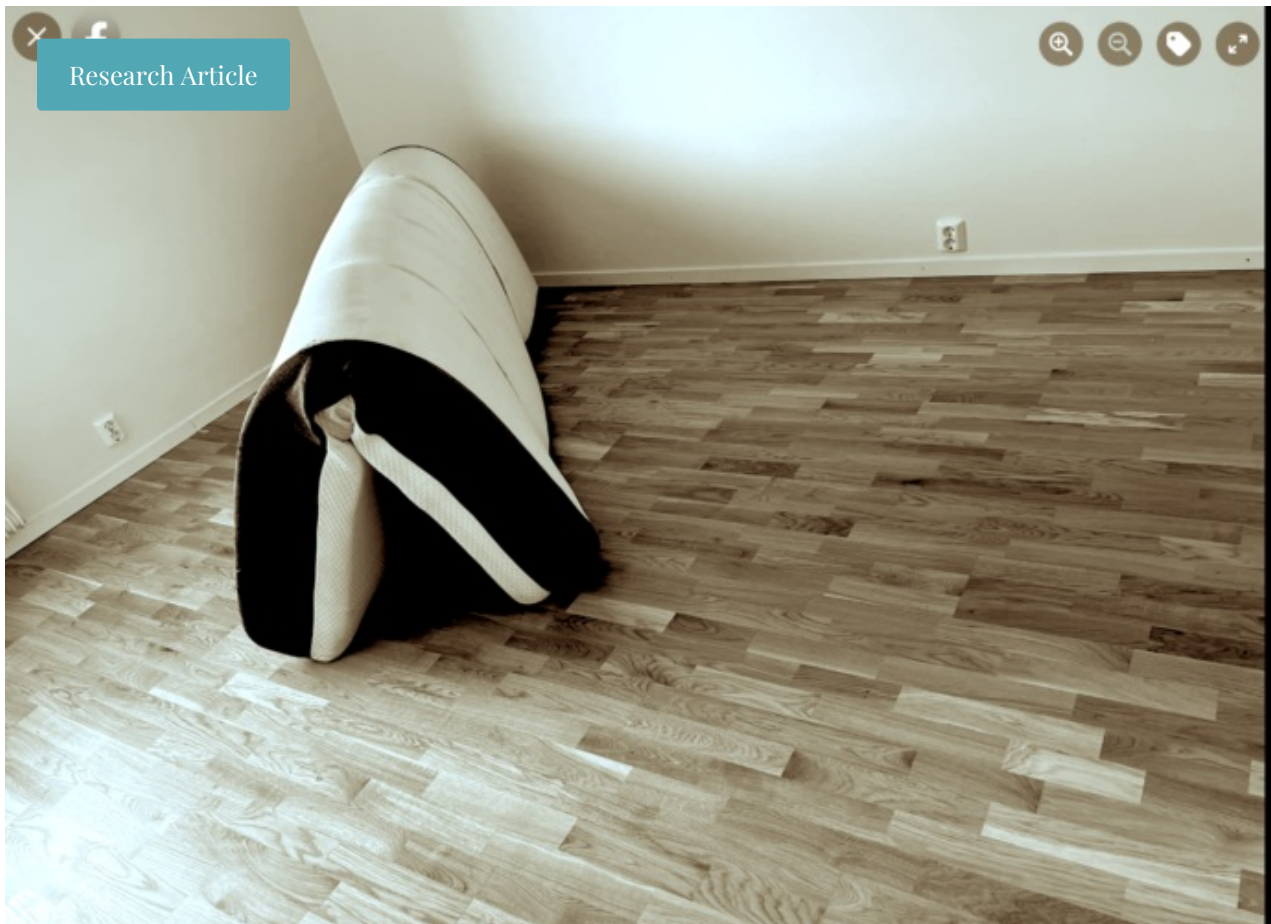




Alienated housing experiences; female sub-tenants in Stockholm, Sweden

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Lenita Kefala

It's a huge stress, it's stress money-wise to move, you're constantly worried about what will happen next. What scares you the most is that you may have to keep going like this for the rest of your life. It's so hopeless and you're so terribly tired of being insecure and above all not knowing the financial situation, you don't know the next need, or what it's going to cost, so your finances are always unstable.

Kajsa, 35 years old, describes her housing situation to me and says that she can't think of any advantages with the sublet market, "if you like changes and to move often, well then maybe it's an advantage, but I see absolutely no benefits". The lack of predictability is a recurring theme in her narrative, along with financial stress caused by the high and irregular rental costs. For the past 14 years, Kajsa has been moving between 15 different temporary, sub-leased rooms and apartments in the Stockholm region because of the difficulties in getting a firsthand rental contract. For the last six years, she has been registered in a queue at Stockholm's housing agency, which is not nearly long enough. Buying an apartment is neither possible financially nor something Kajsa wants to do. She dreams of her own rental contract, which for her, is a symbol of a stable and secure dwelling. A dwelling where she has the power to decide for herself. Moving around and changing geographical location for as long as she and the other women I've interviewed have done, contributes to what Kajsa describes as an imminent fear that the temporary housing solution will become a permanent lifelong situation.

Recurring themes in the interviews with subtenants include a lack of self-determination, control, overview, and planning for your future life – a description that relates to the concept of alienation. "Alienation hinders a life of freedom" as the philosopher Rahel Jaeggi (2014) points out. Briefly, alienation means estrangement, objectification, or othering and refers to the inability to establish a relation to other human beings, to social institutions, and to oneself. In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Karl Marx binds together the theological perspective with the political-economical. According to Marx, it is the capitalist system that affects the individual's relations and therefore they do not see themselves as an active governing subject (Wendling 2022). In other words, there is a lack of control of one's relations and intimacies, which I will show is highly evident in the lived experiences of female subtenants who navigate the sublet market.

David Madden and Peter Marcuse have shown that the concept of alienation relates well to the housing market and the connection between housing crises and personal crises. In short, Madden and Marcuse refer to alienation "not only to powerlessness and a lack of freedom but also to characteristic impoverishment of the relation to self and world" (Madden and Marcuse 2016:58). This sense of alienation in the housing market as an existential experience of being displaced in a capitalist society, aligns with the Marxist critique which highlights how the dwelling has become a commodity for profit making.

In this text, I seek to contribute to the discussion on class in the city by discussing the context of the sublet market. The focus is on various living situations of women in the sublet market through the lens of alienation. In 1872, Fredrich Engels wrote about the political-economic housing dilemma and its impact on the working class. Today the question of housing is strongly embedded with class structures and the conflict between

housing as a lived, social space (*home*) and an instrument for profit-making (*accommodation*) are clearly seen in the sublet market (Madden & Marcuse 2016, Pull 2020).

The basis for this article is built on my thesis project where 23 women were interviewed between 2020–2022 about their experiences of subletting in the region of Stockholm. The interviewees were sampled through Facebook pages devoted to finding subleases in Stockholm. Their ages ranged from 27 to 72. Of the 23 informants, 20 were born outside of Stockholm and eight outside of Sweden. Their citizenship situations included full citizenship holders, permanent residency holders, student visa holders, and asylum seekers. Socio-economic status also varied, including precarious economic conditions, university students, service- and social care workers, and middle-class professionals. The subletting form varied; some leased a fully furnished apartment directly from the private landlord, a small family with a baby leased a room, another leased a tiny house on some private property, and another rented a redesigned wardrobe. The relationship between tenants and landlord is defined in both legal terms, as “formal rental” with an officially approved second dwelling contract, and “informal rental” and technically illegal with no or the wrong contract.

“ONLY FOR WOMEN”

The notion of a home has a specific role in the creation of humans as cultural beings and is a space that often links to concepts such as autonomy, security, dignity, and self-determination (Alftberg 2013:108). A home can be described as a place for security and stability, a territory with both physical and symbolic boundaries to ensure control (Thörn 2004, Löfgren 2018). As discussed further in my thesis, the female gender has a specific role in the notion of home, and it is especially seen in the subletting market. Subletting is organised through several different websites, Facebook and Blocket.se are the most common among my informants. It is common that private landlords not only require a stable income but also often seek women as tenants. To be a female becomes a specific requirement that is often demanded in the ads which should be understood as intimately connected with how women historically have been linked to the home and housework, production, and social reproduction. The sublet market is a market where the embodiment of a woman can present and represent security and care, which interferes with the chance of getting a rental.

 **! Bara till KVINNA/ only for WOMEN.** 

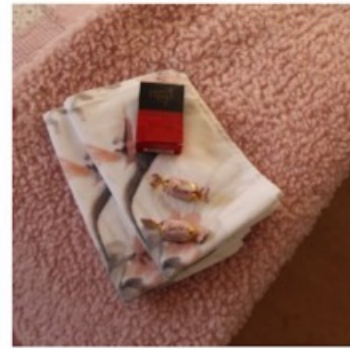
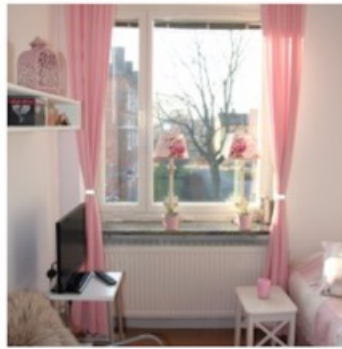
The informants often describe that their female position is highlighted in their application and works as a strategy to be chosen by the landlords, at the same time as they have to confront sexual harassment and unwanted sexual attention. This is a good demonstration of how intersecting power relations shape the experience of the sublet market. As Tester (2008) points out, “low-paid women are especially vulnerable” and in my findings, the combination of gender and class presents itself as a precarious position on the sublet market.

Not a lifestyle choice

Safe housing is considered a necessity for a good life in general and is part of the basic objectives of the Swedish public sector, but it is a goal that does not give rise to any claimable rights (Boverket 2022). The housing inequality is worst in cities like Stockholm, where people are excluded from the rental market due to the lack of affordable housing and rental contracts. They are therefore forced to sublet and leave their housing situation in the hands of private landlords. In the capital of Sweden, more than 700,000 people are in the housing queue (bostad.stockholm.se), where the average waiting time for a rental contract in the outer regional areas is nine years. The number of people living in temporary homes is difficult to estimate. Precarious groups are difficult to reach: they move frequently and are seldom represented by any organisation (Listerborn 2021).

“She depends on me financially,” says Emma, a woman in her thirties, of her landlord, who is herself an unemployed mother with a child. Emma rents a room in a three-room apartment on the outskirts of Stockholm. “I need somewhere to live, and she can’t afford the rent by herself, it’s some weird capitalist symbiosis we live in” she continues and laughs. In Emma’s situation, there seems to be no clear winner and loser, they are both dependent on each other to cope with everyday life. Owning a home or having a first-hand contract is no guarantee of financial security but for many, housing has become an important component of personal security (Listerborn & Molina 2022). Subletting has become a common way to improve one’s personal finances. But for those who need to sublease the cost can become a huge stress. Access to housing, which was once considered a right and obligation of the Swedish state to provide for its citizens, is today governed by market principles where one’s financial resources determine how, where, and for how long one can stay (Grander 2020, Listerborn 2021).

The high cost of subletting is a theme in several of the narratives and is discussed as a contributing factor to the vulnerability of the tenants. The strong economic incentive to subletting leads to the fact that rents the double or triple of the first-hand rent are not infrequent (Boverket 2022, Handelskammaren 2022). “But I have no alternatives, I can’t afford to buy an apartment and it’s not like it’s my choice to sublet”, says Sirpa, a woman in her seventies who has rented various temporary accommodations for the past two years. She has been struggling to find a place to rent. She has moved from a room in her ex-husband’s villa, stayed some months as a lodger with a younger woman. She was then offered a place in a two-room apartment, which she was so happy to get. The landlord called and said he had changed his mind right after she just moved in her furniture. Recurring in her story is the unpredictability and financial stress. “I got a shock, and you know then you stood there, and everything was spinning in my head, what am I going to do now? What should I do with my furniture?” She had to move back to her ex, and even if that was not what she wanted, she needed a place to stay. Sirpa’s experience is another example of how gender and class intersect in a vulnerable position. Historically, we know that a female in a position of dependency on a male partner or ex for housing due to economic inequalities can, face devastating consequences, as Listerborn points out (2021).



One day at a time

The rental period within a sublease is often limited, and there is usually some kind of negotiated length of stay. The rules differ slightly depending on whether the sublease relates to a rental apartment or a private rental. In the former, subletting is regulated by the *rental law* (hyreslagen) and in the latter by the *private rental law* (lag om uthyrning av egen bostad) (Boverket 2018). After two years, a sub-tenant has the right to apply for the security of tenure, meaning they don't have to move out of the apartment. Therefore, it is very common for the accommodation period for a subletting to be kept under two years. Time is therefore a very central dimension of subletting (Listerborn 2021). Living temporarily is embedded within a calculated life schema and a constant preparedness to move again. This preparation creates a here-and-now existence.

By insecure I mean that I don't know what's coming next, I don't know what my next housing will look like... just the precariousness of not knowing where my next accommodation will be located, and unsure of... precarious in money... precarious in life.

Agneta tells me that her precarious housing situation makes her feel left out and jealous of friends and colleagues who have stable housing. Here negative feelings are a consequence of not knowing how long she will be able to live in the current apartment she is subletting, there is no formal contract. She tells me that she "trusts the landlord" not to suddenly throw her out on the street but she has no guarantee and therefore tries to make as little fuss of herself as possible. She went from living a normal life in a condo with her ex-husband to living in uncertainty due to the separation. Several informants describe a constant awareness of being replaceable but unaware of *when*. A situation that impacts their everyday life and produces stress, anxiety, and insecurity.

It's important to think, not to get stressed or furious but to think clearly. I have to cope with this today and I have to cope with this tomorrow and so I have to take one day at a time.

Focusing on one day at a time and not stressing yourself out becomes what I interpret as a strategy in line with a calculation where everyday life is lived according to an awareness and planning for sudden unpredictability. "I don't know how long I can live like this, but what's the alternative? There are no other options so then you continue to deal with it" Agneta continues and tells me that she "doesn't want to think about it all the time, I don't want to think about it [the uncertainty] more than I do". Agneta and the others can't see the entirety of their housing career. Living in someone else's house is an example of alienated housing, where you live under the control of the contract holders and for as long

as they want to sublease (Madden and Marcuse 2016). The worry and stress of not knowing how low they can sublease produce stress and anxiety.

I really wish I had an accommodation where I had more overview or control over myself. That it was up to me to choose whether or not I wanted to stay.

Taking one day at a time becomes a way to take control here and now and not lose herself in the uncertainty of the future. This also hampered the connection with the dwelling as a home (Dovey 1985). Subletting means often that the house owner decides the conditions, the subletter is often the one who decides for how long they can stay and which rules there are.

Undoing a home

Several of the informants mention the lack of material footprint in their temporary housing environment. To rent a fully furnished dwelling or a room, which several of the women I interviewed do, makes it difficult to bring their own furniture and things. Limited possibilities of doing what the informants express as ‘ordinary’ things such as hanging up clothes in wardrobes, putting up paintings on the walls, or cooking and inviting friends and families for dinner, are examples of a lack of attachment that describes an alienated or a relation-less relation (Jaeggi 2014). They are denied the chance to build a relationship with their housing as expected. Ordinary things and practices often define notions of a home and an adult life. Adulthood has, to a large extent, come to be associated with independence, autonomy, and an established place in both the labour- and housing market (cf. Kåks 2007). An imagined and expected adult life is also about determining your own habits and routines and how you want to live your life. Something that the informants give examples of is the difficulty of their uncertain and temporary housing situation. Karin is in her forties and describes the difference between having a residence and a home.

I live there, but it's not my home. But I have also done that on purpose for myself because I know it's not. Even if I can stay there for a couple of more months, I will have to move pretty soon. So it feels like I live there but it doesn't really feel like a home and... it's not my home above all.

Karin says that she can neither shape the dwelling she rents nor expresses her individuality in it. Aspects that can be understood in Peter Marcuse's discussion of residential alienation as the inability of a person to shape or control her dwelling, and the inability to symbolically manifest individual ownership in that dwelling (Marcuse 1975, Madden and Marcuse 2017). This inability to express yourself, find satisfaction, and fulfil individuality in the domestic sphere is a condition of commodified housing, where the subtenants only stay temporarily. Making few personal and material attachments in the room or apartment becomes a strategy for women to move from one dwelling to another more easily. The informants describe that they do not want to invest their time, commitment, or any unnecessary costs in the temporary housing. To avoid having to move furniture around and not knowing where to store them, several of the women own furniture that they can easily dispose of in a move (things they received for free or bought cheap secondhand).

Yasmine, 30 years old and a mother of two children, tells me that her six-year-old son has already changed schools five times and that she has promised herself that next time will be the last. She tells me that she hopes that her children will not make too many friends and does not want to give the dwelling a permanent feeling because then “the breakup” from the dwelling will be so much more difficult. She explains:

The combination of the uncertainty, of the economy and for me the biggest thing is that I don't want to be friends with our neighbours, I kind of don't want to get close to other parents at school because we will soon move.

Yasmine's expression of not wanting to invest and establish emotional and social bonds with neighbours and other parents could be seen as another example of how she is living an alien life (Jaeggi 2014). There are neighbours living in the same apartment building and parents of children at the same school, but it is an incomplete relationship where Yasmine doesn't want to forge any real bonds because she is constantly prepared to move, so why invest with other people? Jaeggi (2014) describes alienation as the relation of relationlessness, as a separation or detachment between people and things, and between people and people. Jaeggi emphasises that there is a relationship to what one is alienated towards, alienation does not describe absolute detachment but a distant connection; “being alienated from something means having become distanced from something in which one is fact involved or to which one is in fact related – or in any case ought to be” (2014:25).

A common concern among the informants was the lack of an overview of their future and control of their lives. “To decide for yourself”, as Sirpa points out to me, is what she longs for because now, she continues, “it feels like someone else is deciding, that's probably the hardest part”. The women's lack of an overview of their future everyday life in terms of practical, financial and emotional leads to insecurity, and alienation.

Conclusion

This short text illustrates how the unequal and precarious housing situation that the women experience on the sublet market manifests the concept of alienation. Being excluded from the ordinary housing market means a life that is insecure, vulnerable, expensive, and precarious in different ways. Some will have the financial possibility to buy an apartment and therefore leave the sublet market after a year or two. However, several of the women I interviewed have been subletting for ten years or more.

A fundamental aspect of a home is to have control over that space. Being prevented from having their own things and furniture and not knowing how long they can stay and where and when they will have to move, creates feelings of discomfort, stress, and of not being located here and now. It's an expressed separation from the house they live in, from activities that create a feeling of being at home (Madden & Marcuse 2018, Westin 2021). The loss of a stable dwelling goes along with the loss of self-determination and lack of opportunities to control one's own future.

Residential alienation should not be seen as an exceptional moment of crisis, but rather as

a consequence of the contemporary commodified housing market where dwellings are seen as a means of profit rather than a social right. According to Isabelle Lorey precarious living conditions are being normalised at a structural level, and the liberal mode of governing produces economic, social, and legal relations of inequality (Lorey 2015).

The relationship between tenant and landlord on the sublet housing market needs to be seen in the light of a structural housing inequality, where some more or less (in)voluntarily become hosts and others are forced to be guests. The unclear, sometimes non-existent agreements and expectations that exist between tenant and landlord create insecurity in relation to each other and to the dwelling they live in. An insecurity that spills over onto life in general as alienation. Where the lack of control and power over rules, routines, financial situation, and expectations make it difficult to anchor emotional bonds and material footprints, to make the temporary housing a home.

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Authors



Lenita Kefala

PhD Student » Stockholm University

Lenita Kefala is a PhD student in ethnology at the Department of Ethnology, Gender studies and History of religion at Stockholm University. In her thesis project, she investigates experiences of the contemporary sublet housing market in Stockholm, Sweden. Her research interest is the intersection of housing inequality, lived experiences, precarity and feminist theory.