

Keeping the Roof Over Her Head: Precarious and Lost Homeownership Among Older, Single Women

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Introduction

Older woman's home owning status in Australia has been inextricably linked to partnering with a male because historically, single women were denied home loans.¹ A critical life event such as illness, unemployment or loss of partner (and subsequent severance from male privilege) can have enduring consequences for housing security.² Women on average are paid 17 per cent less than men throughout their life course and have half the superannuation and savings on retirement, with 55 per cent of women 60 years and older having no superannuation at all.³ Casualisation, interrupted workforce participation and unpaid domestic and caring labour mean that women have less diverse assets and greater financial risk in later years.⁴ Family violence is the leading cause of homelessness in women of all ages.⁵ Associated financial abuse has multiple impacts including damaged credit ratings and loss of the family home. Older women also have greater barriers to sustaining employment due to age and sex discrimination, and greater pressure to financially support adult children.⁶

There is moreover an emerging cohort of housing insecure older women who are tertiary educated, have conventional employment and housing careers and are former homeowners, challenging the stereotypical view of homeless and at-risk older people as a high needs group already engaged with support services.⁷

Unemployment in older, single women is a major factor in housing stress, with current unemployment benefits up to \$190 per week below the poverty line.⁸ In 2001, women over 50 comprised five per cent of Newstart recipients compared to 20 per cent in 2019, with a

third of women over 55 on the payment for over five years, an increase of 13 per cent since 2009.⁹ Women below pension age are frequently trapped in a punishing 'seeking work' compliance system that fails to recognise employment barriers such as jobs shortages, locational disadvantage, family violence, sex and age discrimination, and poor health.¹⁰ Tightening of the Disability Support Pension (DSP) eligibility requirements has left many women in a no-man's-land of being too sick to work, too young for the aged pension and not sick enough to meet DSP eligibility.¹¹

This article explores two little understood facets of older women's housing distress, precarious home ownership and lost homeownership which are both associated with vulnerability to homelessness and poverty.

Lost Home Ownership

While 28 per cent of Australians currently renting had previously owned a home, for older single women the figure has been found to be as high as 66 per cent.¹² When couples separate, men are better resourced to pay out their ex-partner however disbursements are often insufficient for women to re-enter the property market.¹³ Women retaining the family home are also more likely to be forced to sell in adverse circumstances.¹⁴ Many flee the family home to escape family violence while male perpetrators remain, and after settlement may receive limited or no payouts.¹⁵ Sex-based power imbalances and financial abuse contribute to women falling out of homeownership. Historically, women have been disempowered through exclusion from financial decision making. This subjugation can have severe

impacts on women's housing when it intersects with financial abuse by male partners and/or male relatives.¹⁶

Case study 1

Emma, 61 years

Emma is a mother of two children and an educated professional employed in the health sector. Over decades she had contributed her wage to a shared mortgage and had trusted her husband to manage the family finances. Because 'male as household head' was part of her cultural and ideological schema, she had never questioned him. Her husband unfortunately had channelled the majority of their equity into exploitative criminal activities leading to loss of the family home. Emma and her children were forced to find a rental property and set up house, a difficult task because her husband had drained their joint bank accounts. She now struggles as a sole parent to pay rent and cover living expenses. She has limited super due to interrupted labour engagement, while her husband was able to use his super to purchase another home and hire a lawyer to defend his financial assets. The trauma of betrayal plus her beliefs about marital obligation and right behaviour prevented Emma from pursuing her own legal, financial claims. Her mental and physical health has deteriorated, but she has no choice other than to continue working full time, and, with no savings or assets, she faces a lifetime of renting.

Emma's story illustrates the vulnerability of women to financial abuse within intimate relationships due to their normative, cultural exclusion from financial decision making. Emma also typically retained responsibility for children, giving her additional financial pressure. This case study demonstrates that tandem

factors of financial disempowerment and abuse are strong risk indicators in homeownership loss for older women. For Emma the enmeshed financial, psychological and emotional abuse experienced is likely to have lifelong detrimental effect on her wellbeing and financial and housing security.¹⁷ Higher education and hard work have not provided lasting security for Emma, demonstrating the effects of ongoing, gender based economic disadvantage, and the financial vulnerability of women when separated from male privilege.¹⁸

Precarious Home Ownership

In 2015, 28 per cent of Australians over 55 years were still paying off a mortgage, double the figure compared to 1987.¹⁹ Single, older female homeowners may experience higher levels of psychological distress and ill health when experiencing

financial pressure.²⁰ Divorced women, particularly with children, are more likely to experience mortgage stress, with 60 per cent of women compared to 49 per cent of men, experiencing post-divorce financial hardship.²¹ The high costs of home ownership can also be financially crippling, with a home ultimately becoming a liability for older women with no other assets.²²

Case Study 2

Torey, 64 years

Torey divorced when her three children were small and managed with her payout from the family home to buy an old country town hall, mortgage free. This enabled her to obtain a line of credit mortgage to fit the hall out as a dwelling. 'I wouldn't have got the mortgage without the equity from

the hall'. Torey juggled irregular earnings from her IT consultancy and local jobs, with judicious use of the line of credit. Torey had a chronic illness but in 2008 she became acutely unwell and was incapacitated for four years during which she lost her difficult-to-find job. Upon recovering from her illness, Torey was taken off sickness benefits and put on the dole. In a rural area of high unemployment, she was forced to apply for countless jobs which inhibited her re-establishing her IT work.

Having to:

'impose myself upon business who weren't looking for workers, or when they had 200/300 looking for one job. When they know they don't want you, too old, you feel rejected. I got depressed'.



Photo by Annie Cabrié

Due to Torey's illness the credit had maxed out; \$2,000 of emergency plumbing repairs, a leaking roof, rates. She could never afford insurance. Then at 56 years old, lured by the mining boom Torey went to Gladstone. While camping there in the wet season looking for work Centrelink told her they deemed her home an asset and she was off the dole. She was forced to return home.

Torey then rented her house and worked as a security guard in Canberra. She clawed back her line of credit debt, but her tenants defaulted on the rent and damaged the property, leaving her \$6,000 worse off. Back home again at the age of 60 she managed to stay afloat by getting a house mate and working 12-hour security night shifts in a nearby resort town. Torey has now, thanks to Covid, casual fulltime online work and has managed to drive down the mortgage again. She has no superannuation and the house absorbs all her Centrelink income.

'The house is my other half. I never buy new anything or eat out. I give my adult son \$100 each week if I can. But the leaking roof! Fuck, now what do I do? Start all over again. Start to think about selling.'

Torey's experience highlights the fragile nature of homeownership for older, welfare dependent women with episodic or no employment and a mortgage. Factors include the ongoing support of children, interrupted labour engagement due to ill-health and having no superannuation, savings or assets other than the family home.²³ Additionally, welfare and fiscal policy do not support women like Torey to sustain homeownership, nor does it recognise or respond to the structural, sex-based inequality that underlie housing insecurity for this cohort.²⁴ In Torey's case, welfare policy concerning homeownership has created disadvantage and increased her susceptibility to homelessness, that is, the dearth of local employment forced her to relocate which lead to her being penalised by Centrelink. The psychological cost of constant financial pressure moreover, even for resourceful women such as Torey, takes a heavy toll on physical and psychological wellbeing.²⁵

Conclusion

This article has discussed sex-based inequity and its relationship to housing insecurity for older single, women. The male breadwinning, nuclear family norm that characterised Australia's peak period of homeownership has long passed, yet it continues to exert great influence on policy direction.²⁶ Older female homeowners are highly vulnerable when separated from male financial privilege because they have limited savings and superannuation and often, the ongoing responsibility for adult children. The above case studies of professional, working women and housing insecurity highlight emergent themes around financial abuse, female subjugation and financial disempowerment.

Torey was only able to achieve a home by pursuing an innovative strategy to circumvent her inability to borrow for outright purchase, while due to family violence, Emma was unable able to re-enter the housing market. Both studies demonstrate the fragility of homeownership for women on low and insecure incomes and challenge market liberal assumptions that hard work and education will enable one to 'get ahead' and ultimately move into secure home ownership. It would be far better that government recognise and address older women's barriers to attaining secure homeownership.

Endnotes

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