Ageing and Women’s Homelessness: Overcoming the bag lady syndrome

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ABOUT THE ORGANISATION

Women’s Property Initiatives (WPI), formerly Victorian Women’s Housing Association (VWHA) was established in 1996 to develop innovative mechanisms that provide a range of housing options for disadvantaged women and their children to address and prevent homelessness.

WPI is a non-government, not-for-profit entity. It is women specific. It is a Registered Housing Provider with a proud and award-winning record for Leading Practice in the Community Housing Sector.

Connections with local government and community agencies ensure tenants are supported in their new housing and are able to form links in their local community including; counselling, rehabilitation and support services.

WPI is committed to creating more affordable housing, as it is the foundation for building a better life.

WPI’S MISSION

To build a secure future for women and children in need by developing and providing good quality, long term, affordable rental housing.

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Australia is facing a tsunami of poverty amongst ageing female baby boomers that will directly affect their well-being, economic viability, and housing options. Flow-on effects will impact on families, support agencies, governments, and the community as whole.

While support agencies and federal and state governments have recognised the issue there has been little action. It is almost too late to reverse the tide. Leadership is needed to ensure these women do not become “bag ladies” on the streets in their twilight years. Finding solutions will not be simple. Addressing this issue will require multiple strategies involving housing, health, employment and government support.

Women’s Property Initiatives (WPI), an innovative affordable housing provider, is particularly interested in working with government, non-government organisations, the private sector and academia to devise economically and socially viable options for housing older disadvantaged and vulnerable women.

The options need to recognise that women have strong social connections to their community as well as social engagement with and connections to places through families and friendships. Access to health facilities, and public transport and ensuring personal safety must be factored into potential options.

Traditional responses including public housing and rooming houses are unlikely to meet the needs of older women. As one rooming house provider noted, “women won’t share bathrooms and they feel unsafe in rooming house accommodation”. WPI has developed and now manages the tenancies for 66 properties which provide long-term, self-contained affordable rental housing to women who are on low to moderate incomes. WPI properties are integrated into local communities and the developments are selected on the basis of access to transport and other facilities. Experience has told WPI that security of housing and being treated with respect makes an enormous difference in women’s lives. WPI’s Social Return on Investment study indicates that WPI’s housing returns $3.14 for every $1 invested.

Many older women often have superannuation or assets, which may be significant but is not adequate to buy or maintain a home in the long term. WPI wishes to work with governments, philanthropists and other housing providers to find options that reflect the lives of women and their ability to contribute financially to their housing. It is now time to find innovative ways of creating and funding new solutions.

This paper sets out the key findings from research into older women and housing security in Australia. The aim is to raise key questions that need to be considered, and propose further action to be taken, in developing viable housing options for this growing group of older women in danger of homelessness.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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Australia’s Lack of Affordable Housing

The housing market has slowed since the middle of 2010, with transaction levels and prices declining variably across most of the country. This has coincided with a widening gap between supply and underlying demand, and evidence that the rental market has tightened further in many places. The National Housing Supply Council’s (NHSC) central projection suggests that over the five years to 2015, the cumulative demand–supply gap since 2001 is projected to grow by a further 142,000 dwellings to 328,800 dwellings and by 640,200 dwellings by 2030.

Rental increases have outstripped movements in incomes in recent years, and vacancy rates are low. The rate of increase in rents for flats has outstripped that for houses in the largest cities over the past year. The ability of lower-income groups to access the market is already a significant issue that affects access to employment and services. Lack of access to healthy, affordable, well-located housing could have intergenerational implications for engagement with work, the community, and productivity in the economy.

A 2011 report which disaggregated the 2006 data by capital cities found, for example, that in Melbourne 87% of very low income households and 22% of low income households cannot access affordable rental housing. As the National Housing Supply Council (NHSC) notes, these affordability outcomes are the direct result of the way in which housing supply shortages play out in the market.

The problem is not simply one of insufficient stock. The location of dwellings relative to where households live or want to live, the income of households relative to housing prices, the preferences of households for particular types of dwellings and the size of households relative to the size of available housing (number of bedrooms) all impact on affordability.

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3 National Housing Supply Council 2011
5 2nd State of Supply Report, National Housing Supply Council, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Canberra, 2010, p.xv
In Australia, there is a strong correlation between household income, tenure and the rights of occupants. Households with very low incomes tend to occupy private rental, social housing and marginal housing such as rooming houses, caravan parks, pensioner-only Supported Residential Services and improvised dwellings. Low income households tend to occupy private rental and some social housing; whereas moderate income households tend to live in private rental and owner occupied housing.

**Older Women and Homelessness: An under-reported problem**

The increasing problem of lack of affordable housing has a dramatic but under-reported impact on single older women. There is limited gendered research or data collected in Australia or internationally. The causes of women’s homelessness and the plight of older women confronting housing stress and crisis are not well documented.

Researchers and academics are beginning to recognise that women’s experience of, and ways of dealing with, housing stress and homelessness differs from men’s and needs to be have specific program and policy responses.

The Australian definition of homelessness - *Primary, Secondary, Tertiary* - developed by Mackenzie and Chamberlain in 1992 and adopted by the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness in 2001, ignores the different experiences of women’s homelessness.

The three definition categories are: 6

1. **Primary homelessness** – people without conventional accommodation living on the streets, in deserted buildings, railway carriages, under bridges, in parks etc.

2. **Secondary homelessness** – people moving between various forms of temporary shelter including friends, emergency accommodation, refuges, hostels and boarding houses.

3. **Tertiary homelessness** – people living permanently in single rooms in private boarding houses without their own bathroom or kitchen and without security of tenure. They are considered homeless because their accommodation does not have the characteristics identified in the minimum community standard.

The ‘cultural norms’ that underpin the above three tier definition of homelessness enable recognition that a woman experiencing violence in her home may be regarded as homeless (homeless-at-home) 7. However, there has been little recognition of other circumstances where the nominally housed could be considered homeless.

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6 Chamberlain C, Johnson G and Thebold T 2007 *Homelessness In Melbourne Confronting the Challenge*, RMIT Melbourne

In addition, this definition ignores the different experiences of women facing homelessness which include a range of adaptation strategies. For example a 2008 study of experiences of single, low income women 35-64 years of age facing secondary homelessness found that the women were significantly worse off after separation hence some women explicitly link their housing to partnering, or swap sex for somewhere to sleep. A spokesperson for the Department of Human Services said in an article in The Age newspaper that women's primary strategy, when at risk of homelessness, is to partner, disregarding the risks such as abuse and violence which can be considerable.  

It has been suggested that 'homelessness' may not be a particularly useful way of describing the experiences of women and 'housing insecurity' may be more appropriate. Hulse and Saugeres in 2008 identified six dimensions of housing insecurity as:

- lack of privacy
- lack of belonging
- lack of physical comfort
- housing mobility
- housing instability
- feeling unsafe.

Point in time analyses such as street counts and the national census do not find many women nor consider women’s situational homelessness. Street counts of homeless people assume the visibly homeless represent the total of the homeless population, and find very few women. However, women’s homelessness is often hidden and managed by a range of adaptation strategies such as remaining in unsafe relationships or living in poor quality high cost housing, forgoing food and heating to retain housing. The ABS census in most instances does not pick up homeless women as they do not list themselves as ‘staying temporarily with friends or relatives’, or living in boarding houses or sleeping rough.

Most housing supply data is not gender disaggregated, apart from crisis accommodation. Moreover, Supported Assistance Accommodation Program (SAAP) services do not target or support single homeless women over the age of 25 without dependent children, who do not have a mental health or drug and/or alcohol problem, or who are not refugees. Thus, as most Australian research into homelessness and its causes uses SAAP data, women over 25 years of age who are homeless are not sufficiently included in data or analysis.

Women are more vulnerable to housing stress due to their low incomes, and patterns in the workforce. In 2010 women’s pay rates were 17.3% below men’s for full time workers. There are higher numbers of women in low paid, part time and casual employment than men.

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8 Sharam A. 2008, Going It Alone: Single, Low Income Women and Hidden Homelessness, Women’s Information Support and Housing in the North , Melbourne
10 Hulse, K. and Saugeres, L. 2008 Housing Insecurity and Precarious Living: An Australian Exploration, Final Report 124, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
11 Robyn Martin 2011Gender and Homelessness AHURI 101001 Research Curtain University of Technology
12 Beverley Kliger and Andrea Sharam 2010.Older Women and Homelessness A Literature Review , City of Boroondara
Additionally:

- women are predominantly the carers for children
- 90% of single parents are women
- women are predominantly the carers for parents

Anecdotal evidence and qualitative research has highlighted the increasing numbers of older single women seeking support. As Ludo McFerran states in her report ‘It Could Be You: female, single, older and homeless’ \(^{13}\) we rarely think about older working women as a potential wave of homeless people, but according to evidence that is the problem we now face.

**OLDER WOMEN AND HOUSING STRESS**

Vulnerability to housing crisis for older women is linked to a range of circumstances. Women remaining in unsafe and inappropriate housing can be linked to the hidden homelessness of women. Data is starting to emerge about the housing stress facing older women.

\(^{13}\) L. McFerran 2010 *It Could Be You: Female, Single, Older and Homeless*, Homelessness NSW, Older Women’s Network and St Vincent de Paul Society NSW (www.ownnsw.org.au/it-could-be-you)
In 2010 McFerran argued that the SAAP data is now starting to show significant increases in single, older women, 'they are squeezing into services that don’t want them’. Additionally, Sharam’s 2008 research found over 26,000 single, older women in Eastern states were living precariously.

Research has also found older women’s housing stress is linked to the following circumstances:

- older divorced or separated women in Australia have the highest rate of financial disadvantage of all separating couples

- women live longer than men but continue to earn less than men, both in lower wages and due to working part-time hence women have less savings and superannuation

- the lack of appropriate and affordable housing

- older women are subject to exploitation by others, such as family members whose interest is the housing not the women the Victorian Government Elder Abuse Prevention Strategy proposes that older women are two or three times more likely to experience abuse than elderly men and that their children are most likely to be responsible for the abuse

- older women face problems of cultural adaptation and can be embarrassed about revealing their plight, such as lack of family support, to public and/or welfare organisations

- older women’s lack of money skills and knowledge of where to access help when their partner dies

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14 McFerran, . (2010) Why gender matters, presentation to the Women and Housing Workshop, Community Housing Federation of Victoria, 3 May, Mantra on Russell Hotel, Melbourne


20 Victorian Government Elder Abuse Prevention Strategy Fact Sheet May 2009


22 Kutza and Keigher 1991

• older women’s susceptibility to the marriage breakdown of the adult children who support them, with the most significant increase in the proportion of divorced and separated adults in the 40-69 age range.\textsuperscript{24}

• psychiatric disorders are more prevalent amongst older women than men.\textsuperscript{25}

• older women have high rates of poverty.\textsuperscript{26}

The population is ageing. Women live longer than men and have less superannuation than men. In 2007, males aged 15-69 years were more likely to have superannuation coverage (81%) than were females aged 15-69 years (74%). The difference largely reflects greater workforce participation by males, especially in older age groups. In 2007 the mean superannuation balance for males with accounts in the accumulation phase was $88,000, while for females it was $52,000.\textsuperscript{27}

A 2007 study by Tually, Beer and Faulkner using ABS demographic modelling shows a sizable proportion of women baby boomers (45 and over) are single, have low incomes and face housing insecurity.\textsuperscript{28} The 2011 census reveals that 4.4 million women are aged 45 years and over. Of these, 1.2 million women fall into the category of lone parent, group household member, or lone person.

Figure 1 below reveals that of women over 45 who are not dependent on another, 40% (482,572) could be considered to live in “insecure tenure “ that is private rental or paying a mortgage.\textsuperscript{29} Of these, 59% (374,736) are women aged between 45 - 64 years.

\textsuperscript{24} Austen, Currie and Jefferson 2006
\textsuperscript{25} Cohen 1990
\textsuperscript{26} Robyn Martin 2011 Gender and Homelessness AHURI 101001 Research
\textsuperscript{27} ABS 2012 Gender indicators, Australia, Jan 2012
http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by+Subject/4125.0~Jan+2012~Main+Features~Earnings~1210
\textsuperscript{28} Tually S., Beer A and Faulkner D. 2007 Too Big to Ignore: Future Issues for Australian Women's Housing 2006-2-25 AHURI Southern Research Centre
\textsuperscript{29} Insecure tenure – Older people are more vulnerable to a change of circumstance such as loss of work or illness, where greater expenses or lower income make it difficult to meet mortgage payments
Figure 1 Housing tenure for female lone parent, single or in group households 45 years and over 2011

Source: 2011 ABS Census

Figure 2 sets out income by tenure in four income levels per week:

- Low income from $0 to $455;
- Medium Low Income from $456 to $849;
- High Income from $850 to $1,373;
- Very High Income of $1,374 and above.

Figure 2 (below) reveals that 69% (258,567) of women aged 45 -65 renting privately are in receipt of low and medium low incomes, below the Australian median income. This represents almost 260,000 older women who are vulnerable to housing stress as they age, as private rental housing does not offer security of tenure and is unlikely to be adapted to support increasing frailty as a tenant ages.

30 Public rental is excluded from the data
The situation is becoming desperate as older Australians in private rental, or those entering private rental for the first time, appear to be particularly vulnerable. While the population is diverse, these people all have insecure tenure and limited income. A Hanover study found that older people often experienced age-based discrimination from real estate agents. Without assistance from an advocate, many older people find it impossible to find private or public rental that is affordable, suitable and secure within their existing community. Without a secure home base, vulnerable older people living in private rental have limited and sometimes no opportunity to age in place.

The study also found that specialist homelessness services do not have appropriate responses. Their responses included short term crisis response without follow up support or an inappropriate referral to unsuitable and unsafe accommodation. 31

Additionally, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission stated that The private rental market is not a viable alternative for many older people, who face difficulties paying high rents and utility bills.

One participant in the Commission’s study said that the amount of income paid on rent leaves very little left for necessities like food. In addition, participants stated that landlords often want to see an older person’s bank balance and many will not accept older people on Centrelink payments. One participant stated that We can’t compete with couples with two incomes. 32

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32 Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission 2012 Rights in Focus Report on Rights of Older People
Exacerbating these concerns is the finding of a 2011 survey of women over 40 years of age that higher income women may also face housing stress as they age. 33

The plight of older women is not being noticed in official data as outside the youth and family violence categories women do not figure prominently in homelessness statistics in Australia or internationally. A number of women writers have argued the existence of hidden homelessness amongst women. 34 They argue that:

- Lack of services for women, especially women without children and older women, skews data collection and hence the analysis;
- There is a shortage of gendered housing research, especially regarding older single women and homelessness in Australia,35 and
- The focus of gendered research is linked to family and domestic violence.

The lack of services for older women facing homelessness is becoming desperate. A 2012 report on the rights of older people found that Older women are sleeping out in cars because it is often safer than other forms of crisis or emergency accommodation available. Nothing is tailored for older women. The real gap is that there is no appropriate emergency accommodation for older people and there is nowhere to refer an older person who is living in a car for example, where they can go to be safe. They are probably safer in a locked car than they will be in a rooming house. 36

Other strategies used by older women facing housing stress to restore housing include:

- Re-partnering to restore housing but for some this involves suffering abusive and exploitative relationships
- Taking on housekeeping and caring, even though this may jeopardise their health and severely limit their quality of life
- Residing with abusive and exploitative children who take advantage of them, insisting they provide childcare and housekeeping and/or accessing their meagre financial resources. This issue is referred to in the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission report.
- Living in sub-standard housing which compromises their health and standard of living. This may result in high energy costs leaving little for other essentials.

33 Sharam A. 2011 No Home at the End of the Road: survey of single women over 40 years of age who do not believe they will own their housing outright at retirement, Salvation Army of Australia South Australia
35 Sharam A 2008; Office for Women, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008 Women, Domestic and Family Violence and Homelessness A Synthesis Report, Commonwealth of Australia
The flow on effects of the potential tsunami of poverty amongst ageing baby boomer women that will directly affect their well-being, economic viability, and housing options impacts on families, support agencies, governments and the community as a whole.

Women's Property Initiatives' 2010 Social Return on Investment study confirmed that safe, secure, good quality, affordable housing contributes to improved physical and mental health. Research by Baker and Tually concluded that housing is an effective health intervention that is important for women as they age.

While support agencies and governments at federal and state level have recognised the issue there has been little action to address the lack of affordable housing. Whilst it may be too late to reverse the tide, there is an urgent need for leadership to ensure the generation of baby boomer women do not become “bag ladies” in their twilight years. If governments do not provide, contribute to or facilitate affordable and good housing, then they will pay in other ways, especially with high health care expenditure. Health care for older people is already becoming a major cost to both state and federal governments.

Finding solutions is not simple, as with all complex policy conundrums, addressing this issue will require multiple strategies across housing, health and government support.

Options that could alleviate the housing stress facing older women include:

- increasing the supply of community housing, which offers security of rental tenure and focusses on being responsive to tenants’ needs
- inclusive private developments that incorporate a proportion of affordable rental housing
- partnerships between Government and community agencies for community housing development.

For women with some equity, shared equity models may be developed. One such form of community housing that has been successful overseas and is emerging in Australia is the land trust model, which has the following features:

- land ownership is separated from dwelling ownership
- the land is held by the land trust, and provided at no cost or low cost
- the dwelling is purchased via private finance

37 VWHA Research Report Victorian Women’s Housing Association investment in affordable housing for women – the social and economic returns May 2010

• there are restrictions on eligibility and subletting to ensure the properties are targeted to owners who cannot afford to buy in the private market

• limits can be placed on capital gains benefits for dwelling owners who sell, to ensure ongoing availability of the property as an affordable housing option

Where to Next?

See next page
Allocation of resources will help identify and address the housing needs of older women in Australia. They encompass activities within the spheres of research, legislation and the private sector to understand and provide for these growing needs.

Option ~ Establish and manage a women-specific housing needs database, potentially by the National Housing Supply Council in conjunction with bodies including Office for Women, AHURI, Equity Rights Alliance, Australians for Affordable Housing, health and housing service providers.

Option ~ Work in partnership with key stakeholders including tenants unions to advocate for increased security of tenure through long-term tenancy legislation/agreements.

Option ~ Undertake a feasibility study into the barriers and opportunities to superannuation funds investing in social housing.

Option ~ Review existing taxation incentives to consider the possibility of a proportion of negative gearing tax offsets being allocated to investment in social housing.

Option ~ Advocate to state and territory governments to emulate the 2005 Housing Plan for South Australia, which has a specific target of 15% of housing in all new significant developments to be affordable housing, including 5% high need housing. As an example, these targets could be incorporated into Victoria’s Plan Melbourne Metropolitan Planning Strategy.

Option ~ Establish cross-sectoral partnerships between governments, community housing agencies and private organisations to foster innovation and financial assistance to grow the community housing sector.

Option ~ Work with AHURI, research partners and financial institutions to consider and develop potential shared equity models for housing ownership.

Option ~ State and federal governments, together with financial institutions and developers, to pilot shared equity project to assist women who have some equity to put into their housing.