



**National Women's
Safety Alliance**

Submission on the development of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan

October 2023

Submitted by



National Women's Safety Alliance

www.nwsa.org.au

Introduction

The National Women's Safety Alliance welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the proposal to develop a *National Housing and Homelessness Plan*. The Alliance brings together 435 individual and organisational members to provide policy guidance, lived experience and frontline expertise to inform national policy and reform on women's safety. We support the work of our members, including Women's Community Shelters, Homelessness Australia and frontline homelessness services who have made recommendations to this significant reform.

Domestic violence is the leading co-presenting factor when women seek housing and homelessness assistance.¹ For countless women and children, issues of safe and affordable housing, pending housing insecurity or homelessness are inextricably linked to their safety at home. Our members have contributed to countless Australian Parliamentary and government inquiries, consultations and strategic reforms related to the significance of safe housing in responding to domestic and family violence. The messaging of members remains consistent; a safe and sustainable exit point, free from domestic or family violence, is intrinsic to individual and collective safety and achieving the objectives of the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and their Children 2022-2032*.

We use this submission to draw attention to the overwhelming need for measurable ambition in preventing, reducing, and ending homelessness. We also reiterate the unique place of specialist women's homelessness services which prioritise survivor autonomy, recovery, and healing. We also call for a recalibration of homelessness definitions to particularly call for a new category to be included; women and children who are forced to live with violence because there is, quite simply, no other safe alternative. Lastly, we raise structural issues such as the adequacy of income support as a barrier to recipients finding safe and suitable housing options.

¹ SHS clients, by reasons for seeking assistance, by state/territory and sex, June 2023
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-monthly-data/contents/monthly-data>

Overarching considerations

In consultation with our members, the following were identified as core areas for consideration in the National Strategy.

- 1) The Plan must incorporate goals, targets, and timelines for preventing, reducing, and ending homelessness and housing insecurity more broadly.
- 2) Living with domestic or family violence, and having nowhere else to go, must be added to the definition of homelessness and considered a form of homelessness, in its own right.
- 3) The role of specialist women's services in the delivery of homelessness services, specifically targeted to women and children, must be preserved.
- 4) The (in)adequacy of income support payments are inextricably linked to issues underpinning homelessness such as poverty and financial instability.

The need for an ambitious plan

"If you're going to aim to end homelessness, then you really need to have targets around ending homelessness"- NWSA Member.

'Housing stress', 'housing insecurity', 'mortgage cliff', 'nowhere else to go'. These are all-too-common expressions that go some way to summarising what women's front-line housing and homelessness services hear every day. With growing public awareness of

domestic and family violence and political prioritisation of the issue, demand for front-line services has significantly increased in recent years. In June 2023, nearly 24,000 women accessed Specialist Homelessness Services with domestic or family violence as a co-presenting factor to their immediate accommodation needs.²

The shortage of housing supply, across the spectrum, has real life consequences that are well documented and reported. Safe and permanent exits from transitional or short-term crisis housing are difficult if not impossible, leading to a block in client transition, effectively prolonging their own insecurity and that of

² <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-monthly-data/contents/monthly-data>

those next on the waiting list. Homelessness and trauma are prolonged, and recovery is indefinitely delayed.³ A truly wicked problem, that affects both the individual's sense of wellbeing, the wellbeing of support workers, service capacity and budgets as brokerage funds are swiftly exhausted.

Without a suite of achievable but still ambitious targets to end *homelessness*, our members are concerned that a proposed National Strategy will become conflated with simply adding to the affordable or market supply. A future National Homelessness and Housing Plan must accommodate targets across the entire housing spectrum and must include targets for social and supported housing options.

Further to the immediate issue of supply, workforce shortages, burnout, funding uncertainty and staff turnover across the homelessness sector are a brake on delivering continuity and improved wellbeing for both clients and staff. We urge that the plan not only accommodate specific targets in building supply, but also in building a more sustainable workforce.

“There can't be safety without *safe housing*.”

Literature research into the intersection between domestic and family violence, and homelessness among women and children confirms what those working in front-line women's organisations have long known; that women living with violence face an unenviable choice, *poverty*, or *violence*.⁴ Today, this 'choice' is amplified. As cost-of-living pressures increase, savings are dried up and housing becomes more expensive to either get in to, or to sustain, the choices for women who live with violence face are hardening. This has been demonstrated in NAB research which reveals women are feeling the current economic pressures at a higher rate than men, (though this trend has recently narrowed).⁵

This context gives some clarity to the unique issues facing women who live with violence, which are compounded by overwhelming housing shortages and unmet demand at services. Within the development of the National Homelessness and Housing Plan, our members have considered the existing paradigm of women's

³ <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/2023-08/AHURI-Final-Report-407-Crisis-accommodation-in-Australia-now-and-for-the-future.pdf>

⁴ Summers, A. (2022) *The Choice: Violence or Poverty* <https://www.violenceorpoverty.com/>

⁵ <https://business.nab.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/NAB-Consumer-Sentiment-Survey-Q2-2023.pdf>

homelessness and identified options for widespread cultural, policy and service reform:

Definitional reform – a precarious homelessness

Homelessness in Australia is statistically defined using six operational groups: rough sleeping, living in supported homelessness accommodation, temporarily dossing with others, living in boarding accommodation or other temporary lodgings, and those in

“And in all the groups in homelessness that are not measured, women and children who may have a roof over their head, but they don't have a home. They have a dangerous place that they have to stay because they have no other option” – NWSA member.

severely overcrowded dwellings.⁶ While this is a welcomed broad scope, Australia's definition fails to adequately capture the virtual homelessness for those who live with violence because in the absence of safer alternatives, the outcome is poverty and often homelessness.

Given the actionable items of the National Plan 2022-2032 and the role of housing in achieving a safety led response for those leaving violence⁷, this data gap undermines a greater understanding of the extent of this precarious homelessness. Capturing this information has the potential to improve our understanding of not only the shortage of housing but also illuminate workforce shortages and under resourced ancillary support that is needed to assist a survivor of violence navigate to a safer housing outcome.

Shifting the paradigm

It is a *fait accompli* that when there is violence in the home, it is women and children who often make the decision to leave. For those who don't, they confront the perennial question “*why don't you just leave*”? The expectation that it is women and children who leave violence by leaving the home, subjecting themselves to potential homelessness, is so culturally entrenched its almost inconceivable that it could be otherwise.

⁶ ABS homelessness operational groupings <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/guide-census-data/census-dictionary/2021/variables-topic/housing/homelessness-operational-groups-opgp>

⁷ The National Plan (2022-2032) identifies safe and secure housing, across a breadth of housing options, as a critical action of the ‘response’ domain (p 21.)

For women who may be experiencing homelessness or poverty without safe housing options, the exit pathway can often be via new relationships of violence or abuse. Homeless women, particularly those with children, confront a myriad of challenges to their physical safety and that of their children, as well as enduring the emotional toll of being a homeless parent, while their perpetrator can remain free of accountability and in the family home. This archaic social norm can shift with a National Housing and Homelessness Plan that aligns with the objectives of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children, including perpetrator accountability and a sustainably resourced homelessness and women's sector.

A lot of women escape homelessness by taking a journey into violence. It's shockingly common for women to find a pathway out of homelessness via [dating platforms] or just via the men they might meet in the completely unsuitable accommodation they are put in by a homelessness service that, you know might be a rooming house with homeless men.

We need homelessness services that can address women's safety needs by providing safe accommodation and the unique supports that women need, because otherwise we're putting women in a situation where they have to make very real choices between one bad man and the perils of being in an environment like a rooming house where they might be subject to violence from multiple quarters
– **NWSA Member.**

The role of Women's specialist services

We acknowledge that women's lived experiences of discrimination, violence and inequality are dynamic and compounded by intersectional identities of race, ability, culture, gender identity and class. First Nations women, women with disabilities, women living in poverty, women of cultural and linguistic diversity and gender diverse persons experience discrimination, violence, and inequality in cumulative and complex ways. These intersectional experiences are unique and responding to this individual matrix is a core pillar of our members' work.

As specialist service providers, our work is trauma informed and underpinned by a feminist framework. We work in a field where trust between the client and the service is paramount to achieving outcomes, in this regard the specialist nature of our work simply cannot be replicated by generalist services or government. By operating within feminist theory our work recognises that all violence and discrimination against women is the sum of patriarchal power dynamics rather than a collection of individual experiences.

The future National Homelessness and Housing Plan must recognise the unique value of women’s specialist homelessness services and preserve their role in addressing homelessness and housing crisis among women and their children.

Structural issues

While we acknowledge the issues paper frames the development of the future

“We have a client who escaped family violence with her four children. She makes a modest income but is thriving in every way. But has been in transitional housing for four years now! She’s ready to move on to her own property but there just aren’t the exits for her. Not only is her salary too low to compete in the market but she is discriminated against both as a single mother trying to house her kids and a culturally diverse person.” – NWSA Member and front-line housing provider.

National Plan around seven ‘focus areas’ that are relevant to the spectrum of housing, there is a notable absence of the structural issues that impact on around housing security and tenure more broadly, such as income support, discrimination, and poverty.

Women are the greatest cohort of those receiving income support, meaning that as a collective, they are the most vulnerable to changes in

market conditions that affect the cost of housing and other goods. Further to this, the vast majority of single parent households are led by women who, as single parents, face discrimination and prejudice in the private rental market. There is a role for the National Plan to consider these deeper issues and address them accordingly.