



THE WOMEN'S HOUSE

Stories of homelessness and hope
in one small town.

Compiled by
Louisa D Pearce
on behalf of the
Maleny Neighbourhood
Centre

The Women's House

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DISCLAIMER: All care has been exercised in the compilation of this resource. Statistics are correct at the time printing, and participants have provided consent for their stories and artwork to be included.

Acknowledgements

We pay our respects to the First Nation peoples of this country and surrounding lands – to both the Jinbara and the Kabi Kabi people; to their elders past, present and future; to their ancestors; to the land that supports us; to the rivers, mountains, forests and earth; to the elements and seasons; and to the animal and plant kingdoms that share it with us.

We would like to thank the participants who courageously shared their personal stories of homelessness, transiency and experiences of staying in the house. Thank you for your insight, suggestions and help to raise awareness of this issue, so that our community can continue to work towards solutions.

We would like to thank all the donors who have given financial or in-kind contributions, and all the volunteers who have given their time and skills.

Without you, this project is not possible.

“When we go walk-about, wherever we go is home.”

—Kabi Kabi woman & emerging elder, Dinnawhan

Foreword

It is easy to walk past “The Women’s House” in Maleny and not know that this attractive and seemingly ordinary house in an ordinary street provides an essential service for women and children experiencing difficulties with housing or homelessness. Over the last few decades, rising living costs and rental competition on the range have created a need for help, and behind the affluent and buzzing Maple Street, the Maleny Neighbourhood Centre (MNC) daily receives visitors who are experiencing hardship.

In true Maleny fashion, solutions arose from within the community. In late 2017, the MNC and concerned locals held a meeting to discuss ways to meet this housing need, and a steering committee was formed at MNC. Community support was sought and \$15,000 of donations was offered by local people, businesses and organisations. In 2018, a three-bedroom house was bought by a local benefactor and offered to MNC at below-market rent. On the 9th December 2018, the first three tenants moved into the house.

This resource forms part of a formal evaluation of the Temporary Accommodation for Women and Children in Maleny that I undertook as part of my Masters of Social Work studies for Flinders University. Over a period of eight months, nine women shared aspects of their stories, their views on The Women’s House, and their wisdom learned from life. Six of the women had been tenants of the house, and three had experienced homelessness or transiency in the area. Some of the women took photos to help capture the experience.

These stories often involved difficult life changes – being forced to move, a partnership break-up, a traumatic event or an accumulation of stresses. Many of the women did not have family or people to count on in times of crisis. They told me how they felt unsafe. Overwhelmed. Invisible. Frustrated. Ashamed to ask for help. Judged. And always in survival mode. Some also felt free, and that they had grown from the experience. These are remarkable women who found their way through tough times.

This resource showcases the women’s stories. As a companion to the full report, it seeks to give voice to the experience of homelessness. It illustrates how we all need each other to live thriving, happy, healthy lives. It inspires us to find creative ways to find housing solutions and solve social problems in our own communities. And it speaks to the growing inequities in our society that render some people invisible and powerless in the social-economic system.

Since the opening in December 2018, the house has provided safe and stable accommodation for 14 women and 11 children. This is indeed something to be proud of.

It has been my honour to be a small part of this process and to provide this resource to assist the longevity of the Women’s House and other accommodation solutions that may arise in the future.

May all people be free and abundant,

Louisa D Pearce

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Snapshot of tenants and outcomes

TENANTS	CHILDREN	CIRCUMSTANCES	STAY AT HOUSE	OUTCOME
14 women aged between 20 and 61 years	11 children aged between a 6-month-old baby to 8-year-old child	1 living in a tent 5 living in cars 3 living with friends 2 staying in motels 1 staying in emergency shelter 1 staying at health clinic 1 staying at ex-partner's house	Between 2 weeks and 7 months	2 found transitional housing 3 found permanent social housing 3 found shared private rental 3 went to live with friends 1 purchased a home 2 still at house

Background

TIMELINE

September - November 2017

- MNC identifies need to assist women and children and holds a community meeting to discuss local ways to meet this need.
- MNC steering committee is formed.

December 2017 - March 2018

- Community support is sought and \$15,000 of donations offered by local people, businesses and organisations.

April - November 2018

- A 3-bedroom house is offered by a local benefactor to MNC at below-market rent.
- Policies, procedures and tenancy leases are organised for a 12-month pilot program.

December 2018

- The first tenants move into the house on short-term tenancies (up to 3 months), with one permanent tenant to look after the house.

March 2019

- A Support Worker is recruited from MNC volunteers to support tenants, improve assessment, and address operational challenges.
- New furniture and household goods are provided for the house.
- Model is changed so that all tenants have temporary leases.

July 2019

- Social Work student is engaged to interview tenants and evaluate the project.

November 2019

- Interim Report is provided to steering committee.
- Committee and MNC Board agree to operate the house as part of MNC core services.

January 2020

- MNC is successful in receiving a Dignity First Funding grant from Queensland Housing to assist with relocation costs for the tenants and help with buying essential items, like whitegoods and linen.

March 2020

- After 15 months, a total of 14 women and 11 children have been provided with accommodation.

HOUSING STATS*

Poverty & financial stress

- 3.24 million Australians (13.6%) are estimated to be living below the poverty line, and 774,000 of them are children under 15.¹
- The poverty line for a single adult is \$457/week.²
- The Newstart Allowance rate is \$300/week (\$600/fortnight) for a single person with no children, while the Disability Support Pension is \$425/week (\$850/fortnight).³
- 43% of people on Newstart Allowance are classified as “people with partial capacity to work” (having a physical or mental health disability which affects their employment).⁴

Housing costs

- Housing costs in Australia have risen by an average of 4% a year from 2007 to 2017; this rise has unequally affected those on lower incomes, rising by 42% in the ten-year period for low income earners, compared to 15% for middle income-earners.⁵
- “Housing stress” is defined as a household that use more than 30% of their income on rent or mortgage repayments; single pensioners are facing “extremely to severely unaffordable” rent, where between 50 - 90% of income is spent on rent for a one-bedroom unit.⁶
- About 80,000 single mothers with low incomes are paying between 40-70% of their income on rent, therefore experiencing moderate to severe housing stress.⁷

Homelessness

- Women are the fastest growing demographic facing housing stress and homelessness, especially single mothers and women over 55. In the 5 years, there was a 31% increase in women who were homeless.⁸
- People experiencing serious mental health conditions have an 89% increased likelihood of financial hardship and a 39% increased likelihood of being forced to move within one year of onset.⁹

* Statistics are accurate at the time of writing.

References are available at the back of this publication.

Lisa: Following her Intuition

When I meet with Lisa for our interview, she tells me that our meeting is a “lesson in asserting herself” to leave her house, to come to a community space and tell her story. We meet in the garden, sheltered under trees; appropriate for Lisa as she is so connected to nature. She dreams of living sustainably, with permaculture principles in a like-minded community.



A year earlier, Lisa chose Maleny for a fresh start. As she drove through the hills into the township or the first time, she knew she was in the right place. She was leaving behind another life in another state. She was a long way from “home” but admits that this old home had been her “torture chamber”.

Following a workplace assault three years prior, Lisa had suffered both physical and psychological trauma. Crippling depression and social anxiety led her to completely isolate herself. She describes herself as being a “prisoner in her own home”, grappling with increasing suicidal thoughts and feelings. Making a new start was literally a matter of life or death for Lisa.

Lisa has a knack of combining intuitive wisdom with practical, hard work. She arranged for a two-month stay at a mental health clinic, where she learnt many coping strategies to help herself. But as mental health professionals know, it can take years to heal from trauma, so when Lisa left, she was still emotionally vulnerable. She booked some short-term accommodation but the lodging didn’t have locks on the doors – for Lisa, this created too much anxiety to bear. Not feeling safe, she left and booked a room in a motel.

It was at the motel that Lisa learnt about the Maleny Neighbourhood Centre, and within a few hours she was connected to the Support Worker who was able to offer her a room at the temporary house. Lisa describes the chain of events as being magical and “meant to be”:

“I felt so honoured and privileged... it made me feel like I could finally breathe. And actually rest. I feel really blessed and lucky that the universe was looking out for me, and I’m actually listening. I know when listen to myself, that doors do open. So that’s the thing I’m learning about myself.”

Lisa is shy about calling herself homeless, explaining it was only for a short period and that she had some money to use if she needed it. I reflect that it could be better to help someone before they entirely “slip through the cracks”; Lisa concedes that this is exactly what the house gave her. She had been thinking of buying a car and sleeping in it, but wonders how she would have managed that, given her anxiety. As she puts it:

“I personally don’t know whether I would feel safe enough. Because of my past experience, I’d just be petrified of a night. Sometimes I just hear a gumnut drop and I’ll have a panic attack. And being a woman on your own, people see you as an easy target.”

Thankfully, Lisa never had to sleep in her car – she is now living in permanent accommodation in the area and is creating the dream life she wants. We talk about the growth and learning that came from her experience, and Lisa shares her hard-won wisdom:

"I work hard, I do work hard every day. And I try and challenge myself. You can be in paradise and make it a prison... if that's where your mind takes you. Or you could be in prison and be free, I know you can do amazing things with your mind if you set your mind to it."

Elsa: Spiritual Catharsis

Elsa is a graceful, softly-spoken woman in an age demographic that is getting more media attention these days: the "over 55s". Sitting in her newly accommodated unit in Brisbane suburbia, Elsa describes the long journey that brought her here, and the profound affect it's had on her life.



Like many women, Elsa can trace the path to homelessness to her divorce a decade earlier, when she "came out with nothing" and had to raise four children on her own. When the kids left home, Elsa was unable to pay the rent of the large house on her own. Down-sizing efforts were futile – Elsa could find scant accommodation in the hinterland that a single woman on a Disability Support Pension could afford.

She found herself drifting, staying with friends, sleeping in garages, gardens and sometimes in her car. Weeks turned into months, and then into years. In all, Elsa spent two years surviving this way. She describes this time of her life as exhausting, a time when she lost her confidence, creativity and identity:

"I'm a creative type but my artistic juices have shrivelled up. I didn't do any art for 2 years... I lived in a friend's backyard in a tent for six weeks ... it's all about surviving rather than connecting and thriving. I'm a nature person and a people person, and when you're homeless, you disconnect from that as well because it's all survival and there's fear involved. It was really, really hard... it basically broke me."

As Elsa tells me her story, she serves me salad and falafel wraps. She likes to be healthy and to look after herself but her health had suffered whilst being homeless, as she could no longer prepare fresh, wholesome food. She described the expensive living costs of food, groceries and fuel. And she spoke of intangible challenges, like judgment and stigma:

I've encountered some rather serious judgment when I was homeless... people who look at you and blame you. And some people are against handouts and helping and people think "shut up and take what you can get".

Despite living through a suffering which few could imagine, it is Elsa's strength and dignity which strike me. I ask if she has gained anything from her experiences, and she is emphatic:

"I've learned a lot in some ways and I'm grateful to the experience in some ways because it's cathartic for me spiritually. I've had to do a lot of work on myself but it's not just that, it's a whole

process... For a woman who's on her own and being vulnerable, security is an issue... there are practical issues... but spiritually, it shifted me a lot, in a good way... I'm actually really grateful that I've been brought back to my centre more."

For Elsa, that centre is her spirituality. As she looks around her new abode—the social housing unit she has been provided with—she has mixed feelings; she hasn't really settled in and she doesn't want to live in the city. She feels isolated and unhappy. Yet she brings herself back to gratitude. She was thankful for The Women's House and for all the support she was given there to find this unit, and to find her way out of homelessness. It's a stepping stone, we agree.

A few months later, when I update Elsa about the project, she is in a happier state of mind. She has continued with her spiritual practices, finding ways to be present and at peace. She reflects on how much she has grown from her experience of homelessness, as she says:

"It was part of the process I needed to go through. It was humbling. You can only grow when you're humble."

Ann: Freedom on the Land

In a small, unnamed park in a back street of Maleny, there is a magnificent tree providing shade to people and shelter to wildlife with its broad branches and dense foliage. Walking through this park one day with Ann, she tells me how she had donated that tree as a seedling for the park. Ann is now in her 70's. She tells me too of the Davidson's plum trees that line the small creek nearby – forest food that only a few locals know about.



Ann and I discuss how when a person is transient, they come to know the land in ways other people don't.

Ann has not been a tenant of The Women's House yet she has much to teach me about "homelessness". Although Ann has no fixed address, I hesitate to say she is homeless. Social services and disconnected government departments would classify her as such, but the word "homeless" fails when home is the land. Much like the words "place" and "country", there is an implication of something much deeper, something cultural and spiritual that transcends the definition of "four walls and a roof".

Ann lives in a van, travelling between various base camps and towns in this area that she has called home for as long as the tree has been growing. A true free spirit, she describes how she broke away from years of programmed fear that was instilled from her cultural upbringing and her father's teaching that "it's a cruel world".

She recalls a time when she was too frightened to go into a pub or restaurant by herself. She sees many women now who are afraid of life – and especially afraid of nature and of travelling or camping

alone. However, a series of major mid-life changes in her 50's propelled her into a life on the road, where she gradually learnt to embrace her freedom and personal power, and to trust the land to protect her and share its secrets.

"All my magic moments have been in the wild. Something happens in the park, it's exhilarating. There's paradise wherever you go, if you look for it."

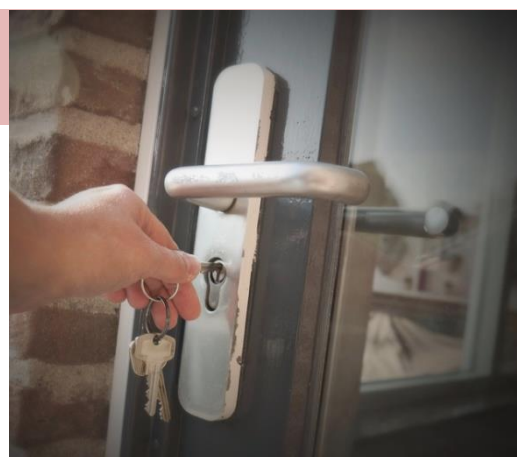
But there are challenges too. She feels upset about the price of simple things that should be free, like water. She has been asked to pay money to fill up her water containers and finding "free taps" is difficult. She dreams of places for nomadic people like her, where these comforts can be easily accessed at sporadic times. Walking through town with Ann, she notices how the council spends money on bus shelters and playground equipment, and muses that it would be just as easy to make some shelters for transient people to use.

With her cheeky sense of humour and child-like wisdom, Ann seems resigned to seeing the world differently to others. Social services have tried to put her into permanent housing but she felt stuck and miserable in these places. She wants her freedom and connection to country; it's simply too valuable to give up: "These experiences I've had; you can't buy that. I could have lived in suburbia but I would have gone mad", she explains.

Ann's housing solution is for a safe, temporary boarding house in the area. A "come-and-go-as-you-please" type of place. Something that helps people but doesn't keep them stuck.

Debra: Resourceful Resiliency

There are stereotypes of homelessness that conjure visions of extreme poverty, extreme ill-health or extreme ill-fortune. But in Australia today, with living costs and housing deficits, it is relatively easy to fall into the category of "homeless" without being extremely *anything*. It can happen simply because of timing, like it did to Debra.



When we met for a chat at a local library and Debra's story unfolded, I found myself admiring her resourcefulness and resiliency to survive as an independent woman through some tough life challenges. Now in her fifties, Debra had escaped domestic violence and raised three children on her own. She had no family to rely on and lived with chronic anxiety and depression, which had made it all but impossible to get and keep employment.

So Debra had industriously created an income by buying, renovating and selling houses. As home-owners and investors know, the timing of sales is critical and it can be easy for all of your money to be tied up with the banks. This is exactly what happened to Debra, leaving her penniless and homeless as she waited for settlement dates and other legalities.

Debra had tried to plug the gap with short-term shared accommodation but the arrangement fell through when she did not feel safe with her male house-mate. This theme of safety is common for women. Homelessness is not something you plan – it can easily happen when fleeing accommodation in fear. Yet as Debra discovered, sleeping in her car provided little refuge:

I went to stay at a caravan park but they wouldn't let me because they knew I'd be sleeping in my car. A few times I slept in the street, like behind the pool, but it's just very unsafe. You never really slept, you're always on guard...and my vehicle wasn't a van that was covered in or anything, mine was a [wagon] you could see straight into. It wouldn't be hard for someone to break into it.

Debra spent four weeks living this way, and in this time her mental and physical health declined significantly. She tried to seek help at the local hospital but was turned away for not being “acutely ill”. Debra says she wasn’t suicidal but was despairing. A bout of flu pushed her to then seek help at a local neighbourhood centre, where she was guided to the temporary house in Maleny.

“I do think that the house was my saviour at the time. I don't know what would have happened... I would have tipped over the edge ... whether I would have gone banging on the hospital door to get in because I needed somewhere safe to stay...”

The house gave Debra much-needed safety as she waited for her new house to be available and for her funds to come through.

Months later, as she settles into her new life, she reflects on the damaging stereotypes about homeless people. She herself had felt stigmatised and had told no one about her circumstances, other than the neighbourhood centre. She has compassion for people going through hard times and is motivated to now help others.

“I think a lot of people don't realise that a lot of the woman that go to the house are not drug dependent and they're not on alcohol, they're not spending their money on frivolous things... We don't want to be in that situation, we know we can do better, we're striving to get there and there's just that little stumbling block that we need help with.”

Jane: The Invisible Cage

When I talk to Jane she is six months out of homelessness, having found a place to rent in the local area. The strain of two years of couch-surfing and living in tents or cars is still visible as she tells her story. She admits she is far from recovered and she hopes that voicing her story will help her and others:



"I have felt really strongly that I want that story to be out, and not just for me. During the whole experience I felt so voiceless and unseen. And that whole experience was earth-shatteringly, massively stressful and traumatic, and to be invisible in that kind of desperate condition and feel voiceless was horrible."

The theme of "invisibility" runs like a delicate but essential thread through Jane's story, echoing what other women have told me. Jane goes so far as to describe the experience as "an invisible cage" which others could not see, and which prevented her from participating in life and expressing herself. As much as she wanted help, she found it difficult to share her troubles, even to friends and family:

"It's hard for people. You can apply it to any situation; when someone doesn't understand what you're going through. On the outside they're like, 'why don't you just get a job?' You tell that person your sad story several times and they don't want to hear it anymore, or even if they don't say it, they start to give you silent judgment. I didn't feel like I had anywhere to go to share it."

The silent judgment of others was compounded by Jane's own sense of failure and self-blame over the circumstances that led to her homelessness, even though such circumstances can easily happen to anyone – especially to sole parents on low incomes. Jane had already been struggling to maintain a private rental and was going without food at times to pay the rent, before the owners decided to turn the dwelling into an Airbnb. Becoming homeless, things quickly went from bad to worse. Her freelance employment required her to present well to people, yet her mental health was crumbling after years of trauma. Most painful of all was that Jane had to relinquish care of her child during her time of homelessness:

"And so added to the whole picture of things spinning around in my messy head was what a failure I was of a mother ... that plummeted me into a nasty mental state, and from there I had trouble finding work."

She describes this as a "vicious cycle" which few people understand or appreciate. This period also sowed her seeds of contempt for the social-economic system, or the "rat race game" as she calls it, that forces people into poverty. Jane was born in this area and has lived here her whole life, yet she feels she has been pushed out of her own land because of rising prices and affluent newcomers. Whenever she drove past an empty house, she found herself wondering with a child-like sense of injustice, "Why is that house empty and I'm not in it?" Jane shares her anger with candid honesty when she says:

"After about 18 months of being in and out of peoples' lounge rooms and spare rooms and gardens and tents and cars, I found myself walking down the main street of Maleny and seeing all these beautiful people who have really comfortable, lovely, rewarding, beautiful lives ... the ones that have happy marriages and healthy children who go to the lovely school and they have

promising careers and they have enough money, and I found myself just seething with hatred at these people, because they had what I didn't have... I'm born here, how come I can't live here? I was raised in this society, and somehow I'm an outcast. An invisible outcast."

Jane's struggle to find a home in her native land eventually paid off when she found a private rental. But she feels far from secure and, as she vividly describes, moving into a home after being homeless does not bring the relief one might imagine, as suddenly there are new pressures – pressures to pay rent on low income and pressure to fill the house with all the things you need. As well, there is an emotional collapse that accompanies post-homelessness, a view that was shared by all the women I spoke to. Jane called this the "fall apart" stage:

"Because everything that had to be held together could now fall apart in privacy, and that wasn't small. But the 'fall apart' was concurrent with the need to pay the rent... Falling apart with the simultaneous requirement to be the sole householder and make a functional economic situation work..."

Jane says recovery from the experience is slow. Homelessness necessitated the shutting down of aspirations, dreams, desires and creativity, so that basic survival needs could be met, and re-connecting with a sense of joy and safety has not happened automatically. As Jane puts it:

"Every day there's little things that unravel ... it takes courage to let free the little, tender yearnings that want to propagate plants. I was so used to 'not going there' with different yearnings that relate to home; not going there with acquiring a nice something or other to put in your home, or not going there with getting this cheap bulk food so you could have it for later, or not going there with having a plant because there was nowhere to put it. Now I have a plant and it looks like I could propagate it, and so ... Do I dare to let myself have that joy? Is it safe for me to trust that I will be here long enough to do that?"

I still have that thought. I still have my stuff in suitcases. I haven't let go of the boxes. I've still got my stuff ready so that I can zip it up and I will be out of there in half a day if I had to. There's this real thing about what I'm allowed to be, and how I'm allowed to be, and how much I'm allowed to enjoy having a home ...I think it comes from all these things that people take for granted about being in the world, they were just sort of shut down."

Like Jane's tender yearnings for homely things that she is slowly allowing to grow, she also reveals the tender gifts that came from the experience of homelessness. She is thankful for the deepening of connections with loved ones and friends, and for meeting the "homeless people" that seem invisible yet are there, even in towns like Maleny. She praises places like the library, which provide essential services and a non-judgmental welcome. She has found compassion for people from all walks of life and a sense of "home within" that can never be lost.

Given that Jane felt so voiceless during her experience, it seems apt to ask her what message she would like to give to the people of her community. She says:

"I guess I have a message for the wealthy people who are living comfortably. I would like them to be aware that there are a lot of people who have the same aspirations to community and lifestyle as them who are really struggling to be here, and that they could help them... help them by making their properties available for rent - that's a very simple thing."

Homelessness, like any complex circumstance, does not come out of nowhere, nor can it be ascribed to a single cause. There are nearly always multiple stressors which contribute to the eventual act of leaving a home with a few possessions and no clear plan. When asked to describe the preceding circumstances, the women spoke about the following:

Relationships ending: the ending of marriages or long-term relationships was commonly the catalyst for precarious financial situations. Some of the women were trying to raise children as sole parents with very little income. Two of these women cited domestic violence as the reason for leaving the marriage.

Financial hardship and lack of employment: most of the women were struggling to survive on either pensions or the Newstart Allowance. Finding secure work was not possible due to being in constant 'survival mode', raising children or significant health challenges.

Housing affordability: most notably in the Maleny area, it was difficult to find low-cost housing and two of the women who were born in the area found themselves being economically displaced. There was perception that the short-term letting market had dwindled private rental supply, especially of secondary dwellings.

Mental and physical health: many of the women cited significant mental and/or physical health issues that had existed prior to becoming homeless, and which acted as significant barriers to gaining reliable employment and securing accommodation. Mental health issues stemmed from previous traumas, including workplace assault, workplace bullying, domestic violence, and childhood trauma.

Safety: three of the women became homeless due to feeling unsafe in their accommodation.

IN THEIR WORDS

Housing affordability

"So I was a separated parent on a sole income and the place that I was living in was being sold out from underneath me and turned into an Airbnb... I [was] eking an existence, with hungry times where there wasn't enough money for food. However, still, there I was... I was out and there was an Airbnb. So this is where the seeds of contempt [began] that people could do that ..."



Mental health

"I don't like the word but I use it because it's what people know... I had PTSD, childhood trauma, trauma from my marriage, domestic violence... So my emotional state can tend to be vulnerable and with stress it's not very good..."

"So I got to the point where I was doing everything... that I'm supposed to do, but it just didn't get any better... And then I just thought about [suicide] like I'd almost done before and that's when I realised I didn't want to do that. So I was like, "Oh my God, I can't stay here". Even though I loved my little house, it became my torture chamber... I was like a prisoner in my own home..."

For some women, homelessness was a traumatic experience in itself which impacted their ability to function, let alone thrive. Others emphasised the positive aspects of freedom and connection to the land. All of the women were able to cite something helpful or beneficial that emerged from their experience, and at the same time, there were many painful discomforts. Common themes were:

Isolation and lack of family support: this was due to a range of reasons such as estrangement from family; not feeling emotionally safe with family; geographical distance from family; and shame or pride. Some of the women struggled to share their problems for fear of judgment.

Mental and physical health: mental health issues were exacerbated and without adequate support, these issues then impacted their ability to change their circumstances. Five of the women also had significant physical ailments whilst homeless and many said they were unable to eat healthy diets, which further impacted their health.

Expenses: Three of the women talked about how hard it was to survive financially; they explained there were burdensome expenses, such as petrol and food, which particularly had an impact.

Possessions: Some women spoke about the worry and burden of carrying around their possessions in boxes, suitcases or cars, and the emotional heartache of not being able to buy the things they needed or wanted for lack of money or space.

Support services and amenities: some of the women expressed frustration or anger at the lack of housing support available, the degrading application process, and the long waiting lists for single women under age 55. One of the women found social housing options intolerable when compared to her freedom on the road. But she also was frustrated at the lack of amenities that would make “life on the road” easier, such as simple shelters, free water taps or wifi. Another participant spoke of the importance of the local library, in providing non-judgmental help and amenities.

IN THEIR WORDS

Family

“Because I’m co-parenting, and because I care for my son to not be dragged through transient situations, because I didn’t want him in the car or in a spare room and stuff like that, I left him in the care of his father. And so added to the whole picture of things spinning around in my messy head was what a failure I was of a mother ...”

Mental health

[Being alone] is one of the hardest things. And you’re still alone and you still have your disabilities of anxiety and depression in this busy world. You’re still doing it on your own. There’s not really any support there unless you have family support, you pretty much having to cope the way you can.

Diet

“You’ve got no way of preparing it, so you end up buying fast-food, so your health is affected. My diet changed because I was constantly on the move. I wasn’t able to have fresh stuff as much, so there was a lot more junk involved or pre-made food.”

Expenses

“There’s nothing cheap about living out of a car, because you have nothing to be able to store cheap food, make food at home, like it’s just a cycle like that. And even to try and eat healthy food, to keep yourself in good condition, it’s really expensive. And if you need to buy it from the shop every day, you can’t.”



Safety: Four women spoke about safety concerns and the fears of being assaulted. Conversely, one of the older participants had reconciled her fears about safety after years of transiency, and she felt liberated from this.

Identity, stigma and judgement: Six of the women spoke about challenges to their identity and worth; these challenges came from self-judgment and from others. Along with losing a place to call home, the women often lost work and jobs, ability to contribute, and even caring duties for their children. They lost self-esteem, self-confidence and creativity. They found it hard to interact socially when in a constant state of “survival” and crisis. Some were angry over the injustice of homelessness and the feeling of being invisible or ostracised in one’s own town. This anger went hand in hand with feelings of shame.

Positive aspects and gifts of learning: The women spoke of learning about compassion for others, and of deepening understanding of the homeless community. Some of them expressed gratitude for the help they received from the community. Some shared insights about spirituality – finding their “home” or “centre” within. For others, the gift was a sense of freedom and liberation from a social-economic “system” – these women challenged society’s conservative definitions of home, replacing it with connection to oneself, the land and nature. There was an appreciation for the magical moments that transiency could bring.

Gifts

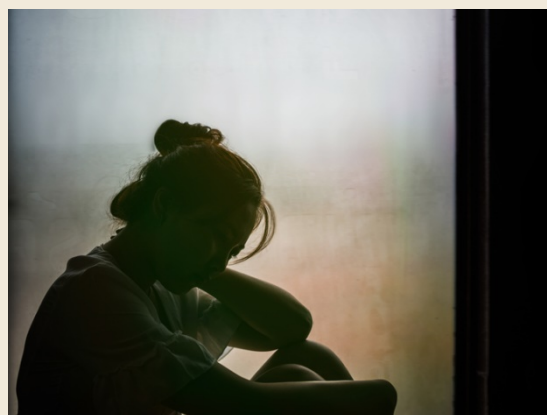
“People in this community seem to be more open to helping people. And they do see people and they do say hello to you in the streets, and that really struck me.”

“It’s still there and will continue to be there forever... it was the amount of compassion I gained for people in any circumstance. That you can just not know what’s going on in the background of someone’s life to explain why they are or where they are. That was a really huge gift that came out of it, a gift of insight.”

IN THEIR WORDS

Identity and stigma

“During the whole experience I felt so voiceless and unseen. And that whole experience was earth-shatteringly, massively stressful and traumatic, and to be invisible in that kind of desperate condition and feel voiceless was horrible. If it were an image, it’s this kind of invisible cage, an invisible cage that I moved around the world in, with all these interlocking panes of glass which has some aspect that is an unspoken one, and an unrecognised one, and it’s a block that says “I can’t do it, I can’t...”



“I do wish I’d taken a photo of my car... you know, everything that one could possibly need was pared down to the absolute minimum. It looks pretty ugly, right, so then there’s the blanket that goes across so no one can see what’s underneath that, right. And then there’s the shame if you forget to put the blanket there... the shame...”

“I’ve never not worked. And I was a single parent before I studied. It’s very important to me personally, as well as to teach my son. I don’t want to just sit at home and do nothing. And that’s why ... I spiralled into some crazy depression. Because I just didn’t have any value in myself because I wasn’t contributing anymore. I wanted to work. I even tried to go back early but that just traumatised me even more. So for me, to have not even a job is really ... uncomfortable to admit to people. I am actually doing a job; it’s just not valued or named. I’m looking after myself.”

Note: The views are from the women who resided in the house at different times over the course of a year – in that year, the house operations changed to rectify problems and improve things. A description of these changes over time is provided in *The Evaluation of the Temporary Accommodation for Women and Children in Maleny*, March 2020.

At the time of interviewing, six of the women were/had been tenants of the house. They gave detailed feedback about their experiences, and data was also collected from seven feedback forms. All of the women indicated that the house met their expectations as a stepping stone for permanent accommodation. During the interviews, they also gave feedback and suggestions on ways the house could be improved. The common themes were:

Gratitude: All of the women expressed gratitude for the time spent there and for the additional supports provided. Gratitude was especially given for the Support Worker's help and for the little touches that made them feel cared for, such as the weekly fruit and veggie box, and the provision of household supplies.

Sharing with strangers: The women found it difficult to share with strangers, particularly when feeling vulnerable and stressed after a period of homelessness. They acknowledged the role of trauma, domestic violence and mental health issues in these difficulties. Problems arose such as: over-sharing stories with each other; isolating (staying in their rooms) due to fear or mistrust; isolating due to feeling uncomfortable in each other's company. Three of the single women felt that that having children around adversely affected their mental health. Age differences were also cited as being counter-therapeutic for the older women. On the other hand, some women saw the positives of companionship and of learning to share a house with others.

Conflict between tenants was identified by six tenants. The issues ranged from fairly "minor" issues (such as washing machines being used late at night or

IN THEIR WORDS

Gratitude

"It's such a beautiful house. I thought it was going to be this run-down, beaten house... because I have lived in places like that as a child, so I didn't think it was gonna be so beautiful, so beautifully presented."

"I'm so grateful, it just made me feel like I could finally breathe. And actually rest. It gives you faith in humanity again. That people actually do give a shit about you, even though you're nobody to them. And you know it's genuine, it's not put on. That's what makes a difference – it's real, it's not pretend. It's not pity, that's what it is, it's not pity. I just felt really grateful."



Sharing with strangers

"It's not a quiet space, the floorboards, the echoing... there's nothing to absorb the noise. I don't think that house is suitable unless you have it available for all singles or all people with kids."

"If you get women to share, they become more confident and can perhaps go on to share a house."

Conflict

"[MNC management] said we're not here to counsel but I really think there needs to be something set in place for the women. Everyone's coming from a crisis. You put a number of stressed, vulnerable, damaged, traumatised women into a soup-pot and expect it all to go well, it's not."

furniture being moved), to more serious breaches of house-rules. Mediation of such problems proved challenging as MNC staff tried to strike a balance between helping the tenants versus expecting the tenants to resolve their own conflicts.

Emotional support: Three of the women wanted more emotional support to be available, such as formal and informal counselling, and/or supportive group activities, like basket-weaving, art or picnics in the park. Although they understood that the house required them to “live independently”, they also pointed out the reality that tenants are invariably traumatised and in need of support. They felt that this level of emotional support was beyond what should be expected of a volunteer.

Practical support: The women also spoke about the value of practical supports, from housing referrals and help filling in forms, to the provision of household supplies. They articulated how the stress of homelessness had eroded their capacity to navigate welfare, housing and legal systems. They were also grateful for the supports and activities at the neighbourhood centre, and in the town generally.

House rules and operations: There were not many comments about the house rules and when they were mentioned, it was positively. Two of the women commended the use of privacy locks on the doors as helping them feel safe. Three participants felt that the model of the ‘head tenant’ as a permanent resident (which had been used originally) would be beneficial provided it was a suitably skilled and caring person.

“Oh, [the fruit box] is just like amazing... it gives you faith in humanity again. That people actually do give a shit about you, even though you’re nobody to them. And you know it’s genuine, it’s not put on. That’s what makes a difference – its real, it’s not pretend. It’s not pity, that’s what it is, it’s not pity. I just felt really grateful.”

IN THEIR WORDS

Emotional support

“I think the house does need [therapy support]. That do need to have someone on call... because some of the conversations, I don’t want to be having those conversations with those people... you’re only a person going through this experience as well, and it’s just too much.”

“[The volunteer Support Worker] would come on Wednesday but you don’t have your issues just on one day. I think if they’re going to have a support house for women then they need to have some emotional support as well.”

“When you land, the shit hits the fan emotionally. It’s like hitting a wall. You’re in survival mode and then “boom!” You land.... it’s happened to me before. I really crashed and burned because I’m so exhausted and overwhelmed, and you’ve never had the time to process how yuck everything was.

Practical support:

“[The volunteer support worker] was good too in terms of resources, like when she connected me to St Vinnies in Nambour, like, that was amazing, because ... when I’m under stress, I can’t concentrate. I was dreading filling out forms and [the support worker] from Vinnies did all the forms for the housing. And I mean, I’m in here just a couple of months after it all happens, and some people are on a waiting list for years, so... you need guidance when you’re under stress and confused and emotionally battered and exhausted. It’s exhausting! Being homeless is exhausting!”



Photovoice

The women were invited to take photos that represented their experiences of homelessness. These photos have been taken by them, unless others stated. A few of the women gave me images which I then took photos for on their behalf. I wish to thank them for allowing them to be shared.



It's really difficult having to carry everything you own everywhere, as I have a bad shoulder from a previous work injury from years ago. It's takes a huge toll on my body physically as well as emotionally, with people looking at you as a homeless person.



Broken, Lost & Alone.

Lost and alone in this crazy world

Where do I fit into the broken pieces of this world ? Where can I open & keep my head and heart safe.....I don't know??



Somewhere to Call My Own

If only I had my own address! It makes it hard to apply for jobs & other accommodation without a fixed address.



Where is Home??

Always on the road trying to find somewhere to call Home."



The IGA community board. I go there regularly to know what's going on in the community. And if there are rooms available, or a car... but you've gotta go regularly and daily, because I almost got a car but one guy beat me to it. Like things go quickly. But then I suppose if it's meant to be, its meant to be.

**photo taken by researcher*



Blinded in Uncertainty

Even in short term accommodation you don't feel truly safe.

As you never know who your next housemate might be?

Will we get along?

Will they accept me?

Will someone come into your room if I'm out?

Will this locked door keep me safe??



Ann is concerned about the price of simple things that should be free, like water. She has been asked to pay money to fill up her water containers and finding "free taps" like this one in the park, is difficult.



The tree in the local park that Ann donated as a seedling – she has her roots deep in this land.

**photo taken by researcher*



"We all need homes" is Ann's message. In her chalk drawing, she draws symbols of home: a dolls house, a nesting box for a bird and a kennel for a dog.



Cooking... You miss cooking for friends and loved ones. Or even a normal meal



Ann dreams of places for nomadic people like her, where comforts can be easily accessed at sporadic times. Walking through town, she notices how the council spends money on bus shelters and playground equipment, and muses that it would be just as easy to make some shelters for transient people to use.



"That public library supports so many people. It is one of the greatest assets to this community, that library and the staff there. They're very supportive, they're very non-judgmental, and so many ... I tell you, the homeless people of this town rely on that library for the wifi, and for the information that's in there, and for the seats and the shade and the tap and the plug... and the smiley people in there..."

*photo taken by researcher

Everyday there's still little things that unravel ... it takes courage to let free the little tender yearnings that want to propagate plants. I was so used to not going there with different yearnings that relate to home... not going there with having a plant because there was nowhere to put it.

*photo taken by researcher

Afterword

If this resource has inspired you or raised awareness of this issue, then its purpose is fulfilled.

While the social causes of homelessness are complex and overwhelming, in small towns like Maleny, we have opportunities to truly help.

We are all in this together.

Want to know more?

This resource is only a small part of this project. Please contact Maleny Neighbourhood Centre for a copy of the full report, entitled *The Women's House: Evaluative Report of the Maleny Temporary House for Women and Children* (March 2020). The author can also be contacted at louisa@louisadpearce.com.au

Want to help?

The Women's House does not receive any government funding and relies solely on donations of money, in-kind support or volunteer time. If you wish to give any or all of these gifts to this project, please contact:

The Maleny Neighbourhood Centre
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Phone 5499 9345 or Email: info@malenync.org.au
www.malenync.org.au

That's all everybody wants, is just to be seen. That's what it comes down to.

—Lisa

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- ~ All of the donors who provided the finances, services or in-kind support for The Women's House;
- ~ All of the volunteers and MNC staff who helped make this project possible and continue to work hard to provide this ongoing service;
- ~ All of the women who participated in this project and shared their stories.

Donations are welcome

The Women's House does not receive any government funding and relies solely on donations of money, in-kind support or volunteer time.

We need funds for everyday expenses to keep the house running and to help provide a comfortable home for the women.

If you wish to donate time, money or services to this project, please contact us.

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