

This article acknowledges the diversity of Australia's First Nation Peoples, that sovereignty was never ceded and that this land always was and always will be Aboriginal land. Aboriginal is used in reference to the information utilised from Aboriginal Housing Victoria's documents and research, therefore does not speak for all Aboriginal peoples or for all First Nation Peoples in and of Australia.

There has been increasing awareness of the statistics of women aged 55 and over experiencing homelessness in Victoria and Australia more broadly. The 2014 report '*Older Women's Pathways Out of Homelessness in Australia*' found that women in this age group may have limited superannuation, minimal work experience and potentially inadequate financial literacy from time unemployed due to caring responsibilities and unpaid labour. Therefore many older single women may be living off welfare payments with minimal savings while renting in the unaffordable and unsustainable private rental market. The 2014 report states that older women are more likely to be the 'invisible homeless', both physically and statistically; more likely to couch surf, live in their car or at home under threat of violence than be sleeping rough¹. This physical and statistical invisibility means that appropriate and specific services, support, referrals and housing are minimal. It also means on a policy level there is limited government understanding of what is needed to not only support older women out of homelessness, but prevent homelessness or housing instability occurring in the first place.

Within this unseen, vulnerable minority of older women exists a population of women who experience further barriers, historical and personal, to secure appropriate and affordable housing – Aboriginal women. In colonial Australia physical and statistical invisibility, discrimination and oppression is chronic for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. 2017 marked only the 50th year that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples were acknowledged in the Australian Bureau of Statistics' population estimates². Prior to this, settlement for Aboriginal Victorians involved forced removal from community and country, forced removal of children, deprivation of language, culture and self-determination and socioeconomic exclusion and disadvantage.

Aboriginal Housing Victoria's (AHV) 2016 '*A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy*'³ asserts that due to prioritising unpaid caring responsibilities over accessing paid employment and accruing super-annuation and savings, Aboriginal women, like all women, experience economic and housing instability in older age. This same document highlights that for Aboriginal women, their caring responsibilities often extend to not only care of their children and grandchildren, but the

¹ <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2014/04/older-women-among-australias-hidden-homeless/>

² <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs%40.nsf/mediareleasesbyCatalogue/E31B62F372FC7BCECA2581320029DC01?OpenDocument>

³ http://ahvic.org.au/cms_uploads/docs/ahv-gender-equality-consultation-paper-march-2016.pdf

children and grandchildren of those in their broader kinship and community networks. In the 2016 *'Closing the Gap'*⁴ report it was found that the employment rate for Aboriginal women is 41.2%, compared to 50.2% for Aboriginal men. As of 2014-15 statistics, non-Aboriginal women and men were employed at 65.1% and 78.3% respectively⁵. This information paired with the fact that Aboriginal women generally have children at a younger age, often have more children, have a higher chance of experiencing family violence⁶, and a younger mortality rate than the broader Australian community⁷, means that in older age they are more severely disadvantaged when it comes to securing safe housing that suits both their physical needs as well as their cultural needs. It is vital to consider that Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings of home and homelessness differ; the Australian Bureau of Statistics' definitions homelessness do not capture Indigenous perspectives appropriately. Spiritual home and homelessness; connection to country, language, community and culture is not understood or considered in government data collection⁸.

'A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy' also found an over-representation of Aboriginal Victorians in the homeless population. It was found that not only were Aboriginal clients more likely to be female, compared to non-Aboriginal clients (62% to 57%), but most significantly in the 55 and over age group, 62% of clients were Aboriginal with only 49% being non-Aboriginal. As outlined by Aboriginal Housing Victoria, this presents particular repercussions for women in general, but specifically to female Elders. These issues can be regarding their health and support needs, cultural needs, their ability to obtain affordable housing and their ability to remain connected to economic, employment and education options.

This limited access to physically, culturally and spiritually sensitive support services and housing options has the potential to compound historical and personal traumas, and further promote disconnection to place and country, family, kin, community and culture. The ongoing social and economic exclusion of female Elders and future female Elders in turn, limits the community authority, wisdom and support that these Elders can provide to the younger generations in passing down the traditions, cultures, practices and languages that survived colonisation. All women over 55 who are experiencing housing instability or homelessness have a human right to live in a home that feels safe and comfortable, with access to specialised and appropriate

⁴ https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/closing_the_gap_report_2016.pdf

⁵ <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4125.0~Feb%202016~Main%20Features~Economic%20Security~6151>

⁶ http://ahvic.org.au/cms_uploads/docs/ahv-gender-equality-consultation-paper-march-2016.pdf

⁷ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/indigenous-health-welfare/indigenous-health-welfare-2015/contents/life-expectancy-and-mortality-key-points>

⁸ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/836e0f83-0fff-492f-8862-8ae43ceb6ab4/17595.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

supports. But it is vital that Australia's First Nations older women who are experiencing homelessness are recognised, supported, listened to, and empowered to live in self-determined physical, spiritual, social, and cultural safety; for themselves and for future generations.