

Transcript for the podcast **Coming Home**

Episode I: Homeland

Kate: A warning to listeners. This episode contains references to childhood sexual assault and violence.

This podcast was made on the lands of the people of the Kulin Nation, and we pay our respect to elders past and present and any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be listening.

[Music]

Neen: I used to walk past houses no matter where I went, and I'd look at the house and I'd think, I wonder what happens in there. I wonder, I wonder if they're happy in that house.

Mary: So the government built this brand new house and my parents stayed there. I don't think they'll ever let it go, so.. Yeah, it's a meaningful property.

Kiara: Initially, I believe it was actually a commission house that we rented, we paid cheaper rent, and then years of Mum and Dad working and saving up, we finally bought a new, our first home.

[Music]

Kate: This is Coming Home, where we follow the stories of three women, from childhood through young adulthood, to their experiences of homelessness and how they eventually found hope and safety and a place to call home.

Coming Home will show how women's homelessness looks different from men's. We'll examine the systemic drivers that lead to women becoming homeless: the gender inequalities, women's economic disadvantage and family violence, and the profit-driven Australian housing system that can no longer provide enough affordable homes.

[Music]

INTRO

Welcome to this first episode of Coming Home. My name's Kate Lawrence, and I will be your host throughout this series. This podcast weaves through the lives of three women who have faced homelessness. They became homeless because of the laws and culture underpinning our society around gender roles and property ownership.

This is the story of a society that has lost its balance, its sense of justice, of an unfair system of wealth distribution that supports wealth building for a few and wealth subsistence and aspiration for many.

And it is the story of society's laws and unfair gendered roles and expectations that disadvantages women economically and leaves them vulnerable to physical, emotional and financial abuse.

This is also a story of strength and struggle and triumph of three women in the face of odds stacked firmly against them.

This podcast has been made possible by Darebin City Council and Juno – a feminist social change organisation supporting women experiencing a housing crisis and family violence in Melbourne's North.

This podcast would not have been made at all without the honesty, commitment and resilience of Neen, Mary and Kiara.

We're going to follow each woman's journey from childhood through their adult life to the circumstances that culminated in their homelessness, but first, let's meet them in their daily lives now, where they can feel right at home.

I asked each woman to keep an audio diary about day-to-day happenings and thoughts, so here they are, at home, speaking into their phones.

[Music]

Mary: Hello? Hello. Um, I've got two little boys at home with me, full-time, three and one. A nice, beautiful hot day today, Monday. About to go to the beach in a couple of hours, I used to take half a bag with me, and now it's like a bag each, and then a bag each for the wet stuff that we're going to come back with, including the towels and the clothes and two bags of toys.

It was good when it was just me, but now, and there's two more of me everywhere I go. There's extra extras, but I won't change it for the world. My boys are my life. Yeah. We've been through a lot, and we're here today, and it's all worth it. You know, it's all worth the smiles and the kisses at the end of the day, and... God, I got emotional straightaway, didn't I? (laughs)

Kate: Mary's a single mum of two toddlers now living in a private rental house around the corner from her parents.

Next, we'll hear Neen, She's 59, has raised two children into adulthood, and she currently lives in a one-bedroom unit in public housing for older people.

[Music]

Neen: Tomorrow, I'm going, hopefully, I'm going out with my worker, and we're going out to Rivers, which is a nursery at Yarrambat. And it's a really lovely place to go. Saturday, I'm going with my son and his partner his the two kids, and we're going, as far as I know, to, um, Stringybark Creek - cause I'm a very big Ned Kelly fan. We're actually going out to where the three policemen in the story were shot. I've never been there and I've always said I'd like to go and have a look.

[Music]

Kate: Kiara made the following recording on her phone as she was getting her second child ready for school. Her daughter is 12. She has autism and is nonverbal. You can hear Kiara's birds chirping in the background.

Kiara: Put this one on, the t-shirt, it's too hot. Yeah, there you go, back to front, yeah, good girl. Brush your teeth, come one, just a little bit, I'll squeeze it. Come on.

Kate: Kiara is a single mum with four children. Her youngest child also has a diagnosis of autism. Kiara lives in a private rental, further out from the city and further away from her parents than she'd like. On another day, she recorded this into her phone.

Kiara: I'm really enjoying how the yard is looking. I have a cherry blossom in the middle of, um, maple trees. It's been good being in the garden and being quite therapeutic, even though it's not my house. It's only a rental; it's looking and feeling more like home. It's probably the first time I've actually.. feel comfortable in for many years. It's been over a decade where the children and I have constantly been moving.

Kate: To understand how Neen, Kiara and Mary became homeless; how they survived and came through the other side to where they are now; to understand the unique and traumatising experiences of women and our housing crisis; and to understand how we created this crisis in the first place, we need to consider some big concepts.

[Music: That Folk]

Typically Indigenous and traditional cultures have a system of land rights and responsibilities that operate on a communal level, where the group, village or community have rights over the land. And they hold the land in common for the benefit of everyone, Like air and water, land is too essential for life for anyone to be allowed to hold exclusively.

It comes from the idea that actually we all belong to the Earth. It is our inalienable right, having been born on this Earth, to live on, with and from the Earth.

In Australia, we can see the horrendous consequences of the theft of a whole continent, the dispossession of all lands and waters that were traditionally held by Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people for tens of thousands of years. In one foul flag planted in the ground, the entire continent was claimed for the crown of England. Rights to these lands were never ceded. They were taken and never returned, stolen and never compensated for.

Everything that we explore in this podcast about the ownership, usage and rights over land, and houses, is actually based on illegal and violent acts that don't go back to the dawn of time, but a mere 250 years.

It is systemic actions, policies and failures over these 250 years, that have pushed the costs of housing such that now, every single day across Australia, more than 150 women are turned away from specialist homelessness services because of a lack of resources and affordable housing.

It's a legal system that has always protected the interest of landlords over the rights of people to their home, and so allows exploitation of the human need for shelter. And most importantly for women, it is the gendered laws and cultural expectations that create a significant gap between women and men's income and wealth; that assumes women will be primary caregivers and financially dependent on men and creates the conditions where women can be controlled and abused: physically, psychologically and economically.

All these factors have materially contributed to Mary, Neen and Kiara being rendered homeless, and we'll unpack them more fully throughout this podcast.

But now let's hear from Mary and her life growing up.

[Music: Stem]

Mary: My Dad came here when he was nine. My Mum came here when she was 18. They met, I think three years later fell in love, got married, had me a year after that, in 85. And then we moved, I think, to Dandenong, where we stayed until I was 12. And they had two other sisters for us, four girls.

Kate: Mary is the 35-year-old daughter of Turkish immigrants. She was the eldest of those four girls. She is a total live-wire, prone to passionately sharing her strong opinions with a fine antenna for injustice and a warm-hearted chuckle.

Mary: My dad's got really bad asthma. We had a huge backyard in Dandenong, and his asthma got worse and worse, so we had to move away and be closer to Royal Melbourne hospital. So we were given a unit in Brunswick West, but we had a pretty great childhood.

We always had clothes. We always had toys. We always got to watch TV. There was a timeframe for everything: breakfast, get up, get dressed, you know, school, after school snacks.

My mum used to pick us up from school every day in summer and go to take us to the beach. My dad is not a beach person, but he loves scenery. So we would drive altogether, but Dad would sit in the car and then Mum would be in the water with us.

My parents had been excellent gardeners. That's one passion that they've shared throughout their lives together. We've been to Turkey a few times.

Kate: I asked Mary about her mum as a role model when she was growing up and about her parent's relationship.

Mary: For probably the first 15 years of her marriage with my dad, so the first 15 years of my life, really, she didn't speak up. And I think when she did, she was told to sit back down, by him.

I guess my mum kept the marriage going for many reasons, for us, for herself. She didn't have anyone else here. My mum came when she was 18 with her older sister, my auntie, who was 21. And she got married as well, straight away. And my mum got married a few years later.

And yeah, my mum never really spoke up, because they had number four. And things changed. Number four got what she wanted all the time. She was a little spoiled one. We all spoiled her. She was my doll.

And then my parents, they worked, they, we had money, went overseas. My mum had a lot more of a say in her life, our lives, dad's life. And it was more of a partnership from then on. I don't know. Maybe my dad grew up at 35, and yep, I've got four kids, and now I've got to be different somehow.

My dad didn't have a father figure. My grandfather, when my dad and his family came over here, when he was nine, my grandfather was hit by a train, three months after he came here. So my grandma was left raising three kids on her own, with no English. So she just started working, and my dad had to help raise his younger siblings.

Kate: It was when Mary talked about why she chose to study biology when she left school, that her story took a different direction.

Mary: I went and did biological, environmental science at Swinburne. My sister after me, she was born a year and a half after me. She was into biology. Um, we lost her in 2003.

She was diagnosed with, um, a lymphoma. One night she just, well, it started probably a few days before that she was just coughing, randomly. She was 14, and she didn't eat one day. Mum took her to the doctor. We were at school, and they didn't come back with news that they told us they, they did find out something, but they didn't tell us and that day she didn't eat anything.

And that night, she wakes me up about three o'clock in the morning because we shared a room and we were very close, and she said, sis, I'm hungry. I haven't eaten anything all day. Wrong decision. I'm really hungry. And I thought, all right, go downstairs and I made her toast with Nutella on it and orange juice and cut up an apple, I think it was, and brought it back upstairs with the tray, to our room, but she was on the top of the stairs, and she couldn't breathe.

She went blue in the face, and I went to my parents' room. I woke them up yelling and screaming, and dad did CPR, and I called the ambulance, and they came, and she was in a coma

for ten days. Um, and she passed away about a year and a half later. She was 16 and three months, in 2003.

So that demolished us (we were living in Brunswick), as a family, my parents.. That was really hard. She was my, everything really she was (cries).

I was 17. I turned 18 a few months later, and I got my tattoo of her, on my shoulder. Oh, it's been like 17 years now. I kind of did rebel after we lost her. I didn't know what to do. I stayed back, year 11, to do it with her cause she was a year younger. And then, by the end of year 11, she was gone, really. So I didn't want to do year 12.

My third sister, the third, number of the three of us, didn't really know what happened. She kind of got a bit angry and upset all the time. And the youngest didn't really talk to anyone. And then they were all I had, so yeah, I finished school, started uni.

I was dropping them off to school and picking them up. I did rebel during uni as well. I stayed at friend's houses. To study, but we'd eat Maccas all night, for example, and watch movies sometimes.

Kate: Yep, eating Maccas and watching movies all night was Mary rebelling!

But losing a sibling when you're a child is a significant and deeply traumatic event. So too is losing a parent, physical and sexual assault, domestic violence, being in a car accident and experiencing a natural disaster.

According to research by Dr Emma Barret from the University of Sydney, 54%, more than half the people of Australia, experience a traumatic event before they turn 18. Traumas, of course, vary in how prolonged or damaging they are, and while childhood trauma can have a range of long-term effects, homelessness isn't inevitable.

Homeless becomes more likely for people dealing with ongoing effects of trauma when and because housing is hard to come by - it's expensive and unavailable; when and because navigating the housing system is exhausting and re-traumatising; when and because social and familial trusts and supports are broken. So the relationship between trauma and homelessness is complex, as we'll see in later episodes.

For Mary and her family, the role and place of home was a key factor in their unfolding story, and their grief at the loss of 16-year-old Hazel.

Mary: We were given the house from the government as, it was actually for my sister because she was in a wheelchair last year of her life and we needed, we were living with stairs, like so many stairs, to get into the place we were living in Brunswick. So the government built this brand new house for my mom and my sister, when else, but mainly for her, that was flat on the ground. So there's no stairs in this house, and my parents stayed there.

I don't think they'll ever let it go, so. Yeah, it's a meaningful property. She never got to see it. She died a month or two before we moved in there. The move was rushed with my parents. It was very grab everything, throw it in the new house. I don't want to see Brunswick anymore. They kind of hated Brunswick after it. I guess we all did.

Kate: So many memories, so many mixed emotions. Houses hold us, bind us, protect us and become part of us. They are more than the sum of their parts, more than the bricks and mortar, the roof and walls. Our homes become characters in our lives and when we don't have one, it is like we're missing a limb.

Mary: Yeah, we still made her room in the new house. Yeah. Room, her curtains and her bed and her bedsheets, her toy box, everything. It was her room for years and years until my youngest sister didn't want to sleep in my room anymore. So, she needed her own room. She's turned into a young teenager, so we boxed up all of the stuff and gave my youngest sister that room.

She kind of loved it a bit more because of that, I guess.

[Music]

Kate: Twenty-five years ago, Mary and her family were placed in public housing and were twice supported to move, so they could take care of their health issues. Twenty-five years ago, the median house price in Melbourne was 500% less than it is today.

Two years ago, Mary was pregnant and the single mum of a toddler, and she could not find an affordable home.

[Music]

Neen: I used to walk past houses no matter where I went, and I'd look at the house. And I think I wonder what happens in there. I wonder, I wonder if they're happy in that house.

Kate: Even as a child Neen, who grew up in a medium-sized town in central Victoria, was questioning the public-private divide, the veil we collectively pull over what happens in the home, a veil that can leave women and children vulnerable, dependent and trapped.

Neen grew up in the sixties, and it can help us to understand the current housing crisis if we can understand the history of housing across her lifetime.

Andrea: I'm Dr Andrea Sharam, and I'm in the school of property construction and project management at RMIT university.

Kate: I asked Dr Sharam what was going on with housing in Australia in the sixties.

[Music]

Andrea: Well, think of the context. Uh, we're in the, uh, post-war boom. There was, there was a lot of homeownership. So people were building houses for ownership. There was a very small, tiny private rental sector. And there was, the public housing system was, uh, much larger than it is today.

Kate: In 1963, a few years before homeownership in Australia peaked, at 70% of people owning a home, Neen's parents joined the great Australian dream, and they too bought a house. Neen was two.

But it was not to be a dream childhood for Neen. In fact, she describes her childhood as horrendous.

So, that's a bit of a heads-up folks. Neen's childhood story is compelling, but it's also pretty tough listening. There are descriptions of violence and abuse, so please take care. It takes a lot of courage to share stories like Neen's, and it's easy to turn away from difficult stories we can't change, so thank you for listening.

It is important that we hear, that we bear witness, that we break the silence and that we try to understand the impact of gender inequality and violence and government policies on real women's lives.

[Music]

Neen's a bit of a rough diamond. She's living in a body often racked with pain, a legacy of her experiences. She has a deeply compassionate heart, not just for her own suffering but for anyone who's doing it or done it tough.

Neen: My mother was very violent when she drank. She was very argumentative and violent. She was only a tiny woman, but she had the strength of ten men (laughs).

My parents were violent with one another, but they were also violent with us. We'd come from school, and go, "Oh no, they're drinking, we're in for it tonight."

And you never knew when that was gonna happen. So, you were always living on the edge and that insecurity and chaos that surrounded all of that.

There were six of us, but I always knew that there was someone missing from the family. My mum had a baby when she was 20, and she had to give her up. I've sort of been able to piece together how hard that must've been.

I was always told that I was never wanted. "We should have got rid of you at birth." Dad never said that, but Mum did, all the time. And I used to think, what have I done?

I kind of put it down to, I was the first girl baby born after that girl baby, she had to give up. So, I always felt that I didn't belong. I didn't deserve to like, be there.

A couple of times over the years, I thought, well, you know, it wasn't like it was the bloody royal family, hello (laughs). Why did you have to fight for acceptance into this bloody family of all things? (laughs)

There was a sense of stuff when I was four, three. I remember dad had the two older brothers, and he was banging their heads outside, banging their heads against the brick wall, because they didn't say 'please'. They asked for something at the dinner table and they didn't say 'please'. He said, "I'll teach you bastards manners if it's the last thing I do."

And I can remember hiding under the bed, and I was rocking. He's gonna kill them. He's gonna kill them. I remember saying that. There was that fear then, but that was still way before things got to the severity that they did.

So, I was also being sexually abused by a neighbour from the age of seven, which happened every day. I was told that what was happening to me happened to all little girls. I was threatened that if I spoke out that no one had believed me because you're just a kid and kids lie. I was also told that I'd be taken away from my family and never see them again. And, that would leave, that would pave the way for him to abuse my younger sisters.

"If you do that and you get taken away, well then, I'll just do the same thing to them." That's enough to keep you silent.

Kate: Childhood sexual abuse is shockingly common in Australia. Exact numbers are unknown because so much of it is shrouded in silence- victims shamed into keeping quiet. According to the Royal Women's Hospital Centre Against Sexual assault, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men are sexually abused before the age of 18.

When boys become men and girls become women, the figures change to 1 in 5 women, and 1 in 20 men. This is a crime based on power. Over 90% of offenders are male.

This is a gendered crime that thrives in a culture that gives more power in the home, in the community, in the workplace, at all levels of society, to men.

Where men, usually known to the family, prey on children - girls more than boys, grooming them, using their positions of power and trust to abuse. This is a crime that thrives in a culture that teaches women and girls to be silent, that shames and objectifies our bodies and treats us as less-valued humans.

Neen: As the sexual assaults got worse, there were more people involved. One of them was a policeman. In our town. These people were known to my parents as well. The policeman, his mother-in-law, was one of my mum's best friends. One day he came in to see his mother-in-law, and because Mum and I were there and you know, the younger siblings, and he walked in, and he just looked, and I looked at him and I thought, "Whoa". I think if anyone had noticed me do that, they would probably have put it down to the fact that he was in his police uniform.

You know, he told, he said to me, "Oh Neem come outside. I want to show you something out the back". They had horse stables out in the back, and I was so reluctant to go, and I was terrified, but I went. And that's when he threatened me, stood over me and threatened me and said, "If you ever speak about what, what we do, you'll never see your family again."

This big policeman on this little eight-year-old kid- just horrendous. So, they're the very people that are supposed to help you. He was one of the ones that was saying, "If you speak up, I'll make sure you disappear."

I didn't sort of stop to think that someone might say, "Where's she gone? She was here. Where is she?"

As a child, you're taught to believe adults. You are taught to never question them. You never question an adult and you never spoke back to them, and you never spoke badly about them. And if you did, the consequences were an absolute hiding. So, you just, there was just nowhere to go.

And I felt like an object, especially when we would go to, I called them the pedo parties or the pedo picnic. And you were just dragged off. They didn't ask you how you felt. They just come and grab you and drag you off and do their thing and bring you back and then someone else would take you off and, and you just felt like a lump of meat. I don't even remember them speaking to me.

One of the times when we pulled up, and we got out of the car, and one of the men said the afternoon's entertainment's here. So, I was their entertainment.

It was only sort of a couple of weeks ago, but that, that came through, and it was a very sharp memory of that. And it was like, well, that just goes to show how objectified I was.

'You're the reason this is happening,' was another really good strong thing that they used to push. 'It's your fault that this is happening.' Ok so, what did I do? You questioned that. What did I do? And then go back over, looking at yourself, trying to pinpoint what it was that you gave them that signal, that they could do that to you.

And I say, I call them a signal now because I'm thinking, what was it that I put out there that said you can abuse me and bloody toss me away and dehumanise me? You know, a girlfriend of mine. Very, very similar story to me. She was abused by the Catholic priest up there. Her family, her father was an alcoholic, and there was a lot of family violence and same thing, a lot of sexual abuse by a lot of people.

We've been able to sort of sit down. She said, I never knew that that was happening to you. We went to school together. We were at high school together, and I never knew that it was happening to her, and another friend of ours that we went to school with, the same thing. And it's sort of like, wow. And we wonder whether some of the people that abused each of us, whether we were being abused by the same people.

On a horrendous day, if I'd been abused by the neighbour, sexually abused, and then you come home, and you're being, for hours, physically, mentally, and emotionally abused and there were times when I thought, if I don't get out of here, they're gonna kill me because it just wasn't stopping. And so I'd take off sometimes in the middle of the night. I'd be in my pyjamas, I'd be bleeding, and I'd just, I'd run from the house. And I, I ran as far away as I could possibly go.

[sound of running and night insects]

You know, there's a children's cemetery up home. I didn't deliberately head for there, but the first night that I did this thing, that was as far as I could get, and I couldn't go any further. So, that's where I stayed. And I remember screaming when I got out, letting out this God almighty scream, and just crying and stuff like that.

Because the ground was so hard there, they couldn't dig down very far. And this cemetery was closed in 1851. So it's a very old, but what some of them did was stack the stones up around the graves, and they were still there, and I found that I could lay in there and no one would see me.

And my reason for doing that was I thought, "They're gonna come after me." If I come up, if they come looking for me, I mean, this is the rationale of a little kid. If they come looking for me to see where I've gone, if they drive up the dirt road, they're not going to be able to see me, but it became a place to go to for me. It was my secret place.

You know, I can remember going out there, lots of times. And I would say, "God, I don't want to wake up in the morning. I want to be with these kids."

And I remember laying there asking God for me not to wake up. And then in the mornings, when I did wake up, I was very angry with him because he's not listening. So he's another one that just doesn't listen.

[Kookaburra calls]

But then I'd wake up sort of just as the sun was starting to come up, and I, I've gotta get home, and I'd run all the way back home, and I'd just get in the door. Dad, dad, would have gone to work, so I missed him. I'd have a quick jump in the bath and have a bath, put another lot of pyjamas on, jump into bed for another hour or whatever, and then get up and have to go to school and get my brother and myself and my younger sister ready for school. And then try and survive school on probably about an hour's sleep.

Um, I do go back to my hometown. I do have difficulties when I do, but I have family and friends up there, and I won't, I won't allow what happened to me to be separated from them again.

There's quite a bit of preparation that goes in for me to be able to step foot off that train and go there. There's a lot of sort of self-preparation that goes into that, and that can be very exhausting.

[Music]

Kate: Thanks, Neen, for your courage, your strong voice and your advocacy for your younger self. And thanks, listeners; Neen's is a big story, so many powerful images, so much wrong and harmful in what happened to her as a child.

And thank you to all the people working with, believing, supporting and advocating for children.

[Music]

Home. It's one of those stretchy words. On the one hand, it can mean a feeling, the feeling of comfort and familiarity, of being at ease, feeling loved and loving, understood, safe, away from the madding crowd: all the things that were missing in Neen's childhood.

As the saying goes, "Home is where the heart is". But it's also a physical place that provides the very material needs of shelter, a place to eat, sleep, toilet and keep our belongings.

To truly have a home, these two aspects - the feeling of safety and the shelter and comfort - need to go hand in hand. In the words of the writer Maya Angelou, "The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."

[Music]

Kiara is a softly spoken yet fierce advocate and mother of four with enormous inner strength and commitment to making a better life for her children. Kiara's story also has some tough listening elements, with references to childhood sexual assault. And again, I want to acknowledge her courage in telling her story and yours for not turning away.

And apologies in advance for the poor and mixed quality of the audio. Here's Kiara:

Kiara: I was born in Vietnam. Mum was a city girl from Saigon, Dad was a village boy when they met and I came over, uh, when I was two. My Dad actually still wanted to stay in Vietnam, but mum wanted to come over here to Australia for a better future. Mum and Dad being the elders on both, both sides. Wanting to find better work to support their family in Vietnam, a better future for us away from a communist country. Was it 1975 with a Vietnam war?

We stayed in Malaysia before we were accepted by immigration. I have two older sisters and one younger. So I was the third girl, which Dad was hoping to be a boy, so many years Dad actually dressed me up as a boy, Mum and Dad. I was actually considered their boy, for up until when I was eight or nine years old.

Yeah. I used to always hang around and play with the boys. Yeah. While the girls were sitting playing hopscotch, I was just really in the dirt and with the soccer, football, cricket.

Anything that was needed to be lifted, lawn mowing, gardening. I was Dad's basically, uh, yeah, son in the family. Dad taught me how to run a lawnmower at a very young age.

I didn't know the difference until there was meetings and then they had interpreting and you know, Mum and Dad were told not to continue dressing me up as a boy.

Kate: Rigid gender roles are not restricted to any one culture or language. Here eight-year-old Kiara's natural ease and comfort being physical, sporty, in the dirt- enabled because she was breaking the gender barrier, dressing, acting and being treated like a boy at home- all this was crushed by an education system that insisted on strict binary gender rules for all children.

And these unfair boundaries around who we are and who we can be, hound and control us throughout our lives.

Kiara: Mum and Dad were very hardworking. Dad's in the same, in the same factory for the last 40, 41 years. They've had a change of owners and everything, but he's still there, he's still working very hard and supporting the family and overseas, and Mum and Dad, yeah, worked very hard to bring my sisters and I up to.. for an education.

Growing up, my sisters and I, and Dad, Mum loved music. And dad would use to play the guitar, and he would try to teach us.

[Guitar music]

We sang. My sisters and I used to memorise a lot of the songs that he taught us, and that was like our entertainment. I didn't grow up with toys, et cetera. We had like one tricycle between the four of us, but, you know, we found things to do and I enjoyed sketching and drawing. Initially, I believe there was actually a commission house that we rented. We paid cheaper rent.

Kate: Here Kiara is talking about living in a house when her family first arrived in Australia in 1981, a house owned by the government Public Housing Commission. Mary also grew up in public housing, and her parents are still renting from the government. Here's Dr Andrea Sharam again, talking about the housing system from the '70s through to the 1980's.

[Music]

Andrea: Uh, as we went into the 1970s, governments felt like they had overcome the post-war housing crisis, and they started to ratchet back the provision of public housing. It was the start of the waves of sell-offs that have occurred since that time. The Commonwealth really wanted to step out of the, because there's a Commonwealth State housing agreement that went for 50 years where they got together and determined what spending would occur on what, and that has changed very significantly in recent times. That agreement doesn't exist. It's now got a different title, and there's a lot more emphasis on really the private rental sector rather than the social housing sector.

In the early eighties, there was a lot more stock than there is now, the housing stock. Yeah so, and because the public housing system was set up for workers and their families. That was its reason. It was never a welfare system, not ever. Welfare is what charities did- so the Benevolent Society, for example, whereas public housing, the big estates were built next to the big factories, those post-World War factories, like car manufacturing.

But still, in the early eighties, you know if you needed a house, you could probably get a house. But a lot of people were, workers were moving out of the housing commissions. They were buying, buying those housing and going into home-ownership.

Kate: And that's exactly what Kiara's parents did. In 1985 they'd saved up enough money to buy a house for their family.

[Bird noises]

Kiara: I guess I grew up in a very traditional family with certain traditional values Mum and Dad taught me, and we grew up in. You know that you grow up, you get married, and you have children, and then you save up to buy a house. It came in that order. And that was what I grew up to believe.

It was a difficult childhood. We were expected to be self-sufficient, independent at a very early age because Mum and Dad were mainly at work. There was incidents in the family that really tore, really was quite traumatic in the family, which even though our parents were alive, we felt as if they weren't emotionally and physically there for us.

I recall, it was a weekend or Sunday, where my parents had a few friends over and one particular friend that Dad was quite close to. He was drunk, and Mum and Dad said to him to just sleep on the couch and sober up, 'cause it's not safe to drive home. And in the morning, my Dad's friend was nowhere to be seen, and my oldest sister was nowhere to be seen either.

We, Mum and Dad sent the police and everyone looking for them. And I recall the police lady had bra and knickers of, I don't understand back then, as I got older, it's actually all connecting. I can make some sense of things. She, the, um, my dad's friend actually abducted and raped my sister. Um, there were court hearings, and he was in prison for ten years plus, and since then, I guess my Dad was a very, very angry man for a long time because he held so much guilt and hurt, and so does my Mum.

Yeah. We just felt like, you know, Dad was just, we lost him in, at that time. Yeah. He was very, it became very strict on us. Um, but you know, I wasn't allowed to sleep over a friend's house, camps, anything that involved a lot of interaction with other people or attending parties and that. I never, yeah, we never had that. We were raised in a very suppressed family because of my dad's fear that he had lack of trust in people. We all learnt to basically go to school and do house chores and tidy up and prepare things. And that was just how it went.

Kate: Again we see the damaging effects rippling out from childhood sexual assault that doesn't only harm the child involved but causes vicarious harm to those around her. It doesn't only

impose fear and limitation on the girl assaulted, but on all girls, For Kiara, the strictness and anger of her father and her isolation at home compounded the already deep trauma at the assault of her 12-year-old sister.

Kiara: My sister grew up here. She struggled with education. And she's actually illiterate. She doesn't write or know how to read. My second older sister was very intelligent. Yeah, she managed to successfully finish year 12, get into university, finish her degree. Myself too.

I guess I, I felt like I could have done better if, uh circumstances in the family were different, because we were... I guess as children, we were more so always protecting our parents, knowing what they went through. I had a understanding how devastated they were.

So, a lot of things we emotionally, we dealt on our own. Any issues we, my sisters and I continued to keep things to ourself and I guess looking back, that's also led to a lot of things where I didn't seek a lot of help and because we would constantly make excuses for people, try to understand them where they're coming from and now, looking back, I didn't much, I didn't have much of a childhood at all.

I used to want to stay at school. I felt more at home at school. I felt more, a sense of accomplishment through my teachers because they always acknowledged me. They always, um, you know, they saw the work that I did. They asked how I was.

[Music]

Kate: As the African saying goes, "It takes a village to raise a child." The violent and criminal actions of one man turned Kiara's childhood home from a haven into a heartache. That same education system that fixed her into a rigid gender role when she was eight, became her only contact outside the home, and the simple action of a teacher in acknowledging her, asking her how she was, became her lifeline to human connection.

[Music]

Coming Home is a podcast set in and around the stories across time and place, of three incredible women. It's a narrative structure. It's not a podcast set around themes, with snapshots of 'lived experience' dropped in. It follows the meanderings of the women's lives, as the flow and direction of the whole series. And so the best place to start was at the beginning.

[Music]

Next episode on Coming Home, we follow the stories of each of the women as they leave home and explore the world, making the life choices of youth and learning how the world responds to them.

[Music]

OUTRO

Thanks for listening to Coming Home, a podcast about the impact of Australia's inequitable gender culture and failed housing system, on three strong yet ordinary women.

If this podcast has raised any issues for you, please call 1800 RESPECT on 1800 737 732 or see Juno.org.au for a list of support services. This podcast would not have been possible without the willingness of Kiara, Mary and Neen to so generously share their stories. It was time-consuming and not always easy. A deep and heartfelt thanks to each of you.

If you like this podcast, please tell people. Word of mouth is the most common way people learn about podcasts. But liking, reviewing and sharing on social media also helps. Podcasting can be like speaking into the void, so we love hearing from listeners.

This podcast is made by Juno, an intersectional feminist social change organisation run by women for women. Since 2002, Juno has been working with women and non-binary folk in Melbourne's north who are experiencing homelessness or family violence. Juno also advocates to improve systems and structures which contribute to gendered poverty, homelessness and family violence. You can find out more about Juno via their website www.juno.org.au, and follow them on social media.

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Theme music 'Wanderlust' is written by Scott Buckley, scottbuckley.com.au, and released under a creative commons license.

This podcast is written and produced by me, Kate Lawrence.

[Music]

ENDS