

Transcript for the podcast **Coming Home**

Episode 6: Long Road Home

Kate: A warning to listeners. This episode contains references to domestic abuse and violence. This podcast was made on the lands of the Wurundjeri 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]

Kiara: So, even though I moved, I still didn't have my freedom and I still felt really trapped and controlled by him.

Mary: My mum got my room ready. They welcomed me, which annoyed the absolute bejesus out of me, because like, where have you been for six months?

Neen: I was walking up the front steps. and there was like a little front porch thing where, I thought you could sit out there on a nice day if you wanted to.

[Music]

INTRO

G'day, and welcome to this 6th and final episode of "Coming Home". My name is Kate Lawrence.

If, by some chance this is your first time listening, I suggest you go back to episode one and start there, and if by some chance you have listened to the previous five episodes of "Coming Home", thank you. I can only assume that you have found it valuable and so I have a favour to ask.

Could you please tell us and/or the world what you have liked about the podcast? Feedback from listeners is the best way to thank the women for sharing their stories, to let funders know they ought to fund more podcasts like this one, and to encourage more listeners. So if you can, please leave a review on iTunes, or if you'd like to email a message, send it to alice@juno.org.au. We would love to hear from you.

In this episode Kiara continues to deal with her ex-husband's abuse, Covid panic sets Mary on a path to find a home closer to her family, and Neen is rewarded for her persistence with a remote and detached system, and finally finds a forever home.

[Music]

Before we get started let's hear from Kiara now. In December 2020, she recorded this while talking into her phone from the comfort of her home, a private rental in an outer northern suburb of Melbourne.

Kiara: I have uh, in my backyard, cucumbers are growing nicely. I have okra, some tomatoes and I've got spring onions, mint, basil. So all the, uh, yeah, a lot of the small ingredients that I need for my cooking.

I'm also trying to grow my own ginger, because ginger has been quite expensive. I was quite shocked of how much it cost me, just for a little small bulb of ginger. It was like \$12.50.

[Music]

Kate: Kiara's been through hell with her second abusive husband, and she finally accepts that he is not going to change and the best option for her and her children- despite the shame and terrible feelings of failure, despite the parenting load, despite the erosion of her self-confidence and identity- the best option is to try to find a house to rent.

And she does; she finds a cheap rental in Lalor, but Lalor was not to be a place of peace for Kiara.

[Music]

Kiara: I moved there, but then my ex was constantly still driving through

[screeching car]

all night, midnight and just, uh, doing laps throughout the neighbourhood. He knew whatever car parked, even my sister, when she had her new car, she parked in front of my house. He would send messages saying that I had a new man in the house. Yeah, and just basically harassing me over things. So, even though I moved, I still didn't have my freedom and I still felt really trapped and controlled by him.

Kate: While Kiara manages a new household and three children post separation, her husband continues to control and abuse her. She also negotiates with him around care and access visits with her four-year-old son, who lives with her ex-husband.

Kiara: Down the track, I realised he was not even properly bathing him, changing him, feeding him properly, and, uh, that was when I, I tried to actually request that he had to be bathed, to be fed, to be changed. It was going for a while.

When he was four, he was dressed in clothes for an 18-month-old baby. He was coming back with the penile infections and when I had time with him, taking him to the doctor, because it wasn't properly bathed and showered. He was just simply wasn't getting the attention and, and the supports that he needed.

I try to communicate, even after separation with the father regarding his learning and his behavioural issues, which all went ignored. He would just constantly message me and make me inappropriate things and try to make me jealous, that he's with this, this female and that female and sending pictures of random females' pictures, but everything that I put forward, regards to my concerns about our son went ignored.

Kate: The ongoing impact of continued harassment on women on their housing options, is not uncommon. Here's Tess, a homelessness case manager with Juno.

Tess: That does happen quite regularly. They may initially leave the, the property that they shared with the, the ex-partner or perpetrator, and they may move somewhere else, but due to a lot of, many reasons, the perpetrator may find out where they are, and then that in turn makes the new, the new place where they are unsafe and that, they then have to move from there as well, for both their safety and, if there are children involved, the children's safety as well.

A lot of perpetrators these days are using kind of tech surveillance, tracking, things like that, so a woman may not even know that her phone or, or email or things like that, has been compromised, so they may leave and go somewhere else, but the whole time the perpetrator has been able to track them and see where they've gone.

Kiara: I was trying to move without him finding out, but then overnight, the board, "For Lease" sign came up,

[Hammering and suspenseful music]

so he knew, obviously he found out and on the day where, of my access time, when I was meant to then, that morning's, meant to return my son, led to my ex-husband and his, uh, another mate in another car, following me in the car and then trapping us in the car.

I went in through a dead end road and then he pulled in front of my car, and then his mate behind my car and just trapped me in. And then that was when I went finally, uh, had to go back to the police. Uh, he was landed with an IVO.

Kate: IVO stands for intervention order. It's a legal order a court makes that restricts the contact and distance another person can have. Breaking the conditions of an IVO is a criminal offence.

Kiara: Initially he didn't want to take, but then finally, February the fourth of 2020, that he finally took the IVO. And, um, because of the significant things in the history, um, and the protection of all the children, my son went, came back into my care.

Then my ex-partner tried to go to the family courts. I received a phone call on the day he was in court without being informed by any solicitor or anyone or by email, he, he claimed that he didn't know where I was and he didn't had no means of contacting me.

Her Honor actually put me on the phone and that, he actually tried to claim sole custody of my son. So, this is why all these court proceedings had continued until now. And the final thing was about the dispute about the schooling. So, since he's, my son's back being back in my care, I've had him assessed and diagnosed with autism, because I knew there was issues there and he's had extensive therapies from speech therapy to OT. There's been a lot happening in the last two years.

Kate: It's a tragic, frustrating and not uncommon phenomena, where perpetrators of domestic violence use the legal system, and their own children, to control and abuse.

Beth: I don't know if the family court always gets it right.

Kate: This is Beth, a Juno Family Violence outpost worker.

Beth: So, a woman can do everything right under the state, sort of system, so she can leave the relationship, get support, even get housing, engage with child protection, get an intervention order, and then the family court, especially if the perpetrator has money, so means and the resources to use a lawyer to navigate what is a really, like complicated and overbearing system, and then he can get an order to access the children, which overrides everything the woman has done to protect the children. And I think that that's a real problem.

Kate: Since leaving her husband three years ago, Kiara and her children have lived in six houses. Kiara has been on the public housing waiting list for over 11 years. Here she reflects on some of her struggles in that time around housing.

[Sad music]

Kiara: It's been difficult, looking for rentals and being turned down. I guess a lot of things, they look at: your income and your, your job prospect. I've been a mum for all these years and a carer. It just didn't look too promising to me, but now, you know, I've got a home and being able to rebuild. It's still challenging. I had to, I didn't have the money to, to move or furniture. I took out a small loan from the bank to, and, which is like seven years to repay instalments.

I'm paying more interest than, than, (laughs) the actual thing back. But it's, you know, it was worth it, because it was my way out, and my children's way out to new happiness and freedom. Now, my challenges is all the kids, especially my oldest, being the eldest and understanding so much. She's lived with a lot of trauma, which I hold guilt for and she's having to be in counselling, my youngest son too.

I guess my second daughter with severe autism, she's very oblivious to everything. Even though she had lived a lot too, with the trauma, the children have all suffered a tremendous amount of loss. My older daughter, she's 14 going on 15. She's, a whole

chunk of her childhood has been around homelessness, separations upon separations, being thrown out constantly, of our home.

And for a long time called home, being home or somewhere safe. This is the lease of rental and this lease, there's no security. And I'm lucky that the real estate and agent have been very good like that. Considering the fees, the costs in rentals nowadays, houses are very expensive. I guess, (laughs) week by week we've got to make things work.

Kate: And Kiara has made it work, but the toll has been heavy. Housing remains an unresolved issue, physically and emotionally. She is still haunted by being tricked out of her share of the family home by the very person she was taught to trust: her husband.

Kiara: I guess, with regards to the theme of homelessness, when I look back before I was married and had children, my friends would say, to agree with me, that I used to be a very strong, confident person, but I guess all that confidence changed. I changed as a person after I got married and had my children. With my first marriage, with the children, I did have a house. I guess I was so trusting and so naive and so gullible with everything.

You basically want to believe everything they tell you is true. And I guess that's one thing I regret is that I, I still have not resolved yet to get a settlement with the first house. It's been 11 years. I walked away and struggled myself and as well as put my children through all this.

My mum says that that's the most stupid thing that I did. I guess at that time, I didn't think anything else, but just to, to raise my children, but I did, I did struggle to make ends meet, to pay for rent and bills, school fees, etc. It was being quite difficult.

I guess my worry at the moment with my housing, with the, especially with the rent and also the costs of everyday living and the cost of how to, to buy a house, uh, I worry for the children. Their generation, when they get a bit older, 10 years time, how they will be able to afford to rent or even buy a house themselves?

Kate: Kiara's not the only one thinking and worrying about how the next generation will afford housing. Here's Dr Sharam from RMIT University.

Andrea: At least a quarter the population are now in private rental, with a large part of those who will be in private rental for their entire lives. So, we've got what we call generational rent. So, it's young people who can't get into the home ownership because they're starting off in their careers, so they don't have the kind of income, so don't have enough incomes, while they pay rent, in order to save for a deposit.

So, they're locked out of home ownership unless they are able to go to the bank of Mum and Dad. So, if you don't have that kind of Mum and Dad, then it's an intergenerational issue. Once you're parents locked out, you're likely to be locked out and that's how it's just going to be.

Kate: The cost to Kiara's relationship with her parents has also been significant.

Kiara: I guess I didn't want to burden them with my issues and problems, because they had so much going on and they were worried about my sister as well, my oldest sister. There's always been things that they were focused on. Like, I didn't let them in on a lot of things, simply because I just felt like I didn't want to worry him and burden with my issues.

Despite everything, I do love my parents and it's nice to always catch up with them, but um, I guess for a very long time... I know they probably would want to help and support me, but uh, for a long time, when I got, went through a lot of hardship, they weren't around, simply because obviously they had no idea how bad it was, I guess. Even with my first relationship, they didn't know.

Simply, I just was living a lie and (laughs) I just, you know, put on my face to the world that I was fine and everything was all good.

Kate: In 2015, when Kiara's husband strangled and threatened her and she agreed to work with authorities because he agreed to attend programs to help him change, in that very same year the Victorian premier, Daniel Andrews said this:

Dan Andrews: Family violence is a national emergency. Awareness means little if the system is broken, and our system is. Those seeking help and assistance fall into endless waiting lists. It's a betrayal. When family violence is committed against women and their children, it diminishes us all because it is our problem and it is a crime.

It's 40% of police work. It's the leading contributor to death and disability in Australian women under 45. One woman is murdered by her current or former partner each and every week. One in four children witness violence against a parent, and that's a form of violence in itself.

Tonight Victorian police will respond to around 100 incidents of violence and abuse. All will be, one way or another, let down by a system that simply cannot cope and cannot protect. The biggest law and order issue in our state is unfolding inside our homes. That's why today I announce that a Victorian Labor government will establish Australia's first Royal Commission into Family Violence.

[Applause]

Kate: A year later the royal commission handed down its eight volume report, containing 227 recommendations. The commission was at pains to point out that there has been progress over the last twenty years, but it often seems like a two steps forward, one step back kind of progress.

[Music]

In amongst its 1000's of pages, the report said: "There is no doubt that violence against women and children is deeply rooted in power imbalances, that are reinforced by gender norms and stereotypes."

The commission made recommendations. Here's Beth, Juno's Family Violence outpost worker again.

Beth: Since the Royal commission in 2015 into family violence, there's been a lot of positive changes in terms of the legal system and more services being funded to respond to the crisis that is family violence. So, a woman needing immediate wraparound support, I think that's a lot better, but the issue is, there's the long-term solutions- there's a big gap. There isn't enough housing and there's not a lot of options for women in the longterm.

[Music]

Kate: We pick up Mary's story when she has just given birth to her second child. She's spent the last six months homeless with a two-year-old, after her parents kicked her out when Jimmy, the father of her children, was sent to jail.

Mary's parents have said she can come home once the baby is born. While Mary's in labour, her youngest sister is looking after her two-year-old son.

Mary: Who she took to my mum's apparently that day, and then my mum was like, "No, you got to leave him here now, because she's going to come back anyway."

So yes, my sister unloaded my car at my mum's house. My mum got my room ready. They welcomed me, which annoyed the absolute bejesus out of me, because like, where have you been for six months? There were so many things I had, still like the anger and stuff from everything, like for the last six months. It was a buildup.

Kate: Then Jimmy's release date looms.

Mary: Oh my God. So, my parents literally were like, "When he's out of jail, you're out of here, if you're with him." I said, "I'm not with him." (laughs) But he wanted to somehow help with accommodation or this, that, and the other, and his support worker came and saw him, when he was still in jail and said, "It would be better off for both of you to get a property or some sort of support property, um, if you're together."

And he got on the phone with me, the support worker in jail, and said the same thing. He said, "We can help you both out if you're together because of your son, your newborn." Well, I said, "Look, can we just say that in words, but it's not true? Can that happen, as long as we get a place?"

And he said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, we can do that. No worries." They gave him a one bedroom property. The week after he got out he could move in there like that (claps). All he needed was a criminal record. All he needed was to break the law to get help. It blew

my mind. I've been homeless with children for this long, and I got nothing but food. Not only as soon as he got out, but the week before he's getting out, they're helping him before he gets out!

Just because they're in jail and they've broken a... This is how much we take care of the wrong people, but as a single mum, who's got no alcoholic history, no drug history, no gambling history or anything of the sort, who's looking after a one-year-old, ends up homeless and all we can give her is off food.

[Sad music]

As long as she's not sleeping in the car with their kid, coz then we can intervene by taking her son and putting him in a house, but she still has to find her own way. So let's separate a family even more, not only is the father in jail, but let's separate them even more by taking the mother away from her son. (breaks down)

Because she's in the car with her kid and that's the only kind of accommodation, roof over their head, that she can find at that homeless time. And that's her fault too! Point the finger, blame me, throw my head onto the concrete and take my son away from me! (cries)

[Sad music]

Kate: The threat of intervention from child protection creates an added layer of fear and stress and complication to women's lives when they are homeless, and contributes to the invisibility of women's homelessness. Here's Dr Sharam from RMIT university.

Andrea: If you're a young mum, this happens quite a lot, you've got a toddler, you hide. You try to hide from the system because you know, you're going to be concerned that they're going to take your child away from you, so that child protection issues intersect there. And that increases the invisibility of lots of women who are homeless with their children.

Kate: For a complex mix of reasons, Mary joins Jimmy on his release.

Mary: He had a house, or he had some sort of accommodation. It was like a cabin-type thing for three days when he got out. So we joined him!

Kate: Mary went to stay with Jimmy, knowing that this would cut her off from her parents again.

Mary: I kind of did that, I guess out of spite. I was already so angry with them, because they put me in this situation that I didn't get over and then it got topped off with all this un-support that I received and I was just so angry.

So, I thought even if I don't come back, I don't care. I'm going to take the piss out of whatever government is helping him and his family, coz we looked like a family. I don't I care what law I'm breaking, coz obviously it works!

St. Vincent's paid two extra weeks for that cabin. I said, "I'm not moving." If they're paying \$500 a week for you to stay in this two bedroom, kitchenette, everything included, cabin. He went to the Salvation Army to get a third week into that cabin, because his accommodation wasn't ready.

For King ___, they said, "Look, we can't actually give *you* a third week, but is there any adult staying with you? We can put it in their name," and he put my name down. So, they gave me two weeks. They paid another thousand dollars, but they couldn't put me up anywhere for six months.

[Sad music]

Kate: While we don't want to suggest in this podcast that people leaving the criminal justice system, or people with drug and alcohol issues, don't deserve housing, far from it, housing is a universal right and need, and housing people in the community is so much better than housing them in prison, Mary's passionate plea relates to the value we place on the rights of children and their carers, which in our culture is predominantly women.

[Music]

The reality is our housing system is broken, for everyone, and we're sold the stories that people are homeless because they've made bad choices, or they're down on their luck, that house prices are caused by natural and uncontrollable market forces; that Governments and politicians are doing all they can, when really they just tweak the edges with this or that quick-fix solution.

They treat symptoms not causes and the problem continues to worsen. But in the end, we are the government, we are the market, we create the rules, and we can change them. It's a matter of will, of imagination and commitment to a society where equality and rights to a decent standard of living are more than empty rhetoric.

Katrina: I think a lot of our policy, a housing policy in Australia, is about tinkering around the edges. Like the absolute lack of willingness for a major political party to do anything at all that might increase housing affordability is, you know, mind blowing to me.

Kate: During the time Mary was in the cabin with Jimmy, there was lots of talk from agencies about Jimmy being given more secure housing, possibly big enough for Mary and the children, but Mary had a feeling it was all going to take a lot longer than a month, and so that whole time, she was looking and applying for houses, and one day, she had five house inspections lined up.

Mary: Three of them cancelled. I had two left. The first one I went to, for that day,

[door closing and voices]

I fell in love with that house. So I did, I applied and I wrote this huge, amazing email and she called me three days later and said you're approved.

Kate: Mary strikes a bit of luck with this house, luck she didn't have when she was pregnant and homeless, and she moves in and makes a home there, in a house she loves, halfway between her parents and Jimmy's house.

Mary: He wasn't living with us, but he'd come over and see the kids often, which I was okay with, coz it seemed like he was doing good. After that he got on the alcohol again, and he started coming over drunk. And then when COVID hit, I went through really bad anxiety and I started freaking out daily.

Kate: There's no doubt COVID has impacted all of us, but for people already in precarious housing, or work or financial situations, the impact has been huge, usually for the worse, but sometimes for the better, and it's had some extraordinary impacts on our housing mania. Here's Dr Katrina Raynor from Melbourne University with a number of impacts on our housing system from the COVID pandemic.

Katrina: One thing that I found really interesting, heartening, horrifying about COVID, was the speed with which we responded to rough sleepers- that for years, we've been saying that rough sleep is, is this wicked problem. "Oh, we can't possibly solve it." And then COVID emerges on the scene, and almost overnight we've moved all of these people who are rough sleeping into hotel accommodation. We're working through a rapid rehousing process and supporting people who may have been struggling with homelessness for a long, long time, to access secure housing.

And so, just from a public health perspective, if people are securely housed, they're less likely to be spreading a virus, but also we're seeing the spread of, of COVID through overcrowding is more common, or couch surfing and things like that, so, you know, access to safe housing is a benefit to that individual, but also to the community from a viral spread and equity perspective.

Also, with COVID driving up the cost of regional housing markets dramatically, we're going to see huge spikes in overcrowding, where people do things like they split the top and bottom level of their home, so they can somehow still exist in these communities that have doubled in price.

Mary: I spoke to my landlord. I said, "Look, I've got some weird mental issues going on. We're in lockdown. I don't want to stay here anymore. My ex is starting up all over again. So far away from my family, is there any chance I could break this lease and move?"

He said, "With what's going on with COVID, you can move anytime you want. I'm not going to take any more rent off you." I cried! I thought this cannot be happening. This is the best thing that could have come off, out of this phone call. Yeah, it took me about two months.

Everything was expensive. No-one was accepting a single mum for some reason. Finally got approved for one.

[Music]

It didn't look like a house before I moved in. After I moved in, I was like, oh, this place actually does look really nice. And I've been at this property now since May, end of May last year. My kids love it. We walk to their grandparents' house, four streets down.

Kate: There was one final altercation with Jimmy. He'd stayed the night, sleeping on the couch, and in the morning he lost it and in his anger broke a coat hanger and pieces flew near Mary's two boys.

Mary: Those hangers, I still think to this day, they could have really hurt them. So, that was my it straw. I didn't have to wait for him to strangle me (laughs) again. I didn't have to wait for him to leave and come back, to slam and break stuff. That was it. You broke a hanger. I'm calling the police. So I did, then they just escorted him out and that was it.

Kate: Finally Mary found some housing stability, backed up by support. She also found the line, the line with Jimmy, and she would not allow him to jeopardise her children's safety. The impact of those six months of being homeless, the memories of what ought to have been a magical time of pregnancy and mothering her one-year-old, will always be tarred by deep pain of how society did not care about her or her children.

[Music]

Neen lived for over six months in a caravan in her friend Mark's backyard. At the end of the last episode, Neen gets the call - there's a house available. Does she want to look at it?

Neen: I was actually in the caravan when I got the phone call

[Phone ringing]

and they said, the house is in ___, coz I said that that would be where I'd like to be, because my doctors are here, and all my appointments are around ___, and I don't have a car to drive. I have to rely on public transport to get there.

It was units, which, that didn't faze me. I just thought, the only thing I hoped was that there were good neighbours. It was the front unit, which I liked because I had that little bit extra.

[Birds and footsteps]

So, I was walking up the front steps. It had, like a conifer tree planted, so it was a little bit private and there was like, a little, front porch thing. I thought you could sit out there on a nice day if you wanted to. I walked in and it had a fairly good size lounge room. Big

kitchen, and the kitchen had only just been put in, so it was new. Both bedrooms had built-in wardrobes. I thought, "That's a bonus." And I was really very happy with it- had a bath in the bathroom.

Kate: And so finally Neen is allocated a house- a two bedroom transitional house which is fully furnished, down to the sheets and the cutlery.

[Music]

All Neen's possessions stay in storage. It was to be a twelve month rental, but Neen ends up staying there for four years. I asked Neen how it felt when she moved in.

Neen: It was quite strange because, I'm sort of saying, "This is yours, but it's not really. There will be another move." I do remember going to bed. I was exhausted, of course. And I'm sorta like, "You're sleeping under your own roof. Like, this is, it's mine to do what I need to do with it." Mark and Eugene were really good with letting me stay in the caravan, but it's still not your place.

Ok , you still know you've got to move. There's one more move to make. There was just a lot less pressure. There wasn't that having to go in every day, or call every day, or keep them on their toes, so that you're not kinda shoved off into a corner somewhere and forgotten about, as they do. I've slipped through the cracks in quite a few things over the years. (laughs)

I didn't have to do any of that anymore. And I had a person that was working with me to achieve my other goals. And it was kind of nice having that person there. It was kinda like, you're not doing it on your own.

Like, if I went in to see someone about something, and they'd go, "Yeah, yeah ok," and kinda felt like the patronising pat on the head, whereas if you have a caseworker with you, they know how to talk the talk, and things get done. And I'd sit there and go, but I only, I said the same thing as what you did. (laughs) How come it didn't work for me, but it works for you?

If something wasn't going right, just ring em or they'd call you and you'd tell em and they'd go, "Look, we know what to do." Sometimes they do it and other times there'd be the both of us doing it. Geez, that takes a load off. It really takes a load off.

Kate: We can see in Neen's story the way a support worker can be a critical ally in navigating the system, but with over 100,000 people on the housing waiting list, the housing support system is also at breaking point, and many, many people do not even come close to getting a housing support worker.

In this transitional house, Neen's daughter can finally rejoin her mum and continue her schooling at home.

Neen: I felt like it was sort of bringing the family back together a bit, coz it was quite splintered when I moved out, coz I know she was going through a bit of a hard time. Like their household wasn't a particularly happy one either. I know she was glad to move back home. One of my friends said, look, you know, you probably won't feel it at the moment, but in a year's time, you're gonna look back and go, "Wow, look at how far I've come!" Well, it took me a bit longer than that, because there was that little part of me that's saying, the journey's not over yet.

You go over things, where this might jeopardise your housing. Mark said to me, "Neen, if, if you don't keep your house clean," which my house was clean, but it was, would get a bit messy at times, but it wasn't filthy or anything, "They'll do a house inspection and if you're, if it's not up to scratch, that report will go into housing, and they won't put you anywhere nice. They'll stick you somewhere that's really quite nasty."

I said, "I don't have shit all over the floors. I might have, like a few clothes that haven't been folded or something like that," but I said to him, "You know, it's not, it's not filthy." We did have a house inspection. I totally went from top to bottom the day before, dusted all the window sills and did all that kinda stuff and the worker from Haven Home- she came in and she went through the house. Had a look in the bathroom, the laundry, the lounge room. Didn't go into the kitchen at all.

She checked the like, the bedrooms, and that and she's, "All good." And then she said, but there is a problem. And I thought, oh God, what? What's the problem? And it was that I didn't clean the outside globe at the front door. There was cob webs. And I was really angry at first. "Wah,wah,wah, wah!" And then I thought, you know what, if that's all they've got to worry about, then so be it. (laughs) But I thought, *that!*

Kate: While Neen lives in the transitional house, she's on the waiting list with the office of housing, for a place in public housing. This has the huge benefit of being considered secure housing. Once you're accepted as a client of the Office of Housing, unless you break the rules, they will make sure you always have a roof over your head. Eventually she gets the call!

[Phone ringing]

Neen: You know, I got a phone call to say, "You need to come down to the office straight away. We've got this place. Now, otherwise we'll give it to someone else." And I'm like, yeah well, I don't want that to happen. (laughs) So, I don't even have time to ring my case worker for them to come down with me.

So anyway, I've kinda, I've gone in there and they said, "Oh, it's in ___ ." Right. They said, "Oh, you've got to go up two flights of stairs to get there." And I went, well, that's just knocked that on the head. And they said, "Why is that?" I said, um, "Have you read my SARS report?" "No, you don't have one." "Yeah, I do." "No you don't." "Yes, I do." (laughs)

You know, there was that banter and I'm like, I know what I've got. Don't treat me like an idiot. Yeah, coz know what I've got. She had the, my records right there in front of her, and in the end she sort of, "Oh!"

[Paper shuffling]

and she's gone through and she goes, "Oh, here it is." Right up the back. And I went, "Right. So, we need to read that, yeah?" And she's gone through all the things that need to, to be and she went, "Can't do stairs. Ok well, that rules that out."

So, when I left there and I came home, I was a bit sort of disconcerted with it all, so I spoke to, I did ring and I spoke to Beatrice and she said, next time they do that, you say to them. "Ah, I have a caseworker and I need to have her with me. And so we'll make a time." Not this rush down there. Anyway, the next offer I got was the same thing and I had Beatrice with me, and she said, "Well, no, that's not suitable. My, my client can't do stairs. Have you seen what her health issues are?"

What aren't they getting? (laughs) So I said, thank goodness you were here, coz I said, if I had to go through that again, I probably would have lost the plot. So, if you going to talk to me, *read*, before you bring me in, *read* what's in there. There's no point in having it stuck in front of you if you're not going to look at it.

Beatrice left and I got a new worker, Stacy. She, and she said to me, "If you don't mind me asking, how old are you?" I said, "I'm 54. I'll be 55 in about two weeks." "We could put you in for a 55 and over. You know, it offers a housing, but it's for people 55 and over," she said. She said, "How would you feel about that?" And I said, "Yeah, count me in." She said, "You'd be surprised how quick they come up."

My next worker was Mazi and Mazi rang me up this day and she said, "There's been an offer and it's in a 55 and over. Are you free this afternoon? I'll come and pick up and we'll go down and talk about it." "Oh, okay. That's good." So we did that and, and they said, "Oh, would you be interested?" And I said, "Well, yeah, I would."

Kate: Some work was being done to the over 55's unit, so it wouldn't be ready to even have a look at for a few weeks. But Neen and her worker go up and look through a crack in the blind, to get a bit of an idea of what it will be like.

Neen: On the right hand side it's just, it's, we called it 'the wall of glass', actually. I said, "Look at all the windows and French doors." And I went, "Wow! Very light and airy." And, and I said, "I love those French doors."

I said to Mazi, "Look, from what we can see, it looks pretty good." And I said, "Look at this."

[Bus driving]

"The bus stops right out the front. Like, it's about 10 steps there, there's a bus stop!"

[Football match sounds]

And the one thing that I, that I really loved about it, in front of the house when, when you walk out the front, there's all the footie fields and the soccer fields and I went, "Oh, open space!"

[Happy music]

And that was one of the big things, when I was there, that I sort of felt, "Wow, that's really, that's really good." (laughs) I'm saying, I love, I'm loving all this space.

Kate: So Neen has three or four weeks to get ready to move into what is hopefully her forever home. It's another move and another mixed bag of emotions.

Neen: There's also that feeling of, "Oh God, I've got to move. I've got to unpack."

I'm in constant pain every day, and if I overdo things, I can be totally wiped out for weeks. And, and like, the pain is excruciating and it can be right through the body, but I said to myself, well, regardless, you've got to do it. So, coz that's how, how it was when I moved into the transitional house. Absolutely, totally in agony, and there was nothing anyone could do. The best part about that house was, there was a bath in it.

[Bath water splashing]

I struggled to get out of it, but I could at least sort of get a little bit of relief from that, and I wasn't looking forward to that pain and I knew it would come and it did. So, there is that excitement, but then there's that, "Oh, you know, what's gonna happen?"

I walked out the back and I thought, "Wow, this unit has got a big backyard on it!" For, for a unit, my yard is really big. Like at Best Street, you kind of walked out the back door there, there was steps, the path, and then a fence.

[Happy music]

I could have a really nice area here and I looked down the back and there was a big rosemary bush and, I'm standing there going, "Oh, I've got a rosemary bush! Oh, wow!" And it's big and it's healthy and no-one's going to kill it. Coz I really love rosemary and the yard itself was, was just dirt, but the lady that lived there before me, she was a little Italian lady, and that whole backyard was one massive vegetable patch. I'm sort of there and I'm watching things and, I'm you know, "That's fennel! Okay. Tomatoes are coming up."

Kate: Neen has the dubious honour of being in the fastest growing group of homeless in Australia. There has been a 30% rise in older women's homelessness since 2011.

For Neen, the years of abuse and control, particularly her partner's refusal to allow her to work for money outside the home, as well as her health issues, has left her completely

dependent on an inadequate social security system. She was able to go on the priority public housing list because of her health and the over 55's list because of her age.

While Neen's story is not uncommon, there are thousands of older women who are becoming homeless, not through domestic abuse, but economic disadvantage from a lifetime of contribution to society in ways that are either completely unpaid, or are paid at much lower rates- low paying industries dominated by women, like health and social care, education, retail and hospitality.

Currently the wage gap is 14.2%, which equates to men receiving an average of \$261 per week more than women. Australia has one of the highest rates of part-time workers across all OECD countries, and over 65% of them are women. And women's superannuation savings are much lower than men's. Here's Dr Raynor again:

Katrina: Gender is absolutely in the middle of it. We know that older women are the fastest growing group of people experiencing homelessness in Australia, and part of that is because women over the course of their lives, are more likely to be caregivers, so they're earning less. They're less likely to have accrued superannuation and they're less likely to own housing assets or assets outside of the home.

If you look at older women, they're more likely to experience homelessness through, uh, a series of couch surfing or moving around the country, living with different family members and to have overstayed their welcome, or caravan parks. There's a different kind of tenuous connection to housing that occurs for them.

[Music]

Kate: Over this six part series of Coming Home, we've followed the often harrowing journey of three strong, ordinary yet extraordinary women, as they faced enormous challenges caused by unfair gender laws and expectations, intersecting with our profit driven housing system and grossly uneven distribution of wealth. And we've heard throughout this podcast from Juno workers and University academics, just how severe the barriers are for women seeking housing and how very broken the system is.

We've also glimpsed visions of housing possibility, places like Vienna, where over 2/3rd of the population live in social housing. But Australia has an equality problem. There's the ever widening gap between rich and poor, where according to a 2020 report by the University of NSW, the average wealth of the richest 20% of Australians is more than 90 times the average wealth of the poorest 20% of Australians. Of course, this general figure conceals the gendered nature of this gap.

[Music]

It's beyond the scope of this podcast to pose solutions for gendered violence and coercive control. Women and men's inequality is complex and wide-reaching in its impact, but a significant part of the solution is clear and simple, although not necessarily easy. Value

financially the contributions women make, including raising children, and ensure women's economic autonomy, and provide everyone with safe, affordable and accessible housing, particularly people raising children.

[Music]

The benefits of equality, for individuals and society as a whole, are clear. According to Professor Danny Dorling from Oxford University and author of 'The Equality Effect', greater economic equality makes us all less stupid, more tolerant, less fearful, and more satisfied with life. And at the same time, the benefits and savings of safe and secure housing are well established. Here's Dr Raynor.

Katrina: The research is incontrovertible about the fact that if you spend the money on supporting people to have a safe, secure home, you save so much money in emergency visits, you save so much money in the justice system, because people who are homeless are more likely to be victims or perpetrators of crime, you save so much money in lost productivity because women who are escaping domestic violence aren't missing work. You increase productivity because you know, kids aren't stressed and they can actually learn at school and they can actually graduate from year 12.

There's so much research that has a direct linkage between moving from homelessness or severe housing insecurity into secure housing and that benefit accrues to the government, because they're spending less money on all these other health and justice and wellbeing service systems, and also to the individual, because suddenly they can live a dignified and secure life and from that point they can find a job, they can get health treatments, you know, all of those things.

We talk about community cohesion and how we think this is a benefit, and this is, this is of value to everyone, but you can't have a cohesive community where people are constantly worried they're going to be evicted, or constantly cycling through homes because they can't afford to live in them anymore.

And I mean, and we talk about it even at the level of key workers. You know, it's a benefit to the community when the person who cleans your buildings or makes your coffees or looks after your children, who cares for your elderly mother, can live in that community. And when housing becomes so unaffordable that those people can't live anywhere nearby, everyone's suffers. So yeah, absolutely, we can talk about the cost of social housing, but the benefits are huge.

[Music]

Kate: We accept deep in our Australian culture, that healthcare is a right, a social good paid for by taxes, that education is a right. Indeed we make it compulsory for all children age 5- 16 to go to school, and we pay for it. We pay for police and prisons, aged care and mental health, drug and alcohol treatment. We aim to provide a financial safety net through social security, albeit now below the poverty line, and not enough for both food and

housing. Even our roads are not user-pays, but housing in Australia is treated as a commodity you have to earn the right to get, and not a social good and a fundamental human right.

Abraham Maslow is an American psychologist, famous for creating Maslow's hierarchy of needs: a theory of psychological health based on fulfilling a priority of human needs.

The bottom rung of Maslow's hierarchy are the most essential, our physiological needs and they include; air; water; food; sleep; clothing; and you guessed it, shelter. Maslow considered these physiological needs the most important, as all the other needs become secondary until these ones are met.

[Music]

So if we don't provide housing, but cater to needs higher up Maslow's hierarchy, we're treating the symptoms but not the cause, we're building society on a foundation of sand. It's like taking pain relief for glass in your foot. Without removing the glass, the pain isn't ever going to get better

There's a huge added cost to our world class health system to support people whose health issues are caused, exacerbated or unable to be tended to because they're homeless.

It's counterproductive to try to educate children when they're couch surfing, sleeping in a car or living in a rooming house with their single mum. It's absurd to bemoan the terrible costs of family violence and wring our hands that something must be done, when we don't provide safe, affordable and accessible housing.

And our criminal justice system is bloated, costly, and overburdened with people who commit crimes because they're poor, addicted, or have mental health issues, often exacerbated or caused by homelessness and then they can't get bail because they have no fixed address. Housing as a primary need is just as relevant for a nation or state or community, as it is for an individual.

[Music]

Instead of housing as a right, we- the collective we of Australia, one of the wealthiest countries in the world- have turned housing into a commodity that we speculate on to make a profit. It's overwhelmingly where we, as a people, seek a return on investment, where over one in five Australians or more than two million people own an investment property, which pushes prices up and locks new buyers out of the housing market.

And despite climate change, Australia regularly tops the list of the country building the biggest houses in the world. And this speculative investment in property is facilitated, indeed encouraged, by government policies like capital gains tax and negative gearing.

The runaway housing train has bolted in Australia, taking nearly all of us along for the ride in some capacity, and many commentators say not only are we obsessed, but that collectively investing in housing is not a good use of money.

[Music]

Katrina: An economist would say to you that our obsession with investing in housing is a really unproductive use of funds, because we're putting our money into housing instead of small businesses or large businesses or shares or other productive things, that are creating stuff. And I would probably agree with that.

[Music]

Kate: So, how can we become a country where homelessness is a thing of history, where our wealth as a nation is shared more equally, and the basic human need for a home is provided, like we provide health and education, and where we invest our money in more productive, creative and inventive ideas, not an empty bubble of inflated prices.

The first and biggest step always is having the intention, the commitment, the political will to solve the crisis. This continues to be lacking in Australia.

When the Liberal government took office in 2013, it abolished the office of Minister for Housing. The last Liberal coalition housing minister was the Minister for Housing and Construction nearly 40 years ago in 1982, so this wasn't surprising.

In May 2019 The Morrison government did establish a Minister for Housing in response to the housing crisis, but it's not as if the Australian Labor party offers much more. Here's Dr Sharam, speaking in August, 2021.

Andrea: Two weeks ago, the federal ALP ditched all the policies they've had around housing in order to make themselves a small target. It's the tax breaks.

Kate: But politicians get their will from the community. So what can we as citizens do to push for change in Australia? Here's a list of possible ideas for action, which you can also find with the show notes for this episode:

1. Talk about the housing crisis with friends and family and begin to develop and spread awareness,
2. Stay informed and share posts and articles on social media,
3. Make a donation to Juno so they can continue the amazing work they do with women and advocating for systems change,
4. Join campaigns like 'Everybody's Home' and be ready to offer support when they ask,
5. Volunteer. Go to volunteer.org.au or google 'volunteer housing',
6. Write to your local member, council or political party and let them know you want them to act,

7. Fund affordable housing,
8. And finally, stand for parliament.

All change begins with ideas. The academics we've heard from throughout this podcast - Drs Sharam and Raynor have studied and thought about our housing system a lot and they have many ideas. Here's just a couple of them.

Andrea: So what, what, what do you do? You know, if you, if you want to be in a political system, which says housing is a human right, everyone should have a house. Well, in Australia, we would have to undergo a major renovation of policy in order to achieve that. We've had 30 years of neo-liberalism where governments don't want to spend.

The public housing systems are very run down. They're cannibalising those systems in order to maintain some of the housing. The only expansion is in the community housing sector and that's, that's really quite slow. So, we would need to get a national housing policy. We don't have one. Lots of countries have national housing policies. We don't have one of those.

Katrina: My dream would be a much larger social housing sector in Australia and that by virtue of existing, would do, you know, a mile of good for rental rights for people who are on lower incomes,

Kate: I asked Dr Raynor how she thought that could happen.

Katrina: Uh, billions of dollars into our social housing system, every year for the next fifteen years please. Twenty years. (laughs)

[Music]

Kate: Before we finish this series, with a diary entry from Neen, just a little whisper that there will be a bonus episode of 'Coming Home'. In October 2021, after all the interviews and editing, listening and checking, five of us most involved in this podcast - our three amazing storytellers, Neen, Mary and Kiara, our collaborator and co-editor from Juno, Pai Rittichai and writer and producer, me,- met for the first time on zoom and de briefed. And it was recorded and I turned it into a bonus episode. We hope you'll enjoy our reflections on the journey of this project.

[Music]

One night in late 2020, Neen made an audio diary recording into her phone, and we're going to end this series with her compassionate and wise words.

[Music]

Neen: Well, I do remember thinking, either Sunday or Monday, when we had those really, really bad winds and a tornado went through a town in Horsham, a town named Horsham.

You know, I remember sitting on the couch and thinking, I thank God that I'm in my little home. I thank God that I've got this roof over my head and my last sorta thoughts for that day were, "I hope that everyone who's out there who doesn't have a home, that they're somehow safe and warm." My last thoughts before nodding off to sleep were of people who didn't have what I have now.

[Music]

OUTRO

Kate: 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 on their website www.juno.org.au and follow them on social media.

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This podcast is created with script editing by Juno staff, with special thanks to Pai Rittachai. 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