



Australian Women Against Violence Alliance

Senate Standing Committee on Economics  
Economics Legislation Committee  
Parliament House  
Via web form at <https://www.aph.gov.au>  
Date: 15 December 2017

### **Submission on Treasury Laws Amendment (National Housing and Homelessness Agreement) Bill 2017**

Thank-you for the opportunity to make a submission on the Treasury Laws Amendment (National Housing and Homelessness Agreement) Bill 2017.

#### **About the Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA)**

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, and women's legal services, as well as organisations representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, young women, women educators, women in the sex industry and other groups. AWAVA's lead agency is the Women's Services Network (WESNET).

As our submission on this Bill, we provide the following excerpt from our submission to Treasury on priorities for the 2018-19 Budget. We also refer the Committee to a submission on the 2018-19 Budget prepared jointly by AWAVA with Harmony Alliance, the National Women's Alliance representing the concerns of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. This joint submission contains recommendations for implementing action 3.8 of the Third Action Plan of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children, which addresses the need to ensure migration rules and eligibility requirements for support services do not disempower victims of violence or discourage them from leaving violent relationships. This action and the recommendations made by AWAVA and Harmony Alliance in the joint submission have important implications for policies to prevent and respond to homelessness, and for the provision of housing support to women in insecure migration situations.

### Housing and homelessness services for women and children leaving violence

Women are the primary beneficiaries of housing support systems, making up the majority of public housing tenants, Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) recipients and people approaching specialist homelessness services.<sup>1</sup> Six out of ten homelessness service clients in 2014-15 were female.<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> In 2015-16, 38% of SHS clients had experienced family and domestic violence and 92% of these were women and children.<sup>4</sup> The number of family and domestic violence clients has increased by 33% since 2011-12.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> The majority of unassisted requests came from people identifying as female (66%).<sup>8</sup> Therefore issues of gender and violence are not marginal to the 'main problem' of homelessness and housing; they are central. An effective national homelessness policy has to put them at the centre.

A gender-responsive approach to housing and homelessness policy<sup>9</sup> 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 if the new National Housing and Homelessness Agreement is to reshape housing systems in a way that does not disadvantage women.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA) and Equality Rights Alliance (ERA) 2017, Submission to the Productivity Commission Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services Draft Report, P.5 <http://www.equalityrightsalliance.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/AWAVA-and-ERA-Submission-to-PC-Draft-Report-on-Human-Services-20170714.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015, Specialist Homelessness Services 2014-15: Clients, Services and Outcomes, Australian Government, Canberra

<http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/specialist-homelessness-services-2014-15/clients-services-outcomes/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/australias-welfare-2017-in-brief/contents/housing-and-homelessness>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> <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>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2016-17/contents/unmet-demand-for-specialist-homelessness-services>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2016-17/contents/unmet-demand-for-specialist-homelessness-services>

<sup>9</sup> <https://awava.org.au/2017/10/12/submissions/era-awava-letter-state-territory-governments-re-gender-responsive-national-housing-homelessness-agreement>

Together with other peak bodies, we are concerned that under the new agreement the social housing and homelessness sector may be expected to increase its capacity without additional investment.<sup>10</sup> While reforms are needed, these must be implemented in a way that does not exacerbate the pressure on service providers and social infrastructure, recognising that these are already over-stretched and under-funded. As AWAVA has previously stated, substantial additional investment is needed to meet housing needs and provide homelessness services.<sup>11</sup>

We note that the Third Action Plan of the National Plan<sup>12</sup> includes the following commitment:

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.

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.

In order to meet this commitment, it is vital that the Commonwealth's commitment to the new NHHA includes funding increases and that the new Agreement embeds principles of gender-responsiveness within a broader national strategy. These principles must include measures to strengthen the position of specialist women's services and the provision of competent gender-informed support by other services.

Alongside the new Agreement, there are key immediate steps that the Australian Government can take to assist women who are in temporary migration situations and are facing family violence, and to ease pressure on the services attempting to support them. Recommendations on these issues are contained in a joint pre-budget submission by AWAVA and Harmony Alliance.

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<sup>10</sup> NSW Housing and Homelessness peaks- Statement on the confirmation of Commonwealth funding, July 2017 <https://files.tenants.org.au/resources/2017-NSW-Housing-and-Homelessness-peaks-Statement-on-the-confirmation-of-Commonwealth-funding>

<sup>11</sup> Australian Women Against Violence Alliance, 2017, Pre-Budget Submission, 19 January, [https://static.treasury.gov.au/uploads/sites/1/2017/06/C2016-052\\_Australian-Women-Against-Violence-Alliance.pdf](https://static.treasury.gov.au/uploads/sites/1/2017/06/C2016-052_Australian-Women-Against-Violence-Alliance.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.dss.gov.au/women/programs-services/reducing-violence/third-action-plan>

AWAVA endorses the recommendations made by Council to Homeless Persons<sup>13</sup>, and recommends that the Australian Government:

- 1. Significantly increase spending on social housing to meet growing demand.**
- 2. Develop a federal strategy to end homelessness that addresses critical drivers of homelessness, including social security spending, family violence prevention, and measures to deliver affordable rental housing.**
- 3. Work to ensure that the new National Housing and Homelessness Agreement is introduced as a package negotiated and agreed with the States and Territories, together with the accountability measures (what the Agreement aims to achieve), and the performance framework (how the measures will be monitored).**

In addition we urge the Commonwealth to:

- 4. Together with the States and Territories, adopt a gender-responsive approach to housing and homelessness policy, as outlined in a recent joint letter to all jurisdictions from AWAVA and ERA.**<sup>14</sup>
- 5. Take immediate steps to ensure that any agreements (bilateral or overarching) addressing homelessness include the requirement not only that State/Territory strategies include measures to support women and children escaping violence but also that funding spent under these strategies goes to services with specialist capability to address the gendered dynamics of violence and homelessness<sup>15</sup> (i.e. specialist women's services and/or generalist services with documented specialist capability.)**

Once again we thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the Bill. If you would like to discuss the contents of the AWAVA submission further, please contact Merrindahl Andrew, AWAVA Program Manager, using the details below.

Merrindahl Andrew

Program Manager

Australian Women Against Violence Alliance



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<sup>13</sup> <http://chp.org.au/news-and-events/emails/sector-bulletin-1-november-national-housing-homelessness-agreement-nhha/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://awava.org.au/2017/10/12/submissions/era-awava-letter-state-territory-governments-re-gender-responsive-national-housing-homelessness-agreement>

<sup>15</sup> <https://awava.org.au/2017/08/10/research/brochure-unique-role-specialist-womens-services>