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Women and Housing After the Lismore Floods (Australia) – A Relational Rights-Based Approach

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Abstract

Australia is experiencing both a housing crisis and an increase in extreme weather events due to global warming. This largely dry continent, beset by bushfires and floods, is a land of stark inequality. These inequitable landscapes make recovery from disaster difficult and prolonged for those already marginalised. National statistics reveal that older women are the fastest growing group facing housing precarity, and disasters compound upon this dire situation. This paper presents a relational rights-based approach, informed by a feminist ethics of care, to attain the right to adequate housing for all in the Australian context.

Keywords

feminist theories, human rights, climate change, homeless women, social justice

Introduction

Australia, due to our warming planet, is experiencing an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events (CoA, 2020; CSIRO & BOM, 2024), as is the rest of the world (IPCC, 2023). This largely dry continent, beset by widespread bushfires, floods and droughts, is also a land of deep inequality (Ewenson, 2024b). The aftermath of such disasters spotlights the depth of these inequitable landscapes, as recovery for those already marginalised is additionally difficult and prolonged (Alston et al., 2019). On 28 February 2022, within the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales (NSW, a state within Australia), a week of 'unprecedented' rains led the Wilsons River, which runs through the picturesque regional town of Lismore, to breach its banks and reach a height of 14.4 metres, 2 metres higher than the previously predicted 1 in 100 year flood level (Legislative Council Select Committee, 2022, p. 1). This severe flooding led to 4055 properties being deemed uninhabitable, 10,849 properties being assessed as considerably

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damaged, and over 4000 people were immediately evacuated from Lismore, with thousands more people displaced (and many remain displaced) across the region (NSW Auditor-General, 2024, p. 1).

At the same time as such disasters, Australia, like many other 'developed' nations, is experiencing an escalating housing crisis (Martin et al., 2023). The cost of purchasing a home is out of reach for many; rental increases and short-term rental tenure insecurities prevail (see e.g., Morris et al., 2021), and we have limited social housing provision (AIHW, 2023; Walsh, 2022). Statistics reveal that older women (aged 45 years and above) are the fastest growing group in Australia facing housing precarity and homelessness, and disasters, as worsened by climate change, compound upon this dire situation (AIHW, 2023, 2024; Alston, 2011; Northern Rivers Community Foundation, 2022). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reports that "the experience of homelessness has become increasingly widespread among older women, growing by almost 40 per cent between 2011 and 2021" (AIHW, 2024).

There is no single definition of homelessness, however, the Australian Bureau of Statistics considers a person homeless "if their current living arrangement is in a dwelling that is inadequate; has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations" (ABS, 2012). 'Precarious' housing includes household-based conditions such as forced moves and living in unaffordable or overcrowded housing, or homes where violence or other safety issues are experienced (Ong Vifor J et al., 2022).

This 'in brief' piece responds to the call for embracing a feminist ethics of care in this era of climate change (Boddy, 2018; Holdsworth & Boddy, 2024; Tronto, 2013), and links this with legal efforts aimed at progressing the recognition, implementation and protection of the right to adequate housing within Australia (Hohmann, 2020). This piece has a focus on women, as well as non-binary people, through positioning an allyship and solidarity with trans people and others often invisiblized in such housing commentary (see e.g., Fraser et al., 2021; Humphery, 2020; Rogers & brown, 2024). This linking of feminist theory with legal frameworks shapes what is here positioned as a 'relational rights-based approach' to achieve the right to adequate housing for all, with the relational aspect of this approach encompassing the ethics of care theory. This piece argues that social work has an imperative to advocate for, and to progress, this relational rights-based approach to achieve the right to adequate housing in all contexts, including that of disaster recovery. Furthermore, this writing centres the importance of localised or place-based approaches underpinning social work advocacy, albeit within the present confines of a short theoretical piece.

Lismore, A Town of the Northern Rivers Region

The Northern Rivers region has a distinct demographic with many single parent households, and a greater than national average older female population (ABS, 2021). The town of Lismore, in particular, has a high population of single-parent families at 26.1 per cent (compared to the Australian average of 15.9 per cent), the majority of which are headed by women (ABS, 2021). The town also has a significant older population with 14.6 per cent of the population being 70 years or older (compared to 12.1 per cent across Australia) (ABS, 2021). Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people comprise 5.5 percent of Lismore's population compared to 3.2 percent of the broader Australian population (ABS, 2021). Lismore's median household weekly income is considerably lower than the rest of NSW, at $1202 per week, compared to $1829 per week (ABS, 2021). Given these statistics, the process of recovery from disaster is expected to be challenging compared to regions with higher economic resources (Ewenson, 2024a). However, it is important to recognise and highlight that Lismore is a town with high social capital renowned for its strong sense of community, a vibrant arts scene, a thriving First Nations community, a popular and engaged state member of parliament, all while located in sub-tropical valley of extreme beauty (see e.g., Alison, 2024; Koori Mail, 2024; Ngulingah Local Aboriginal Land Council, 2024; Tongue, 2022).

Women in Australia have far greater access to education and employment than 50 years ago, yet the precarious housing existence experienced by many women, and in particular older women, as referred to by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2024) and within scholarly literature (Darab & Hartman, 2013; Hartman & Darab, 2017; Petersen & Tilse, 2023), belies these social and economic gains. The interaction of poverty and gender, exacerbated by factors such as domestic violence, financial abuse, racism, broad unpaid caring responsibilities, and prolonged and fraught family law property dispute processes (Easteal et al., 2018), reveal that immediate action on increasing affordable and social housing is imperative. It also highlights that a greater understanding of the compounding impacts of climate change and disasters upon other life events is required (King et al., 2016). The feminisation of poverty in this Northern Rivers region is clear (see e.g., Rolfe et al., 2020), and this has led to significant and widespread housing precariousness for women in the area (Darab & Hartman, 2013; Darab et al., 2018; Hartman & Darab, 2017), a situation made worse by the advent of the catastrophic 2022 floods (End Street Sleeping Collaboration, 2022; Healthy North Coast, 2023; Legislative Council Select Committee, 2022; van den Nouwelant & Cibin, 2022; Women Up North, 2024). The urgency of addressing this multi-layered issue cannot be overstated, and this 'in brief' piece aims to provisionally shape a relational rights-based approach to frame social work engagement at a policy and advocacy level.

Women in Australia: Inequality to Housing Precarity

Australia is a wealthy nation, however, this wealth is not shared equally between men and women. The most recent *Status of Women Report Card*, delivered by the Prime Minister's Office of Women in March 2024, highlighted that while Australia has the fourth highest level of tertiary educated women in the OECD, only 60.4 per cent of women are in paid employment with "35.7 per cent of women cit[ing] caring for children as the main reason they are unavailable to start work or work more hours, compared to 7.3 per cent of men" (Australian Government, 2024).

Australia's structures for paid work and childcare arrangements (from newborn to the end of schooling years) create significant challenges for women in maintaining paid full-time work, in progressing their careers and in accumulating superannuation (Argyrous et al., 2017). There remains a considerable gender pay gap for those women who do undertake paid work (Australian Government, 2024), and the caring professions such as nursing, early childhood education, aged care work and social work, professions dominated by women, are generally poorly paid (Fair Work Commission, 2024). Violence against women is endemic across Australia (Fitz-Gibbon, 2021), and women in violent relationships are often faced with the perilous choice between remaining in a violent home or facing poverty and housing precariousness if they manage to leave, in part due to the undervaluing of caring work (both paid and unpaid) (Summers, 2022). These factors contribute to making women the largest growing cohort facing housing precarity or homelessness across Australia, an issue which has a relatively low public visibility (Brown et al., 2024; Petersen & Parsell, 2015; Petersen & Tilse, 2023). Furthermore, there is a growing evidence base demonstrating that in the aftermath of disasters Australian women experience an increase in domestic violence, highlighting that domestic violence escalates during times of housing shortages, amongst other profound challenges (Alston et al., 2021; Boddy et al., 2024; Foote et al., 2024; Parkinson, 2019).

Incorporating An Ethics of Care

A driving force for why women in Australia experience homelessness or housing precarity is that our society does not value caring responsibilities across a range of relationships. Caring for our children, elderly parents or other relatives, caring for the environment, caring professions and caring for others within our community more broadly—relational and essential activities—are not highly regarded

(Connelly & Kongar, 2017; Gilligan, 1982; Strazdins et al., 2016). However, the time consuming processes of caring are essential and integral to the human experience. At a minimum, we are all cared for as newborns, children, when elderly, and sometimes in intervening periods of illness or disability (Lee, 2023; Power, 2019; Tronto, 2013). However, our society financially rewards historically masculinised ideals of individualism and materialism, placing a reliance on 'market forces' promoting excessive consumption patterns that are intrinsic to the fossil fuel-driven warming of the planet and the ensuing climate disasters. Australia, alarmingly, is a significant driver of these global carbon emissions, being the eighth largest fossil fuel CO_2 (carbon dioxide) emitter in the world *per capita*, even when excluding the 80 per cent of our carbon footprint which is exported (Grant & Hare, 2024, p. iii). Australia, like other major greenhouse gas emitting nation-states, has not yet taken full responsibility for the harm these emissions cause domestically, and beyond our borders, through both fast and slow-onset climate accelerated disasters (see e.g., Bullock et al., 2024).

Housing, in every form, is where the bulk of caring work occurs. While social work as a profession is also founded upon ideas of modernity and individualism, the more recent embrace of eco-social work theory (Boetto, 2019), and a feminist ethics of care (Boddy, 2018; Holdsworth & Boddy, 2024), can help us now push to re-orient the power relations across society. We need to recognise and privilege caring for each other, and caring for the environment (Jerneck, 2018), while understanding that valuing the interdependence between humanity and the environment is something that First Nations peoples have practiced for millennia (Gammage et al., 2021). As noted in the introduction, the use of the word relational in a 'relational rights-based approach', here incorporates the meaning of an ethics of care. Systems of oppression which directly lead to women's housing instability, exacerbated after disasters, need to be dismantled and replaced by a relational rights-based approach. Society needs to radically transform our economic and social systems which currently privilege colonial oppressions (Anderson et al., 2023; Davis & Langton, 2016; Lansbury et al., 2023; Watego, 2021), extractive fossil fueled growth, neoliberal agendas and unnecessarily consumptive lifestyles (Cuadra & Ouis, 2023; Mazzucato & Farha, 2023; Mazzucato & Perez, 2022). Instead, we need to dramatically elevate and value relationality and human rights; this would help us move toward a more sustainable and socially just society, and prevent, or at least delay, the climate tipping points that we are currently racing towards (Gergis, 2024; IPCC, 2023).

An Ethics of Care and the Right to Housing in the Context of Climate Disasters

Housing provides the foundation for all of us to lead flourishing dignified lives and the jurisprudence surrounding the right to adequate housing, as enshrined in the *International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights* (Article 11), reflects this reality (Hohmann, 2020; May & Daly, 2019; United Nations General Assembly, 1966). Article 14(h) of the *Convention to End Discrimination Against All Women* (CEDAW) also collectively demands that women's right to adequate housing must be upheld (United Nations General Assembly, 1979). Australia has ratified both of these instruments, and is expected (generally) to uphold the principles contained within, frequently claiming to be a responsible global nation-state (see e.g., Azzi, 2024; Crawford et al., 2016). Australia is edging toward the incorporation of the right to adequate housing within domestic legislation (both at the Commonwealth and state levels), which will, when legislated, enable marginalised populations to more easily hold governments accountable (AHRC, 2022; Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2023, 2024). To date, Australia has made greater progress incorporating civil and political rights than economic, social and cultural rights (Baset, 2023). Market forces have not created a society in Australia where adequate housing for all is achieved. Instead, housing has fundamentally become regarded as a commodity, rather than as a requisite right underpinning a dignified

life (Bell, 2024; Daly, 2021; Kohler, 2023). The uneven impacts of climate change and ensuing disasters further showcase the limitations of capitalist markets and neo-liberal policies (Friel, 2020; Morley, 2016; Verchick, 2023). In Lismore, the significant—yet under-recognised—paid and unpaid caring roles of women leading community disaster recovery efforts after the 2022 floods has been documented (Foote et al., 2024), yet this evidence sits alongside women being the largest group accessing homelessness support services in the region almost two years after the floods (Healthy North Coast, 2023). As the legal and policy settings currently stand in Australia, profound involvement in the provision of caring work (both paid and unpaid) at all stages of life, including within the community after disasters, does not ensure that women can access adequate housing, and concerningly, this has been consistently found in prior decades in comparable contexts around the world (see e.g., Enarson, 2008; Enarson & Fordham, 2001).

The NSW Government's *2022 Flood Inquiry*, held to examine and report on the government response to the 2022 Northern Rivers region flooding (after receiving considerable criticism), received 1450 submissions from individuals and organisations (O'Kane & Fuller, 2022b). Analysis of these submissions (undertaken by consultancy League of Scholars) found that the phrase 'lost everything' was closely followed by 'totally destroyed', 'lost income' and 'house lost' (O'Kane & Fuller, 2022a, p. 184). The majority of these 1450 submissions, as concerned with homes, family and recovery, were written by women (O'Kane & Fuller, 2022a, p. 184). Community housing providers based within the Northern Rivers region have also repeatedly highlighted the increasing number of homeless and precariously housed populations in this area before and after the floods, and the especially dire situation for women (see e.g., Social Futures, 2022a; Social Futures, 2022b; White, 2020; Women Up North, 2024).

Remembering that we live within a society which is intricately bound together through a range of caring relationships, and that the notion of living within a sterile economy is a fallacy, leveraging the tool of international human rights law can frame social work's operationalisation of a feminist ethics of care in our macro-level advocacy and policy work. Legal, policy and program interventions to ensure adequate housing for all must be informed by the profound inequalities we currently have —which climate change and disasters have worsened—and the utilisation of an ethics of care shaping and underpinning a relational rights-based approach for adequate housing can propel forwards this meaningful change.

Conclusion

Social workers across Australia engage within strong multi-disciplinary teams in all stages of disaster, and bring a unique skill set grounded by principles of social justice, ethical practice, equity, relationality, compassion and human rights as articulated within, and mandated by, our Code of Ethics (AASW, 2020). Working in long-term roles alongside marginalised communities, including with women in the Northern Rivers region, social workers understand that in times of disaster recovery, unless long-standing inequities are addressed, recovery outcomes will only, at best, perpetuate the deeply inequitable status quo (Ewenson, 2025; Foote et al., 2024). Lismore, a verdant town of great community strength and splendour, illuminates these gendered inequities and resultant challenges as deepened through the housing crisis in this time of prolonged disaster recovery (Women Up North, 2024).

Adequate housing is central to our ability to care for each other, and for our wellbeing individually and as a community overall. A relational rights-based approach to housing, as presented in this piece, advanced by social work's advocacy and policy work, can refocus our attention in this era of climate change and escalating disasters. The dominant ideology of unfettered capitalism and trickle-down economics needs to be replaced by a system that values caring for each other, and caring for the planet. By leveraging international human rights law frameworks, which provide substantive

normative elements (individually and collectively) and procedural elements, and incorporating an overarching ethics of care, we can help to recalibrate our inequitable and warming world. Social work must take a central role in this transformation.

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