

The First Ten Years: 1974-1984. Women's Refuges in NSW and Australia

Part Three: Out of Canberra and Back

Expansion or consolidation

By 1980 the NSW women's refuge programme was one of the largest funded by Youth and Community Services. It had survived federal cutbacks in the previous year which had seen women's health centres funding reduced by 30% and violent reactions to the budget such as the storming of the Sydney stock exchange by trade unionists. Unlike other programs in community health, refuges were still receiving 75% of their funding from the Commonwealth, and had experienced spectacular growth since the Fraser government came to power, from nineteen Australian refuges to ninety-five. The Australian government hailed this expansion as one of its major achievements for women at the U. N. Decade of Women Conference in July 1980. Yet demand continued to outstrip supply, doubling in NSW over 1979 and 1980. As the refuge liaison officer noted in her 1980 progress report: 'there would seem to be infinite scope for expansion', but what concerned her was the effects of a policy of expansion on the state of existing refuges.

While the NSW received the lioness share of federal refuge funding, when distributed between twenty-nine refuges the average relegated NSW to fourth behind Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania. In Victoria expansion had been capped, because the sixteen refuges and their administering department saw themselves as highlighting the deficiencies in community resources rather than trying to provide them. Victoria also had a state award covering refuge workers. As a consequence, Victorian refuges were on average the highest funded in the country, if only able to accommodate a third of the women seeking refuge. The immediate effects of lower average funding in NSW were to keep wages low and working conditions poor.

What (they) see as significant funding, we have begun to see as the most exploitative system of cheap and concerned labour since marriage and the nuclear family. Women's refuges have always suffered from inadequate funding and built-in volunteerism. In the 1979-1980 year, an estimated 100,000 hours of voluntary labour (an equivalent of 59 full-time positions) have kept NSW refuges functioning as crisis services. On top of this, paid workers have not been allocated wage increases for three years, not even consumer price indexation, nor overtime, sick, holiday or replacement pay. (Marrickville Women's Refuge 1980)

A choice had to be made between expansion and consolidation. The liaison officer argued for a policy of consolidation, and in her budget estimates submitted for funding to bring full-time staff in all refuges up to a minimum of nearly four at

salary rates recommended by the Australian Social Welfare Union (A.S.W.U.). The refuges could not stomach the choice. There were up to eight new refuges waiting for full funding. Funded refuges felt a real sympathy for them. Many workers could remember their early years without funding and how committed they had been to keeping their refuges going. They also had to reconcile turning homeless women away with the goals of personal gain in the form of better wages and improved conditions. It was a dilemma they felt powerless to solve.

The Union

Union membership, though, was growing, and by early 1980 a policy for wages and conditions had been hammered out with the ASWU. This development caused a heated debate at the refuge state conference (Newcastle, February), where a number of feminist anti-union positions were put. It was argued that the refuge movement was capable of fighting its own industrial battles and could do so without a traditionally patriarchal union movement. There was opposition to the role of the Union in industrial disputes within collectives and a fundamental resistance to refuge work being seen as a job. There was still a body of thought that refuge work was a stage in a woman's developing political commitment, not a career to be pursued for personal gain.

The A.S.W.U.'s national organiser, who attended the conference and faced a stiff barrage, wryly concluded that women's refuges presented the Union 'with one of its most interesting challenges to date' ¹, and the Union had faced a few. The ASWU had grown out of a professional association of social workers, registering as a federal trade union in June 1976. A national award campaign to cover all welfare workers in the award-free area was launched, but having realised the enormity of the task and the limits of their resources, the ASWU concentrated on an award for Community Youth Support Scheme (CYSS) workers. The Union met with powerful opposition from the Commonwealth, the major funding source, and from other unions, who had woken up to the tact that the industry non-government welfare was booming with fresh, non-unionised workers who could be poached from the puny ASWU. Once again, the ASWU was forced to shorten its sights, to concentrate on industrial goals at a state level.

The Union was having more success with its policy of equal opportunity for women. The first national organiser and secretary were women, and women's caucuses were set up to encourage women to take up more positions in the union. A 1980 ACTU report on the integration of women in trade unions held up the ASWU as a success story, with women as federal president, secretary, and treasurer, as state industrial officers and as many branch officials. Following the refuge conference in Newcastle, it was the women's caucus that drew up an industrial policy for collectives, the first of its kind in Australia. The policy supported the collective form of work organisation as a 'revolutionary alternative to traditional hierarchical work situations' and committed the Union to 'responding

to the stated needs of collectives'. As for industrial disputes in collectives, the policy stipulated:

Where an industrial dispute arises between a member of the ASWU working in a collective and the collective, the Union will only intervene when all possible attempts have been made to resolve the dispute within the collective. That members with experience in collectives be encouraged to take responsibility for the handling of industrial disputes affecting members in collectives.

Any hopes for a rapid improvement in industrial conditions were dashed when the NSW government in its 1980 budget ignored the consolidation recommendations and pumped much of the extra \$600,000 into four new country refuges (Inverell, Moruya, Como and Maitland). Frustrated, refuges at their next state conference (Coffs Harbour, November) unanimously called for direct action to achieve a greater balance. As a safeguard, the conference supported a resolution that all refuges would back any action taken by an individual refuge or a group in the campaign. Fighting words, but less than a year later the refuge movement was in tatters over this very resolution.

An ambitious movement

The last refuge meeting in 1980 had an almost holiday atmosphere. Delegates stayed in caravans by the sea and bathed in the warm waters after sessions. They laughed at the Big Banana and ate North Coast Indian cuisine together. They had done what seemed so improbable only three years before. Through their common experience they had welded together a strong movement. Everyone was on first name terms and women from every corner of the state and from the poles of style and background met again as friends not just colleagues. Despite the budget setback, they adopted an aggressive outlook on the funding future and were prepared to support each other in any necessary campaign. They had a string of ambitious initiatives planned for 1981. They were well established, and could now afford to undergo a thorough evaluation of their services, to participate with the State government in a taskforce into domestic violence, and to expand the borders of their programme to new types of refuges and services.

The evaluation was another brainchild of the liaison officer. She had long resisted pressure from the Commonwealth for a conservative evaluation, but felt that this pressure could now be turned to the refuge's advantage if they initiated their own evaluation using their guidelines as criteria. The evaluation was to be 'a study to look at women's refuges aims, future directions, areas of need, funding inadequacies, quality of care, and to establish that refuges are a vital service in the community'.² Three more ex-Marrickville Women's Refuge workers were employed to conduct the research on thirty-six refuges.

When working against domestic violence, refuges had constantly found themselves isolated. Their most problematic relationship was with the police, who were happy to bring women and children to refuges but not to charge and remove the men from the family homes. The refuges wanted domestic violence treated and punished as a form of assault like any other. Legal reform in this area interested the Women's Co-ordination Unit. As early as April 1978 the Unit had organised a seminar for women's centres on domestic violence and a series of legal options were discussed at a meeting of State Women's Advisors in late 1979. In 1980 the NSW Premier announced the creation of Australia's first Task Force into Domestic Violence.

Since the days when the open-door policy was reversed and priority was given to women and children escaping domestic violence, the problems of other homeless women had continued to haunt many refuge workers. It felt like unfinished business, especially as knowledge grew of the complex factors contributing to homelessness and the often arbitrary labels attached to need. The homeless had problems with alcohol or substance dependency, poor physical and mental health, and most had experienced family violence at some or many points of their lives, problems compounded by their poor access to public housing. The refuge movement had supported a series of submissions for what was described as special needs refuges. These had made no progress until the repeal of the Summary Offences Act de-criminalized prostitution, and prostitutes, many of them young, became a visible presence on the streets around Kings Cross and Darlinghurst. An alarmed public called for government action, and as part of the pacifying package, two new refuges, Women's Place for drug and alcohol affected women, and Single Women's Refuge were state funded in early 1981.

A submission for a refuge for women with mental health problems was less successful. They were a group no one wanted to take responsibility for. As the Minister for Youth and Community Services had said: 'responsibility for such women lay in a grey area where Community Services and Health Commission functions overlapped'.³ Or as Betty Harding from Blacktown refuge remembers it: 'Getting one Minister to talk to you is hard enough, trying to get two is nearly impossible, especially as quite often they dislike each other intensely'.⁴ Workers at Blacktown refuge, freed from the restraints of their management committee, set up a working party called Women in Limbo, to step up the campaign. They had no illusions that this would be an easy campaign, realising that at this stage the government was not keen to support a community based alternative to the mental health system.

There had been ongoing progress on the public housing front. By the end of 1980 the number of women from Sydney refuges who successfully applied for special allocations through the Housing Commission rose to a staggering 70%. The downside was that most were sent out to the new estates on Sydney's western fringes, where basic facilities were still scarce, and women were cut off

from family and friends, jobs and services. Special allocation housing also remained largely unavailable in country areas. The improvement in Sydney allocations did expose the refuges to periodic accusations from other community housing groups and even the Housing Commission that women used refuges to jump the housing queues. It was probably a fair comment.

Trouble in Canberra

Then the storm broke, and it was in Canberra that the trouble started. The Commonwealth had activated an expenditure review committee, a 'razor gang', to scour the public sector for savings. Relationships with the Commonwealth had soured over the Victorian addresses issue, creating an uneasy mood to the third national refuge conference, meeting in Canberra in March 1981ⁱ. Tempers flared during a meeting with bureaucrats, who could answer none of the direct questions about the future. The federal health minister thought he could, and assured the conference that funding was safe under his party's government. Refuges were, as they had been assured in the past, one political football that would not be kicked around Canberra. No one left the conference feeling reassured.

Two months later the trimming began. Refuges would no longer have money earmarked for them in the federal budget. The States would receive lump sums, general revenue grants, and would distribute these as they saw fit. Since 1976 these grants had been falling behind the inflation rate, so in effect the Commonwealth passed onto the States the dirty work of making the cuts. Refuges would find themselves in direct competition with other health services such as hospitals and women's health centres for a share of the diminishing cake.

An emergency meeting was held at Marrickville Women's Refuge. Workers from the Sydney Rape Crisis Centre, which was directly affected, attended and argued forcefully for a united front of women's services to fight the federal decision. There was an immediate rift. Feminist refuge workers felt a sense of solidarity with other women's services. They saw their services as complementary. They also understood that isolated centres such as Rape Crisis and the Women's Information Services for would be far more vulnerable under the new funding arrangements than the large and well-organised refuge programme. They were appalled to find that other refuge workers did not automatically share the same outlook, and refused to join the proposed coalition. The sense of solidarity between refuges extended only to the refuge movement. Tribalism had been mistaken for awareness.

Underestimating the depth of opposition to a coalition, feminist refuge workers continued to organise a response to the federal government with other women's

ⁱ The second had met in Adelaide in August 1980 and had concentrated on the attacks on women's services.

services. A 'women's services campaign' was launched, which called for a Women's Service's Program, triennially and nationally funded under a special purposes grant, and administered federally by one department. The campaign was to have no effect on the Fraser government. It was precisely this type of special purpose grant, a leftover from the Whitlam years that they were trying to phase out.

There were early rumours that the old tease Social Security might pick up the tab, and a refuge delegation rushed to Canberra to see the Minister, but it came to nothing. The trip was not entirely wasted. It gave some delegates an opportunity to see the Minister for Health and harangue him for his duplicity. Outside Parliament House, busloads of workers and residents were arriving for a demonstration. Tired of shouting at walls, they filed into Kings Hall, the lobby of the building. Security guards stood by in confusion as refuge children irreverently festooned austere statues of foreign Kings with placards and balloons. The mood hardened as members arrived for the sitting. Hissing and chanting, the women and children sat down occupying much of the hall through which members had to pass. Government members darted past with averted eyes. Several ALP members stopped to offer moral support. A small group of women discussed charging into the belly of the building to occupy the Prime Minister's office. Certain suicide, it was decided.

So the women and children left, but were back a week later though this time they were violently thrown out by Commonwealth police. There were ugly scenes on the steps of Parliament, captured by the media. The right of women to use unfeminine tactics to defend their interests was hotly debated. It provoked a mixed response: 'Politicians should not be subjected to physical harassment while going about their duties in Parliament' thought the Sydney Morning Herald editorial on June 4th. Some may have thought it brought a little of the reality of daily life for thousands of battered women closer to those protected politicians. In the National Times of June 7th, Anne Summers returned to the fray, comparing the very different treatment meted out to film industry lobbyists, who were at the same time were being rewarded with millions of dollars through tax benefits to investors in film. 'Of course the film lobbyists did not blow whistles and embarrass members by their radical appearance'. Nor did the media show such qualms about the safety of politicians when two years later retrenched steel workers from Wollongong stormed into Kings Hall. They were defending their jobs in a manly way.

The violence inflicted on women in the Parliament had outraged Labor members, especially in the Senate, and they mobilised to at least save the refuge programme. Women from all parts of Australia stayed in Canberra to lobby, many camping outside Parliament in mid-winter. The lobbying was furious and enough government senators were said to be wavering to carry an opposition amendment exempting the refuges. The amendment was debated on the night of June 5th. Women from the galleries called out to the Coalition senators to cross

the floor, but party discipline held them in their seats. As they left, defiant refuge workers shouted: "We'll be back" and they were right.

In a last ditch effort Neville Wran called for a moratorium on the transfer of responsibilities to the states. It was rejected by the Prime Minister, who, after seeing a women's services delegation, was able to write to the Premier that 'I have informed the women (sic) that I would be asking the States to ensure that all needs in this area are met'. Yet in a letter to the Minister for Youth and Community Services, the federal Health Minister stated 'There is no requirement laid down as to the services to which the funding may be applied. It will be entirely a matter for the States to determine their priorities'.⁵ Wran hastened to assure NSW refuges that his government would maintain funding levels in real terms and supported further discussions between women's services and the state.

A splintered movement

Then came the backlash from within the refuge movement. Television and press pictures of women struggling with police on the steps of Parliament House scandalised some conservative communities. The group of refuges who had been unhappy with the women's services coalition hurriedly circulated a media release distancing themselves from the demonstrations. While the media showed no interest in this infighting, it left a very bitter mood in both camps of the refuge movement. The resolution of mutual support adopted only eight months before in Coffs Harbour had proved worthless. It left the movement rocked by recrimination and suspicion. There were serious discussions about splitting the movement, but feminists were aware that this would lead to political obscurity, as the two parts would neutralise each other. Biting their tongues, they carried on.

In early July eight representatives of the refuge movement and four from other women's services met with the Women's Co-ordination Unit to conduct the discussions approved by Wran. There were immediate problems. Refuges had used their established regional system to produce representatives, but the three St Vincent de Paul refuges would not accept representation by a feminist refuge. They insisted that they have their own representative, and one who was not a member of staff but of management. The Premier gave in to this demand, despite the angry opposition of other representatives. The meetings became bogged down in a fairly academic examination of possible administrative models for women's services. Any federal option was abandoned, and the choice came down to the continuation of separate state administration of women's services or the creation of new joint administration under an interdepartmental committee or 'division' for women's services. Joint administration became known as the 'umbrella' option and services engaged in fierce and ultimately pointless argument for and against life under this canopy.

In late August representatives met with the Premier, who could only promise to support women's centres and look at them as a budget item. The meeting coincided with a large women services demonstration and march supported by many sections of the Women's Liberation Movement. The march began from State Parliament, though the Women's Co-ordination Unit thought the Commonwealth Offices might have been more appropriate, and rallied at Sydney Town Hall. Police prevented fire-eaters from igniting an effigy of Malcolm Fraser. It was only marginally less satisfying to have the effigy hurled from the steps of the Hall onto the pavement and doused in tomato sauce.

Discussions with the Women's Co-ordination Unit dragged on until early September. The refuge movement remained deeply divided on the umbrella option, with positions becoming increasingly inflexible and tempers frayed. To general relief, the meetings were called off. The campaign was over. As a direct effect of the campaign Rape Crisis and Women's Information Centres survived. Refuges who had resisted a coalition had complained they did not 'know' other women's services, so a group of women's service workers toured the state giving workshops in refuges and community centres on health, addiction, rape and abortion. The refuge movement stayed intact, though the honeymoon was over. A group who claimed to represent the middle voice of the refuge movement had emerged. They communicated, lobbied and caucused to provide the movement with the first real challenge to the six years of political dominance by feminists.

Going for broke

Wran kept his word and maintained funding levels for refuges, pegging them to inflation. By the 1981 budget the NSW contribution to refuge funding matched the Commonwealth's almost dollar for dollar. The state had also come up with chronically needed capital funding in 1980 and was supporting six refuges on state funding alone.ⁱⁱ The state government was not, however, prepared to support any further leaps in funding. Their greatest fear was the achievement of award wages, which they estimated would lead to a 30% hike in overall salary costs, and which seemed imminent.

In July 1981 the ASWU had registered as a state union, the Social Welfare Workers Union, and lodged an application for a state award for all welfare workers covered by the Union. The Premier had warned women's services in August that higher wages might lead to a demand for more qualified workers and extolled the virtues of volunteerism. If footing the bill, this Labour government was capable of some low tactics in industrial matters. It rushed through legislation in 1982 to bring Home Care, over which there was a coverage dispute between the SWWU and the PSA, under the Public Service Board, stopping the progress of a consent award between the SWWU and Home Care managements. The Premier was reputed to have personally intervened to pressure managements to accept this arrangement.

ⁱⁱ Maitland, Como, Inverell, Moruya, Single Women's and Women's Place

If the government could not stop award wages, it could limit the number of eligible workers. Department heads in YACS who understood the relationship between low wages and wage splitting in women's refuges, advised the Premier that refuges should be told to employ only the approved number of workers, and to cut back their services. But with Australia moving into an economic recession and with social services being cut, more women were turning to refuges because of poverty than domestic violence. In the twelve months from June 1980 to May 1981 over eleven thousand women and children passed through the thirty-three NSW refuges, nearly half as many again were turned away. Refuges were becoming the dumping ground for a system closing down. The last thing they could do was cut their services.

Under this new strain many refuges were nearing the end of their tether. Some Sydney refuges did adopt a stricter criteria for admission, turning away women who were not immediately fleeing a situation of domestic violence. Others opted for more desperate tactics. Single Women's Refuge, which had opened with half the funding submitted for, started paying workers for the hours worked. A similar tactic was being followed at Grafton refuge. They called it 'going-for-broke', a conscious policy of overspending their budget, publicising their problems, hoping to achieve supplementary funding, and it could be spectacularly successful. Grafton, along with Lismore and Griffith, was one of the lowest funded refuges in the state. The other two at least had rent free housing, Grafton's rent consumed over a tenth of their funding. The workers bore the burden, with wages of \$1 an hour. YACS were sensitive to the charge that their early oversights had contributed to the problems in Grafton, and the workers exploited this. They overspent their budget and threatened to arrive in force at YACS central office, where they would wait until their needs were met. In three years, they tripled their funding.

Single Women's Refuge occupied the Minister's office, demonstrated on the Sydney Harbour Bridge during its anniversary closure, and conducted a relentless media campaign. They won an extra \$40,000 in March 1982, only days before they would have had to close. Blacktown also threatened to close in March 1982. From 1977 to 1981 their funding had only increased from \$33,500 to \$51,000, though they had expanded to two cottages and from three part time workers to eight. They were constantly full yet were funded for less than half the amount of comparable Sydney refuges. An interim cheque was rushed to them and they stayed afloat.

The tactic was effective for those who thought they could use it. Others were not so lucky. Griffith refuge's problem was isolation; situated in the south-west of the state, only the refuge in Broken Hill was more isolated. Refuge workers often had to drive hundreds of miles to pick up women or take them to services. The refuge was forced to act as a youth service, a drug and alcohol centre, a rape and health resource. The town had large immigrant and Aboriginal communities

needing special services. There was no psychiatric care in Griffith. Yet the refuge was funded for two workers and had received no basic increase since their first cheque in 1978. It remained in the region of \$30,000 despite the refuge more than doubling its capacity from one hundred and eighty women and children in 1979 to four hundred and twenty in 1981.

Griffith refuge believed in the power of persuasion and reason rather than direct action, but when Single Women's Refuge received more supplementary funding from their go-for-broke campaign than Griffith's basic funding, something snapped:

We do not agree with strike action or violent demonstrations. However, unless we receive some indication from the NSW government that we are to receive extra funding we will be unable to continue functioning.⁶

Unfortunately, YACS did not believe them; they thought the refuge would 'get by'⁷. Scheduled to give a paper on isolation at a national conference in 1982, refuge workers from Griffith had to leave before the paper could be read. They were needed on roster: the unread paper summed up the implications of their isolation:

We are unable to participate in decision making, skill sharing and demonstrating in the cities, which magnifies our isolation. The isolation politically allows YACS to get away with funding us a pittance. The very nature of this isolation of small communities in the vast area which our shelter services contributes to the suppression of women and children.

By March 1982 the situation had become so desperate that refuges took an unprecedented step: a statewide series of rolling strikes. Refuges from all factions picketed local government offices guilty of off-loading responsibility onto the refuges. One group took the issue to the heart of YACS by occupying central office and meeting with the Director General. The month ended with a sour note. A mass demonstration outside Parliament House in Sydney called to draw attention to 'dumping' ended in more violence. Sheltering from the rain at the far end of a veranda from a group of Right-to-Lifers, refuge women were dragged off by police. By the time the media arrived they caught only shots of incensed women behind the Parliament fence. It was Canberra 1981 all over again: bad coverage, a backlash in some communities, and refuges at each other's throats.

While the 1982 state budget did provide the refuge program with a 18% funding boost, incredibly four more new refuges were fundedⁱⁱⁱ, including two which had been refused funding in the past because they did not comply with the guidelines. Intense lobbying on their behalf by their local members, and the unrelenting pressure on the Labor Government to maintain its rural vote, once again contributed to the remorseless expansion of the refuge program, now

ⁱⁱⁱ Penrith, Moree, Katoomba, Toronto.

numbering thirty-seven. Not only damaging the ability of the program to consolidate, this policy of expansion was increasingly making it impossible to organise. Many of the internal divisions of 1981/1982 were due to the lack of processes between state conferences to respond to crisis. Decisions during the campaigns tended to be Sydney based, isolating country refuges and making them vulnerable if their communities were unsupportive. Some new bridging structures were necessary. A permanent, funded 'working party' was proposed by a group of feminist refuges. It was conceived as not a peak organisation, but a workhorse, with representatives from each region, implementing decisions made at state conference. State conference supported the proposal (Blacktown July 1982) and it was funded by a delighted YACS.

Not in time for the St Vincent de Paul Society. On the front page of the Catholic Weekly, June 1982, it was announced that their refuges would no longer be involved in the refuge movement. They did not want workers to represent the Society at meetings, they found male workers useful in women's refuges 'to protect the Society's guests from the harassment they had sought to escape, and they objected to demonstrations 'which can bring discredit to those involved as well as be an affront to the dignity of persons'. They would now deal directly with the state government.

The Domestic Violence Report

The tumultuous events of 1981 had overshadowed the completion of the work of the Domestic Violence Task Force, set up in 1980 to report to the Premier on the current state of domestic violence in the state. The theoretical framework of their Report was feminist. The Task Force rejected theories of 'individual pathology, class background, and childhood experience' to explain domestic violence, and argued that it was a product of 'social customs and workforce patterns (which) produce a structural inequality of power in relations between men and women. These characteristics of our society provide a structure which leads to men being violent to women'.

After interviewing and surveying a range of agencies that dealt with domestic violence, the Task Force found that this structure also produced professionals who often responded to victims or domestic violence with a moralistic and inappropriate attitude. Housing, health, welfare and legal agencies were generally not found by victims to be useful. Most professionals received no training in how to assist battered women. No agency even kept data on the cases of domestic violence they responded to, though for agencies such as the police, domestic violence represented the bulk of their assault work. Recommendations appear time and time again for data collection and for training of professionals.

The area of legal response was a major concern of the Report. Over half the victims or domestic violence surveyed found the police 'not useful' though they were the first source contacted by most women. The Task Force recommended

faster access to warrants for police, a twelve hour peace to allow police to hold men overnight, that police lay charges and not expect women to do so, that wives be made compellable witnesses, and that courts issue special injunctions ordering men to keep the peace with the power of arrest if breached. A Domestic Violence Act was proposed to incorporate these recommendations.

The Task Force also recommended amendment of the laws of self-defence. The highly publicised case of Violet and Bruce Roberts had highlighted the injustice for women of a law that required self-defence to be a spontaneous act. The Roberts had received long sentences after the premeditated murder of their extremely violent husband and father. They were released after a public campaign in 1980. After finding that a third of the victims of domestic violence were attacked after leaving their partner, and that access to the children granted by the courts was often the avenue for this continued violence, the Task Force recommended supervised access centres.

Women's refuges were found to be the most effective agency for dealing with domestic violence and the Task Force endorsed the practice and philosophy of the refuge movement. It also recommended that a twenty-four hour service could not operate with less than eight full time workers. Aboriginal women surveyed called for more Aboriginal refuges run by Aboriginal women and the Task Force recommended that new Aboriginal refuges be opened in inner Sydney, Moree, Lismore and the South Coast. The employment of migrant women in existing refuges was recommended rather than separate refuges for migrant women.

One controversial recommendation was the funding of counselling programs for violent men based on those already operating in the United States. North American women's refuge workers had worked with the 'men against sexism' movement to set up perpetrator programs. The NSW refuges saw a number of problems with these models. Some of the US programs conceded that they would be counter-productive if not operated by men with a developed awareness of sexism. The US had a thriving 'men against sexism' movement; this was hardly the case in Australia. There were doubts about the effectiveness of the programs, with small numbers responding and marginal successes. There also seemed to be a fundamental flaw in promoting government funding for perpetrators programmes while services for women were still under-resourced.

The legal aspects of the Report were not unanimously welcomed. Some welfare counselling groups with religious backgrounds saw them as more attacks on the Family. Radical lawyers opposed a proposal for compulsory detention of the perpetrator. They successfully argued that the police already had sufficient powers to hold a man under the Bail Act. Not all feminist refuge workers felt easy with the law and order line, but there was general frustration with poor law enforcement. A woman known to Marrickville refuge had recently been shot with four of her five children. Despite a long history of violence, the father had been allowed access, and yet she was denied legal aid when he breached a

restraining order. The police, fully aware of the family history, then issued him with a gun licence, and he used a gun to kill them. All refuge workers believed that a tighter definition of the law's duty to protect women would at least force the agencies of the law to examine their attitudes. One who needed to do just that was the principal director of Family Law Court counselling. In an extraordinary outburst, he circulated a letter to unions accusing the Task Force Report of being 'simplistic and sexist' because the Task Force contained more women than men. He appealed to all non-feminists and especially men to stand up and be counted, espousing the old line that women 'manipulate' men into acts of violence. In the outcry that followed, the letter was withdrawn, but the director kept his job.

New domestic violence legislation was proclaimed in NSW in April 1983. Known as the Crimes (Domestic Violence) Amendment Act, it introduced the Apprehended Domestic Violence Order, an order that could be obtained by an individual or the police to restrict for six months the harassment of one spouse by another, including de facto couples and regardless of whether they were living together. Breach of this order was made a punishable offence. Women were made compellable witnesses in order to encourage police to lay charges. Radio warrants were made available to police to allow them to enter a family home where they suspected a domestic assault had occurred. Police were also instructed to lay charges for domestic violence rather than leave this to the woman, and to use existing bail provisions to oppose bail if they thought the man likely to repeat an act of violence. In his speech supporting the Act, the Premier recognised that the legislation was most powerful in shifting the way people perceived domestic violence 'the Government believes these law reforms will contribute to the reduction of violence in NSW by giving the lead to the community in recognising that domestic assault is assault'⁸.

The evidence and recommendations in the Report, and the ensuing legislation, placed the Women's Co-ordination Unit in the pivotal role of pursuing reform against domestic violence. The Unit struggled behind the scenes with the upper echelons of the Premier's department throughout 1982 to have a wide range of health, welfare and housing recommendations from the Report implemented. They were given the opportunity as convenors of the NSW Domestic Violence Committee, set up in April 1983 and including a refuge representative, to monitor the new legislation and co-ordinate community and professional education. A media campaign, an information phone-in, and extensive workshops for welfare agencies, the police and magistrates followed. But the profound sexism of the agencies of law enforcement proved to be a powerful stumbling block to this legislation. In its first Report (1985), the NSW Domestic Violence Committee in 1985 records that the police, though offering the only twenty-four hour service 'capable of providing immediate protection,' generally failed to use the legislation. During 1984, the Bureau of Crime Statistics received only 470 bail returns relating to domestic violence. This represented an average of only 9 returns a week for the whole state, and a reduction by 31% from the previous year. In only 18.5% of cases was bail refused. Only six telephone warrants were issued. A

major intention of the legislation was to get police to press charges, but the Committee found they 'seldom use this power'. The Chairperson of the Committee could only conclude 'domestic violence is not a social problem that will disappear over night'.

The Evaluation Report

The Evaluation Report of women's refuges had also been completed by the end of 1982. The evaluation team visited all thirty-six refuges, and talked with hundreds of residents, ex-residents, paid and unpaid workers and management members. Four hundred residents and over two hundred workers filled in detailed questionnaires. The questions were based on the refuge guidelines: how extensive was the refuge service; did the refuge include residents and workers in decision making; were women's issues raised in the local community? Residents were asked about their stay in the refuge, and workers about their working conditions. Women often spoke candidly about their experiences, making the Report on some level a very personal account of the state of NSW refuges in 1981. The vast majority of residents felt 'comfortable' in the refuge, most enjoyed living communally, over two thirds felt they were involved in the running of the refuge and nine out of ten women wanted to keep in touch when they left.

Refuges run by religious charities were criticised for refusing to allow staff and residents a say in the decision making, for long and strict house rules (specifying meal and prayer time or lights out at 9.30), or for denying women access to information (one house rule read 'Any guest seeking an abortion must find other accommodation'). Where they employed men: 'In each situation it is the male worker who is the highest paid and has the most powerful position of the staff, such as co-ordinator or manager'. In contrast, women staying in collectively run refuges felt 'a growth in their self-confidence and independence', though collectives were criticised for inefficiency, communication breakdowns and poor hiring and firing practices. Inner city refuges, which were usually feminist, scored badly for overcrowding, poor facilities and equipment. Refuges in the country or at the beach were found to be most pleasant for women and custom built refuges the most suitable buildings.

The Evaluation provided important information on refuge working conditions. There were over 250 paid workers in the thirty-six refuges, an average of seven per refuge. Refuges were funded for an average of less than four staff, so the practice of wage splitting was widespread. Most workers worked a full time week on part time pay, with some hourly wages as low as \$1.86. Most refuges had no overtime pay, no time in lieu, no maternity leave, and seven had no holiday or sick leave. Only four refuges had job contracts. The conditions produced a rapid staff turnover. Only 50% of workers lasted more than a year. As one put it:

My whole life has been swamped, taken over by chaos and anxiety. I'm only supposed to work three days a week but I have often gone eight

without a break. I dread the phone ringing at home. The refuge thrives on coffee, crowds and crises and the demand is never ending.

So volunteerism, in the form of volunteers or unpaid hours by paid workers, was forced onto the refuges. Residents pointed out that the problem with relying on volunteers was that as they averaged only fourteen hours per month they disrupted the continuity of the refuge. Just over half the refuges employed ex-residents, though they represented only 14% of the total number of workers. A tenth of residents were Aboriginal and a quarter migrant. The Evaluation strongly recommended more employment of women from these communities. Child support was still poorly resourced. Since the provision of childcare funding to all refuges in 1979, the number of children using refuges had increased by 40%. Yet the funding still provided for only one worker.

The Evaluation was a long and at times rambling report that was itself criticised for being less than scientific. But it made the needs of residents central to an understanding of quality in refuges and was committed to the importance of the everyday, because the everyday is crucial for women. The great value of the Report was to be felt when the next evaluation occurred. The criticisms had been taken seriously and acted upon. Like the Childcare Report before it, the production of the Evaluation Report also made a great contribution to the unity of the refuge movement. Throughout the difficult period of 1981-1982 a deeply divided movement kept meeting and talking in the forum of the evaluation steering committee.

New frontiers

Life went on. A source of extra child support funding was made available by YACS in 1981. Known as 27A, it was questionable whether refuges qualified for this payment, and it was problematic as the names of residents had to be provided, breaching the confidentiality policies of refuges. As the funding situation deteriorated in 1983, in a reversal of income flows of the past, YACS advised refuges to top up their core funding with 27A money. Childcare workers were now meeting as a group, and pushed a set of childcare guidelines through the working party. They also discussed how to distribute the resources of a refuge more equitably between children and women. It would require a re-thinking of attitudes. For most refuges, it was the childcare worker's job to keep the children quiet and out of the way, while the real work was done with their mothers. 'As a childcare worker you took on the status of the kids in the refuge. It's a visual thing. The kids are not seen below eye level' (Chris Burke, Essie Children's Worker interview 83/84).

The value of children was reflected in how their workers were treated. Some refuges would pay childcare workers less and not include them in staff meetings. At refuges like Essie this attitude was reversed. Refuges normally assessed their capacity by the number of women they could accommodate irrespective of the

number of children accompanying them. An influx of several large families could horribly overcrowd a refuge. 'We started to look at the number of kids when we looked at the capacity of the refuge' (ibid). In June 1983 at the state conference in Mt Druitt, the first day was given over to discussing children's issues, and a special conference on children followed in April 1984.

A mystery was baffling workers at the Single Women's Refuge. The women coming to the refuge had such a variety of backgrounds, but shared a common experience of a crisis in adolescence, with tragic consequences for their lives. A film on incest shown at the refuge sparked off a number of discussions, revealing that 85% of residents had experienced sexual abuse in their families. When these girls had reacted, they were further punished, working class girls being labelled 'uncontrollable' and put into girl's homes, middle class girls labelled 'mad' and hospitalised in psychiatric wards. Like domestic violence ten years earlier, incest was exposed as another skeleton in the family cupboard.

Childcare workers formed a coalition, Women Against Incest, with feminists from women's health centres, hospitals and YACS. In 1984 they organised an incest phone-in. The findings confirmed what many suspected. In 65% of cases incest was committed by the father against girls usually six to seven years old, 25% were under five. Most of the respondents were adult women, recounting events that had occurred twenty or thirty years ago. For most of these women the incest continued into their teens. Many had not talked about their experiences until years later, for 12% the phone-in was the first opportunity. Fifty of the callers went on to use the counselling services of Dympna House, set up by Women Against Incest to support incest survivors and to offer crisis accommodation. The phone-in received enormous media coverage, and in June 1984 the state government set up a Child Sexual Assault Task Force, with a Dympna worker as a member.

The exposure of incest gave feminist refuge workers a new outlet, and those exhausted and frustrated by the debates in women's refuges and the legacy of 1981-1982 moved into new and more specialised areas. Housing was another. There had been some progress in the provision of halfway housing, though not without some arm-twisting. Back in 1978 a YACS report⁹ had looked at the overcrowding in women's refuges, the numbers of women who needed housing more than a refuge, and the long periods women were spending in refuges because they had nowhere else to go. It recommended that part of the \$330 million empty government owned property in NSW be converted into emergency community-based housing schemes, to be co-coordinated by an Emergency Accommodation Unit (EAU) in the Housing Commission. The plan went to state cabinet five times without reaching the agenda. Government departments loath to hand over property had stalled any progress. One of the Domestic Violence Task Force representatives leaked the proposal to the media, and the coverage of homes standing empty in downtown Sydney forced cabinet to act.

The EAU was established in 1981, but it was a bitter disappointment for refugees. The original proposal had recommended that groups be funded to run these houses. No such funding was made available, and refugees found themselves acting as slum landlords, having to overcrowd the properties they were offered in order to raise near-market rents. An angry delegation met with the Housing Commission to demand for EAU tenants the same rent rebates as public housing tenants. The Commission refused, saying it was paying market rents to the government departments that owned the properties, and had been given no extra resources to subsidise EAU tenants. Many refugees were forced to give up houses they had fought so long for.

The Single Women's Refuges could not. The Housing Commission was facing an anti-discrimination case for denying single women access to public housing. The EAU provided single women from refuges with one of their few housing options. After causing some embarrassment to the Government by squatting a home in a prestigious eastern suburbs street, a group of young single women were moved into EAU houses, and because many were under eighteen and unable to afford rent, funding was rushed through for a housing co-op to subsidise rent, maintain the houses and provide support workers. This Housing Company for single women steadily grew, taking on more government properties and expanding into ones that were custom-built. It was considered a model by the Interdepartmental Committee on Homeless Women set up in February 1984 by the Minister for Housing.

The Report commissioned by the Committee concentrated on the private rental sector, because this housed the bulk of low-income women tenants, twice as many as the public sector, and because women in private rental were likely to be paying up to 80% of their incomes in rent. The Report recommended low interest loans to women homebuyers, amendment of landlord and tenant legislation to prohibit discrimination against women with children, and an evaluation of rent fixing. The Committee, however, shied away from the politically sensitive issue of private tenant protection and concentrated on the proposal of the latest women's refuge housing group. They had produced a section of the Report that examined the lack of public housing for women in rural NSW and women such as the psychiatrically disabled. A survey in refuges of twenty-five women with mental health problems found seventeen had a history of domestic violence, and twenty-one had been either physically or sexually assaulted, or both. Only five found suitable accommodation after leaving the refuge¹⁰. The Committee proposed a new medium-term supported housing program based on the Women's Housing Company. In the 1984 state budget, \$4 million was provided for a women's housing program, enough to purchase or construct living space for one hundred and eleven women throughout the state. Finally, the campaigning to respond to chronically homeless women with a history of mental health problems, turned away from Elsie back in 1975, had achieved some results: the women's' medium-term housing programme provided two services specifically for psychiatrically disabled homeless women.

A rejection of volunteerism

Some still dreamed of a women's services program: a rational gathering of many complimentary aspects of women's needs in one programme similar to Aboriginal Affairs or the Women's Departments and Ministries in other countries. Others disagreed, arguing that such a concentration would become a token, relegating women's' needs to a backwater, and that it was positively dangerous to put 'all the eggs in the same basket'. Accepting the 1981 campaign as only a temporary setback, the women's' services program lobby organised a national conference in Sydney, August 1982. The most significant resolution was to press the ALP to take a position on the federal funding of women's services. In November refugees met for a national conference in Melbourne, and here the same resolutions were passed for a federal women's services program, administered by a Ministry of Women's Affairs. When the Federal ALP brought out its 1983 policy for women, there was a commitment to the federal funding of women's refuges and rape crisis centres under a new programme called Women's Emergency Services and to the development of women's health centres, but to nothing resembling a greater women's` services programme.

The policy also referred to 'sufficient funding to ensure that paid workers can receive at least the appropriate award wages'¹¹. Wages and unionism was a recurring theme during 1982. In a repeat of the federal experience, the NSW SWWU had found a general state award too hard to pursue, and had decided to lodge applications for separate awards. The progress of any award was, however, painfully slow. State and Commonwealth governments had obstructed wherever they could, and the SWWU was bogged down in coverage disputes with a number of large unions, notably the Public Service Association:

Most unions have an imperialistic attitude. They want to expand. The last few years have also seen a shift in welfare to the non-government area on the cheap. This has affected jobs in the public sector. The PSA was worried about membership and the privatisation of welfare. (Carol Mathews, SWWU Industrial Officer 1981-1984, interview)

In many ways the debate about unionism had already been decided in the refuge program. There was lingering concern about the relationship between collectives and the Union, but there was general recognition of the valuable role the Union had played in a number of disputes and that poor wages and conditions was the major crisis facing refuges. Many refuge workers also felt that the SWWU was trying to be a different type of union, working hard at consultation and fairly representing women. Many refuges joined en masse in 1981 and by the end of the year over 80% of refuge workers questioned by the refuge evaluation approved of the union.

Realising that an award would be a hollow victory if wages were provided for only a fraction of the workers needed, a staffing formula was developed. It was based on a recommendation of the Domestic Violence Task Force Report that a 24-hour crisis service could not operate with less than eight fulltime staff. NSW refuges were funded for an average of less than four. At the state conference (Bondi, February 1983) the refuges added to the recommended eight a further two child support workers and a part time follow up worker, producing a minimum staffing of 10.5. Paying this staff at award rates, plus running costs, would mean average refuge funding of \$300,000. In 1983 the average was \$90,000. There was a long way to go, especially when shortly after the Conference the new Minister for Youth and Community Services had a refuge delegation into his office to read them the riot act. He told them he did not consider go-for-broke campaigns as fair industrial practice, and that he would not accept the staffing formula as a program position as a number of refuges had informed his staff that they disagreed with the formula. This produced an angry internal response:

It means that it is impossible for us to operate as a state refuge movement; that the state conference has no meaning when we reach agreement; that some refuges are making no attempt to use the forums far debate we have created, but are prepared to undermine agreements reached, and to make the NSW women's refuge movement look ridiculous in front of the NSW government ¹²

An extraordinary one-day conference of refuges was organised for May to resolve the staffing issue. Intense lobbying went on before the conference, revealing that many who opposed the staffing formula had simply misunderstood the concept. They were so used to getting by with unpaid hours, skeleton staff, limited holiday or sick leave and volunteers that they had problems even conceptualising what to do with ten or more staff. The Women's Co-ordination Unit produced a useful document for the debate, de-mystifying the implications of the formula. Representatives from every NSW refuge attended the conference, even the St. Vincent de Paul Society sent representatives for this debate. When the time came to go round the room, every refuge agreed with the formula.^{iv} In a significant way the refuge movement had gone beyond award wages as an industrial landmark for the programme. By accepting the staffing formula, they had rejected the ties with volunteerism as a feminine and sometimes feminist virtue.

^{iv} There was one amendment to the formula. It was to read 10.5 'salaries' rather than 'workers'. This enabled refuges to continue employing on a part-time basis. Many argued that refuge work was too demanding to be full time, and that part time work assisted women with children. In 1984 over a third of women in the NSW workforce were part-timers (only 6% of men), the figure rose to half in the non-government welfare sector (The Labour Force NSW. ABS. August 1984)

Back to Canberra

There had been a sense of urgency in resolving the matter of the staffing formula because the State Government and the refuges needed a set of common demands with which to negotiate with the new Federal Government. Back in March, the Bondi Conference had been suspended for several hours on the Saturday morning to allow women to march on the International Women's Day March, held a week early because of the general election the following Saturday. Many of the chants on the march called for the fall of the Fraser Coalition Government. A week later, with tears in his eyes, Fraser lost power and a Labor Party government was back in Canberra. This was considered a tremendous boost for the refuge movement. The Childcare and Evaluation Reports and Program Guidelines demonstrated that the NSW program was accountable, performing well and able to improve. The proposed award and the staffing formula indicated the resources needed by the program. The development of specialised services for Aboriginal, immigrant, and single women pointed to areas of future expansion. There were complimentary opportunities such as the women's medium term housing services, and the outcomes of the Domestic Violence Task Force. A new Commonwealth Labor Government had ample scope to back up its commitments to the campaign against women's homelessness and domestic and family violence.

By July the Commonwealth had made its initial offer of \$4 million to boost refuge resources and related services. For the next nine months the Commonwealth and states argued over how much of the \$4 million was recurrent funding or just one-off, and to what extent the states were expected to match the dollars. In a bizarre return to the early funding conundrums of the 1970's, it was further announced that the refuges would finally move under the Department of Social Security and that a super new program would be based on the findings of a review of all crisis accommodation services. The review appeared in November, recommending that women's and youth refuges and the homeless persons hostels be brought under the same umbrella to be called CAAP, the Crisis Accommodation Assistance Program, later renamed SAAP, to emphasis the Support rather than Crisis function. The Commonwealth proposed a five-year agreement with the states, which would cover guidelines for the operation of the program; co-ordinating committees, including non-government representative: and funding, which would cover follow-up workers, childcare, migrant workers, half-way housing schemes and award wages at an 'appropriate staff/client ratio.

The NSW refuges welcomed features such as the five year agreement, but warned the Commonwealth that they were unhappy with the concept of a coordinating committee, and explained their system of state conference and working party for decision making and consultation. They were also unhappy with

references to data collection, and pointed to the success of the Evaluation in providing detailed information on their services. They found the commitment to staffing levels too vague, and emphasised to the Commonwealth that staffing was a NSW priority. Most fundamental was the dissatisfaction with being shunted into a crisis accommodation programme. Many felt that this was no more appropriate than having been in a community health program. There was still no program they felt reflected the broad and comprehensive nature of women's refuges. Only as part of a more flexible, more complimentary women's services programme could they find a funding home to call their own. So in the face of a worse alternative, the refuge movement of NSW finally threw its full support behind such a program. The Commonwealth would not pass on any of the \$4 million announced months earlier until the states had signed the funding agreements, but refuges would not budge until they had met with services from other states. Lobbying for funding for a national women's services conference had begun almost immediately after the federal election, and with Social Security money, from all states and territories three hundred women from women's legal centres, Aboriginal women's services, women's housing co-operatives, rape crisis centres, working women's centres, migrant women's services, a new incest service, single and young women's refuges, women's telephone referral services, abortion clinics, short-term employment programmes for women, health centres and more than 160 refuges for women and children came to Canberra in March 1984, ten years after the squatting of Elsie.

The conference was opened by Anne Summers, newly appointed head of the Office of the Status of Women, but who spoke as an original member of the Elsie collective. She reminded delegates of the feminist tradition of which they were a part and were celebrating by meeting ten years since the opening of Elsie. But she also placed women's refuges very firmly in the context of a women's services movement, highlighting the establishment of Elsie, Leichhardt Women's Health Centre and Sydney Rape Crisis Centre within the same year. The stated purpose of the conference was to 'produce a proposal to guarantee national funding for all women's services'. It quickly became apparent that this could not be achieved. The groundwork should have taken place before the conference, but no one had the national resources to do the work. Australian refuges were united in their opposition to SAAP, but had no concrete alternatives. Only NSW had an extensive women's services network with a history of working in coalition, and even then under some strain. The conference fell back on a call for a halt to the development of any federal program affecting women's services while a national review of women's services occurred to determine the best model. There was no contingency plan should this fail. In June the Commonwealth announced its rejection of a review. Meanwhile, state governments had been negotiating separately with the Commonwealth, and when they had achieved agreement to contribute less than the 50% initially proposed, they signed up. On 1st January 1985 the women's refuge program became history, absorbed into the new super homeless program, SAAP.

¹ Fran Hayes, ASWU News 1980

² Evaluation Report Foreword

³ Rex Jackson, Sydney Morning Herald September 1978

⁴ Betty Harding, Blacktown refuge in interview

⁵ McKellar to Jackson 20/6/81

⁶ Letter to Wran, April 1982

⁷ Refuge Liaison Officer quoted in June 1982 refuge newsletter.

⁸ Second Reading speech, Legislative Assembly 9/11/82

⁹ Emergency and Special Accommodation For Women, Youth and Families. Halley and Morosi November 1978.

¹⁰ Reported in 1985 Refuge Evaluation

¹¹ The ALP and Women. Towards Equality

¹² A joint statement by Single Women's Refuge, Women's Place, Elsie, Marrickville and Delvena. Refuge Newsletter April 1983.

Closer contact with women's health centres during the funding campaigns of 1981 kept the issue alive in the refuge movement. There was a concentration of politicised Latin American women working as health workers, who attended refuge conferences in 1982 to urge more employment of women from different cultures. They argued that refuges should not wait for special funding, but employ migrant women as ordinary refuge workers with the extra skills of second languages and firsthand experience of racism in Australia. The push led to a movement position supporting the equal employment of migrant, Aboriginal and Anglo Celtic women. Support groups of Aboriginal and migrant refuge workers were established and funded. The refuges went on to adopt an extended set of guidelines, committing them to multicultural goals and non-discriminatory practices, including Aboriginal and immigrant women on management. By 1987 three refuges had equal numbers of workers from different cultures, and there were at least forty immigrant women employed as refuge workers

The First Ten Years: 1974-1984. Women's Refuges in NSW and Australia

Part Two: Infinite Scope

Proliferation

By the middle of 1975 women's refuges were appearing across Australia. There were three more funded refuges operating in New South Wales: in Sydney's Western Suburbs Bonnie Women's Refuge in Liverpool and Community Cottage in Blacktown had opened, and in the west of the state Wagga Women's Refuge. There were eight in other states: Naomi and Women's Emergency Shelter in Adelaide, South Australia; Half Way House in Melbourne, Victoria; Hobart Women's Shelter in Tasmania; Nardine in Perth, Western Australia; Townsville and Brisbane in Queensland; and a refuge in the Australian capital, Canberra. There were also many unfunded refuges, and more in the pipeline. Over the next decade there were to be monumental battles on every front, over the control and ideology of this potent new force. But there would also be brilliant partnerships, crossing previously unthinkable divides. The scope appeared infinite.

By late 1975, the vigilant Half Way House was warning that in the rush to fund refuges, the feminist originators, were becoming 'one of the crowd'¹ and called for government-imposed standards to protect the rights of residents. Some Commonwealth guidelines were being drawn up, and they were based on a feminist model, emphasising the non-institutional and self-help aspects, the need for support and follow-up for residents after the refuge, and the role of refuges in research and community awareness. Yet they also stressed the need to geographically spread the program, beyond the urban centres where feminism seemed concentrated, and it was precisely from the suburbs and the country towns that pressure was coming for new refuges.

What followed demonstrated that feminist ideas had spread, and feminists now came in many shapes and forms. A community women's group in Liverpool set up Bonnie women's refuge in December 1974 in a house lent to them by the Housing Commission. The management committee saw its role as supporting the development of a broader collective style of management rather than a hierarchy. Community Cottage in Blacktown was the first of many refuges to be set up by Community Aids, voluntary community groups that instigated and co-ordinated many non-government welfare services. Their composition varied from community to community, profoundly affecting the character of different refuges. In Blacktown many of the local Community Aid women were feminist. They set up the refuge in another resumed Housing Commission house and ran without funding until December 1975. The local Community Aid then fell into the hands of more conservative women, who enforced stricter management and isolated the two part-time workers from contact with other refuges for three years.

Although initially proposed by the Wagga International Women's Year Committee, the refuge was taken over by the St Vincent de Paul Society, and all mail was directed to the male president. Though not conforming to the

guidelines, the Wagga refuge was considered important by the Government as the first one in a country town and was funded. Funding for Elsie was seven times greater than for Wagga refuge. While they encountered similar problems, the new refuges had to cope with two or three part-time workers, or a housekeeper in Wagga's case. They had no childcare, and could attempt no research. They had all submitted for less, but found that it was a false economy.ⁱ

For Marrickville Women's Refuge in Sydney's inner west, their funding was almost lost in a web of bureaucratic complexity. The small group of feminists who set up Marrickville had also been involved in the establishment of Elsie, but could not squat a new refuge because they lacked the numbers. They saw, however, advantages in this, as it would make resident involvement a necessity. They applied for funding and waited. Funding bodies, however, expected community groups to be operating a service on donations and voluntary labour before receiving funding. The Community Health Program rejected Marrickville's submission, but did refer them onto the South West Sydney Regional Social Development Council, which then existed in name only (but what a name).ⁱⁱ As a fledging program it was far more cautious than the CHP and demanded proof that a refuge was needed in Marrickville. The delays obviously rattled the Marrickville collective, who, in their report to the Council, toned down the standard feminist critique of marriage: 'the hostel should not be seen as a threat to the institution of marriage. It is merely an attempt to meet with dignity a real need that already exists but is at present not adequately catered for.'

Wages for only one administrator and a caretaker were submitted. This was not designed to make the submission attractive to a funding body. The private purpose of the collective was to have only an establishment staff and to hand the refuge over to residents within six months of opening. To the Council, however, there were only guarded references to 'resident involvement'. But further delays did occur. A supplementary submission describing Marrickville women's refuge's intention to specialise in migrant women's needs led to a three-month delay while the Council clarified the situation.ⁱⁱⁱ In early 1975 the Regional Social Development Council was ready to fund Marrickville Women's Refuge, but an announcement that the Federal Government was to fund all refuges through the HPAP once again brought matters to a standstill while the situation was clarified. Finally, in June 1975 the refuge received \$80,000 to buy a house, but building modifications demanded by the local council held up opening for another nine months. In desperation the refuge was opened without approval in April 1976 and was full within a week.

ⁱ 1975/76 Elsie submitted for \$90,500 plus \$21,000 for childcare. The Community Health program would not accept childcare as its responsibility, and funded Elsie for \$89,000. Bonnie received \$37,000; Blacktown \$26,5000, and Wagga \$14,000.

ⁱⁱ This Council was a pilot project for the Australian Assistance Plan, another federal government initiative

ⁱⁱⁱ The migrant population of Marrickville was four times the national average, and the refuge undertook to foster the involvement of local migrant women and meet their special needs

Communities responded very differently to the opening of refuges. Western Sydney's Bankstown, run by a progressive council in the early seventies and in Premier Neville Wran's electorate, identified Betsy Women's Refuge as one of its achievements. A broad based women's group had set up the refuge in September 1975 and received federal funding in December, A local rotary club built a new refuge on land donated by the council, and it was opened by Wran in October 1976. By contrast, there was fierce opposition to a proposed refuge in Manly Warringah on Sydney's North Shore during International Women's Year. A Social Security officer had discovered a desperate need for a refuge when she surveyed local pension applicants. The refuge group could provide figures from the Henderson report into poverty which revealed a concentration of widowed, separated and divorced women in the area. Yet the possibility that domestic violence and poverty could be North Shore problems was met with general disbelief, and a virulent local press campaign denied the need for a refuge. The refuge group did receive funding in late 1975 and began operating under the name Bringa Women's Refuge. They found a house, but due to a petition against them the Council only approved the opening for a probationary twelve months. 'I think they were upset it was going to be run on radical militant lines'.² The experience, though, had toughened up the Bringa group. They were prepared to challenge the funding body, and threatened to close down when their funding was cut back in June 1976. They won an extra \$7000, and their funding jumped to over \$56,000 in 1977. They had veered away from a feminist refuge model, and at refuge meetings were prepared to voice an opposition to collectivity and demanded validity for their methods. It was the start of a challenging relationship.

Trouble in Canberra

The overthrow of the Whitlam government in November 1975 threw the refuges into confusion and despair. Funded for under a year and still struggling to establish their services, refuges were unprepared for a conservative backlash. The immediate threat was to the survival of refuge funding as a national program. Seeing the writing on the wall, Canberra bureaucrats had urged women's refuges to form a national secretariat. The more geographically isolated refuges supported a centralised lobby, but were out voted by the inner city refuges from Sydney and Melbourne. These were worried about a clampdown on their overtly political activities, and suspected that any proposal originating from the bureaucracy would be restrictive as a matter of course. Sara Dowse, then senior adviser of the Women's Affairs Section to the Prime Minister believed they lost a golden opportunity to maintain a voice in Canberra: 'largely through the refuge's suspicion of the bureaucracy and the inability of many of them to look beyond the immediate needs of their individual collectives'^{3 iv}

A lull followed the election of a conservative coalition government led by Malcolm Fraser, which undertook to honour all funding agreements until June 1976. There was a revival of the funding debates within the Women's

^{iv} The refuges did form a short-lived national confederation, with a newsletter 'The Monthly Cycle'. Half Way House thought the aims of the confederation 'wishy washy', for which the Hobart Women's Refuge accused them of elitism.

Liberation Movement, but only briefly. At a Movement conference in Sydney, mid 1976, feminists from funded women's services announced their political autonomy from the Movement. They saw themselves as front-line workers for whom funding was essential, and asserted their right above the Movement's to determine the necessary steps to maintain that funding.

The declaration revealed a significant shift in the character of the Sydney Women's Liberation Movement. The health centres, rape crisis and refuges had assumed responsibility for much: of the political work around rape, domestic violence, contraception and health. The baby had grown up and left home. This contributed to the decline of the Women's Liberation Movement as a united organising force. Real damage had already been done by an internal rift over policies of inclusion. A Trotskyist faction had persistently disrupted Movement meetings, yet feminists hesitated to limit the scope of the Movement by expelling the troublesome Trots. The issue imploded in 1976, splitting the Movement. The general meetings, where feminists appraised and informed each other of the work of the different parts of the Movement, stopped in 1977. In future, the Women's Liberation Movement was only called on by women's services in times of funding emergencies.

The first of these was not long in coming. The Fraser government was opposed to the extended funding role the Commonwealth had assumed under Labor. The new Treasurer attributed heavy tax burdens to the 'dramatic expansion of welfare programs over the recent years'.⁴ No new refuges were funded in the 1976 Commonwealth budget, and funding to existing refuges was seriously undermined. The Federal budget reduced the Commonwealth contribution to 90% of running costs and 75% of capital costs, creating a gap in funding and bringing refuges into line with others funded under the Community Health Program. The Commonwealth also stopped directly funding refuges. In future, their funding would be 'earmarked' as part of the block grants for health to the States, grants that were cut in the 1976 budget. By earmarking funding, the Commonwealth assumed that State governments would pass on the money to existing projects. The Queensland government, under the right-wing Premier Bjelke Petersen, immediately disappointed his federal colleagues by refusing to pass on Commonwealth funding to feminist refuges in Brisbane and Townsville.

The refuges' worst fears had been realised. They revived their campaign to move the refuges into the Homeless Persons Assistance program. The funding might be less but it was still a secure national program, and the Minister, Margaret Guilfoyle, seemed willing. She announced in September that she would introduce a Bill to administer and fund all women's refuges and was considering emergency aid for refuges in funding difficulties. Later that month women's groups were invited to Canberra to meet the new government. By some arbitrary standard, women's refuges were lumped in a 'health and welfare' group with the right-wing Women's Action Alliance. The group was expected to produce a joint submission. The WAA proposed a scheme to provide wages to persons caring for the young, the aged and infirm at home, by siphoning off future growth in real wages. The refuges put forward demands for specific purpose grants triennial funding, with priority for

new services, and immediate emergency assistance to the two beleaguered Queensland refuges. They quoted figures of twelve thousand women and children who had used the twenty-three refuges by June 1976 and argued that these essential services should not have to depend on charity or charges made on the women and children.

But hopes for a dramatic reversal by the Commonwealth were dashed at a meeting with Ministers. Only the WAA's proposal received fleeting interest. Guilfoyle appeared indifferent. She seemed to be having second thoughts about taking on a high profile and controversial program. Commonwealth Ministers were able to argue that States, other than Queensland, were willing to pass on Commonwealth funding and fill the gap. The recently elected NSW Labor government had made gap funding an election promise. Nor had the Commonwealth ignored the Queensland situation. Indeed, the Prime Minister had asked the Premier for an explanation. Bjelke Petersen informed Fraser that he was withholding the funding as the two refuges were run by Marxist lesbian feminists. The Prime Minister's Women's Affairs Section advised him that while this was true, the value of the service outweighed the politics of the service providers. Amazingly, he accepted this advice, and provided the federal contribution directly to Brisbane and Townsville women's refuges, over the head of Bjelke Petersen.

A month after the meeting in Canberra, in a reply to a senate question, Guilfoyle suggested refuges would be financially better off staying where they were. The issue of funding under Homeless Persons was quietly dropped, not to be revived for four years. With the door firmly closed on a national program, refuges turned their attention to their States and building their defences closer to home.

The States

The NSW Labor Party may have promised while in opposition to fund the gap as the Commonwealth reduced its contribution to refuges, but once elected, the ALP State Government found itself in a potential minefield. Pressure to fund new refuges was snowballing, and it was likely that the Commonwealth would continue to reduce its share of funding, placing heavier and heavier financial burdens on the States. The NSW government faced an avalanche of welfare spending. They needed to keep a lid on the program. An inter-departmental committee was briefed to produce a solution. Included was a representative of the recently created Women's Co-ordination Unit, a policy development body to advise the Premier on women's issues, and Youth and Community Services, the State welfare department. The Committee recommended that the State gap-fund those refuges already receiving Commonwealth funding, and provide only the same level of gap funding (10% of running costs and 25% of capital) to previously unfunded refuges. The Premier accepted their advice, and four new refuges received partial funding.^v

^v Delvena, on the North Shore of Sydney, Warilla, near Wollongong, and two on the central coast north of Sydney, one at Toukley the other at Woy Woy. Elsie submitted for \$145,000 and received \$86,000. Wagga received \$13,000, Bringa \$35,000, Marrickville \$37,000, Blacktown \$40,000, Betsy \$38,000 and Bonnie \$26,500.

By 1977, the Commonwealth had reconsidered its position on refuges, and realising they were a popular issue, pumped \$1 million into new refuges. The next two years were to see an astonishing expansion in the refuge program from nineteen Australian refuges to ninety-nine. The federal government extracted great political mileage from this growth, but it was achieved by seriously underfunding new refuges, placing greater funding burdens on the State governments or directly on the refuges themselves in the most conservative States. In the 1977 Commonwealth budget, the funding gap was increased by reducing federal funding to 75% of running costs and 50% of capital. Once again the Commonwealth urged States to prioritise women's refuges, and increase their contributions to fill the gap. This time Western Australia joined Queensland in disappointing their political allies in Canberra. They both provided only half the State's money for gap funding. Both States insisted that refuges raise the other half of the gap (12.5% of their running costs, 25% of their capital) from their own resources. Only once they had done so would the State hand over the Commonwealth and State contribution.

They argued that the ability to raise donations proved the refuges had community support, but this was designed to penalise refuges set up by community groups without the massive support of a religious organisation and to discourage other community groups from applying. Rather than defund feminist refuges, they planned to starve them to death. This time, the Fraser government did nothing. In New South Wales, Commonwealth funding to existing refuges was slashed, in some cases by almost a third. The Inner City Health region suffered particularly drastic cutbacks, affecting Elsie, Marrickville women's refuge and Leichhardt Women's Health Centre. The Marrickville collective closed the refuge with the full support of the residents. Within three days, the Health Commission backed down, and increased funding to the centres, though Elsie's funding remained lower than the previous years and \$15,000 less than in the first year of funding. Marrickville's remained at a constant low of \$37,000.

Quality control

The Premier's inter-departmental committee, fearing 'there would be an overwhelming number of requests from all the charitable agencies which operate hostels for women' (YACS files) had drawn up eligibility guidelines: a comprehensive welfare service, provided in a non-institutional setting, and involving the residents, and by implication the staff, in management. By late 1977 there were a number of hostels run by St Vincent de Paul and, the Salvation Army which expressed an interest in the women's refuge program, All the religious hostels fell outside the guidelines^{vi}, particularly when it came to sharing management responsibilities. The St Vincent hostels had their own committees, answerable to a regional conference of the organisation. The

^{vi} The St Vincent de Paul hostel, Butler Lodge, had opened a street away from Elsie, a duplication of service in an area that should have automatically disqualified them for funding.

Salvation Army hostel manager was answerable to the central social welfare division of the Army.

There were more fundamentally political incompatibilities between the religious hostels and the original refuges. Feminists and the Christian religion opposed each other on the role of the Family. The conflict was, clear and bitter. Feminists saw the Nuclear Family as a primary source of women's oppression. Christians saw it as the fundamental unit of a Christian society. The battlelines were drawn between change and independence, or charity and family reconciliation. The growth of the refuge program was a charged issue. Maureen Kesteven had the job of department consultant, liaising between the refuges and the administering department, Youth and Community Services (YACS). She took the position that a refuge should come out of a local women's group: 'If we wanted any homogeneity in the program, we would have to exclude the church groups' (interview).

Youth and Community Services had negotiated funding under Homeless Persons for the religious groups. The Salvation Army was prepared to agree, but St Vincent DePaul would not. They were determined to benefit from the greater sums of money available in the women's refuge program. As a fallback position, YACS argued that the hostels could receive Commonwealth funding through the women's refuge program but make up the gap themselves. A barrage of lobbying went on behind the scenes, with St Vincent de Paul bringing into play the full force of their political weight on the catholic wing of the Labor government. They must have struck a chord with many in the ALP and the bureaucracy when advocating for a sensible Christian voice within the refuge program. The pressure told, even on the secular and politically progressive Premier. In November 1977, he asked Rex Jackson, Minister for Youth and Community Services, to reconsider his opposition to funding the hostels. Jackson remained adamant that they did not come within the guidelines. The next day Wran succumbed to the pressure and announced that the hostels would be funded as women's refuges. Jackson was furious. In a memo to cabinet he wrote that his department's consultant would have:

no avenue by which she is able to negotiate with the church organisations to convince them to broaden the service they are providing and involve the women using the refuge in the management of the refuge. YACS files

Organising a movement

Of the sixteen new refuges funded by the Commonwealth in NSW in 1977 only two, Jenny's Place in Newcastle and Essie at Rooty Hill in Sydney's Western Suburbs identified as feminist. Feminism was suddenly a minority position in the program it had created two years earlier. Behind the scenes, feminist bureaucrats remained hopeful that the more conservative refuges could be radicalised by their contact with feminist ones, but who would influence whom hung in the balance.

After a two-year break, refuges met again nationally, in Melbourne March 1978. The Conference gave those funded in the massive increase of 1977 their first taste of national refuge politics, and for everyone a cultural shock as they coped with the new diversity of refuge politics. A clash of style as much as anything, with inner city dykes in their overalls mixing with North Shore ladies in jumpsuits, sensibly dressed country women, and women in uniform from the Salvation Army. The promise of a women only dance as the social highlight of the conference sent shock waves round the room. The conference was useful for exchanging experiences but little else. Queensland and Western Australian refuges were struggling to make up the gap in their funding, usually from the pockets of their own workers. The Victorians had organised themselves into the powerful Victorian Women's Refuge Group, while in NSW the program was so scattered politically and geographically, that the benefits of working together were still obscure.

The total number of NSW refuges rose again to twenty-seven with the funding of four more in country towns in 1978. An inner city innovation had spread across the State, with over half the refuges outside the Sydney area, as far north as Lismore, as far west as Broken Hill and as far south as Albury. To some feminists this was a good time to get out. The establishment of the program meant the future of refuges was assured, but to others the need for a feminist presence was more important than ever in order to keep the program political.

In 1977 the odds may have seemed poor but something was stirring at the grass roots level that was to improve those odds dramatically. Women who kept the refuges running, who had daily contact with the violence, the degradation and the intolerance, found themselves becoming angry at the treatment women received. Most refuges began to experience problems finding housing for women after the refuge, getting good legal advice or a helpful police response, and taking care of children without childcare funding. The ordinary women dealing with the everyday problems at the refuge began to relate this treatment to their own experiences as workers and volunteers. Women employed as housekeepers, housemothers, and even hostesses for \$1 an hour began to resent being bullied and patronised by out of touch management committees. A middle ground of common interest was to be found between the disparate refuges, where enormous social, political and cultural gulfs could be bridged, or at least better articulated. It was the feminist refuge workers, with their experience of organising learnt in the women's liberation movement who were able to draw together women from all the refuges. The impetus, however, was not to come from Elsie, still recovering from its 'experience', but Marrickville, Essie and Bathurst. They came together over basic issues, housing, childcare and funding.

Housing manifesto

Housing had emerged as the most pressing concern for refuge workers during a seminar for women's centres organised by the Women's Co-ordination Unit in April 1978. Many residents were returning to violent relationships because they could not find alternative housing. NSW set aside a smaller proportion of

housing for emergencies than any other State. The NSW Housing Commission became the refuges main target for it could be accused of discriminating against single mothers. By 1978 this group accounted for 42% of all applicants for public housing, but were allocated only 30% of the stock.⁵ By gaining access to a resident's file, the refuges discovered that the Commission considered women in refuges to be housed not homeless, and therefore ineligible for emergency or 'out-of-turn' housing. In 1977 only three of the 107 women who were resident at Marrickville women's refuge had been able to secure public housing. The Chairman of the Commission was quoted as saying of victims of domestic violence '(they are) young girls who don't take their marriage vows seriously'.⁶

Essie, Marrickville and Bathurst organised a refuge housing group, which began meeting with the Commission in October 1978. Their initial goal was to persuade the Commission to provide more emergency housing. The housing group also wanted a revision of the criteria used to allocate public housing, as the existing criteria could exclude those most in need. There were more radical demands such as the liberalisation of Commission policy to include co-operatives and extended families, a rental subsidy for women waiting in private rented accommodation for public housing, low interest loans for women buying homes, and halfway houses attached to refuges

Although the Commission was adamant that it would not treat women's refuges as a special group, it did agree to accept that women in refuges were homeless and could apply for out-of-turn housing. The Commission firmly refused to make its homes available as halfway houses, as this would be dragging the Commission into the arena of welfare provision. Although the meetings often felt interminable, the results were tangible. By the second half of 1979 refuge applicants accounted for 25% of successful out-of-turn allocations.

Funding manifesto

Having successfully come together to work on housing, the refuges also looked at funding and in July 1978 circulated a joint statement to politicians and funding bodies signed by an impressive cross-section of refuges^{vii}. The Statement contained the basic funding platform for the next five years: a fully federally funded national program, providing triennial (three year) funding agreements, and both consolidation and expansion of the program. They also discussed the real work practice in refuges: that wage sharing was common and that job classifications were largely irrelevant. 'In reality every refuge worker is a counsellor in some sense'. The Statement called on government to respond to this reality rather than the original submissions from many refuges, which had underestimated the need for childcare, follow-up and night workers and had forced refuges into a heavy reliance on voluntary or unpaid labour: 'we consider it vital to overcome the assumption that we will work for low wages, or for nothing'.

^{vii} Essie, Marrickville, Betsy, Bringa, Delvena, Albury, Woy Woy, Toukley, Jenny's Place, Marian Villa, Broken Hill, and Bathurst.

Working together for children

Refuges in New South Wales did receive a substantial boost to their funding in the 1979 budgets. Theirs was one of the few areas of Commonwealth funding growth in this period. It was justified. Over 1979 the numbers of women and children using NSW refuges doubled. Yet despite the thousands of children now entering refuges, they were receiving no funding for child support. Childcare was on the agenda for the National Refuge Conference in March 1978 and a National Conference on Children in Refuges followed in June. Elsie was considered a model for their comprehensive childcare program, but they were siphoning money away from their core funding to cover the costs. With much less funding, most refuges could not afford this option. The conference called for funding for all refuges to provide a similar service.

The Office of Childcare in the Federal Department of Social Security granted a small sum to each State refuge program. The NSW refuges agreed the money would be most profitably spent on an enquiry into childcare. Three of their own, from Marrickville Women's Refuge, were employed in early 1979 as the research team. The process became an ideal opportunity to continue drawing the individual refuges into a movement. When fourteen refuges met for the first State refuge conference in Bathurst, February 1979, the State was divided into regions, each one nominating a delegate to sit on the childcare committee managing the childcare project. As part of the project, the research team visited every refuge, where discussions ranged beyond childcare to how was the refuge run, who made the decisions, who was paid, how much, and what role did the refuge play in its community? These personal contacts were invaluable. Women who had previously fallen back on caricatures of each other, now realised their common experiences, and the effects were as profound on feminists as anyone else.

By the time of the next State conference, in May 1979 in Rooty Hill^{viii}, it had become clear that most women present were not so much opposed to feminism, as unclear about what the word meant. They were often mystified by the language of feminism, and intimidated by the tactics and intensity of feminists. Workers from feminist refuges were asked to explain feminism in the refuge context. It was not always an easy task. Most feminists were themselves still grappling with concepts like power sharing, consensus and resident involvement.

The childcare report came out in June 1979. By simply stating the scale of the problem, that nearly two thirds of refuge residents were children, the report challenged an attitude that reduced children to a nuisance factor or an appendage of their mothers, and demanded a serious response to their needs. Many of the children had personally experienced physical or sexual

^{viii} State conferences were planned for every three or four months, alternating between Sydney and country areas. Attending meetings outside Sydney was seen as the best way to make the notoriously parochial city people more aware of country issues.

abuse, but unlike their mothers, were often unable to talk about their experiences. Their needs often placed extra demands on the mothers, at just the time when they could least cope.

Unless there is some intervention to break this common cycle of increased demands and historically specific inadequate response, both the child and the mother relationship will suffer. Childcare can provide such a therapeutic intervention ⁷

But not through existing services. The majority of refuge children were under school age, and in need of daily childcare. The report found the community childcare services scarce and overloaded, too expensive for families on low incomes, and unable to provide the special care needed by refuge children. Childcare for refuges had to be able to respond to particularly traumatised children; it had to be in a secure place where children were in no danger of being snatched; it had to be available in the evenings and weekends, and it had to be able to respond to the diverse ages of children and the fluctuating population. The Report recommended that each refuge be funded to provide a childcare program, with a minimum of two childcare workers and attached capital and operating costs.

The Report was presented to the Minister by a mass delegation, while simultaneously a press conference was organised at Marrickville refuge, with visiting Elsie children 'covered in peanut butter all over their faces, and staring through the bars of the gate. It really looked like childcare was a pressing problem" (Heather Saville interview). Days later Premier Wran announced a one-off grant to refuge childcare of \$150,000. This was distributed in a novel way. The refuges put together a list of childcare priorities and each refuge put in a claim with a report on its facilities and the demands on its services. At a mass meeting the refuges considered each case and distributed the money according to need. Wages from \$100 to \$5000 were distributed between twenty-three refuges and money for childcare space from \$150 to \$10,000 between twelve. The smoothness of the distribution spoke volumes for the level of co-operation that had developed between the refuges. More success was achieved when later that year, when a NSW delegation to Canberra carrying the Childcare Report followed one from Victorian refuges lobbying for childcare funding, and was rewarded with the news that the Office of Childcare would provide funding of \$12, 000 to every Australian refuge.

As a result of the contacts made through the childcare project, childcare workers from Elsie and Marrickville were invited to a regional conference for Riverina refuges from Albury, Griffith and Wagga, in the heartland of right-wing Catholic NSW. The refuge in Albury was on the record for not agreeing with 'stopping the traffic or marching with sandwich boards'⁸ but it did see its role as giving women alternatives and was aware of the danger of becoming a welfare bandaid. Albury had quickly identified with the refuge movement. They had represented their region on the childcare committee and organised the first regional conference. They recorded in their official refuge history that two months after the conference: 'the Elsie refuge arrived back with about twenty children, two workers and a dog and camped in the area'. During their stay the

Elsie workers helped Albury set up their childcare program. Some saw this as the turning point in refuge relations: 'The right-wing Catholic push meets the radical lesbian push' (Deb Mills interview).

An Aboriginal Women Refuge

In the 1979 NSW budget, another milestone was created. Cawarra, the first refuge for Aboriginal women run by Aboriginal women was funded. The refuge was planned for Penrith, on Sydney's western edges, but faced extreme local hostility. Two years before, women attempting to set up Essie women's refuge in Penrith had been forced to move to the neighbouring Blacktown area. They had been accused from the pulpit of being a front for an abortion clinic, and the house they were offered by Council was next to the municipal dump. But in the Cawarra women, Penrith had met its match.

Pansy Hickey was a founding member of Cawarra:

I had been working in an early education program funded by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (D.A.A.) for about eight years. I would do some speaking at different conferences. People would ask me what I would like to see happening for Aboriginals. For many years I would say that I would like to see a house that women could go to who had problems, because I didn't define it as domestic violence then, where they could share accommodation and be supportive to each other. It was at this time that I saw on the news that a group of women had squatted a house in Glebe. I was sitting at home with a woman I shared house with, and who thought the same way I did about these things. We screamed and jumped through the roof with such excitement that someone had actually gone and done this type of thing. We had no idea of squatting and going to those extremes, but from there on we thought that somewhere along the line something would happen for Aboriginal women. (interview 1983/84)

Discussions between the DAA and YACS led to the formation of a refuge group. Pansy was one of three women given six months training by National Employment Strategies for Aboriginals, including counselling, basic bookkeeping and placements with government and non-government agencies.

Placement meant for us being on the other side of the counter. That was not an experience we had ever had. I will not forget the experience when at Penrith Commonwealth Employment Service of looking through the information cards on people. I noticed some cards had red or yellow stickers. When I enquired what they meant, I was told that the yellow represented people were intellectually handicapped, the red they were an Aboriginal. It had a devastating effect on me. I wondered how many other government departments had systems which MARKED us. I saw the kinds of things Aborigines have to experience when they lodge an application for a Housing Commission house. They were assessed by three people from child welfare, from Aboriginal

welfare and from the Housing Commission. If you were white you were just assessed by the one. Now those three people all had to agree that the person was good enough to be housed. They assessed you according to how you lived. You could have been living in a tin shack with a dirt floor. Many Aborigines were not being passed.

No local real estate agent would rent them a five-bedroom house for an Aboriginal women's refuge, so the DAA used their influence to have a house purchased for them. But when a house was found in Penrith, the Council deferred their development application every time it came up for six months. In the meantime, they had rented a house in Blacktown.

It was a three bedroom weatherboard cottage in a dead-end lane, with no public transport and a couple of kilometres from the nearest shopping centre.

But the local mayor was sympathetic and they were getting a lot of support from the refuges:

We had just begun attending State refuge conferences. We sat wide-eyed as we experienced what seemed like an explosion of new dialogue. We thought these women were brilliant. We were left feeling inadequate. However, it was really great how some of the delegates gave us clear messages of support, and with this and the support we received from our good friends at Essie Women's Refuge, we decided to stand our ground on the location of our choice, Penrith. We had chosen Penrith because it was away from the Housing Commission estates, and being Aboriginal we knew that we define our boundaries by our environment. It is said there are more Aborigines in Mt Druitt (Blacktown) than in any other single area in the State. Penrith, even so close, was out of bounds and so safe for women to escape to.

They found a house they wanted in Penrith and approached the Council once more. This time they were more insistent, and while Council was meeting they organised a demonstration outside, attended by a mixture of refuge workers and Aboriginal people from the local area and the inner city. The media took up their case.

Mike Willesee sent his TV crew out. A talk back program on the local radio asked for my views. We had lodged a complaint with the Anti-Discrimination Board against Penrith Council. The demonstration caused some publicity and got people interested in what was happening. I think that it was due to the publicity that it was decided that the Minister for YACS would put the development application in for us. Finally we moved into our house in Penrith. They still painted graffiti on our walls like 'blacks go home', but the Housing Commission removed it. We did get some kind of respect from Penrith Council out of all this in the end.

On the question of why have Koori refuges run by Kooris, some things should go without saying. Before an Aboriginal woman can deal with her stress, she needs to feel secure, she needs someone who shares her values, her history, someone she will not feel inferior to, who she will not feel intimidated by, someone who shares her distinctive thinking, who identifies with her culturally.

Cawarra is now known all over Australia. We would get calls from other Aboriginal women's groups and have Aboriginal women coming to stay a just to see how it works. This is not just a refuge; we have opened up opportunities to other women. We would employ women who had not worked before because when a woman looks for work the first thing they say is: what experience have you had? We use this refuge to train women to go out into the community. These women get to feel what it is like to have a wage in their pocket. We encourage women to feel there is a place in the world for them.

Trouble in other States

While the situation for refuges was improving in NSW, they were souring elsewhere. A wave of attacks on feminist services in other States had grown to such proportions that there was speculation it was an orchestrated campaign. It began in Hobart in August 1978, with a smear campaign in the press against the local refuge. Echoing Elsie in 1976, the refuge was accused of employing lesbians. Next, the Victorian right-wing Women's Action Alliance attempted to take over the La Trobe Valley refuge. The action moved into the Federal senate in April 1979, with questions being asked about two refuges that advertised for refuge workers, specifying that they must be feminist. The Melbourne refuge, Western Region, even described the work as political. They were criticised for discriminatory employment practices, and Western Region was pressurised by their State government to sign a declaration that workers would not be 'involved in political action during working hours'.

In May a delegation of feminist refuges went to Canberra to explain the concept of political refuge work to the Minister. They also discussed the latest examples of harassment. In Western Australia the feminist refuge Emmaus had its funds cut when it moved location, and Tasmania's young women's refuge, Annie Kenney, was being investigated by the State government. Though cordially received, the delegation failed to move the government, who would rather leave the States to run the programs. For feminists, the situation continued to decline. In December 1979 a feminist health centre was taken over by its State government followed by a feminist refuge in Alice Springs and the Darwin women's refuge. These services were then handed over to right-wing groups.

The Victorian addresses issue, however, seemed to infuriate the Commonwealth. The affair blew up in October 1979. For security reasons Victorian refuges had a policy of keeping the location of their houses secret. They used a central referral system as a point of access for women, and would move houses if there was a security breach. The Victorian government

decided it wanted the addresses and access to the refuges for inspection. Halfway House and Western Region refuge swore to refuse funding rather than divulge their addresses. A compromise was reached, with the addresses being held by a mutually acceptable nominee, but this did not satisfy the Commonwealth. They still demanded the right to inspect, in order, as they claimed: 'to gain first hand knowledge of problems faced by refuges and to be more responsible to requests for assistance in overcoming such problems'.⁹

The Victorian Department of Community Welfare Services understood this was less about caring government than the "politically contentious nature of the refuge program"¹⁰ and were prepared to adopt a more flexible approach. The Commonwealth then pressed for greater evaluation and statistical reporting from the refuge programs. As this seemed to only amount to the number of beds occupied each night rather than a meaningful assessment of the quality of service and the gaps which existed, NSW refuges refused to fill in the statistics forms and, in a united front, NSW YACS refused to pass onto Canberra any that were completed. The Commonwealth dropped the issue, but their patience was wearing thin, and they did not forget their defeat over the Victorian addresses.

Guidelines to good practice

During 1980 the Right kept the issue of refuge accountability alive. At two conferences, Women for Family and Society and the United Nations Decade of Women, conservative women accused refuges of indoctrination and the use of untrained staff. Unlike Victoria, New South Wales had no separate right-wing women's organisation, to co-ordinate an anti-refuge campaign. Instead, YACS issued a press Statement defending the systems of accountability for refuges, and challenging the Women for the Family conference to disclose to whom they were accountable. The hardening of attitudes in Canberra was, however, considered serious enough to persuade the recently appointed refuge liaison officer, Deb Mills, that it was imperative for NSW to develop guidelines for the refuge program before the Commonwealth enforced their own.

Since the State conference in Rooty Hill, where refuges had asked what constituted good feminist refuge practice, there had been an absence of any definitive Statement, yet here was the State administration coming forward with an offer, and a very good offer it was. A draft set of guidelines was circulated before a special guideline conference held at Delvena refuge in October 1979. All the essential feminist principles had been included: self help, a non institutional approach, a comprehensive service, involvement of workers and residents in management, refuges run by women for women, and the need for a political role in the community.

Deb Mills had been convinced that feminist refuges did provide a better service. They had better childcare, follow up and advocacy services; their levels of information and support were higher; and their means of management gave women workers and residents access to skills and confidence previously denied them. The broader services justified their higher

funding levels. She saw the guidelines helping women in other refuges to raise their expectations, and to encourage them to demand higher funding to meet improved services. But she still had to convince a refuge program in which feminist refuges were a minority to accept feminist guidelines. In the end, it was not so hard. More and more refuge workers rather than management were attending conferences. These women knew from their work experience why it was important to treat residents as equal human beings, why they had to ask questions in their communities about the way women and children were treated, and why they deserved a say in how their refuge ran.

The one stumbling block was the participation of men. Refuges that employed men or had men on management defended their contribution. The rest argued that women brutalised by men wanted a women-only space and that refuges should employ women because women's unemployment was so much higher than men's. The Delvena conference almost stalled on this issue, but the arguments in favour of men defeated themselves. Men's contribution had been to adopt traditionally masculine roles in refuges: in management, as handymen, as security guards. Only in childcare had some of the patterns been broken, but not without problems, as the Elsie experience demonstrated. After lengthy debate the refuges agreed to the general principle that women's refuges should be run by women.

Control and management

The Minister of Youth and Community Services adopted the guidelines in March 1980. They were vulnerable to the prevailing political climate, and had only the sanction of disapproval if breached, but they marked a high point in the radicalised relationship between the refuges. The aspirations they generated flowed across the State, and burst out in a number of bitter disputes over control. The move towards greater worker's rights had been steadily progressing since 1978, and was accelerated by contacts and discussions at State conferences, through the childcare project, the housing meetings, and the development of the guidelines.

The first wave of management problems occurred in refuges trying to combine two management systems. Elsie had untangled to some extent the knots of broad and worker collectives, with the workers essentially left running the refuge. In 1978 Essie had lived through the pitfalls of investing management status on a committee that did not share collective ideals with the workers. At Bathurst there was a struggle between a coalition of catholic and conservative agencies and a feminist collective for control of the refuge. By June 1978 the collective had won the day, and was explaining the benefits of collectivity in the local press.

There were examples of smooth transitions to greater worker-management co-operation. After four years the Albury women's refuge became autonomous from its parent organisation, apparently without any hard feelings. On the contrary, the refuge was named after the organisation's President. In 1979 the refuge still relied heavily on volunteers, thirty-eight to

support the four workers. They gradually dropped terms such as volunteer, housemother for workers, and ladies for residents, and developed a team philosophy, with rotating refuge rosters for management committee members which 'increased committee sensitivity to problems, made involvement more satisfying, and promoted team unity between paid and unpaid workers'.¹¹. In 1984 the refuge became a company with paid workers on the board.

The bitterest disputes were in traditionally run refuges, where management committees and parent bodies simply refused to give up their exclusive control of the refuge. YACS and increasingly the Australian Social Welfare Union became involved on behalf of staff. At Blacktown refuge relations between staff and management had reached an all time low by 1979. Staff complained of over-management, conflicting instructions, and being kept on casual rates for part-time hours. Instead of submitting for more wages, the management proposed to replace the three workers with one full time social worker. YACS informed the management that they were prepared to transfer the refuge's funding to the staff, and the ASWU threatened the management with arbitration.

Betty Harding was involved in the movement against homelessness and domestic violence from the beginning. She was employed in the new Blacktown refuge, where she worked for many years.

I was working for Sydney City Mission as a volunteer. I used to see so many cases of battered women. You had the choice of four places to send them. They were always full, very judgemental and women could only stay a week or ten days. They often separated the women and children, who fretted terribly. It was really bad. Most battered women I saw had no choice but to go back home and put up with the battering. I wasn't surprised when Elsie was squatted, because people were getting desperate.

I tried to get the Sydney City Mission to open a refuge. But they would not come at it. Their reasons were that it would be breaking up 'good Christian families' and would not get the support of the big firms who apparently gave large donations to the Mission and were run by very religious people. The local Community Aid took it up. They applied to the Housing Commission for a house, which is the house we are still in nine and a half years later. It was a house condemned to be demolished. I was the second worker employed. I knew it would be an overwhelming job, so I only took it for three months. Those months nearly killed me. I was employed for seventeen hours a week but worked many more. There were only three bedrooms and we often had twenty to thirty people in the house. It was pretty rugged. We played it by ear because it was a completely new concept. I had some ideas I wanted to put into practice, but I have got to say that when I look back I realize that I have grown and broadened my ideas considerably. I must have been a very conservative person.

A new executive of Community Aid had been elected which was much more hierarchical. A lot of it was so unreasonable. We were charging the women a small amount of money. If someone shot through without paying, Community Aid used to threaten to take it out of our salaries. We wanted to know why we were never allowed holiday or sick pay and why our pay had remained at the same level.

So they said they would sack us. They did not know that we had joined the ASWU and our union said that if they did not retract what had been said the whole thing would go to arbitration and be thrashed out in public. We had some friends in Community Aid and at a public meeting the old executive resigned and there was a vote of confidence in the workers. We became a limited company with the staff as the committee, run along collective lines with no boss or co-ordinator. We felt we had been exonerated but it took a long time for the flack to die down. A lot of poisonous things had been said. We gradually built up a strong local network and our relationship with Community Aid is quite good now.

I really want to change society. We are in a unique situation in refuges. We are not really beholden to government departments. We can really have a go at them and they can't do much to us. If we were public servants we would never have the freedom to speak out about the terrible things that happen to women and children. I remember being criticised by my Church and in the press for aligning myself with feminists. Feminists put into words the things I had been feeling for years. That set me on a different course from the one I would have followed. Once you take a step and say 'this is wrong and I'm not going to go along with it just because that's the thing you should do' I do not think you ever go back again. It's like the women who come to a refuge. They have taken the first step and they never thought they would have the courage to do it. They are never going to be quite the same again.

To my mind, the diversity of the refuge movement gives it strength. There is a great feeling of unity. Women are always supposed to outshine each other with beauty and attract men. Men could be mates but women could not. I have felt a 'mateship'. It's an old fashioned word. You might know the new word for it. Maybe I mean 'comradeship' or more likely 'sisterhood' (Interviewed 1983/84).

Head to head in Grafton

The longest running, the bitterest and at times even bizarre dispute happened in Grafton. Rather like Community Aid in Blacktown, the Grafton Community Care Council (GCCC) would not cut the apron strings to the refuge and indeed held on so tightly that even the Premier of the State was to find himself on the refuge doorstep, urging workers to defy their bosses.

Once a thriving port on the Clarence River, Grafton, the home of the jacaranda tree, had been devastated by flood and rural decline and overshadowed by neighbouring Coffs Harbour and Lismore. In the ten years up to 1984 its growth, according to its own town planners, was 'less than dynamic'¹². The population was poorer than the State average with 47% of the households on a yearly income of less than \$12000. Yet the town was stoic. If it had become a backwater, at least it had avoided the unpleasant aspects of modern times: the drugs, the broken families, and the weird lifestyles. It was a religious town, giving Fred Nile^{ix} a civic reception; a blue ribbon Country Party seat; a town that referred to the rest of the world as 'the outside' and prided itself on taking care of its own.

In April 1976 the GCCC decided that its first project would be to open an emergency accommodation centre. Their priorities were road accident victims stranded without money and students cut off from their homes by floods. Battered women came sixth on the list. Yet the GCCC applied to the women's refuge program for funding and, incredibly, was successful. Only a week before the funding arrived in late 1977, the house committee formed to deal with the daily running of the refuge decided to weed out the likes of 'travelling salesmen' and to allow to stay only 'deserted fathers, men who were part of a stranded family or runaway adolescents'. Predictably, battered women swamped the centre when it opened. Grafton seemed happy: 'Even if it does nothing else, the GCCC deserves the congratulations and appreciation of the Clarence people for the establishment of the emergency accommodation centre'.¹³

How prophetic this was to prove. Things started to go wrong quickly. Staff at the refuge, known as hostesses, complained that the centre had receiving funding to pay union recommended rates but they were paid \$1 per hour. The house committee, a GCCC sub-group responsible for the centre, supported them, and by 1978 called for the centre to become autonomous. They were supported by YACS, who once again intervened in a refuge dispute on the side of the workers. Relations with the GCCC further deteriorated over the issue of the refuge property, which had been purchased by the GCCC for \$20,000. A high rent component was included with the refuge funding to allow the GCCC to pay off the house, but YACS had not put this agreement in writing. By mid-1979 the house debt was almost cleared, and YACS insisted the GCCC hand over the lease to the centre. The GCCC refused, saying that the inflated rent was their only income, though the centre was still their only project. YACS sidestepped the GCCC and funded the refuge directly. The local State member and even the Premier urged the refuge to stop paying rent.

The dispute dragged into 1981, with the recriminations becoming more and more bitter. The GCCC admitted that their hostility was due to the radical feminist politics of the refuge, while the GCCC was accused of being controlled by an evangelical group. Fred Nile pitched in, with an accusing headline 'Refuges for Sex Hatred'.¹⁴ The final meeting was, according to

^{ix} An evangelical member of NSW's Upper House.

YACS notes, 'conducted in an atmosphere of tension and lack of cordiality'. The GCCC issued an ultimatum: they would reduce the rent if the present staff were sacked. In exasperation, YACS put the matter in the hands of the Crown Solicitor and privately advised the refuge workers to leave town. Matters deteriorated further. The Mayor publicly stated that he did not care if the refuge closed. The refuge was constantly threatened with eviction and in April 1982 the house was put up for sale. It was offered to the Salvation Army for \$20 yet an offer of \$10,000 from YACS was refused. The Crown Solicitor considered deregistering the GCCC but concluded that this course would be politically damaging. In the end, the GCCC dissolved itself in 1983. In eight years the sum total of its achievements had been the opening of the refuge and a campaign to close it down.

Residents take control

Struggles for power took on another aspect at the Marrickville women's refuge. Marrickville had set out to learn from Elsie's mistakes, to be a different type of feminist refuge. If Elsie created the model for women's refuges, Marrickville laid the foundation for the movement. Elsie still commanded enormous political authority, but its state of permanent feminist revolution intimidated other women. Marrickville workers were more accessible, less threatening. Marrickville acted as an interpreter of feminism for other refuges, but Marrickville was marked for internal upheaval as devastating as any that had happened at Elsie.

Despite the early commitment to resident involvement, the first Marrickville workers were not ex-resident. They experienced similar problems with power as had the Elsie collective, but Marrickville workers chose a policy of objectivity rather than total immersion. They tried to see refuge work as a job, and were critical of the integration of work, politics and pleasure at Elsie. The Marrickville collective worked on systems of rotated specialisation, and set a two-year limit on job tenure to prevent women becoming entrenched.

Because they had planned to quickly hand the refuge over to residents, the first Marrickville submission had applied for only two workers, compared with Elsie's six. Marrickville never recovered from the shortfall in funding this produced. When they realised their mistake, they appealed to the Sydney Women's Liberation Movement for volunteers, but this was a movement that had been drained by Elsie, and the volunteers did not appear.

Marrickville then developed a semi-volunteer system, paying ex-residents a small wage for a night shift. It was seen as a good way for ex-residents to keep contact with the refuge and supplement their pensions. 'The Last Resort' (1981), compiled by Vivien Johnson, traces the discussions that led to the first ex-resident run refuge. Marrickville had employed follow-up workers, and had abolished any time limit on residents staying at the refuge. This produced a sense of stability, and a strong ex-resident group formed. In 1978, with funding from the Ethnic Affairs Commission, Marrickville employed the first worker in the refuge program to concentrate on migrant women. She was also the first ex-resident employed by the refuge and was followed by many more.

The collective then had to tackle the same problems as had occurred at Elsie: how to overcome ingrained class differences between women who had stayed in the refuge and those who had not; how to achieve the transition from worker-resident relationship to peer relationship; how to stop categorising some workers as ex-resident?

They experimented with different combinations of workers: an ex-resident would work with a non ex-resident on an issue like housing, or the ex-resident half of the collective would work together for half the week. These were formal attempts to overcome fundamentally different needs and priorities. Ex-residents were looking for a support system not just a job. They all had children and looked to their workplace for support in combining childcare and work. For them the needs of the resident women were primary. They accused feminists of using refuges as political bandwagons, of treating residents as 'passing traffic in the house', and found unacceptable that 'a certain percentage of the residents were looked upon as a reasonable loss alongside other priorities'¹⁵ They also believed they could campaign for social change more effectively as ex-residents because they had the experience around which the campaigns were being fought, and would not become locked into a middle class debate with the State. A debate they considered the death sentence of radical action.

The ex-resident group could see only one solution, and in mid 1980 they demanded that the refuge be handed over to ex-residents. Caught between a rock and a hard place, the others agreed, and by August Australia had its first ex-resident run refuge. It sent shock waves round the refuge movement, challenging all workers to evaluate their positions:

I suppose if a feminist refuge was really honest with what feminism is all about, like giving women the opportunity to control their own lives...they would all have ex-residents working there'¹⁶

A year later, an evaluation of NSW refuges found only 14% of refuge workers were ex-resident, and that most of these had problems with childcare, transport to work and knowing what was expected of them. Workers at Marrickville were familiar with these problems:

Most of us were mothers and we would start the day at five a.m. getting school lunch ready for the big kids and getting the little kids ready for pre-school, and then we would start heading off for work. We had to drop the kids off and take the babies with us. The instant you get into a refuge there is a crisis in the morning, getting children to school and organising childcare. It is quite difficult to deal with your own children and then deal with this. (Pam Johnson, ex-resident and worker at Marrickville, interview).

They also found that being workers set them apart from residents in some of the same ways that they had criticised in non-ex-resident workers. In one significant instance, they closed ranks as a collective against resident's

complaints. But they also suffered from a lack of support from other refuges. They were simply too challenging:

We needed someone at this time to say: look, consolidate what you have started, it's really important that you do. The reason that it was important was that a lot of people were looking at ex-residents with all the expectations of failure. (ibid)

It was with an audible sense of relief that other refuges heard of the gradual re-employment of non ex-resident workers at Marrickville. Not surprisingly, childcare was the first area ex-residents allowed other women to take over. The Marrickville ex-resident collective was represented as a failure in refuge mythology. This is a mistake, because the long-term effects were far reaching.^x Marrickville continued to employ a high proportion of ex-residents. By 1985 one in five NSW refuge workers were ex-resident, and over a third of all refuge workers had personal experience of homelessness and physical abuse.¹⁷

Migrant women

Marrickville refuge had also blazed a trail for immigrant women. They were the first refuge in NSW to employ a woman from a non-English speaking background to work specifically with other migrant women. Migrant women made up a large proportion of refuge residents. The 1977 Royal Commission Into Human Relationships was given figures of 45% at Elsie, 33% at Marrickville and 35% at Bonnie. The Childcare Report found that as many as 50% of residents at refuges in Griffith, Newcastle and Wollongong could be migrant. There was some criticism of how these women were treated in refuges, with the Royal Commission hearing evidence of 'cultural misunderstandings' occurring and a report tabled by the NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission in 1978 challenging the capability of refuges to respond to the needs of migrant women. Indeed, there was a strained relationship between refuges and migrant services. Migrant services workers were critical of the low level of awareness about racism amongst refuge workers, who in turn suspected migrant services workers of putting the interests of their communities before individual migrant women. The stalemate was broken when the Ethnic Affairs Commission convened a seminar on migrant women in refuges in late 1979.

Migrant services and refuges acknowledged at the seminar that their relationship had been problematic, but saw this meeting as a historic

^x The whole process at Marrickville closely mirrors the creation of an ex-resident dominated staff at Elsie in 1976. There, the issue that bought matters to a head paying all women for work performed, though there was also a reaction to a middle class style of running the refuge. Ex-resident employment was less clearly articulated at Elsie than at Marrickville and the impact was also far less on other refuges. This may have been because Elsie had withdrawn into itself, and because there was not such an established movement on which to have an impact.

opportunity to overcome the past and work together. They discussed the lack of resources for migrant women in refuges, the problems with children interpreting for their mothers, the clash of cultures in a communal house, and failings in the government interpreting service. Women from Griffith refuge drew special attention to the acute lack of resources in country areas, and the risk of exposure for migrant refuge workers in small communities.

They established a joint working party to produce information about domestic violence and refuges in a number of languages, approach the ethnic media about its hostile attitude to refuges, and seek improvements in the interpreting service. Migrant women staying in refuges were to be asked about their needs. The significant issue of more migrant refuge workers was not raised. The refuge state conference in February 1980 endorsed the work of the working party, but did not support a call by Marrickville for a migrant worker in every refuge.

The working party met regularly, distributing its posters and leaflets, and installing a three-way phone for translations in one refuge. It lapsed during 1981, a year when funding overshadowed all other issues. Reconvened by the Women's Co-ordination Unit in 1982, the working party produced a resource booklet, which caused a storm as migrant women claimed to have not been consulted on the contents. The working party decided to call it a day, but with one final significant finding. Bringing the debate full circle, they concluded that 'the most appropriate method of addressing the problem is to provide funding for the employment of ethnic workers within refuges'¹⁸ The NSW Government passed this on to the Federal Minister for Immigration with a request for funding for ten migrant workers.

Ziyet Keskin was employed by Marrickville women's refuge as the first migrant women's refuge worker in NSW:

I grew up in Turkey with a working class background. I was married at fourteen and had my first child when I was fifteen. When I was seventeen we came to Australia. I often went work with bruises on my face. It started months after I was married but it was getting a lot worse. At work I was constantly crying. I was bruised and cut. People were concerned. They gave me the number of someone to talk to who could speak my language. I was scared to ring that person. For the first time I would be talking to a stranger about my marriage. Would that get back to my community and would people judge me? But I did ring her and she gave me the number of a refuge and a bit of information about what a refuge was. I rang Marrickville Women's Refuge and the worker was very gentle and supportive. That day when I got home I told the kids we were leaving. We put our things in garbage bags and a neighbour helped us get a taxi to the refuge.

My first impressions were shock. Walking into this big house full of people all talking English. They invited up to eat a meal that was really awful. The food was all watery stuff with meatballs just sitting there. After dinner the worker talked to me about Social Security. I couldn't

really understand. I was worried about my community's reaction towards a woman who had left her husband. The attitude was that if you leave it has to be your fault, that it is less acceptable than if your husband bashes you up.

There were huge problems over the cleaning roster because it was written in English. I had to ask what to do. After a long time you memorize what to do. It's really horrible when people are talking about you and you don't know what they are saying but it is really obvious. You don't have the language to confront them. Some girls locked a migrant woman in the bathroom. I said to the girls: Why did you do that? They said: she's only a wog, we never mixed with wogs before, we were always told by our parents never to go near the wogs. The workers were really concerned that there was a problem in the house but they didn't know how to deal with it because they hadn't come to terms with it themselves. My impression was that workers thought it was nice to have migrant women in the house because they do a lot of cooking and don't cause trouble because they can't talk English.

I tried to be the umbrella for migrant women in the refuge. Like a Greek woman who came, her head split like a watermelon by her husband, I would sit for hours and hours in her room, communicating by touch because we both had common cultural differences and pressures. The collective decided I was good to have around and maybe they should offer me a job, but I couldn't possibly be one of workers who got paid like any other did. I had to sit around Ethic Affairs for hours telling my lifestory because if I did that we might get funding. I soon found that one problem was people expected me to do everything, to speak all languages or at least understand them. What a migrant woman was doing about her childcare was my problem, her needing money was my problem, her finding a house was my problem, painting her house was my problem. Everything under the sun was my problem. I saw the isolation these women were in but how much could one person do?

Ludo McFerran 2008

¹ Melbourne Halfway House, 1975, *Half Way Where?* Scarlet Woman Sep

² Bringa Social Worker 1976, from Bringa files

³ Dowse Sara, 1984, *The Bureaucrat As Usurer*. in *Unfinished Business: Social Justice for Women in Australia*. D.Broom. Allen and Unwin

⁴ Press Release March 1977

⁵ Oldmeadow, Pam 1978, *Women In Last Resort Housing*

⁶ Sydney Daily Telegraph 8/10/78. Quoted by O'Donnell and Saville in *Domestic Violence and Power*.

⁷ Hounslow, Saville, Stephenson, 1979, *Childcare Needs in Women's Refuges, N.S.W.*

⁸ Albury Refuge Annual Report.1978

⁹ Quoted in *Women's Refuges, Collectives and Accountability*, a discussion paper for the Victorian Department of Community Welfare Services

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Albury Women's Refuge Annual Report 1981/82

¹² Grafton Information Handbook 1983

¹³ Daily Examiner 25 August 1976

¹⁴ Sunday Telegraph July 1981

¹⁵ Ex-resident quoted by Vivien Johnson in unpublished thesis

¹⁶ Johnson, Vivien 1981, *The Last Resort*, Penguin pp 174.

¹⁷ NSW Women's Refuge Evaluation 1985

¹⁸ Undated letter from YACS Minister to Federal Minister for Immigration. In 1985, under a Labor federal government, NSW refuges received eight salaries for migrant workers as part of a new federal program

The First Ten Years: 1974-1984. Women's Refuges in NSW and Australia

Part One: Elsie

Introduction

On the morning of Saturday March 16th 1974 in a quiet suburban street in Glebe, Sydney a group of about twenty women entered a vacant house and changed the locks. The plaque on the front wall of the house named it as Elsie. The group spent the weekend making the house and its neighbour, Minnie, habitable. The two houses were single storey, each with two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen and an outside bathroom. One front room became the office and living room, leaving all remaining space to be used as sleeping areas. They painted, cleaned, repaired windows and doors, restored one kitchen and bathroom and ran a hose from the house of a sympathetic neighbour to supply water. They then opened Elsie Women's Refuge to any homeless woman and child,

This was the unlikely beginning of one of the most significant social movements of twentieth century Australia. Within ten years there were over forty women's refuges in the State of New South Wales and more than one hundred and sixty in Australia. More significant than the proliferation of refuges was the elevation of domestic violence to a primary social issue. By the end of the century responding to domestic violence had become a multimillion-dollar, multifaceted industry.

The speed with which the issue of domestic violence gripped the Australian imagination and motivated the policy makers may have surprised the women who set up the first refuge. The energy and courage with which communities and individuals across the country have tackled the problem would probably have amazed them. That we have failed to profoundly change the conditions in which domestic violence flourishes and to break the link between domestic violence and homelessness would undoubtedly disappoint them.

Those women had a clear set of aims that went far beyond providing just shelter. They wanted to take the stories of the women and children using the refuge back out to Australian society, to challenge a social system that allowed the violence, and change that system. This account looks at the survival and success of those aims during the decade from 1974 when Australian women began to take their own futures into their hands.

The account is based on the day books and files of numerous refuges and departments, interviews with many of the women involved, and on my own experience, as I became involved with Elsie Women's Refuge in 1978 and have remained active in the campaign against domestic violence to this day.

Background

It can be argued that domestic violence is one of the rediscovered crimes of the twentieth century. Historically, married women became the property of their husbands, with ownership extending to the use of force to discipline. The only limit was the severity of the force, infamously a stick no bigger than a thumb. Yet by the end of the nineteenth century domestic violence was understood as criminal behaviour. Feminists and social reformers in late nineteenth century England and North America had overturned the legislative approval of domestic violence and campaigned for married women's property rights. In 1889 legislators in New South Wales tabled a 'Wife Beaters Punishment Bill'. Reformers believed the violence was due to the 'animal' component of male nature, and, influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution, saw this component declining as society progressively evolved.

This trend towards criminalisation was reversed in the first seventy years of the twentieth century as domestic violence was pathologised. Vulgarised Freudian psychology attributed domestic violence to 'psychologically fractured individuals' and female masochism. The very notion of battered women as victims entitled to state protection was itself challenged. Domestic violence was renamed an individual rather than a social problem and was decriminalised by being siphoned away from the criminal law system into the newly created family law courts.¹

The cover-up had proceeded so smoothly that by the early 1970's there was little evidence of the extent of domestic violence. The Journal of Marriage had since its inception in 1939 published not a single article with the word 'violence' in the title.² Emergency services, which dealt daily with domestic violence, kept no records of its incidence or severity. References to wife battering were more likely to be found in the humour of postcards than in the libraries of serious research.

These developments had their most profound effect on the battered women themselves, who believed they were personally responsible for the violence. Even if they could break through these paralysing feelings of responsibility, their options were limited. A woman who left home because of violence was not eligible for emergency public housing. As long as a matrimonial home existed, she was not considered homeless.

Until the introduction of the Supporting Mother's Benefit by the Whitlam Labor Government in the early seventies, most women with children were economically trapped in violent relationships. The lack of childcare facilities made employment difficult and a woman risked losing custody of her children after separation because of the poverty to which she had been reduced. A survey of domestic assaults in 1975³ found that for forty eight percent of women the main reason for putting up with domestic violence was simply having nowhere else to go.

Religious charities had traditionally provided the homeless with accommodation, but 'homeless people' meant destitute men. The 1973

Federal Government working party into homelessness concentrated on homeless men and the religious charities that provided for them. It was left to two students taking the first social welfare course at the Workers Education Association in Parramatta in 1973 to conduct the first survey of homeless women.⁴

The students found seven hostels catering for nearly eighteen hundred men, and only four hostels that could accommodate seventy-three women and seventy-five children. Women would often be separated from their children, while being separated from the men's beds by only a curtain. Accommodation was very short-term and women complained of being advised to return to their violent relationships. The survey concluded that there was a desperate need for total care emergency accommodation for all kinds of homeless women.

Two years earlier, the world's first domestic violence women's refuge had opened in London. Known as Chiswick Women's Aid, it had been started by a small group of women as a drop-in centre 'where women and their children could come to meet and escape, for a time, from loneliness'⁵ The group was given a derelict house for the centre by the local council. Gradually, women coming to the centre stopped leaving at the end of the day. The first was 'a wraith-like figure who seemed to be totally homeless and friendless'⁶ Gradually women began to talk about domestic violence. One woman told her story of having been beaten all nineteen years of her married life. When Chiswick Women's Aid enquired about her rights, they were told 'that a woman who leaves home has voluntarily made herself homeless and therefore is not entitled to any assistance from social services'⁷.

It is interesting that in her 1974 account of the early years of Chiswick, Erin Pizzey states that the preferred option of Women's Aid was to petition for a divorce on the grounds of persistent cruelty and apply for an injunction to the Family Division of the Divorce Registry. The injunction would provide women with a protection order, custody of the children, maintenance from the husband, and the matrimonial home. Pizzey argued that women should be compensated for the violence perpetrated against them, 'if a divorce is granted on grounds of cruelty, the house should be given to the wife for her lifetime'⁸. Chiswick Women's Aid had flagged one of the contradictions that was to dominate future domestic violence debate in Australia.

Sydney 1973

By 1973 news of what was being achieved in Chiswick had spread to Australia. A small group of Sydney feminists interested in setting up a refuge for homeless women began meeting together. They too were interested in the broad issues of women's homelessness and the need for low cost housing. Anne Summers was one. She had been shocked after moving from Adelaide by the housing conditions of inner Sydney, and inspired by the work of Erin Pizzey, who she had interviewed in an ABC radio program. Another member of the group, Sydney feminist pioneer Bessie Guthrie, who was then over seventy, had long campaigned to protect young women thrown out by their

families from the court system and institutions. Bessie wanted a safe place for these girls to stay.

All members of the group had been affected by the growth of the squatting movement, which had culminated in the Victoria Street Campaign in Sydney's Kings Cross in 1973. That campaign focused on the homelessness caused by evictions of low income earners to make way for middle-class housing development. Builder's labourers had introduced stop works they called green bans on building demolition, and activists had squatted the empty homes. Squatting became a popular and immediate tactic in the struggle for affordable housing.

The most significant factor motivating this group of feminists may have been a growing sense of inertia in Women's Liberation. It was five years since the latest wave of twentieth century feminism had re-established itself in Sydney. For many feminists these years had been spent in discussion and consciousness-raising. The feminists of the seventies attempted to get under the skin of oppression by looking at women's feelings, their personal lives, and the everyday. The slogan 'the personal is political' brought women together out of isolation and gave them, through consciousness-raising, the forum to discover that what they had experienced as personal problems were products of a social system which exploited women on a myriad of levels. Consciousness-raising had been essential to build a united movement of women from diverse backgrounds and needs. In many ways it had been successful. In Sydney, large numbers of women, sharing common political goals, regularly met together as the Women's Liberation Movement. Yet, after five years many had become impatient with being 'over-concerned with theory and changing our lives and not doing very much to assist those women with real practical difficulties.'⁹ The Movement, brimming with young women full of enthusiasm, energy and passion, was in the mood for some direct action.

The first challenge was to find a house. In late 1973 the refuge group approached several large property developers with empty houses they could not demolish because of the green bans. One house was offered, but it was tiny and in poor condition. The group then applied to the Commonwealth for the use of a former migrant hostel, but the local council wanted the land for a car park. For the group it was the last straw, and they began the search for a house to squat. As Anne Summers recalls:

We discovered that the Church of England owned a very large number of houses in Glebe, and that these houses were progressively becoming vacant and being left unoccupied because the Church was negotiating to sell the whole Glebe Estate to the Federal government. I will never forget the day when, with notebook in hand, I walked up and down every street in the Estate, noting the houses which were empty and evaluating which could be suitable. In Westmoreland Street we found a tiny cottage called Elsie, which was joined to another house. Both places seemed in reasonable repair, they had a large joint backyard, and most important of all, they were vacant'¹⁰

Action

Now the group needed the energy and support of the feminist movement to squat and run the refuge. The opportunity came very quickly. To mark International Women's Day, a two-day conference was held in Sydney on the first weekend of March 1974, where women spoke out about their own experiences of violence.

It was for all present the most harrowing weekend as we listened to woman after woman describing her rape, her bashing, her violence at the hands of her father or husband or boyfriend'¹¹

Anne Summers spoke about the plans to open a refuge and asked for help. The timing was right. The linking of violence against women, homelessness and the need for action galvanised those present, 'the place was in uproar, with women screaming their enthusiastic support'¹². Later that week sixty women crowded into the movement's headquarters, Women's Liberation House, and plans were laid to squat the cottage in Westmoreland Street the following weekend. The plans were fraught with danger. Those who had experienced or witnessed the violence used by police and hired thugs to evict squatters from Victoria Street during the squatting campaign were apprehensive. The address of the house to be squatted was known to only women in the original refuge group in order to avoid leaks. Their plan worked. On the morning of Saturday March 16th 1974 a group of about twenty women forced their way into the vacant house called Elsie and changed the locks without interference. There was not a policeman in sight.

It was three days before a woman arrived at Elsie. During these first three days we dutifully did our rosters, argued about how we should run Elsie and did endless media interviews in order to get news of our existence out to women. But I must admit that by the third day we were getting a bit nervous. Would anyone come? Were we wrong about women needing sanctuary from domestic violence? What would we do if no women came? The first woman to arrive at Elsie was probably somewhat overwhelmed by her reception. After that, of course, Elsie was never empty.'¹³

Vision

What were those arguments about how to run Elsie? Despite the diversity of the women involved, and the new ground they were breaking, three fundamental aims took shape surprisingly quickly, and began to appear later in 1974 in statements made on behalf of the refuge. The first aim was to provide shelter and support to women in need. The second was to have the refuge run by women for women and the third was to overturn the system that made a refuge necessary. It was these last two aims that announced that something very new had arrived on the political and social landscape of Australia. Elsie would not be just another welfare service. Their purpose was not charity but change.

The second Elsie aim emphasised a commitment to self-help both in the organisation and provision of support. The refuge should be run by women for women, not only to ensure an unthreatening and safe environment, but to also build on the political unity of women. It was argued that in the political sphere men had ignored, denied and trivialised women's oppression. After all, men would obstruct a political analysis of oppression that implicated them. Women's experience in political parties and other movements had shown them that autonomous women's organisations were needed to achieve progress for women.

In the women-run refuge, they believed that new hierarchies between women could be avoided by working collectively. Everyone involved would be part of the Elsie Collective and would share the responsibility for tasks and decision-making. By discovering a common interest based on their oppression, women would overcome the tensions and rivalries that had previously divided them. Collectivity would also include residents and ex-residents. It was hoped that their involvement in the running of a refuge would give them the confidence to take control of their lives. The collective believed that it was a lack of 'educational, financial and emotional resources' ¹⁴ rather than masochism that trapped women in violent relationships. Women would learn at Elsie how to use the system, and then could make informed decisions about their own futures, helped by other residents in a safe and supportive environment. By helping each other, women would 'break through the spiral of dependency which so many women and children find themselves in, often transferring their helplessness and dependency from a husband to a welfare institution' ¹⁵

Elsie's own obsolescence was built into its third aim. This was to use the experience of the women and children who stayed in the refuge to expose to the community the reasons why domestic violence and homelessness occurred. For feminists, the reasons were grounded in the systemic oppression of women and children. The balance of power between women and men was weighted against women, and every system and institution in society reinforced women's powerlessness. The main culprit was the patriarchal family, which trapped women economically and in their role as carers for children. Men were violent to women and children in their families as enforcers of the dominance of men, and the legal and judicial institutions sanctioned their force. Attempts by women to escape from the patriarchal family were stymied by the lack of employment, low pay, alternative housing, and hostile social systems.

The women at Elsie wanted sweeping changes to redress this imbalance between women and men. These changes were reflected in the reformist and revolutionary demands of modern feminism: from equal pay and opportunity in the workplace, free childcare and women's rights to control their own reproductive capacities, to the destruction of the patriarchal family. Once achieved, refuges would no longer be needed. The reason for their existence would have been solved.

Reality

Fitting in the time to achieve these revolutionary aims was to be a problem at Elsie. There were more pressing concerns. In the first six weeks forty-eight women and thirty-five children crowded into the two tiny houses. The conditions were shocking. Rather than turn people away more mattresses were squeezed in. As one volunteer put it, there were 'wall to wall women, rafter to rafter' (Jill Meikle interview). Some women had to be literally carried into Elsie because of the damage done to them. There were women who had suffered repeated bashings for decades. Children could be so distressed that they would beat their heads against a wall until someone put their hand between the child and the brick. A neighbour was shot because he would not give the address of the refuge to a husband looking for his wife

The immediate future of their squatted houses was solved, despite the demands of the local board of the Church of England that they vacate, by the Commonwealth's hasty purchase of the Glebe Estate. Running costs still needed to be found, and as there was no charge to stay in the refuge, these amounted to about \$200 a week. Up to forty women worked as volunteers. They were more likely to be performing roles as traditionally feminine carers than political activists. They organised benefit dances, collected donations of furniture to help women set up new homes, and scrounged food from local shops. Desperate times created some new career opportunities. In her autobiography, Anne Summers describes her lucrative experience as a marijuana dealer, the profits providing the refuge with a major source of income.

The day books through which volunteers and residents passed on information to each other give a fascinating insight into the extraordinary daily life of the refuge at that time. In May was an entry reporting the first threat by a man to burn down Elsie. An entry in June revealed that people were sleeping in the storeroom, and that a woman with both ankles fractured was sleeping next to the kitchen. There is a general plea for someone to scrape together enough money to buy milk. There were comments on an offer by the Glebe Liberal Party that Elsie cater for one of their functions and keep the profit, and a report on the visits by women's groups from other capital cities who intended setting up refuges. One resident wrote that she objected to her husband who was harassing the refuge being referred to as a 'bloody imbecile' in the daybook.

From the day books we learn that in the first two months many women with children could not cope with the crowded conditions and returned to the relationships they had left, but that the same women would then return to the refuge for a second stay. The difficulties were exacerbated by the open-door policy. In the first four months over half the residents had been recently discharged from psychiatric hospitals or were long-term homeless single women. Their lifestyles and needs often clashed with those of women with children.

The fact that the longer term homeless women had probably themselves once been victims of family or domestic violence, that this had resulted in their homelessness, and that they may have had their own children at one time was obscured. Those women for whom being homeless was a new experience perceived the others as different. Perhaps they saw in them their own future, and did not like the vision. Perhaps it was simply they wanted to protect their vulnerable children from the damaged behaviour of some of these women. This tension reoccurs throughout the history of refuges, and has led to a separation of the issues of domestic violence and homelessness which is problematic, and to which we will return.

Volunteers too were voicing their frustration with the open-door policy and some of the overly optimistic expectations of self-help:

There are people in need of help we are quite unable to provide...it is time to stop pussy footing around. We are not helping them by allowing them to deteriorate further while we wonder about the morality of taking responsibility for people who are no longer responsible for themselves. Like it or not, we are responsible for people living here who need more than a bed (Elsie day books)

The mothers staying at the refuge took matters into their own hands, and refused to allow women recently discharged from psychiatric hospitals into Elsie. The Elsie collective decided to abandon the open door policy, particularly for mentally ill women. They increasingly returned them to hospitals, or asked the police to remove them from the refuge. For feminists who saw these hospitals and the police as equally oppressive institutions for women it was a traumatic step

The pressures were taking their toll, and after only three months there were desperate pleas in the Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter for more volunteers. This drain of feminist energy fuelled criticism of Elsie from within the Women's Liberation Movement: that it was a mere band-aid, absolving the State of its responsibilities to provide shelter for women, and consuming valuable feminist political energy. This led to an exchange between two of the Movement's prominent members. Liz Reid, then adviser to the Prime Minister on women's affairs, argued that refuges were not 'political acts which undermine the existing society' ¹⁶. Galled, Anne Summers replied 'Once women see the necessity to rebel, the preconditions of their liberation exist. Women's refuges are able to provide the shelter of a stepping-stone on that road to realisation' ¹⁷. These were arguments that were to be turned back on feminists at a later date, by ex-residents accusing them of using women as a vehicle to promote their political ends.

Funding or not?

Pressure was, however, mounting on the NSW Government to take some responsibility for the growing crisis at Elsie. By September 1974, more than 80% of women at the refuge had been referred by government or church agencies. An article in a November edition of the National Times ¹⁸ accused

the Government of turning a blind eye on the terrible conditions at the refuge while its agencies 'dumped' women there. The press had been genuinely shocked by the squalid state of the refuge. It was for them a disturbing reflection on the circumstances women and children had endured at home that they would now choose to move to Elsie.

Pressure was also growing for more refuges. By the end of 1974 new refuges had been established by women's groups in the western suburbs of Sydney, in Adelaide, Melbourne, and Hobart. None of the new refuges had the resources to endlessly operate on donations and volunteers. For all of them the need for funding was urgent.

For some feminists funding was a contradiction. How can you accept resources from the system you are opposed to without being compromised by the transaction? It is an illusion that you can have your cake, eat it, and depose the baker. Wages would introduce a paid feminist social work system. But was this any worse than exploiting the voluntary labour of women? Where was the line between activism and volunteerism? The arguments raged in the Australian Women's Liberation Movement in the seventies. This period saw an explosion in community-based welfare, largely thanks to the Whitlam government. This gave women's groups access to resources otherwise unattainable. Already, a Sydney Women's Health Centre had received federal fundingⁱ, and the Australian Labor Party pledged financial support for Elsie within a few months of the refuge opening. Women who had never had resources before found themselves in the unusual position of debating whether or not to accept them.

Not all women's groups agonised over the issue. A new women's refuge group in Melbourne, Women's Liberation HalfwayHouse, refused to open until they were funded. They believed that without funding refuges could only provide a poor service to a small number of families at the expense of an enormous amount of feminist energy, while at the same time absolving the government of its responsibilities. Funding would draw attention to women's oppression and would give credibility to the overtly political aims of the refuges.¹⁹ If the relation of refuges to government was to be contradictory, so would that of government to refuges.

Torturous process

Despite the commitments made by the Federal ALP government to provide women's refuges with government funding, the process of securing this funding was to be torturous. Women's refuges just did not fit neatly into an existing program. Domestic violence crosses many portfolios; this fact was to be both a strength and a curse when it came to developing anti-domestic violence policies and strategies in the future. In 1974, in the absence of a women's funding program into which the refuges could be easily slotted, it was to prove a curse. As early as July 1974 the Elsie Collective submitted for funding to the Health Department's Community Health Programme (CHP), a

ⁱ Leichhardt Women's Health Centre in March 1974.

channel through which the Federal Government was providing substantial funding to new welfare models. But in the case of women's refuges, the Commonwealth felt this was not the appropriate funding source. In February the Department of Social Security had set up a working party into homelessness, which recommended the creation of a Homeless Persons Assistance Programme (H.P.A.P.). In an election speech in April 1974 Prime Minister Gough Whitlam announcing the creation of the HPAP, linking its future to women's refuges:

This is a programme devised in response to a much neglected need...to the deserted or disturbed women and her children...to the battered woman or the battered child, to the single parent-in short to anyone without support or an income.

Unfortunately, the homelessness working party had concentrated on the needs of homeless men and the large charitable institutions that provided for them. The funding proposed for the HPAP was the form of subsidies to overnight hostels, offering only half a salary and seventy-five cents per day per person accommodated. The religious organisations running the hostels were to provide the balance of the costs. Local women's groups setting up refuges simply did not have these resources, nor did they want to run just overnight hostels. They needed to provide twenty-four hour support.

The CHP could supply funding in the quantities needed and was sympathetic to the aims of women's refuges, but it was a model of State and Commonwealth co-operation, with the States contributing a proportion of the funding. The HPAP, on the other hand, was to be a totally Commonwealth funded initiative. This was seen to have two major benefits by a meeting of refuge groups from all over the country (Sydney, November 1974). A national program would be better placed to tackle national issues affecting women such as pensions, housing, family law and medical insurance. The meeting also foresaw a bleak future for women's refuges in the more conservative states, and believed they would be safer under a federal program. The meeting concluded that the working party into homelessness should be reconvened, this time with refuge representation, to consider amending the Homeless Persons Act in response to the specific needs of women and children.

A period of furious lobbying in Canberra followed but without success. Bill Hayden, Minister for Social Security was personally hostile, reputedly judging women running Elsie as a group of middle class feminist do-gooders using residents of the refuge as a front. His public servants shared his low opinion. They were dismayed to be doing business with women who a few months previously had squatted church-owned houses and were now demanding \$100,000 in tax-payer's money to run overtly feminist centres. It was a clash of cultures. Entire collectives, some in tuxedos, would turn up for meetings with public servants. For a period, most of the Elsie Collective adopted the surname Egg.

The pressure did produce some stopgap results. In December Elsie heard that the CHP had allocated Elsie a one-off grant. This was not all good news for the Collective. There was the 'gap'. Under the terms of the CHP funding agreement, the Commonwealth provided 90% of running costs and 75% of capital costs. The State government was to provide the 'gap' in funding, but the Liberal government of New South Wales was not prepared to co-operate. A series of bitter communications followed between the Federal and State Governments, but the NSW government would not back down. The Commonwealth finally gave up and provided 100% funding to Elsie.

The first part of their CHP funding arrived at Elsie on 1st January 1975, nine months after the refuge had opened its doors. The Collective had submitted for six salaries at \$6000 per worker, for three childcare workers and for running and capital costs. They received \$25,000 for six months. There was no funding for running costs or childcare. The Health Commission stressed that this was a once only grant, and that Social Security would provide funding in future.

To add to the confusion, 1975 was International Women's Year. The Australian Government had set up an IWY Secretariat, whose job included initiating substantive changes to policies affecting women within government departments, and pulling into line departments that were not responding. The Secretariat also had \$2 million to distribute to women's projects. It was, predictably, deluged by submissions from groups setting up refuges. When the Secretariat distributed the funding to one-off projects, there was an outcry from refuge groups. The Secretariat argued that by funding refuges they would have been relieving one department, Social Security, of a major area of responsibility for women.ⁱⁱ

Then a chance meeting at the Federal ALP conference in Terrigal NSW, March 1975, gave the refuges new hope. A member of the Elsie collective attending the conference managed to talk with Bill Hayden about funding. She argued that he should visit Elsie before dismissing it. The Minister would not commit himself. A week later a resident at Elsie answered the door to a man. He said he was Bill Hayden. She gave him the stock answer that men were not allowed in the refuge and slammed the door in his face. Horrified workers found him on the street and brought him back. The visit changed his mind. Seeing the conditions residents were choosing to live in rather than return home he threw his support behind the refuge. He advised them to apply to the HPAP and wrote at the foot of his letter:

After seeing what you and your colleagues are doing and the difficulties you labour under so worthily I am determined to do what I can to help- you are all wonderful people. March 1975

Elsie immediately submitted to the HPAP. They waited from April until June, desperately juggling funding in order to keep operating. Finally events beyond

ⁱⁱ In her autobiography Anne Summers is highly critical of this process, citing the granting of large sums of funding to the film 'Caddie' and to Germaine Greer for a television documentary.p362

the control of the Government cut through the indecision. The Whitlam Government was confronted with a critical by-election for the Tasmanian seat of Bass. The women's vote was perceived as crucial and a member of the International Women's Year Secretariat was sent on a whirlwind tour of the country to find 'what the women of Australia wanted'. She came back with one unanimous finding. Women of all political backgrounds were able to agree that refugees were the highest priority. It was an extraordinary finding. In less than eighteen months and despite the unorthodox methods employed, the opening of Elsie had stirred the minds of women across Australia. Whitlam was persuaded. He ordered a national women's refuge programme, with 100% federal funding under the umbrella of the Health Commission (June 75).

Local politics

Closer to home, the future of Elsie was being threatened by local hostility. The suburb of Glebe had traditionally been a working class area, which in the 1970s experienced a middle class invasion. Housing was the major source of tension, and the refuge was expected to exacerbate the housing shortage by drawing homeless women into the area. Local men were also angry when their partners started using the refuge. Some of the first residents were wives of local policemen. This created a history of hostility between the refuge and the Glebe police station.

Elsie became a target for harassment. On the night of 15th August 1975 a fire destroyed the bathroom and laundry. Tapping had been heard at the back window and a man was seen running up the yard. A week earlier Elsie had been warned that \$1000 had been offered to destroy the refuge. A front window had been smashed and obscene phone calls received. But the refuge also received community support. As soon as Elsie had been squatted Westmoreland Street was leafleted to explain what was happening and to ask for support. Local women not only used the refuge, but gave their energy as volunteers and donated food, furniture and clothes. Bessie Guthrie, one of the original Elsie group, lived in Westmoreland Street and was instrumental as a mediator between the refuge and the community.

A move to better premises precipitated a crisis in community relations. The Federal Government had purchased the Glebe Estate from the Church of England in late 1974. Elsie was allocated a large house several streets away and \$50,000 for renovations. These renovations were sometimes inappropriate, gold pile carpet was laid, and caused resentment amongst other Glebe Estate residents waiting for basic and overdue repairs. Matters intensified with an article in the local paper denouncing Elsie as a 'half-way house for female homosexuals'. The reporter claimed he was abused by marijuana smoking women when visiting the new premises, and quoted an 'English tradesman' as saying that the old 'headquarters' in Westmoreland Street had been left in a disgusting state. 'Its just as though one rat hole became too foul for them, and so they've moved into potentially another'. The collective investigated suing, but found the paper survived on libellous reporting and kept only \$4 in the bank to deter suits. One of the workmen from the refuge site did write to Elsie denying any of the workmen had made the

quoted comment, and accused the paper of discriminating against the English.

The local resident action committee entered into the argument. They claimed the right to choose workers for Elsie and wanted police verification that women had been bashed before being accommodated at the refuge. The head of the committee, a Mr Tom Witty, brought matters to a head in spring 1976 by inviting the local M.P. to the refuge. Residents, pillars of local society and funding department representatives were present to support Elsie. Throwing caution to the winds, Witty accused the residents of being lesbians who had borrowed children for the day. This was too much for the local Member, who fled, leaving Witty, who was charitably presumed drunk, to publicly relieve himself in the backyard. After this dramatic climax, matters settled down, but it would not be the last time refuges would be accused of being lesbian fronts.

Inner workings

While Elsie was publicly undergoing a trial by fire, the refuge was passing through an internal transformation. Four full-time workers had been employed with one-off Community Health Programme funding in January 1975. The first paid workers had a mixture of backgrounds, some had professional qualifications, others had relevant life experience. More workers were employed in mid-1975. The process was innovative. Two hundred women attended a mass meeting at which a series of simultaneous interviews took place.

The employment of paid workers caused both relief and uneasiness to the women who had struggled to keep the refuge open before funding. Although they had stressed the necessary role of volunteers in their submissions, they recognised that their roles would need re-defining in relation to paid staff. Many women exhausted by the strain of the past nine months used the employment of workers as an opportunity to drop out, but others felt pushed. The Collective was broadened to include paid and unpaid members, residents and ex-residents, but it was to prove an uneasy alliance.ⁱⁱⁱ

The paid staff worked a loose nine-to-five day though workers and volunteers often stayed late and workers were on-call twenty-four hours. All four jobs were equally paid in line with collective theory, but the jobs were categorised. One childcare worker was employed. Elsie's first submission had recognised that mothers and children needed different forms of support in the refuge. Another was employed to concentrate on addiction. She reported that 83% of residents had experienced violence aggravated by alcohol and 32% were on prescribed drugs for nervous conditions (1975 statistics).

ⁱⁱⁱ Melbourne's Half Way House formed a broad collective, with paid jobs being rotated every six months.

Elsie was under much scrutiny, not only for its own relevance, but for the relevance of refuges across Australia. Being a showcase refuge produced many internal tensions. Residents became increasingly unhappy with the constant stream of reporters coming to the door, especially as they focused on the sensational aspects of battering. This was a dilemma for the refuge. Sensationalism made good copy and stirred up community support, but it risked again reducing domestic violence to the isolated behaviour of a few psychopaths who terrorised innocent women and children.

Unlike other journalists, Anne Summers, now writing for the National Times, attempted to examine the long-term effects of domestic violence.²⁰ She also broke away from the media's fascination with Elsie by writing about women staying at Bonnie women's refuge in Liverpool. It was, according to her article, becoming apparent that refuges could only provide a brief respite for women and their children, With no rights to emergency public housing and with pensions set below the poverty line²¹, life after the refuge could be as hard for women as life before. Half the women at Bonnie were returning to violent relationships. The alternative was a four-year wait for public housing accommodation or to pay half their pensions in private rental.

But the most serious post-refuge problem was loneliness: 'There is an immediate and stark contrast between the bustling conviviality of a refuge and the quiet of a lonely flat'²² A radical solution was being attempted at Elsie. Following the example of many communal feminist households, where women lived together to combat poverty and loneliness, four Elsie ex-residents and their nine children, aged between one and ten, moved into a small house near Elsie. They shared housework and held house meetings to resolve problems. It was a closely monitored experiment, which ultimately failed. The pressure of thirteen children and adults living together in such a small space proved too great.

Despite the failures and limitations, women continued to flock to refuges. Thirty-seven women and children were jammed into Elsie in January 1975. In the last six months of that year a phenomenal eight hundred women and children passed through Elsie, most of them coming from other parts of Sydney or the State. The majority had suffered attacks over many years; nearly half needed hospital treatment for their injuries and were permanently injured-or scarred. Most women suffered from stress related illness and nearly all experienced depression²³.

These findings were the result of collaboration between Elsie and the Royal Commission on Human Relationships, which conducted its own phone-in on domestic violence during February 1976 with sixty-five women responding. Most of the women who phoned in were middle class, which dispelled the theory of domestic violence being a working class phenomenon. The Commission supported refuge demands for a federal program providing triennial funding and adequate salaries; for a Housing Commission tenancy to be transferable to the woman if the perpetrator was removed, and for the provision of halfway housing attached to refuges.²⁴ The co-operation between the Commission and Elsie confirmed an observation in the Elsie daybooks 'we

are now recognised as a source of knowledge by the system'. Their 1975 report to the Health Commission was a study in optimistic projection, announcing a shift from rudimentary crisis care to 'counselling in alcoholism, women's health, nutrition, and special care for children'.

Inner conflict

Under the surface there were rumblings. Paid workers still depended on volunteers for the daily mundane tasks of running a refuge. Despite the high migrant population in the areas surrounding Glebe, there were no migrant women employed as workers. Indeed, 'How to do roster' sheets advised volunteers not to accept women who could not speak English, as the refuge could not cater for their needs. Childcare also looked better on paper than in practice. In the crowded conditions at Westmoreland Street the new childcare worker felt like a 'superintendent mother' responsible for 'getting the kids out from under everyone's feet'. Even in the new premises there were no childcare facilities. The tiny backyard was taken up by a rotary drier. The childcare worker felt like a second-class citizen: 'You could come into a collective meeting after you wiped your feet' (Julie Nyland, children's worker, interview).

Despite the existence of the broad Elsie Collective, the paid workers effectively took control of the refuge through the authority of money and time spent at work. Yet by emphasising the research and educative work of the refuge, workers became increasingly distant from the residents, who complained that workers were impossible to see because they were always at meetings. Use of the largest ground floor room in Westmoreland Street for an office, banishing residents to the dining room or backyard, symbolised for some that the emphasis chosen by the staff was wrong. As an ex-resident, Bobbi Townsend, remembers:

The refuge was so busy, there was always something to do, and you thought you knew better than the workers so you did it. I remember going to some collective meetings, which were hard to understand because of language and class differences. But some of us just persisted. We thought that if we sat there for six months we might understand and then be able to say something because by then I saw lots of things I didn't like. Like women who could talk about you but had never spoken to you or spent any time in the house. Or being displayed like guinea pigs. We wanted more control over what interviews we did. There were things we didn't want to talk about, mainly our violent relationships. We were changing and wanted to talk about what: we were going through now. I wanted to get rid of the label battered woman. Its a repulsive and degrading term (Interview)

A network of ex-residents had steadily built up. Rents were still low enough in Glebe for women to live close to the refuge and for a while the communal ex-residents house was a focus for activity. Many ex-residents worked as volunteers at the refuge and formed links with other non-resident volunteers. Debates began on why some women were paid for their work and others not.

Matters came to a head when workers and volunteers intending to write a book about Elsie left the refuge in the hands of the residents and ex-residents. Progress on the book was slow, instead the issue of paying all women for their work dominated the discussions. They discussed a proposal that all wages be pooled and divided between all women contributing to keeping Elsie going. There was bitter disagreement, with most workers on wages opposing wage splitting and its impact on work conditions. They lost the argument and resigned. The volunteers and ex-residents who wanted employment were then taken on, almost doubling the staff and halving the wages.^{iv}

The Elsie experience

Wage splitting allowed for the employment of a very different group of workers at Elsie, changing the direction of the refuge. The articulate propagandists of the 1974/5 period had played an essential role in establishing not only Elsie, but also a national women's refuge program. They had calmed community hostility, sceptical taxpayers and nervous public servants and had carried out important research and educative work. By March 1976 half the Elsie workers were ex-resident. These women wanted to concentrate on the more personal and internal issues facing women in the refuge. This was to be a critical period for the national women's refuge program, but Elsie withdrew into itself. As one worker put it 'I didn't know any other refuge existed' (Julie Nyland)

Children became a greater priority. From Christmas 1977 Elsie had a distinct childcare program moving childcare from a shed in the backyard of the refuge to a rented house. Renting and equipping a house and running a van marked a significant shift in resources to childcare. Community Health had continued to reject funding responsibility for childcare, so funding was set aside from the general grant received for the refuge. Men volunteered to care for children at the refuge, and one was employed to work alongside the woman childcare worker. This caused further dilemmas for the collective. They wanted a positive male role model for the children, but they did not want him in the refuge space they had created for women or in their women's collective. The compromise was that he worked solely in the childcare house, and was not included in the collective. It proved unworkable, and when he began adopting a traditional male role in the house as the handyman, he was asked to leave.

The new Elsie workers saw sole responsibility for children as one of the major barriers facing women, and believed that children should be a community responsibility. As a group, they shared the care of worker's children, a critical need for the ex-resident workers, 'it was the most practical thing anyone could do for us'²⁵. To provide collective childcare, most workers lived in a number of communal houses. There was no separation between work and leisure. Indeed, 'work' was seen as an extension of an individual's personal and political life, as an aspect of activism. Being an Elsie worker became an all-consuming experience.

^{iv} In the euphoria of wage splitting even worker's children received wages. They were designed to encourage the kids to budget, but the mothers quickly pocketed them.

I was talking with another woman the other day and she said it was like coming home when she arrived at Elsie. You could start thinking about things that had happened to you, to try and understand why. Learning that my thoughts and feelings were valid was the biggest thing for me. It was sitting up all night talking about different things and the excitement of discovering women as friends. Sexuality often came up. Most of us knew nothing about our bodies or our feelings, and to listen to other women talking about sexuality was amazing. Most of us had never considered it valid enough to talk about. (Bobbi Townsend, ex-resident then worker at Elsie 1975-1977 interview).

These developments caused alarm to women who had previously been involved in the refuge. They were concerned that a concentration on autonomous life styles for women could be interpreted as anti-male and might adversely affect migrant and boy residents. The new Elsie introspection was seen as a rejection of the political campaign work of the refuge, even an anti-feminist shift. The issue which brought about the confrontation between the old collective and the new was, however, more prosaic.

Serious problems had been discovered with the sewerage, collapsing ceilings and faulty wiring in the refuge. Levels of hygiene plummeted, and the Health Commission considered cutting Elsie's funding if standards did not improve. The Commission was also alarmed by the decline in administrative skills on the Elsie collective. A late Elsie audit was holding up funding cheques, not only to Elsie, but to other refuges. This prompted a group of old collective members, including ex-workers, to write to the paid staff and, in the name of the Elsie collective, inform them of a meeting to discuss the threat hanging over the refuge. As they were still technically collective members, they believed they had the right to take this action. According to the Elsie constitution, any past worker, volunteer or resident seemed able to claim collective membership. By late 1976 there existed an enormous pool of women who had no active contact with the refuge, but could call themselves Elsie collective members. This all came as a shock to the workers, who had become accustomed to a collective dominated by themselves. The meeting went ahead. Tempers flared, all parties called for resignations, but supporters of the workers had stacked the meeting and the challenge was seen off.

The idealism surrounding the establishment of the early Elsie was itself taking a battering. The Collective, designed as a unifying and consensual enabler, was in its changing manifestations, proving to be a battleground of conflicting interest. Women were turning on women, women were being excluded, women were feeling used. They were discovering that not only could women have competing agendas, but the politics could get very personal. Women would have to learn how to disagree without taking it to heart. Some important principles had survived, particularly domestic violence survivors running their own refuges, but not without some strain.

We thought we were doing such a great work but there were problems. Like not knowing how to tell a woman you are friends with that she is a rotten mother and that her kids would be better off somewhere else.

Telling a woman she had a really bad alcohol problem and here we are sitting in the pub drinking with her. We never wanted to have that difference between the residents and workers and here it was happening to us. We were learning that as workers we were in a privileged position compared to the women in the house. (bobbi Townsend).

As rents rose in Glebe women moved further away from the refuge, scattering the support groups. Women could not sustain their involvement and new women were unprepared to commit themselves night and day to the refuge. Residents who remained distant from the daily organisation of the refuge and the activities of the collective complained that they received less support from the workers than those who threw themselves into the 'Elsie experience'. The consuming intensity gradually depleted everyone's energy. By the end of 1977 the 'experience' was over.

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¹ Allen Judith, 1982, *The Invention of the Pathological Family: A Historical Study of Family Violence in NSW*. Family Violence in Australia Ed. O'Donnell and Craney, Longman Cheshire. pp 22.

² O'Donnell and Saville 1979. *Domestic Violence and Power: A Study of Battered Women*. Project funded by I.W.D. Grant No. 12.053.03.

³ NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, (1975). *Statistical Report 5, Series 2, Domestic Assaults*. Researched the cases of 184 women who came before the chamber magistrates of NSW.

⁴ Harding and Smith 1973. *Survey of Homeless Women*. Unpublished

⁵ Pizzey Erin 1974, *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear*. Penguin Books.

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid

⁹ Summers, Anne 1984. Opening Address to National Women's Services Conference Canberra

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ ibid

¹² Summers, Anne 1999. *Ducks on the Pond*. Viking pp.324

¹³ Summers, Anne 1984. Opening Address to National Women's Services Conference Canberra

¹⁴ Elsie's First Report in their Submission for funding to the Health Commission, July 1974.

¹⁵ Summers, Anne 1974. *Refuges for Women in Urban Areas*. Community No. 3 Sep.

¹⁶ Refractory Girl No. 6 Autumn 1974

¹⁷ Women's Liberation Newsletter August 1974

¹⁸ Preston Yvonne, 1974. *Welfare Housing Too Little Far Too Late*. National Times Nov. 4-9

¹⁹ Melbourne Half Way House, 1975. *Half Way Where?*. Scarlet Woman Sep.

²⁰ Summers, Anne 1975. *How Women Live- If They Must- Without Men*. National Times. 22-27 December

²¹ The Henderson Report (1975) into poverty found that those on supporting mother's pensions were further below the poverty line than those on unemployment or aged benefits, and that the poverty increased with the number of children.

²² *ibid* 20

²³ One hundred and eleven women were surveyed from late 1975 to early 1976 by an Elsie worker for the Royal Commission on Human Relationships.

²⁴ Final Report Vol.4