

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs
PO Box 6021 Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Submitted online via www.aph.gov.au
Date: 12 June 2020

Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs on Homelessness in Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs on homelessness in Australia.

About Australian Women Against Violence Alliance

Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA) is one of the six National Women's Alliances funded by the Australian Government to bring together women's organisations and individuals across Australia to share information, identify issues and contribute to solutions. AWAVA's focus is on responding to and preventing violence against women and their children. AWAVA's role is to ensure that women's voices and particularly marginalised women's voices are heard by Government, and to amplify the work of its member organisations and Friends and Supporters. AWAVA's members include organisations from every State and Territory in Australia, representing domestic and family violence services, sexual assault services, services for women in the sex industry and women's legal services, as well as organisations representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, young women, women educators and other groups. AWAVA's contract manager is the Women's Services Network (WESNET).

Acronyms

AHURI	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AWAVA	Australian Women Against Violence Alliance
DFV	domestic and family violence
CALD	people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
LGBTIQ	people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer
SGBV	sexual and gender-based violence
SHS	specialist homelessness services

Introduction: a need for an intersectional gender lens

In this submission we are discussing homelessness arising from experiences of domestic and family violence. As the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has established, “Domestic and family violence is the main reason women and children leave their homes in Australia and is consistently one of the most common reasons clients have sought assistance from specialist homelessness agencies”.¹

Homelessness arising from the experiences of domestic and family violence is also linked to the lack of affordable housing, ineligibility for women on temporary visas to access social and public housing, discrimination and other gender-based economic and health inequalities. Homelessness also increases risk of gender-based violence in particular sexual violence. In addition, when intertwined with poverty and lack of social security support, many women are forced to engage in survival sex to obtain any accommodation, ‘pay the rent’ or to obtain general ‘protection’.²

A general lack of affordable housing and social and public housing may increase dependency on a violent partner, especially for disadvantaged cohorts of women, including women on temporary visas, women with disability and women who are unemployed. Available government programs designed to support women to stay in their homes post separation are not able to support all women in need. For example, in NSW there are capped amounts of places that can be supported given the requirement of case management and security upgrades and the fact that for some women and children it will not be safe or desirable to remain in their own homes due to factors such as the perpetrator’s knowledge of their location.³

Where women post separation are moving into private rentals, as AHURI reports, they may be facing discrimination from landlords or be “unable to effectively compete with childless, working couples in tight markets where landlords can choose from a large number of prospective tenants.”⁴ They may also have a poor renting record due to behaviours and property damage by their violent ex-partners or other family members inflicting violence.

Other compounding factors that disadvantage women include the intersection with child protection, where a lack of housing may be the ground for child removal as well as Family Court orders mandating the places where women must reside. AHURI reports that “Family Court decisions can trap some women in unaffordable housing markets in order to enable their violent ex-partner to continue to have access to children”.⁵ Women in regional, rural and remote communities and women with disability may also be facing a shortage of services and accessible housing options.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2016-17*, Canberra: AIHW, 2018. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2016-17/contents/client-groups-of-interest/clients-who-have-experienced-domestic-and-family-violence>; Spinney A. (2012). Home and Safe? Policy and practice innovations to prevent women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence from becoming homeless. Final report no. 196. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

² Watson, J. (2016) Gender-based violence and young homeless women: femininity, embodiment and vicarious physical capital. *The Sociological Review* 64 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12365>; Watson, J. (2018) ‘Just a piece of meat’: how homeless women have little choice but to use sex for survival. *The Conversation*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/just-a-piece-of-meat-how-homeless-women-have-little-choice-but-to-use-sex-for-survival-101113>; Greene, J. M. et al (1999) Prevalence and correlates of survival sex among runaway and homeless youth. *Am J Public Health*. 89(9): 1406–1409.

³ NSW Government, Program Guidelines for Staying Home Leaving Violence Program.

⁴ AHURI Policy Evidence Summary. Securing safer housing for people experiencing domestic and family violence. Based on AHURI Final report No 311

⁵ Flanagan, K., Blunden, H., valentine, k. and Henriette, J. (2019), Housing outcomes after domestic and family violence, AHURI Final Report No. 311, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne.

Other research has shown that single mothers, single older women, those working in casual or part-time employment, and women with disabilities are at a greater risk of insecure housing.⁶ With regard to social housing, while it is more affordable, not all women are eligible to access⁷ it and its supply has not kept up with demand.⁸ In the context of housing unaffordability and systemic disadvantage women may have no choice but to return to an abusive partner.⁹

Thus, measures to prevent and address homelessness must be undertaken through an intersectional gender lens recognising the disproportionate impacts on women and compounding drivers leading to homelessness. Issues of gender and violence are central to housing and homelessness policy.

Responses to the terms of reference

TOR 1: the incidence of homelessness in Australia; and TOR 6. support and services for people at particular risk of homelessness, including: a. women and children affected by family and domestic violence

Access to housing as a part of comprehensive efforts to prevent and respond to violence against women and their children.

Affordable housing, appropriate support from housing and homelessness service providers and long-term housing options are essential for comprehensive efforts to prevent and respond to violence against women and their children.

Attention to the experiences of domestic and family violence must remain central in the provision of homelessness services due to the prevalence of DFV. Available research confirms this:

- Domestic and sexual violence is the leading cause of homelessness and housing instability in Australia, and is consistently one of the most common reasons clients seek assistance from specialist homelessness services (SHSs).¹⁰
- In 2015-16, 38% of SHS clients had experienced family and domestic violence and 92% of these were women and children.¹¹ In 2016-17, 40% of clients seeking Specialist Homelessness Services were experiencing domestic and family violence.¹² This is an increase from the

⁶ valentine, k. and Breckenridge, J. (2016) 'Responses to family and domestic violence: supporting women?', Griffith Law Review, vol. 25, no. 1: 30–44.

⁷ National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence (2018) Path to Nowhere: Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence and Their Children.; National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence (2019) Blueprint for Reform: Removing Barriers to Safety for Victims/Survivors of Domestic and Family Violence who are on Temporary Visas.

⁸ Yates, J. (2017) 'Overview', in P. McClintock, (ed.), Housing Australia, Committee for Economic Development of Australia, Melbourne: 15–34.

⁹ Ibid.; National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence (2018) Path to Nowhere: Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence and Their Children.

¹⁰ See more at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/australias-welfare-2017-in-brief/contents/housing-and-homelessness>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2016-17*, Canberra: AIHW, 2018. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2016-17/contents/client-groups-of-interest/clients-who-have-experienced-domestic-and-family-violence>

previous year and the number of family and domestic violence clients has increased by 33% since 2011-12.¹³

- The 2016-17 AIHW report on specialist homelessness services, including services supporting women and children facing domestic and family violence, found that two in five clients had experienced domestic and family violence.¹⁴ The same report found that on average there were 261 requests for assistance per day that were unable to be met, most commonly because agencies were unable to meet requests for accommodation because there was no accommodation available at the time.¹⁵ The majority of unassisted requests came from people identifying as female (66%).¹⁶
- Almost half were single parents: Nearly half of all clients (48%) seeking assistance for domestic and family violence were living in single parent households (with a child or children), similar to the previous year.¹⁷
- The 2019 AIHW report has found that in short-term or emergency accommodation, women are 5 times more likely than men to seek assistance escaping domestic and family violence.¹⁸
- One in 4 clients (25%) experiencing domestic and family violence were Indigenous, matching the overall SHS population.¹⁹

Women who are living on temporary visas and experiencing family violence face more barriers accessing housing and homelessness services due their ineligibility for social security. The 2018 Path to Nowhere report²⁰ prepared by the National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence found the following:

- Around a quarter (24%) of women on temporary visas (out of 387) were living in crisis accommodation and around one in ten (11%) were living in temporary accommodation.
- Almost one third of the women had been supported by the service for over six months, 8% had been assisted for between a year to two years, and 5% of the clients had been assisted for more than two years.
- Crisis and long-term housing was the service most needed by clients that organisations were unable to provide.

¹³ See more at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/australias-welfare-2017-in-brief/contents/housing-and-homelessness>

¹⁴ See more at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2016-17/contents/client-groups-of-interest/clients-who-have-experienced-domestic-and-family-violence>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2016-17*, Canberra: AIHW, 2018. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2016-17/contents/client-groups-of-interest/clients-who-have-experienced-domestic-and-family-violence>

¹⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. People in short-term or emergency accommodation: a profile of Specialist Homelessness Services clients. Cat. no. HOU 300. Canberra: AIHW.

¹⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2016-17*, Canberra: AIHW, 2018. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2016-17/contents/client-groups-of-interest/clients-who-have-experienced-domestic-and-family-violence>

²⁰ National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence (2018) Path to Nowhere: Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence and Their Children. Available at https://awava.org.au/2018/12/11/research-and-reports/path-to-nowhere-report-women-on-temporary-visas-experiencing-violence-and-their-children?doing_wp_cron=1585695664.5707859992980957031250

In addition, those women who are accessing short-term and temporary accommodation stay there much longer with no exit points. The majority of women on temporary visas experiencing violence are not eligible for social security payments which means that they are unable to move into private rentals and remain reliant on community organisations to fully support them.

Women who become homeless as a result of DFV are also subjected to further gender-based violence. Juliet Watson has shown in her research with young women in Melbourne that in the context of “lack of money, welfare support and social capital meant, for some, their only resource was to exchange sex for somewhere to stay.”²¹ Similarly the US-based study on homelessness, survival sex and trafficking among young people²² in New York identified 23% of young people being subjected to trafficking and survival sex. The study reported “that approximately one in four of the youth either was a victim of trafficking or had engaged in survival sex at some point in life”.²³ The study also showed increased vulnerability and risk of being trafficked for sexual exploitation.

Project Respect, one of AWAVA’s Advisory Group members, works with women in the sex industry and women trafficked for sexual exploitation and also reports that “homelessness and housing insecurity for women with experience of the sex industry, including women trafficked is pervasive and prevalent.”²⁴ In a 100 cases review, 21% of women who used their services were homeless at the time of the intake. The majority out of them were staying in brothels which would not be recognised as homelessness based on the homelessness statistic indicators. Project Respect has reported that is it common for landlords to demand sexual acts from women who are working in the sex industry and threatening to “out” them to their families if such sexual acts were refused. Experiences of family violence were also common among their clients both as drivers of homelessness and “intimate partners forcing and/or controlling women into the sex industry to earn an income and forcing them to perform sexual activities in their home.”²⁵

YWCA National Housing’s report on women’s housing needs in regional Australia has highlighted that of the more than 1000 women living on low and moderate incomes in regional Australia who were surveyed, 63% experienced housing stress, with many relying on options such as couch-surfing or sleeping in a car.²⁶ The same study found that 23% of respondents said their finances and housing had been impacted by family violence.

In 2018 AWAVA conducted a sector-wide survey consulting on the development of the Fourth Action Plan of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children. Availability of housing options for victims/survivors of domestic and family violence has been identified as one of the major gaps in services, as an ongoing pressing concern, as both an area not implemented with the Third Action Plan and an area that would need to be addressed in the Fourth Action Plan. The housing need identified included increasing housing options for women who are escaping DFV; need for tenancy

²¹ Watson, J. (2018) ‘Just a piece of meat’: how homeless women have little choice but to use sex for survival. The Conversation. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/just-a-piece-of-meat-how-homeless-women-have-little-choice-but-to-use-sex-for-survival-101113>;

²² 70% of research participants in the discussed study identified as female people.

²³ Covenant House (2013) Homelessness, Survival Sex and Trafficking: As Experienced by the Youth of Covenant House New York
<https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/Homelessness%2C%20Survival%20Sex%2C%20and%20Human%20Trafficking%20-%20Covenant%20House%20NY.pdf>

²⁴ Project Respect (2020) Submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria.
https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/projectrespect/pages/861/attachments/original/1590045851/Project_Respect_Submission_for_Inquiry_into_Homelessness_in_Victoria.pdf?1590045851

²⁵ Ibid., p12.

²⁶ YWCA National Housing (2020) Women’s Housing Needs in Regional Australia. Melbourne, Victoria: YWCA National Housing https://www.ywcahousing.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/2020_WomensHousingNeedsinRegionalAustralia_SinglePages.pdf

reform to be responsive to DFV; increasing availability of shelters and refuges.²⁷ (The finalised Fourth Action plan is discussed below.)

In 2020 AWAVA conducted a survey with victims/survivors of gender-based violence on their experiences with seeking service support. Access to emergency housing was identified in the top 10 services sought and one of the most-needed services for victims/survivors of domestic and family violence.²⁸ Respondents also raised issues with the current housing eligibility in addition to residency requirements and Centrelink eligibility that included a lack of awareness on the issues of financial abuse. One respondent wrote:

“I wasn't eligible for housing because I earned too much, but I had nothing due to long term financial abuse.” (Respondent ID 115)

Therefore, issues of gender and violence are not marginal to the ‘main problem’ of homelessness and housing areas. They are central. An effective national housing and homelessness policy has to put them at the centre.

A gender-responsive approach to housing and homelessness policy²⁹ in Australia is needed to engage effectively with the structural disadvantages experienced by women generally as well as the particular situations of different groups of women facing housing insecurity and unaffordability. Such an approach would also be focused on preventing homelessness arising from domestic and family violence as well as supporting victims/survivors of violence by ensuring and enabling the focus of specialist services to address and respond to the gendered drivers of women’s experience of violence and homelessness. Recognition that the feminisation of poverty and violence shapes women's housing outcomes is vital to the prevention and responses to homelessness in Australia.

Housing and homelessness commitment in the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children

Although some progress has been made on tenancy reforms, on the whole, the commitments made in the Third Action Plan of the National Plan³⁰ in relation to housing still need to be implemented. These are:

3.3: Strengthen safe and appropriate accommodation options and supports for women and their children escaping violence, including specialist women’s services.

3.3(a) Assess and work to address the immediate, medium-term and long-term accommodation needs of women who are escaping violence.

3.3(b) Increase the stock of affordable, accessible and social housing and the support needed to enable women and their children, if they want to, to stay in their own homes through Safe at Home initiatives.

3.3(c) Improve the availability of accommodation for perpetrators who are removed from the home to ensure the safety of women and children in their homes.

²⁷ AWAVA (2018) Consulting on the Fourth Action Plan of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children. Summary of Survey results.

²⁸ AWAVA (2020) Data analysis report. The role of the specialist women’s services. Survey on the standards of service provision for victims/survivors of gender-based violence.

²⁹ Equality Rights Alliance, AWAVA (2017) A Gender Responsive National Housing and Homelessness Agreement: Joint letter to all Federal, State and Territory Treasurers and Ministers for Housing, Women and the Prevention of Family Violence: https://awava.org.au/2017/10/12/submissions/era-awava-letter-re-gender-responsive-national-housing-homelessness-agreement?doing_wp_cron=1585700676.9206891059875488281250

³⁰ See more at: <https://www.dss.gov.au/women/programs-services/reducing-violence/third-action-plan> See activities 3.3. to 3.3. (e)

3.3(d) Assess the effectiveness of Victoria’s use of Individual Flexible Packages for women and their children who are escaping violence as the basis of a joint review of future funding models, including a possible broader rollout.

3.3(e) Develop national principles for tenancy legislation to ensure consistency across jurisdictions for women who are experiencing violence.

The Fourth Action Plan commits to “Improve access to suitable and safe accommodation within their communities for women who have experienced domestic, family and sexual violence”, but does not initiate any new housing or homelessness measures apart from the \$78 million package announced in 2019.³¹ This is the ‘Safe Places’ package, incorporating capital works funding contingent on applicants securing matching funding and not including funding for case management or service provision, and additional funding for Safe At Home programs where victims/survivors are supported to stay in the family home after removal of the perpetrator. In response to the package AWAVA has reiterated the need to integrate this funding with resourcing to existing specialist women’s services. We have also reiterated the importance of case management to be funded and provided in addition to capital works through the Safe Places program.

We also note the \$150 million package announced by the Commonwealth Government for family violence support as a part of the pandemic response measures, including some support for accommodation and Safe at Home programs for victims/survivors.³² While this funding is welcome, it is time-limited and further investment is needed to address ongoing and increasing need.

Recommendations:

1. Develop a comprehensive gender-responsive national housing strategy incorporating the principles of visibility, capability and accountability, and setting targets for reducing homelessness and increasing affordable housing stock.³³
2. Adequately resource and provide policy direction for the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA), so that it can deliver the housing options needed by the diversity of women and children facing violence.
3. That State and Territory governments expand the eligibility for and provide equal access without any migration restrictions (in line with an existing model in South Australia³⁴) to

³¹ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Social Services (2019) The Implementation Plan of the Fourth Action Plan: <https://plan4womenssafety.dss.gov.au/implementation-plan/>; Prime Minister, Minister for Social Services, Minister for Women (2019) Funding to support women and children escaping domestic violence. Media release, available at <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/funding-support-women-and-children-escaping-domestic-violence>

³² Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Women, Assistant Minister for Health, Minister for Families and Social Services (2020) \$1.1 billion to support more mental health, Medicare and domestic violence services. Media release available at <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/11-billion-support-more-mental-health-medicare-and-domestic-violence-services-0>

³³ This recommendation has been reinforced by: a) Equality Rights Alliance, AWAVA (2017) A Gender Responsive National Housing and Homelessness Agreement: Joint letter to all Federal, State and Territory Treasurers and Ministers for Housing, Women and the Prevention of Family Violence: https://awava.org.au/2017/10/12/submissions/era-awava-letter-re-gender-responsive-national-housing-homelessness-agreement?doing_wp_cron=1585700676.9206891059875488281250; b) Equality Rights Alliance (2020) National Plan on Gender Equality. Affordable and Appropriate Housing for Women. <http://www.equalityrightsalliance.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PRINT-Affordable-and-Appropriate-Housing-for-Women-final-2020.pdf>

³⁴ There is no requirement to meet any visa requirements in South Australia in order to access public housing <https://www.sa.gov.au/topics/housing/public-and-community-housing/register-for-public-and-community-housing/registering-for-public-housing>

temporary accommodation, crisis accommodation, rental assistance, public housing and Safe at Home Programs to ensure that women on temporary visas experiencing violence and their dependants can have a safe place to live and a safe home.³⁵

4. Treat specialist women's, sexual violence and family violence services for women facing violence as a priority program, with dedicated funding in each State/Territory allocation for these services, strengthening services that work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disabilities, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (including migrant and refugee women and women on temporary visas), LGBTQI services and services for women who live in regional, rural or remote areas and services for women exiting prison.³⁶
5. Recognise and support local women's specialist services through increased and longer funding terms and embedded standards reflecting the good practice principles³⁷ developed by specialist women's services over decades.
6. Revitalise housing support systems with a significant and renewed commitment to direct Government investment in public housing. Ensure investment in public housing adequately resources culturally safe and accessible building design standards, to ensure housing location, design and occupancy is equitable for all women and their children.
7. That State and Territory Governments reform tenancy legislation to ensure consistency across jurisdictions for women who are experiencing violence which includes the ability for a domestic and family violence victim to end a tenancy with no cost or penalty or alternatively to take over a tenancy where they were previously an occupant and the perpetrator has been removed from the property by law enforcement authorities.

We also draw your attention and wish to reinforce the 2018 CEDAW Concluding observations recommendation to:

- 5.9. Allocate adequate resources for the implementation of outcome 4 of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against women and their children and enhance efforts to ensure the availability of women-only and women-led support services for victims of gender-based violence.

³⁵ This recommendation has been reinforced by the National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence (2019) Blueprint for Reform: Removing Barriers to Safety for Victims/Survivors of Domestic and Family Violence who are on Temporary Visas.

³⁶ This recommendation has been reinforced by: a) Equality Rights Alliance, AWAVA (2017) A Gender Responsive National Housing and Homelessness Agreement: Joint letter to all Federal, State and Territory Treasurers and Ministers for Housing, Women and the Prevention of Family Violence: https://awava.org.au/2017/10/12/submissions/era-awava-letter-re-gender-responsive-national-housing-homelessness-agreement?doing_wp_cron=1585700676.9206891059875488281250

³⁷ AWAVA (2016). The role of special women's services in Australia's response to violence against women and their children – Policy Brief, 7 April 2016, Canberra: AWAVA, 2016, retrieved from: <https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/awava-cdn/awava/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/01082955/AWAVA-Specialist-Women-Services-Policy-Brief-2016.pdf>

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the access to housing for victims/survivors of domestic and family violence

Past pandemics such as Ebola³⁸ and Zika³⁹ have shown that incidence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) increases, shifts in its nature and affects social and economic opportunities for victims/survivors. Most of the available reports on the increase in SGBV refer to the increase in the instances of domestic and family violence. Requirement to self-isolate and disruptions in access to social networks compounded by the gender drivers of domestic and family violence have contributed to the increase in instance of DFV.⁴⁰ Victim-survivors who have experienced unintended pregnancy during isolation are also less likely to have access to pregnancy options or abortion or adoption, increasing lifelong ties to and financial dependence on abusive partners.

Such increased in the incidence of DFV has been reported in many countries. UN Women have released the most recent data⁴¹ showing an average of 30% increases in calls being reported in France, Cyprus and Singapore. In Australia the following has been reported:

- 50% of frontline domestic and family violence specialists in NSW reported an increase in client numbers in NSW (or 59% in Victoria), 75% reporting an increase in complexity of needs (86% in Victoria), 50% reported an escalation of violence and abuse (also 50% in Victoria) and 47.5% reported an increase in the number of first-time cases since the outbreak (42% in Victoria).⁴²
- 40% increase in women approaching services for emergency assistance.⁴³
- There has been data that Google searches related to family violence have increased by 75%.⁴⁴
- 40% increase in urgent applications to the family courts are reported.⁴⁵
- In Queensland, magistrates have been inundated with cases of domestic and family violence in their courtrooms, and paramedics are getting more calls for help.⁴⁶

³⁸ UNDP (2015) Ebola recovery in Sierra Leone: tackling the rise in sexual and gender-based violence and teenage pregnancy during the Ebola crisis.

³⁹ Oxfam International (2017) Dominican Republic gender analysis: study of the impact of the Zika virus on women, girls, boys and men.

⁴⁰ For more information see: <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/covid-19-women-front-and-centre-1584973401> and <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/emergencies/COVID-19-VAW-full-text.pdf?ua=1>

⁴¹ For more information see: <https://data.unwomen.org/resources/covid-19-emerging-gender-data-and-why-it-matters#vaw>

⁴² For more information see: https://www.womenssafety NSW.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/UDPATE_COVID19-Impact-on-DFV-in-NSW_2.04.20_WSNSW.pdf and https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/Responding_to_the_shadow_pandemic_practitioner_views_on_the_nature_of_and_responses_to_violence_against_women_in_Victoria_Australia_during_the_COVID-19_restrictions/12433517

⁴³ Source: <https://www.9news.com.au/national/coronavirus-domestic-abuse-women-seeking-help-hotlines-decline/147704ae-3f8f-42ca-97a3-3605bf95f5e2>

⁴⁴ <https://7news.com.au/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/coronavirus-lockdown-results-in-75-per-cent-increase-in-domestic-violence-google-searches-c-901273>

⁴⁵ Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/live/2020/may/08/coronavirus-australia-live-news-national-cabinet-scott-morrison-nsw-victoria-lockdown-economy-latest-updates?page=with:block-5eb4f9e28f0858b1a8106471>

⁴⁶ Source: <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/queensland/queensland-courts-inundated-with-domestic-violence-cases-amid-lockdown-20200506-p54qis.html>

- In Qld, reduction in sporting injuries and road trauma has been partially offset by trauma caused by domestic and family violence and service providers had reported a dramatic increase in the brutality and severity of attacks on women and children.⁴⁷
- In Victoria, presentations to St Vincent's hospital related to family violence had more than doubled in the first quarter of 2020 compared to 2019.⁴⁸

Where a decrease in calls or service access has been reported, generally it has been found that it was not as safe for individual women to be in touch with services, due to proximity/surveillance by the perpetrator or not having phone credit or data to reach out for help. inTouch Multicultural Service Against Family Violence reported that a number of our clients expressed that there was no longer a safe time to talk to their case manager and they have subsequently disengaged from the service.⁴⁹

Some of the reported impacts of the pandemic in the context of family violence and access to housing included the following:

- With no access to income support, women on temporary visas become even more dependent on abusive partners and have limited opportunities to leave abusive relationships.
- Women, particularly older women and women with psychosocial disability, whose housing crisis pre-dates COVID19 and who may have been staying with family and friends or in temporary accommodation at camping groups have found themselves unwelcomed in their previous arrangements and have had to move to rough sleeping arrangements and into deeper crisis.
- Victims/survivors who lose their income have limited ability to leave violent relationships. This, compounded by increased demand for crisis accommodation in turn, may force them into homelessness if they do separate. This is especially true for women living in regional, rural and remote locations where there are limited emergency housing options available.
- Increased demand for crisis services and accommodation is limiting safe exit points.

AWAVA has run a survey with victims/survivors of domestic and family violence and services assisting them with housing to capture the impacts of the pandemic. Individual respondents raised the following issues:

- An increase in the incidence and severity of family violence, including escalation of financial abuse;
- Women who left their abusive partners during the pandemic found it difficult to find affordable housing as well as in some cases problems with securing their own places due to a lack of rental history under their names.
- 67% of respondents who did not make an attempt to leave an abusive partner reflected on the barriers. These included financial constraints, fear of losing connections with family and friends, having already left and return and having a disability that exacerbated restrictions on movement.

Services (N71) that filled in the survey reported the lack of affordable housing, social and public housing and other housing options for victims/survivors of domestic and family violence. A lack of long-term

⁴⁷ Source: <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/queensland/queensland-courts-inundated-with-domestic-violence-cases-amid-lockdown-20200506-p54qis.html>

⁴⁸ Source: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-09/victoria-family-violence-cases-double-at-melbourne-hospital/12227594%20>

⁴⁹ Source: https://intouch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/inTouch_COVID19IssuesPaper_April2020_website.pdf

and affordable housing options places a burden on specialist women's services and limit exit options for victims/survivors of domestic and family violence.

"A lack of affordable housing options created a gridlock within our refuge. This ultimately means we are unable to offer adequate support to many families who require this. We have many women residing in high security refuge, who no longer require such security, however are unable to move on due to a lack of options."

"In rural and regional areas there are very long wait lists for public housing and the private rental market is too expensive for women and families fleeing domestic violence. I know of one family who is couch surfing amongst friends at present whilst various service providers try to secure permanent housing for them. There needs to be a massive injection of funding to provide appropriate hard infrastructure to support women and children."

"There is a lack of social housing which means that women and children are vulnerable to homelessness or unstable accommodation and food insecurity when they try to establish a new home."

"We are in a remote mining town and housing is predominately utilised by those employed by the mining company. If the perpetrator leaves the victim has no rights to remain in the house. Private rentals when found are exorbitant ie, \$1100.00 per week. There is a shortage of housing in the town. People can remain on Department of Housing houses wait lists for years."

"There are not enough permanent or transitional housing available for women and children escaping FDV. In order to receive this benefit the women have to have a 'justice' response and this makes it difficult for women to feel safe when not wanting justice/ Police involvement and would feel better developing a safety plan."

"It has been very difficult to secure any longer term accommodation for clients that is affordable for people who are dependent of Centrelink"

"Extremely difficult to finding housing for clients due to the COVID restrictions. More of our DFV clients have found themselves homeless as unable to return home, have no family that will take them in and difficult to source sort term accommodation with closure of caravan park, motels in a small community. travel passes where difficult to obtain without assistance."

"Affordable housing should be a priority for Federal, State and Local governments."

Escalation of family violence was also identified including compounded financial debts, impossibility of victims/survivors to approach services with perpetrators of violence being always around and returns to abusive partners due to lack of other options.

"Unsafe home environments which escalates violence. Rent arrears are a huge issue with women experiencing huge amounts of debts"

"We are receiving a high number of calls from people who are experiencing housing insecurity of homelessness. This has become more frequent and more severe during the covid-19 pandemic. Very often callers are unable to leave violent living situations because of their inability to access housing due to many factors, often specifically linked to the family violence they are being exposed to and the lack of housing support that is available."

"We are seeing situations of overcrowding and stress as a response to homelessness during the pandemic, with some clients telling us that they are tempted to return to unsafe DFV situations in order to have stability and space."

Lastly, a lack of enforcement of perpetrator accountability and removals of perpetrators as also reported:

“Our service supports women experiencing DFV and there have been numerous examples of police refusing to remove perpetrators due to the pandemic or using the pandemic as a reason not to remove violent offenders, which has resulted in women either having to stay with the perpetrator or attempt to access refuges which have been limited due to COVID 19.”

Recommendations:

That the Australian, States and Territories Governments:

1. Increase investment in Safe At Home programs from \$18 million to \$180 million and States and Territories Governments match this investment so that victims/survivors who want to be supported to stay home safely aren't forced into homelessness.
2. Provide additional funding for refuges and specialist DFV services to provide specialist outreach, support and safety planning where necessary remotely and if appropriate to support women and children being placed in temporary accommodation.
3. Increase capital works (expand and extend the Safe Places program) to increase refuge supply in light of the potential surge in demand once immediate crisis is over.

We thank you for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry. If you would like to discuss the contents of the AWAVA submission further, please contact Dr Merrindahl Andrew, AWAVA Program Manager, using the details below.

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