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### **'Lived bodies' and the neo-liberal city – a case study of vulnerability in London**

This article explores the 'more-than-work' aspects of the lives of vulnerable women who street-sex work, through Iris Marion Young's (2002, 1990a, 1990b) concept of the 'lived body' and Yi Fu Tuan's (1977) exploration of spaces and places as created through emotional entanglements. Particularly, we are interested in the differences between the women's experiences, within the broader context of power structures as manifested in neo-liberal cities. Few studies have explored this aspect of street-sex workers' lives and theorisations of the co-creation of environments tend to elide the experiences of the most vulnerable people. Specifically, we explore the relationships that these women have with two environments: the quotidian (where they undertake routine everyday activities), and the gentrified (relating to changes in the spaces in which they live and work). We find that their experiences are extremely local, and heavily contingent on the services made available to them (or not) by the statutory and third sectors and the emotional contacts they make, particularly in third sector support services. This challenges some of the literature which suggests a separation of 'home' and 'work', and which finds close associations between women who street-sex work. While places designed by the third sector are more responsive to these women, they are also more vulnerable to closure through lack of funding. This contributes to a significant degree of ontological non-linearity (Braidotti, 2011) and ontological insecurity (McNaughton and Sanders, 2007) in these women's lives.

#### **Key Words:**

Neo-liberal city; street-sex work; identity; urban space; lived bodies

## Introduction

Studies on the relationship between urban space and sex-work tend to focus on the ways in which spatial practices enacted by the state regulate those of street-sex workers. These often lead to criminalising their work, displacing street-sex workers, and sanitising the city (Hubbard & Sanders 2003; Hubbard 2004; Laing & Cook 2014; Sanders 2016). While this is certainly the case, we want to suggest an alternative reading of some of these processes. We analyse the relationship between embodiment, identity and place with women engaged in street-sex work in two gentrifying areas in London - Tower Hamlets and Kings Cross. By examining their situated experiences and relationships to their surroundings through a body of feminist progressive visions of cities and politics, this article addresses Orchard *et al's* (2016) recent call for more research on how physical surroundings and social context engage bodies in multiple ways and evoke different subjectivities. In relation to their study on sex working women's spatial practices and subjectivities, Orchard *et al* propose that 'although sex work consumes a great deal of their time and socio-sexual and spatialised experiences, it is neither their sole identity nor their only embodied directive for moving through urban landscapes. These women occupy multiple gendered, familial and social roles as mothers, daughters and service recipients alongside their sex work-related identities' (2016:2). Hence, and inspired by Jupp's (2014:1304) call for 'the reinvigoration of feminist visions of cities that suggest different framings of aspects of urban life', this article examines the various ways in which the urban landscape and bodies are in a dialectical relationship.

This helps us to understand women's manifold subjectivities without stereotyping them as street-sex workers.

The potential of space to be transformational for women who do street-sex work is examined using Toril Moi's concept of the 'lived body' to disrupt what she sees as overgeneralising individuals. This is qualified by Young who, while finding the concept useful at the level of the individual, maintains gender as a social-structural concept (2002, see also Moi 2001). Both Moi and Young argue that much discussion about gender fails to cope with individual particularities as they relate to the situations and environments we are contextualized in (see also Jupp, 2014). To address this failure, we examine the potential of the 'lived body', as a concept, to explore the role of place in the lives of a group of vulnerable women with complex needs who engage, or have engaged, in street-sex work in London. By doing so we illustrate that 'gender as structured is also lived through individual bodies, always as personal experiential response and not as a set of attributes that individuals have in common' (Young, 2002:426). We draw also on Young's earlier consideration of how the lived body is gendered in its constraints, opportunities and relationship with physical space (Young, 1990b). We further explore Young's suggestion that 'as a normative ideal, city life instantiates social relations of difference without exclusion' (1990a:227). While we do not question that women who street-sex work are amongst the most stigmatized and vulnerable in urban environments (Hubbard & Sanders 2003), we do want to explore the potential of the city to allow for a reformulation of the self, of 'openness to unassimilated otherness' (Young 1990:227).

This article emerges from research undertaken between 2015 and 2016 with a third sector service provider of support to women who engage in street-sex work, have done so in the past, or who are at risk of doing so in the future. The project explored the everyday lives of women involved in street-sex work in response to third sector concerns that these women's support needs are not fully known, inadequately addressed, and related to different, if intersecting, aspects of their lives. We draw on those parts of interviews with these women and with service providers, which have revealed how being in particular spaces affects street-sex working women's feelings about their gendered and embodied selves. While we focus here on women engaged in heterosexual street-sex work, rather than on men selling sex, or on same-sex transactions (see also Spanger and Skilbrei, 2017), this should not be read as normative but as a way of accessing a group of women with certain shared experiences and vulnerabilities. Our interviewees have made it clear to us that women who street-sex work have distinct needs from men who do so, and also benefit from and feel safer in women-only spaces. Through interacting with women in these spaces, we are also aware that some women who sell sex to men define themselves as lesbian.

In order to understand how space in general and particular places affect street-sex working women's everyday lives, their feelings of identity, and relationships with other people, we have categorized spaces in two ways. 'The Quotidian': domestic or everyday spaces, including the places where the women live and work, and the spaces which the women use to access services on a regular basis; and 'The Gentrified': those parts of the inner urban landscape where the women live and work, but which have been much changed over recent years. These categories are experienced both positively and negatively and while there are overlaps between them, for conceptual ease we present examples where we consider them to best fit. While the women feel stigmatised as marginal through being homeless,

substance abusing, and/or sex workers in their habitual spaces, a focus on the positive dimension of both categories provides an opportunity for an alternative re-formulation of their self-identities (Keith & Pile 1993; Knowles & Alexander 2005). However, we also question the ability of extremely vulnerable people, with very few material, personal and social resources, to participate fully and regularly in the co-construction of spaces. This has implications for how space is planned and services are provided, particularly with reference to the participation of such vulnerable people within a dominant neoliberal urban agenda. Our conclusion considers the broader implications of our findings for theorising street-sex working women's lives through an emphasis on 'the lived body' and for vulnerable groups in contemporary neoliberal cities. It situates our research within the emerging literature on street-sex workers, space and identity (Hubbard & Sanders, 2003; McNeill *et al*, 2008; Sanders and Neville, 2012; Orchard *et al*, 2016).

### **Space, subjectivity and identity**

Feminist geographers provide a range of critical theoretical frameworks to understand the gendered and embodied subject in space (Walkowitz 1992; McDowell 1999; Massey 1994, 2005; Spanger 2013) to ask 'what kinds of spatial difference do different bodies make?' (Tonkiss, 2005:94). They point out how some bodies, such as those of female street-sex workers, are marked as overtly sexual through heteronormative discourses and thereby 'depicted as a motif of degeneracy, contagion and sexual lasciviousness, and hence a threat to male bourgeois values' (Hubbard & Sanders 2003:75). However, as Orchard *et al* (2016) point out in this journal, few studies have explored sex working women's spatial practices and subjectivities beyond their work, and how particular qualities of the urban might offer different and multiple identifications as they move across different places. Considering

gender and sexuality in the city means to pay attention to the ways in which the physical environment reproduces structures of gender and sexual difference as well as ways in which individuals also 'find spaces in the city in which to perform or express difference' (Tonkiss 2005: 94). We expand these arguments by taking the 'lived body' of street-sex working women as a starting point to think through how their gendered and embodied identities are constantly changing, structured and performed in interaction with their physical surroundings.

As well as Young's work on the lived body (1990b, 2002) we are also informed by Tuan's analysis of how we, as subjects, transform space into place through the emotional attachments and the investments that we have there. Tuan holds that 'abstract' space is transformed into place by acquiring definition and meaning, particularly through repetitive and therefore familiar quotidian activities (1977; 2004). He distinguishes space as an arena of action and movement from place, which is about pausing, stopping, resting, becoming involved. For Tuan, the home is our most intimate place, the one we know best and have our most intimate relationships with. However, this is a problematic concept for people for whom 'home' is somewhere from which they have been excluded, or is a negative experience.

Influenced by phenomenological approaches, Tuan identifies the importance of embodied experience by emphasising the role of sensory perception in creating places. As it is through our embodied and sensual engagement that places are encountered and mediated, for Tuan, place starts with wherever we are situated bodily. People are not being passively set in an environment but are actively engaged in the creation of meanings by interacting with their material and social surroundings over time and where, as Price explains, 'identities

both individual and collective are solidified through human relationships to place' (2013:120). In this conception, space is not an external force that works on the body, but a lived and shared place whose 'effects' cannot be understood or accounted for independently of the human action which animates or creates them.

Such an approach resonates with Young's suggestion to develop Moi's phenomenological concept of the 'lived body' within a structural analysis of gender to understand 'the experience of differently situated men and women' (Young 2002: 418). With the notion of the lived body Moi moves away from a general discursive construction of gender to highlight how individuals are situated within different embodied subjectivities that are positioned within a complex web of structural forces and different power dynamics. This requires an understanding of how 'embodiment, social and physical environment appear in the light of the projects a person has...the material facts of her body and its relation to a given environment' [which Young calls 'facticity'] and the 'ontological freedom [a person] has to construct herself in relation to this facticity' (Young, 2002:415). This indicates the multiple and various experiences different street-sex working women might have within particular spatial settings, even though their position in a gendered power structure may be shared at a general level. (Jupp, 2014: 1311).

Earlier, Young had explored the apparently different ways in which men and women use their bodies in space, and concluded that the more constrained use of space experienced by (most) women, compared to (most) men is a result of 'their sexual oppression in contemporary society' (1990b:153). Taking Merleau-Ponty's idea of 'lived space' organised as 'a continuous extension' of a human being developed through 'motility' and 'body confidence' (*ibid*:150), Young considers how women's frequent lack of trust in engaging with

the physical environment creates a 'discontinuous unity with itself and its surroundings' (*ibid*:149), and leads to females being more likely to experience space as enclosed and confining. This theorising helps us to understand the limited and constrained relationships that our interviewees appear to have with different spatial settings. As we will explain, however, different street-sex working women do not relate to different socio-spatial settings in a uniform way. This is important in theoretically and practically differentiating the multiple subjectivities street-sex working women might inhabit as they move through a variety of spatial settings. Hence, the making of place is always related to an engagement with it, which is, in its nature, multiplicitous, depending on how one engages with it.

This raises questions about how we are to conceive of identity and subjectivity. Massey (2005) explains how subjectivity has long been understood as a subjective temporality. However, as Massey argues drawing on Gatens and Lloyd's (1999) work on the relational construction of subjectivity, individuality and sociability are inseparable. Our identities are constituted through our relations with our 'exterior' world: 'For if experience is not an internalised succession of sensations (pure temporality) but a multiplicity of things and relations, then its *spatiality* is as significant as its temporal dimension' (2005:58, emphasis in the original).

This reverberates with Rosi Braidotti's consideration of our subjectivity, which she suggests is 'embedded and embodied memory', and mediated through social and power relations, which catch the body 'in a network of power effects' (2011:45). Braidotti sees location as a 'materialist temporal and spatial site of co-production of subjects in their diversity' (p271). It is unlikely, however, that this co-production will be linear, or progressive, and Braidotti favours a 'dynamic and internally contradictory or circular time of becoming' (p228) which



she describes as 'ontological non-linearity' (p229), and which we have also noted in the experiences of the participants in this research.

These ideas of how 'lived bodies' are set within social power relations, how space and time interact in the co-production of our selves, and the non-linear ways in which we construct particular subjectivities, point towards a non-essentialist, fluid sense of gendered and embodied identity. It further helps to theorise 'gender as structured [but also] lived through individual bodies, always as personal experiential response and not as a set of attributes that individuals have in common' (Young 2002:426). The transiting out of homelessness and sex work into ordered lives is far from straightforward and McNaughton and Sanders (2007) identify several barriers to change. The first is the failure of mechanisms that can eventually lead to successful transitions (housing, networks and welfare services). The second is the continuous coming in and out of negative situations (a "yo-yo" effect), which relates to Braidotti's concept of 'ontological non-linearity'; the third is the absence of 'ontological security' (*ibid*:886). Conditional welfare support (inasmuch as it is entangled with criminal justice systems) can, paradoxically, lead to recipients 'maintaining marginal lifestyles and a cycle of entrapment into social exclusion' (*ibid*:888), an observation we will make later when we discuss the domestic experiences of the women we interviewed. However, while those who are outside of mainstream society become represented as 'deviant' and 'disordered' (*ibid*, 2007), our intention here is to explain a broader range of the experiences of women who street-sex work. Thus we also explore whether and how the third sector and urban spaces have the potential to act as spaces for 'unassimilated otherness' (Young 1990a:227) where street-sex working women can first and foremost be women, rather than being defined by the paid work they do. In order to do so, we first present our methodological approach and research locations.

## **Methodology**

The data which underpins this paper was collected between October 2015 and March 2016, during which time we were involved<sup>i</sup> with a centre providing support for vulnerable women with complex needs, many of whom are or have been vulnerable to becoming drug dependent, homeless and/or street-sex workers. A number of the women who use this centre also have learning difficulties and/or mental health issues. For both the quotidian and gentrified spaces which we discuss in this article, we draw on research commissioned by the centre. This project emerged out of discussions between centre staff and the first and second authors about whether the centre, and the third sector in general, was providing adequate support for the women in question.

The authors were committed to working from a feminist perspective through which our participants' voices would be faithfully represented and it was intended that the research would have the potential to make a positive difference to the lives of the women (Jupp, 2014; Spanger and Skilbrei, 2017). As our own experiences of street-sex work are limited to hearing the accounts of women over a period of eight years, we made a conscious effort to involve women who had used the participating centres, and who had engaged in street-sex work, in the Advisory Group, alongside service providers and researchers. This involved those with the most authentic epistemic privilege in decisions about the framing of the research questions, the research methods, and subsequent dissemination (Harding, 2004). The Advisory Group's useful critiques of the research design, process, findings and dissemination, gives us confidence that the experiences of women engaged in street-sex work are well represented.

The fieldwork was conducted in the London Boroughs of Islington and Tower Hamlets.

Service providers were contacted to identify and reach women who might be willing to talk to us and this generated one discussion group of seven women, and individual and paired interviews with eight women. Ten of the participants were White British, one was from the Irish Travellers' community and two were Black British, an ethnic distribution that reflects three studies of sex work undertaken by Toynbee Hall in 2009. All were poor and were motivated to engage in street-sex work because of the need to raise money (Walkowitz, 2017).

To establish the level, extent and nature of service provision in Islington and Tower Hamlets, and to get the professional and personal views of service providers in the third sector and statutory agencies, nine service providers were also interviewed. Two other services provided information by email. The interview schedules and discussion group questions were developed in collaboration with service users and providers, and discussions held in the project's Advisory Group meetings also ensured that the research process was sensitive and ethically appropriate (U Turn Women's Project, 2016). All participants gave their informed consent for the interviews and their recording. Most of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The discussion group was graphically recorded, and one interview held in a location with distracting background noise was not recorded.

### **The Places**

The research was undertaken in places historically defined by poverty and marginality, until the recent process of intense state-led and corporate gentrification. Bethnal Green and Whitechapel in Tower Hamlets have a long history of gang culture (most notoriously Dick

Turpin in the 1730s and the Kray Brothers in the 1950s and 1960s) and street-sex work. The concentration of thieves, gangs and associated activity dates from the mid-nineteenth century as a consequence of an earlier cleaning up of central London which pushed this activity to the City of London's eastern margins. This finds echoes in the attempted 'cleansing' of street-sex workers, particularly in the run up to the London 2012 Olympics, in which Tower Hamlets was one of six affected boroughs (Hall, 2012; Laville, 2012; Neumann, 2009). The framing of Bethnal Green and Whitechapel as marginal and linked to a persistent history of street-sex work is noted by a number of our interviewees:

...Brick Lane has always been known for kind of sex working women. And the area surrounding that...having the city so close to us. I think, historically, we've always had that kind of name. (Service Provider, LBTH)

The Metropolitan Police have identified Islington and Tower Hamlets as notable for street-sex work, and the Tower Hamlets Drug Action Team estimated that approximately 250 women were selling sex in the borough in 2005, and that these women are 18 times more likely to be murdered than non sex working women who share the otherwise same demographic. (Toynbee Hall, 2009).

The gentrification of areas previously associated with the sex industry, drugs and other 'vices' is, as Sanders-McDonagh *et al* (2016) suggest in their discussion of Soho, a way of 'cleaning up' an area by new private development and high market rents, rather than through policing. This is a pattern familiar to Kings Cross which, until recent re-development, was well known as a venue for street-sex work and where some of our interviewees worked. Sanders-McDonagh *et al* (2016) also note the paradox that the particular 'edgy' activity which drew young creative types to a neighbourhood in the first

place (Soho, Shoreditch), thereby creating the opening for corporate gentrification, is itself erased. Other writers have indicated how it is precisely the diverse social histories that are used in their branding strategies that provide upcoming areas with a veneer of authenticity and credibility (Kerkin 2003). Having introduced the research and geographically contextualised the places, we now turn to the spaces that structure our analysis.

### ***The Quotidian***

In their study of working class life in Bethnal Green in the 1950s, Young and Wilmott (1957) note the close knit-ness of the overwhelmingly white working class families. Children of families who had lived in Bethnal Green for generations mostly set up their own independent households within walking distance of their parents. Our interviewees reflected this experience exemplified by one service provider who told us that:

In Tower Hamlets, the majority of women ...that are sex working...have lived in Tower Hamlets and were born in Tower Hamlets...and don't want to leave Tower Hamlets either.

Indeed, localness is considerably smaller scale than the borough, with women living in a hostel in Whitechapel telling us that a support service ten minutes walk away was considered a 'long walk', and that they never move outside their 'square mile'. This was also illustrated by a conversation with Sandra, using services in Islington, who was very reluctant to travel to unfamiliar services for reasons which included the difficulty of walking into a service where she doesn't know anyone: 'I'm thinking oh my God, stop staring. And I will tell them to stop staring. [laughs] Yeah.'

This restricted geography challenges O'Neill *et al's* (2008) findings that on-street sex workers do not normally live in the same area where they work. However despite the unusual localness of the women we interviewed, their positive identification with the neighbourhood is sparse. Nor did we find the kind of social networks identified by Sophie Day who, in her ethnographic account of sex working dynamics describes how valuable the friendships built with peers are for street-sex workers (Day, 2007:56). Instead the friendships that were brought to our attention were more likely to be between third sector service providers and users, with one service in Islington being described as 'like family, really' by Elisabeth. This resonates with Tuan's description of place as a space where one can feel at rest, stop and engage meaningfully with one's surroundings, as described by our interviewees, and explains why any change of staff is felt to be extremely unsettling.

The experiences of hostel living and encounters with other women in these venues were recounted to us as overwhelmingly negative, and this contributed to the difficulties our interviewees met in trying to extricate themselves from the complex imbrication of drug dependency, mental health problems, and street-sex working. Elisabeth was effectively homeless after leaving hospital having been treated for a brain tumour, during which time her mother died. On approaching the council for housing she was put in 'a fucking hotel in Kings Cross. Come on. Do you know what I mean? What do you expect?' Asked to expand on what was bad about Kings Cross (this was over ten years ago and before the redevelopment) Elisabeth explained:

You're a single woman, and you're going to Kings Cross, and, like... you just lost your mother, you know? You've done this before, so...there wasn't a day when I never ran out of money and I was like...you know? I think I was walking to my sister's, actually, one night, and someone stopped me in the car and, I mean, that was it. I thought, oh,

yeah. And then that was it.

Jennifer was returned to a large women-only hostel located in one of the two main street-sex working areas in Tower Hamlets, after she had been discharged from rehab. She explained: 'to put me back here, you might as well give me £100 and send me to a crack house.' This hostel's environment was said to be unpleasant, stressful and noisy by the women we interviewed. It was also perceived as not responding appropriately to some of the participants' needs. For example, one woman complained that she was accommodated on the second floor, even though she had recently tried to jump out of a window when depressed. More generally, lax management is seen as contributing to an environment where drug taking, alcohol abuse and sex work feature prominently as Jennifer observed:

You got people smoking crack in the TV room with their visitors with staff not knowing. People walking around with alcohol like it's legal. You got people having sex in the garden the other night and it's like: are you blind to this?

Locally, potential clients solicited participants who were trying to leave street-sex work. This highlights how urban space also fixes and positions certain bodies as they are linked to particular places and activities:

You can't come out of [the hostel] without being pulled by a punter or a man walking down the road going, 'Do you want business, business, business?' Do you know what I mean? And it's not nice. (Lindsey)

Interviewees' limited strategies to escape this environment include 'staying in their rooms' (Lindsey), sometimes for days, or consciously manipulating their sensory landscape by 'having [their] telly blaring' (Jennifer) so as not to hear other residents. Such behaviour illustrates the space that we have quoted Young as describing as enclosed and confining. If

we take Young's argument further, that women are more likely to be more 'field dependent' with a greater tendency to regard figures as 'embedded within and fixed by their surroundings' (Young, 1990b:153), then we can see how the lack of housing options is oppressive for vulnerable women, fixing them in the surroundings in both space and time. There is a lack of alternative hostels, particularly women-only accommodation, which is what participants said they wanted. For Beth, when she had a break from this hostel, she ended up in a mixed hostel which was:

worse than a police cell...the bed was close to the floor and you had a shelf that came over the bed like that...you had an old sink in your room....You come out of your room and obviously, you had two showers, two toilets. You had to share with men as well. It was horrible, horrible.

In contrast to the negative accommodation described above, some of the non-residential spaces provided by third sector service organisations were seen as havens to which the women could escape the constant reminders of drugs and street-sex work, as well as the boredom of a life without much meaningful occupation, frequently mentioned by interviewees. For example, Elisabeth, our oldest interviewee, credits the support she received from the centre in Islington as enabling her to give up drugs and for being 'like a safety blanket to me...' and a place where she 'learnt how to open my heart'. Angela valued the third sector run centre in Tower Hamlets which provided moral support when she felt 'crippled with self-doubt. Someone you can get back to when you face difficulties...someone to hold your hand while applying for jobs...to curse together when things were tough.' The founder-director of this centre acknowledged the women's multiple subjectivities (which she phrased as working with the 'whole woman'), and believed that difficult challenges could be partly mitigated by an attractive and sensorily pleasant environment. The women's



involvement in the design of the centre is an example of a positive co-creation of space, although one which was firmly under the control of the director who raised the funds and took the initiative throughout:

They asked for really expensive things like underfloor heating, wooden floors, leather furniture, shower provisions and I worked really hard to get all that and this beautiful building. We have the leather furniture, we have the wooden floors, we have the underfloor heating, the showers. It's designed to be a nice friendly place...it's relaxing.

This demonstrates how third sector organizations can provide a protective and potentially transformative atmosphere for street-sex working women where they can socialize and receive social support without feeling judged; additionally, they can make streets safer through outreach work, and can intercede on behalf of service users when they feel powerless (Sanders & Neville, 2012). Young (1990) points to the importance of these, on first sight, banal acts of interaction in public spaces in the making of political subjects, and as Jupp notes, paying attention to embodiment and materiality can reveal 'the unfolding of embodied experiences, identifications and subjectivities within particular spaces, which may involve feelings of solidarity, care and empathy in unexpected places' (2014:1318). It is notable, incidentally, that when referring to locations, and as evident from the quotes we have used, the women interviewed invariably refer to 'place' rather than 'space', indicating, we think, the particularity of geography.

Finally, having a space where they could be regarded as being more than their sex working life was highly valued by the women interviewed. Being able to undertake everyday activities such as washing clothes, cooking, chatting, and watching TV, in an atmosphere

where they could relax and engage with others was seen as therapeutic. Indeed engaging in different activities such as knitting, yoga, music or art projects offered regularly by the centre, and the linked banter and camaraderie that accompanied such activities, were said by participants to create different embodied experiences and shifting identifications. This highlights the need for policy to consider the importance of ‘caringscapes’ (Bowlby et al 2010), the ‘emotional and affective ‘landscapes’ of times and spaces of care that many city dwellers, particularly women, navigate in different ways’ (Jupp 2014:1316).

### ***Gentrified areas***

During the fieldwork, the ten year rent reduction ‘holiday’ enjoyed by the organisation which commissioned this research ended, which obliged the charity to start paying a market rent. As the charity was located in a fast gentrifying area of East London, market rents had increased substantially since the organisation opened its doors twelve years previously. This represents what Neil Smith has termed the ‘class remake of the central urban landscape’ (1996:39) at best, and ‘revanchist’ at worst – a vengeful attack on ‘minorities, the working class, women...gays and lesbians, immigrants’ (*ibid*:44). For the women we interviewed, gentrification is mostly an exclusionary force, rapidly changing their familiar environment and reducing access to outdoor space. As well as business rent rises, rising residential rents have put familiar areas well out of reach, compounded by the ‘bedroom tax’ introduced in 2013 through which people housed in council tenancies would be financially penalised by living in properties with more bedrooms than they are deemed to need (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013). Islington is the 4<sup>th</sup> most affected borough by this, and Tower Hamlets 9<sup>th</sup>, reinforcing Beatty and Fothergill’s conclusion that the poorest areas and people have been most affected by recent welfare cuts in the UK. Susie thought that the area where she was

born and grew up had gone 'downhill', citing the rising expense of property as the reason. Furthermore, she highlights the lack of availability of affordable shops, cafes or pubs to go to as well as the changing feel and look of the area, and expresses feeling displaced and dislocated.

Elizabeth, who used to work in Kings Cross before the large scale re-development of the area, thought it was more dangerous now as there is a more transient public and lack of familiar faces: '...you don't know, the police could be coming from one side, and a maniac could be coming from (the other)...yeah, at least the people who phone me, I've known them for years.' Elizabeth was one of the very few interviewed who had her own accommodation (a flat), and is therefore able to use mobile technologies to arrange her business there. For the majority of women for whom this is not an option, they are exposed to higher levels of violence and danger. However, Lindsey talked positively about how a woman she had become friends with in a hostel had:

'actually got me out...Doing certain things more than what I would if I wasn't...Like me and her, we might go out. We take a walk down and have a look in a couple of art places or the vintage stores.'

Several service providers interviewed stressed the importance of a change of place in helping women escape their roles as street-sex worker and/or drug abuser. As well as being away from the influence of punters and drug dealers, illustrated in some of the foregoing quotes, different landscapes allowed interactions in which the women could become someone different, and access different forms of identification, providing the possibility to imagine a different future. This could happen in places physically close but conceptually different, such as areas in relatively early stages of gentrification which offered

opportunities for alternative activities. Arguably, urban areas in these first stages of social change offer more tolerance for difference as existing residents might be moving out and newcomers are attracted by the diversity of social experiences available (Kerkin 2003). Areas becoming gentrified are often (though controversially, see Smith, 1994), defined by a lack of 'coherent community' and thus may offer, in Young's view, the 'ideal city life' which 'embodies four virtues that represent heterogeneity rather than unity: social differentiation without exclusion, variety, eroticism and publicity' (1990:13). The director of one service provider explained this when she described a nearby renovated market where some service users put on a fashion show. Although only fifteen minutes walk away from the centre which had organised this, some of the women had never ventured across the trunk road which divided the market from the centre. They returned from the event energised and momentarily inspired by the possibilities they had glimpsed. Another activity, which was designed to give the more organised women an experience of alternative work, generated a moving dialogue between a dress designer who had left Serbia during the Balkan war, and Gloria, who engaged in street-sex work, and who had a family history of abuse and violence. For Gloria, this was an encounter that exposed her to the torments of another woman's life, and enabled her to see that as there had been a way out for the designer, so might there be for her. This illustrates Young's point that 'in the great metropolis we see people who have learned to live socially, choosing to associate with those with whom they have an affinity, but without throwing obstacles to an equal thriving of others' (1990:x). That these two women could meet in a common neighbourhood was possible when it was in the early stages of gentrification.

## **Conclusions**

Using the concepts of the 'lived body' and 'lived spaces', as developed by Young and Tuan respectively, draws attention to embodiment and materiality and away from discursive policy categories that tend to construct a fixed identity of women as sex workers and victims. Instead, attention to the lived body 'can offer a way of articulating how persons live out their positioning in social structures along with the opportunities and constraints they produce' (Young 2002:426). As our research shows, women are not passively set in an environment in one particular role, but are actively engaged in the creation of meanings by interacting with their material and social surroundings.

Yet, there is a paradox of the gritty histories of Islington and Tower Hamlets forming part of their attraction to the incoming population, while those who live extremely challenging lives in these areas are further marginalised. It is hard to escape the physical and psychological constraints on these women's lives which limit their ability to be fully co-creators of their environment. The recurring motifs of our interviewees' lives, bounded by institutional housing and limited services or what Young describes as the 'opacities and resistances' which populate the world and which 'correlate to its own limits and frustrations' (1990b: 149), suggest a degree of constraint which fixes the women in space which they mostly lack the confidence and resources to change or escape. Nonetheless, we have also found evidence of real and hard won change in the women's lives through engagement with 'practiced space which is its relational construction; its production through practices of material engagement. If time unfolds as change then space unfolds as interaction. In that sense space is the *social* dimension. Not in the sense of exclusively human sociability, but in the sense of engagement with a multiplicity.' (Young, 1990a:61). We have, too, uncovered temporal dynamics through which the women's lives evolve in a form of 'non-linear' ontology (Braidotti, 2011), in which periods in which they are able to extricate themselves

from drug use and sex work provide them with moments when they can engage more productively in co-creating their spaces (for example in obtaining council or secure rental housing) than others, when they have periods of relapse.

Our findings, then, have implications for vulnerable groups in contemporary cities, who are increasingly marginalised through large-scale gentrification and neo-liberalisation, which leaves fewer interstitial places available for non-conforming populations, and the organisations which support them. An acknowledgement of the (albeit limited) agency of women who engage in street-sex work is essential. Only in this way will it be possible to understand how they negotiate power relations in places where they interact, and where they can exert their capacity for meaningful action. But relational space needs a relational politics which urban planning is not currently providing. Only by bearing in mind such capacity and its possibility of existing within the streets will it be possible for governmental and non-governmental agencies to develop more effective strategies to improve the quality of life of women who street-sex work.

### *Afterword*

During the short course of this research the local third sector provision landscape changed dramatically. A centre in Islington withdrew its specialist provision for women who street-sex work in order to focus its resources on young people in need. A centre in Tower Hamlets was forced to close because of a lack of funds while another third sector provider in East London withdrew its outreach work. This considerably reduced the outreach presence in Tower Hamlets. These are the centres to which our interviewees claimed a connection, indeed friendship, and which are a victim of the pressures that elsewhere are fueling corporate/neo-liberal gentrification.

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<sup>i</sup> We have performed multiple roles in the centre since 2008: as volunteer yoga teachers, a trustee, and researchers. This enabled the women who used the centre to get to know us and build up a level of trust which has facilitated subsequent research, and which we hope we have honoured.