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4 Interpreting vulnerabilities facing women in urban life: a case study in Madrid, Spain

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Abstract

The chapter analyses interpretations of vulnerable life situations that women face in a large city in different settings, in local policymaking, welfare s

ervice system and in women's daily lives, by presenting a case study from Madrid, the capital city of Spain. Three datasets are used in this analysis: local policy documents, interviews with women in one of Madrid's central neighbourhoods and interviews with professionals from the local welfare services. The findings indicate that even if the interpretations of local policymaking, welfare professionals and women themselves differ, vulnerabilities are connected with social structures and economic conditions instead of being interpreted as characteristics of individual women or specific groups of women. The findings further emphasise the importance of (female) family relations and social support but also other social ties in protecting women from and in vulnerable life situations. The question remains as to what extent these vulnerabilities are specifically urban, which requires further intersection of research on vulnerabilities and social welfare with the sociological research on urban life and urban environments.

Introduction

Every spring, since 2018, massive demonstrations against male violence have been organised all over Spain, the biggest ones being in Madrid. These demonstrations indicate increased awareness

of the inequalities, social problems and vulnerabilities that women face in their daily lives. The political leadership that governed the City of Madrid from 2015 until spring 2019 was actively promoting gender equality policies and even announced Madrid to be a feminist city. The local leadership has since changed and is currently even hostile towards feminism, but this still makes the city an interesting case to study the vulnerabilities facing women in urban life and local actions to counter them. In this chapter, we ask how these vulnerabilities are interpreted and encountered in local policymaking and welfare services, and how they actualise in women's daily lives, presenting a case study from Madrid,[1] the capital city of Spain.

Gender influences all aspects of our being, our relationships and the society and culture we live in (Järviluoma, Moisala, and Vilkko 2011). Gender intersects with other distinctions and inequalities related to age, ethnicity, class, economic situation and so on. Even if violence against women has been the most visible topic in many countries recently, all over the world, there are other vulnerabilities facing women, related to poverty and economic hardship, poor housing and even homelessness, insecurity, loneliness and lack of social support, drug problems and so on. Many of these intensify in urban environments (e.g. Wratten 1995; Laparra and Pérez 2008; Fundación Foessa 2019).

Big cities harbour a significant part of the social problems that characterise contemporary urban societies. Even if often seen in terms of economic prosperity or employment hubs, they are also spaces where inequality, poverty, social segregation and isolation cumulate, in addition to enormous environmental problems. The most common sociological description of urban life reflects a weakening of local ties, individualisation and a sense of uprooting (Putnam 2000; Ascher 2010). Such a problem-oriented portrait of cities dominates sociological discussion, but

there are also other interpretations of urban life emphasising belonging and social action in local contexts (Kuurne and Gómez 2019).

Feminist scholars have shown that urban life has a gender dimension, which is most often discussed in terms of gendered use of urban space and city planning (e.g. McDowell 1983; Fenster 2005; Álvarez 2017). Conceptions, experiences and daily life differ depending on gender, which leads to different ways of using the city (McDowell 1983; Durán 2017). Women suffer from spatial constraints related to the gendered division of public and private spheres (Harding and Blokland 2014). Many authors have also pointed out the dangers that cities pose for women (e.g. Wesely and Gaarder 2004; Sweet and Ortiz 2015; Pernas and Román 2017). Women limit their use of urban space due to their dedication to care tasks, but also because of their awareness of insecurity and the risk of sexual attacks and other forms of violence. In addition to gendered urban space, it is important to study local welfare policymaking and how it influences women (Kutsar and Kuronen 2015). Several feminist scholars have also called for an everyday life perspective in studying gendered urban life (e.g. Vaiou and Lykogianni 2006; Sánchez de Madariaga 2013; Beebeejaun 2017).

In analysing how vulnerabilities facing women are interpreted in different contexts, we use three different datasets collected between 2016 and 2018. We have first analysed policy documents to find out whether and how vulnerable situations of women are recognised and addressed in the local policymaking of the city of Madrid. These documents were collected from the former local government website and were chosen based on their focus on equality, human rights and social and health issues. We analysed more carefully those parts of the documents where women and vulnerabilities were explicitly mentioned. Second, one of the authors has interviewed women living in one of Madrid's central neighbourhoods about their daily life, their sense of belonging

to the local environment and their coping after the severe economic crisis that hit many European countries and had a particularly severe impact in Spain. Third, we have interviewed professionals from the local welfare services and NGOs working with people facing severe vulnerable life situations, including homelessness, violence, mental health and drug problems. These three datasets provide different perspectives on and interpretations of the vulnerabilities faced by women in a large city.

Local policies recognising the vulnerable life situations of women

Local governments have an important role in making urban welfare policy, even if their mandate differs from country to country. Spain has a multi-level governance system, divided into different territorial tiers and characterised by the strong role of the regions (Kuronen and Caillaud 2015). The City of Madrid makes its own policy, but it has limited powers and resources for it. In recent years, there was a political commitment on gender equality and even feminist politics due to its former socialist-oriented local Government and the Major Manuela Carmena (2015–2019). González, Lois González, and Piñeira Mantiñán (2016), in their comparison of urban policies in Barcelona and Madrid, conclude that social issues were the priority of the former local government in Madrid, with special attention given to disadvantaged groups and vulnerable neighbourhoods. Their analysis shows that local political priorities depend on the parties in power and can change quite rapidly.

The City of Madrid presents its local policy priorities in different documents. For our analysis, the most important document is the gender equality plan 2018–2020 (Plan Estratégico para la Igualdad de Género de la Ciudad de Madrid). Other documents are the operational plan concerning human trafficking and prostitution (Plan Operativo contra la Trata de Mujeres y

Otros Abusos de Derechos Humanos en Contextos de Prostitución) and the Madrid addiction plan 2017–2021 (Plan de Adicciones de la Ciudad de Madrid). We also analysed the City of Madrid's annual report from 2017 (Cuenta General Ayuntamiento de Madrid[2]) where the City Council described, among other things, its actions to tackle vulnerable situations of women and its financial contribution to these actions.

Under the former local government, the City set up the gender equality plan, which included four main goals: integrate gender perspective into all local policies, make Madrid a city free of gender violence, promote 'sustainability of life' related to gender division of care as formal and informal work and increase the political and social participation of women. The plan first identified the major 'gender gaps' in Madrid, stating that the population is highly feminised and the gap increases in the oldest age groups. It mentions the high percentage of older women living alone as well as the high number of single-parent households headed by a woman. The plan further recognises women's position in the labour market, their lower participation rate and higher share of part-time contracts relative to men. The majority of the city's residents of non-Spanish nationality are also said to be women, and these residents' insecure social position is specifically mentioned. Many of these identified gender gaps are related to economic vulnerabilities and the high risk for poverty among women.

> In our city, many people suffer from inequality, poverty and exclusion that hinder the full exercise of their rights and affect women in a specific way. On the one hand, the feminisation of poverty punishes many women and their dependents with living conditions below basic standards, limiting their access to basic goods and resources. And on the other, gender violence in all its manifestations deprives basic rights of many women, such as the right to life, security and freedom, and represents the most common violation of human rights in the entire world.

In the quotation, poverty and violence against women are linked and strongly defined in terms of human rights violations. It also refers to the feminisation of poverty, which has become a widely used academic and policy concept, but which has also been criticised for its conceptual and methodological weaknesses (Chant 2006) and for disregarding important issues in the understanding of vulnerability processes (Anderson 2003). Even so, many authors see the connection between poverty and gender as an incontestable fact (e.g. Laparra and Pérez 2008). In this policy document, the feminisation of poverty is not analysed further in the local context, but it simply refers to the high poverty risk of women.

Eliminating gender violence was raised as one of the four main aims of the plan:

> The municipal obligation is to prevent and detect violence early, and to guarantee sufficient, accessible and quality resources to assure integral attention and recovery to the victims. … priority will be given to actions with older women, migrants, disabled people, homeless women and girls.

The plan recognises social responsibility and the obligation of the local government to prevent gender violence and help the victims by, for example, offering psychological and social services and legal advice. This statement is in line with the way in which the American legal theorist Martha Fineman (2010) is calling for the responsibility of the state to reduce the risks of vulnerability.

Male violence against women and services for the victims receive special attention in all of the policy documents. They report that there are special services for the women in prostitution and

the victims of trafficking, such as a mobile unit and a shelter (Gender equality plan, 29–30; Operational plan against trafficking of women … 2018–2020). The Madrid addiction plan recognises the specific problems that women face in obtaining addiction services but also the likelihood of violence:

> The most relevant differential characteristics observed were that women encounter greater difficulties in access, treatment and social integration, that they have greater delays in demanding treatment, tend to suffer family burdens and are more likely to suffer gender-based violence.
>
> (Madrid addiction plan, 75)

Furthermore, the City of Madrid's annual report states that, for example, new housing programmes were carried out for the groups at risk of social exclusion. One of them was the programme for attention to women in vulnerable situations, where the objective was to temporarily provide housing for and improve the living conditions of single mothers and their children, especially those who are recovering from abuse (Annual report 2017, 110).

The policy documents also describe other welfare services and discuss women as service users. The annual report says that the percentage of women served in the local social services was significantly higher than that of men in 2017, representing 72.7% of the service users. It is explained that women are more likely to seek support not only for themselves but also for the whole family. A higher number of women among older people also means higher care service needs (Annual report 2017, 153). The report also describes the activities of Samur Social, the local social emergency service, which runs mobile units and emergency centres, provides a telephone helpline, intervenes in social emergency situations and attends especially to homeless

people and the immigrant population on the streets of Madrid. No specific services for women are mentioned but the amounts of service users are presented by gender.

The policy documents not only describe the actions taken by the City Council but also those of other local actors. NGOs have an important role in Spain in complementing public welfare services, and in raising public awareness and campaigning for improvements (Muñoz 2016). A vast majority of the NGOs receive public funding (Besteiro de la Fuente 2016). The annual report shows that this is the case also in Madrid. The local government is making contracts with and financially supporting the work of various NGOs in their specific fields (poverty, Roma population, LGTBI persons, homeless people and so on) which complement the actions of the local government. There are also national NGOs, such as the Spanish Red Cross, which is working with people in vulnerable situations across Spain and has also published a series of reports on social vulnerability. Two of these reports are specifically on women (Cruz Roja Española 2015, 2017). Many of these NGOs are described as having specific services or activities for women such as shelters or emergency housing, group activities or training to improve their employability.

Analysis of these documents shows that in the local policymaking under the previous local government, the vulnerabilities faced by women, the analysis of their causes and actions to tackle them received wide attention. The main focus, in line with the feminist campaigning, was on gender violence, along with economic vulnerabilities and the poverty risk of women, especially of specific groups, such as lone mothers, older women living alone or migrant women. However, there is no assessment in these policy documents whether and to what extent these local policy statements have been transformed into concrete action that have an impact which improves women's lives.

Economic vulnerabilities in women's daily lives

The central neighbourhood of Madrid where we carried out 29 interviews with women is inhabited by a social mix of working-class residents, students, older people, artists, academics and other professionals. Most women reported especially about their economic hardship after the financial crisis in 2008 and its consequences in their daily life. They had lived a rather ordinary life before, but it changed dramatically and resulted in an economically vulnerable situation where they were struggling to cope, with great impact on their social life and relations.

One of our interviewees, Amparo, a cook who was looking for a better job because her current one was part-time with a very low salary, explained her total lack of a social life and the need to reduce her expenses after the economic crisis:

> Social life, going out, I already told you that since the crisis started, nothing, nothing. My husband got ill, so nothing. After that, because the economy went down, I was out of work, now I only work a few hours. I'm cutting back, cutting back. In the past I used to go to the gym nearby. I also had to give that up, I'm cutting back on things.
>
> (Amparo, 54 years)

Amparo describes the vicious circle leading to an even more vulnerable situation: unemployment and illness making things worse, giving up hobbies and social life, thereby limiting social connections with other people, which leads to a life where everything is just about 'cutting back'. Another interviewee, Isabel, was working in the field of the performing arts, organising personal development and empowerment workshops using theatrical dynamics. Until recently, her work had been funded by public institutions. Yet those institutions had begun to make financial cuts

and other social programmes were being reduced. As a result, she was facing serious economic problems:

> I share the flat. I live sharing because I have to, I mean, at the beginning when I bought this flat – I'm still paying the bank – the idea was… I did not want to share the flat, but well, things got very ugly with the crisis and in the end … I also like living with people, although I have almost always lived alone, now I like it. And now I'm still having to share the flat, that is, I live with two other people, usually women.
>
> (Isabel, 48 years)

In Isabel's case, problems coping with her housing costs eventually led to a positive solution, sharing her apartment with other women, even if she was forced into it in the first place. However, Isabel's situation demonstrates the problem affecting the entire city of Madrid and many other Spanish cities, namely, difficulties in accessing affordable housing. The shortage of social housing in Spain together with the low level of wages has given rise to a large problem that increases the economic vulnerability of the population (Rodríguez López 2018).

Mónica, who has moved to Madrid from Paraguay, is a documented migrant but as many women who arrived in Spain looking for a better life, she has faced many problems:

> But as I say, I have three children and my intention was that they came here to study. That was my intention. And I do not know, it was a dream at the same time too, right? Time passed, time passed, and in the end when you do not have work here, you are not anyone, because of course, you have to pay for everything. For us who do not have a flat on our own, it is very expensive, the rent… And when you do not have a job in two, three months, all the money is gone. And here, being here, you have to send for your children, for your family.

Mónica had a dream to bring her family to Spain so that her children could receive an education and a better life. Instead, she ended up living on her own in a precarious employment situation and struggling with the high cost of housing. Previous studies have shown that the position of migrant women is weak and vulnerable, especially for those who, unlike Mónica, are undocumented migrants. Their employment situation is unprotected, and they do not have rights even for basic social and health services (Caballé-Climent 2018), which is not a unique situation in Madrid or in Spain.

Some of the women shared how they are supporting their family members who have economic problems, which makes their own situation even worse. An older lady, Maruja, describes how she financially supports both her adult son and grandson:

> I have been helping him, my son [50 years old], who does not work anymore. He does not work because he is unemployed and does not receive the unemployment benefit because of his bad head, and I have been helping him. But I already told him that I could not because the repairs in the building where I live are very expensive and every Monday and Tuesday you have to be fixing something. […] My grandson [19 years old] comes to my flat to eat on a Saturday, and the next Saturday my son comes.

Maruja's way of acting is an example of the articulation of strong family ties in Spain (Tobío et al. 2010). Her situation shows the devastating impact of unemployment due to the economic crisis and the dependence of several family generations, in this case, Maruja's son and grandson, on aid from the poor pensions of the elderly.

The vulnerable situations that these women from different social backgrounds reported were primarily caused by their economic situation but it influenced their entire life in many ways: their housing conditions, family and other social relations, social life and activities in the urban environment where they were living. They were searching for solutions to cope but often did not see a way out. They did not mention any welfare services where to seek help. Instead, coping on their own and even helping others was their strategy of survival (also Chapter 12, Virokannas in this book).

Professional perceptions of women's vulnerable situations

We also interviewed managers and professionals in different welfare services to get their views on vulnerable situations of women, their needs as service users and the provision of specific services for women. These professionals were from the local social emergency services (Samur Social), addiction services and the Red Cross. We asked them whom they considered to be women in the most vulnerable situation and why. They reflected on this question from the perspective of their specific field of expertise, which is different and more concrete than the one in the local policy documents, but it also differs from the daily life experiences of the women we interviewed.

The representative from the social emergency services mainly spoke about homeless people, which is one of the main groups they work with:

> I believe that they are mentally ill women, not because they are worse than other women, who are already very bad off, but because there are fewer resources for mental health cases. As there is less coverage, they are more vulnerable, they have less protection…. But [homeless] women are in general very bad, very bad.

The professional working in the Red Cross mentioned two groups of women, victims of violence and lone mothers without support from the child's father:

> Women in situations of great vulnerability are those who suffer violence because up to the moment when they receive a response in economic or legal terms, a time occurs in which this situation makes them feel very unprotected. They do not have money to pay the rent, electricity is cut off, and what about the children? Another situation that we address here has to do with non-shared responsibility, mothers with children whose father does not participate in their care and attention.

Both of these professionals stated that vulnerability is not an individual characteristic but the consequence of a complex combination of a lack of services, economic resources and protection. It is interesting to see how they are aware of and emphasising the social and structural causes of vulnerabilities. These female professionals had a good sense of the concrete problems women face in their daily lives and how those are connected with the gendered structures of Spanish society. Representatives from the addiction services described the connection between addiction and women's experiences of violence:

> Gender violence is quite common, unfortunately. First of all, gender-based violence may be the cause of women entering into substance abuse, that is, it can be used as a way to relieve the suffering. … And then, the women who are substance users normally find themselves in situations of violence much more frequently, they are more vulnerable, they lose the defence signals, the signals at a certain moment that can warn you that you are getting into a

In the quotation above, the professional is describing the complex connections of violent intimate

relationships and addiction problems. Violence against women is seen to intertwine with other

problems women face. Other professionals also discussed violence at homes, on the streets and

even in the centres where women seek help and protection. Gender violence has received a lot of

attention in local policies, as was shown in the analysis of the policy documents.

Professionals further emphasised the significance of family networks. A lack of social support

from the family get women to search for help from the social emergency services as a last resort.

The professionals were talking about the situations where family protection fails or is lacking, and how solidarity between women has declined. Jupp (2014) argues that women are expected to recreate and strengthen weakened community solidarity, especially in disadvantaged communities. In a similar sense, the professionals pointed out how family, and especially female family members, protect women in vulnerable situations. They also stated that because of their family role and responsibilities, women try to cope even in extremely difficult situations. Family connections are strong in Spain, and with the low level of public social security, extended family even provides financial support for its members (as we saw earlier in Maruja's interview). Carrascosa (2015) argues that family is more important than the welfare state in Spain in protecting its members and that the economic crisis has even increased the importance of family solidarity. Moreover, Tobío et al. (2010) conclude that in difficult times, kinship relationships, especially the vertical ones, become more important. When this 'safety net' is missing, as in the case of migrant women or lone homeless women living on the streets, they end up in extremely vulnerable situations economically, psychically and mentally (also Chapter 11, de Miguel Calvo in this book).

In terms of family support, male partners were actually excluded from this concept; they were seen as a source of financial security but more often as a problem for women when violent and abusive. Despite the threatening situation, women often remain in violent relationships to avoid homelessness (Laparra and Pérez 2008). Men might provide a sort of 'protection' for women from other men, but at the same time that relationship can be very abusive, as our next interviewee describes:

… some homeless women, and I believe with home too, they feel more protected with a man next to them. It is true that there may be a man who abuses them but if not, there might be abuses by many more men. This is what happens with the pimps and prostitutes that, indeed, there is a man who abuses them but they are protected from the rest of the men, and this phenomenon I have seen it, this happens a lot.

(Interview in Samur Social)

Professionals defined the vulnerabilities women face from their specific field of expertise but what they shared was the connection they made between economic problems, violence and various other vulnerable situations, and how they saw the lack of family support and protection causing or worsening women's situation. Professionals actually discussed very little how vulnerabilities facing women are tackled in the services they provided. They recognised the need for specific services for women but also the lack of them. One of our interviewees emphasised that the action should be taken at different levels: at the individual level by empowering women and helping them to improve their life, at the community level by creating supportive social networks and at the societal level with gender equality work, prevention and by raising public awareness.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have analysed vulnerable situations that women face in urban life from the perspectives of local policymaking, professionals in the welfare services and as experienced by women themselves. These three contexts provide different interpretations of vulnerabilities, but there are also some similarities. Local policy documents remain at the general level in defining vulnerabilities and some specific groups of women at greater risk. Even if the gender inequalities

of the society are recognised, policy documents are institutional texts that have no connection with the actualities of women's daily life and their experiences (Smith 2005, 183–201). The interviewed women, but also welfare service professionals, reflected more concretely on how vulnerabilities actualise in women's daily lives. Such an everyday perspective is important, as some feminist urban sociologists have argued (Vaiou and Lykogianni 2006; Beebeejaun 2017). It is important to take the standpoint of women's local actualities and their material conditions when analysing the wider social and economic processes that generate vulnerable situations (Smith 2005, 54–57).

However, it is worth noting that in the interviews with professionals and women themselves as well as in local policy documents, vulnerabilities were connected with social structures and economic conditions. They were not interpreted as individual failures or characteristics, a tendency that has recently been criticised by many academics (see Virokannas, Liuski, and Kuronen 2020). It is also evident that vulnerable life situations were seen as a combination of various problems and processes influencing women's lives simultaneously. Professionals often discussed how living in an abusive and violent relationship is combined in complex ways with other problems, such as economic hardship, substance abuse or housing problems. Both women and professionals stated how economic problems are connected with the lack of social relations and activities, influencing one's whole wellbeing. The cumulative nature of vulnerabilities requires further research. The limited scope of the welfare services also deserves deeper scrutiny. The professionals simultaneously recognised the need for specific services for women and their absence. To this should be added the fact that women did not even mention such services when they described their daily difficulties.

Initially, we wanted to study the vulnerabilities that women face in a large city as urban vulnerabilities. However, the question remains as to what extent these vulnerabilities are specifically urban. For example, vulnerable situations related to gender-based violence are not only an urban phenomenon but also permeate entire societies, whereas vulnerabilities that women face in the Madrid neighbourhood are related to the local urban environment, unemployment and the excessive costs of housing. Some problems such as homelessness or drug abuse are more wide-ranging in cities, but are not specifically urban problems. However, the idea of modern urban life characterised by the weakening of local ties, individualisation and the sense of lost community is somewhat questioned in our findings, which emphasise the importance of (female) family relations and social support, but also other social ties protecting women from and in vulnerable life situations. In order to answer this question, there is a need to deepen the promising intersection of research on vulnerabilities and social welfare with sociological research on urban life and urban environments.

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[1]Unless mentioned otherwise, we refer here to the city of Madrid, not the Region (Autonomous Community), which is also called Madrid.

[2]2017 was the most recent year where the annual report was available at the time of the data collection.

[3]Translated by the authors from Spanish into English. All the policy documents and interviews are originally in Spanish. Madrid addiction plan is translated in English, and we have used its English version. For the sake of clarity, English translations of the names of these documents are used in this chapter.