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## Care-givers, leisure and meanings of home: a case study of low income women in Dublin

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This article seeks to contribute to the literature on the meanings of domestic spaces by furthering understandings of the sorts of roles that space plays in shaping women's leisure experiences. The study researched a group of 15 women who live in disadvantaged areas of Dublin city and care for dependent children. Focus groups and structured conversations revealed the poverty of the spatial capital available to these women, depicting local environments as difficult and stressful, and to be endured rather than enjoyed. They further revealed the extent to which the women's lives were shaped by their obligations as care-givers. Within the home itself, private domestic spaces were found to be deeply embedded with powerful ideologies of motherhood that did not necessarily evaporate in the simple absence of obligations imposed by children. Instead, they tended to serve as constant reminders of how things 'should be', consequently constraining some women's abilities to divest themselves of care-giving duties and engage in self-focused recreation. Some of the women studied were able to move beyond obligation, and for them leisure represented modest yet significant opportunities to self-determinedly relax, reclaim and even luxuriate in certain spaces within their homes. Similarly, once relieved of child-caring responsibilities, leisure encounters within the local environment afforded some women new insights into familiar spaces.

**Keywords:** women; leisure; home; ethic of care; Ireland

### Introduction

The importance of home as a central concept in geographical as well as in humanities and social sciences enquiries more generally cannot be overstated. Yet, as several authors have noted, the domestic spaces of the home were overlooked for a long time by geographers (Rose 1993; Domosh 1998; Blunt and Varley 2004). Recently, this oversight is being redressed, with the home receiving increasing attention since the early 2000s (Blunt 2005). Given that the home has long been socially constructed as a 'woman's place', the recent upsurge of interest in researching domestic spaces has 'naturally' had a strong focus on women. While longstanding geographical enquiry has demonstrated that the home has many meanings for women, it fundamentally reveals home to be a highly gendered space and argues that the structures and relationships characteristic of the home environment are an extension of the uneven social relations that shape equivalent relationships outside the home (Rose 1993).

While there is undoubtedly a longstanding leisure studies literature on the disproportionately home-based nature of women's leisure (Gregory 1982; Bialeschki and Henderson 1986; Henderson et al. 1989), the spatial dimensions of leisure in the home and

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its environs are infrequently discussed. The conceptualisation of leisure in the social sciences has tended to be framed by notions of time rather than space (Green, Hebron, and Woodward 1987; Kay 1998; Henderson and Hickerson 2007). Although researchers have highlighted the existence of gendered space (Dixey and Talbot 1982), posed questions about the difficulties that women face in finding leisure spaces within their own homes (Deem 1986), and problematised the spatial inequity of perceived leisure opportunities (Deem 1988), spatiality remains under-theorised. An interest in spatial issues increased in the late 1990s (Aitchison 1999; Scraton and Watson 1998), however, the focus has tended to be on public, outdoor spaces, with domestic spaces receiving much less attention.

This article seeks to redress this imbalance by investigating how home space, and spaces within the local environment, are reproduced as leisure spaces for a group of women who act as care-givers to dependent children. Clearly, the influence of gender and the forceful weight of ideologies about motherhood are not the only forces shaping these women's lives. In particular, researchers have long acknowledged the strong influence of social class on women's leisure (Green, Hebron, and Woodward 1990). All of the women studied experience social exclusion and exist on low incomes, and these particular economic and social class contexts are of fundamental significance. While acknowledging this to be the case, the central questions posed in this article relate to gender as opposed to social class and a core aim is to investigate the role played by an 'ethic of care' in contributing to what has been described as a lack of sense of entitlement to leisure among women (Deem 1986; Green, Hebron, and Woodward 1990; Blair and Lichter 1991; Bialeschki and Michener 1994; Shaw 1994; Miller and Brown 2005). In brief, the article seeks to investigate whether space has a role to play in facilitating/constraining women's leisure experiences and how, if at all, space is implicated in promulgating a lack of sense of entitlement to leisure among women.

The 15 subjects of the qualitative research reported here are women care-givers. They all live in disadvantaged areas of Dublin city and all have responsibilities toward at least one dependent child. The women were studied at a 'moment in time' during which their domestic responsibilities were ostensibly temporarily reduced, as the children in their care had been taken away on holidays by a charitable organisation. The research objective was to explore how the women 'recreated' in their home, given that their time was freer and their domestic spaces emptier than was usually the case. The study also took its enquiries outside into the immediate environs of the home, into spaces routinely used by, and very familiar to, the women.

### **The domestic spaces of home**

As Bondi and Davidson (2005, 16) suggest, the term 'place' is often thought to refer to a bounded entity within which people forge profound attachments and identities. The symbolic nature of home as an especially important type of place has long been established, and the complexity of home as a concept has been an issue of much debate over time. In the 1970s, humanist geographers unambiguously celebrated the idea of home, signalling its symbolic importance as being at the core of human existence. Over time, the complexities of home have been increasingly problematised and it is now understood in much more nuanced terms. While it can be, and often is, that profoundly important central resting place described by researchers like Buttner (1980) and Relph (1976), home is now acknowledged to have many meanings, all of which can change over a life-course.

Feminist geographers were key in prompting a more nuanced interpretation of the concept of home, arguing that traditional ideals about home were born of masculinist

perspectives (Rose 1993). From a woman's viewpoint, it was argued that home often meant unpaid labour, repression and sometimes resistance (Rose 1993; Gregson and Lowe 1995; McDowell 1997). Over time, the validity of these arguments has been irrefutably made and empirically illustrated. Contemporary understandings of home now both attest to its importance as symbolic and embodied space, and problematise its diverse meanings in highly nuanced ways.

Until recently, discussions of home rarely, and then mostly incidentally, included details of ordinary domestic activities (Percival 2002). Yet these ordinary, everyday spaces and activities are worth exploring, for, as Domosh (1998) argued, the home is rich territory indeed for understanding the social and the spatial. Gregson and Lowe (1995, 226) discussed how research on the ideology of home 'revealed home to be not just a gendered space but a space which is critical to the gender constitution of society'. Space is reproduced in the home in ways that are replete with social meanings as to what society expects a woman's role to be (Allan and Crow 1989). As Blunt and Varley (2004: 4) suggest, 'domestic life and everyday practices of cooking, decorating and other domestic work have much wider implications'. Increasingly, geographers are now investigating the ordinary and the apparently mundane to further understandings of how gendered home spaces are linked into the wider environment and to learn how 'the practical and ideological aspects of being a woman in a particular place are negotiated in the course of carrying out everyday responsibilities and demands' (Dyck 1998, 106). As yet, the move to interpret the mundane has barely touched on the very ordinary world of informal, unstructured, home-centred, everyday leisure. Questions as to how, where and when people recreate in the course of the daily routines unfolding in everyday places are rarely posed. In contrast, the importance of public leisure places in serving as ordinary yet significant spaces implicit in the construction of family time and ties has begun to attract attention (Hallman and Benbow 2007).

### **Leisure entitlement and the 'ethic of care'**

The lack of attention to leisure in mainstream geography debates is likely to be related to the fact that leisure has traditionally been defined as 'non-work', and accordingly viewed as having little quantifiable value. As Aitchison, MacLeod, and Shaw (2000, 120) point out, since the early influential work of Parker (1971), leisure has been theorised in relation to work. According to Bittman (2002, 411), 'leisure is often thought of as residual, ... as the "free" time that remains after maintaining one's body in a healthy and socially acceptable state, contracting time to the market and meeting domestic and family responsibilities'. Such definitions of leisure as 'non-work' ill-considered the fact that many people are not engaged in paid labour outside the home, and that for many women, especially mothers, the notion of describing the private domestic realm as a 'non-work' environment is seriously misguided (Allen 1993). This concept of leisure as a residual 'non-work' entity has now long been argued to be inappropriate (Deem 1982; Wearing and Wearing 1988). However, the exact meanings of leisure for women with domestic and family responsibilities, especially within the home environment, continue to offer much scope for further research (Deem 1988; Aitchison, MacLeod, and Shaw 2000).

Already, there is a strong understanding of how women are constrained in their efforts and abilities to experience leisure relative to men. Research on time-use and leisure has long demonstrated that women tend to have less time than men to engage in relaxation or recreation in the home environment (Talbot 1979; Wimbush and Talbot 1988; Kay 1998; Harrington, Dawson, and Bolla 1992; Gunthorpe and Lyons 2004), McGinnity and Russell

2007), with Miller and Brown (2005) reporting that women with dependent children have the least amount of free time to devote to leisure. A failure to provide leisure facilities for women is a further constraint (Henderson et al. 1989). More recently, the absence of a sense of entitlement to leisure among women has emerged very forcefully within the literature on constraints. Henderson and Bialeschki (1991), for example, argued that men tend to prioritise their own personal leisure needs above domestic matters in a way that women do not. For women there is a tendency to 'subsume their own relaxation to fostering it in other members of the family' (Munro and Madigan 1999). Women carry out work tasks that others take for granted, thus making leisure possible for those others (Hunter and Whitson 1991). Mallett (2004, 75) has written that 'for men, home is a space in which they have ultimate authority yet limited responsibility for the domestic and child-rearing duties that take place in it. Home is a haven from the pressure of the outside world, even a site of leisure and recreation'.

Simultaneously, home space is inscribed with very powerful ideologies of women as nurturing and supporting care-givers and about the centrality of motherhood in the identity of an ideal woman (Allan and Crow 1989; Raisborough 2006). As Kay (2000) reminds us, prevailing ideologies of motherhood and womanhood have been extensively recognized as fundamental influences on women's leisure. This is the case in both private and public domains. 'The message that women should behave with respectability, according with the "ideology of housewifery"' (Henderson et al. 1989, 21) and displaying the characteristics 'naturally' expected of mothers, is produced and reinforced by a wide range of processes' (Kay 2000: 249). Some have now been so internalised that they have ceased to be visible as value systems or as sets of culturally formed beliefs (Wearing 1998).

### **Making leisure space**

Reading the extensive and longstanding literature attesting to the difficulties that women experience in accessing leisure experiences, one wonders whether women with dependent children ever manage to find or create spaces for leisure experiences. In the leisure literature, Dyck (1989) encouraged researchers to pay attention to exploring how women can actively construct their lives within the context of identifiable constraints. Since then the conceptualisation of constraints has become more complex, with literature discussing how leisure presents women with opportunities to resist socially constructed notions of motherhood and womanhood. Wearing (1998), Currie (2004), and Sharpe (2008), for example, have all argued that leisure sites are potentially subversive spaces where women can exercise their personal agency and resist societal expectations. Wearing (1998) suggested that leisure spaces are somewhat 'different' types of spaces containing different discursive relations and formations than those found in 'everyday' spaces. Raisborough (2006) highlights serious leisure, suggesting that it is often theorised as a different kind of space. Focusing on women involved in the Sea Cadet Corps, she examines how identity forged through engagement in serious leisure can enable women to powerfully challenge traditional ideologies about women. Other literature has explored how leisure can function as a coping mechanism for women experiencing stress in their lives. Klifzing (2003), for example, analyses how leisure helps homeless women to cope with their crisis lifestyles.

All of this work emphasises individual agency and the power of the individual to manage situations that can be fraught with difficulties. Most of it focuses on the public sphere. Yet of interest here are the everyday spaces of the home. Dyck (1989) was writing in a leisure context but her comments bring to mind those of Domosh (1998) who, in writing about the spaces of the home, called for a move beyond conceiving of the house

only as a site of reproduction in ways that allow for more flexible and creative uses of the home by women. As already discussed, the home is an enormously complex place and it seems likely that this very complexity is problematic in attempts to unleash the subversive potential of the home as a leisure space. Yet it may be that leisure represents opportunities for women to use the home creatively as a way of resisting or perhaps of lessening the burden of the ideologies that structure the mobilities and routines of their daily lives. It may be that through leisure women find new ways of focusing on themselves and of actively carving out identities for themselves.

### **Study context and methods**

Irish women's engagement in leisure is an under-researched topic. Byrne (2003) has described Ireland as a familist society, arguing that in Ireland, womanhood has been historically attained and recognized through heterosexual attachment, marriage and reproduction. Such a description does not bode well for the prospect of leisure engagement, as internationally, leisure researchers have been very clear in arguing the importance of engagement in paid employment for opening up access to leisure (Deem 1982, 1986; Green, Hebron, and Woodward 1987; Henderson and Bialeschki 1991; Shaw 1992; Wimbush and Talbot 1988). Historically, women in Ireland were under-represented in the paid workforce relative to their European counterparts. However, since 2005 this is no longer the case as the female employment rate in Ireland at 60.5% (in 2008) now exceeds the EU average (Central Statistics Office 2009a). In 2006, however, women's hourly earnings were just 86% of men's. In general, Irish women are more at risk of poverty than Irish males. This is particularly the case for unemployed women, whose risk of poverty rose from 31% in 2004 to 44% in 2007. It is lone parents, however, above any other social group, who are most likely to be living in poverty. In 2008, 17.8% of lone parents were living in poverty compared to 4.2% of the population as a whole (Central Statistics Office 2009b). Females accounted for 91.4% of the growing population of lone parents in 2008.

The data discussed in this article are derived from a broader study which primarily examined children and leisure. The children studied were accessed through a number of non-governmental agencies active in providing holidays for children. The women discussed here participated because they were the care-givers (although not always the mothers) of the children studied. The women studied lived in one of six inner-city and suburban areas of Dublin city, each officially and popularly understood to constitute disadvantaged areas and to be associated with social exclusion. Several were lone parents relying on state social welfare payments. Others lived with spouses/partners and were either in receipt of social welfare payments or lived on low incomes. They ranged in age from late 20s to mid-60s and cared for between one and six dependent children. All were white, Irish women with the exception of one English woman who was married to an Irish man.

The research conducted with the women was highly qualitative in nature. It was also exploratory and generated many methodological challenges in terms of access, trust building, and communication more generally. In choosing in-depth structured conversations as a data collection tool the study was influenced by feminist researchers who have discussed the 'importance of in-depth interviews in gaining a perspective on women's experiences in a way that more structured methods of research cannot' (Miller and Brown 2005, 408; and see Olesen 1994). The women participants were encountered twice: initially in a focus group setting and then on an individual, one to one interview setting in a location of the woman's choosing. In most cases, this was the woman's home.

All of the focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The women's comments are reported verbatim without editing. The data were collected during the summer of 2006.

### **Surviving home**

For people experiencing social exclusion, summer time has been described as one of survival and of heightened exclusion (Gill and Wellington 2003), and this study concurs. Home places were largely depicted in extremely negative terms. Local surroundings were described as boring, lacking in facilities, unsuitable for families, unsafe and dangerous. Deviant practices reported by the women as being prevalent to varying degrees in all of the areas studied included bullying, drug-dealing and criminality that included assault, car-theft and joy-riding. Dealing with these difficulties led to stressful living conditions for the women studied. Not surprisingly, it was found that a preoccupation with the children's well-being strongly shaped the daily routines and mobilities of both the women and their children. Valerie, for example, talked about the drug-dealing and drug-taking that goes on openly in her block of flats and explained how she had to limit the children's movements in consequence:

here they are just confined to the one block, and they're not allowed to run, well mine is not allowed to go out too far. Front, back, at the square yeah, yeah, it's not that I wouldn't trust them [the children] like, I don't trust the area, I don't trust the people in the area.

For this reason, she regularly took the children away from where they lived:

we go up to my ma's, my ma lives in \*, my sister is across the road and then the other sister is around the corner from my ma, my other sister is in \*\* ... They've all that gardens and all out, they've the run of the place up there you know what I mean.

Emma told of a similar routine: 'I mean, my two aren't allowed out, they are not allowed to play out around here, they are not allowed out on the road. The only time, the only place, they are allowed out to play is up in me ma's.' So did Martha, a mother of five boys, who described living in her area in summer time as 'hell, absolute hell'. To get away from the troubles her children encounter on the streets she explained:

I find once the weather is good we take the DART (train) out to Howth, they love the beach and we spend the day, as long as we can over there. But it's the older group [of youths in her area] then from about 10 o'clock are hanging around outside the houses and causing damage.

### **Daily routines and localised spaces**

In discussions about their daily routines, notions of leisure, recreation, relaxation or non-obligation simply did not feature. Two characteristics were prominent. Most obvious was the care-giving persona of the women and obvious too was the highly localised sphere within which their routines unfolded. The women tended to define 'the area where they were from' in extremely narrow terms. Equally, they and their children moved in small social circles, dominated by family and what seemed to be immediate neighbours. As Patricia explained, 'Yeah, see around here you have to spend it [time] with the ones you know, isn't it really, because, it'd be the one you don't know that ... , no just stay with the ones you know, you know, strangers, not really.' They spent most of their time in local areas going to shops, services, playgrounds, schools, etc. Again, this is not a surprising finding. Fenster (2005), for example, wrote about mothers' attachment to the local environments within which their daily tasks of shopping, paying bills, taking children to

school, walking with babies, etc. takes place. Angela's response when asked how she spent her time was typical: 'Just dragging the kids with me, ... Yeah, doing what I normally do, like, everyday shopping and stuff you know.'

The obvious exception to this was the practice of visiting other family members who sometimes lived in another part of the city. This was a regular, sometimes daily routine for some of the women studied, several of whom also acted as informal, part-time care-givers for their elderly parents. Occasionally, finances permitting, women took their children off on day trips to the beach or to a seaside suburb. Maria, for example, when asked how she spent her time replied:

Nothing, just trying to entertain them really you know, trying to think of things that you can do, you know what I mean, because I be trying to bring them on the train because they don't really go on the train very often, so I get a family pass and go out to \*\*\* or something, you know, we all put a backpack on our back and just do a picnic and, just, you know, trying to think of things different days, but you can't afford it every day, you know yourself.

Caring for children who were now at home all the time was an all-consuming part of daily routines. Leah, when asked how she spent her time said 'I just spend time with them' (her children). When asked whether she herself ever got a break, she replied: 'No, when they go to school that's it, but then it's spent cleaning [laughed], and cooking, I never get a break.' This situation was typical, especially if the women had several young children as most of them had. When Angela was asked did it make any difference to her life at all having two of her four children go on holiday with the NGO, she replied:

It did now because it was much easier, well, because you only had two to watch. Like with the four of them they are running this way and that way, so you would have to have eyes in the back of your head, but at least with the two you would have one on each side and you would say don't move, don't move.

When pressed further as to whether she got any time to herself she responded:

No, no ... No, you don't never ... But it is like non stop constantly with them, do you know what I mean like ... [except when] their da would probably take them out for a few hours on a Saturday.

Comments like this suggested that for the women studied, their time was not their own. They repeatedly explained how they were constantly 'on the go' and had the children with them all the time. In addition, they had constant concerns for their children's safety, as discussed above. If they did get a break, for example, when the children were at school or if they went to visit their father for a period, then there was housework to attend to.

### **Conflating 'familial', domestic and self-space**

It was evident from the women's comments that there was a considerable degree of conflation between what was 'family' and what was the domestic 'home' and also between what might be objectively thought of as a woman's own 'self-space' and communal family space. It was clear from the daily routines related by women that if their time existed to be drawn upon collectively by other members of the family, so too did their space. Some of the women acknowledged and accepted this to be case, and furthermore, as they reflected on a time when the collective claim on that space lessened (i.e. when the children were away on holidays) it was as if that knowledge somehow became clearer. Angela, a mother of four children, in one of only a few instances where a sense of entitlement emerged in the data, explained: 'And I need the space sometimes away from them but I never get it ... Like even, do you know what I mean, even if you are in the toilet: ma, are you here ma, where are you?'

The conflation between family and home was even more apparent. It was very evident that the presence of children was an enormous part of what constituted home for the women studied. Their homes were very different places depending on whether their children were present or absent. Children may create work, cause tiredness and give rise to constant concern, but they also fill and embody space with noise, social interaction, liveliness, and plenty of reason for undertaking tasks like preparing meals, shopping and doing the laundry. Given the degree to which the women's daily lives were profoundly shaped by the presence and needs of their children, it was not surprising that many of the women said that they had missed them. This was so even for women who thought they would enjoy the break, as was the case for Valerie:

I just missed them, like ... I can't wait for them to go, a good week away from them, but it's when they go, no matter how bad they are, you miss them like, or how like messy or whatever, you still miss them like, you miss, its real boring, real quiet like.

Rachel's comment was typical: 'I have to say I missed her around the house, I know it's only a few days and I knew she was fine where she was but, sure it doesn't stop you from worrying about them.' Angela missed the company: 'you would miss the eldest one 'cause she is a yatter box and I keep her up a half an hour later than the rest of them'. Some of the women were so in the habit of caring for their children that they sometimes forget they were gone. Jean, for example, kept forgetting to cook fewer portions for meals, while the aforementioned Valerie explained: 'At one stage I was actually going out and calling them off the block, and Anne said to me; "well sure the kids are in \*\*\*\*".'

### **Lost at home, in the children's absence**

For some women, once the children were gone, there was a sense of reclaiming time and space in their absence and this was liberating. As will be discussed later on, it allowed a re-focus on, and a relaxation of, the self, and created flexibility and creativity for women to determine how they could be in their space solely as themselves. For others, the children's absence had a disruptive and sometimes disabling effect. Rather than being a facilitating absence that created new possibilities, it sometimes acted as a constraint, stopping women from acting as they normally do within their domestic spaces, yet simultaneously closing off any other potential ways of being at home. As the women talked, it became clear that some of them only felt at ease at home while in the guise of care-giver. Some inhabit their homes so strongly as care-givers that once this persona is temporarily suspended then the 'homeliness' of their domestic spaces seems also to fade. Listening to Maria talk about how different life was when the children were gone, for example, it seemed that the familiarity that defined her home seemed to evaporate in their absence:

One of the days I was doing a lot of ironing here and normally I'm used to one of them scuttling in or out or asking for this and, here I was: 'God this is mad' ... I only had the two eldest ones you know what I mean I was; 'oh God, this is weird', like, you know ... and I was even times I was bored, I was knocking around to friends just for a cup of tea because I was getting bored, you know what I mean like.

It seemed that the lack of activity, the quiet and not least of all the orderliness that reigned in the absence of the children were so unusual as to make some of the women feel strange, even out of place, at home. One woman actively replaced her child-care duties with caring for other members of the family: 'I was a bit lonely to be honest, but I was able to call up to see my ma more often.' For some, loneliness became a problem. Martha, for example, when asked was there anything she did not like about the children being away replied in

just two words: 'the loneliness'. When asked whether her children being away made any difference to how she spent her time replied: 'I was at a loose end. The house was very strange, so quiet without the two youngest, you know, you spend so much time ...' When asked had she done anything different, because her youngest three (of four) children who lived at home with her were gone away, she replied: 'No, I didn't do anything out of the ordinary at all, no because, well I don't really go out at night anyway but I'd say if Mark [husband] had been home we might have went out, you know but ...' She was so pleased to have her children back home that she actually went out and as she explained: 'it had been allowance week so I had bought them [wheelie runners] for them for coming back, so that they had something to go out with, something new'. If Martha had been unable or uninterested in taking advantage of her sons' absence, Emma explained in very clear detail how she felt completely lost once her twin boys left.

I managed to let them get on the bus and they just kept laughing cause I just said to them are you going to give me a kiss and a hug and they said no, 'see ya' and I was devastated, I was broken hearted and Tom [holiday organizer and also Emma's boss] just stood there laughing at me and he says 'go home' ... so I was coming into work hours before I was due in ... Cause I had nothing to do, nothing to do and nowhere to go, ... And then Tom kept sending me home from work early then and here I was 'but I have nothing to do' ... I just sat there [at home] reading the newspaper, staring out the window.

Here we see an understanding boss assuming that a woman/employee would enjoy the luxury of having no children and thus a reduced set of obligations at home, confronted by woman/mother who feels lost when at home while her children are not there. Existing research on women and leisure has associated the meaning of the leisure with 'non-obligation'. Bialeschi and Michener (1994), for example, found that women tended to engage in leisure once all obligations were fulfilled and that it was only at this point that they could access time purely for themselves, which is what their study participants considered leisure to be. In this study, some women were so embedded within their family obligations that they were unable to move into either a time or a space that enabled a focus on themselves alone. Other researchers have argued that the meaning of leisure needs to be understood in terms of experience, rather than time (i.e. residual time) (Henderson et al. 1989), and have written about the ability to engage in self-determined experiences as a prerequisite for accessing leisure. Some of the women in this study could not self-determine a new way of being in their homes while their children were absent. The quietness, orderliness and emptiness of their home seemed to disorient them and all they could do was wait for the spaces of their home to be restored to their former selves, to be filled with talk, noise and tasks, before they themselves could resume their normal way of living.

### **Finding time and space for self in the children's absence**

If, for a minority of the women studied, leisure did not automatically ensue when time and space opened up with the reduction of domestic and child-care duties, this was not the case for all. Some were able to choose to relax into their now quieter, more peaceful domestic spaces and, manifesting a modest sense of entitlement, take simple pleasure in just being there. Valerie was an example of this. As she reported: 'I didn't even go anywhere I just sat around and, peace. I spoilt myself, I sat around, stayed in bed.' For Margaret too 'it was, now it was nice, I did have a nice time now, quiet, it was, it was nice now, I wasn't up and on the go all the time'. The women now had time to themselves to enjoy, with only perhaps a baby or an older child remaining at home. They could also arrange their domestic spaces as they wished and have them looking the way they wanted them to look. As Valerie explained, 'it was good,

I only had to clean the house once, and I cleaned all the bedrooms out once, and that was it, it was spotless for the week'. This was important. Concurring with the findings of earlier studies, it seemed that several of these women could only relax once certain obligations, as they saw them, were fulfilled. Cleaning the house and presenting it in a particular way was certainly one of these obligations. Now it was possible to present the physical space in a way that pleased the women and enabled them to then relax and enjoy it. In addition, they could use some of the space within the house differently. The theoretically private space of the bathroom for example, now actually operated in practice as a private space where the women could be alone in private or relax without disturbance, as when taking a bath. As Leah explained, once her two youngest children had gone on holiday: 'I could actually get into that bath and just lie there for an hour, rather than someone banging on the door [laughter].' Leah continued: 'but it's only like an hour for yourself. . . . I don't ask for much', thus stressing, without actually saying it, how much time and space she routinely gives to her children.

Women were also freer to move outside their homes and to experience their local areas differently. In the first instance they were simply more mobile, having no, or perhaps fewer, children to bring with them when they went shopping or out into the locality for a morning. This reduced the workload and the stress routinely involved and meant that they could move with greater ease. The women had more freedom to go to more places and engage in activities differently, although this freedom was modest and might have meant dropping into a neighbour for a coffee or browsing in the local shopping centre. Informal child-care arrangements involving other family members and neighbours were the norm for the women studied and now, with perhaps just one child at home, it was easier to ask someone to take care of them while they went off for a few hours.

The modest increase in freedom also meant that the quality of their experiences of the world outside their home could be different. Fenster (2005) drew on the work of De Certeau (1984) to explain how knowledge of a place is gained through the ordinary routines of repeated movements from home to shops, workplace, school, bus stop, etc. Her research found that women feel more attached to their local area after becoming mothers because they spend more time there, using local space more intensively as they carry out their mothering roles. Yet experiencing space goes beyond simply knowing its physicality. While the women studied here spent most of their time in their local places and clearly 'knew' them, some of their conversations suggested that their experiences of space differed depending on whether they were in care-giving mode or not. Maria, for example, related how in the children's absence she spent time at her local shopping centre. Visiting the shopping centre in itself was not unusual. As a place it was very familiar to her, yet her experience was quite different. As she explained:

Oh yeah, I went over one of the days to the centre and I had a walk around, and you know in shops that you wouldn't normally get to go in because the kids would say 'oh no way', and I actually got to walk by McDonalds and I was saying: oh God, this is brilliant, the kids aren't here they'd be saying: 'are you coming into McDonalds', which was brilliant, and just browse and looking at things, even I weren't buying them but just to look, you know what I mean, it was great and I walked back, I came back here to him [husband] and I said: 'that's the first time in a long time I really enjoyed walking around the centre you know, it's brilliant'.

Divested of her care-giving role, Maria was experiencing and practising being in an everyday, familiar place in a completely new way. Similarly, Grace, a mother of one dependent 13-year-old boy, explained how she could enjoy socialising anew, once devoid of child-care responsibilities.

Well kind of, in the evening it did yeah, because I was able to do things that I wouldn't normally do, I was able to go to my friends, go to bingo if I fancied it, if I fancied just going

down the road I could go, not wondering where \* [her son] was, where was he, who was he with, that side of things. If you bring your child around you're constantly in and out the door, you're not enjoying your cup of tea or whatever, want to see what he's up to, he'd say 'ah no I'll follow you around' and you're worried.

Valerie echoed these comments, explaining how the children's absence meant that she had a bit of freedom to choose what she herself would like to do: 'I could have went where I wanted to.' The sort of 'freedoms' talked about by the women studied were very modest. They were brief, simple, home-based, and localised yet there were significant and meaningful because they were premised on the women's ability to choose to do something, however modest, for themselves. Clearly, for women like Valerie, being able to go 'where she wants to' is not the norm. Her routine daily life is characteristically filled with duties and responsibilities towards others and a simultaneous absence of self-focused choices.

## **Discussion**

This article has been concerned to enquire into the sort of roles that space plays in facilitating/constraining women's leisure experiences, and to examine how, if at all, space is implicated in promulgating a lack of sense of entitlement to leisure among a group of women who both have dependent children and experience social exclusion.

Implicit throughout the research was a querying of the presence or otherwise of leisure in these women's lives. A very basic conclusion drawn in this respect related to the poor quality of the spatial capital (Soja 2009) available to the women studied. In their own words, the spaces of the immediate locale were described as difficult and stressful places, and not at all relaxation-inducing. In terms of the leisure opportunities available to women, it is no exaggeration to describe these immediate environments as impoverished. There was little evidence that any structured, formal leisure activities featured in the routine lifestyles of the women studied. Preoccupied by a strong ethic of care and a desire to protect and care for their dependent children, these women were not in a position themselves to voice any sense of entitlement/demand for leisure provision. Evident here is an example of how women can be excluded from leisure experiences not only by the all-consuming demands imposed by their care-giving duties, and societal expectations as to what their role should be, but also by the way in which leisure is constructed as a social practice.

Instead, the limited amount of leisure evident pointed to the already well acknowledged importance of informal, unstructured, inexpensive or free activities for low income women. Furthermore, the women's leisure experiences tended to involve either solitary situations or interactions with one other individual. There was no evidence of group or large scale social interactions. The activities that constitute informal leisure for these women are stitched into their daily routines in a variety of diverse and unremarkable ways that are not 'named' by the women as being leisure. In this, the study clearly supported the findings of extant research with respect to the holistic nature of women's lives (Gregory 1982) and to Martinson and Schwartz's (2002, 32) suggestion that women tend to engage in 'minute vacations' throughout the day, rather than setting aside blocks of time readily identifiable as leisure time. The support of close-knit extended family and neighbour networks was often very important in both facilitating and creating relaxing and recreational experiences that were unremarkable, barely identifiable as 'leisure', yet sustaining. Leaving a child in the care of a relative for a few hours, having a cup of tea with a neighbour, and visiting a sister and her children were examples of this.

So much about the study sample's engagement in leisure (the timing, quality, quantity and location) was influenced by the presence of children in their lives. In this, the study

echoes existing research (Bialeschki and Michener 1994; Samuel 1996; Maher 2005). The weight of the ethic of care burden in constraining women's leisure was very evident and home played a key role in promulgating this burden. The study concurs with extant research in finding that the spaces of the home were deeply embedded with normative ideologies about motherhood and 'housewifery'; that among this study sample, a mother's time and space were not her own and that there was little recognition among family members, including the care-giver herself, that she could assume any role other than that of care-giver/mother. The spaces of the home, the family and the female care-giver overlapped to a point where they were almost indistinguishable. Some women could not unravel themselves from their domestic casings, and indeed some seemed able to function only in the guise of care-giver. Extant research has suggested that the absence of duties or the state of 'non-obligation' is what makes leisure possible, but this study did not concur, finding that the spaces of the home were deeply embedded in powerful ideologies of motherhood that did not evaporate in the simple absence of the obligations posed by children. Instead, they could serve as constant reminders of how things 'should be', maintaining the women's care-giving personas even in moments when theoretically there was no care-giving duty to perform and making it difficult for them to relax in the home space.

In closely related fashion, the argument that women, especially women with child-care duties, may not have a strong sense of entitlement to leisure was strongly borne out here. This absence of a sense of entitlement was strongly related to the fact that they were not in the habit of focusing on themselves and on their own needs. Indeed, their identities were so strongly interwoven with their child-care roles that when an opportunity arose to access a relative increase in freedom, some of the women studied were simply unable to respond.

For others, however, moving beyond obligation meant temporarily re-appropriating the spaces of their home and, in the process, recreating identities for themselves. Some women were able to relax once they were satisfied that the house was ordered as it should be. They then could determinedly relax, reclaim and even luxuriate in, certain spaces and ambiances within their home. Privacy, peacefulness and the bathroom emerged as sacred in this respect. For a minority, the process of experiencing anew thoroughly familiar spaces was found to continue in trips into the local environment, as a focus on the self, as distinct from on dependent children, facilitated a self-determining way of practising being in space.

It is not very clear why some of the women studied seemed better able than others to profit from the changed circumstances presented by the reduction of their care-giving duties. The presence or otherwise of a partner in the home did not appear particularly significant, as some single parents were able to relax and enjoy their quieter, more peaceful domestic spaces, while others were not. The same held true for women with partners. Clearly, while all of the women studied experienced financial constraints as the norm, none of the women specifically mentioned a lack of money as a reason explaining why their lifestyle did not change during their children's absence. Nobody, for example, said that they would have engaged in some kind of leisure activity in their children's absence, if they had had the money. Implicit here is the message that living on a low income does not simply mean a lack of finance. It also means a lack of social and cultural capital and a series of social limitations in respect of expectations, values and norms.

Neither was the number of children in the family an obvious explanatory factor. Several women continued to be constrained by child-care responsibilities yet could enjoy their increased freedom. In contrast, at least one other woman left totally free of child-care responsibilities could not. One factor that did seem important was the women's general quality of life. Three of the women most adversely affected by the absence of their

children seemed to routinely experience particularly high levels of stress and anxiety. It may be that the preoccupations and duties imposed by their care-giving role sustains these women on a daily basis. Once this role was reduced/divested, the effect was disorienting rather than liberating.

## Conclusion

In terms of future research, the complicated question as to if and how leisure can present women with opportunities to use the home and the home environment creatively as a way of lessening the stresses and strains of daily life and to actively carve out identities for themselves seems very important. As this study has shown, space is intimately involved in influencing women's engagement in leisure. Home spaces, because they are so deeply embedded with powerful normative ideologies of motherhood and so symbolic of uneven social relations, are extremely influential. Their apparent banality and ordinariness belies a multitude of complexities that can, as Domosh (1998) asserted, offer a great deal of insight into the inter-relationships between the social and the spatial.

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## ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

### **Las cuidadoras, el ocio y los significados del hogar: un estudio de caso de mujeres de bajos ingresos en Dublín**

Este artículo busca contribuir a la literatura sobre los significados de los espacios domésticos, por medio de la mejor comprensión de los tipos de roles que el espacio juega en cuanto a dar forma a las experiencias de ocio de las mujeres. El estudio investigó a un grupo de 15 mujeres que viven en áreas carenciadas de la ciudad de Dublín y cuidan a niños. Los grupos de enfoque y las conversaciones estructuradas revelaron la escasez del capital espacial disponible para estas mujeres, describiendo los ambientes locales como difíciles y estresantes, y que son soportados más que disfrutados. Ellas revelaron también hasta qué punto sus vidas fueron afectadas por sus obligaciones como cuidadoras. Dentro de la casa misma, se encontró que los espacios domésticos privados eran profundamente incorporados en las poderosas ideologías de maternidad, que no necesariamente se evaporan con la simple ausencia de las obligaciones impuestas por los niños. En cambio, tendían a servir como recordatorios permanentes de cómo las cosas ‘deberían ser’, y consecuentemente, limitando así las habilidades de algunas mujeres de separarse de sus obligaciones de cuidado y dedicarse a su propia recreación. Algunas de las mujeres estudiadas fueron capaces de ir más allá de las obligaciones, y para ellas el ocio

representaba modestas pero significativas oportunidades para, de una forma decidida por ellas, relajarse, reconquistar e incluso deleitarse en ciertos espacios dentro de sus hogares. Igualmente, una vez liberadas de las responsabilidades del cuidado de los niños, los encuentros recreativos dentro del ambiente local les mostró a algunas mujeres nuevas perspectivas sobre los espacios familiares.

**Palabras clave:** mujeres; ocio; hogar; ética del cuidado; Irlanda

#### **照护者、休闲和家的意义：都柏林低收入女性的案例研究**

本文旨在透过深化理解空间之于形塑女性休闲经验所扮演的角色，对家户空间意义之文献做出贡献。本研究对十五位住在都柏林市衰败地区，且须扶养孩童的女性进行研究。焦点团体以及结构化的访谈显示出这些女性在空间资源上的匮乏，在地环境对其而言充满艰困与压力，因此必须忍受而无法享受。研究也揭露出女性做为家庭照料者的责任形塑其生活的程度。在家中，私领域的家户空间充斥着不必然随着孩童照护工作终止而消失的强烈母性意识形态。反之，它们无时无刻提醒着「该做些什么」，因此限制了许多女性卸下照护工作，从事关注自我的休闲娱乐。若干受访女性得以超脱（母职）义务，对她们而言，休闲代表着适度在家中特定空间里自主放松、休养、甚至是恣意享受的重要机会。同样地，一旦从孩童照料的责任中解脱，在地环境的休闲经验则使得一些女性对其原本熟悉的空間有了崭新的体悟。

**关键词:** 女性、休闲、家庭、照护伦理、爱尔兰