Safe Spaces of refuge, shelter and contact

Introduction to Themed Section - Gender, Place and Culture

Abstract

State and societal responses to a diverse range of abuses, injustices and exclusions often take the form of providing designated spaces of temporary shelter from the hostility. This introduction to the themed section on Safe Spaces of refuge, shelter and contact outlines the five contributions on such gendered spaces in Australia, Cambodia, England, India and USA. Across the varying rationales and regimes of refuge, shelter and contact, three key themes emerge: the boundary work necessary to carve out safe spaces in a hostile world, the practices within designated safe spaces, and what is achieved in terms of safety and autonomy from gender-based violence.

State and societal responses to a diverse range of abuses, injustices and exclusions often take the form of providing temporary shelter from the hostility. Such designated spaces may be accommodation for women and children escaping violent partners, for young people escaping controlling societal norms, for marginalised people; or they may be spaces of shorter periods of encounter, such as for children's contact with absent or incarcerated parents. Creating safety in contexts where there would otherwise be fear and danger is an important rationale for the provision of such spaces. These spaces may either attempt to exclude danger, such as by maintaining the secrecy of locations of women's domestic violence refuges; or attempt to manage risky encounters, such as in child contact centres. The contributions in this themed

section explore a range of such places – the extent to which they are safe spaces, and the practices that foster or frustrate such spaces becoming more transformative spaces of meaningful interaction towards achieving safety and autonomy in the wider world. These are important questions for both academic understandings of such spaces, across geography and other disciplines, and for state and society responses to safety as a human need and right.

The papers in the section were initially presented as part of two sessions on 'safe spaces' at the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers Annual Conference in 2017. Other aspects of safe spaces, and other contexts – such as educational settings – were also presented. However, this themed section brings together papers focusing on gendered spaces of refuge, shelter and contact. The roles and responses of women's refuges/shelters are explored through studies in Australia, India, England and Cambodia. These contributions highlight varying rationales and regimes of sheltering, including the limitations of shelters in meeting immigrant and refugee women's needs in two Australian states (Murray et al. 2018) , and the shelter home as a site of contested victimhood in Eastern India (Guha 2018). The potential for shelters to enable autonomy and freedom for women is explored in safe shelters in Cambodia (Graham and Brickell 2018) and in England (Bowstead 2018), highlighting possible transformative, rather than just safe, spaces. All four contributions highlight the centrality of practices within spaces of refuge and shelter in determining whether the potential for autonomy and freedom is achieved. Practices to manage safety and fear are also explored in the context of a child contact exchange centre in Central Pennsylvania, USA (Cuomo 2018), highlighting the intimate terror from which safe spaces attempt to provide temporary refuge.

What all the papers examine is both the nature of the safety, and the nature of the

spaces in 'safe spaces'. In a range of locations in the Global South and Global North, the papers consider service responses to women and girls at risk of abuse in intimate or family relationships. In Cambodia, England and Eastern India the focus is on shelters and refuges for women and girls, whereas in Australia the focus incudes a wider range of services; and in Pennsylvania, USA the focus is on centres for child contact with abusive fathers. Whilst all the service provision discussed aims to ensure physical safety and protection from harm, there is consideration and critique as to whether this is a sufficient goal, and the extent to which it is achieved. As Graham and Brickell (2018) state, "safety from domestic violence does not mean freedom from it", and the papers here therefore go beyond discussing bare safety, following Lewis et al.'s (2015) argument that women need to be safe *from* abuse before they can be safe *to* achieve wider control, autonomy and freedom.   Safety is therefore seen as multi-layered, and practices of safety are seen as potentially restrictive and controlling: continuing the abuse that the spaces were intended to provide sanctuary from. The spaces themselves are similarly complicated, following The Roestone Collective's (2014, 1346) argument against static and acontextual notions of safe/unsafe, inclusive/exclusive; and highlighting instead the relational work which cultivates positive spaces for negotiating difference and challenging oppression.

Across the varying rationales and regimes of refuge, shelter and contact, three key themes emerge: the boundary work necessary to carve out safe spaces in a hostile world, the practices within designated safe spaces, and what is achieved in terms of safety and autonomy from gender-based violence.

In an (imagined) society where women and girls are safe from gender-based violence, there would be no need to carve out specific safe spaces such as shelters. Shelters and

refuges therefore only exist in a hostile world; and creating and sustaining these safe space requires engagement in boundary work to maintain safety for those inside their walls. This is the context for the critique of Graham and Brickell of shelters in Cambodia, in which NGO staff enforce rules that isolate women residents, and reduce their confidence and autonomy. Whilst some of the restrictions are seen as a recognition of the risk of encountering family members in the local area, others are seen as punitive, with negative impact on women's well-being and freedom. Even in the hostile context of Cambodian society, the boundaries imposed by shelter living are argued to be enforced too rigidly, and to be actively debilitating in terms of women's recovery and healing from emotional and physical abuse. In Australia, Murray et al. show that immigrant women face similar rigid boundaries between remaining within their communities, with associated risks from a known abuser and/or from restrictive community norms, or extreme isolation in the safety of remote areas.

Guha also argues that some practices in a shelter in Eastern India are punitive, particularly in the treatment of young women designated as victims of child marriage. From in-depth interviews with a small number of 14-16 year olds, Guha concludes that the young women have been sent to the shelter by their families who want them to be subjected to strict spatial and relational boundaries. The residents are not allowed mobile phones and are unable to leave the premises, however the young women argue that they are not victims of child marriage, and identify their families as using the shelter to enforce control. Rather than needing rescue and protection, these young women argue that their families are restricting their choices and sexuality, and using the shelter to discipline them. Safe spaces originally set up to protect women and girls from forced marriage, are therefore acting as a further resource to be mobilised to restrict their freedom and autonomy. Staff in the shelter in India are uncomfortable in their enforcement roles, emphasising the toll of boundary work. Cuomo

also discusses this point in relation to the staff at the child contact centre in Pennsylvania, USA. At times, staff there are physically constructing the place of encounter in terms of thinking through spatial and temporal layouts to minimise risks of abusive contact. In avoiding the risk of encounters between abusive fathers and ex-partners, the staff – all but one of whom are female – become targets for abuse themselves, which they attempt to manage through work and non-work practices.

Considering the practices of staff, residents and service users in 'safe spaces' turns our attention to the second theme of such spaces as not just containers, but as relational places. Bowstead contrasts the collective and communal practices that are possible within refuges in England, with the increasingly one-to-one service provision in the UK which does not attempt to create safe spaces or relational places, but instead to individualise service responses. The more holistic approaches of refuges are highlighted in both England (Bowstead 2018) and by Murray et al. (2018) in Australia, whilst acknowledging the tensions and challenges that are also possible in such spaces (Burman and Chantler 2004). The physical spaces are important, both with Graham and Brickell and with Bowstead discussing issues of shared facilities and degrees of homeliness that are possible; but it is the practices within such spaces that are greater determinants of what women are enabled to be safe *to* rather than just safe *from* (Lewis et al. 2015).

Whilst all the papers focus on services to address gender-based violence, not all of these services draw on feminist understandings of the causes and consequences of such violence, which affects the practices expected of staff and residents. Guha highlights how NGOs, despite being formally independent of the state, may deviate from their original principles – including being set up by feminists – because of the requirements of funders and

authorities. In contrast, Cuomo shows that the child contact centre was only set up to manage the implications of risky court decisions, including attacks and homicides when abusive fathers encounter their ex-partners and children. Its staff feel highly constrained in their practices, fearing that if they attempt to exclude more subtle and vicarious abuse, the abuse will simply be displaced to more public locations. Practices within such spaces are therefore understood as embedded in the practices outside these spaces, and vulnerable to being used to enable rather than restrict abuse. In the same way as Guha highlights how families could use shelters as a tool to control young women and curtail their autonomy, Murray et al. highlight how immigration status can be used to abuse and control women. Designated safe spaces are therefore seen as limited in the extent to which they can foster the place-making practices that would create spaces of more-than-safety and enable greater freedom and autonomy for women and girls in the outside world.

The extent to which such service provision achieves spaces and places of safety and autonomy is therefore the third theme across the contributions. Cuomo highlights how child contact handovers, and the associated potential for abuse of ex-partners, children and staff, are privatised in the institution of the centre. Rather than being acknowledged as a public safety concern, the risk and reality of gender-based violence is thereby internalised in the experiences of the overwhelmingly female staff. All the papers highlight that violence against women is normalised across these societies to the extent that it is the women and girls who are separated from society, rather than society being changed to reduce the violence. Within such gendered safe spaces, many women and girls do find a respite from abuse, and a sense of freedom and autonomy. Some of these women and girls may move on from these temporary spaces more empowered and confident to face the hostility in the world. But that is not inevitable, and the contributions emphasise the practices of more-than-safety that are

required both to equip individuals, and to promote more collective action and structural change in society. They also discuss the absence of such practices in punitive rules-based regimes which do not enable residents to participate or negotiate in the life of the shelter (Graham and Brickell 2018) or that demand performance of a particular notion of victimhood (Guha 2018). Positive practices within refuges may also be curtailed by limited interactions between women (Bowstead 2018), or by over-crowded facilities.

The 'safety' and the 'freedom' in these constructed safe spaces are therefore neither static nor predetermined (The Roestone Collective 2014), and do not necessarily impact the world outside the boundedness of the space. In fact, depending on the principles and purposes of the services, there may be no intention to affect the outside world. Whilst refuges developed on feminist principles (Bowstead) do resist an individualising explanation of domestic violence (Lewis et al. 2015), services such as child contact centres (Cuomo) (Morrison and Wasoff 2012) may have no intention to address the root causes of abusive behaviour. They act as simple mediators. Women and girls are therefore commonly offered only physical isolation from a specific abuser, in societies as diverse as Australia and Cambodia, or required to adopt an individual identity of victimhood, in societies as diverse as India and USA, rather than a human rights-based language and action towards justice. Murray et al. highlight the tightrope walked by migrant women in Australia, caught between isolation and surveillance, between escape and ostracism. As migrants they experience multiple relocations, internationally and internally; and there appears to be no option for women simply to be safe to be themselves in society.

Notions of 'safe spaces' are premised on spatial separation, risking leaving other spaces clear for abusers to continue unaffected, and, more widely, normalising systems of

oppression. However, in the contexts of societies across the Global North and Global South where gender-based violence is highly prevalent and deeply normalised, the argument *for* temporary safe spaces of refuge, shelter and contact can be couched as a vital temporal separation, however temporary. Depending on the practices within such spaces, they can be powerful places of protection and recovery – transformative of individual lives, inspiring in developing collective support; and also a source of wider societal change. The contributions in this themed section therefore both critique the potential for 'safe spaces' to reinforce gender-based injustice, and recognise their potential to counteract the isolation of abuse and enable gender-based empowerment.

Acknowledgements

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