

**The impact of housing on the lives
of women and children - post
domestic violence crisis
accommodation:**

**A study undertaken by the NSW Women
Refuge Movement and the UWS Urban
Research Centre**

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Executive Summary

“I think the main issue is when a woman is in domestic violence she thinks ‘where am I going to go’ and if she’s got a house or like affordable housing like somewhere to go to when she escapes. For me..., this housing provided for me... it did so much for my wellbeing –I enrolled in TAFE... I am moving on with my life. I feel like I achieved something. If I didn’t have this housing probably..., I would go on the other side and get depressed and isolate myself. I wouldn’t be able to meet people and wouldn’t even want to go... and that would then have an effect on my children and all... I think that’s so significant like housing and wellbeing –I think it is the most important thing”

Interviewee 1

This study is based on interviews with 12 women who had exited a women’s refuge 6 months or more prior to the interviews. The twelve women ranged in age from 27 to 63 the most predominant age group was that of women in their 30’s, the women had 40 children between them.

This research aimed to identify in general the impacts of housing on women and their children who experience domestic and family violence. The study investigated the quality and timeliness of appropriate housing provision and its link to women and children’s wellbeing.

In general this study shows that housing for women and children who experience domestic and family violence deteriorated significantly. The key concerns were the affordability, length of stay, the physical condition of the housing, the neighbourhood, safety and the availability of maintenance. In some situations the poor condition of the housing put them in a compromising situation with DoCS in terms of the environment they were able to offer their children. Most of the participants who experienced difficulties reported that they were scared to complain or felt that they did not have the right to ask for anything better.

The interviews revealed the lengthy and fragmented processes the women experienced when attempting to obtain safe, secure and affordable housing. The processes involved moving between various types of accommodation that lacked security of tenure and/or failed to provide a sense of safety. The lack of stability generated through constantly ‘moving places’ directly impacted on the women’s ability to attain a life free from violence.

Throughout the interviews it was evident that the safety and wellbeing of the children was a paramount concern for the women. The concerns ranged from ongoing fears for the safety of children in relation to the perpetrator, safety concerns for the children in relation to the neighbourhood, the impact of housing on the children’s health and schooling.

In addition to these concerns several participants identified issues with child protection authorities. The findings from this study demonstrate how the interface between domestic violence and child protection responses can impact on housing. In some instances the initial child protection response was the direct cause of long-term homelessness.

Many of the women interviewed who accessed or attempted to access more affordable housing identified numerous barriers with administrative and bureaucratic processes that were complex, confusing and difficult to comply with. In a number of instances women had to stay on waiting lists for years because policies in relation to women and children experiencing domestic and family violence were not empathetic or consistently applied.

The women in this study had to navigate a range of complex service systems in an attempt to secure both, their own and their children's safety. In this process the role of support from various networks was a vital component. The women emphasised that the support refuges had provided significantly exceeded any of their original expectations. A majority of the participants in the study continued to seek support from the refuge long after they had left the accommodation of the service. The lack of integration between agencies, however, continued to threaten the women and children's pathways away from the perpetrator and the violence. The continuum of service provided by the refuges was pivotal in advocating, facilitating and coordinating other agencies support to the women and children.

In some cases the barriers to affordable and stable housing forced women to accept help from the violent ex-partner who was offering money or assistance in signing leases. As a result women and children experienced further violence and other abuse.

Over the past 12 to 18 months both the Commonwealth and the NSW Government have announced several policy initiatives and reform packages that have the potential to improve both the housing and non-shelter outcomes of women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence and subsequent homelessness

Domestic and family violence remains the primary cause for women and children accessing specialist homelessness services in NSW and nationally. The Commonwealth Government released the Homelessness White Paper: *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness* in December 2008. The White Paper identified the need to expand programs that allow women and children to remain in the home once the perpetrator is removed. The NSW Women's Refuge Movement strongly supports this expansion. However, the White Paper acknowledged that this will not be a viable option for all women and children, hence there must also be a focus on transitioning women and children quickly out of women's refuges into safe and secure long term housing (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, pp.33-4). One of the White Paper's interim targets for 2013 was a 20 per cent increase in the number of families that have experienced domestic and family violence who maintain or secure safe and sustainable housing (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p.18). In order to achieve this target it is recommended that a percentage of social and affordable housing stock be specifically allocated to women and children who are homeless because of domestic violence and family violence.

Current policy initiatives also offer an opportunity to address the support needs of children. As the White Paper notes the costs for not assisting children who access specialist homeless services, including women's refuges, is estimated to be \$1 billion per year, given the 22% increase in the number of homeless children since 2001 these costs look likely to increase significantly over time if their needs are not met (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p.10) In order to ensure that the needs of homeless children are better met it is recommended that brokerage funds be made available to women's refuges through the current policy initiatives.

A number of studies on feminist theory have explored the concept of home for vulnerable women, including women who have experienced domestic and family violence (Watson and Austerberry 1986; Boydell, Goering et al. 2000; Rollins, Saris et al. 2001; Owens 2003; Parker and Fopp 2004; Leith 2006). These explorations have noted that the voices of women and vulnerable people are not often taken into consideration for policy making and provision of services. This disconnection represents a challenge for providing vulnerable people with housing that contributes to their wellbeing.

The release of this study is timely as it provides policy makers with a richer understanding through the voices of women, of the critical importance of appropriate housing in improving the safety and wellbeing of women and children in NSW who experience homelessness as a result of domestic and family violence. The study provides some clear indications on what parts of the service system should be improved to reduce the level of homelessness caused by domestic and family violence, a task which both the Commonwealth and NSW Governments have committed themselves to addressing.

1. Introduction

This study explored the links between housing provision and the wellbeing of women and children who had previously accessed crisis accommodation through women's refuges due to their experiences of domestic and family violence. The literature on women and domestic violence identifies secure and stable housing as a major contributor to women's wellbeing (Parker and Fopp 2004; Phibbs and Young 2005). More generally, housing is said to play a central role in everyday life; it is fundamental to the development of a sense of control over circumstances, social identity and social status (Dunn and Hayes 2000). One of the aims of the study was to identify the quality of housing provision for women who experienced domestic or family violence and to test the impact of housing and outcomes and women and children's wellbeing.

This study analyses the issue of housing in the context of women who have experienced domestic violence in NSW who have support and accommodation provided by women's refuges.

The specific research questions were:

- How does the provision of housing influence the lives of women and their children exiting refuges?
- Which aspects of housing provision contribute to and/or detract from the wellbeing of women and children exiting refuges?

The research design involved a qualitative case study in which the process of women and their children moving from refuges to long term housing was examined. The method of collection was in-depth interviews, which focused specifically on the women's housing experiences following refuge accommodation. The interviews did not ask about the domestic violence experiences per se.

The NSW Women's Refuge Movement Resource Centre is the central contact for the Women's Refuge Movement (WRM). The WRM is a network of women's refuges located across New South Wales. The purposes of refuges are to provide support and accommodation for women and children experiencing domestic violence. The WRM was created in the early 1970s following the establishment of the first Women's refuge in Australia. This organisation has contributed to changing the life of many women and their children through consistent and quality support to women and significant levels of advocacy work at government and interagency levels. They also provide advice and influence policy and legislation (www.wrrc.org.au). Throughout years of work with and for women and children experiencing domestic violence, the WRM has identified a series of issues that need further research and analysis. This study covers such an issue.

This study gathers first hand empirical information about the outcomes for women and children who have been previously accommodated in women's refuges. The study complements the existing quantitative data on the issue (such as NDCA reports on Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) statistics). It is hoped that this study will benefit policy makers and program development by providing a source of new empirical knowledge.

2. Literature Review

Recent research provides a variety of useful material about the current Australian housing crisis, with problematic issues such as housing affordability, the complexity of the rental market and homelessness (see, for example, Milligan and Yates et al., 2007). Those most affected by this housing crisis are the poor, vulnerable, and disadvantaged, among them, women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence. Women and children's vulnerability to homelessness due to domestic and family violence has consistently been highlighted by Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, (SAAP) data. International studies have also found that domestic violence is one, if not the main cause of homelessness (Watson and Austerberry 1986; Metraux and Culhane 1999; Rollins, Saris et al. 2001; Baker, Cook et al. 2003; Strand-Huntchinson and Weeks 2004; Auh, Cook et al. 2006)

In NSW, during 2006/07 SAAP supported 31850 clients of which 59% were female. Additionally SAAP provided support to 16900 accompanying children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2008, p.5 & p.9). The most common reason for accessing SAAP services was domestic violence and family violence (AIHW, 2008, p.16). The data are even more pronounced when examining the main reason for women seeking SAAP services, with 55% of women with children and 40% of women alone over 25, identifying domestic and family violence as their main reason for seeking assistance (AIHW, 2008, p.19). Indigenous Australians are over-represented in the client population of SAAP, accounting for 18% of SAAP clients. One in 14 Indigenous women access SAAP (AIHW, 2009, pp.5-6). The proportion is significantly higher for younger Indigenous women with 1 in 8, 20 – 24 year olds and 1 in 9, 25-34 year olds becoming SAAP clients (AIHW, 2009, p.6). Thirty eight per cent of SAAP support periods to Indigenous clients were provided by agencies targeting women and children escaping domestic or family violence (AIHW, 2009, p. 15). For 38% of Indigenous women the main reason for seeking assistance was domestic and family violence (AIHW, 2009, p.17).

Despite such a large percentage of SAAP clients seeking assistance due to domestic and family violence, turn-away figures for SAAP services indicate that 1 in every 2 women and children making new requests for accommodation at SAAP agencies targeting women and children escaping domestic and family violence were turned away (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008a, p.58). The level of unmet demand for women's refuges is exacerbated by women and children's lack of safe and affordable long term housing options (Tually, Faulkner, 2008, pp. 43-45). Literature highlights that the demand for SAAP and other accommodation and support could be greater than demand figures suggest as many women seek other means for refuge from domestic and family violence (Tually, Faulkner et al., 2008, p.14).

A robust body of literature has explored the link between domestic violence and homelessness from different perspectives. A number of academic studies, agency and government reports have explored the avenues in alleviating the problem of homelessness for women (Neil and Fobb 1994; Nunan and Johns 1996; Bartholomew 1999; Metraux and Culhane 1999; Rollins, Saris et al. 2001; Baker, Cook et al. 2003; Owens 2003; Tually, Faulkner et al, 2008). There is no singular pathway to homelessness for women who experience domestic and family violence. Broadly, however the literature recognises that it is safety concerns the primarily drive most women and children into homelessness (Tually, Faulkner, 2008, p.16). Many of the women reach a crisis point where her fear for their or their children's safety necessitates them leaving (Tually, Faulkner, 2008, p.16). Two of the key

critical determinants for women and children's homelessness as a result of violence are a lack of independent income and poverty (Tually, Faulkner, 2008, p.17).

Avenues to address homelessness for vulnerable women

One comprehensive report in Australia, 'Home Safe Home' (Chung, Kennedy et al. 2000) discusses the inefficiencies and limitations of the housing schemes in Australia to cater especially for women escaping violence. The study highlights that domestic violence is not dealt with adequately mainly because of social prejudice and lack of a strong legal framework to prosecute the perpetrators (Chung, Kennedy et al. 2000). The issue becomes a structural problem that affects the society at large (Chung, Kennedy et al. 2000). However, apart from the report 'Staying at home leaving Violence' (Edwards 2004) there is little empirical data that illustrates elements and processes that make housing sustainable, appropriate, safe and permanent, and housing that improves the quality of life of battered women and their children. There is a lack of qualitative data that reports the perceptions of women on housing issues and homelessness which could contribute to the academic debate, service design and policy making (Bartholomew 1999; Boydell, Goering et al. 2000; Rollins, Saris et al. 2001; Parker and Fopp 2004; Brown 2005).

The Commonwealth's White Paper on homelessness identifies two main specific responses to homelessness caused by domestic and family violence, in addition to the Government's long term objective of reducing domestic and family violence through the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, pp.33-34). The two main responses identified were an expansion of Staying Home Leaving Violence type models and the continuation of crisis accommodation models (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p.34). The NSW Government is currently in the process of rolling out a further 16 SHLV programs across the state (NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2008, p.23). SHLV programs offer many benefits to women such as "stability of accommodation; stability and security for the children: women are able to continue on with their lives, with less disruption; a sense that justice has prevailed – the innocent party has been able to remain in her home and the guilty party has had to leave; and a possible shift in power relations between the victim and the perpetrator.." (Edwards, 2004, p.36). Such models must be about providing choice for women (Tually, Faulkner, 2008, p.37). SHLV models are an important component to addressing homelessness caused by domestic and family violence and improving the safety, wellbeing and housing outcomes of women, however these type of "models do not suit all women, and do not purport to do so" (Tually, Faulkner, 2008, p.37). This was well articulated by a research participant, Rose in Robyn Edwards report:

"As long as he was aware of where I was living I never would've been safe...I'll be dead by the time the Police arrive"

(Cited in Edwards, 2004, p.47)

Other reasons for wanting to leave the home, aside from safety, cited by participants in the Edwards research included a need to leave the memories of the abuse and violence and a desire to develop their own independence (2004, p.47). However, as Edwards (2004) notes, leaving the home to escape violence does not always mean that women are safer in the long term. SHLV models also should be supported with the capacity to provide rent and mortgage assistance (Tually, Faulkner et al. 2008, p.40).

The role and functions of refuges have diversified significantly over time (Tually, Faulkner, 2008, p.44; Edwards, 2004, p. 11). Refuges now provide a range of services such as safety planning, support groups for women, children's services, advocacy and transitional accommodation and these services are offered to accommodated clients and non-accommodated clients (Tually, Faulkner et al, 2008, p.44; Edwards, 2004, p.11).

Participants in the Edwards study who access the services of women's refuges had reflected on the "life saving and nurturing approach" of women's refuges (2007, p. 47). These findings are also supported by research that examined the cost effectiveness of SAAP services in Western Australia (Flatau, Zaretsky et. al 2008). This report found that 87% of participants who had accessed SAAP DV and single women's services had improved feelings of safety (Flatau, Zaretsky et. al, 2008, p. 65). A further 97% of participants identified that the assistance provided by SAAP DV and single women's services had been 'very important' (Flatau, Zaretsky, 2008, p.67).

The above mention report also highlighted that the experience of homelessness and care for children was also of significant concern to women who participated in the research (Flatau, Zaretsky, et al., 2008, p.5). Three of the participants had noted that lack of access to housing had resulted in them having to 'give up their children' or 'put them into care'; such outcomes had a destructive effect on the women and children's lives (Flatau, Zaretsky, et al., 2008, p.5). Consultations from women who had accessed the services from two Sydney women's refuges undertaken during the development of the Homelessness Strategic Framework also highlighted the interface between domestic and family violence, child protection and homelessness (Housing NSW, 2008, Appendix 8). Participants in these consultations reported that child protection authorities threatened to remove children because of the domestic and family violence, this in turn resulted in homelessness, followed by further threats to remove the children due to the experience of homelessness (Housing NSW, 2008, appendix 8). Also of significant concern to these women was the impact of homelessness on their children's schooling (Housing NSW, 2008, appendix 8). The Wood Commission of Inquiry into child protection services also reported that DoCS's responses to homelessness and domestic violence tend to be incident based and not holistic (Wood, 2008, p.339). The Final Report of the Wood Commission of Inquiry into child protection services also highlighted the need for appropriate housing:

Affordable, accessible and liveable housing is essential for families, particularly women and children escaping violence. Its provision is a necessary component of a universal response to supporting families and in ensuring child safety.

(Wood, 2008, p.259, [7.290])

A common finding in research on housing provision for vulnerable people and homelessness is the fact that most support services—especially the formal ones—are insufficient to meet the high demand they continuously face (Baker, Cook et al. 2003; Owens 2003; Edwards 2004; Parker and Fopp 2004). Owens (2003) suggested that informal support networks were more vital to women than more formal ones. At the same time, government and agency reports highlight the importance of generating a more integrative policy and service provision. It is considered that services generally are too fragmented and lacking co-ordination (Chung, Kennedy et al. 2000; Brown 2005; HomelessnessNSW.ACT, NSW Women's Refuge Movement et al. 2006, Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). The success of services such as women's refuges is also dependent on the provision of appropriate long term exit points. Currently a sufficient level does not exist (Tually,

Faulkner, 2008, p.54). An increased number of exit points across tenures, particularly social housing and affordable private rental is required (Tually, Faulkner, 2008, p.54). It has also been reported that women's access to social housing is also being obstructed by lengthy application requirements and restrictive criteria. The Wood Commission of Inquiry cited a case where

a young mother with four young children who was moving between motel rooms and refuges was told she needed proof that she had unsuccessfully applied for private rental ten times before she would be considered eligible for priority housing.
(Wood, 2008, p.258 [7.288])

Most of the literature on women, housing and homelessness has emphasised the need to provide better services through processes that are more efficient and minimise the distress of the women affected. The literature has also claimed that appropriate housing that ensures safety, flexibility, stability, and satisfaction to women and children needs to be urgently provided (Bartholomew 1999; Chung, Kennedy et al. 2000; Baker, Cook et al. 2003; Owens 2003; Parker and Fopp 2004).

However, these studies do not provide a lot of detail about the factors that make housing safe, stable, flexible, appropriate and contribute to the wellbeing of women and children. This research aims to investigate in general the importance of housing to women and their children from the perspective of the women.

In the case of women who have experienced domestic and family violence, the literature often describes their homelessness in terms of 'secondary homelessness' according to Chamberlain and MacKenzie's definition. Furthermore, Nunan and Johns (1996) expanded on the definition by developing the idea of 'housed homelessness' where "violence against women in the home denies them [women and children] their security and safety and destroys foundations of their identity" (Chung et al 2000, p.18, cited in Tually, Faulkner, 2008, p.16). Violence against women in their home denies them the possibility to find a safe place, negating their feelings of control, sense of belonging, and sense of security and undermining the foundation of their personal identity (Nunan and Johns 1996). Whilst also limiting many women's social and economic participation and connections with family, friends and community (Tually, Faulkner, 2008, p.16).

A number of studies on feminist theory have explored the concept of home for vulnerable women, including women who have experienced domestic and family violence (Watson and Austerberry 1986; Boydell, Goering et al. 2000; Rollins, Saris et al. 2001; Owens 2003; Parker and Fopp 2004; Leith 2006). These explorations have noted that the voices of women and those advocating on their behalf are often not taken into consideration by policy makers and hence not reflected in the provision of services. That disconnection represents a challenge for providing vulnerable people with housing that contributes to their wellbeing. In the case of women who experience domestic and family violence, their perceptions need to be explored in order to understand whether the housing outcomes they experience contribute to their sense of belonging, safety and sense of home.

Some studies have explored factors that determine satisfaction with neighbourhoods and housing (Rollins, Saris et al. 2001; Phibbs and Young 2005). These studies also acknowledge that this area needs more investigation, especially in regards to low- income and vulnerable people. Research on housing from the perspective of health, psychology and environment and behaviour studies have explored the links between housing and people's wellbeing. Research on non-shelter outcomes of housing mainly developed by AHURI establishes these links. For instance Phibbs and Young (2005)

note that there are direct links between housing quality and positive health and educational outcomes. Their research has focused on low-income households and the ways housing contributes to improving their standards of living.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the background presented above shows that despite the fact that the issue of housing is considered vital in terms of homelessness, welfare, policy making and wellbeing of women living with or escaping domestic violence, little has been researched about the in-depth characterisation of housing and the impact it has on women and children's wellbeing. A number of authors had mentioned that the most important characteristics that need to be ensured for vulnerable women through housing include, but are not limited to, safety; stability; affordability; ownership and appropriate condition and maintenance; proximity to urban resources such as employment, schools, medical facilities, recreation and shopping; and maintaining links with family and friends (Nunan and Johns 1996; Metraux and Culhane 1999; Rollins, Saris et al. 2001; Owens 2003; Edwards 2004; Parker and Fopp 2004; Phibbs and Young 2005; Decker, Cary et al. 2006). However, the actual empirical studies that explore such claims specifically in the case of the needs and perceptions of housing from the perspective of women who have experienced violence are minimal. This is the gap in the literature that this study seeks to address in New South Wales.

3. Current Policy Context

Over the past 12 to 18 months both the Commonwealth and the NSW Governments have announced several policy initiatives and reform packages that have the potential to improve both the housing and non-shelter outcomes of women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence and subsequent homelessness. The Commonwealth Government released the Homelessness White Paper: *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness* in December 2008. The White Paper identified the need to expand programs that allow women and children to remain in the home once the perpetrator is removed, whilst noting that this will not be an option for all women and children (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, pp.33-4). Furthermore such models require an integrated service, which is not currently occurring (NSW WRM WP Inc, 2008). Hence there must also be a focus on transitioning women and children quickly out of women's refuges into safe and secure long term housing (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, pp.33-4). One of the White Paper's interim targets for 2013 was a 20 per cent increase in the number of families that have experienced domestic and family violence who maintain or secure safe and sustainable housing (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p.18).

There are numerous policy initiatives currently in the late stage of development that have the potential to assist the Commonwealth, the States/Territories and service providers to reach the interim targets set out in the White Paper for women and children experiencing homelessness as a result of domestic and family violence. Broadly these include:

- The National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA)
- The Homelessness National Partnership Agreement
- The National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children
- The NSW Strategic Homelessness Framework
- The NSW Domestic and Family Violence Framework
- The National Child Protection Framework
- The NSW Government's response to the Wood Commission of Inquiry into Child Protective Services
- The Social Housing National Partnership
- Community Housing Regulations
- NSW SAAP Performance Monitoring Framework

It is difficult to assess at this stage how successful these initiatives will be at meeting the needs of women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence. It is critical that these policy and program initiatives are coordinated to maximise effectiveness and efficiency in responding to the needs of women and children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness due to domestic and family violence.

These policy initiatives represent an opportunity to drive action to address the key learning from this report and to improve the housing and other outcomes women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence.

4. Methodology

This qualitative study investigates the experiences of women going through the process of leaving a violent relationship and changing their family life, as well as the impact of housing on such processes. The sample included twelve women who had exited a refuge more than 6 months prior to the interview. The selection process involved inviting women to participate, with the co-operation of a number of refuges. This invitation was made directly by the women's refuge staff, not by the researchers.

A consent form and an information sheet was developed describing the purpose of the study and what the study involved. The information sheet, in a question and answer format, outlined responses to possible concerns the interviewees may have in relation to their participation in the study and indicated that an interviewee could withdraw from the study at any time.

The interviews were planned as semi-structured, in-depth interviews intended to last between 45-60 minutes. Each interview took a minimum of 45 minutes and some ranged to 1½ hours and all were transcribed. In-depth interviews allow exploration of issues in a holistic manner and help to incorporate relevant categories of analysis only identified by the participants of the study.

Aims and objectives:

The specific research questions for the project were:

- How does the provision of housing influence the lives of women and their children exiting refuges?
- Which aspects of housing provision contribute to and/or detract from the wellbeing of women and children exiting refuges?

In addition, this study aimed to identify the ways in which housing provision may or may not contribute to women's overall wellbeing and it sought to:

- track the interactions of women with the housing market;
- record their satisfaction levels with their housing;
- assess the impact of the housing on their children (from the women's perspective);
- assess the housing aspirations of the women; and
- collect some basic and general information about the household.

Sampling

The NSW Women's Refuge Movement Resource Centre (WRMRC) contacted a number of individual women's refuges in an attempt to sample a mix of women to participate in the study from metropolitan and rural areas, requesting they identify women to invite to participate. Refuge staff explained the project to potential participants and sent information sheet to those who were interested. The women who decided to participate contacted the refuge and made arrangements for the interview with the interviewer.

Five refuges assisted the project. Half of the interviewees (6) were from the following metropolitan areas: northern beaches area of Sydney; inner west Sydney; south-west of Sydney; and the Sutherland Shire. The remainder of the interviewees were from rural (south-west) NSW.

Data collection and analysis

The method of data collection was in-depth interviews structured within five main points:-

1. basic description of the household and the dwelling;
2. previous interactions of the women with the housing market;
3. levels of satisfaction with housing,
4. impacts of housing on their children (from the women's perspective) and;
5. the housing aspirations of women.

In this way interviews aimed to address factual data or descriptions and information about the past and present housing and their experiences, and thoughts about their future in terms of access to housing. These themes were outlined in an interview guide.

The interviews were conducted in the refuge in which the interviewee had previously been a resident with the exception of two participants, as both had found housing in areas not located near the refuge. These two interviews were conducted at the residence of these two participants as this was their preferred location.

All women were informed that a support worker who had worked with them at the refuge could be present during the interview. In all of the interviews conducted at refuges the support workers were present at the beginning of the interview until the woman felt comfortable. For the remainder of the interview staff were a short distance from the interview room in case the interviewee wanted to call them for support or to discuss anything during the interview process.

For those interviews conducted in the interviewee's homes, both refuges checked with the interviewees as to whether the woman felt comfortable that no support worker would be present. In both instances, the interviewee stated to the refuge worker that they did not require their attendance.

Interviewees had a high level of interest in the project which reflected the positive level of backgrounding work undertaken by the Women's Refuge Movement, Resource Centre staff and, equally as important, it also reflects the interest in the project by the individual workers at the five refuges which participated in the project. A number of the interviewees requested a copy of the transcript of their interview, whilst others were happy to receive information about the outcome of the research and others did not want either a copy of their transcript or of the research outcomes.

5. Findings

The twelve interviewees ranged in age from 27 to 63, the most predominant age group was that of women in their 30's. The 12 interviewees had 40 children between them. One Aboriginal woman had had guardianship of 5 of her grandchildren. Four of the interviewees were born overseas and migrated to Australia at various ages and had been in Australia for varied lengths of time.

Two main themes emerged from the study. Firstly, safe, secure and affordable housing in an area of the women's choice was a critical element for the women and their children to transition from domestic and family violence. The location of housing in relation to suitable social and community networks, employment and educational opportunities and other services was vital to the family's recovery from the trauma of violence and future wellbeing.

Secondly, the role of support services was pivotal to a successful transition to safety for the women and their children. The two main themes of housing and support are intrinsically related and both include an array of sub-themes. The findings of this report have been grouped into these two main themes, with an additional section on children and finally the aspirations of the women.

5.1 Leaving the violence: the role of housing

"Sometimes it is only one year [community housing lease] because my lease was for one year first but they extended it for another year because I was studying...but ideally it would be like... it may sound... but... five years for a family – because five years would give you time to, like, study or do whatever you want –find a job –establish yourself in a job –and it's a good time for kids if you're there for five years –it's not like moving around it's not like a big 'we have to move again'..."

Interviewee 1

The interviewees had a very wide range of housing outcomes after they had exited the refuges from some being in community housing at a subsidised rent; to those who went to medium-term supported accommodation at a subsidised rent for a limited periods of time; to those who went to subsidised housing through Housing NSW; to those who struggled financially in the private rental market. Some returned to live with the perpetrator because of the lack of housing options. Some women experienced repeat period of homelessness that included, sleeping rough in cars with their children or on family and friends couches. Most of the interviewees experienced a range of the above outcomes and endured periods ranging from months to years of unstable, unaffordable and unsafe housing.

Many of the women experienced lengthy and fragmented processes when leaving the violence and attempting to obtain safe, secure and affordable housing. It often involved moving between various types of accommodation. Often this accommodation failed to provide security of tenure and/or a sense of safety. This lack of stability was detrimental to the women's ability to live a life free from violence. It also created further challenges and made it difficult to address the trauma caused by the violence as can be evidenced by the following quote

“the kids were seeing a counsellor so I kept on top of that but the home thing... it was more the personal stuff that we wanted to try and fix, it wasn't the big picture of the debt it was getting bigger and bigger because of the high rent...”

Interviewee 3

The stress, frustration, emotional and financial burden and health risks the women had experienced was at times so overwhelming that many of the women felt that they had no choice but to return to the perpetrator of the violence.

“So, you know, we had all those dramas [giving birth and community housing burnt down few weeks after] and they said I couldn't walk or do anything for six weeks... so you know most of that time my eldest couldn't go to school... she couldn't go to school because I ... just... didn't... have the manpower to do that...and then... [perpetrator] came... and it was really... I really appreciated him...you know helping out...you know. But then there was that thing and it was like and we ended up in [Suburb name]...”

Interviewee 4

Throughout the interviews women identified many housing related concerns, which were broken into three broad sections for further analysis:

1. Firstly, many of the women identified securing accommodation when leaving refuges as a significant challenge for numerous reasons.
2. The second broad issue of concern to many of the women was the security of tenure, location of the housing, particularly in relation to proximity to children's schools, also the proximity to the perpetrator and the neighbourhood it was located in.
3. The third broad concern for women was the actual condition of the housing.

Securing safe housing after refuge accommodation

As SAAP data indicates many of the women who are supported by women's refuges often have very little income, hence housing options are significantly restricted (Tually, S, Faulkner, D., et al., 2008, p.18). The restriction of housing options due to limited financial resources was evident throughout the interviews as the majority of the participants had expressed a need to access social housing: some had been successful, others had not and had to endure the additional challenges that private rental represents. The lack of financial security and access to affordable housing made the women more vulnerable to continued abuse and exploitation by the perpetrator and others.

Many of the women interviewed who accessed or attempted to access more affordable housing identified numerous barriers with administrative and bureaucratic processes that were complex, confusing and difficult to comply with. In a number of instances the women had to stay on waiting lists for years because policies in relation to women and children experiencing domestic and family violence were not responsive to their needs.

“ Like my mother got sent to a bedsitter in a place at [suburb] and she was told it was for over 55’s. And she’s like, oh my god, she’s got it, she’s got priority housing... There were mental illness patients... going to hospital everyday. There was somebody on ice that was bashing the windows... how they dare put a woman who’s also experienced domestic violence...”

Another woman had applied for priority housing numerous times over 8 years and although the interview clearly identifies that she met all of the criteria for priority housing, the woman had been unsuccessful. She identified the housing officer’s attitude as the main barrier for access, as can demonstrated below

“and I really believe too that when you put in a priority application, because I’ve put in four over the 8 year period –when you put one in it should be looked at by a separate person not the same person...”

Interviewee 3

One woman did not qualify for Housing NSW support as she co-owned her previous home with the perpetrator. This was despite the fact that she and the children could not move back into the house due to safety risks. One woman clearly articulated how she believed this resulted in the continued victimisation of women:

“I mean it’s like they are [women] being punished for what’s happened to them”

Interviewee 5

This situation left many of the women with the only option of applying for private rental accommodation. In the private rental market, women were in a disadvantaged position because of high rents, and experienced various forms of discrimination relation to their income type, parenting status or because of their cultural or ethnic background. The high rents forced some of the women to move to more affordable suburbs, isolating them from their social networks, children’s school and community.

“I looked near {Inner Sydney suburb}, but I can’t find... it’s expensive and sometimes I think... they... they won’t rent to me... because they don’t like children”

Interviewee 6

“I remember one real estate in particular –she actually said to me ‘oh the place is gone’ but I had a white Australian friend in the car with me –it’s actually my aunty and she’s white Australian, so I went back out to my car and I asked her to go in an inquire about the same property. She went in and they scheduled an appointment for her”

Interviewee 4

Many of the women and their children interviewed in this study went on to experience further acts of violence and abuse including sexual assault of children, arson and theft as the following quotes show:

“[after leaving the refuge] My girls were attacked ...[and] I’d had enough, I couldn’t take it no more. Everyone in the town was isolating us, yelling abuse –I even had to have my own aunty

charged... my family who sided with him,[attacker] saying he wouldn't do that to the girls...after two weeks we went back to the refuge"

Interviewee 7

"The fire occurred when she [her youngest child] was about three or four months...I'd taken the children to church...instead of going straight back, I'll drop in and see how my auntie is...about 8 pm I get a phone call from the landlord...and he says: 'your house has been burnt down"

"...the landlord... um... just pretty well went out of her way to make my life a living hell...the landlord had cleared my house out, so then I was left with nothing..."

"it was a horrible neighbourhood, the house [the house assigned to her and her children] has been vacant for that long that when we arrived the neighbours called the cops...Then they were smashing beer bottles on my driveway...And I didn't tell anyone because in my head it was like, be thankful that you have a house..."

Interviewee 4

Another issue that affected the women's sense of security was access to money. As stated above, some ex-partners attempted to exert control over the women by restricting their access to money which in turn resulted in significant levels of debt. In some cases the barriers to affordable and stable housing had forced some of the women to accept help from the violent ex-partner who was offering money or assistance in signing leases. As a result women and children experienced further violence and other abuse. In other situations the ex-partners concealed their incomes so they did not have to pay child maintenance, causing continual financial hardship. In other cases the women had got into debt because they needed to use credit to pay everyday bills such as food and accommodation for themselves and their children once they had left the perpetrator. In two cases the debt was generated due to previous addictions, specifically a gambling and drug addiction.

With constant moving many of the women lost their material possessions and their sense of control, stability and security. Some of the women felt extremely debilitated by the process, and in some cases they went back to the violent relationship.

"they [two older children] were sick of wearing second hand clothes and not being able to go out with their mates... well he [their father] didn't pay any –he never has –actually I've only just started receiving it [back payment]...yeah... he basically bought them –that's why they moved over with him"

Interviewee 3

"I'd come out of a relationship and I was so dependent on my husband for everything...it was such an unhealthy co-dependant relationship..."

"I've had to fall back on my ex constantly and I've really hated that...I resent that he can always use that against me. He always does too –he goes: 'oh whenever you've moved I've always been the one' and it's true"

Interviewee 4

“[housing] it’s a base if you don’t have that everything else can just fall apart because all you think is ...oh... just paying rent and you can’t afford it and lots of women go back to their ex-husband or ex-partner because they can’t afford to live”

Interviewee 1

Housing Location and Security of Tenure

The quality of the house and the neighbourhood were quite important in strengthening the sense of security and safety of the women and children

“probably because of the violence in my life and the thing is like... when you go through that turmoil, that crisis, you really don’t feel safe anywhere, you are always in some sort of... like a paranoid fear that somebody is going... or like ex-husband, going to come and knock on your door or whatever so... this place is so good because I have my neighbours around me like it’s so close and in any case if anything happened you know they would be there and it’s...just that sense that you know. I’m safe, no one can come and the kids are safe as well and...”

Interviewee 1

Being able to establish new routines and maintain important routines like schooling proved remarkably important for the women and children’s wellbeing. However, often women were only able to secure housing for relatively short periods of time. The findings demonstrated how systems that facilitate a sense of security and belonging are of critical importance for women and children’s outcomes.

“yes... we moved a lot in my country and escaped from the trauma in my country you know we had a war in my country. Coming here and settling in this area this is what we know - what is their school - they have friends and I would love to stay in this area just because if we move somewhere else I think I would be lost....”

Interviewee 1

It was evident that the wellbeing of interviewee 1 and her children had been greatly improved due to the security of tenure she had obtained through community housing. A similar situation prevailed for interviewee 2 whose sense of belonging had provided her with a strong sense of achievement:

“I do I do, yeah I’m proud of the fact that I’m set up”

Interviewee 2

Most of the participants, however did not have that security of tenure and the multiple moves had a significant impact on both the women and their children

*so for two months or so and when we were staying at (suburb) I was already looking [for housing]....I was looking **before** we went to (suburb)...um....and I was still and then that thing happened [house was burnt down] and in between dossing around, I couldn’tI really seriously didn’t have*

the energy to constantly look around. Then we got the place at (suburb) so I'm still lookingand it was so difficult explaining it to the children. They were saying 'why are we still looking for a house when we've got a house...we've got a house'. I was, like, 'no baby, we don't – this house isn't ours, right, we're only here for a little short time'.

Interviewee 4

Finally it appears that the greater the distance the women had to move the greater the impact on their lives and their children. It was especially disruptive when the women had to move to areas that did not offer a sense of safety and security.

Housing conditions

In general this study found that the conditions of housing deteriorated significantly for the women and children who had fled the violence for safety. In addition to the issues of affordability and security of tenure was the issue of the physical condition of the housing available and the availability of maintenance. This study found that in public and private rental housing the women had difficulty accessing housing in an adequate condition. Some participants were charged significant amounts of money for repairs. In other situations the poor condition of the housing put them in a compromising situation with DoCS in terms of the environment they were offering their children. Most of the participants who experienced difficulties reported that they were scared to complain or felt that they did not have the right to ask for anything better.

There were maintenance issues for at least half of the participants; the slow or non-existent maintenance responses created a range of financial and personal problems that generated more stress for the women. In a number of Housing NSW properties there were extreme cases of vandalism that made the premises unliveable leading to repeat periods of homelessness. Additionally a number of participants commented on feeling unsafe living in public housing estates due to threatening and unwelcoming behaviours from neighbours.

... And he [neighbour]... how they broke in was through a shotput ball... my house got broken into four times. I reported the security to Department of Housing. They never fixed the security whatsoever.... And the Department of Housing tried to give me a bill for it even though I had the police event number..."

Interviewee 9

Whilst many of the women expressed genuine interest in taking care of the premises to provide a healthy and clean environment for their children in many cases the housing that was available to them was already in bad condition. This made it particularly difficult for them to keep the premises in an acceptable condition.

"I do most of them [repairs] myself... because you wait... and ...uh... I think if they [Housing NSW] did, they wouldn't have so much trouble with the house... it wouldn't cost so much... actually when they had their own maintenance I think it was a lot better but now they have contractors which go onto sub-contractors... they only have one number for you to ring and then you can be on the phone for 45 minutes and then you're on a big long list... I suppose they got a lot of

people, I can understand that...but when you got things happening... you know... you generally want them fixed..."

Interviewee 5

"my grandmother was in that Housing Commission house for thirty... oh thirty years when I moved in with her. She actually moved into that house when my mum was pregnant with me and my mum lived there with Nan... if she wanted something done...she did it herself. Um... I think Housing Commission are on that level they only fix houses up once they leave and I found that is terrible. Vet Affairs did a bit of work on the house because my grandfather fell sick first but he passed ways a year before my grandmother. When my grandfather was sick they put a wheel chair ramp on, handles where they were needed... And it was in a poor state."

Interviewee 12

Overall participants that had accessed community housing reported less difficulties with security and maintenance.

5.2 The steps towards empowerment: the role of support

"...So it would have been the beginning of '96... I was actually living in (town name) at the time, had no support there, I only had my ex-husband and his family who all treated me badly. And I decided to pack the car and come home to (another town) where I'm actually from and ended up at the refuge here..."

"Oh, the refuge staff here are fantastic—they still support me to this day, mainly just someone to talk to, there's always someone here, so if you're feeling down you take a seat with one of the ladies"

Interviewee 12

The women were required to navigate a range of complex service systems to secure both their own and their children's safety. In this process the role of support from various networks was an important component. High levels of support from relatives and friends, the community, the government and other non-government bodies were in many cases important to their success.

The participants emphasised that the work of the refuges had significantly exceeded any of the expectations they had, to the point that the majority of the women remained in contact with the refuges and received further support and some had even worked as volunteers for the refuges. The study found refuges addressed the needs of women and their children by offering a welcoming environment, a holistic response, committed service and advocacy without prejudice or judgement. A number of participants in the study had ongoing housing and support needs after leaving the refuge; the continuum of services offered and provided by refuges was evident throughout the interviews.

Support from family and friends

For some of the women support from friends and family, was pivotal to overcoming homelessness and living a life free from violence. This study showed a direct link between women's lack of

community, family and friends support and their continued vulnerability to violence. Often perpetrators took advantage of this vulnerability to continue to exercise control and power over them.

We stayed with the Salvation Army for three and a half weeks because my father wouldn't allow us into his house, because he didn't want any abusive phone calls"

Interviewee 7

"not many at all. I don't have family as such, I've got some good friends but I don't have any family...I did [grow up here] but I grew up with violence as well, so it was just a continual thing and just the way of life for a long time."

Interviewee 12

I have no family, I have no friend... I have nothing"

Interviewee 6

A number of participants expressed that their own relatives and friends were not in a position to help due to facing violence at home as well, or due to mental health and other issues. These feelings of isolation and loneliness were expressed by several of the women. In these cases the refugees became a point to return to for help and support.

Impact of community supports and attitudes

This study has shown that there is great potential for the development of a strong culture of support in local communities. It can be observed from the study that the women who had achieved relatively secure and safe housing and a stable lifestyle had felt a part of the broader community. Support from neighbours, schools, locally based community organisations, refugees and the like had been extremely beneficial, especially for women who could not count on the aid from relatives and friends.

"... this place is so good because I have my neighbours around me like it's so close –and in my case if anything happened you know they would be there and it's just that sense that, you know I'm safe, no one can come and the kids are safe as well"

Interviewee 1

"they do –the two eldest go to a local school –which before anything and before I left...my ten year old was already at that public school so it wasn't that they have been relocated at all it's umm... he's been at that school since day one. They understood my circumstances and I've always been open with the headmaster so they've been able to cater for his needs. And then when my daughter started school we were actually out- of- zone by then but because the older one was already in the school and, like I said, they knew the circumstances so we were able to stay so I've kept them there. It's a very little school but we've been able to stay"

Interviewee 2

"I had a beautiful landlord...no. Their son actually owned the house but he lives in England and works over there and when he came out to Australia for Christmas, I'd get a phone call: 'can I come

and check the house? I'd go: 'yes, no drama'. You know he put palm trees out the back so there was shade for the kids... everything... he was really nice"

Interviewee 7

Some participants expressed their reticence to talk about their situation, while they acknowledged that it was important to talk about the violence and knew there were others in the community in similar situations. They also pointed out that they had to face prejudice and feelings of guilt and embarrassment while nothing happened to the perpetrators.

"what I learned with the domestic violence thing you have to tell everyone... you have to tell your lawyer, Centrelink... and your life is so exposed to so many people. Then, after a year or something, you just feel like shutting down and no one needs to know any more... it is different when you are talking to service providers because they are there to help you but when you tell others they put their judgement on it and you don't need that you just want to get through these times"

Interviewee 1

"also with my culture when you get married you stay married and...a lot of responsibility is placed on the women even though the men hold the authority and it's women that hold all of it together...because there are many expectations placed on the women –how the man appears how the family appears and everything. If the man hits a woman, well the woman must have done something"

Interviewee 4

Support from community organisations and government

There is a very complex network of government agencies and community organisations playing a role in providing services for women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence. The majority of the participants identified that navigating the system was, and for some continued to be very challenging. This demonstrated the lack of integrated services directly hindered the women's ability to prevent further episodes of homelessness and violence.

The participants had varying degrees of satisfaction with the services they received. Some considered they received helpful and efficient services whereas others considered they did not receive the help they required when they required it.

"I'm paying \$177 now for rent –its community housing, finally after being on the list for eight odd years –eight and a half years..."

Interviewee 3

Generally the interviews revealed that as the service provider became bigger, the participants encountered more bureaucracy and difficulty with accessing the services. Conversely, the smaller organisations (eg. community based organisations) were perceived as providers of better quality and efficient services. Some participants expressed satisfaction with community housing providers.

"...No, there is not [time limit for her lease], because this is what they've called my last home. At the time when I needed to be relocated from the last one that I was at, they pretty much... had accepted that I was now their client and so they housed me and at the time there was nothing that

they had available for me so they... advised me to find somewhere and they would subsidise the rent. So what they've said with this one is basically this is mine unless the owner wants to sell it...

"Yes, its fully through a real estate and everything –the housing associations name is on the lease as the main leaseholder and I'm a sub-leasee."

Interviewee 2

The majority of women acknowledged that some individual staff in larger organisations, such as Centrelink, Housing NSW and DoCS, attempted to assist them but were unable to do so due to the policies they had to comply with.

"Interviewer: [so] you wouldn't be eligible for community housing because of the house you co-own

Yeah but I don't own it. Do you know what I mean? I'd like them to know all the debts we've got and I left the premises because of domestic violence and they should know that I'm frightened to go back to that house"

Interviewee 11

There were other cases, as highlighted previously where staff from such organisations were perceived as unhelpful and judgemental.

"I was just annoyed... he [Housing officer] rang me up and he was all angry and said: ... we're looking after this house [burnt down house] and is there anything there that's of real value and do you really need to go back? And I said: 'of course there is, everything that's in there I worked really hard for so don't touch anything that's there because anything that can be salvaged I'm taking"

Interviewee 4

Services offered by Women's Refuges

Interestingly, the interview schedule did not include questions about the services or experiences of the women's stay in the women's refuges, however 11 of the 12 interviewees reported high levels of satisfaction with the assistance and advocacy provided by women's refuges.

"ob over and above [refuge's level of support], I didn't know what I was expecting or what you know I should have received but the staff here were just amazing ...

Interviewee 2

all these people at [Refuge] has helped me...all they've done...I can't explain to you how much they have helped me...you know when I've been down and out and had absolutely nobody – they've always been there...

Interviewee 4

that the women's refuge has been very supportive over the years and seen me through the times when I needed them the most and putting me in homes and houses and everything – it's been great, you know.

Interviewee 10

In another case the participant had received some level of ongoing support from the refuge for over 20 years.

Interviewer: did you come back to [refuge]?

Interviewer: so, I'm just trying to get an idea of the years that these happened... so 17 years ago there was violence from your daughter's partner and that was the first time here at [refuge] what length of time were you here?

"well I was here for nearly three months"

Interviewee 5

The interviews revealed a significant level of support by the women for the service models developed by women's refuges. Beyond providing accommodation and support, the refuges played important role in empowering women and children.

I mean you go somewhere else in Australia...I mean what they have here, they even get us women into TAFE, we have time out from the kids to do a TAFE course, we go on little excursions, like, one week we'll have playgroup here, next week we'll have our women group, and it just gives us that time to be.....free women..... I think they're very helpful here, and a lot of people don't realise that and there's not really that many organisations that help, that help them, I think.

Interviewee 9

“I think when I got my house [started trusting in the refuge staff] because I was so rapt because [names refuges staff members] they used to drive me around town all the time looking for a house and...”

Interviewee 8

“oh, everything...at the refuge...everything. They give me food, they give me the place where I stay... they give me everything, everything...”

Yes, yes. In this moment...um...there was two women in the staff speak Spanish...they help me a lot for the immigration, because I need the new visa for me.

Interviewee 6

“talking with [refuge staff] was a bit like... I... they expanded my social literacy so much... it was just unbelievable... I grew so much from here...and if I didn't have that behind me... I don't think I would have the strength to look for places... for me it was mainly through talking with [refuge staff] that gave me the confidence to face the world again...”

Interviewee 4

The findings suggest that the services provided by refuges were of great benefit to the women and children. However, the first contact for many of the women was not easy mainly because of their experiences of violence, but also because some had preconceived ideas about the refuges. Then, the learning curve and the improvement in women's perceptions about the refuges were shown to be very positive.

“the first time...we were there for fifteen weeks...and that was really challenging for me...because it was so healthy and normal and there was routine and there was safety...and...but for me it was strange people, a refuge...that's how I, you know... really what they were offering me were safety and routine and something secure for my children and food and all of that. But I saw them as strangers... refuge... you know people who were linked into DOCS people who can take my kids away –that's how I saw them”

“well the minute we arrived [refuge staff member] was... so welcoming and then she showed us to our room and I went to the room and there were towels, like... brand new towels, brand new this, brand new that...there were toiletries, like a little hotel room and there was a play room for the children and I was like ‘oh my goodness this is so different to what I expected’...so immediately I was like ‘anything for my kids as long as we're not in the car’ and then when she showed me there was food...”

Interview 4

5.3 Children, Housing and Domestic and Family Violence

Throughout the interviews it was evident that the safety and wellbeing of the participant's children was a significant concern. The concerns ranged from ongoing fears for the safety of children in relation to the perpetrator, safety concerns for the children in relation the neighbourhood, the impact of housing on the children's health and not having access sufficient support services.

In addition to these concerns several participants indentified issues with child protection authorities. The findings from this study demonstrates how the interface between domestic violence and child protection responses can impact on homelessness, in some instances the child protection response was the direct cause of long term homelessness.

“and then one day DoCS come out and they said : ‘look, we’re thinking about taking your kids’. And I went: ‘What!’ and they said: ‘Well you have got a choice – either be in the refuge on Monday morning or we will come and get your kids’. Well, hell no, I was there at 6.30 in the morning”

Interviewee 8

The DoCS response above demonstrates that child protection responses can be a direct path to homelessness. The interviews also revealed that many of the women and children continued to have ongoing involvement with DoCS as a result of their lack of access to safe and affordable housing.

Interviewee: *and then DOCS had to come to it and I was explaining to DOCS that is so unfair because I’m in the same situation...and then he started with his same old routine again....*

Interviewer: *being violent toward you?*

Interviewee: *yeah.*

Interviewee 4

A number of women expressed how DoCS pressured them, giving deadlines and maintaining a close monitoring of their housing conditions. The majority of the women however acknowledged that DoCS monitoring is necessary for the wellbeing of their children. However the lack of empathy and consistency in approach made them anxious and fearful. In the majority of cases the women were helped by the refuge to access DoCS services and comply with their requirements.

“no, the refuge made me fill in...um... housing... and then I went there and then the refuge took me to [community housing provider]... yeah actually it was quite good because the day I went there was the day I was really given a deadline by DoCS and I wanted out of here and the day I went there for the interview, was the day I got my house”

Interviewee 8

Several participants identified that the multiple moves had impeded and compromised the children's schooling. In one case a child had missed around 200 days of school. Many of the participants

emphasised the importance of stable schooling in their children's lives and in several cases the women voiced their thoughts about schooling

“Yes, because I don't want to change their [children] school. They have been moving, moving I am trying to keep them in one school... They are very resilient I think the kids are doing well but now... how can I explain... we have to move again I don't know how it is going to impact”

Interviewee 1

*“The children were transferred from there because of the violence... they used to go to **** School... and then when I moved they were going there as well so I tried to keep them in one school but when I got permanent residency in the area, like this one I'm in now, I had them transferred to that school that I said was just up the road... so they really haven't ... I've tried to limit the change of schools because that's a big thing”*

Interviewee 5

For some participants, their commitment to ensure stability for their children, by limiting the number of changes in schools, had resulted significant increases in travel time and consequently limited their own ability to expand their involvement in other activities such as employment and other community activities. For some of the participants private travel to and from school was necessary due to the continued threat of abduction of the children by the perpetrator

Interviewer: *do you think you might feel more confident next year if they are at the same school if they were to catch public transport to school – is it on the same train line or is it a different train line?*

Interviewee: *(suburb) doesn't actually have trains – there are buses to (neighbouring) station – no, not really I'm a little bit protective of them – I've had a lot of trouble with my ex-husband with domestic violence – he's actually tried to abduct them – I just have a little bit of a thing – I'll drop you at school and I'll pick you up'.*

Interviewee 3

5.4 Aspirations for the future

One of the final questions was in relation to women's hopes for the future. For the majority of women who had not been able to access safe, affordable and appropriate housing, access to such housing had remained one of their key concerns and aspirations. One woman explicitly noted that her main aspiration was to get a house further away from the perpetrator of the violence, but she could not see how this would occur due to the high costs of rent out of the area.

Aspirations beyond just housing were only identified by participants that had secured appropriate housing. The aspirations of one of the participants provided a richer understanding of the impact that the violence and subsequent homelessness upon the wellbeing of her and the children:

Interviewer: How do you imagine your life in the next couple of years?

Interviewee: hopefully debt free and just being able to perhaps... not have to worry about bills and money.... Maybe even go camping ... it cost[s] a little [bit of money] in fuel and hiring of space where you go – just those little things that you don't get to do”

Interviewee 3

The aspirations for another woman that had accessed appropriate housing for a longer period of time were.

Interviewee: I do but I don't want to be in that mindset of poverty...the mindset of 'this is going to be it for us'. I have a lot of thoughts in my mind about business and building a business and stuff... so in saying that I sort of, obviously, if financials change in my life then I am not going to be entitled to stay in a housing house and I don't want to be stuck in a mindset of 'cool we're in this house and this is it' and....

Interviewer: you don't want to close yourself off to options.

Interviewee: no I don't.

Interviewer: and opportunities by the sound of it....

Interviewee: I do, I do...

Interviewer: keeping your mind open to opportunities which may involve another move or it may involve staying there for a period of time whilst you go through a transition?

Interviewee: yes, I don't want to be in a box where 'this is my life' – whilst it is great that we are getting this great assistance but I don't want to assume 'this is it'.....

Interviewee 2

6. Discussion and Recommendations

A major finding of the study is the central role that affordable and appropriate housing can play in allowing women to re-establish their lives. It is the foundation for change in the lives of women and their families. This position is very well described by one of the women in the study.

“I think the main issue is when a woman is in domestic violence she thinks ‘where am I going to go’ and if she’s got a house or like affordable housing like somewhere to go to when she escapes. For me..., this housing provided for me... it did so much for my wellbeing –I enrolled in TAFE... I am moving on with my life. I feel like I achieved something. If I didn’t have this housing probably..., I would go on the other side and get depressed and isolate myself. I wouldn’t be able to meet people and wouldn’t even want to go... and that would then have an effect on my children and all... I think that’s so significant like housing and wellbeing –I think it is the most important thing”

Interviewee 1

These findings corroborate a number of issues addressed in recent literature such as the contribution of stable housing on reducing levels of stress, changing the perspectives of women by empowering them, and generating a positive atmosphere for children. The length of stay directly related to a sense of security and a sense of a settled life. Being able to maintain important routines like schooling proved markedly important for women and children’s wellbeing. However, often women were only able to secure housing for relatively short periods of time. Housing systems that facilitate a sense of security and belonging were of critical importance to women and children’s outcomes.

Many of the women experiences involved moving between various types of accommodation that lacked security of tenure and/or failed to provide a sense of safety and social inclusion. These findings accord with the broad acknowledgement that there are not sufficient exit points for people exiting specialist homelessness services, including women’s refuges (Tually, Faulkner, 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2008a, p.21).

The findings from this research supports previous research that states that, for most women who have experienced homelessness as a result of domestic and family violence social housing should be readily available (Tually, Faulkner, p.55). The findings from this study, however also indicated that community housing providers were more responsive to the housing needs of women and children. Importantly, the stock should be geographically dispersed to ensure women do not become isolated from support networks and services.

This study provided an avenue for the voices of women to be heard in relation their housing needs and experiences, it presents an opportunity to bridge the disconnect between policy and service responses and the real the experiences and long term needs of women and children who experience homelessness as a result of domestic and family violence. This is necessary to ensure policy and program responses contribute to women and children’s sense of belonging, safety and security.

The recent allocation of social housing and homelessness programs announced by the Commonwealth, and other reforms being implemented by the NSW Government, provide an opportunity to improve housing outcomes for women and children who experience domestic and

family violence. There is currently significant potential to increase the number of suitable housing options to women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence. Mechanisms to achieve this could be a specific allocation of the additional social housing dwellings, through the Commonwealth's housing stimulus package for women and children exiting refuges and as a direct pathway out of violence. The National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) also provides opportunity for an increase in affordable housing stock for women and children and funds through the Homelessness National Partnership Agreement could also improve the capacity for women's refuges to directly support women and children to maintain their housing.

In addition to the quantity of affordable and safe housing, there is a need to ensure such housing is of appropriate quality and accessible to women and children. The interviews revealed that some women had found that their inability to access social housing was not only hindered by the lack of sufficient housing stock but also by some of the attitudes, practices and policies of multiple agencies. These findings indicate the need for specialist domestic and family violence services, including women's refuges to work in partnership with the NSW Government agencies to address these barriers. One opportunity for this to occur is the Review of Housing NSW policies that was identified in the consultation draft of the NSW Homelessness Framework under action 3.1.7 "Consider eligibility requirements for access to priority housing for homeless people" (Housing NSW, 2008, p.21).

Recommendation:

1. The Commonwealth & State Governments and Community Housing Providers work with women's refuges and other specialist women's services to increase the number of affordable and safe housing options available to women and children who experience domestic and family violence. There are a number of initiatives that could be undertaken to achieve this, some of these include:
 - a. A percentage of the estimated additional 9,000 social housing dwellings to be developed from the Commonwealth housing stimulus package be quarantined to increase exit points from women's refuges as well as provide direct pathways into permanent housing for women and children experiencing domestic violence. The housing provided through such partnerships should include configurations of medium term and long-term housing to increase housing options for women and children exiting refuges. To achieve this, the additional housing stock should be:
 - i. Directed to those community housing providers who currently have existing partnerships with women's refuges and invite other housing providers to form partnerships with women's refuges in key low housing stock locations.
 - b. A percentage of the 50 000 properties to be developed as part of the National Rental Affordability Scheme be specifically allocated to women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence, as previously recommended by Tually and Faulkner (2008).
 - c. The provision of brokerage funds to women's refuges to improve safety and security measures to women and children living within both social housing, private rental properties and remaining in their home after the perpetrator has been removed.

2. A larger study be undertaken with women who have experienced domestic and family violence and the services that support them to investigate not only the impact of housing on the lives of women and children-post crisis accommodation but also examine of the models of housing that positively impact on the wellbeing of women and children.
3. The review of housing eligibility requirements must specifically examine the barriers that women and children currently experience, particularly in relation to:
 - a. The extensive level of evidence required for housing;
 - b. The use of asset testing, particularly home ownership, for women who have experienced domestic and family violence needs to take into account that the capital of these assets can be inaccessible in the short term due to lengthy legal processes and safety concerns.
4. Housing NSW provide training to housing staff to improve the overall knowledge and service delivery to women and children who require housing after experiencing domestic and family violence.
5. Housing NSW develop regional domestic and family violence specialised support worker positions to support Housing NSW staff and strengthen interagency partnerships with regional domestic violence services.

Throughout the interviews it was evident that the safety and wellbeing of the participant's children was a significant concern. The concerns ranged from ongoing fears for the safety of children in relation to the perpetrator, safety concerns for the children in relation the neighbourhood, the impact of housing on the children's health and a lack of support structures available to women to remedy these concerns.

The findings from this study demonstrate how the interface between domestic violence and child protection responses can lead to protracted periods of homelessness. This issue should be addressed in the development of integrated service responses through the NSW Government's response to the Wood Commission of Inquiry to Child Protection Services, NSW Domestic and Family Violence Framework and the NSW Homelessness Action Plan. This integration should provide mechanisms to ensure that child protection interventions address both the immediate and long term safety and housing needs of both women and children.

As the White Paper notes the costs for not assisting children who access specialist homeless services, including women's refuges, is estimated to be \$1 billion per year, given the 22% increase in the number of homeless children since 2001 the costs look likely to increase significantly over time if their needs are not met (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p.10).

Recommendation:

6. The implementation of specialist services for children recommended in the White Paper such as brokerage funds to specialist homelessness services, regional child development workers and closer links with child protection services be a priority:
 - a. The role and skills of child support workers in NSW Women's Refuge Movement refuges be formally recognised and utilised to increase the coordination and

facilitation of services and resources to better meet the needs of children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness because of domestic and family.

Another major finding of the study was the positive support the women received from refuges. The participants continued to receive support from the refuges long after they had stopped using the refuge accommodation. This feedback was particularly interesting as there were no specific questions in the interview schedule relating to the services provided by the refuge. Many of the participants reflected on experiences where refuges had played an important role in meeting or facilitating access to other services to address a diverse range of needs that women and children required.

Despite the important role of refuges, they can only deliver permanent success if they are part of a continuum that includes permanent, safe and affordable housing (Tually, Faulkner et.al, 2008, p.46). This statement is supported by the findings in this study, for the minority of participants who did find stable and safe accommodation the importance of this in rebuilding their lives was identified. In contrast the women who were unable to access appropriate housing remained in unsafe situations and experienced multiple periods of homelessness. The findings from this study provide some clear indications on what parts of the service system should be improved to reduce the level of homelessness caused by domestic and family violence, a task which both the Commonwealth and NSW Governments have committed themselves to addressing.

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