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Spaces of safety and more-than-safety in women's refuges in England

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Spaces of safety and more-than-safety in women's refuges in England

Abstract

Many women escaping domestic violence spend time in women's refuges (shelters) whilst they deal with practical and emotional issues in a safe space. Such spaces are therefore an important place for women's recovery and empowerment after abuse, but are also complex spaces of displacement. In the UK, there is a wide range of refuge providers, and different models of accommodation and support provision in refuges. Differences, such as those between refuges providing self-contained flats and those with communal facilities and communal activities, can provide very different experiences for the women and their children who live there. In addition, there have been shifts in the policy context of refuges, and increasingly individualistic models of service provision. This article explores women's refuges as spaces of safety, and of more-than-safety, drawing on interviews with women in the Midlands, South Coast and London, and on participatory creative groupwork with women in the Midlands and South Coast. Refuge spaces require, but also enable, contact and encounter between women; and communal living and group processes can enable interaction and collaboration between women. The article draws on women's words and images to exemplify these experiences, concluding that the safe spaces of women's refuges can enable processes of more-than-safety. These collective processes begin to counteract the isolation of abuse and to help prepare women for their lives after the refuge.

Keywords: domestic violence; safety; displacement; groupwork; communal

Introduction

In the United Kingdom, tens of thousands of women and children relocate every year to escape domestic violence, making journeys of forced internal migration. Some travel to accommodation without accessing any public services, some stay with friends or family, and others access a range of temporary accommodation in the private or public sector, including hostels and refuges. Women's domestic violence refuges have existed in England since the 1970s in many – but not all – local areas (Coy, Kelly, and Foord 2009), providing temporary accommodation and a range of support services for women escaping interpersonal violence – generally from a male partner or husband. Women's refuges have been set up and funded in diverse ways, and so vary widely in terms of the spaces they provide. There was some increase in consistency of provision across England during the period of funding under the Supporting People Programme from 2003 to 2011 (ODPM 2002), and Women's Aid has developed quality standards with its federation of over 200 organisations in England (Women's Aid 2015); but provision is devolved to local areas and increasingly subject to public sector cuts (Towers and Walby 2012; Grierson 2017). This is the context in which this article considers women's refuges as spaces of safety, and of more-than-safety, drawing on a literature from England and elsewhere, and on research in refuges in the Midlands and Southern England. The next section provides an overview of literature on women's refuges in England, and some contrasts with refuges elsewhere. Then, following an outline of the research methodology, the interview and groupwork data are discussed within the two themes of spaces of contact and encounter and spaces of interaction and collaboration. The article concludes that these spaces are dynamically co-created by practices of residents and workers in women's refuges; building temporary communities that can counteract the isolation of abuse and to help prepare women for their lives after the refuge.

Women's refuges as gendered spaces of safety

Women's refuges in England were developed as part of a wider feminist movement with goals in terms of freedom, autonomy and equality of which responses to end male violence were an aspect (Pahl 1978; CRAWC 1988; Russell 1989). Dobash and Dobash (1992) identified three goals of the refuge movement: placing assisting women and children alongside goals of challenging male violence and changing women's position in society. In the early 21st Century, Warrington (2003, 131) outlined a shift from refuges as part of a social movement, to a more professional, but much narrower, notion of refuges as a social service. She highlighted a change from a feminist ethos of mutual empowerment of women, where workers would often be experts by experience (Hague and Mullender 2006; Wood 2016), towards a less equal relationship of professional workers helping service users. A similar shift is noted by Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) who argue that autonomous women's shelters are essential because "Violence Against Women is not an individual problem but a social problem with far-reaching ramifications" (WAVE 2002, 35). However, WAVE highlights that adequate funding is often only available for shelters run by regional or municipal authorities, whereas shelters run on feminist principles often receive inadequate funding. The reality is that, though both the UK Parliament (HMSO 1975; HMSO 1993; HMSO 2008) and the European Parliament (WAVE 2002) have adopted a capacity provision of one family refuge space per 10,000 population, this level of provision has not been achieved over the decades since it was adopted.

Relocation journeys, including relocation to a refuge, is only one possible spatial strategy to escape interpersonal violence and abuse; and may be harder for more isolated women, or women in more isolated areas (Little 2016). Other strategies may be tried before or instead

of relocation, including using criminal and civil law for protection; and spatial separation from an abuser may be subsequently bridged by ongoing contact with children (Morrison and Wasoff 2012). The geographical journeys of escape to a women's refuge are also generally only one stage in complex, segmented processes over time and space (Bowstead 2017). Achieving safety from a known abuser is therefore rarely an event, but an ongoing process both practically and emotionally. In this context, refuges are not "static and predefined" safe spaces (The Roestone Collective 2014, 1347); they are safe for particular women and children, in particular locations and circumstances, and safety is maintained through a dynamic process of safety assessments and planning. For example, it is likely that if a woman is at sufficient risk of abuse that she needs to go to a refuge, she is unlikely to be safe enough to go to her local refuge (Bowstead 2015a). Refuges in England attempt to enhance women's own safety strategies by maintaining confidential locations and security measures, though there have been debates about the implications of such isolation from local communities (Haaken and Yragui 2003; Chester-James 2004). Practices may be different in different countries, with the safety issues in shelters (refuges) in North America, where women can typically only stay for 3-6 weeks (Fisher and Stylianou 2016) being very different from those in European countries where stays may be much longer.

In the UK, refuge stays of 6 months or more are part of a model of providing time in a safe space to deal with both practical and emotional issues, so that most women will be expecting to move out to independent living (Abrahams 2010). Stays of around six months have been considered optimal, with concern that longer stays can lead to individuals becoming institutionalised (Warrington 2003). In the Netherlands, Jonker et al (2014) outline three functions of women's shelters: asylum, balance and transition. Safe accommodation is the focus of the 'asylum' function, but the ongoing stay enables rest, recovery and social

integration in the 'balance' function, and the 'transition' towards independent and safe future living arrangements. A similar, but not necessarily linear, process is presented by Abrahams (2007) in the UK, and Burnett et al (2016) also emphasise that processes are non-linear. A focus on function helps explain why refuges are not highly home-like (Burman and Chantler 2004), and Somerville (1992, 535) characterises them as a 'safe house' which cannot restore a wider ideal of home; also bearing in mind that women's recent experience of home has been far from such an ideal. Burman and Chantler (2004) argue that refuges fit Augé's concept of non-place (2008), but that, even though women and children are in transit, the spaces become places filled with meaning. Whilst the physical space may be institutionalised in its focus on safety and functional layout, the emotional space can include both support and isolation, care and containment; with a tension between maintaining existing networks with friends and family and making new connections with other residents (Riger, Raja, and Camacho 2002; Sandberg 2016). They argue that minoritised women may be particularly isolated if discrimination and racism are not addressed within the refuge, so that structural positionings – such as around immigration status – remain as barriers within the space.

Safe spaces of women's refuges are therefore about more than the physical environment, and about more than physical safety; however they can be understood as enabling first steps towards becoming a survivor of abuse (Whitzman 2007). Herman (1992) argues for a process towards recovery starting with securing control over one's own body, and extending towards the immediate environment and then wider context. Lewis et al (2015) argue that women need to be safe *from* abuse before they can be safe *to* achieve wider control, autonomy and freedom. Similarly, Willis et al (2015) characterise finding control over one's environment as a step towards recovery from child sexual abuse. Women's refuges therefore

provide, as a baseline, safeguarded spaces with confidential addresses and hidden locations; and it is in such spaces that the empirical research of this article was carried out.

Research on women's domestic violence journeys

The research on which this article is based is a mixed-methods research project on women's domestic violence journeys throughout England, and from the rest of the United Kingdom (for further details see Bowstead 2015b). This article draws on the qualitative aspects: interviews with a purposive non-probability sample of 20 women in seven locations in the Midlands, London and Southern England, whilst they were in refuges, and at the stage of rehousing; as well as interviews with refuge workers in eight locations. The refuges were a mix of those with self-contained flats – 'self-contained refuge' - and those where women shared kitchens and bathrooms – 'shared refuge'. In two of those locations participatory creative groupwork was carried out: with five women in a city in the Midlands and four women in a city on the South Coast, over four and three half-day sessions respectively.

Recruitment via a service provider ensured that all interviewees and groupwork participants had access to support, and the study was approved via the ethical procedures of both the service provider and the university. The interviewed women had a range of different ages (18-56), ethnic origins (including White British, White Other, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan within the Asian/Asian British census category, and both Caribbean and African within the Black/Black British category) and disabilities. Twelve women had children with them, aged from under 1 to 14. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and content and thematic analysis was carried out within Nvivo software. Open descriptive coding was brought together into links and hierarchies to identify emergent themes, and representative quotations

were identified to describe these themes. The groupwork involved activities to explore issues of place, space, home and resettlement, including working with materials about the relevant local area. In between sessions, women were given digital cameras with which to take photographs for themselves and for the research, and during the sessions they produced albums for themselves and chose images to put into the research, providing captions and explanations if they wished. Thematic analysis was carried out on the images, with example images identified to present these themes.

The research was participatory during the process of interviews and groupwork, with some women involved in second or third interviews up to eight months later, but women were not involved in the later analysis and dissemination. The methods therefore represented a commitment to feminist participatory engagement (McIntyre 2003; Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007; Askins and Pain 2011) with the aim of facilitating “a deeper understanding of the complexities of the lives of research participants”(Caretta and Riaño 2016, 260) by enabling women to tell their stories (Frohmann 2005; Giritli-Nygren and Schmauch 2012). However, at this stage of publication, the research is presented as a single-author experience (Sharp 2005), with the images and quotations referenced as the participants agreed. Visual methods can present particular ethical challenges (Dickens and Butcher 2016; Wiles et al. 2010), especially for women at risk of domestic violence (Frohmann 2005), and photographs are therefore only presented in the research where they are judged to be safe in terms of people and places. The groupwork was designed to contribute to the research whether or not any images could be presented to a wider audience, and the process enables reflections, along with the interview materials and a wider literature, on refuges as spaces of safety and more-than safety.

Refuges as spaces of safety and more-than-safety

Spaces of contact and encounter

Home is often characterised and idealised as a key source and site of belonging and personhood - “the material anchor for a sense of agency and a shifting and fluid identity” (Pratt 1999, 159). However, violence and abuse in that private space is recognised as creating a sense of being homeless at home (Wardhaugh 1999; Brickell 2012) whereby women feel isolated or displaced without having relocated. Life with an abuser may include ever-present threats and intrusions in terms of privacy, so that control over space and privacy may actually be less than when sharing accommodation with strangers (Heath et al. 2018, 24). Home is clearly an ambiguous “space of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear” (Blunt and Varley 2004, 3). It is a characteristic of male violence to women in intimate relationships to “erode[s] a woman’s personhood” through coercive control (Stark 2007, 218; Brush 2009), which may be particularly effective against ethnic minority women and others where the public space is also unsafe (Batsleer et al. 2002). In discussing the women and children who access a domestic violence refuge it is therefore important to acknowledge that many abused women do not make such journeys.

For those who do, arriving at a refuge is often a woman’s first contact with others who believe and understand what she has experienced, and with women who have experienced similar violence and abuse. Gloria¹ was surprised to feel so at home in a refuge.

I was actually surprised! I was shocked because [laughs] – I didn’t think it would be like this! So that was a relief to me – that I had somewhere safe to go with my child.

And I had somebody there to listen, without judging me; without looking for any other cause besides what I'm telling them – to understand where I'm coming from. It made me feel so at home and at peace – I cried – that was the first time I cried. [Gloria: shared refuge]

Violet, who came from a large owner-occupied house, talked about how coming to a shared refuge with her son had made her more open to others.

I've never ever regretted it – you know, coming from this big enormous house into this room [...] alright, it's a little room, but we're free, and we're away.

I didn't think that I'd be able to cope; but I have! And it's made me look – I've never been narrow-minded – but it's made me more open to all different kinds of people and never judge anyone; because it's just – we're all in the same boat really.

Refuges can be understood as contact zones; as spaces of interaction that may enable meaningful encounters between different social groups (Askins and Pain 2011). Such encounters can “disrupt, shake or surprise” (Wilson 2017, 460) and are potentially transformative, as women recognise similarities and differences (Valentine 2008), during a time when they are rebuilding their own identities after abuse. This is not to deny the potential for internal divisions (The Roestone Collective 2014), or for discrimination such as racism in refuges (Burman, Smailes, and Chantler 2004). However, given that all the residents in a refuge have experienced threats, abuse and violence, it can be extraordinary to discover that it is possible to be safe to disagree (Lewis et al. 2015). Julian Rosa, in a shared refuge, felt that both she and her children were seeing more positive ways of being.

I've definitely changed – my way of thinking and seeing things. I feel more in control of my life than I was before; and as well with the kids – it was not the way to teach them – so now I've shown them how it should be.

Some of the refuges provided self-contained flats and others had communal facilities.

Women, such as Maud (in a self-contained refuge), could see the pros and cons of both types of spaces.

I start streaming – and you don't really want people around when you're crying. But then – it's a good thing; because maybe you do need people around as well; so I don't know what the right thing is, to be honest.

In the shared refuges, women had their own room (with their children, if they had children), and it was important to women to have control over some space:

It's a very difficult situation to live in, but it's better than back in the house – a lot better. When I shut my door it's shut! [laughs] It's communal living – so everybody's going to be different. [Cathy: shared refuge]

The women in self-contained accommodation talked about the extra effort needed to meet other women, so that they did not end up isolated.

If you went in a main lounge [in a shared refuge], then you'd hope for conversation; and you could meet other people and have a coffee or what have you. Whereas – here

– you've got to make the effort; and you might knock on somebody's door and they're in the bath or whatever. So it's difficult for people – especially for the new ones – to meet anyone to talk to. [Elizabeth: self-contained refuge]

However, some of the refuges with self-contained flats did ensure there were communal activities. Aliya found something that worked for her problem of hair loss, and a refuge worker encouraged her to run a session for other women.

And she said that there are other ladies going through the same things that I am going through, so she recommended I get everyone together and show them how to do the hair loss treatment. And that was last Tuesday; and I think about six people attended. And then – tomorrow – I was actually going to do another on make-up tips.

The isolation of the abuse is often contrasted with the positive contacts at the refuge, with the intensity of the situation making encounters more meaningful (Valentine 2008), and many women making close friendships.

I used to think I was the only one – and that's not true at all. It was my mistake to think that I'm the only one. And I've also learned that there's always some solution to a problem – there's always something that can be done. [Faith: self-contained refuge]

It feels like home here – it feels like a whole extended family with the workers and the other residents. I never had that feeling before – I never had family in the UK. [Koli: shared refuge]

I've made a lot of friends; a lot, a lot of good good friends – like sisters in all this.

[Julien Rosa: shared refuge]

Refuge spaces are therefore distinctive spaces of encounter in comparison with other services which provide one-to-one contact with a professional, and Macy et al (2016) found that, in comparison to other services, shelter workers focus more on women's goals, needs and safety, rather than requiring detail of the nature or extent of the violence experienced. The resistance to individualising explanations of domestic violence (Lewis et al. 2015), and consequent pathologising discourse around the services women need (Wathan et al. 2015) is a significant focus of women's refuges developed out of a feminist analysis, whether or not they are still provided by explicitly feminist organisations. Lewis et al (2015) characterise women-only spaces as being not just about the absence of men, but about feminist practices of active listening, respectful and affirming exchanges, and honesty. This provides a stark contrast to short-term interventions on cases which are designated as high-risk, which even employ medicalised metaphors, such as the notion that a "dose" of a service to a woman will lead to a cessation of abuse (Howarth and Robinson 2016, 55); as if abuse was an infection rather than the actions of another person. In addition, such one-to-one interventions do not enable spaces of contact and encounter, as interviews and sessions may take place in a range of locations, such as police stations, or over the phone. Such practices do not create a safe space for women, nor develop women's space for autonomy and action (Sharp-Jeffs, Kelly, and Klein 2017). Rather than an individualising discourse of behavioural change (Marquardt 2016), refuges are therefore seen to enable more interactive and collaborative practices and relationships between people and spaces.

Spaces of interaction and collaboration

Refuges in England provide an enormous range of physical spaces of accommodation, in terms of types and size of building, numbers of rooms, and facilities such as playrooms, offices, counselling rooms, gardens and security technology. Some house each family in a self-contained flat, others provide a family bedroom and shared facilities such as kitchens and bathrooms; and both types may have additional communal rooms for activities, play or study for women and children. Residents may therefore be required to interact on a day-to-day basis, or interaction may be more voluntary, or consist of specific group meetings or activities. Life in a women's refuge may therefore be more or less communal, and interaction and collaboration may be on a continuum from simply necessary to being encouraged and embraced – both as a function of the spaces of the building, and the practices of the workers and residents. In refuges, as in other shared housing, there are different degrees to which “the sharing of housing implies the sharing of lives” (Heath et al. 2018, 8). Rather than binary notions of communal or self-contained accommodation in refuges, it may be more illuminating to focus on practices which support interaction and collaboration, and those which do not. As The Roestone Collective (2014, 1346) argues, spaces cannot be understood through static and acontextual notions of safe/unsafe, inclusive/exclusive, but as the relational work which cultivates positive spaces for negotiating difference and challenging oppression.

In addition to some of the refuges offering group activities, this research enabled collaborative groupwork in two locations. The small scale meant that women had limited time, as has been noted in other research which aims to be participatory (Pain and Francis 2003, 50); and their feedback included that they would have liked more time to reflect, and for there to be more sessions. As noted in other research (Giritli-Nygren and Schmauch

2012, 603) it enabled participation by women without needing to use English, and four of the women in the Midlands group had no English (nor had they ever used cameras before). Munt (2012, 555) sees such participation as creating a temporary “community of practice”, and the groupwork in this research enabled a similar process of women having digital cameras to take photographs between sessions, to share with the group, and to put into the research.

The strongest theme of the photographs, and the largest number, was of women’s children. This was partly having the opportunity to photograph their children for the first time, or to replace photographs that had been left behind in escaping the violence, but also it reflected women wanting to explain how their priority was their children.

Happy Times – my girls happy and growing up – and when you’re down your kids can always bring you back up! [Mia: self-contained refuge]

Some photographed the children in a way that meant they were not identifiable – such as from behind, or their hands or feet – but others wanted identifiable images to go into the research though not to be published or displayed. Again this highlights the relational space of the refuge, with the emphasis for women of the importance of interaction with other people, such as children playing in the garden, or at a birthday party. Jasmin did not have children of her own, and was keen on sewing, so made clothes for some of the children and photographed these.



Figure 1 Photographs from groupwork in women's refuges

However, through photographs, women also presented their lives in the refuge, including the frustrations of sharing, and the enjoyment of parties. Figure 1 shows (top left) Janet's photograph which she captioned 'Henry the disappearing hoover: One of my best friends in the house – caused the most arguments, but yet a necessity I don't think I can live without!' Though that refuge had self-contained flats it also had communal areas and a rota for women to clean the living room and kitchen. Janet also took photos of those areas after she had cleaned them, taking pride in them; as well as taking photographs at her support worker job of meals she had cooked, and rooms she had tidied.

In contrast to Janet's photographs of the everyday, other images were of special occasions. Figure 1, top right and bottom left are Jasmin and Koli's photographs which they captioned, respectively, 'The food for a children's party – I really enjoyed the day and all the residents came together to help cook and celebrate' and 'I have enjoyed parties in the refuge as everyone comes together'. Koli had prepared traditional Bengali food – '*handesh*' – and these are in the foreground of Jasmin's image.

In addition, both groups produced a poster for display in the refuges, bringing their images and captions together, and adding messages such as 'good luck to new women who come here!' (Figure 1 bottom right shows part of one poster). The posters were an example of women wanting to communicate to a wider audience than the immediate group. This reflected both a sense of reaching out to other abused women, and wanting professionals and authorities to understand their experiences, and therefore treat future women and children better. Women developed shared group narratives and imagined themselves as part of a community of women who had experienced abuse; both the actual community of women and children living in the refuge at the same time as them, but also a community outside, and in the future. They imagined the refuge "as having its own history and permanence" (Heath et al. 2018, 114) beyond their stay. Connections can thereby be created in places of exile (Bowstead 2016); and imagined back to a shared homeland of being an abused woman; with women offering advice and support to other women.

I tell you – I would encourage everybody who had been abused to go in a women's refuge. A women's refuge is not a prison – it's a place where you can get – it's a safe haven. [...] – it's a place where you start all over again. [Gloria: shared refuge]

It can be a vital role of women's refuges to support such connections; supporting women to create shared narratives through positive collective processes (Munt 2012, 555). Unlike other participatory research projects (Askins and Pain 2011; Frohmann 2005), this research was not planned to produce public exhibitions, and therefore did not have the pressure to produce 'professional product' (Askins and Pain 2011, 812). The outputs have however been presented and published in a range of settings; and the posters in the refuges presented positive messages to women which participants imagined in the refuge in the future, such as: *'Don't feel TRAPPED!!'* and *'Help is at hand'*.

Conclusions

Women's refuges are much more than just safe containers for women and children on the move as they escape domestic violence. The history of the refuge movement highlights their vital role in the safety of women and children, housing thousands in England every day of the year (Women's Aid 2018), but also their role in supporting wider processes of survival and recovery. This article has shown how they are safe spaces in a dynamic way, and can enable processes of more-than-safety through contact, encounter, interaction and collaboration. This may depend on the physical space of the refuge, such as self-contained or communal facilities, but it significantly depends on the practices of workers and residents. Refuges in England were developed as part of a wider feminist movement, and those which retain feminist practices of active listening, respectful and affirming exchanges, and honesty continue to provide spaces for women's recovery and empowerment after abuse.

Although women and children in refuges have not chosen to live together, they co-create the refuge space through their interactions; and thereby co-create both the safety and the more-

than-safety. Practices of more-than-safety within refuges can help to counteract the isolation women experienced in the abusive relationship, and the displacement of their relocation journeys. Through contact with other women, women can develop more structural and collective understandings of their experiences, and resist individualising or pathologising explanations and service responses. Such encounters can develop into more ongoing interaction and collaboration with other residents, as women build friendships and support. This article has explored how interviewed women in a range of refuges experienced and narrated their experiences of contact and interaction; and how the structured collaboration of participatory groupwork in two refuges enhanced women's experiences of creativity and communication. Quotations and images by the women indicate their sense of connection and community with other abused women – including beyond those they have met – and their messages of support for believing in and achieving positive lives after the refuge.

Notes

¹Participants are referenced with the pseudonyms they chose.

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