next to it. That's my space.

The lack of personal space and constant negotiation over communal areas created an environment of perpetual discord. This tension was not limited to physical altercations but extended to psychological stress, as individuals felt they were continually on edge, unable to relax in their own homes. The overcrowded conditions exacerbated these feelings, as the limited space intensified the competition for resources and the frequency of conflicts.

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INSECURITY, POWER AND CONTROL

Third, a sense of physical, emotional, and ontological insecurity, which seems to leave them in a position of heightened vulnerability. This pervasive sense of insecurity stemmed from both the physical conditions of their accommodations and the social dynamics within them. Many women recounted experiences of harassment, theft, and even violence, which contributed to a constant state of alertness and fear. The transient nature of these living situations also meant that relationships with fellow tenants were often superficial, lacking the trust and mutual support that could mitigate feelings of vulnerability.

A lack of trust among cohabitants compounded these forms of insecurity. The fragility of relationships and the transient nature of tenancy produced an environment where mutual support was rare, and suspicion was normalized. In extreme cases, participants recounted episodes of sexual violence or abuse that remained unaddressed by landlords or public services.

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SUBMISSION AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY

And fourth, a sentiment of having nothing more than to accept and acquiesce to imposed norms and restrictions, e.g., in the use of commons spaces, kitchen, bathrooms, heating systems, with resistance to allegedly unacceptable living conditions being seen as opening the door to homelessness.

Despite these harsh conditions, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience through a range of adaptive strategies that allowed them to assert **agency** within the narrow margins available to them. These coping mechanisms were diverse, creative, and deeply embodied. Some women formed informal networks of solidarity within the household or with neighbours in similar situations. These small acts of reterritorialization offered not only momentary relief but also a form of everyday resistance against the spatial and social fragmentation imposed by their housing conditions.

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CONCLUSSIONS

Our findings disrupt normative imaginaries of the home as a site of safety, intimacy, and stability. For the women in our study, the sub-let bedroom is a space of surveillance, constraint, and resignation, a space that denies autonomy, limits care and erodes agency. These dynamics are not incidental but deeply structured by the intersecting logics of neoliberal housing markets, restrictive immigration regimes, and welfare retrenchment. In this sense, the informal room rental regime operates not at the margins of the housing system, but as a core expression of its current configuration.

Barcelona, while specific in its urban history and housing politics, reflects broader Southern European and global patterns: cities where financialized urban development, tourism-driven inflation, and inadequate housing policy intersect to push vulnerable populations into invisible, informal arrangements. This underscores the need to theorize informal tenancies not as exceptions, but as constitutive of contemporary housing systems.

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CONCLUSSIONS

1. First, sub-let bedrooms in Barcelona, far from serving as a liberatory alternative, often function as sites of constraint, particularly for women with limited housing options.
2. Second, these sub-let spaces are emotionally fraught and psychologically taxing. Brickell's (2012) conceptualization of home as a geopolitical and gendered space captures the tension: our participants describe their rooms as regulated, surveilled, and emotionally exhausting.
3. Third, relational fragmentation is pronounced. The suppression of routines like hosting visitors, performing care, or leisure significantly depletes relational networks.
4. Fourth, ontological insecurity is deeply embedded. Narratives of harassment, forced privacy compromises, and emotional exhaustion illustrate a persistent state of alertness.
5. Fifth, the state's role emerges as a critical dimension. Our life stories reinforce this critique: women interacting with social services frequently experienced emotional exhaustion, referral cycles, and feelings of abandonment.
6. Finally, mental health impacts were ubiquitous. Elevated anxiety, emotional distress, and psychosomatic symptoms were common.

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CONCLUSSIONS

Still, participants showed forms of resilience. Whether through peer networks, micro-reclamation of space, or aspirational planning, many created low-tech infrastructures of care. Simone's (2004) "people as infrastructure" framework captures this well, though such resilience remains fragile and resource constrained. These strategies reveal the emotional and relational circuits sustaining women under sub-let regimes.

Barcelona's housing landscape, shaped by financialization, insufficient public supply, and rotating informal markets, is emblematic of post-austerity urban dynamics. Recent studies show how these conditions produce "off-radar" housing modalities, from sub-letting to precarious room rentals that remain statistically invisible yet deeply harmful (Spencer et al., 2020).

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As Judith Butler writes: *Precarity is not the same as vulnerability. It is a politically induced condition, one that can be dismantled.*

As Tronto (1993) argues, *care is not a private virtue — it is a public necessity.*

And as Power and Mee (2020) insist: *housing is care infrastructure.*

Meanwhile, Spain has one of the lowest rates of public housing in Europe — just 2.5%. And in cities like Barcelona, housing is increasingly treated as a financial asset, not as a social good. Cáritas reports that 70% of the households they support can't pay rent. The system is failing. And women are absorbing the cost.

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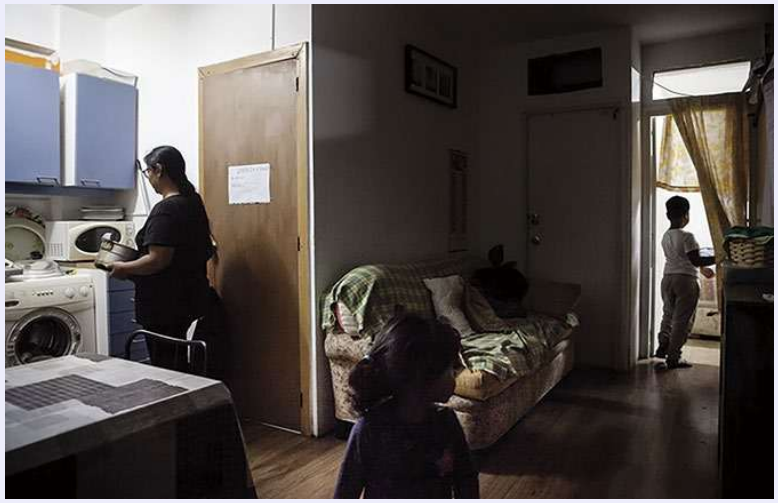
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recognize sub-let tenants, even informally. Legal visibility is the first step toward protection.
2. Include room renters in housing diagnostics and public policy, using frameworks like ETHOS 8.2.
3. Guarantee access to health, schooling, and registration regardless of contract status.
4. Invest in mediation services, tenant support programs, and community housing inspectors, especially in low-income neighborhoods.
5. Shift from housing as commodity to housing as care infrastructure. This means funding not just units, but supports, emotional, legal, and relational.



Thank you!

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