

Gendered and classed homelessness: A life-history analysis on displaced survival in Lisbon

Género, classe e exclusão habitacional: Histórias de vida sobre a sobrevivência das desalojadas

Saila-Maria Saaristo¹

Abstract

This article examines the gendered and classed dynamics of homelessness and displacements in Portugal. I use the lens of displaced survival to bring light to the complex web of relations that promote the housing exclusion of low-wage single mothers. I show how these families, expelled from housing programmes and unable to afford housing in the private rental sector, are left to suffer from a cycle of displacements, leading to accentuated poverty and dispossession, which also leads to over-generational perpetuation of poverty. Methodologically the study draws from life-history interviews and policy analysis, conducted from 2017 to 2019 in Lisbon. In addition to being exploited within paid and unpaid labour and having to pay an unaffordable rent, displacements and evictions exacerbate the dispossession and poverty of these families, given that their specific conditions as low-income single mothers are not recognised within the policy responses.

Keywords: displacement, care work, social reproduction, homelessness, gender, Portugal

Resumo

Este artigo analisa as dinâmicas de género e classe presentes nas exclusões habitacionais em Portugal, utilizando o conceito de sobrevivência das desalojadas para trazer luz à complexa teia de relações que promovem a exclusão habitacional das mães solteiras de baixos salários. Mostro como estas famílias, expulsas dos programas de habitação e incapazes de pagar a habitação no sector de arrendamento privado, são deixadas a sofrer um ciclo de deslocações, levando a uma acentuada pobreza e despossessão, o que também leva a uma perpetuação da pobreza em excesso através de gerações. Metodologicamente, o estudo baseia-se em entrevistas de história de vida e análise de políticas de habitação, realizadas entre 2017 e 2019 em Lisboa. Para além de serem exploradas no contexto do trabalho remunerado e não remunerado e de terem de pagar uma renda inabarcável, deslocações e despejos exacerbam a desapropriação e a pobreza destas famílias, dado que as suas condições específicas como mães solteiras de baixos rendimentos não são reconhecidas no âmbito das respostas políticas.

Palavras-chave: despejo, cuidados, reprodução social, exclusão habitacional, género, Portugal

¹ DINÂMIA'CET-Iscte, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Portugal, saila_maria.saaristo [at] iscte-iul.pt

Introduction

“I’m 31 years old. I’ve been moving every year for ten years, and I still have no housing solution for myself and my children. If they [the municipal police] knocked on my door at this moment, I’d have nowhere to go! I can go to a friend’s house, then to another, maybe I can drag it out for a month. And then what?”

In April 2019, this was how Sara summarized her situation. For the last one year and a half, she had been occupying a council home in a social housing estate, engaging in what the Lisbon City Council called *ocupações abusivas*, ‘abusive occupations’. At that time, her home was one of the 305 council homes that were occupied without permission in Lisbon, out of a total of 26,592 apartments, of which 2,637 were vacant (INE, 2016). This article provides an account of the efforts of single mother-headed households as they struggle for decent housing and survival in Lisbon. In scholarly literature on the housing crisis, the dominant market-based approach to housing has been questioned by pointing to the financialization of housing (Barata Salgueiro, 1994; Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2019; Harvey, 2005; Santos, 2019; Sassen, 2014) and austerity policies (Caldas, 2012; Gillespie et al., 2022; Mendes, 2017; Nowicki, 2017; Peck, 2012; Seixas et al., 2015) after the 2008 global financial crisis as significant explanatory factors to housing exclusions. The impact of gender and race on homelessness has also attracted considerable attention, with literature that examines the kind of specific challenges and discriminatory practices that women, non-binary, transgender and racialized people might face in accessing housing, as well as assessing the effectiveness of existing policies in addressing gender and racial disparities and identifies potential policy recommendations to mitigate housing exclusions (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Bretherton, 2017; Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; Kern & Mullings, 2013; Lewinson et al., 2014; Pleave, 2015; Roy, 2017; Smolen & Harrison, 2013).

Even broader focus has been attempted, recognizing that experiences of housing insecurity and discrimination are shaped by multiple intersecting factors, with the aim of fostering wide-ranging housing justice (Roy et al., 2019). Yet, few researchers have addressed the question of how housing exclusions relate to other essential commodities, such as labour power (tenants, debtors) and money (wages, rents, welfare payments), which can contribute to masking the class, gender, and racial relations that are inherent to the production of urban displacements (Soederberg, 2021). Many women, especially racialized women, struggling against displacements and housing precarity work in the precarious low-wage service sector (Sassen, 2009; Soederberg, 2021), notably in the care sector (Farris, 2013; Ferguson & McNally, 2015; Tronto, 2013), not earning a sufficient salary to cover living costs. In addition to being exploited in wage labour, they are also made responsible for unpaid reproductive labour (Federici, 2004; Tronto, 2013). This feminization of poverty is related to ‘feminization of housing deficit’ (Pestana Lages, 2022), with women disproportionately affected by housing precarity. During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty rates started to exacerbate in Portugal, and it has been concluded that women with precarious employment contracts, poor single-parent households, as well as large households facing poverty and overcrowding, are population groups that have been hit especially hard by the pandemic (EAPN Portugal, 2020), while the measures launched to compensate for housing precarities caused by the pandemic have been largely inadequate and insufficient (Pestana Lages, 2022).

In this article, I use the lens of displaced survival to examine homelessness and displacements in contemporary Lisbon. In doing that, my objective is to mobilize this conceptual framework to bring light to the complex web of relations that promote the housing exclusion of low-wage single mothers. I show how these families, expelled from housing programmes and unable to afford housing in the private rental sector, are left to suffer from a cycle of displacements, leading to accentuated poverty and dispossession, which also leads to over-generational perpetuation of poverty. I argue that their housing exclusions are profoundly affected by their positions as ‘disposable’ workers within the low-wage service sector, mainly the care-domestic sector; by their general position as women and mothers, responsible for social reproduction; and by their omission of the policy responses to homelessness.

The next section will discuss how displacements intersect with care work, bringing in the notion of displaced survival. The proposed theoretical framework is also completed by analysing how the gendered nature of homelessness has been understood in relevant policies. In the following section, this study is contextualized within historical and current housing struggles in Portugal. Section 4

goes on to explain the methodology and present the research materials used for this study. Section 5, divided into four subsections, examines the research materials, analysing diverse facets that contributed to gendered, classed, and racialized forms of homelessness. Section 6 summarizes the central findings of the study, highlighting the impacts of various forms of exploitation and inequalities as faced by the women interviewed. The concluding section considers the implications of the research findings, arguing that the analyzed practices and policies need to be conceived as political choices.

Displaced survival of caregivers

Displaced survival, as conceptualized by Susanne Soederberg (2021, p. 50) describes the cycles of displacements, such as overindebtedness, evictions, and homelessness, that low-wage tenants face, being displaced by their places of survival (rental homes). Soederberg's model focusses on the role of rental housing in the production of disposable workers. These often racialized and gendered workers, although indispensable to maintain cities and societies functional within global capitalism (Ferguson & McNally, 2015), are treated as disposable in the sense that they do not earn sufficient wages to survive (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Marx, 1976). In addition to the degradation of wage labour, the concept of disposability involves the devaluation of household labour of social reproduction (Ferguson & McNally, 2015, p. 15), considered fundamental to capitalist accumulation (Federici, 2021; Mohanty, 1997; Tronto, 2013). Soederberg (2021) does not theorize in depth the aspects related to social reproduction, focusing instead on societal reproduction, by which she means to shift the focus to the role of wage-work and other monetized practices, rather than unpaid activities occurring inside the household or the neighbourhood.

While I will build upon Soederberg to illustrate the dynamics producing displacements in Lisbon, I will add to her framework an analysis on nonmonetized activities, notably carework. This is fundamental as the cries of a 'crisis of social reproduction' (Tummers & MacGregor, 2019) or 'care crisis' (Tronto, 2013) intensify: after many years of feminist struggle, reproductive work continues to be associated with women, its role in capitalist accumulation remains undertheorized (Federici, 2021), and carework is still considered a largely private matter within Western political life (Tronto, 2013). Carework, encompassing both labour to care for people as well as the unpaid reproductive labour, has historically been 'one of the most exploitative, flexible and invisible forms of labour performed by women' (Akbulut, 2017). It is profoundly gendered, classed, and racialized, with women, racialized people, and lower classes made responsible for care work, of which a significant part occurs in informal and unpaid sectors, making the workers less well protected and receiving fewer benefits (Ferguson & McNally, 2015; Tronto, 2013).

Just as the inability to pay rents causes evictions, evictions and displacements have been identified as key factors causing poverty and dispossession (Desmond, 2016; Sassen, 2014). In addition to being a direct violation of the right to adequate housing, evictions very often result in other severe human rights violations, such as the human right to food, water, health, work, property, security of the home and person, and freedom from cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment (UN-HABITAT & OHCHR, 2014b, 2014a). The gendered nature of home and childcare means that the lack of housing contributes to perpetuating inequalities for the whole family. They also often assume the main responsibility for children before, during, and after eviction (COHRE, 2008) (COHRE, 2008), and they also tend to become responsible for mitigating other daily housing related challenges and struggles (Muñoz, 2017).

Other aspect promoting housing exclusions of women links to the definition of homelessness, both within research and policy responses. Definitions of homelessness vary, which poses challenges not only for the statistical comparison of the data on homelessness across countries (FEANTSA & Foundation Abbé Pierre, 2018; Jobe, 2019; Springer, 2000), but also for the effectiveness of the policies designed for the homeless. Often, definitions are too restrictive, approaching homelessness through the particular case of adult single men who live rough and in emergency accommodation (Bretherton, 2017).

There is evidence that women's homelessness and housing precarity have different characteristics from men's homelessness, constituting more hidden phenomenon. First, many homeless women

do not sleep rough or occupy public space (Kern & Mullings, 2013), mainly because women and children sleeping on the streets are even more prone to violence and abuse than men. Homeless women rarely feel confident on the streets; rather, they try to “disappear into the shadows” to survive (Wardhaugh, 1999: 103). In particular, mothers with small children avoid the street for fear of their children being taken away from them (Smolen & Harrison, 2013), relying on informal support, depending on their friends, acquaintances, or relatives to keep them accommodated, and approaching homeless services if these other forms of support are exhausted (Bretherton, 2017). Second, women are much more likely to experience family homelessness, a highly gendered phenomenon that has been recorded as disproportionately affecting young single women with children in Europe (Pleace et al., 2008). Additionally, women’s homelessness is more often triggered by rent arrears and poverty (Bullock et al., 2020; Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010).

FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, has argued for the need to use an inclusive typology on homelessness, ETHOS, which captures various categories of homelessness:

Table 1. ETHOS categories of homelessness

Conceptual category	Definitions
Rooflessness	Living in the street or in public spaces, without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters. People who use overnight shelters.
Houselessness	With a place to sleep, but in a temporary institution or shelter. People due to release from institutions (penal, medical, children’s institutions, or homes).
Insecure accommodation	Temporarily with family or friends. No legal (sub)tenancy. Illegal occupation. Living under threat of eviction. Living under threat of violence.
Inadequate accommodation	Living in temporary or non-conventional structures Occupied dwellings unfit for habitation. Living in extreme overcrowding.

Source: Own elaboration, based on FEANTSA 2017.

Yet, in many countries, only the first two categories are taken into consideration, resulting in the exclusion of many homeless families and women from policy responses. This is also the case when it comes to the “National Strategy for the Integration of Homeless People” (ENIPSSA 2017–2023) in Portugal, which defines homelessness as including only two groups of people: those sleeping rough and in emergency accommodation; and those who are in temporary shelters designated for the homeless (Government of Portugal, 2017, p.3925). The municipal strategy for the homeless in Lisbon also uses the same definition. The homelessness of mothers and their children often goes unnoticed in policies for the homeless, simply because mothers are forced to find solutions other than the street. The proportion of homeless women in relation to men rises dramatically in the EU when more categories of homelessness are considered, yet the member states do not tend to even gather information on these categories of homelessness (Baptista & Marlier, 2019), contributing to the anticivilization of this phenomenon (Soederberg, 2017).

In this context, housing acquires meanings that are miles away from the dominant neoliberal housing governance practices, in which housing is primarily seen as a commodity and a financial asset (Haila, 1988; Rolnik, 2013; Sassen, 2014), or a ‘scarce’ resource to be carefully controlled (Pozzi, 2019; Saaristo, 2022b; Wilde, 2020). For women facing homelessness and housing exclusion, ‘housing’ is not only a roof or shelter, let alone a financial asset: It is a central resource to achieve a degree of power and agency in and outside the home (Miraftab, 2001); a base that allows their participation and claim-making for other resources and services (Muñoz, 2018). In this article, my focus will be on the social costs of displaced survival, as I will explore how evictions and homelessness intersect with and relate to carework and poverty, arguing that many gendered and classed aspects can be

identified in the factors that cause the cycles of displacement and dispossession for single, low-wage mothers.

Housing and labour struggles in the context of finance-real estate-tourism complex

The occupations of council housing in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area are framed within a general housing unaffordability crisis. In Portugal, diverse dynamics of housing crises can be identified over the years. The long-term housing struggles have been linked to rural to urban migration and migration from the former Portuguese colonies to Portugal, triggering the phenomenon of self-built housing (Beja Horta, 2006; Cachado, 2011). In Portugal, a particularly important public housing programme was the PER (Programa Especial de Realojamento), implemented from 1993 onwards in the Lisbon and Porto metropolitan areas, which resettled tens of thousands of families in self-produced neighbourhoods. However, the PER has also received strong criticism, as in many cases it led to segregation, reproduction of social exclusion and the loss of social networks (Cachado, 2012) as well as to forced evictions without housing alternatives since it continued to base its registration on resettlement needs on outdated surveys (Alves, 2016). However, Portugal invested considerably more in incentivizing homeownership, allocating 74% of the state housing budget to home loan interest rate subsidies from 1987 to 2011 (IHRU, 2015), thus promoting the financialization of housing, by pushing housing to the sphere of finance. Since PER, little new public housing has been built and funds for the management and maintenance of public housing estates have been scarce (Carreiras, 2018). This has resulted in overcrowding being a significant problem in many of the council homes in Lisbon (Guerra, 2010; Silva, 2019), although the quantitative data on the problem tends to be largely inaccurate. The municipality of Lisbon is the largest social housing owner in Portugal and Lisbon is also where the proportion of social housing is more significant, representing 8% of the housing stock, in comparison to 2% nation-wide.

Portugal has largely followed the global tendencies of housing policies, basing them on the withdrawal of states from direct housing production, on the creation of stronger and larger market-based housing finance models, and on the commodification of housing (Rolnik, 2019; Scanlon et al., 2015). These strategies have been directly linked to the increased financialization of the Portuguese economy, involving the financialization of the housing sector through credit, liberalization of the national banking sector and its insertion in international financial markets (A. C. Santos, 2019). Land and real estate, sectors identified as intimately connected with the advancement of capitalism due to the link with urbanization and absorption of surplus value and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2005, 2008), are considered central to Portuguese strategies of economic growth (Rodrigues et al., 2016).

In Portugal, as in many other countries (Caturianas et al., 2020), the general negative impact of housing financialization on housing affordability (Van Heerden et al., 2020) and its general tendency to promote territorial dispossession, displacement and intensification of segregation (Farha, 2017; Rolnik, 2019) has been exacerbated by the lack of state funding for housing, with the executed central state for housing decreasing from €631 million in 2002 to €174 million in 2011 (IHRU, 2015). These policies might have an even larger impact in a country like Portugal, where the proportion of social housing remains residual. Since 2011, the figures have not increased significantly: Portuguese expenditure on 'housing and community amenities' represented from 0.4% to 0.5% of PIB from 2011 to 2018 (Eurostat, 2020). In 2019, the total budget for housing was 156 million euros (Pinto, 2018).

While housing is not a direct competence of the European Union (Scanlon et al., 2015), these developments can be viewed as intimately connected to the policies promoted by the European Union. In its legislation, the EU has prioritized economic competitiveness, growth and stability over social and labour market policies, and hence it can be argued that, by empowering capitalists over labour interests, it has had a significant role in shaping urban displacements (Soederberg, 2021, p. 66, 71). For example, through the creation of the Maastrich Treaty (1992), all restrictions on movement of capital between member states were prohibited and fiscal discipline curtail taxation and spending was institutionalized, while worker's rights, tax justice, and environmental protection were classified as 'soft' areas, subject to the consideration of member states (Soederberg, 2021, p. 71). In the context

of Portugal, the current economic model relies strongly on the finance-real estate-tourism complex (Aalbers et al., 2020; Caldas et al., 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2016), with various forms of dependency (Reis, 2018) and economic policy constraints (Rodrigues et al., 2016). On the other hand, it can be concluded that the EU policies and regulations that have stimulated the integration of mortgage markets and the reduction of transaction costs have most probably promoted homeownership and private rental sector – in detriment of social housing – as well as the financialization of housing (Allegra et al., 2020).

From the perspective of access to housing, recent policies within the EU cannot be considered successful, as a strong and constant increase in housing costs can be observed throughout Europe (Eurostat, 2020b) and homelessness has increased in almost all EU countries (FEANTSA & Foundation Abbé Pierre, 2018). In most EU member states, housing costs rise faster than incomes, and housing cost overburden has become a significant challenge, affecting 10.1% of Europeans in 2019 (Eurostat, 2020c) and 33.8% of Europeans in the first income quintile (Eurostat, 2020d). In Portugal, the number of families that are overburdened by housing costs in Portugal has increased by 80%, with the following situation for poor households: in 2016, about 7.5% of the general population and 29.1% of poor households were overburdened by housing costs (FEANTSA & Foundation Abbé Pierre, 2018: 54). It has been advocated that improvements in housing justice could be achieved by reviewing EU directives and reconsidering the definitions of Services of General Interest (SGEI) of the Lisbon Treaty (2009), to make it easier for the Member States to support housing needs (Caturianas et al., 2020; Housing Europe, 2021).

Life histories of eviction and survival

Life-history, or biographical, method can be understood as research that makes use of individual stories to comprehend lives within a social, psychological, and/or historical frame (Merrill & West, 2011). The singular and collective dimensions of social life are thus combined in the use of this method, which accordingly has the capacity to present a 'history of constraints that weigh upon the individual', as well as 'a complex of liberation strategies' (Ferrarotti, 2007, p. 29, translation by the author). The 13 life-history interviews I conducted during the research for my Ph.D. thesis (Saaristo, 2022a) from 2018 to 2019 had a strong focus on single mothers (7 interviews), which included interviewees born in Portugal (5 interviewees) and abroad (2 interviews). In addition to the life history interviews, this article also draws on policy analysis. Several policies and laws have been taken into account when reflecting upon the processes that currently lead to displacements in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area.

The study was also strongly influenced by my participation within the housing rights association Habita. The relationship between housing problems and the condition of single mothers was also reflected in the data collected during Habita's open door sessions, comprising 276 cases of housing problems between January 2018 and December 2019 (Saaristo, 2022a, p. 79). Of these cases, close to 80% were raised by women, compared with 17% raised by men and 4% by couples. This reflects how housing is often perceived as the domain of women, with the domicile forming the traditional 'female' sphere. Many people, 43% of the cases, came to the sessions due to problems faced in private rental apartments, including eviction, non-renewal of a contract, lack of building maintenance, and the inability to pay the rent because of health issues or unemployment. The second most significant category – 36% – were people occupying a council apartment without authorization. Another 12% came because of other problems with council housing, making complaints, above all, about overcrowding, family conflicts, or lack of maintenance. A further 5% were roofless. Most people were of Portuguese nationality, while PALOP countries (African Countries with Portuguese as an Official Language) also had high representation. Regarding ethnicity, as recorded by Habita, afro-descendants, Roma and 'migrants' had a strong relative representation: 21%, 11%, and 7%, respectively.

For the purpose of this article, I chose to analyse three life-history interviews in particular because these three women conveyed many central issues related to displaced survival observed during the research, by myself and the other activists at the Habita Association. All the women had spent a significant part of their lives on the council estate of Condado of Lisbon, or Zona J, as they called it. At the time of the fieldwork, all three women were living and raising their children alone, occupying a council apartment without authorization.

Cátia is from Mozambique, but her father is Portuguese. She is in her forties and has a 10-year-old son. She moved to Portugal with her mother and siblings when she was eight years old. She has worked as an assistant in an elderly home in Santa Casa for over 13 years. I met Cátia at the Habita family assembly organized in 2018 and we used to talk a lot. In 2018, she was actively involved in many of Habita's actions and meetings. In June 2018, we walked together through the neighbourhood of Condado and began to count the vacant council apartments that had been closed with a steel plate. We counted 80 apartments in 24 buildings in just a few hours. After the summer, Cátia gradually attended fewer of Habita's meetings, saying that she had been too tired and stressed out. In April 2019, we recorded an interview at her home. She had worked a nightshift the night before and was quite exhausted, also because she felt disillusioned and depressed with her life and future prospects.

Sara, in her thirties, is a mother of two, a 10-year-old daughter, and a toddler son who is about to turn two. She has worked in clothes shops and also does gel manicures. She is white Portuguese, with Portuguese parents, although "everyone thinks that I am in some country from Eastern Europe", she comments – due to her blue eyes and blond hair. I met Sara at Habita's meetings near Condado, and she agreed to an interview at her home. We ended up talking for three hours about her life, politics in Portugal, and the difficulties in securing housing, while her son was playing nearby.

Emilia was born in São Tomé. She came to Portugal when she was six years old. At the time of the interview, she was now 29 years old, with three children: a two-year-old son, a daughter of eight, and another son, twelve. Before meeting her, many people had talked to me about her. For many in the neighbourhood, she seemed to embody the 'mother – fighter – occupier' spirit. The interview was recorded the second day we met, after a brief meeting the day before, when Cátia and I ran into her, and Cátia introduced us. We sat in the park and Emilia told me about her life.

Housing histories: cycles of displacement and dispossession

Displacement caused by violence at home

Emilia came to Portugal with her mother from São Tomé in the early 1990s, when she was six years old. She was living in a council home with her mother and siblings in Zona J. However, when Emilia was 16 years old, she got pregnant. Her mother did not accept the pregnancy and told her to leave the house. Emilia made an application for housing on the council, but since she was underage, the city council did not accept it. "I left my mother's house and found an empty storage room in one of the building blocks. I spent the entire pregnancy sleeping in a storage room", she recalls.

Sara's father was assigned a council home when Sara was 16 years old and, together with her sister, they moved in to live with him. Yet her father had a drug addiction problem:

"My father didn't buy school supplies, he didn't buy the bus pass so that I could go to school. So I reached 11th grade and dropped out of school. I started to work, and my sister started to work as well. Yet we couldn't have anything at home: at the end of the month, when we made basic purchases like shampoo, washing powder, and hygiene products, our father would break in the bedroom door and sell everything. It became absolutely unsustainable to live with such a person."

When Sara was 18, she moved in with a boyfriend and got pregnant. Yet when she got pregnant, the things worsened quickly:

"I think he kind of thought: 'Now I really have you in my hands. You were already going to your father's house, but you came back because you couldn't stay there. And now you're pregnant.'" That's when domestic violence started. It was mostly psychological, but also grabbing, shaking, shouting, slapping every now and then. There was one day when I got really beaten up, when my daughter was six months old. She was on her room sleeping in the cot, but I thought, 'What if she already understood things?' She would have seen her mother getting beaten up. And that would be the worst thing. So, at that moment that I really decided it would be the last time."

Emilia and Sara's displacement cycles began when they began their 'reproductive work': their

pregnancies triggered violence at home. Sara's story highlights a common cause of women's homelessness: domestic violence (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Lewinson et al., 2014), while Ema faced violence by her mother, being pushed away from home. This violence also contributed to children's homelessness, both in the case of Sara's daughter and Ema's son. While their stories differ significantly, Ema and Sara share the experience of suddenly being pregnant without a 'safe space to call home' – a situation in which their unstable family backgrounds played a significant role, which is a factor that has also been highlighted as central in contributing to women's homelessness (Smolen & Harrison, 2013). This made Ema 'roofless', while Sara experienced 'insecure' housing" (FEANTSA, 2017), an 'unhomely home' (Blunt & Dowling, 2006), resulting in a displacement produced by domestic violence (Brickell, 2012).

Displacement due to unaffordability of private rental housing

Cátia was seven years old when she arrived to Portugal from Mozambique with her mother and siblings in 1978. After spending some years 'houseless', staying at her father's relatives' homes and pensions, as well as 'roofless' on the street, the City Council assigned them a room (inadequate because of overcrowding). A few years after, when Cátia was 13 years old, they received a council home. In the meanwhile, she migrated, and when she came back, she found herself unable to secure access to housing. She got pregnant and stayed at her mother's place, still the council apartment, where they were too many: the mother, three siblings, two spouses of siblings and children (inadequate due to overcrowding). Cátia's son was born in that home, but soon after Cátia decided to rent a house.

"So, we rented a house in Camarate. But then I was the only person who worked at home, and it's not possible to pay the rent alone. I have tried renting an apartment. I have the minimum wage, plus the food allowance, and extra for the night hours. It's almost 800 euros. But it is still not much! [...] Where can I find a house for 300 euros? Only if it was outside of Lisbon, only if I left Lisbon."

Sara had met another young woman with children in a family support group and they decided to rent an apartment together.

"I had two jobs at the time, paying a rent of 500 euros, not to mention food and all that. I used to work in a clothes shop, and I did gel manicures, which is what I still do nowadays. I was counting the pennies so that I could pay the rent. Because it was the rent, plus gas, plus water, plus electricity, food, transport, school. So when my friend stopped paying the rent, I knew I had to leave. That's when my eviction adventure began."

Ema described the challenges of combining unpaid care work at home and paid care work at the home of older people, leading to her unemployment.

"I couldn't combine the work schedule with the kids. I'm on my own. I leave home at 6 AM to go to work. I'd get up at 5, I'd leave here at 6 AM. I'd earn 600 euros. I had to pay 100 euros for someone to stay with the kids until the nursery opened so they could go in. Then I had to pay another 100 euros for daycare. That's already 200 euros. How much did I leave with? 400. Food, electricity, water, then I would notice that two weeks had passed since the end of the month and I no longer had a cent."

Ema and Cátia, employed as assistants in old people's homes, illustrate workers that are treated as disposable but that are indispensable for the working of our societies (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Tronto, 2013). While generally considered a profession of importance, these professions are generally pushed towards women, racialized, immigrant and lower-class workers, with a low remuneration that does not cover living costs (Ferguson & McNally, 2015; Sassen, 2009; Tronto, 2013). With an average rent for a 50m² apartment of more than 400 euros in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, but exceeding 13.5 €/m² in some parishes in the city for new rental contracts (INE, 2019), paying them clearly falls out of reach of families that earn a national minimum of wage (600 euros in 2019, PORDATA, 2019) and becomes also challenging for single parents earning an average monthly salary in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area: 1,113 euros for women and 1,316 euros for men in 2019 (PORDATA, 2019c).

Single-parent households seem to be under particular strain. In 2019, after social transfers, 25.5% of single parents' families were considered at risk of poverty (PORDATA, 2019b). In comparison, the at-risk-of poverty rate after social transfers for all households with dependent children was 17%, while for the general population, it was 16.2% (PORDATA, 2019b). Single parents are statistically a relatively large population group in Portugal, and single parents in Portugal tend to be women: In 2019, there were 390,000 single-parent households headed by a woman in Portugal, representing 85% of all single-parent households (PORDATA, 2019a).

In addition to being exploited in wage labour, these mothers are also made responsible for unpaid care labour at home, while the fathers of their children get 'passes' as Tronto (2013) describes the situation, meaning that social and political institutions make some to bear the care responsibilities while others are allowed to escape from them. For the functioning of capitalist societies – or any societies – social reproduction is essential, yet the role of unpaid labour is mostly invisibilized both in theorizations on global capitalism (Federici, 2021) as well as when designing housing policy responses.

As noted by Sara, "Since my pregnancy until today, everything that my kids have has come from me. I had to be the mother and the father because the father just says 'Hello' on the street, and gives his child a kiss. 'Is everything okay? Alright, bye then.'"

Housing exclusions due to inaccessible social housing

Cátia, Sara, and Ema have also applied for council housing for many years (as the applications need to be renewed yearly). Cátia recalls:

"I was never lucky. I've been to the city council services at Entrecampos. I went there and talked to the social assistant, but it is always the same story: it's because of the point system. But I don't see what that system is – I mean, I don't understand. How do people live if they don't work? If they have an income, they cannot have council housing."

In Lisbon, the applications to access council homes are made via Lisbon City Council that assesses the applications according to the regulation on access to social housing, RAHM¹. There are few houses in comparison with the demand: In 2018, 4,331 applications were made, while 747 homes were allocated between 2013 and 2018 (Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, 2019, p. 23). The access conditions stipulate that anyone can submit an application, as long as they have a residence permit in Portugal, do not have a dwelling of their own, and their income is low enough (Article 5). However, the applications are then given points according to income, family composition, type of current housing, and disabilities that family members might have, among other criteria. Nonetheless, the points system gives most weight to income, resulting in a situation in which households with no income tend to receive a higher score. According to the city council, more than 50% of the candidates had an average income of less than 408.00 euro/month (Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, 2019, p. 25). This tends to result in the exclusion of employed candidates, even if their wages do not allow them to rent an apartment within the private rental sector.

The situation of rooflessness or homelessness also provides points. However, Cátia, Sara, and Ema, as women with small children, try to find alternatives to sleeping rough, they are not considered homelessness in the matrix, resulting in fewer points. According to the city council, 70% of the applications were made by women; most of them lived with family members or in a rental apartment (CML 2019, p. 23), which points to their probable situation in 'insecure' or 'inadequate' housing, in addition to highlighting the feminization of the housing question. CML (2019) also mentions that the second-biggest group of applicants – after single-person households – consisted of single parents with their children (35.1% of all applications).

In 2019, an alternative to social housing was the Lisbon City Council programme 'Renda Convencionada' - PRC, a prize draw intended "to create housing of intermediate value", "with rents up to 30% lower than the market prices" (Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, 2012: 24). However, very few

¹ RAHM was replaced by the new regulation, Regulamento Municipal do Direito à Habitação (RMDH, Municipal Regulation on the Right to Housing), which came into effect in November 2019.

homes have become available through the programme, while the number of candidates tended to be huge: a total of 23,193 applications, compared to 375 apartments that have been made available by the programme from 2013 to 2018 (CML 2019, 26). Lisbon also offers a municipal subsidy for housing, through which a third of the housing costs could be covered. Yet this subsidy was granted for only one year, after which it could be extended for a maximum of one year. Hence, many families argued that it was not worth trying to rent a house and mobilize the whole family to move in there if one might only be able to stay there for a year, facing homelessness again.

More recent policy responses include the New Generation of Housing Policies, with its programmes “1.º Direito” – Housing Access Support Program and the Programme for Affordable Renting, funded by the Recovery and Resilience Facility of the European Union. The legislation on 1º Direito (Degree-Law 37/2018, Art. 6-1) stipulates that a Portuguese resident who lives in ‘undignified conditions’, and is in a situation of financial hardship, could access housing financed by the programme. ‘Undignified conditions’ as defined by the programme (Art.5), include rooflessness, houselessness, domestic violence, overcrowding and cases in which the person has to leave their rental home due to insolvency or non-renewal of the contract.

However, the funding of 1º Direito is conditioned by having a local housing strategy (Estratégia Local da Habitação, LH) of the Municipality approved. In the ELHs, municipalities define their priorities for the programme, which make them also dependent on the resources allocated by the municipalities as well as on the attitudes of technicians and politicians in relation to participation and integration of different groups of population (Jorge, 2022). In the case of Lisbon, the municipality identifies the ‘rehabilitation of housing units to be allocated to families living in undignified housing and in economic need’ as the first priority (CML, 2019, p. 50).

In general, it has been argued that the New Generation of Housing Policies tends to fail as the policies do not try to curb housing commodification and financialization; on the contrary, they are based on the fiscal stimulation of private and public entities (Santos, 2019), directing more state funding to the already booming housing market (Pinto et al., 2021). The results so far have been meager: 263 households benefitting from 1º Direito, 950 affordable rental contracts signed, and 1,2% execution of the budget for Bolsa Nacional de Alojamento Urgente e Temporário, the National Urgent and Temporary Accommodation Scheme (Ferreira Esteves & Burd Relvas, 2023)

Evictions causing further dispossession

Sara has already faced forced eviction, a ‘domicide’, a deliberate destruction of the home (Porteous & Smith, 2001), a number of times. In the first case, after leaving a private rental apartment due to rent arrears, she had occupied apartment in Zona J and had stayed there for two months, and then she and the baby were evicted by the police. She rented a basement room, stayed there for a while, until she could not afford it anymore. By that time, her father was off the drugs, and Sara decided to move in with him again in the council home. But the father did not pay the council rent – and did not tell Sara about it – and one day, she received a call saying the city council was evicting them.

“It was the most complicated situation at that time because I can say that that I was truly homeless. I left my daughter at her father’s place. All the stuff from the house had gone to Gebalis’s warehouse, and I said, ‘And now? Where am I going?’. So I spent one night at one friend’s house, then another night at another friend’s house, until, you know, it’s nice to visit for the first two or three days, but then it becomes a nuisance. So, my father was sleeping in the house from which we’d been evicted. It was on the ground floor and the window had been left open. So, at night, he lifted the blinds and went there to sleep, and I started doing the same. We’d been evicted from our house, and we started using the house like intruders.”

When Ema’s first child was one year old, the city council found her in the occupied council home and gave her an eviction order. The police came and broke the door down, and filed a criminal case against Ema, for trespassing on city council property. Yet Ema refused to leave and got support from the neighbours, who called journalists to report on the case. Gebalis backed off, called her to visit their office, and told her she should wait for a transfer to another house. Ema explains: ‘I made an application, brought all the documents they asked me for, gave my passport, as I was

waiting for the residence permit, and I handed in my son's papers.' Ema's struggle for housing was further complicated by not having Portuguese nationality. This might have excluded her from some alternatives available to Portuguese, as she suggests when mentioning her first application process. Ema says that Gebalis tried to persuade her to leave, saying that she would get a council home but that at the moment she would have to leave because they needed to start a construction work. After some months, she agreed to leave and rented an apartment, with some support from Santa Casa. Yet the situation quickly became unaffordable for her and she had to leave, this time for an institution for single mothers run by nuns.

"I was there for almost a year. I couldn't adapt to that. There were a lot of people. I put my children to bed at six in the evening. The children were no longer well, and my son, who had a heart attack, was ill. He'd never wet the bed before, but started to do that."

She was houseless and living in an inadequate housing, and she decided to occupy again, this time a ruined council home. She put a floor, windows, and toilets in the apartment, but one year later, experienced again a domicile: 'Gebalis and the municipal police went there one year later, and took all my stuff and put it in the street, and broke the toilets, the windows, everything, in front of the kids.'

Lisbon City Council has not held back from directly causing homelessness and dispossession, evicting mothers and careworkers with their small children from their places of survival, causing a domicile, and sending them to the street. This practice is a clear violation of international law that prohibits forced evictions, highlighting that they can be permitted only 'after all feasible alternatives to eviction are explored with the affected person or community' and 'after due process protections are provided to the individual, group or community,' including the provision of adequate alternative housing (AGFE & UN-HABITAT, 2011; UN-HABITAT & OHCHR, 2014b). In fact, after the Habita Association denounced an eviction case to the Committee for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESC), Lisbon City Council recently received a communication from the CESC requesting it to suspend one of these evictions, or alternatively, to provide the family with an alternative housing appropriate to their needs, 'in the framework of genuine and effective consultation' (Habita, 2022).

Contrary to the arguments to the city council, that present the unauthorized occupations as an attentat against the norms and regulations (Saaristo, 2022b), Sara, Ema and Cátia consider the occupied apartment their last option, the ultimate place of survival, as Sarsa described:

"My only option was to occupy another house because otherwise I really wouldn't have made it, because I had already spent many years moving from one place to another. My daughter will soon be ten and I've lived in about nine or ten different houses since she was born. So, this is the only place, my last chance. After this, there is nothing else."

Ema presents her situation in very similar terms:

"I think about it every day. I always go to sleep worrying about them coming here and saying 'get out!' They will say 'get out', and then you can't afford to rent a house. And then what are you going to do? As a matter of fact, I have seen many such situations. Losing the house, the mother is in no condition to be with the children. They end up taking the kids away, and the kids are forced to go to an institution because you don't have the money to rent a house. This is often the case. It's sad, but it's the reality. They don't help the mothers. Then they say that there are no children in Portugal. Of course, there aren't. Because usually the poor have the most children."

These evictions result in many cases in the loss of all the material assets owned by the evicted family, including all the investments they had made to create comfortable conditions in their places of survival. Inevitably, an eviction causes irreparable damage to the whole organization of the family life. Many times it forces women to skip work – and to face the consequences of this: salary cuts or even being fired, making it impossible for the children to go to school or to the kindergarten, not even to mention the destabilization of all the support networks the women might have had within the neighbourhood. Scarcity of housing resources cannot be a justification for the state to directly cause homelessness (Saaristo, 2022b; UN-HABITAT & OHCHR, 2014b) as displacement exacerbates

the already dire conditions that families face. Due to the difficult housing situations, Ema and Sara also did not study for long, while Cátia herself made the decision to quit studying. This fact is significant, considering that research has shown that educational level is one of the main enabling factors of social mobility in Portugal (Bago d'Uva & Fernandes, 2017). When they quit their studies, they created the first condition for the cycle of social reproduction of poverty to continue.

Not knowing whether they will be able to provide a home for their children causes anxiety and distress, which is in line with previous research identifying the adverse consequences of evictions, not only in material terms, but also in terms of mental well-being (Desmond & Kimbro, 2015; Lewinson et al., 2014). Moreover, the fear of losing custody of their children is an additional institutional violence inflicted on these mothers. This is also one factor why homeless women do not stay on the streets, as it might, with a high probability, result in a destruction of their family.

Disposable workers and mothers without a policy response

This article has examined what factors contribute to the housing precarity of single mothers and low-wage workers in Lisbon. The life histories analyzed in this article clearly bring the social class and gender aspects of displaced survival to light. The displacement cycles that Ema, Sara and Cátia continued to endure were all initiated by having their first babies, which triggered violence at home, rejection by the rest of the family members, or simply pinpointed the lack of adequate space they had for themselves and their children. After that, during the following twenty years, the cycle of displacement has implied various forms of housing exclusion and homelessness, ranging from roofless to houseless, insecure and inadequate housing, always due to reasons typically associated with women's homelessness: domestic violence, poverty, and rent arrears (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; Lewinson et al., 2014) and an unstable family background (Smolen & Harrison, 2013). Their situation as homeless families, instead of single persons, is also associated with women's homelessness (Pleace et al., 2008).

The income women receive from their waged labour does not permit them to acquire a safe and adequate home for themselves and their children through the private market, in the context in which urban policies consider housing and real estate mainly as means to gain wealth and economic growth, instead of contemplating them as a home and a human right. Not regulating the private rental sector is a political choice that relates to the consideration of the real estate sector as fundamental for the economic growth in Portugal. Yet it has been argued that regulating the market would allow the state to pursue effective social redistribution policies (Jorge & Leiria Viegas, 2022). In this sense, it can be argued that housing precarity is actively produced by the state (Soederberg, 2017), as political decisions have prioritized housing privatization and commercialization over the production of social housing, producing homelessness through eviction instead of letting families stay put in their places of survival, as well as invisibilizing the phenomenon of homelessness by not collecting data on gendered forms of homelessness.

The economic exclusion faced by Cátia, Ema and Sara is tied to their condition as 'disposable but indispensable' workers (Bhattacharyya, 2018) – one that disproportionately affects women, racialized persons, and migrants – in the kind of wage-labour that is not secure nor sufficient to earn a salary that would provide for their basic needs. These women exemplify the conditions faced by a care worker, both in paid and unpaid labour, as in addition to – in the cases of Cátia and Ema – providing care in the market, they alone are responsible for the provision of care at their homes, while the father of their children have opted for not getting involved in reproductive work. The fact that these three women were made solely responsible for providing for the needs of their children strongly conditions their room for manoeuvre, as it makes it more difficult to access better-paid jobs that demand more flexibility in terms of working hours. Considering the heavy economic burden they also bear as the sole providers in their families, it can be clearly seen how they are exploited for the reproduction of the displaced low-wage worker (Soederberg, 2021), both as wage labourers as well as for the reproduction of the labour force (Federici, 2004). In a similar way, the lack of attention to practices of care, and the labour it involves, is arguably a political choice, resultant from the gendered, classed, and racialized nature of care work. Yet, as Tronto (2013, p. 97) argues, 'as long as care continues to shape differently the capacities of citizens to be citizens, there can be no genuine

equality among citizens in their capacity to exercise political rights.'

In addition to being exploited within paid and unpaid labour, these low-wage single mothers are not recognized within the public housing policy responses. They fall out of reach of all housing options, being too poor for the private rental market, too rich for social housing, and 'not homeless enough' to be included in the policy responses for the homeless. For this reason, for most of their lives, they have been living in either "insecure" or "inadequate" housing (FEANTSA, 2017). Their ways of facing housing exclusion are also strongly related to gender and their situation as single mothers: instead of staying on the streets, they have tried to seek various forms of informal support (Bretherton, 2017) and occupied council homes. The state, however, does not recognize these actions as stemming from the condition of housing exclusion, and further exacerbates the dire conditions of these families by evicting them from their places of survival – occupied homes. The condition of homelessness has frequently been misrecognized by the institutions, which can largely be due to the restrictive definitions of homelessness (Bretherton, 2017). The available housing policies fail to address the specific needs of women with low income, which is consistent with Pestana Lages's (2022) argument that housing policies in Portugal pay generally little consideration to gender. This draws attention to the importance of integrating the categories of inadequate and insecure housing into the policy responses to homelessness.

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