

Women Face Special Housing Problems

Bonnie Shapiro

Women's issues in housing are so great and so small, so intrinsic a part of our daily routine, that they often go unthought of, even by women. Housing as an issue hardly ever makes it into feminist thought. Yet, while many male-protected feminists sit comfortably at home, many unattached women are finding it difficult to find decent, affordable housing and those that do are often subjected to psychological pressure, even abuse. Problems range from outright sex discrimination to special needs such as nursing homes and shelters for victims of domestic violence.

Although discrimination against women in housing based on sex is illegal, enforcement is another story. Only seven sex discrimination cases and four consent decrees have been issued in the entire country. This paucity of cases is surely not for lack of discrimination.

Women suffer in housing because of their economic relationship to the larger society. The current rule of thumb is that 25% of income should go for housing. Many women earn salaries so low

that they cannot "afford" decent housing. Landlords and mortgagers reject women on financial grounds even though women have always been able to make "ends meet" in the worst economic situations.

Many landlords do not want children. This discrimination against children most adversely affects women. In Bergen County, New Jersey, for example, there are over 9000 female heads of households accounting for 24% of that county's housing needs. These head of household mothers face combined problems from low income, children and "type" of income. Alimony and welfare payments are often rejected as bona fide sources of income. Welfare as income creates its own special problems. There has long been "moral" discrimination against the welfare mother, who is supposedly lazy and immoral, having children for profit. New Jersey currently has two bills (A 1676 and A 1890) in the Assembly making it illegal to discount these sources of income. So far, they have not been able to get much support.

Government has certainly not intervened to help the low income or welfare mother. On the contrary, moral prejudice has always been one justification not to build public housing. And the federally funded rent supplement program, called "Section 8," has been slashed as part of the federal budget cuts.

For women who have found apartments, their problems are hardly over. Female tenants are doubly deprived. Like all tenants, they are prop-

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ertyless in a class society; as women, they face extra harassment at home and injustice in the courts. Lawyers tell of court cases in which lawyers for the apartment owners turn to male-strangers in the courtroom and accuse them of having keys to the female defendant's apartment. This, of course, establishes the female as a woman of "easy virtue" and probable liar. Many judges show their "concern" for female defendants by paternalistically talking them out of staying in their apartments: "You don't really want to live there, dear, do you?" they suggest.

Harassment at home by building owners and their agents ranges from actual sexual assault, to propositions, to allowing or disallowing male visitors (or suspected lesbian visitors) to controlling overnight guests. One woman was evicted (illegally) for having a male exchange student stay with her and her daughter for three days and nights. This woman felt ashamed and degraded, and sought to "prove" that she was "respectable." Some owners try to forbid women from living with people to whom they are not married. Many women, believing that the owner has the power of eviction (even if the owner legally does not), live in fear of the watchful eyes of maintenance workers and others, afraid to stand up for their rights lest there be some sort of retaliation. And indeed, many owners of buildings, especially in rundown areas, call authorities and malign women who receive AFDC grants in retaliation for complaints about poor conditions. Women alone often find that they cannot get any maintenance service. They are ignored when they request repairs, ridiculed as complainers, or put in the position of having to play "cute" sexual games with servicemen in order to get service.

Another problem disturbing to female tenants is that of the key requirement. Many leases require that a tenant hand over a key to the owner or managing agent. Maintenance personnel get the key, too. And friends of the maintenance personnel? In some developments, maintenance men use their keys to walk in on women at home during the day, or get in before the woman comes home. It is a fact that 25% of rapes occur in the home.

While maintenance men are obviously not committing all these rapes, there is more thought being given as to whether the owner is responsible for the safety of the tenant. In California and New Jersey, suits are in progress against apartment owners for rapes occurring on their premises. In New Jersey, a bill (A 3355) has been introduced to make it illegal for an owner to require a key to an apartment.

There are reports of higher rape statistics in low income areas. In some of these areas, the direct cause is women opening their doors to men pretending to be supers or building inspectors. Albert De Salvo (The Boston Strangler) used that ploy and so did a recent imitator in East Orange, New Jersey. Identification has not seemed to be the answer; it seems easy enough for these men to get authentic-looking identification. Perhaps if a woman could get her apartment maintained on a regular basis, by familiar workers, she would not so readily open the door to strange "personnel."

There are specialized problems in housing for special groups of women. Women's shelters face exclusionary zoning problems. Women who come to shelters as victims of domestic violence are demoralized and their self-image may be shattered. The best place to situate a shelter would be in a beautiful residential area but most residential areas exclude the shelters, forcing them into commercial or industrial zones, or into the worst neighborhoods.

Older women are the "survivors" in this country, often left destitute after the death of a spouse. For these women, there is little choice in housing. Many women do not think of where they will live when they grow old; the horrible fact is that the average nursing home patient is a 79 year old woman, below poverty level, not necessarily in need of any nursing care but in need of protection from the violence of her old neighborhood.

Meanwhile, many women seniors who need the care cannot get into the "home." They have to wait for someone else to die! Rent subsidies are not so easy to get either; in many urban areas 35% or more of poverty level women over 65 are on waiting lists for senior citizen housing. Some sub-

sidies are available for housing in the private sector, but an apartment owner does not have to accept a tenant who is on rent subsidy.

In the face of all these problems, there lurks a deeper dilemma, one that many feminists do not want to face. Regardless of all the problems in securing housing, or the difficulties of trying to live harassment-free, American women, whether they work outside the home or not, have been taught to identify with their homes. The American woman is still encouraged to find her creative outlet in her living space. The home, or apartment, is a reflection of ourselves, and numerous commercials exhort us to see ourselves in our china, furniture, floors, and crystal. Much of the beating and battering of women is blamed on the wife's "bad housekeeping" or pressure to move up to a nicer (richer) house. The question, "When are you buying a house?" has become second only to "When are you having a baby?" The pressure is on the "apartment wife" for she has

failed to capture the American dream. She is in additional conflict because she is trying to create her own environment in an apartment she does not own. Her lease dictates the color of her walls and what to put on these walls. Older women cling to their homes in the midst of chaos and deteriorating neighborhoods. But elderly women who are forced to move from their homes often can't make it anywhere else — they lose their roots and identity.

Definitely we must start addressing the problems of day-to-day hardship affecting so many women right now seeking "homes" to identify with! Middle class families, falsely secure in ten room houses, may, after sudden divorces or other losses, end up with many of the problems their lower income sisters share. We must begin to view the need for adequate housing *as* a genuine feminist issue, even as we are only beginning to see economics as a feminist issue.