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978-0-521-59320-5 - The Dignity of Resistance: Women Residents' Activism in Chicago
Public Housing

Roberta M. Feldman and Susan Stall

Excerpt

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

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Struggles for Homeplace

[Y]ou really just haven't seen how some people are living over here. We have potholes over here large enough for a small child to fall in. . . . And we have roof leaks. It doesn't make sense for somebody to be living like [this].

Beatrice Harris, Wentworth Gardens Local Advisory Council president

The resident Beatrice Harris, one of the key figures in local organizing efforts at Wentworth Gardens, is speaking with great dismay about the abysmal living conditions of her "homeplace," a 422-unit low-rise Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) family development on the South Side. The time is the late 1980s, when Wentworth, as in other CHA developments, is beleaguered by two decades of underfunding and inept management. Daily life in CHA family developments is beset by inefficient and inadequate buildings and grounds maintenance, and insufficient social, recreational, and educational services to meet the residents' needs (see also Kotlowitz, 1991; Slayton, 1988; Venkatesh, 2000).

When we began our fieldwork in 1989, we too were struck by the deterioration of Wentworth Gardens' buildings and grounds. Signs of dilapidated and unsafe physical conditions were visible throughout the development. The brick building exteriors were cracked. The concrete overhangs were scaling, and large pieces had broken off. Lead paint was peeling, and lights in the public entries and stairwells were in disrepair. The concrete sidewalks, exterior stairs, and retaining walls had huge cracks and large missing sections or were missing altogether. Excavated holes exposing rusted, broken heating pipes with steam bursting out were common. Children's play equipment in each of the development's courtyards was dismantled, leaving behind fractured concrete and big crevices that posed hazards for small children; extensive expanses of dirt with only patches of grass covered the development's central court.

Despite the best attempts of residents to decorate and keep their apartments clean, interior walls and ceilings showed signs of water leaks and

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mold. Deteriorated plumbing pipes and fixtures, roofs that had not been replaced, and brick walls that had not been tuckpointed since occupancy resulted in water damage in the apartments.¹ Gerry-rigged electric wires making up for inadequate electric service, exposed heating pipes, sewage backup in the sinks and toilets, and lead paint in the apartments created health hazards; so too did the periodic floods, and rats and feral cats in the basements.

Records showed that Wentworth's buildings and grounds were cited for over 1,000 building code violations. Virtually none was repaired. Deferred maintenance had become such a serious problem that, as of 1991, a CHA report claimed that approximately \$11 million would be required to repair and raise Wentworth's physical plant up to standard (On-Site Insight, 1991).

Physical deterioration was not the only threat to the Wentworth community's viability. Less obvious to the onlooker, but equally important, children's recreational and educational programs were inadequate, and the on-site field house required renovation and expansion. Social services were inadequate given the residents' needs. Wentworth residents voiced the urgent necessity for adult job training, day-care and after-school programs, young adult recreation and employment, and drug rehabilitation programs. Police protection was less than adequate, although crime at Wentworth was a less serious problem than in CHA's other family developments. Also as in other low-income communities, Wentworth's neighborhood was underserved by retail stores.

The deteriorated conditions at Wentworth Gardens were common to public housing nationwide. Whereas housing reformers had high hopes for public housing in the United States at its inception in the 1930s, by the 1980s, most deemed it a failure. Critics and researchers generally have agreed that the pressing problems facing the federal government's public housing program at the turn of the 21st century are underfunding; concentration and social and physical isolation of poor minority families, typically in undesirable and inaccessible locations; inappropriate building designs (especially high-rise structures, and "nondefensible" public exterior and interior spaces); crime and vandalism; lack of tenant selection and income mix; and again, ineffective maintenance and management, and inadequate or inaccessible services and employment opportunities (for a review, see Bauman, 1994). Notably, Chicago's public housing, although having the third largest number of units in the country (Popkin, Gwiasda, Olson, Rosenbaum, & Buron, 2000), is considered "among the worst in the

¹ Tuckpointing is a process to replace and repair the mortar between the bricks of the exterior walls in order to prevent water from seeping into the interior of the building.

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FIGURE 1. Upper left: East side of Wentworth Gardens along Wentworth Avenue showing two-story rowhouses in 1988 (photographer: Roberta M. Feldman). Upper right: Entrance to the Wentworth Gardens field house and CHA management office located on Wentworth Avenue in 1997. The balloons on the tree were part of Wentworth Gardens' 50th anniversary celebration (photographer: Susan Stall). Center left: Interior courtyard showing two-story rowhouses and three-story walk-up apartment buildings in 1988 (photographer: Roberta M. Feldman). Center right: Three-story walk-up apartment buildings in the foreground and two-story rowhouses in the background as seen from the west side of the Wentworth development in 1988 (photographer: Roberta M. Feldman). Lower left: Front entry of a three-story walk-up apartment building in 1988 (photographer: Roberta M. Feldman). Lower right: Wentworth's central courtyard in 1988 (photographer: Diana Solis).

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nation – poorly constructed, poorly maintained, and extremely dangerous” (Popkin et al., 2000, p. 1).²

Wentworth Gardens residents have not passively acquiesced to these worsening conditions; rather, for four decades, starting in the 1960s, they have been persistently engaged in sustained grassroots efforts to stem the deterioration of their buildings, grounds, services, and programs. In 1988, however, Wentworth activists' resolve was pressed to its limits. The Wentworth Gardens development was threatened with demolition, first to make way for a new White Sox stadium; shortly thereafter, to comply with federal pressures to demolish public housing units nationwide. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) required a viability test of all public housing in 1996, calling for unviable units to be razed. In Chicago, this is the vast majority of units.

In *The Dignity of Resistance: Women Residents' Activism in Chicago Public Housing*, we describe the history of Wentworth resident-initiated individual and collective actions to alter living conditions that have threatened their housing's and their community's viability. *The Dignity of Resistance* is foremost Wentworth activists' story of their daily struggles to meet their own and their neighbors' needs for survival and to save their homes from demolition. Second, it is an analysis of their resistance against increasing government disinvestment in public housing and social services, and the growing poverty in their community. It explains why and how Wentworth resident activists, African-American women representing over 1,200 people, mostly low-income female-headed families, carefully and effectively took on the responsibility for creating a better future for themselves and their neighbors.

The central questions we address in this book are, What has motivated Wentworth Gardens residents, individually and communally, to initiate and sustain their involvement in grassroots efforts to improve and defend their home? What strategies have these residents used? What resources, both personal and collective, as well as outside resources, have they needed? What have been the essential challenges and accomplishments of their efforts? We interpret the answers to these questions within a resistance theoretical framework, especially focusing on the role that public housing has played in the expression and imposition of both “power” and “resistance.”

UNCOVERING PUBLIC HOUSING WOMEN RESIDENTS' ACTIVISM

For the general public and for policymakers, the role that Wentworth public housing women have played in saving their homes is unexpected. The

² Only New York City and Puerto Rico public housing family developments have more units (Popkin et al., 2000).

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popular images of public housing are of an embattled war zone (Garbarino, Kostenlmy, & Durbrow, 1993). As early as 1958, the journalist Harrison Salisbury described New York's public housing as "human catchpools . . . that breed social ills" (Williams & Kornblum, 1994). In a 12-part series, the *Chicago Tribune* (December 1986) called its city's public housing "The Chicago Wall . . . a physical barrier of brick and steel and concrete that separates black from white, rich from poor, hope from despair" (p. 1); and the Public Broadcasting System's documentary about life in the largest CHA development, Robert Taylor Homes, *A Crisis on Federal Street* (aired January 6, 1989, in Chicago), depicted residents as both helpless and predatory, and their housing environment as irreparable. With increasing frequency, the media have supported the call for dismantling public housing.

Social science research focused on residents' experiences of public housing also tends to be unfavorable and most often concentrates on big-city high-rise developments. In William Moore, Jr.'s (1969), observations of life in a midwestern high rise project, he described a "vertical ghetto," where residents were "living on segregated 'islands of poverty.'" In his study of the Pruitt Igoe high-rise project in Saint Louis, Lee Rainwater (1970) called these towers "federal slums" and described "fractured social relations and pervasive fear of physical and emotional violence." Often cited studies of life in public housing depict residents as on the defensive, attempting to protect themselves from surrounding and increasingly internal human and physical threats (Newman, 1972; Popkin et al., 2000; Rainwater, 1970). More generally, social scientists typically characterize low-income people as helpless and apathetic victims of despair (reviewed in Kieffer, 1984; Naples, 1988; also see Rappaport, 1981). Although scholars refrain from "blaming the victim," they portray an oppressed, alienated, passive, and powerless resident population victimized by stigmatization, poverty, and racism.

In Devereaux Bowley's (1978) history of Chicago public housing, he criticizes the "paternalistic philosophy" of both social reformers and public officials toward the poor, in particular those living in public housing, noting:

The residents were treated like children, and the tragedy is that for some it was the self-fulfilling prophecy – they acted like children and were satisfied to have public housing and welfare policies control their lives. Public housing thus tended to perpetuate a permanent class of dependent people, unable to fend for themselves. (p. 224)

It is presumed that low-income people, and especially public housing residents, are incapable of forming and participating in active, productive community (Venkatesh, 2000).

Our research at Wentworth Gardens does not support these blanket generalizations about public housing residents or their experiences; nor does the research documenting the struggles of low-income women who

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have historically fought, and continue to fight, for safe and decent shelter and adequate services (see also Birch, 1978; Keys 1991; Lawson & Barton 1980; Leavitt & Saegert, 1990; Weisman, 1992; Wekerle, 1980). The sparse current research focused specifically on public housing residents' activism illustrates an alternative portrayal: Patricia O' Brien (1995) analyzed the persistent and energetic abilities of a dozen African-American women to manage their public housing development in Kansas; Myrna Brietbart and Ellen Pader (1995) described the prominent role Boston public housing's women residents played in the redevelopment of Columbia Point into the mixed-income Harbor Point development; and Jacqueline Leavitt (1993) documented women public housing residents' successful efforts in Los Angeles to provide their youth with a sorely needed playground. Other current research on public housing (Popkin et al., 2000; Venkatesh, 2000), although focused on other issues, similarly has noted the role women residents play in working to improve their developments. Even with these inquiries, public housing women residents' efforts remain largely invisible.

Feminist social science and empowerment scholars are challenging the invisibility of low-income women's grassroots struggles by broadening the standard conceptualization of politics. Patricia Hill Collins (1991) speaks about some of the problems with conventional researchers' portrayal of the political process, especially for African-American women:

Social science research has ignored Black women's actions in both the struggle for group survival and institutional transformation. . . . White male conceptualizations of the political process produce definitions of power, activism, and resistance that fail to capture the meaning of these concepts in Black women's lives. (p. 141)

Traditional research and dominant cultural portrayals of politics focus on the public, official actors and workings of government, not only ignoring, but devaluing, community-based struggles of people to gain control over their lives: struggles in which women traditionally have played major roles. In contrast, feminist scholarship elaborates upon the ways in which people's race, class, and gender account both for their community-based needs and also for the nature of their involvement in grassroots politics (cf. Bookman & Morgen, 1988; Feldman & Stall, 1994; Gittel, Ortega-Bustamante, & Steffy, 1999; Haywoode, 1991; Leavitt & Saegert, 1990; Naples, 1998a, 1998b; Stall & Stoecker, 1998; West & Blumberg, 1990). Feminist researchers recognize that poor and working-class women, and in particular women of color, cannot rely on culturally normative routes of electoral politics nor financial resources to work in their best interests; rather, they gain their power from the bottom up, through involvement in collective grassroots activism. In low-income and working-class neighborhoods women generally, although not exclusively, have struggled for better schools, improved housing conditions, and safer communities

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and have challenged urban renewal and downtown growth priorities to save and renew their deteriorating neighborhoods (cf. Gittell et al., 1999; Naples, 1998a). Similarly, in public housing developments across the country, women residents have constituted the overwhelming majority of grassroots activists, organizing for improved building and site conditions, social and youth services, employment opportunities, and the very survival of their developments.

Homeplace as a Site of Resistance

Despite the increased attention by feminist scholars to the political dimensions of grassroots activism, the physical settings in which, and often over which, power struggles are manifest are largely overlooked (Feldman & Stall, 1994). Grassroots activism is implicitly place-bound: That is, the networks of relationships and the activism that they support are located in and may involve conflict over places. Sheila Radford-Hill in *Further to Fly: Black Women and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000) argues for an “applied feminism” that both explicates, appreciates, and supports the community-building processes of low-income women and “affirms and reclaims communities as actual spaces or locations where groups of people build reservoirs of activism and love” (p. xvi). As Radford-Hill does, we propose that the foundation of grassroots activism in low-income communities not only is substantially locally based, but often is intimately connected to ongoing struggles for rights to and control over spatial resources to sustain these communities. At Wentworth Gardens, the struggles for spatial resources that house and support everyday life – from the spaces to house needed services and programs in their community, and more generally to the buildings and grounds of their development – have been central to the residents’ community activism.

The starting point for our analysis is the work of bell hooks (1990) and her conceptualization of the role of the “homeplace” in the expression of both power and resistance in African-Americans’ lives. In her chapter, “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” hooks proposed that historically, African-Americans’ struggles to make and sustain a homeplace and community provided more than a domestic service or the necessities for everyday survival; it also had a “subversive value” as a source of resistance. She observed:

Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however, fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one’s homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where

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we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. (p. 42)

Their dwelling, no matter how simple, was typically the only physical setting that African-Americans could, with some reliability, call their own (also see Rainwater, 1966). Yet, hooks also recognizes the central importance of the experiences of "at-homeness." Her descriptions of the "feeling of safety," "of homecoming" (p. 41) upon arrival at one's home, and of black women's central responsibility in constructing "domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance" (p. 42) are indicators of experiences that are central to conceptualizations of at-homeness (Buttimer, 1980; Cooper, 1974; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Relph, 1976; Seamon, 1979; Tuan, 1977). hooks, however, views these experiences not as ends in and of themselves, but rather as central to conceptualizing homeplace as political – the construction of a safe, nurturing place "where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness" (hooks citing Thich Nhat Hahn, p. 43) in "the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination" (p. 42).

In *The Dignity of Resistance* we illustrate the importance of considering the homeplaces in which, and over which, everyday power struggles to maintain households and communities are manifest. We explain that public housing residents' struggles for the material and spatial resources of their homeplace are a critical source of resistance in their lives. Furthermore, we introduce the concept of *space appropriation* in our theoretical analysis of resistance to elevate the importance of individuals' and groups' creation, choice, possession, modification, enhancement of, care for, and/or simply intentional use of space in grassroots activism.

Our conceptualization of the role of space appropriation in the expression of everyday resistance is grounded in the well known work of Foucault (1979). He proposed that cultural discourses about power are transformed into actual power relations in bounded space and architectural forms. Manzo and Wolfe (1990), in interpreting Foucault's work, proposed that places are not only the site of power, of the assertion of dominance; they are also the site of resistance: "[A]s power reveals itself it creates the possibility of resistance" (Manzo & Wolfe, 1990, p. 4). They extend Foucault's theories to interpret the ways in which places reflect both "the desires of some groups of people to reproduce the social order in which they are dominant" and "the attempts by those without such power to resist and survive in a way that is meaningful in their lives" (Wolfe, 1990, p. 3).

Wentworth Gardens activists' efforts, as do other women's grassroots organizing actions, problematize the conventionally defined distinction between public and private life. American culture has been conceptualized as separate public and private spheres that split the "public" formal

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economic and government work done by men and sited in urban public space, from the “private” work done by women and housed in the home and neighborhood (Saegert, 1989; Tilly & Scott, 1978).³ Women of color and low income women, however, have expanded the boundaries of caring for families beyond the private household into the expanded public sphere as they raised and nurtured children in extended family networks within communities struggling for survival (Collins, 1991; Stack, 1974). Through their grassroots organizing, they similarly have extended “the boundaries of the household to include the neighborhood,” ultimately to “dissolve the boundaries between public and private life, between household and civil society” (Haywoode, 1991, p. 175).

Women resident activists are industrious individuals who initiate collective actions to create and sustain their community and homeplace and to engender efforts to redress social and economic inequalities and injustices. In our research analyses we have identified two modes of Wentworth women resident activists’ resistance: their ongoing efforts of *everyday resistance* in the expanded private sphere and the extension of their efforts into *transgressive resistance* in the public sphere.

Engaging in everyday resistance, Wentworth resident activists have organized and participated in grassroots efforts to protect their community against the deterioration of the physical environment and social services necessary for everyday life. These women have drawn upon critical skills and strategies that they have cultivated through the everyday routine activities of maintaining their households and communities, that is, activities necessary to the “‘social reproduction’ of individual households as well as the social arrangements they make to protect, enhance, and preserve the cultural experiences of all members of the community” (Feldman & Stall, 1994, p. 192; see also Morgen & Bookman, 1988; Naples, 1988; Stall, 1991; Stoecker, 1992).⁴ The importance of women’s social reproduction work inside the home has been empirically documented and argued to be “a source of struggle and social change” (DeVault, 1991; Luxton, 1980; Hartmann, 1981); however, only recently has women’s social reproduction labor in the community been recognized as a type of political organizing and resistance (Morgan & Bookman, 1988; Haywoode, 1991).

³ The dominant ideal of family life in the mid-19th century, the “cult of domesticity,” idealized and confined women’s activities to the domestic private sphere. It sought to “protect” women and children from the corrupting influences and unsafe conditions of the public sphere by containing them in a safe, private haven (Cott, 1977). It is noteworthy, however, that African-American, Latina, and Asian-American women were excluded from the dominant ideal of the family and rather were treated as units of labor (Glenn et al., 1994).

⁴ Social reproduction is a concept that was developed by feminists as a critique of Marxist theory’s neglect to elaborate upon the notion of social-reproductive activities in the reproduction of labor power and its role in effecting historic change (Brenner & Laslett, 1986; Harding, 1981). Social-reproduction activities include the care of children, housework, the maintenance of physical and mental health, cooking, personal services, and education.