

Media Release

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A Home of One's Own: solving the homelessness crisis for older women and single mothers across Australia

- ***Older women are the fastest growing group of homeless people, with 15,000 women aged over 55 expected to be homeless by 2030.***
- ***Domestic and family violence is the greatest cause of homelessness, with more than 9,000 women becoming homeless each year after escaping violent homes.***
- ***Two thirds of private renters are in income stress; disproportionately affecting women***
- ***It's time for social investors and philanthropy to help drive housing innovation.***

A new report has highlighted the heightened risk of homelessness for older women and single mothers and has called on the private and philanthropic sector to invest in social housing to help alleviate the worsening housing crisis in Australia.

The report, *A Home of One's Own: Philanthropic and social sector solutions for women's housing* – commissioned by Australians Investing in Women and undertaken by Per Capita Executive Director Emma Dawson – outlines how older women and single mothers are at much higher risk of homelessness and severe financial stress.

CEO of Australians Investing in Women (AIW), Julie Reilly, says that amid falling levels of home ownership, the number of Australians living in expensive private rental accommodation continues to grow, disproportionately affecting women who are much more likely to spend a larger proportion of their income on private rental housing.

“This report reveals a devastating situation where older women are the fastest growing group of homeless people, and the greatest cause of homelessness in Australia is domestic and family violence,” Ms Reilly said.

“Now, more than ever, targeted interventions through government policy and philanthropic investment are needed to provide safe and affordable accommodation for women.

“This report makes a stark case for a gender lens to be applied to housing innovation, with women at such higher risk. Our message to funders of social housing investment (philanthropic, impact, commercial or government) is that a gender lens must be applied to your funding decision and AIW can connect you to the experts who can help.”

Over five years, the number of homeless older women grew 30 per cent to 6,866 in 2016, a trend which will see 15,000 homeless women aged over 55 by 2030.

“It is also heartbreaking that many women experiencing domestic and family violence face a choice of staying with their violent partner or becoming homeless. Each year in Australia, 7,600 women return to live with violent partners, while 9,120 women become homeless after escaping violent homes,” Ms Reilly said.

The AIW Per Capita report found about a quarter of Australians rent in the private market, with rents growing 9.5 per cent in the year to June 2022. Two thirds of private renters with low incomes are in housing stress, with 20 per cent spending half their income on rent. Older women and single

parents are more likely to spend a larger proportion of their income on rent and women are disproportionately represented in this group.

“The great Australian dream of owning your own home is increasingly out of reach for low-income earners with home ownership falling from steady rates of 70 per cent to 65 per cent in 2016. If that trajectory continues, by 2030 home ownership is likely to fall to 60.5 per cent,” Per Capita Executive Director Emma Dawson said.

“This is especially worrying for women who are more likely to live in private rental accommodation and spend a large proportion of their income on rent. Couple this with the imbalance in lifetime earnings and superannuation saving between women and men and we can expect this crisis of housing insecurity and homelessness for women to only worsen.”

Other key findings of the report include:

- Single older women are more likely to live in unaffordable private rental property, and a third of all women aged 65 and over rely on the full age pension as their sole source of income.
- Single mothers with school-aged children suffer significant housing stress and insecurity.
- Without policy changes to make housing more affordable for people to buy, we can expect to see increased risk of housing insecurity and homelessness for women over the next few decades.

“State and Federal Governments investment in social housing is welcome, but other initiatives from the private and philanthropic sector will play a big role in investing in alternative forms of rental housing, developing new financial products for underserved mortgage borrowers and funding charitable interventions aimed at reducing women’s risk of homelessness,” Ms Dawson said.

The AIIW Per Capita report highlights potential solutions including:

- The development of innovative new financial services models to support self-employed Australians to access capital for housing. Banks are currently reluctant to write mortgages to self-employed people, which puts women at a disadvantage when 12 per cent of Australia’s working women are self-employed.
- Philanthropists and social housing providers creating custom-built properties to provide social support to women and children fleeing domestic violence.
- Expanding the housing cooperative model, which is popular in many countries but houses only 8000 people in Australia. There are clear benefits of cooperative housing, particularly for older single women and the sector is poised for growth.
- Connecting older women who may be ‘asset rich, income poor’ retirees with women experiencing housing stress who have their own income streams but don’t own their own home.
- Encouraging private investors to fund equity in social housing, where people can buy or build dwellings without paying for the land.
- Calling on social impact and large institutional investors to enter the build to rent market with affordable housing for low-income families and middle-income key workers. Build to rent housing schemes account for about one fifth of the commercial rental market in Europe.

“The only way we can solve Australia’s housing crisis is through significant and innovative investments in social housing. Ensuring these investments address the disproportionate impact on women, must be a focus of governments, business, community and philanthropic organisations,” Ms Dawson said.

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A Home of One’s Own: Philanthropic and social sector solutions for women’s housing is available at aiiw.org.au

About Australians Investing in Women (AIW): *Australians Investing in Women is a leading national not-for-profit advocate for gender-wise philanthropy and works in partnership with philanthropic, corporate and community leaders to drive progress towards gender equity. AIW takes an evidence-based approach to strengthen society by catalysing investing in women and girls within Australia and globally. For more information, visit aiiw.org.au*

About Per Capita: *Per Capita is an independent progressive think tank dedicating to fighting inequality in Australia. We work to build a new vision for Australia based on fairness, shared prosperity, community and social justice. For more information, visit percapita.org.au :*