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# Spatial practices of care among women facing housing precarity: a study in greater Lisbon during the pandemic

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**ABSTRACT**

COVID-19 made visible the care world. Care includes everything we do to sustain, preserve, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. This paper addresses carework spatially, bridging the concepts of spatial justice, participation, situated knowledge and solidarity, with the pandemic as a backdrop. Based on an action research project, this paper elaborates a conceptualisation of care, both as a practice and a process, focusing on the experience of women living in a context of housing precarity. Using mixed methods, including in-depth interviews, ethnographic work, and workshops, it aims to deepen the comprehension of socio-spatial care practices during COVID-19, focusing on the agency of poor marginalised women, providing frameworks of care within the places they inhabit, also considering the impact on the research itself. Empirically driven, this paper shows that housing precarity and housing deficits affect women more dramatically. Notably, those spatial care practices also reveal forms of mutual aid and solidarity capable of questioning - or even overcoming - obstacles created or intensified by the pandemic.

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## Introduction

Despite the specificities of each context, the current planetary housing crisis reflects the consolidation of the global housing financialisation process in the last decades (Aalbers 2015; Madden and Marcuse 2016). Housing tends to be read as a commodity and a financial asset, hindering access to adequate housing for an increasing part of the urban population and, consequently, worsening its general housing conditions. At the same time, housing

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insecurity unveils itself both as policy and ideology (Rolnik 2019). In addition to the rise in market values and gentrification, hazardous housing represents a growing phenomenon in European countries, with moderate to severe housing precariousness affecting around 260 million people (Clair et al. 2018, 13). Considerably higher levels are reported in Southern European countries like Portugal. An unprecedented step has been taken with the adoption of a European Union (EU) report by Sparrentak (2021), recommending measures to the Member States and the EU to ensure access to decent housing, and to put people at the centre of investment and recovery policies over the next decade. The demand for decent housing to live in was even more pressing when 'staying at home' became a requirement during the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting the most vulnerable social groups - showing that housing policy is also health policy – and intensifying preceding inequalities (Bowlby and Jupp 2021).

COVID-19 made visible a carelessness world. Care work and practices, 'unproductive' tasks associated mainly with women's labour, proved their worth as people clapped their hands in support of essential care workers (Chatzidakis et al. 2020). This new virus also made visible the places where most of the 'essential care workers'—other than medical doctors – lived. Migrants delivering Uber Eats during lockdowns packed into central Lisbon, where they pay to rent a bed – not even a room to oneself –suddenly appeared on TV screens when an overcrowded hostel faced a major COVID outbreak. Cleaners, predominantly women living on the urban periphery in deprived neighbourhoods or on social housing estates, never stopped working, commuting for hours in jam-packed buses. Most were migrants, mainly from countries formerly colonised by Portugal: Cape-Verde, Angola, São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau, or Mozambique, or recently arrived migrants from Southeast Asia. Research showed a greater chance of infection among essential workers on low incomes, fewer resources to stockpile food or the means to work remotely, while living closer to the poverty line (Schulz et al. 2020; den Broeder et al. 2021). Despite their selfless efforts to care for the rest of us (locked down and following strict orders to 'stay home'), they remained invisible and largely underappreciated. The gender inequalities created by the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down efforts to improve equality, undoing decades of progress in eradicating extreme poverty among women and disproportionately affecting women in inadequate housing conditions (Azcona et al. 2020; Falú 2020).

## The housing precariat and housing precarity

COVID-19 made even worse a phenomenon that affects approximately half of the population living in Europe: housing precarity: 35.1% of the population report a score of 1 (low level), 14.7% level 2 and 2.8% level 3 (highly

precarious). Clair et al. (2018)'s study indicated around 15 million people in Europe live in conditions of severe housing precariousness. In this paper, we used the conceptualisation of housing precariousness as defined therein:

> A state of uncertainty which increases a person's real or perceived likelihood of experiencing an adverse event, caused (at least in part) by their relationship with their housing provider, the physical qualities, affordability, security of their home, and access to essential services (Clair et al. 2018, 4)

Their also indicate that women are at greater risk of living in substandard accommodation, making gender a risk factor but not an identifier of precarious housing. Employment in the caregiving sector, characterized by lower salaries, and structurally gendered violence, represents just some of the aspects of social inequality that expose women to higher levels of housing precarity, exacerbated by the pandemic (Parker and Leviten-Reid 2022). Looking at the housing conditions of migrants Dotsey & Chiodelli conclude that housing precarity is 'institutionally constructed, maintained and shaped', pointing to multiple cumulative factors (2021, 1). Regarding low-income migrant communities, Lombard (2023) uses the precarity lens to capture multidimensional and overlapping phenomena, which is also effective. Housing precarity was also linked with renters and older people (Colic-Peisker, Ong, and Wood 2015; Waldron 2022, 2023). Vulnerability, insecurity, and informality are already well-established debates regarding housing, while precarity has only recently extended from the labour market to housing (Beer et al. 2016). Moreover, today's unfolding crises (climate, work, health, migrations) are all connected to diverse forms of precarity (Greenop and Brugman Alvarez 2022, 249).

Listerborn's concept of the housing precariat provides a valuable framework for understanding the challenges facing many people in today's housing market and highlights the need for new solutions to address these challenges (Dorling 2014; Listerborn 2021). And, as we consider them, solutions that have care at their core. As Greenop wrote: 'understanding housing precarity: more than access to a shelter, housing is essential for a decent life' (2017).

## *1. Why care? – a spatial approach to care and housing*

This paper addresses care spatially, bridging the concepts of spatial justice, participation, situated knowledge and solidarity. It engages with the current debate on places we care for, buildings that care for us, and providing effective well-being (Gutiérrez 2021). 'Spatial care' goes beyond spatial justice or right to the city since care aims to reframe the values systems we operate from as space producers, primarily the significance of interdependency (Harvey 2003; Lefebvre 1968; Soja 2010; Watson 2020). This dialogue is mostly

done within the ethics of care line as developed by Tronto (1993) and followed by others (Groenhout 2004; Held 2006; Sevenhuijsen 1998), recognising Tronto and Fisher's definition of care as a grounded concept to operationalise care, also spatially:

> a 'species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible'. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Fisher and Tronto 1990, 40)

Care equally makes a plea for intersectionality, under an ecofeminist perspective, contradicting the dominant neoliberal narrative that places the individual as solely responsible for actions and changes (Power and Bergan 2019; Tronto 2017), cutting their ties with the interdependent notion of care. Neoliberal ideologies erase our mutual responsibility of taking care of each other, fortifying 'de-caring of the welfare state' (Sevenhuijsen 2003, 183). Caring and de-caring have a spatial correlation with spatial practices and policies since they are always spatially constituted. If, as care ethics theorists argue, care is a basic principle of all human societies, therefore housing as an essential infrastructure of care is a vital space to perform it in Power and Mee (2019). The home, the locus of care, is socially and historically related to the private and domestic realm. However, as Power posits, caring with opens a 'conceptualisation of domestic caring that is political and social rather than individual, autonomous and private' (2019, 7). Tronto included caring-with not as a fifth phase of care (after caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care-receiving), but rather as a theoretical conception of care, as the nature of care ethics itself (Tronto 2013). Tronto emphasises the importance of collective responsibility and the need for caregivers to work together, a broad sociopolitical vision of the world. At the same time, Power (2019) situates caring-with in a socio-material and performative frame, outlined by spatial assemblages, a relational production of care practices. She also refers to the limited knowledge of the articulation between housing and care, even though the recent interest in articulating space and care now addresses this topic (2019, 763). Diverse approaches, disciplines and scholars are deepening this discussion because of the pandemic and the need to tackle private and public space, housing precarity or architecture and urbanism for a broken plane (Bates, Imrie, and Kullman 2017; Fitz and Krasny 2019; Glynn and Mayock 2023; Power 2019; Williams 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic, the context from within spatial care is analysed in this paper, opened – or even enforced – practices of communing, mutual aid, and the creation of spaces of/for care. Housing design and housing policy urge a paradigm shift where the ethics of care is placed at the centre of design, to explore and envision 'matters of care' that can effectively address housing inequalities (Bates, Imrie, and

Kullman 2017; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). This paper used this framework to map, reveal and visualise some of the spatial practices of care in our research.

## *2. Exploring spatial care through participatory action-research*

The idea of spatial care was explored empirically through a participatory action-research project, supported by a special line of funding focused on the gender[1] impacts of the pandemic. The project was conducted in the field between July and December 2020 with the support of a multidisciplinary team consisting of three architects, two geographers, two anthropologists, a designer, and a gender studies researcher, in close collaboration with local organisations in three neighbourhoods located in Amadora, Almada, and Lisbon, municipalities with some the highest rates of housing precarity in Portugal. Likewise, the collaboration with an NGO, Habita – Association for the Right to Housing and to the City, allowed us to gain access to women living with different degrees and definitions of housing precariousness.

Our line of research followed a preliminary study suggesting that women were more concerned with their health and that of their families (Magalhães et al. 2020), so they could potentially act as public health agents in the places they live (Raj 2020), empowered as mediators for the dissemination of valid and sustained knowledge about COVID-19. We must mention that, during the first semester of 2020, scientific knowledge about this new coronavirus was still in its early stages, dependent on what was known and seeming at the time to be effective for controlling the spread of the disease.

The project aimed at broadening knowledge about the impact of COVID-19 on the daily practices and habits of women – and their families – in precarious housing situations, to foster disease risk mitigation practices under a context of scarcity. In the field, we also sought out the corroborations and contradictions between what the law and regulations upheld to fight COVID-19, and what was effectively being done for precarious households. At the same time, the project set out to map the different situations of housing precariousness experienced by women, work that was yet to be done at a national level in Portugal.

Despite the difficulties of getting fieldwork done due to lockdowns and severe mobility restrictions, the design research was founded on direct contact. Although the survey will not be central to this paper, it is relevant enough to include it in the breakdown of the design research. A face-to-face survey was conducted with vulnerable women living in situations of precariousness regarding their housing conditions, care labour and gender roles, involving 59 questions. Over four months, we applied it to 232 women (a family universe of 860). Since most surveys were conducted online due to pandemic restrictions, they were completed mostly by persons with a certain degree of literacy and access to the Internet. Depending on online

interaction leaves disenfranchised women living in precarious situations out of the statistics. Bearing this in mind, the importance of surveying/mapping what was 'under the radar' played a fundamental part in our research, looking at a situation that has so far been overlooked.

The survey allowed us to understand the conditions of the house and the household, assessing intersections between their socio-economic characteristics and the immediate effects of the pandemic on employment, reproductive labour, and gender-based inequalities at home. The survey also collected data to understand if women living in precarious housing were aware of their housing rights. Questions on the measures implemented by the housing sector to minimise the effects of the pandemic showed us how far most of those women were from understanding or accessing their right to housing, constitutionally upheld by Portuguese law.

To analyse certain conditions that the survey was unable to cover, we also in-depth interviewed ten women. After four meetings with Habita, we were able to put together a preliminary classification of the situations that affect women more dramatically or differently: homelessness, labour precarity combined with housing precarity, or single-parent households headed by women, among others. Among the women who attended this NGO's weekly assemblies and the previous fieldwork done by our research team, we identified ten such issues. Interviews took approximately two hours focused on their housing pathways according to Clapham's (2002) definition: 'patterns of interaction (practices) concerning house and home, over time and space' (2002, 63), including during their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and except for one, all took place at the interviewees' homes. The following table provides a systematic overview of our interviewees, showing housing conditions, form of tenure, and potential impact of COVID-19 at home Table 1.

The ten women were not objectified subjects for the academic arena. In this sense, they were ready to share and participate, but above all, they wanted to know 'what for' and 'for whom' this research would serve. As Lancione (2017) said, society moves faster than academia, and within the pandemic, even faster and more unpredictably. Non-academic dissemination was therefore given precedence so it could quickly impact women's lives and help create awareness of the experience of the domestic space during the pandemic. The project produced a publication where those ten 'portraits' were presented and discussed beforehand with the respondents, as well as a rationale for the pandemic and housing crises (Lages and Jorge 2020). Although we never used their names, only their initials, all ten women were shown with a photo at the front door of their homes. According to all, making the invisible visible was a convincing enough argument for them to give a face to their housing issues. Lastly, two workshops were held, interacting directly with NGOs and women experiencing housing precarity, informing the

Table 1. Profile of the women interviewed.

| Participant | Housing conditions | Housing Tenure | Covid-19 | Profile |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Homelessness | Homelessness | Homelessness | Portuguese woman, (with no family support) |
| 2 | Extreme precariousness | Own house, self-built, informal settlement | No sanitation, no running water | Black migrant woman |
| 3 | Extreme precariousness | Own house, self-built, informal settlement | No sanitation, no running water | Black migrant woman |
| 4 | Extreme precariousness | Free market rent | Imminent eviction / ruin | Portuguese woman |
| 5 | Squatted council flat | Squatting | Afraid of imminent eviction / no running water | Black Portuguese woman |
| 6 | Temporarily-loaned house | Subletting | Overcrowded | Muslin refugee woman |
| 7 | Precarious house | Subletting | Imminent eviction / house in disrepair | Portuguese woman, (with no family support) |
| 8 | House in an informal neighbourhood | Own house, self-built | Overcrowded | Black migrant woman |
| 9 | Flat on a social housing estate | Social rent. Temporarily relocated in 2015. | Overcrowded | Portuguese Roma woman |
| 10 | Rents a flat on the regular market | Free market rent | Rent effort rate greater than 1/3, afraid of rent increase. | Portuguese woman, over 80 |

research on care practices. They contributed to co-producing information on the pandemic under different housing conditions.

### *2.1. Doing research in the context of COVID-19*

How to research housing precarity throughout a pandemic raised questions for the design of the research itself. The first challenge was, geographically, to choose a representative sample with different levels of housing precariousness and community organisation where care was thriving during the pandemic. Two self-built neighbourhoods were chosen, one - Cova da Moura - with considerable community engagement, and the other, more precarious, smaller and with a modest degree of mobilisation among residents, Terras da Costa. As a contrast sample, a third location was chosen: Alfredo Bensaúde, a council housing estate where many socially vulnerable families live, and social mobilisation is grounded in the work of NGOs that operate in the neighbourhood but are based outside of it.

In the Bairro da Cova da Moura (Amadora municipality, bordering Lisbon), the project addressed density and housing conditions in a peripheral neighbourhood that was self-built five decades ago. Housing between 6,000 to 10,000 residents, caught between the media narrative of the 'problem neighbourhood' and the recognition of its own identity (Horta 2006), the neighbourhood is nonetheless representative of the failure of housing policies to address the issues of poor and racialised communities, evident in the lack of urban infrastructure or qualified public spaces. In the Terras da Costa

neighbourhood (Almada municipality), also self-built but much more precarious, without running water or proper sanitation, the main issue addressed was the lack of means to deal with the pandemic. This place sits on municipal land classified as a 'National Agricultural Reserve', and the community awaits rehousing. It is a home for mainly people of Cape Verdean origin (around 50 families). Located far from the urban fabric, the place is doomed to invisibility (Lages 2017b). Finally, women from the municipal housing estate of Alfredo Bensaúde were also part of the study. Under the jurisdiction of Lisbon municipality, it houses around one thousand inhabitants in 357 dwellings spread over 35 buildings. Issues, such as evictions and overcrowding, became synonymous with this place since this neighbourhood is the home to various disadvantaged communities, mainly Roma. A few days before the first lockdown (March 2020), Lisbon City Council evicted 11 families without prior notice, leaving about 70 people sleeping rough or in parked vans. This chain of events did not go unnoticed in the media, bringing into the public eye the need for the immediate suspension of evictions, particularly when these people do not have a place to go.

From the beginning, conducting research into 'vulnerable' communities raises both ethical and practical challenges and even more so when working with women, since the notion of vulnerability is socially constructed (Liamputtong 2007; Thummapol et al. 2019; von Benzon and van Blerk 2017). Vulnerable groups are usually identified as being children, the elderly, sick, disabled, homeless or women, among others, eminently sensitive to power hierarchies and dynamics, showing that vulnerability is not only material but also relational (von Benzon and van Blerk 2017, 899). In our study, the people who are perceived to be vulnerable are shown to likely be the very same people for whom the right to housing, among other rights, is far from an easily attainable reality. Although it posed significant challenges, working directly with women living in precarious conditions was essential to trace a gendered panorama of the impacts of COVID-19 on society. Our study conforms with the provisions of ISCTE's Research Ethics Code of Conduct explicitly in issues concerning interpersonal relations in research contexts of precarity, with particular attention to vulnerable women being the focus here. Given the research methods used, ethical issues arose mainly in regard to empirical work and knowledge exchange (approving and implementing the survey and workshops), sensitivity to respectful interactions and safeguarding of the dignity and personal rights of volunteer participants throughout the whole research process, bearing in mind that some women were in a fragile state. To gain access to the field and identify women meeting the criteria of living in housing precariousness, we had the assistance of three local associations in the three neighbourhoods. They were paid for their work, including training exercises, so they could fully comprehend each of the survey's 59 questions. As further support, we made an annotated version

of the text they could use in the fieldwork, with translations and a glossary. Those co-researchers, all women and members of the community, allowed us to collect data (consistently and quickly) by establishing a relationship based on trust with the respondents. The privacy and confidentiality of the participants' collected data and its processing (analysis, publication, and presentation of general results) was anonymous, as was also made clear.

Using mixed methods allowed us to cross-reference data in uncertain circumstances, providing insights into an atypical event: the COVID-19 pandemic. The following sections highlight these various methods since we opted for a multi-scalar/multimethod approach. Thus, this action-research project's cross-reference data will emphasise the spatial practices of care performed and conducted by the women we contacted.

### *3. Caring about precarious housing and those who live in it*

*Caring about*, Tronto's initial phase of care involves recognising in the first place that care is necessary. This became evident early in the case of COVID-19 and housing. 'Staying home' was adopted as a universal motto, and places with severely inadequate conditions once again started to be featured on television news channels.

Terras da Costa is a small community in the municipality of Almada, close to the waterfront on the peninsula south of Lisbon. By car, it takes only 20 min to get to the capital's city centre. Built with metal roofs, thin brick walls, and no running water or sanitation, the small and cramped houses shelter around 50 families, mainly Cape Verdeans and other African migrants or their descendants. This place is found on part of an agricultural reserve, surrounded by fields with crops. Their isolation allows this community to keep up practices reflecting their rural origins: they grow their own food, they breed pigs, chickens, and goats to supplement their meagre incomes. As Participant 2 (P2) told us: 'Having livestock helps me! If I don't have a place to put my poultry, I'll get sick straight away. Chickens give good eggs; they give me good health.' At the same time, this very isolation makes them invisible. Everyone's gazes are fixed on the waterfront instead of back at a place subject to more than two decades of socio-spatial exclusion.

The urgent need for resettlement, which existed before, became critical during the pandemic. All families living in Terras da Costa are on a rehousing waiting list, even if their priority is to stay close to where they live maintaining their existing social network. P2 was one of the first to settle in the neighbourhood, awaiting the allocation of decent housing, and even so, her process has yet to get underway. In her case, more than COVID-19, which forced her to wear a mask whenever someone approached, she feared losing contact with the land and, consequently, her means of subsistence and the lifestyle she has always maintained. P2's daily routines, firmly anchored in

working the land and raising animals, complement her income and constitute both a retirement occupation and a way of living. In this sense, maintaining her way of life will be essential to ensure respectful and inclusive rehousing. It is necessary to consider these practices, founded on environmental sustainability and food autonomy - where all is produced and distributed locally in the neighbourhood –as an example to follow in future projects.

We would have thought that Terras da Costa, which provides a home for mainly African migrants or their descendants, would have been granted a quick response during the pandemic crisis due to the severe lack of basic infrastructure. However, this was anything but the case. Here, the lack of sanitation forces women to travel long distances carrying water, making their daily lives even more demanding. The absence of street lighting makes them feel unsafe when they leave to clean nursing homes or hospitals before dawn, work that never came to a halt during the lockdowns, and where many of them found a means to gain some income. As precarious housing came under the spotlight, it made us aware of the people who live in such places: not only poor but also racialised and ethnically marginalised, a discussion yet to be had in Portuguese society (Alves 2019). Among all the above, women's struggles are even more challenging: in Terras da Costa, they account for all the single-parent families, earning less and having more precarious employment.

Cova da Moura is a different story. Located in Amadora, bordering Lisbon, it is nowadays just an 11-minute train ride to the city centre. Built over the last 50 years, the neighbourhood has grown from a peripherical rural area to a well-connected suburb. Surrounded by middle-class buildings, disparities are evident: one of the largest informal settlements in Portugal, it consists of 16.5 hectares of small, low-rise buildings that are mostly self-built, with a constant African presence and a vibrant culture of its own. Houses already have running water and electricity, achieved through constant pressure from local organisations upon the public authorities, a decade-long struggle (Cuberos-Gallardo 2021; Horta 2006). The need for qualified public space, insufficient waste collection, and a great density of buildings made the advent of the pandemic more challenging. We met Participant 8 (P8), a professional nanny deeply engaged with the community life of the neighbourhood where she grew up. She highlighted the diversity of care work arrangements and their implications for gender equality in Cova da Moura. Here, care is a constant across different sectors of employment for women: in the public/private sector mainly in cleaning jobs or as paid care providers, or voluntarily in the multiple forms of participating in community life (organising festivities, taking care of children or older adults), plus all forms of unpaid work (domestic, community or voluntary) (Lyon and Glucksmann 2008). These women continued to work non-stop, even during the lockdowns.

Local associations such as the 'Moinho da Juventude' [Windmill of Youth] were integrated into the Social Service's emergency food network, running a social canteen that provides free meals. P8 told us that (mostly) women cooked and served five times more meals than before, around 400 daily. She described this neighbourhood as a space of resistance forged in the spirit of mutual aid of its community, primarily migrants. Organised into local associations, just like in other places around the world, from Beijing (Dong et al. 2022) to Buenos Aires (Cohen et al. 2022), informal settlements relied on a community-based approach to facing the pandemic, strengthening existing cultures of care or creating new ones, often in the absence of state responsibility.

### *4. Taking care of the home during a pandemic – workshops*

Talking with women during exploratory visits, we realised that, notwithstanding all the information that circulated about protecting ourselves and about the virus, those women and their families had little practical knowledge of what to do to prevent the virus from entering their homes or, if sick, how to share the living space with others.

The following example of care, among its multiple spatialities, directly embraces our scientific research aims and transfer knowledge. One of the project's objectives was to implement measures focused on the domestic space and daily habits to minimise infection rates in precarious housing scenarios, fostering disease risk mitigation practices. From an early stage, the research confirmed the massive discrepancy between the level of awareness we found in the places we visited, and the extensive documents and reports made available by the DGS (General Directorate of Health). Expert advice was not always in sync with the actual conditions of certain social groups in the places they lived. Not surprisingly, media campaigns and institutional advertising reflected a middle/upper-middle-class housing model, generally representing heteronormative white families/persons. Furthermore, as an example, the guidelines for people in isolation expected 'a room of your own if possible/keep the door closed at all times/eat your meals in your room/open the window to ventilate the space'. However, what about those who do not have a separate room? Or any windows?

We prepared a set of illustrated leaflets where up-to-date recommendations were *spatialised*, portraying the different situations that had revealed themselves during the project. How could a house be displayed to represent the experience of common domestic practices? Through the essential elements of visual communication – colour, isometric perspective, texture, and line - we drew an archetype, where the 'perception of home' could resonate with everyone. Two workshop sessions took place at Terras da Costa and Alfredo Bensaúde with women to discuss their perceptions of our approach and our proposal's clarity and validity. The input we received was then

analysed and the proposal was resubmitted with changes. We discussed with all the women living in Terras da Costa, but three. The lack of conditions to help face the pandemic was mainly related to the living conditions in the actual homes: overcrowded and poorly ventilated (most of the houses have rooms with no windows).

The leaflets, with 'visual translations', were based on their conditions, mainly inside and outside their home. The visualisations were geared towards providing graphic information on the use of the domestic space by all people, including those with low literacy levels, and translating spatial information into something that certain groups (such as migrants not fluent in Portuguese) could easily understand. Furthermore, an idiomatic translation was also deemed necessary alongside the graphic materials. With the support of ACM – The High Commission for Migration, those 'visual translations' were translated into seven languages (Portuguese, Spanish, English, Cape Verdean Creole, Urdu, Nepali, and Arabic). The leaflets were then distributed through the ACM's channels to all institutions working with migrant communities, vastly improving the information available, which till then had been scarce and not always easy to understand. Printed copies were distributed in the places we visited and delivered to local associations to circulate among residents.

A spatial practice of care was defined and put into action in the sense that it articulated a framework to care for the living space and thereby care for those at home during the pandemic. As a transdisciplinary research project involving architects, geographers, designers, and anthropologists, it also represented an expansion of what a design action plan can be, transcending disciplinary boundaries and embracing relational conceptions of space capable of problematising design as an instrument for social transformation (Awan, Schneider, and Till 2011).

## *5. Meeting care needs – Interviews*

Feminist scholarship has proven that everyday care is much more than simply caring for things or people, recognising numerous ethic-political implications across a range of domains (Tronto 2015, 2018). From the ten in-depth interviews with women whose vulnerabilities were directly related to their housing conditions, we became aware of a common relation between how politics and policies restrict women's rightful access to a decent home. All ten women claimed that there is not enough public investment to meet the housing needs of those who need them the most, with cases reported of some women waiting for more than 12 years for a response. Portugal has one of the lower percentages of social housing in Europe, amounting to only 2% of the entire housing sector, which is, by all accounts, a major issue (Pinto 2017; Tulumello et al. 2018). Also in need of discussion are the statistics for single-parent households, 11% of the total households in Portugal, of which 85% are headed by women, amounting to almost half a million. Data from a

recent report showed that single-parent households increased the risk of becoming poverty-stricken thanks to the pandemic to 25.5% (Peralta, Carvalho, and Esteves 2022). What this data shows us is that the housing deficit is an issue primarily affecting women. It was particularly the Black women we interviewed who reported how hard it was to get by when faced with low wages, discrimination based on the source of income, racial identity, and one's immigration status. The constant subliminal threat of being separated from one's children also arose. Indeed, it seems that it is simpler to commit a child to an institution, depriving them of the care of their mother, than to ensure that the mother has the material conditions, such as a roof over her head, to raise a child safely, they argued.

> 'All the social services ever did was make threats to me. But I said, "Don't bother threatening me because I'll go to court". I don't mistreat my children. I just want a roof over my head to raise them properly. I never abandoned them. (…). But they don't care. The last time I got so upset, I ended up so ill that I had to spend the night in the psychiatric ward of Santa Maria Hospital. I am exhausted. I do my best… I'm strong, but I'm getting really tired.' – Interview with a mother-of-two squatting in a municipal apartment (Participant 5), Oct. 2020

Regarding squatting in empty municipal apartments, NGOs, such as Habita, see it as a right when women have nowhere else to go. They accuse the State of stockpiling empty homes and strongly oppose the criminalisation of the women/families who occupy them. Along with the interviews, Saaristo's ethnographic work (2022) showed that women broke into flats to avoid sleeping rough with their children, only to be thrown back on the streets because they had broken into an abandoned property. This vicious circle is not helping to solve the problem since public authorities hardly ever stoop to recognising these people's rights, too afraid of setting a precedent for new squatters to flood in. In the meantime, houses continue to be empty. Even during the pandemic, with a lockdown in place, these women and children could not feel safe.

The perception of one's safety during a major pandemic, was also a concern for homeless women. Participant 1 (P1) became homeless in 2012. Entirely alone, with no family support and facing unemployment, she was evicted when she could no longer pay the rent. Then, when her son was institutionalised P1 followed him to Lisbon, where finding a job and a house during a major recession was almost impossible, and she ended up being homeless. From emergency shelters to sleeping rough, she experienced first-hand how institutional responses lack gender-sensibility since they are designed for a neutral homeless person, perceived as a man. The discrepancy in numbers is significant: according to the National Strategy for the Integration of Homeless People (ENIPSSA) in 2018, there were 6044 homeless persons in Portugal, 16.15% of whom were women. Due to the fear of violence and harassment that women commonly experience on the streets, many choose

to go unnoticed in complete anonymity. In the case of mothers with children, there is also the fear of their children being taken from them, as had been experienced by P1. Disproportionate numbers cannot justify critical issues when we talk about women who are experiencing homelessness; invisibility and non-recognition of a broader definition of what it is to be homeless coexist alongside a presiding image of a homeless woman as deviant, alone, and 'unworthy' (Mayock and Bretherton 2016).

During the pandemic, Lisbon municipality provided four more emergency shelters. P1 reported that the lack of privacy, hygiene, and security made her decide to squat in an abandoned house with no water or power supply. Newspaper images of sports halls filled with camp beds, confirmed that shelters provided a roof to sleep under, but little else.

> 'People live in inhumane conditions [in the shelters]: with bedbugs, lice, whatever… it's where they send the people with nowhere else to go. You find everyone there: good people, bad people, thieves, drunks, drug addicts, you name it. There are a lot of people who'd prefer to sleep on the street than stay there. And I'm one of them (…) And the system says: wait a minute, a woman?! Since they don't have many places for women, it gets very tricky. (…) But the system, when it comes across a woman, it's at a loss.'—Interview P1, Sept. 2020

If being a refugee was not easy before the pandemic, ensuring decent living conditions became even more problematic with the advent of COVID-19. In many cases, the State's initial support with European funding granted under specific agreements and programmes proved unable to generate sufficient stability for the most part, affecting most of all the access to housing in the phasing-out process. A Syrian refugee, Participant 6 (P6), sharing a temporarily loaned house with a fellow countryman, told us: 'In the first two years, yes. I had state support as a refugee. Then they told me to vacate the house [paid by the State]. (…). We said "OK" because my husband doesn't like trouble'. The loaned house where she lived allowed her to secure decent housing for her three young children. However, uncertainty about her future led her to conclude that 'housing was an issue yet to be resolved in Portugal', especially after she lost her precarious job as a kitchen helper in a school.

Most of those ten women we interviewed were deeply invested in recognising their rights as urban citizens, coping with all kinds of housing struggles, with a growing awareness of their discrimination based on gender.

## *6. Care and housing futures – a possibility*

Housing issues in pandemic times resulted in new laws, programmes, and regulations, along with lockdowns and isolation. Evictions were suspended, and the government created moratoria and lines for funding loans to pay rent. Yet these measures did not take into consideration that most self-built places go unrecognised by the state (Wildemeersch and Pestana Lages 2018;

Lages 2017), as per the examples we have presented, Terras da Costa and Cova da Moura. The legal framework made available to fight the impact of the pandemic upon the housing sector, and the weight of bureaucratic/normative procedures, disregarded informal self-built places, leaving many people even more vulnerable than they were before, without answers to their problems. In the case of women, it was clear in our research that gender-sensitive approaches are needed, from design solutions to statistics that represent women. Different urban frameworks offering a diverse range of responses, all consolidated by the effective participation of women themselves in urban problem-solving are needed.

Making care a central societal pillar so women face fewer barriers to accessing decent housing for themselves addresses the recognition of the multiple ways in which women are living precarious lives: be it migration routes, racial discrimination, ageism at different stages, or lack of economic resources. It is, therefore, urgent that the women with whom the project collaborated, many of whom have been living in precarious conditions for years, can also participate and have an active voice Their experiences and ways of life may determine the success, or failure, of more sustainable and inclusive rehousing. As shown, informal networks and non-state stakeholders engaged in spatial practices of care facing housing precarity, resist and reclaim safe and decent living conditions for all.

'How to stay home?', grounded in the experience of women coping with different levels of spatial precariousness, relates and shows the interdependency and eco-dependency of our future, drawn up at a time of extreme uncertainty but pointing to a housing solution for all, starting with those who need it the most. Responses need to be more equal, greener, and healthier, considering existing spatial practices of care for women and their communities while fostering new practices that can contribute to a shared future. And why? Because housing precarity is still predominantly a women's issue. The process of recognising their urban rights, engaged in forms of housing struggles, with a growing awareness of their discrimination based on gender, is still ongoing as subjects for political debate. Still, the mobilisation that the research encouraged, or even set in motion, was a start.

Regarding the research itself, as its designers, we confirmed that COVID-19, similarly to previous pandemics, served to reinforce the critical role architecture can play in ensuring the well-being and safety of those living with the bare minimum of conditions, in the hope that better post-pandemic housing policies address and value care as the main driver, by designing care *spatially*. Architectural research only benefits if cross-pollinated by other fields of knowledge, such as Geography, Anthropology, and Sociology, which is only sometimes the case. As social scientists, investigating the link between the nature of precarity in housing studies and care opens up the possibility of working *spatially*, identifying practices of care that can be given agency,

scaled accordingly, and learned from. On a final note, more research is needed in this field, particularly longitudinal studies, allowing researchers to examine how variables change over time and identify patterns or trends that may not be apparent in cross-sectional studies.

## *7. Conclusion*

It was quickly understood that the people on the so-called 'front line' fighting COVID-19 were often those living in the most precarious of conditions, both in terms of housing quality and percentage of overcrowding. Women employed as cleaners and health staff swell the ranks of workers who could not work remotely, simultaneously living in precarious labour/housing conditions. Among those, migrants and ethnically discriminated communities - women and girls - were significantly harmed by the economic and social fallout. As presented in this paper, care has deep political implications, seeking integration into the fabric of democratic institutions and values, recognising its importance for the well-being of women and society, not only during the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic but afterwards.

How to 'stay at home?', both as a research topic and question, showed us that housing precariousness has grown in the context we studied. It revealed the persistent inequalities that disproportionately affect women, indicating that most existing housing policies, and those created to fight COVID-19, are gender-blind. Worsening socio-territorial inequalities expose an unfair spatial model, penalising single-parent households headed by women, women living in precarious neighbourhoods, and homeless women. The pandemic underlined that extreme precarity and a lack of basic infrastructure is still a problem in Portugal, but so is homelessness, access, and affordability. Far from being a Portuguese issue, this is a current global challenge.

Spatial care was then seen as a process that fosters a healthier or improved way of living together, shaping acts of mutual aid, repair, and support. Exploring dynamics of solidarity and collective self-organisation, networks of trust working at a neighbourhood scale, spatial care as we saw it, made visible practices of care already impacting the use of space. In conclusion, rethinking responses to housing precarity in the light of those care practices points us in a direction that can only inform tangible strategies and policies attentive to care.

## Note

1. We define gender as a sociocultural construction of roles, behaviours, expectations, and identities associated with being male, female, or non-binary, and can vary across different cultures and historical periods. Gender encompasses a range of attributes, including gender expression, gender identity, and gender roles, and can have a significant impact on a person's experiences, opportunities, and relationships in society.

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The author report there are no competing interests to declare.

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