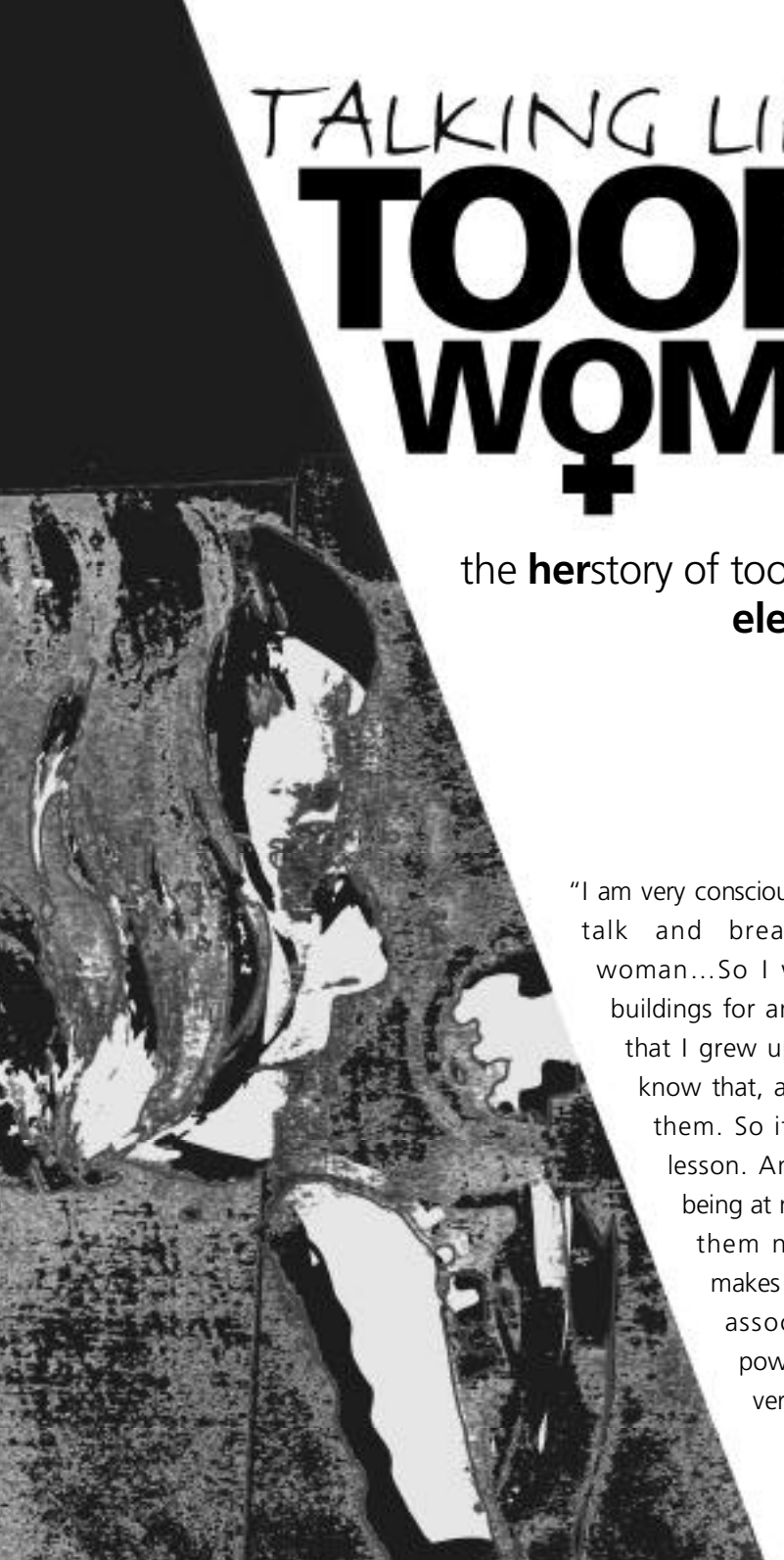
# TALKING LIKE A TOORA WOMAN

the **her**story of toora women inc.

**elena rosenman**



"I am very conscious that I still think, act, talk and breathe like a Toora woman…So I would still leap tall buildings for any one of the women that I grew up with then and they know that, and I know that about them. So it's a pretty enduring lesson. And I would anticipate being at most of their funerals if them not at mine. So that makes it a lifelong kind of an association, a really powerful association and a very special one."

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# toora timeline

## 1970
Women's liberation movement spins out of the anti-Vietnam War movement in Australia. Branches start in most cities including Canberra.

## 1972
Federal election campaign – led by Gough Whitlam and supported by the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), the Australian Labor Party ends 23 years of Liberal government in Australia.

## 1974
Australia's first feminist women's refuge, Elsie opens in Sydney.

## 1975
Canberra Women's Refuge opens.

## 1976
Canberra's Rape Crisis Centre is established.

## 1981
The Single Women's Shelter collective is established.

## 1982
**March – April**
The Single Women's Shelter collective submit a proposal for a Single Women's Shelter to the Department of the Capital Territories Community Development Fund and the Commonwealth.

6 April – Single Women's Shelter is incorporated as a legal body.

**July**
Department of Capital Territories defers Single Women's Shelter grant.

Department of Social Security advises maximum funding of $26 000.

**August**
Department of Capital Territories offers $26 000 conditional on the Department of Social Security matching the grant.

**October**
Department of Social Security decides not to fund Single Women's Shelter.

## 1983
**February**
Women squat in ACT Housing Trust house to draw attention to the need for a single women's shelter.

**March**
Fraser government loses Federal election.

**May**
Department of Social Security and Department of Capital Territory confirm funding for six month pilot of Single Women's Shelter.

**August**
3 August – Toora Single Women's Shelter accepts her first residents.

8 August – Toora Single Women's Shelter formally opens.

Late 1983 – Toora closes for women with chemical dependencies and undergoes extensive training on women and addiction.

## 1984
The Incest Centre opens in the Lobelia Street Women's Centre.

**April**
Department of Housing relocates the Single Women's Shelter to Busby Street, O'Connor.

**November**
Toora hosts National Women and Addiction Conference.

## 1985
Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) Mark I begins.

Toora receives National Campaign Against Drugs and Alcohol (NCADA) grant for one drug and alcohol worker and the Women's Addiction Recovery Service (WARS) is established.

## 1988
The Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS) begins operating in Canberra.

**July**
Allegations of misappropriation of funds. Toora is investigated by ACT Community and Health Service. Investigation finds the allegations baseless and gives Toora an excellent report.

## 1992
Heira, a house for single women escaping domestic violence opens.

Toora moves from Busby Street to purpose built house.

## 1993
WARS is renamed as Women's information referral and education on durgs and dependency (WIREDD) and moves out of the refuge into independent location.

## 1995
Service review – complete revision of Toora management and staffing structures. Two specific managerial positions created – Executive Director and Service Coordinator.

## 1998
WIREDD receives Commonwealth Illicit Drug Strategy funds for 1.5 additional workers.

## 2000
Heira house relocates.

## 2002
**June**
Lesley's Place outreach service is launched as part of the national Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia's Drug Action Week.

## 2003
Lesley's Place expands to provide a residential recovery service for women and children.

## 2004
**February**
Toora Women Inc. open Marzenna, an alcohol and drug halfway house for women and children.

**March**
31 March – Toora Women Inc. launches Betty Searle House, a boarding house for women aged over 55.

**June**
Toora Women Inc. receives funding to provide outreach support to single women.

**August**
Toora turns 21.

# acknowledgements

many women shared their experiences as part of the Toora herstory project and it is vivid because of their generosity.

Thank you to Ara Cresswell, Bridie Doyle, Sukalpa Goldflam, Tjanara Goreng Goreng, Elspeth Lamb, Lirlavatii, Dymphna Lowry, Meg Lowry, Phil Lowry, Di Lucas, Lyn Morgain, Liz O'Brien, Lisa Paul, Jacqui Pearce, Julia Ryan, Chris Rytir, Julie Schneller, Gillian Shaw, Tarryn Smith, Branka Trajkovski, Eddie Wadick, Linda Webb and Julie Whitmore. Special thanks are also due to Patricia Walker, who opened many of her journals and notebooks, and shed an enormous amount of light on her own experiences. Thank you to Meredith Regan, who was enthusiastic about the project, helped enormously in contacting other women, and made herself available to clarify my endless queries.

The brief herstory I offer of the women's movement in Australia is heavily indebted to the usual suspects in Australian feminist history: Marilyn Lake's *Getting Equal: the history of Australian feminism,* and Anne Summer's more personal account in *Ducks on the Pond*. The outline of the development of Canberra women's liberation is constructed largely from conversations I had with Julia Ryan and Liz O'Brien. Julia, Liz and Bridie Doyle also offered their personal experiences of women's liberation – often the best illustration of the issues. All of them have been and remain very active in the Canberra feminist community and were candid and generous with their time.

Thank you also to the Toora women who supervised this project. Jacqui Pearce provided perspective and humour and her best suggestions were offered in friendship. Bridie Doyle read and reread the manuscript and offered invaluable assistance and support. A number of women also read parts of the document and offered advice and suggestions; thank you to Kim Werner and Alexandra Burt. Dorothy Broom in particular provided much editorial assistance, continuing her lengthy commitment to Toora Women Inc.

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Writer Anne Summers and photographer Daniela Torsh were involved with Australia's first feminist refuge, Elsie, and supported both the Toora herstory exhibition and this document. Thank you. On a practical note, thank you to Julie Bizant at Biztech who transcribed hours of interviews and to Delene White for her graphics, dedication and patience.

The ACT Minister for Women, Katy Gallagher has been an enormous supporter of Toora Women Inc. and this project – sponsoring the Toora Herstory Exhibition in 2003 and funding the publication of *Talking Like a Toora Woman.*

As a young feminist, the most amazing thing this project has offered me is an understanding of what it felt like to be a part of Australia's feminist community 20 odd years ago; an empathy for the nostalgia many women feel. The enthusiasm, passion and commitment of Toora women through the last 21 years and that feeling of intoxication with new ideas, is something I would have loved to have seen. So, this project is dedicated to those women who have worked at Toora over the last two decades and moreover, to the courageous women who have used the service in that time and continue to walk through the doors today.

**Elena Rosenman**
July 2004

# introduction

In 2004, Toora Women Inc. is a feminist organisation that offers services to women in Canberra. They provide support to homeless women, women with chemical dependencies, women affected by the chemical dependency of others, women with mental health issues, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, women in trauma and women escaping domestic violence. The Toora umbrella is generous, sheltering eight different services.

**Toora House** supplies crisis accommodation for women unaccompanied by children. The ten beds are always full and the Toora team staff the refuge 24 hours every day of the week.

**Heira House** provides short to medium-term accommodation for women unaccompanied by children escaping domestic violence. In 2003, over 50% of Heira residents came from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

**Likaya** is Toora Women Inc.'s halfway house. It offers supported medium-term accommodation to up to four women.

**WIREDD** is Women's Information, Referral and Education on Drugs and Dependency. It is a drop-in centre in the city and offers counselling, information, advocacy and training to women affected by chemical dependency.

**Lesley's Place** is a residential support service for single women and women with children exiting supervised withdrawal. The service also offers outreach support to women before and after detox.

**Marzenna** is a halfway house for women and women and children. It offers support to women in recovery from drug and alcohol misuse. While it is has only recently become a Toora service, the Toora collective's commitment to identifying service needs for women affected by chemical dependency was instrumental in the establishment of this service ten years ago.

**Betty Searle Hous**e opened in 2004. It offers long-term accommodation to women over 55 unaccompanied by children.

**Outreach Support Service** was recently funded to provide outreach support to women experiencing homelessness.



The organisation has grown and changed dramatically since the Toora Single Women's Shelter opened 21 years ago. From an organisation that opened with three paid positions, there are now over 50 Toora workers. The story of how it came to look as it does today is far bigger than the story of one organisation. Reflected in Toora's herstory are the politics, activism, frustration and hope that have told the herstory of the women's movement since the 1970s. They have shared issues like racism and the changes that accompany the inclusion of radical projects in bureaucratic structures. At times in the last 20 years Toora has led the way, challenging and inspiring the women's movement to address the complexity of women's homelessness.

Toora was the belated daughter of the women's liberation movement, which flourished during the 1970s and radically altered the way women considered their own stories and their role in society. One of the notable contributions of the women's movement was the establishment of feminist women's refuges. In direct opposition to the existing services for women, refuge collectives aimed to offer women support clearly informed by strong feminist principles of solidarity and empowerment. Across Australia these refuges were soon overwhelmed with demand. Many women and children were escaping domestic violence. Some women came alone, bringing with them a plethora of issues: homelessness, addiction, mental health, trauma and violence. Like many other women's refuges, the Canberra Women's Refuge was eventually forced to prioritise accommodating women with children. Single women had nowhere to go.

A Single Women's Shelter collective grew out of the Canberra Women's Refuge. These women worked determinedly for over two years to realise a service specifically for single women. Toora Single Women's Shelter opened in a tiny government house on 8 August, 1983. The women who used the service then, as now, posed a direct challenge both to the women's movement and to Australian society more broadly. For the last 20 years, Toora has been accommodating women that other services could not or would not accept. Out of their life stories Toora developed an important and nuanced political analysis of women's homelessness. They broached the issue of women's chemical dependency, which made them unpopular in many circles of

the women's movement, but also changed the lives of countless individual women.

There have been many challenges, political differences and personal disputes that have shaped the way the service looks today. Some issues were specific to Toora. Their commitment to working with chemically dependent women arose from the women that came through the door on the first day. Toora's expansion also necessitated change. During the early 1990's Toora doubled in size with the opening of Heira and expansion of WIREDD.In 1995 the organisation moved away from a collective structure and a board of management and specific managerial positions were created. The Toor Single Women's shelter became Toora Women Inc.

The women who have worked as part of the Toora collective have been passionate feminists whose commitment has driven the development of the service. Many who joined the Toora collective during the first years of operation were young women who had come of age during the height of the women's movement in the 1970s. They were young women who were receptive to new ideas and challenged the feminist thought they had inherited. They showed remarkable political commitment and courage and Toora was the beneficiary of much of this energy. Many of them articulated and strengthened their feminism at Toora. These women grew up in the Toora collective and brought the organisation along with them.

As an organisation, Toora Women Inc. has been distinguished by a willingness to tackle the most difficult issues and challenge their own process, thinking and action. From its inception, the Toora collective has never been satisfied to simply recognise a need but has always worked to address it. It was this characteristic that lead to the development of the Women's Addiction Recovery Service (WARS), the first gender-specific drug and alcohol service in the ACT. WARS was only the beginning, for the last 20 years Toora Women Inc. has worked to meet the changing needs of women in Canberra.

2004 marks Toora's 21st birthday. What follows is a herstory of the last two decades. Any story of the past is infinitely debatable and *Talking Like a Toora Woman* is no exception. The story that emerged from Toora's voluminous and comprehensive archives and from the women interviewed was compelling, complicated and contested. While the Toora women, past and present, were consistently reflective and thoughtful in their responses, researching Toora's herstory uncovered incongruities and often frank disagreement. I have chosen to let differences of opinion sit side by side as it is these moments of difference that often reveal a clearer picture.

# 1

# toora's political context: the women's movement in australia

Toora's herstory is inextricable from the story of women's movement that emerged in Australia during the 1970s and dramatically changed the lives of women. The movement was borne of the social change that began with the anti-Vietnam war protests.

The Vietnam War had begun in the early 1960s. Television was introduced to Australia in 1956, and by the time the war began there were televisions in lounge rooms across the country. Vietnam was the first war to be televised and the coverage was comprehensive and graphic. Men and women in the United States of America began to question the motivations of their country's involvement in what on the surface seemed to be a civil war in a far off country.

The Australian anti-War movement originated in universities. As the war continued, conscription was reintroduced and through a birthday ballot young men were randomly selected to serve. At the same time, the anti-Vietnam War movement was spreading noisily and insistently across Australia. Thousands of people marched in moratorium marches, young men burnt their conscription cards and peace slogans appeared on walls across the country.

The decades immediately following the Second World War had seen a considerable change in women's roles in Australian society. Women had become more visible in public life. During the 1950s and 60s they had entered university in unprecedented numbers and were active in the academic and political debates on campus: *'Women marched in the streets, attended political meetings and drank in pubs alongside men, and they discovered the ambiguous pleasures of a sexual freedom symbolised by the Pill.'*[1] Women were involved in the anti-War movement, passionately committed to achieving its goals. Despite being young, dedicated and educated, they found themselves carrying the administration of the anti–War movement while the men were setting the agendas and standing behind the microphones. Anne Summers was a young woman involved in the movement. In 1975 she wrote,

> *Women have rarely engaged, except as girl-friends, wives or the operators of typewriters, mimeograph machines and tea-urns, in any of the radical/underground activities of the past decade. The little magazines and newspapers and the later anti-Vietnam and anti-conscription campaigns were organised and their ambit defined by men, and women had either to participate in accordance with terms already down, or to join other male-organised oppositional factions.*[2]

The hypocrisy of men within the movement was beginning to cause women some resentment. It seemed that *'while New Left men worked against the imperialist war in Vietnam, they continued to exploit women within their own ranks and to ignore 'women's' issues in their political practice.'*[3] The expectation of equality many women had

begun their education or careers with was being eroded daily. Their dissatisfaction began to coalesce into an organised social movement. Early in 1970, women's liberation groups began to meet in cities across Australia. In May, the first national Women's Liberation Conference was held in Melbourne.[4]

Australian women were asking for equal rights. It seemed a reasonable request, but it gave rise to a bewildering resistance both within the New Left circles of the anti-War movement and in wider society. As women's liberation grew, so too did anti-feminist rhetoric. In 1970, anti-War protesters congregated at Sydney University to begin their Moratorium march. In what would later be regarded as one of women's liberation's determining moments, the crowd was addressed by a young woman called Kate Jennings. She articulated the dissatisfaction of the embryonic women's movement and the intensity of their frustration;

> *I say to every woman that every time you're put down or fucked over, every time they kick you cunningly in the teeth, go stand on the street corner and tell every man that walks by, everyone of them a male chauvinist by virtue of HIS birthright, tell them all to go and suck their own cocks. And when they laugh, tell them they're getting bloody defensive, and that you know what size weapon to buy to kill the bodies that you've unfortunately laid under often enough. ALL POWER TO WOMEN.*[5]

She presaged the strength of rage and activism that ensured women were heard and that would distinguish the women's liberation movement in Australian social history.

As the decade progressed, the women's movement flourished. Across the country, women's liberation groups formed and met regularly to define political agendas and plan action. Some of the women's liberation movement's primary goals were focused on the formal barriers to women's full involvement in society. They aimed to facilitate women fulfilling their economic, professional and intellectual potential. This was illustrated by the agenda of the Sydney International Women's Day march in 1972. According to their broadsheet, Sydney women had six primary demands:

- *The right to work;*
- *Equal pay – one rate for the job;*
- *Equal opportunity for work and education;*
- *Free child care and pre-school activities;*
- *Free contraceptives;*
- *Safe, legal abortion on request.*[6]

## reform or revolution?

While there was a long history of feminist thought and activism in Australia, it was the resurgence of the women's movement in the 1970s that coined the term patriarchy. The term rapidly became ubiquitous as meanings proliferated. At its most basic, it came to stand for the system through which men governed women's lives. Coining the term and the idea of patriarchy marked a significant shift in feminist thought. Earlier stages of Australian feminism had focused on the state's role to protect women, equal citizenship and women's basic rights under the existing political system. The idea of patriarchy marked a critique of political and social structures themselves. The perception of institutions like law, language and education as gender-neutral was fundamentally questioned. With enthusiasm, women explicated the way their lives were controlled by individual men and through pervasively male institutions.

As the women's movement grew, responses to the developing critique of political and social structures as patriarchal started to diverge. Some women felt political structures could be reformed to provide equality and to accommodate women's specific needs, like child care. Others thought the systems could never truly accommodate the needs and rights of women. The philosophical divide formalised when the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) was formed in 1972. Their politics were defined as liberal or reformist. They were well structured and influential, committed to making fundamental changes within the institutions that formed the bastion of male privilege. In contrast, women's liberation defined their politics as radical. They believed the

systems that WEL worked to reform were intractably patriarchal and equality and change for women would only happen through revolution. [7]

WEL worked tirelessly towards including women's interests in national agendas. In 1972 they set about interviewing candidates for the upcoming Federal election and then ranked them on their attitudes towards issues particularly relevant to women. The incumbent Liberal Prime Minister, William McMahon scored one point out of 40. His opponent, Labor's Gough Whitlam, achieved a substantially better score of 33. Anne Summers remembered that the results were published in *The Age*, and for women, they *'became a guide on how to vote.'*[8] In December 1972, Gough Whitlam was elected, ending 23 years of conservative Liberal government.

The Labor Party's platform included women's issues and within the first few weeks of office, some of their election promises were implemented. Many of the primary demands of the women's movement were addressed, the luxury tax on contraceptives was lifted, the government set up an enquiry into child care and reopened the national wage case to support the case for equal pay in front of the Arbitration Commission.[9] The government also introduced paid maternity leave for Commonwealth public servants and a social service payment to single mothers.[10] However meagre, these payments had the potential to allow women to live without partners and possibly provide for their children. In 1973, Whitlam announced the new position of Special Advisor to the Prime Minister on Women's Issues, which was filled by a Canberra woman, Elizabeth Reid. Feminists were carving out niches for their concerns within existing social and political institutions. As feminist historian, Marilyn Lake, expressed, 'WEL's intervention in the political process was effective in reinstating women as an electoral force, a political bloc united in their demands.' [11]

As WEL worked towards reform, women's liberation strove to free women from the binds of their gender role and worked towards overthrowing the patriarchal system that governed women's lives. A radical, anarchic politic was developing, women were forming the desire for a woman-centred culture as opposed to cooption within the existing system. Women's minds strove towards revolution. The definition of radical feminism was clear for Elspeth Lamb, one of Toora's original workers;

> *Radical feminists believed… [in] changing the way women did things, challenging basic assumptions about women, challenging anti-women structures and processes by developing new, empowering alternative paradigms and processes, and putting them into practice. Ways that recognised and addressed all forms of discrimination and issues that women faced on all levels in all situations. Women doing for themselves, and women grouping together to act and work together from the grassroots up could change the world. Only through this would change happen for women and only if we did it ourselves, not through reforming the structures that were implicitly sexist, racist, classist, ageist, heterosexist, etc.*[12]

## consciousness raising

Consciousness raising was one of the defining features of second wave feminism. Across Australia women formed groups where they interrogated their own lives and relationships with men – fathers, lovers, brothers and friends. These groups exposed the extent of violence in women's lives, how many women had lived through sexual assault in their childhood homes and went on to manage home lives dictated by domestic violence, exploitation and tyranny. Consciousness raising gave birth to one of the most enduring tenets of the feminist movement, 'the personal is political.'

'The personal is political' expanded the feminist analysis of the patriarchy, power and women's oppression. Sexism was more than formal inequality; it was ingrained in cultural and social ideas about women and femininity. It was manifest in every interaction and relationship between men and women. It pervaded workplaces, social institutions and snaked its way through the personal lives of women. As women shared their experiences of families, sex and violence the movement developed an analysis of women's sexuality expressed most recognisably by Australian feminist, Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch*. They also formed a trenchant

critique of women's traditional role in the family, '*identifying the isolated nuclear family household as the central institution of patriarchy and a primary site of women's oppression.*'[13]

Consciousness raising forever altered the meaning of the word political. In consciousness raising groups across Australia women became braver and began to speak about experiences they were deeply ashamed of, or saw as personal shortcomings – stories of rape, incest, and domestic violence. Aired in consciousness raising groups these stories started to take on a much less personal aspect. What women had suffered in isolation began to take on an unmistakable pattern. The personal lives of women told as much about the patriarchy as did the formal inequalities. Moreover, while much of the violence that women suffered was behind closed doors, it was protected by political and public institutions and the cultural construct of the 'private sphere.'

The flip side of 'the personal is political' brought with it a responsibility for women to challenge the patriarchy in their own lives. As Marilyn Lake elucidated,

> *Change began with oneself. Hundreds of women took the advice and walked out of marriages, changed their names, formed new households and began their lives anew…To ease the passage of women wanting to leave their marital home but with nowhere to go, 'halfway houses' or 'women's shelters' were set up by women who sometimes volunteered their own houses for the cause.*[14]

If women were going to change their lives, they needed somewhere to go to do it. The collective of the Melbourne Halfway House wrote in their 1977 herstory, '*It was to be called a Halfway House because it would be a halfway point for women between their old lives and their new ones.*'[15]

The intimacy and intensity of consciousness raising produced a new sense of solidarity among women. Ara Cresswell was one of the early members of the Toora collective and remembered second wave feminists were motivated by the belief that *'women's lives were of crucial importance and we had a role and responsibility to change them.'*[16] Many women started looking for ways to alleviate the sort of trauma, violence and isolation women suffered. The women's refuge movement was one of the primary beneficiaries of this energy, as illustrated by the story of Elsie, Australia's first feminist women's refuge.

It is possible to overstate the differences between women's liberation and WEL. The women's refuge movement provides an illustration of the way that radical and more liberal politics were combined to achieve outcomes for women. The passion and activism of some of the more radical women forced the establishment of refuges. The women who possessed lobbying and advocacy skills and an understanding of the intricacies of funding submissions were essential in keeping women's refuges afloat in a political system that had no understanding of their value or their needs as services.

## elsie–australia's first feminist refuge

In 1973, members of Sydney women's liberation started to work on the idea of a women's refuge to accommodate women who were homeless or experiencing what would later become known as domestic violence. Elsie was hard-won. Her collective tried several tactics to locate premises, they applied to property developers, the local council and the Commonwealth government without success. Then Anne Summers, one of Elsie's collective members, found two connected cottages in Glebe, owned by the Church of England but unoccupied.

Anne recalled the Elsie collective were hard-working, but they were all volunteers and there were not enough of them to staff the proposed refuge. In 1974 International Women's Day was marked by a two-day commission on violence where many women testified their own experiences. As she wrote,

> *Women had become braver about revealing the previously hidden sides of their lives to CR [consciousness raising] groups; however it was quite a different thing to stand in front of 500 women and recount the story of your rape, or the electric shock treatment forcibly administered after your 'nervous breakdown.' In sombre silence we listened as woman after woman stood up to tell her story. By the end of the first day a mood of palpable rage was emerging as we contemplated the violence that so many of*

*our sisters had endured. On Sunday morning when we reconvened for several more hours of harrowing testimony, it was obvious that many of those present were looking for some way to channel that rage. What can we **do**? women asked each other. We can't stand by and let this happen. I decided to seize the moment. I joined the line of women waiting their turn at the microphone. By the time I had finished describing Elsie and made my appeal for more womanpower, the place was in uproar, with women screaming their enthusiastic support.*[17]

On 16 March 1974, the Saturday after the commission described above, 50 women marched through Glebe to Westmoreland Street, broke into the house Anne had found and changed the locks.[18] Ara Cresswell realised the importance of Elsie's establishment:

*Elsie Women's Refuge was radical. A radical change to the nature of the way we did things in Australia. You know, women refused to budge, they said, 'we will take care of women no matter what.' And that house was over crowded, it was just overflowing with women and children…Terribly hard stuff. But very powerful, extremely powerful.*

Ludo McFerran was an early Elsie worker. She appreciated this event was the beginning of something that would radically alter women's lives;

*This was the unlikely beginning of one of the most significant social movements of twentieth century Australia. Within ten years there were over 40 women's refuges in the State of New South Wales and more than 160 in Australia*.[19]

## canberra women's liberation

Canberra was among the first Australian cities to form a women's liberation group. Canberra women's liberation was formed in June 1970 when a woman named Biff Ward called a meeting, to which she also invited two women from Sydney women's liberation. The first public meeting in Canberra was held in November that year and 130 women attended. Thereafter, the group met weekly on a Wednesday night to discuss issues including education, psychology, the family, femininity and their function in the oppression of women. The women met in lounge rooms until women's liberation rented a house in Bremer Street in Griffith in 1972. In this house the group flourished and expanded its projects. Consciousness raising, street theatre, poster creation, women's films, family planning, a women's newsletter, creative writing, submission writing groups were born, as well as the Canberra branch of the Women's Electoral Lobby and the Abortion Counselling service.[20] Women from Canberra women's liberation were responsible for the establishment of many services for women that still exist, including the Family Planning Clinic which opened in civic in 1971 and the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre which opened in 1976.

## the canberra women's refuge

Canberra women's liberation kept steady pace with national developments. In 1974 (the year that Elsie was established in Sydney), women from the Women's Electoral Lobby and women's liberation met to discuss the possibility of establishing a similar service in Canberra. Julia Ryan was involved in the discussions and remembered their methods were different to those of their sisters in Sydney;

*We thought – being Canberra people– that we would use the government auspices rather than going and squatting like they did at Elsie… It was still the Whitlam government and we were going to use the government resources. And we did. It took us a long time to talk them into it…it took us a year or more than a year.*[21]

Self-government for the ACT was still more than 15 years away. Local Canberra affairs were managed by the Commonwealth Department of Capital Territories (DCT) and represented by a Federal Minister. The Canberra Women's Refuge collective applied to the DCT for funding. They received a small grant from the Capital Territory Health Commission, but were still largely reliant on the volunteer energy of Canberra women's liberation members.

The Minister for Capital Territories, Gordon Bryant, allocated the collective a small government house in Watson and the Canberra Women's Refuge opened in March 1975. Beryl Henderson was one of the founding members of Canberra women's liberation and she

opened the refuge in the name of women's liberation. The Canberra Women's Refuge later changed its name to Beryl to honour her contribution to the women's movement in Canberra.

Pat Walker, an early member of the Canberra Women's Refuge collective, held vivid memories of the refuge. Women started to work together to form new lives;

> *I really think that the actual environment itself was a very positive environment, preparing food together and talking together and doing shopping together instead of wheeling your own trolley with screaming kids around you…There was so much that went on in the refuge, things like organising apprehended violence orders against violent husbands and partners so the woman and her family could be safe. The most important thing was to do everything to ensure that the women and children were safe.*[22]



# 2

# single women at the canberra women's refuge

Despite the enthusiasm surrounding its opening, the Canberra Women's Refuge sat almost empty for several months, much to the shock of the women who had established it. Julia Ryan remembered her surprise, *'where were the battered women and children we were expecting? Honestly, for six months none turned up!'* The same thing had happened at Elsie the year before. Anne Summers remembered that the first resident, *'must have been somewhat taken aback by the rapturous welcome she received.'*[1] Both Elsie and the Canberra Women's Refuge were unprecedented services and it took time for news of their existence to spread. While ensuing refuges maintained the strictest confidentiality around their location, secrecy was a luxury Elsie could not afford. Elsie had the



words 'Women's Refuge' emblazoned across the front of the house in orange paint and the collective publicised the address through the media. Despite their slow starts, Elsie and the Canberra Women's Refuge began to fill. For the Canberra Women's Refuge it was only a matter of months before the small house was overflowing with women and children. Gill Shaw, a young woman working at the refuge recalled, *'our policy as a refuge at that time was that we didn't refuse anybody entry…so the place was often absolutely packed to the rafters.'*[2] Pat Walker remembered nights where up to 50 women and children were bunked all over the house, in beds, on couches and on the floor.

The reality of running the refuge was a shock, even to the women who had advocated strongly for the need. As the collective had hoped, the refuge drew many women and children from abusive homes. What the collective had not expected was the complexity of the issues women brought with them. Women also had pronounced mental health illnesses, herstories of sexual assault and drug and alcohol dependencies. The women whose lives consistently proved most chaotic were those who were unaccompanied by children. Housing these women together with women and children became increasingly problematic. The Canberra Women's Refuge collective started to recognise that the needs of many single women were complex, desperate, and unmet.

Pat had come to Australia from England with her husband after the Second World War. She had trained in biology and worked as a school teacher. When she came to Australia she had two daughters and was soon absorbed in their care;

> *I remember having a brief period in my life, I think it was after I recently migrated … and I went to see the doctor and she said, 'oh take some of these pills, take these.' And I had to come back another day and she said, 'oh, have some of these pills.' And eventually I had boxes full of these capsules and I was taking them and I began to get sluggish and sleepy and the next thing when I was putting a line of nappies out my peg missed the line. I have very acute, sharp vision and I tried again and I just couldn't get it on. I went straight inside and shot all the capsules down the toilet and haven't taken one since.*



The next day she went and bought a few simple woodworking tools and set up a workshop in the side room of her house. She used to listen to the radio while she worked. One day a woman came across the frequencies talking about the women's movement and Pat suddenly recognised herself, *'that's me!'* Around the same time a woman came into her workshop and chatted about her involvement in the Canberra Women's Refuge collective. As it turned out, they were struggling to fill a place on the collective, which Pat took up. She began as a support worker in the refuge. Her journals trace her realisation of the needs of single women back to 1979.

## the needs of single women

The single women who came to the Canberra Women's Refuge were often young women who had left home for a variety of reasons or older women who had been homeless for a long time. They were escaping violence and often using alcohol and other drugs. Many were also managing severe mental illness or acute emotional distress. The majority of them were survivors of severe trauma and Pat still keeps memories of individual women, including one who was accompanied only by a dead cat and required substantial persuading to leave it at the door. Gill noticed the connection Pat developed with these women;

> *She was really interested in mental health issues. Women who worked at the refuge with her would say if someone was really flipping out Pat would go and talk to them and they'd be alright. She was very clear about a lot of things. She was very wise.*

Out of necessity, the Canberra Women's Refuge forged a relationship with the Woden Valley Hospital psychiatric unit, 12B. As referrals bounced back between the two organisations, the complexity of needs of women who were facing mental illness began to emerge. Pat recorded such observations in her notebooks at the time;

> *Much of the work we do [at the Canberra Women's Refuge] and that of the Woden Valley Hospital psychiatric unit is lost when women go into isolated flats. Unsupported they are unable to*

*manage leaving this accommodation and return to the refuge and Woden Valley Hospital. If these women are housed close to each other they could offer mutual support.*[3]

Single women struggled at the Canberra Women's Refuge. The daily routine was structured around the needs of children, getting them to school, caring for smaller ones, picking them up, feeding them, getting to bed. The refuge was noisy and hectic. In 1983 Toora's very first resident wrote,

> *I came from Brisbane and found it extremely hard to find accommodation that I could afford. I went to Kingston Women's Refuge [Canberra Women's Refuge] and although they are doing a wonderful job, I found it unsuitable for me as I needed peace and quiet.*[4]

Many single women had children in the care of others and they found the atmosphere traumatic.

Meanwhile, the reality of housing the two groups together was becoming increasingly evident. Many of the more complex problems were compounded by simple issues of space. Gill remembered, *'it was just inevitable that single women would share with families just because of the dynamic of bed space.'* She evoked the story that best illustrated to her the incompatibility of single women and families;

> *[There was] a woman who was in the refuge because her parents had kicked her out because of drug use …She was 20, 21, 22 or something like that. And she was using a lot of drugs while she was at the refuge, and she…left all these nice pretty coloured pills all over the floor in a room she was sharing with a family with kids. And they were young kids, like floor dwellers, and…the refuge kicked her out because that was just so unsafe, we couldn't have that there.*

The collective were expecting women and children straight out of domestic violence on their way to independent living. That the refuge would also draw women outside that profile was unexpected. As Julia Ryan recalled it was an issue evident from the beginning of the service;



> *We ran [Canberra Women's Refuge] as a voluntary collective…We had this ordinary little house in Watson, just in a street in Watson, just an ordinary govo house and our first resident, strangely enough, was a single woman who was actually, I think, a person who had come out of a psychiatric ward or psychiatric hospital and we – this is not the sort of person we were expecting.*

The situation at the Canberra Women's Refuge was becoming unmanageable. Eventually a decision had to be made. *'It couldn't be done…the demand was just so overwhelming that…there had to be a priority for women with children…We just couldn't house everybody."*[5]

The Canberra Women's Refuge collective's decision had been preceded by the same decision at Elsie. As Anne Summers recollected,

> *We [had not] foreseen that we would also attract single women with mental health or alcohol problems, who simply did not fit in with the mothers and children and whose problems were very different. Although at first we had said Elsie was for any women who needed a bed, we had to redefine ourselves as solely as refuge for women and kids escaping domestic abuse.*[6]

## forming the single women's shelter collective

Many of the single women's services across Australia grew out of existing refuges where workers were exposed to the desperate need, and Toora was no exception. Mid-way through 1981, the need for a service for single women in Canberra and enthusiasm for the project coalesced into the Single Women's Shelter collective. All three women who constituted the original collective were involved with the Canberra Women's Refuge in some capacity. Pat was a support worker and devoted much of her energy to women who were alone, often young and in severe emotional distress or struggling with mental illness. Gillian Shaw was an 18-year-old woman who had been using her experience with children's theatre groups to work with the children staying at the refuge. Di Lucas had a long history of activism in the women's movement; she was nursing a new baby and *'ready to do*

*something.''*[7] A friend working at the Canberra Women's Refuge referred her to the embryonic Single Women's Shelter collective and she became a founding member.

The collective grew rapidly from its three initial members. The women who joined were mostly well educated, many of them working as professionals. Pat recalled many of them;

> *Wendy Dunn was a person out in the community…I think that she was working somewhere like the shopfront as probably a social worker and when she heard what we were doing we went to her for information…Annie Mack was a tremendous supporter, she was a young lawyer who had just finished her articles. She was a member of the [Canberra] Women's Refuge collective and she was a steady person for a long way through. Maeve was an in and out member from the [Canberra Women's] Refuge. Joy Woods was a friend of mine that I'd met up with when going into 12B with people and she was a very experienced person in prison and drugs. Rosie Yuille was very supportive was and is one of our local doctors…Chris Kelly…I think she was a teacher…Stephanie Green, she was a fresh graduate in literature, English from ANU. Sara Masters…Janice Baines was an academic, Jess Aan [was from the Canberra Women's Refuge]… Thelma Hunter was a political scientist and lecturer in Political Science. Ruth Sutton…she was one of the people that had access to single and homeless women statistics and began to feed us this information and then herself became interested and started coming along to the collective meetings…Gloria and Sue Nicholls.*

The skills and information these women brought to the collective were crucial in the prolonged campaign for funding;

> *Some of these people were working in government offices and began to supply us with information that we needed for our second or third submissions. [The Department] came back and said they were wanting more information and so on and [these women who worked there] would send this to us and then become interested themselves and come along to the collective. There must have been three, four, five – five women like that who couldn't always come to meetings but they'd give very informed information and tremendous support.*[8]

One of the group's first objectives was to become a legally recognised organisation, capable of applying for and receiving funds. The collective went through the Canberra Women's Refuge constitution with a pen, crossing out references to children and adding the qualification *single* women where appropriate. With more thorough modifications, the group was incorporated as the Single Women's Shelter collective on 6 April, 1982.

In the meantime, the collective were looking for evidence of need beyond their own observations. In August 1981, they circulated a survey among women staying at the Canberra Women's Refuge trying to gather information about how often women were moving, where they had come from, where they planned to go when they left and what assistance they needed. At the same time, the collective was meeting with existing community services and government welfare agencies to assess the need for a single women's service and to gauge support for its establishment. They met fortnightly to work on a submission to establish the single women's shelter. By March 1982, the proposal was complete.

# 3

# funding the single women's shelter

*For many, many years at Ainslie shops there was a mural that said 'Canberra needs a single women's shelter.'*[1]

The Single Women's Shelter collective's funding submission was thorough and meticulously documented. There was a natural division of talents; Gill Shaw remembered that she and Di Lucas wrote most of the proposal; *'Pat didn't do a lot of the writing. Di and I tended to do more of that kind of stuff and Pat did the lobbying and the talking.'* The collective aimed to accommodate 20 women in a shelter that was to be staffed 24 hours a day. They had based the wages for 7.6 full-time staff on the social worker levels as outlined in the Professional Officers' Association Guidelines. The proposed budget allowed for rent, utilities and household expenses as well as the costs of running a shelter van (though it was to be two years until the shelter received funding for a car). The proposed cost of operation for the financial year of 1982/83 was $175 320.

Pat had garnered unprecedented support for the Single Women's Shelter. Gill still remembered Pat's flair for winning allies, *'she was' very well connected through Canberra and she's very charming. And she was really committed.'* When it was finished, the proposal was bolstered by letters of support from over 30 organisations in Canberra. The breadth of services represented attested to the collective's comprehensive understanding of the needs of homeless single women—they also recognised inappropriate services these women were ending up in. As well as letters from existing welfare organisations, both the Alcohol and Drug Dependence and the Psychiatric Units at the Woden Valley Hospital expressed support for the proposal. The Chairman of the Psychiatric Unit (12B) observed,

> *One of the continuing and difficult problems faced by this Unit has been the suitable placement of women who lack any established support system. Many such women have been admitted to the Ward where in fact, had suitable supportive accommodation been available, out-patient treatment would have been preferable.*[2]

In addition to letters of support, the collective had approached existing services to gauge the potential number of referrals they could expect. For the three-month period from October to December 1981, the collective estimated at least 84 referrals in total. 12B alone estimated there were 70 women who would use a single women's shelter in that time.

Although the debate around self-government for the ACT was beginning to take shape during the early 1980s, the Territory's affairs were still administered by the Commonwealth Department of Capital Territory (DCT) and presided over by the Minister for the Territories. The collective applied for funding from both the Community Development Fund (CDF), administered by the DCT, and the Commonwealth Department of Social Security (DSS) under the *Homeless Persons Act*. During March and April 1982, the collective

submitted proposals to both these local and Commonwealth bodies for funding for the 1982/83 financial year. They received favourable coverage from *The Canberra Times*, who ran the story with the emotive headline, "Single-women's shelter proposed: 'No place for needy women without children".'[3]

The CDF grants were announced on 1 July, 1982. Toora's application was not successful. The Minister for Territories, Mr. Hodgman, had the last say on grant allocation. His decision-making process around the CDF came in for media criticism. Under the headline "Year's Allocations Cause 'Profound Unease': Demands for inquiry into ACT welfare funding," *The Canberra Times* reported that, *Under the grants announced earlier this week it appears that some organisations will have to trim or dismantle services and some to lay off staff while others face increased demands with dwindling funds.*[4]

Alhough it was not self-governing, the ACT did have a House of Assembly, which was a locally elected body whose only power was to advise the Minister for Territories. The former chair of the House of Assembly's Welfare Committee, Robyn Walmsley, publicly stated that, *It is about time that the Minister heeded the Assembly's long standing recommendation that there should be a formal, searching public enquiry into Canberra's welfare system.*[5]

It was revealed that the Minister had decided to fund services not recommended by the Welfare Committee and had allocated St Vincent de Paul more than they had requested. Despite the strength of the Single Women's Shelter collective's submission, and against the Welfare Committee's recommendation, he decided to defer his decision on funding the Single Women's Shelter.

Many of the existing women's services in Canberra were already struggling or under attack and fared particularly badly in the allocation of funds for 1982/83. As well as the Single Women's Shelter, the Minister deferred the Abortion Counselling Service's funding. The Canberra Women's Refuge would only be funded $79 721 and was running so short of funds by November 1982, they thought they would be forced to close for Christmas. In a letter to *The Canberra Times* in June 1982, a member of the Rape Crisis collective reported, *'the centre is in difficulties at present, primarily because of the many problems inherent in trying to run a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week service on volunteer labour.'*[6]

When women's refuges were established during the 1970s they were desperate for funding, but did not fit into any one government portfolio. For the ensuing decade, refuge funding was passed backwards and forwards between state and Commonwealth governments and in 1981, the Liberal Party cut federal funding. The funding campaign for a single women's shelter in Canberra seemed to be falling victim to similar frustrations. The Commonwealth's response to the Single Women's Shelter proposal was as disappointing as that of the Community Development Fund. In July 1982, the Department of Social Security advised the collective that it could expect a maximum of $26 000, almost $150 000 less than the estimated operating costs.

Following the deferral of their grant, the Department of Capital Territories advised that the full amount the collective had requested was unlikely to be approved and they suggested a revision of the budget. The collective halved the size of their proposed refuge, from 20 beds to ten and subtracted the $26 000 funding that the DSS had advised would be granted. Their new submission was for $41 000, which in addition to the $26 000 DSS money, would have given the collective a total of $67 000 to run the refuge, less than one third of the original proposal.

## split with canberra women's refuge

At its inception, the Single Women's Shelter collective was heavily reliant on the Canberra Women's Refuge, sharing resources, skills and experience. The first funding submission for the Single Women's Shelter in 1982/83 grew out of their partnership with the Canberra Women's Refuge. When the DSS advised them to expect only limited funding, the collective was forced to make substantial compromises to their submission. These compromises provoked a significant rift with their sisters in the Canberra Women's Refuge.

As part of their funding application for the same year, the Canberra Women's Refuge had been determined to include a strict wage structure that would alleviate its reliance on volunteer hours and allow them to pay workers a reasonable wage. On hearing of the Canberra Women's Refuge grant for the year, a spokeswoman commented to *The Canberra Times, 'it looks like a reasonable amount to run the refuge and pay the staff a pittance.'*[7] Di Lucas remembered the importance of the request; *'it was the first time that the feminist refuge movement in Canberra had actually made that sort of statement, that they should be paid proper wages.'* The Canberra Women's Refuge felt it was a betrayal of the principle when they learned of the Single Women's Shelter's intention to accept a dramatically smaller amount than they needed. For many years women's refuges nationally had struggled to achieve a level of funding that would relieve their dependence on the unpaid work of volunteers. The collective articulated their concerns in a letter to the Single Women's Shelter collective dated 1 July, 1982;

> *We believe the collective of the Single Women's Shelter should not accept the [proposed funding] and our reasons are as follows:*
>
> *1) Women must be paid for the work they do, we cannot continue to provide free services for the government. We are deluded into thinking that we are providing this service for ourselves (women) but in reality we are relieving the government of its responsibility.*
>
> *2) We believe the imbalance that would necessarily be created between paid and volunteer workers would at best be extremely difficult to work with and at worst would destroy the aims and objects of collectivity. We ourselves, in the ratio of volunteer and paid workers in which we work, continually experience problems in the relationship between paid and unpaid workers.*
>
> *3) For some years now it has been the concern of the Canberra Women's Refuge to establish a proper wage structure for workers. We have put a lot of energy into this area and we believe it would be damaging to our case if the collective of the Single Women's Shelter shows itself willing to work unpaid. We believe that this would be divisive as with all things pertaining to women, the only victory we shall have is in unity…*
>
> *Yours in Sisterhood, the Canberra Women's Refuge collective.*

Di recalled this as a crucial moment for her involvement in the Single Women's Shelter collective. She had been on the periphery of the fight for adequate funding for many years, and believed strongly in the principle;

> *I didn't think it was a good idea to undermine that. I thought that we should be in solidarity and actually not accept anything that was not going to be appropriate to staff the refuge and I left at that stage too because I agreed with what the Beryl [Canberra Women's Refuge] women wanted.*

Some women in the Single Women's Shelter found the Canberra Women's Refuge renouncing their support for the project hypocritical. Like most refuges in Australia, the Canberra Women's Refuge had begun spectacularly under-funded and had relied on volunteers for many years. Even after a decade of persistent lobbying and an untiring commitment to the principle, they were struggling to pay all their workers appropriately. The Canberra Rape Crisis Centre had a similar herstory. Originally funded for 1.5 positions, the collective split the money equally between the women who kept the service going (each received $80 a week).[8] Gill felt the Single Women's Shelter should be afforded the same leniency;

> *I'm fairly pragmatic in terms of if you want to achieve something you go about it the way that's going to achieve it. I'm not interested in playing ideological and political games to get there. Because the people that suffer from that – I work in Aboriginal health now and you see it all the time. The people that suffer from those ideological and political games are the ones who need the service...That people were prepared to not have a service that was needed because of an issue of volunteerism, to me that doesn't make sense.*

Nevertheless, the issue was strongly felt. The Single Women's Shelter collective relocated their headquarters to Pat's dining room table and took on a more independent identity.

In response to the amended submission, the DCT announced in August 1982 that it would provide $26 000 funding to the shelter, but with a catch. Their funding would be contingent on the DSS money being formally approved. Pat Walker remembers not being upset by this condition. She had a good working relationship with Jim Wall, the Assistant Secretary of the DSS and she knew the collective's submission was solid and clearly supported by their statistics. Moreover, she knew from her communication with people within the DSS following the submission that they would recommend the funding to the Minister for Social Security.

What the collective had not anticipated was public opposition to their proposal. The Catholic Church was one of the groups who felt the most threatened by the emerging feminist agenda and reacted most strongly. The Right to Life Association had formed in the early 1970s and forged a coalition with the Catholic Church. Together they mobilised in 1973 against a Bill in the House of Representatives which would permit abortion on request in the ACT.[9] The Single Women's Shelter proposal became a target of these groups. Right to Life and a group called the Family Team mounted a smear campaign against the Single Women's Shelter. This loose coalition of opposition felt that a single women's shelter would promote abortion and destroy families. As Pat summarised, *'they perceived us as radical feminists and thus having anti-family values.'* She recalled the shelter was attacked in hostile letters to the paper and on local radio. Gill remembered the groups had submissions in the Assembly. Most damaging of all, the groups combined efforts to personally lobby the Liberal Federal Minister for Social Security, Fred Chaney, not to fund the shelter.

In October 1982 the Single Women's Shelter collective was informed that their submission to the DSS had been rejected. The Minister claimed the evidence of need for the proposal was inadequate. The collective were surprised – this had not been an eventuality they were prepared for;

> *We were very shocked indeed because we knew that we had provided, comparatively, very, very good information, that we had very wide public support, that we had people who were experienced to run the place.*[10]

The collective learned the background to the knock back in a most unexpected manner. One night a shadowy young man appeared at the door of Pat's home, staying only long enough to silently press an envelope into her hands. Inside was a letter from the DSS to the Minister recommending the funding of the Single Women's Shelter. The collective now had evidence that Fred Chaney had gone against the advice of his department and had personally decided not to fund the shelter. This information would prove crucial much sooner than the collective could imagine.

In spite of their submission being turned down, the collective kept up its efforts to obtain funding. Pat realised the need to keep a single women's shelter on the agenda;

> *We decided that we needed to keep the attention on the proposed shelter in the public eye so that we still would get publicity and we could still aim to pick up grants from people and so that we could just keep that energy going, and we'd continue to meet regularly – perhaps not quite so frequently as we did – and our great thing was producing cakes to sell at the stall in the markets and this of course had a flow-on effect… it drew The Canberra Times so we received regular articles and publicity. People in the street would donate money as well as buying cakes so we began to build up money for the shelter. It kept us all together both socially and as a collective. Concerned and interested people still kept information coming through into the collective so that we built up even more knowledge ourselves. And personally, I continued to explore and find out as much as I could about mental health and the care of people generally.*

Pat's relationship with both the DSS and the DCT was still positive and she started to meet with their representatives. She was pragmatic about funding, *'I think the collective realised that if we were to be*

*funded we needed to work with the public servants, and we needed their help as to the ways in which we could do this.'*

The collective also enlisted the support of the Shadow Minister for Social Security, Susan Ryan, who started to publicly request that Fred Chaney to fund the Single Women's Shelter.

## single women's squat

Despite the dedication of the Single Women's Shelter collective, by early 1983 the service was still unfunded while the need for accommodation for single women only increased. The Canberra Women's Refuge was scrabbling for funding and struggling to accommodate the women who continued to come through their door. Di Lucas had resigned from the Single Women's Shelter collective over the issue of adequate pay mid-way through 1982, but through friends had maintained indirect involvement with the Canberra Women's Refuge. She kept abreast both of the need for a single women's service and the government's persistent stalling. *'I remember…out the front of my house one day … [we] were talking about how stressful it was and the problem of single women and that there were a couple of single homeless women at the refuge then.'*

Their frustration soon led to direct action. Women who worked at The Canberra Women's Refuge and some of the single women staying at the refuge formed an impromptu action group; *We decided to do something and we decided to do a squat and we identified a house and we went and squatted it. We went at night and broke in and had to climb fences and all that sort of stuff.*[11]

Although they were not directly connected with the Single Women's Shelter collective, a spokeswoman for the squat announced, *'After two years of lobbying for premises it seemed that this was the only way to establish [a shelter] and to draw attention to the lack of concern shown towards homeless single women in the community.'*[12] Di remembered that the women were realistic about the aims of the squat. While they were unlikely to be allowed to stay, they hoped that they would at least draw attention to the desperation of the need; *'I think we had mattresses and you know – we knew that we wouldn't end up staying there, but we just wanted to stay long enough to get a bit of media attention and make a point.'* In those terms, the squat was successful. *The Canberra Times* covered the story enthusiastically.

The squat was supported vigorously by the women's movement in Canberra. The Women's Centre, which had relocated from its original home in Narrabundah to Lobelia Street in O'Connor, became the squat HQ. The Women's Electoral Lobby put out a press release announcing they lent *'their full support to the brave action of 20 women who last night occupied a vacant government house for the purpose of providing shelter for single homeless women.'*[13]

The Single Women's Shelter collective felt the move was rash and undermined their continued efforts to obtain funding. Di recalled that Pat tried to explain the collective's position to the women who were squatting; *'Pat had actually come to the house to try and convince us to leave, to stop it, because it wasn't doing their cause any good. Then [the police] came to kick us out and she was there.'*

While the process the collective had undertaken was proving both lengthy and frustrating, it was intended to establish the service in a way that was sustainable. In the initial flush during the 1970s many of the refuges had established first and sought funding second. Elsie was a case in point. Anne Summers documented the Elsie collective's desperate search for funds in the months after changing the locks. It was a search that involved tramping fruitlessly down government corridors while the refuge relied on donations, benefit concerts and petty drug deals for funds.[14]

Gill was still actively involved in the Single Women's Shelter collective. She was angry and frustrated at their efforts being undermined so close to fruition, and by women who purported to be her sisters;

> *I was so cross. I thought it was arrogant that they decided all this bullshit…[The Single Women's Shelter collective] women [were] characterised as playing a middle road, which is a pile of crap, and [that they would] go and occupy a house, which wasn't a good way to get the Assembly on side. It was playing exactly into*

*the opponents of the whole place's hands. So I went steaming down there and had this huge argument with them and I remember Black Rose standing in the drive, legs and arms akimbo and me doing the same. I can't remember what we said now, but yes, that was very acrimonious.*

The breach between women who pursued lobbying and those who were committed to activism illustrated the division in feminist thought about the way to achieve social change. The clash between a radical politic and one which was prepared to work within the current system would soon be the focus of a defining debate in Toora's early herstory.

While women involved at the time may still dispute the link, the squat did seem expedient – talks between the collective and the department re-opened the day after the women were evicted. *The Canberra Times* reported that, "Women's shelter talks reopen," and the collective met with the Housing Commissioner and the ACT Director of Welfare. Pat recalled that by that time the Director, Jim Wall, was well and truly convinced of the need, and was keen to work with the view to more rapid progress in establishing the service. He suggested the possibility of a six-month pilot project, which was likely to be funded and would also prove both the need and the collective's ability to run. The collective amended its submission accordingly and applied to the DSS and the DCT for a total of $14 000 to fund a six-month project.

The collective also had funds of their own, gathered through donations and lobbying. Gill Shaw had been awarded a Young Achiever's Award. By her own account,

*I was such an opportunist in those days. I saw this ad for a young achievers award that was – the prize was $5,000 to go the cause of your choice. I thought, that'd be good, then we could get a bit of money so I wrote my own application for it. It was pretty fanciful really. It was through the New Idea so they didn't want some raging feminist, so I carefully tailored what I'd done to fit with the New Idea kind of ideal.*

The cake stalls had raised $560, Rotary had donated $6 000 and the collective had accumulated $1 000 from other donations.

In a propitious turn of events for The Single Women's Shelter's Toora's funding, in February 1983 the Liberal Fraser government was defeated in the Federal election. Susan Ryan, Toora's long-time ally, became the Minister assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women and the Labor party reinstated federal refuge funding. In May 1983, both the Department of Capital Territories and the Department of Social Security confirmed their funding for the six-month pilot project. The Single Women's Shelter was finally afloat.

# 4

# opening the single women's shelter

Through June and July 1983, the Toora collective was occupied with preparations. They met persistently with the ACT Housing Commissioner, Brian Rope. The collective had the support of the local Department of Housing who were looking for a suitable house through early 1983, though they were hampered by peoples' objections to having a refuge in their suburb. Eventually the collective settled on a small four-bedroom house in the inner North, on the condition that they would be relocated as soon as a more appropriate house could be found.

Positions were advertised and interviews were held during April 1983. Pat's house had become the unofficial office of the Single Women's Shelter collective and the interviews were conducted around her dining room table. The paid workers, Meredith Regan, Kim Burke, Lesley Fraser, Pat Walker and a woman called Jan started meeting weekly at each other's houses or at the Women's Centre at Lobelia Street. They discussed the establishment of the refuge, organising furniture and household goods, industrial issues, job descriptions and roster proposals. The group kept returning to the inadequacy of pay rates. Financial pressure forced two of the women originally appointed to paid positions to resign before the refuge even opened. The jobs were eventually filled by three young feminists, Meredith Regan, Elspeth Lamb and Kim Burke. Meredith reflected,

> *It was my first job so I probably didn't have any expectations. Kim had had some refuge experience in Western Australia and Elspeth had worked for Abortion Counselling here…But in hindsight I think I probably didn't know what was coming. Toora was the most fantastic training ground because you got everything. You get everything at Toora, you get the mad, the sad, the courageous, the alcoholics and addicts and it was such a fantastic training ground.*[1]

On 8 August 1983, Toora Single Women's Shelter opened. The collective had decided to name the shelter Toora during the funding campaign. Someone had told them it was an indigenous word for place of women. By the time it came to light that the word actually meant place of bandicoots no–one was compelled to change it.

As soon as the refuge opened Pat said, *'life started as you might say. People came quickly and the need was obviously there.'* The Toora collective had undertaken to accommodate ten women in crisis. The house in which this was to happen was tiny, though it was so hard won women were enthusiastic. In a letter to a friend Pat wrote,

> *Toora – the place for homeless women has opened in a four-bedroom government house…near the shops. I think it is a splendid place, bright and warm when we have wood for the fuel stove and spacious, that is for a government house. But there are those who whisper and say it is not so large as the house of our*

*sisters in Kingston nor is it so beautiful and it lacks a second story and failures of failures there is no separate dining room! Ah well – my only gripe is the kitchen, which is skimpy and has only a small single sink unit.*[2]

The workers took one of the four bedrooms as an office space, which left three rooms to hold ten beds. The budget to run the shelter was tight, with little more than $1 000 for all office expenses. All the furniture was second hand, scrounged from here and there, or donated. The collective knocked the mirror off a dressing table which then passed as a desk. Meredith recalls that she was the only woman small enough to actually fit under the table. The remainder of the collective spent the first months of operation with bruised knees.

While the collective knew the Canberra Women's Refuge had had trouble accommodating single women, nothing could have prepared them for what happened when the Toora Single Women's Shelter opened its doors. Of the women who used the service in the first months of operation half were living with mental illness, a similar number had attempted suicide. More than half were struggling with drug and alcohol dependency. Many were dealing with multiple issues such as alcoholism and depression.

Despite the fervour shared by the women of the collective, between them there was actually little experience in service delivery. One of the original collective members noted, *'probably that was a weakness in the vision of the whole thing – how [were] we actually going to run this place, once we got it?'*[3] Elspeth Lamb remembered Toora's first residents;

*When we first opened the door of Toora I think about six drug-affected young women walked in and put us into crisis because we were not trained in addiction and didn't know what we were dealing with. Those who believed that providing a nice, safe place for women would be enough to get them on their feet, and that the women would be eternally grateful (which was most of us), were very disappointed. We had every rule broken within the first few minutes.*[4]



Lyn's Morgain's memory of what actually happened as a result is vivid;

*The women who flopped through the door of the service on day one were really seriously drug-affected, crazy, mad women who were great. They were sort of equivalent to my peers at that time so I really liked them. But they were capable of creating merry hell in a residential environment with a group of women, meaning 'the collective and workers,' who were unclear about their approach to managing everything…it was a free for all really.*[5]

Toora's budget was limited. Workers improvised with resources available;

*We didn't have a car so we had to catch the bus with resies…we used to beg and borrow cars…[the house] was tiny and we were naive but we were open to learning I guess. But we did things that Toora workers would never in a pink fit do now…[We] took the residents to the Uni Bar.*

Meredith laughed when she remembered that, but was quick to qualify, *'in the really early days!'*

The collective quickly began to formulate policy and procedures that would make the refuge safe for residents and workers. Meredith recalled the impetus for the creation of policy around crisis management when a woman threatened her in the kitchen with a knife. She said, *'I checked my safety as much as I could in that situation but the others ran into the office and shut the door!'* Communication Books and testimony from workers document the collective's struggle to come to grips with what it meant to be running the service. Dymphna Lowry, one of Toora's early workers, remembered that she and another worker panicked that two women were overdosing and rushed them to Casualty; '*We were really worried about them, and the doctor goes in and sees them. And he comes out and we go, "what's wrong?!" and he goes, "well, they're drunk."*' Dymphna laughed, at the enthusiasm of their inexperience. The concern of the trip up to the hospital evaporated; *'We'd almost carried her in there and on the way back we were like, "walk yourself!"'* [6]

In the first months of operation the collective dealt with genuine overdose situations and mental health crises. One conflict that arose between residents in the middle of the night was diffused by the on-call worker, Kim Burke, who took all the women but one home to sleep the night at her place. According to Eddie Wadick, one of Toora's early residents, the fact that the Toora collective couldn't afford to cover all the night shifts was something some women living there often found convenient;

> *They didn't have funding for workers to be there overnight so there was only about six or seven workers at the time and it was in a little three bedroom house and there was like four women per room and it was all double bunks… It was an old house and we had an open fire and [because] the workers didn't stay overnight so we used to all go and get really out of it and go back to there and some of the women would even bring their boyfriends back…and they got up early in the morning and out the door.*[7]

One of the Toora workers, Jacqui Pearce, remembered coming on shift one morning to a feeling that she had disturbed something. When she peered over the couch in the lounge room there were two men crouched behind it.

Despite the good humour with which many women retell their old experiences today, the fear, trauma, chaos and violence the women brought with them to the service was obvious and had an enormous impact both on the workers and on the development of policy.

As Toora took shape during 1983 and 1984, the makeup, politics and dynamics of the collective were to undergo significant changes. By the time the service was actually established, the Single Women's Shelter collective had been operating for over two years. The service had only been funded for two full-time positions. Even split between three women, it was not possible cover the roster for 24 hours, seven days a week. The only option was women volunteering their time to work at the refuge. This was problematic, though Pat and Gill had remained constant, other women had come and gone as their skills were needed, or time or interest allowed. Many of them withdrew when the service opened. Di Lucas, who rejoined the collective in the mid-80s theorised,

> *[I don't know] whether those women ever anticipated carrying on. I mean their role – they might have felt that their role might have actually finished. I mean they might have been, you know, happy to have done that bit but didn't actually want to be service providers.*

Pat supported Di's assessment. Once Toora had opened the commitment of being involved in the collective looked very different and became impossible for many women;

> *Many of the people on the earlier [collective] lists were … in full-time work and they could come in the evening for the odd occasion, some of them continued to do that, but for many of them once the shelter was going or was afloat then they pulled back and a number of women from the Women's Refuge became involved again.*

Fortunately, the opening of the shelter raised its profile and the collective expanded quickly and spontaneously. Meredith remembered how her own involvement at Toora came about; *'I guess just [through] being involved in feminist politics in Canberra. Word of mouth really.'* Lyn Morgain was a young woman who joined the collective as the service was launched and worked with Toora for more than the next ten years of her life. She reminisced,

> *I literally walked in the day that [Toora] had been realised, which coincided with the appointment of the first ever paid workers. So I just rocked up with the intention of becoming a happy little volunteer which – and like with so many other women with hindsight I can now say it was a turning point in my life…at the time I had only really the vaguest sense of what the whole thing was about really and I just literally rocked up one day and said, 'I understand you're opening your single women's shelter, I think I should come and work here.' I mean in retrospect you sort of wonder about that. But that's exactly what I did and women and the warmth at that time were incredibly inclusive and supportive.*

Elspeth remembered Lyn's entrance; *'Lyn arrived one day with a car load of household goods and said she wanted to join the collective.'* Meredith recaptured the collective's expansion,

> *Then Lyn came along…And the collective – there was Lesley and there was Cinmayii, there were other people that I can't remember now but – and Katina or Jane Bardwell who was my friend and…she was there and she was very involved and Kimina was around and it was a very dynamic, very young women's collective…Mostly under 24.*

A new and very different dynamic was beginning to shape the collective. The debates around the formulation of service delivery and policy exposed a significant division in the newly formed collective. Lyn perceived *'brewing tensions in the group that were about differences of philosophy and it really centred on the reformists versus the radical kind of view.'* Pat Walker was still a part of the collective. Through the two years she had guided the collective she had developed a well thought-out view of the service she hoped Toora would be;

> *[Toora] was a place that needed to be within the community so that there was access to all the available services and facilities, information and so on and the shelter was the starting point for this, giving the person some care and support in the early traumatic phase…But doing it in a way that the woman retained control.*

Gill realised the level of thought that Pat had invested in providing a service specifically for single women;

> *I think [Pat] really had a vision of wanting a women's space where young people would have a space to look at the issues around them. I think substance use was a part of that, but she was really interested in mental health issues…. I think she really wanted a chance to explore some of that. So it was very sad when later on basically some people took over who took just wrote her off as a middle class feminist.*



Many of the women who joined the collective after funding had been realised had different ideas. Lyn remembered the differences between the original imaginings of the service and those that followed;

> *[Pat's vision for the service] I think was just more systematised, more conservative, more closely linked to the existing welfare agencies. And they were all things that the… younger, stroppier women in the collective didn't want a bar of.*

The debates that followed reprised the discord between liberal feminist ideals of incorporation and a more radical politic that rejected such aspirations;

> *So there were women like Pat who were of the more reformist school in terms of what was – and I say this with all due respect – and I had these discussions [with Pat] – they had almost a rehabilitative model about what should be happening for women when they came to stay at Toora. So kind of an amalgam of labour market programs and fairly kind but fairly pointy life improvement type stuff. Good stuff I suppose. And there were other women more radical, younger women… like myself and other women who identified on the more radical end of the spectrum who had a more sort of anarchic politic about women's liberation and about our connectedness with what we now called consumers, so resi women.*[8]

The women who opposed the views articulated by Pat were significantly younger than those who had laboured to achieve funding for the service. Many of them were members of a new generation of feminist activists. They were both the literal and the political daughters of the women's movement of the 1970s. They had grown up with and naturally absorbed some of the assertions that had seemed radical only a decade before. Lyn was a good example, she was only 17 when she turned up on Toora's doorstep to join the collective in 1983;

> *I hadn't had anything to do with organised feminism…But then again my mother's generation were feminists so I had grown up with feminists around me, I'd grown up with lesbians around me so that in and of itself wasn't an unusual thing for me. And*

*perhaps that's why I felt that those women were approachable because I'd presumed a level of inclusivity around their activities that meant that when I rocked up and went, 'well think I'm going to be involved as well'. I assumed a level of legitimacy for that. But nonetheless very quickly I encountered the younger woman dynamic … the tendency to critique those around you that are perhaps older, more established in their views I think is – I'd argue that that's to be expected and that's a good thing. So, needless to say I contributed my views reasonably strenuously pretty quickly but at a social kind of level.*

Her experience of feminism was very different to the women who preceded her. Women like Pat Walker and those who constituted the original Single Women's Shelter collective had already been immersed in their lives when the women's movement offered them a new analysis of their personal and professional experiences. They worked within government and public structures to achieve feminist projects. The campaign to fund a single women's shelter gave them an opportunity to use their skills and knowledge for a cause they were philosophically committed to. Many believed the state had a responsibility to provide services to women and they could force that to happen.

The generation of feminists that followed, the younger women in the Toora collective, carried assumptions and expectations premised on the activism of the women who had come before them. Standing on the shoulders of an established feminist politic or set of principles, they were able to challenge, and develop feminist analysis. In addition, they did not have the same experiences working and applying feminism within institutions. In fact, they had serious questions about the possibility of tangible change under the current system. Elspeth recalled,

*The collective at the time was made up of both heterosexual women and lesbians with a mixture being either reformist or radical feminists. The definition of reformist being, (I thought), those who felt only by lobbying state politics, and using state structures to change the structures of society would women change society's views of women, and bring equality for women.*



The differences between the two groups were expressed socially. The younger women had come up through consciousness raising groups and they considered their personal lives inextricable from the politics that shaped their public lives. They worked together, lived together, spent all their time together and formed intense friendships. They articulated their politics differently, they were not interested in compromise. Pat felt the gulf between the two groups;

*Most of the people who were getting involved were younger and were developing their political perspectives and actions and they formed a close social as well as work group…I think it was a very changing period. Age had something to do with it. The difference in age groups, between very young people coming in and the older people with different experiences. I mean it was quite marked.*

Jacqui pearceattested,

*We spent our entire time together, basically. So, [we] spent heaps of time hanging out together on the weekends, and just in our lives as well as at work. So it was a very close-knit community, you know all women who were getting sober and stuff... And we just spent all our time together and women came and went from that as well. And it was intense, we were quite fierce about a bunch of stuff!*[9]

By Lyn's recollection, the decisive point of conflict was over a bureaucratic requirement the collective was supposed to discharge in relation to women under 18;

*Young women in that day and age…used to get care and protection orders, otherwise known as yellow slips…The Welfare Branch of the Australian Capital Territory began referring young women to … stay at Toora, under 18, young women. And in order to effect that referral we used to sign an agreement that we'd notify in any event that they breached, so in the event they didn't come home at night. And when I discovered [this] as a worker, an unpaid worker…in my youthful, anarchic radicalism [I] said I wasn't having any part of that kind of a process. I didn't feel that we were there to be women's gaolers, that was*

*inappropriate and I didn't want to play that role and I didn't think we should be playing that role, as an organisation or as a group.*

While the issue of yellow slips was only indicative of the more deeply rooted differences in philosophy, Lyn described it as the one that caused the collective to reach breaking point;

*And I remember sitting out the back and talking with Pat and I remember Pat talking about her vision for the service, into which she'd put an enormous amount of work for years. I probably didn't have enough respect for that as a young person at that time… Well she was an older woman then and fairly obviously politically active, but [seemed a] middle class, older feminist. That's certainly how I would have perceived her at the time and I think that's probably as she was. And I say that with all due respect…My cut on that was that she bowed out gracefully…She was never someone who badmouthed the service in the subsequent years…It was not a departure of conflict. There was a collective meeting where those issues were robustly discussed and there was clearly a difference of views about which way to proceed. But I think her decision not to remain an active member of the collective was a gracious one in the face of … significant numbers of women having a different view. And I can remember her being unhappy and I remember her articulating what she had hoped for the service and how she'd seen it but I also saw a group of women going, 'no.'*

The graciousness of Pat's exit was more representative of her character than her commitment to the service. Gill's recollection of Pat's story exposed some of the sadness she left with; *'Pat hates conflict, hates conflict. She would do almost anything to avoid it. I think I did a lot of her conflict for her because I didn't mind it. But I remember being really hurt for her, that she had to go like that.'* Today Pat is philosophical about her departure and her contribution to the women's movement in Canberra;

*I was probably pretty silent within the collective but I think that my activities and what I did were very much about identification. I was still conscious at the time of feminist principles and thought I was acting according to how I understood them. I had the view that we achieved what we wanted by working with the people who had the resources.*

In many ways leaving the Toora collective as it was forming was also a way of staying true to her original motivations. She retained her interest in trauma and mental health and went on to work in the day unit of the Canberra psychiatric ward, a position she found challenging and rewarding. Regardless of the politics of her departure, the strength of Toora today rests in part on her persistence and commitment to the needs of single women in the ACT.

# 5

# funding women's refuges

The funding of women's refuges was a contentious issue within the women's movement. Through the 1970s, refuge funding was unreliable and an ongoing source of anxiety for refuge collectives. In the 1980s funding was systematised into the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP).

## the feminist politics of funding refuges

The establishment of women's services like women's refuges, health centres and rape crisis centres posed a dilemma for feminists. These were services that needed money to operate, but there were different views on how they should be funded. Many of the women who were drawn to feminist service collectives identified as radical feminists and had a profoundly uneasy relationship with the state. If the purpose of the women's movement and of women's refuges was to weaken patriarchal structures it seemed hypocritical, even ridiculous, to accept funding from the state, itself one of the primary locations of women's oppression. It was a make or break issue for some women. As Lyn expressed,

> *It was huge and there were many women who walked away at that juncture. There were huge numbers of women who didn't want any part of the service delivery sector and chose not to be a part of that. Went off and became artists and did other forms of work…But other women will say our growth within that system legitimised those interests of women that were citizen-based interests that the government should have been acknowledging. And I would give credence to both views. I mean I'd say both views were equally legitimate. Those who believed that the exchange of funds from government to the community and ostensibly to a community of women and feminists is a legitimate transaction, that that's what should be happening in a democracy, and who are happy to be the caretakers of that objective. There are others who say that fundamentally the issues that affect women and are related to women's emancipation cannot be funded by government and that once they are, you've already lost the battle.*

It was an issue that the Toora collective had to confront;

> *It was a trade for a place in an institutionalised system over a radical politic. It was true, unquestionably…It was a huge issue for the collective. It was huge – that battle raged on and on and on and on and about whether it was possible to retain your independent political critique when you were in receipt of government funding…We framed it up as a feminist conundrum to be solved or not but I think it's true for any group that's philosophical base has something about the relationship with the state. Implicitly you have to kind of consider the trade. Now clearly the women in the collective at that time believed it was possible to retain the strengths of advocacy and meet the social change objective and secure the funding for delivery of services.*[1]

# toora funding 1983 to 1984

The debate around the receipt of funding being more or less resolved, the Toora collective's funding arrangements in the first six months of operation were cause for crisis. In mid 1983, the refuge had been funded $14 000 for a six-month trial, further funding contingent on the collective evidencing the need for the service. The Department of Social Security also provided funds for rent, food and subsidised half of one paid position. Within a week of operation, the collective realised that their funds *'would fall far short of what is required to operate the shelter on a satisfactory basis for six months.'*[2] Indeed the total of the funding provided was $30 short of covering the wages for two positions, leaving nothing budgeted to cover electricity, telephone bills and household expenses. Money was so scarce that the items that the Toora collective requested funding for included a calculator, an office desk and a fire extinguisher. The house was also short on bedding, beds, garbage bins, light shades, curtains and a broom. It wasn't until the service had been running for a year that Toora obtained funding for a car, a red Tarago, in which Meredith obtained her licence.

In addition to the turmoil of the fledgling service, the collective undertook a desperate campaign to extract more funds from both local and Commonwealth agencies. In November 1983, the collective put in a submission to the ACT Community Development Fund for emergency funding. They also exhorted the community sector to petition members of Parliament and were relentless in their own efforts. Susan Ryan, Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Tom Uren, Minister for Territories and Local Government and Don Grimes, Minister for Social Security were quickly becoming aware of Toora's voice, which was loud and insistent. In March, Tom Uren approved $7 000 for April to June. The Toora Communication book documents the 'submission madness' that gripped the collective early in 1983 as they assembled funding submissions for the coming financial year. In response to these efforts, the Community Development Fund allocated $56 000 in July 1984. The collective were less than pleased with the figure and immediately submitted again. As they indignantly declared in the cover letter,

> *We submit this as an emergency submission because it would appear that you have not read our original submission. This is obvious by our grant of $56 000, a figure less than half of the necessary funds to keep the shelter in operation for a year.*[3]

# funding women's refuges – the introduction of SAAP

The Toora collective were also trying to obtain funds from the Commonwealth but found itself in the middle of a major government funding restructure, which would have dramatic implications for the burgeoning women's sector. From the inception of Elsie in 1974, women's refuges across Australia struggled to find a permanent funding portfolio. Anne Summer's appealed to the Health and Welfare Departments for funding for Elsie. Refuge funding was always ad hoc, unreliable and required constant effort to attain. Linda Webb was the head of Community Services in ACT Housing. By her recollection it then some time for the government to understand women's services;

> *The concept of Community Services was really embryonic back then. It just didn't have any of the breadth and depth it does now. And that's where the women's sector – I mean it wasn't even really the women's sector then, but that's when it first started to interact with the public service itself. Up until then all we'd done was basically run government funded programs with government public servants, housing was provided and it was just straight housing, it was just a very different concept. The refuges were floating up in a very loose, nebulous sort of way...And during that period they progressively became, not mainstream, but they did become more an option for government generally to see it as a different way of providing services and the needs of women started to become more prominent. There started to become an acceptance that just because you weren't married with children, you too could have needs. And as, I think, with nearly all these social changes they were driven very largely by the Commonwealth rather than the states and territories. The Commonwealth tended, at that stage, to have the vision and the*

*interest and, to a large extent, the money to change these things whereas the States were still in the mentality of families and child protection and housing only because you were poor not because you had any other problems.*[4]

1983 was the year Toora finally received funding and Labor returned to federal government. The Minister for Social Security issued a statement reinstating the federal funding for refuges cut by the Liberal government. They announced funding would be coordinated by the newly created Women's Emergency Services Program (WESP), which was immediately allocated $4 million in Commonwealth funds. The program included accommodation as well as the support services that augmented refuges, like rape crisis and incest centres. The Minister for Social Security, Don Grimes, announced that the funding of all crisis accommodation services was to be reviewed. He tabled the results of the review in November 1983. Amongst Toora's voluminous archives is a briefing paper for a talk presumably given to women's services sometime after the report came down. Perhaps the woman who delivered it was less direct, but in her notes she says,

*In summary the review found that:*

- *There was no logical basis for the current [funding] arrangements.*
- *There was no co-ordination or planning.*
- *Programs were unnecessarily complex.*
- *There were gaps in service provision.*

The review recommended that the current funding arrangements should be replaced by a new Crisis Accommodation Assistance Program (CAAP). This program would unite women's and youth refuges as well as generalised homelessness services within the Department of Social Security. The financial responsibility would be shared by the Commonwealth and States. The Minister for Social Security committed to consult with concerned parties and the response from the women's sector was negative. They were concerned that CAAP did not include the funding of women's health centres and rape crisis services. Also, the title of the program did little justice to the range of support women's refuges were providing which went well beyond simply providing crisis accommodation. In recognition of that, the program was renamed the Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP), but the Toora collective saw the new name as a token gesture.

There were to be three programs under SAAP: Youth Supported Accommodation Program, General Supported Accommodation Program and Women's Emergency Program. The agreements were to take effect on 1 January, 1985 and run for four-and-a-half years. The length of the funding agreements was appealing to many women's services, as it would save the annual scramble for funds that occupied a considerable amount of collective energy.[5] However, on the whole, women's services were suspicious. Refuges across Australia mobilised and lobbied for a national women's services conference. Ludo McFerran documented, in March 1984,

*From all states and territories 300 women from women's legal centres, Aboriginal women's services, women's housing cooperatives, rape crisis centres, working women's centres, migrant women's services, a new incest service, single and young women's refuges, women's telephone referral services, abortion clinics…employment programs for women, health centres and more than 160 refuges for women and children came to Canberra…ten years after the squatting of Elsie.*[6]

The conference rejected the proposed program. The Toora collective kept notes which recorded the objections of women's services. SAAP amalgamated women's, youth and general services. It still did not recognise the complexity of support provided in women's refuges. It did not include funding for other women's services like rape crisis centres and it required women to sit on committees that would determine funding for other services. The conference requested a national review of women's services to determine the most suitable funding structure. Their request was refused. At ensuing, subsidiary meetings women's services formulated a plan of action including intensive letter writing campaigns, a national day of action, meetings, delegations, lobbying and consultations. They wanted to reinstate WESP as a structure entirely separate to SAAP, and at the very least, abolish the proposed committees. Toora was heavily involved in the campaign as part of ACT

women's services. Throughout the first half of 1985 they met with bureaucrats from Departments including the Department of Social Security and the Office for the Status of Women. During the last third of 1984, Toora's note-taker rationalised,

> *Since the funding doesn't actually run out until March 1985 we have six months in which to work out what we are going to do if they say no. The worst thing that can happen is they shove us under SAAP anyway.*

Little was the Toora collective to know the worst option would be a reality sooner than they thought. Despite the protestations of women's services, the first SAAP money came through on schedule on 1 January, 1985. Toora signed for the funds just as they had for WESP and Community Development Fund money in years previous. However, when the Toora collective went to collect their funds for the last quarter of the 1984/85 year late in June 1985 they were presented with a 13 page contract which had to be signed and witnessed before they could receive the money. Though it was funds they had already spent, they decided they wouldn't sign the contract until the collective had a chance to discuss it. Eventually the collective signed an interim contract and agreed that the new funding arrangement would be discussed in the new financial year. When ACT Women's Services met, they discovered other services been given the same ultimatum and had signed the contracts to be able to pay workers and fill strapped accounts. The network's legal advice suggested that not only were the contracts highly impractical, some of the clauses were possibly illegal.

Debate between services and the Department of Territories drew out over the next financial year. Services were given enough to cover the first quarter of 1985/86 while meetings discussing the form of the contract continued. Twenty-seven such meetings failed to reach a satisfactory compromise either for services or the Department. When the Toora collective went in to pick up the last part of their first quarter funding in September they found it was again contingent on their agreeing to a contract they had never seen before. This contract required a bureaucrat's signature on every cheque the service wrote and stipulated that any breach of the contract would be cause for de-



funding. Here, all of ACT women's services drew the line. On September 12, *The Canberra Times* reported, "Shortage of funds shuts down refuge;"

> *The Canberra Women's Refuge closed on Tuesday because of a lack of funds, and other Commonwealth funded women's services in the ACT may also be forced to close within the next few weeks … [An ACT Women's Services] spokeswoman said yesterday that the contract which the Department presented to them was unacceptable and threatened the viability of the services and the confidentiality of their clients … 'ACT Women's Services remains willing to negotiate, however, the Department of Territories has taken a non-negotiable stance which leaves ACT Women's Services unable to operate.'* [7]

The Canberra Youth Refuge followed the Canberra Women's Refuge a week later. The president of the Youth Refuge Association said,

> *We can only conclude that the Department of Territories is holding its refusal to release funds over our head in order to pressure us into signing what we currently consider to be an unacceptable document.*[8]

Somewhere within the 27 meetings that preceded this crisis and the furore that followed, Linda Webb became much more directly involved;

> *I got involved when it went belly up entirely with the women's sector and all these people came in and said, 'but they won't do what we want.' And you sort of think, they won't do what we want? I couldn't understand – they couldn't tell me what the problem was…and by that stage I think there'd been a series of meetings so I ended up going to one of them [in the Melbourne building] where the Welfare branch was, the second floor had these big cavernous meeting rooms and I walked in with a lawyer and our lawyers are young, they've never done anything like this and they had no particularly strong riding instructions. And I walked in, the room was stuffed full of women. I'd reckon everyone from the women's housing sector was there and none*

*of us had seen anything like it in our lives. They didn't have on suits, they were interjecting and talking across each other, they didn't have one person – because they were all collectives – so they didn't have anyone who was obviously in charge, and agendas, you know, to hell with agendas…and they were there to negotiate. They were not there to do what we told them…We came out and I said I think I've been hit with something, what on earth was all of that about ?*

The formalisation of funding arrangements had fared much better in organisations like religious charities, that did not feel conflicted about having a formalised relationship with the government, and already had a hierarchical structure;

*Commonwealth funding started to go across to the refuges and…about that same time came a bit of a feel that there needed to be a bit more accountability about money being spent, a very basic level, of people needing to take responsibility for the money that was being handed over…And a lot of that went very smoothly and very easily, you know places like Marymead and the other Catholic services provided, Richmond Fellowship, Barnardo's, all of these sort of – basically hierarchy kind of structured bodies sort of fitted into that without too much drama.*[9]

Women's Services' disquiet had roots in their inherent distrust of government. Refuges were largely a radical feminist project. Their inclusion in bureaucratic structures contradicted much of radical feminist theory, which maintained that change could only come through dismantling such structures. As Toora collective member Tjanara Goreng Goreng recalled,

*There were a lot of fights. Being a feminist organisation, trying to work with the government and that was new to funding these kind of services as well – SAAP was new, and having that fight of [this is] what they expect of you and [this is] what you're prepared to give. And it was always an us and them, whereas now I can see the relationship is much stronger. It's a relationship of partnership.*[10]



Linda discerned the gravity of women's services' negotiations with the Department;

*[Amendments to proposed funding structures] were recognising that this group operated in a collective style, that they had a very specific group of women they were trying to help and that if they were to be funded it was to help those women, it was not to do other things that [the Department] wanted or may want in the future…They were thinking about it in terms of, 'if we formally engage with the government we have formally engaged.' And that's it, there's no way out of it after that. And the parameters we set in place now we may well have to live with five and ten years down the track and can we live with that?*

The meetings between bureaucrats were ultimately productive; the proposed contracts were re-worked. While a compromise was eventually reached, the inclusion of women's services in the SAAP program would continue to cause drama and tension. Every time contracts were re-negotiated, women's services saw more and more attempts to water down their agendas.

Linda believed it was during this tense negotiation process that the women of the Toora collective emerged as skilled political operators. Perhaps they saw the implications with clarity and saw the need for the sector to unite to retain some level of autonomy;

*I don't know why, but I'm pretty confident the whole thing would have fallen over entirely if the Toora women hadn't been there because they helped me, and the rest of the people that were with me, enormously. Not trying to con us or treat us like idiots or anything like that, but articulating more clearly than the rest of the women could, what their issues were and then helping us tease out where we had room to move… So that's where I got the real respect for Toora because they were prepared to really go for the long-term and basically try and bring everyone along. Yes, they were wise, much wiser than I think either side of the table.*

Di Lucas played an important role in the wider world of women's services in the ACT, within that capacity she acknowledged Toora's leadership,

> *[Toora] was always very astute bureaucratically. It has never been a service that has sat back from being involved in contract negotiations or anything that the women's sector was actually dealing with. It has always been one of the services at the forefront. You know there've been times other services - you might not see them for months on end at meetings. But Toora's never been one of those. Toora's always been involved and it has done heaps.*

Many of the women who had moved from grassroots activism during the 1970s were now working in influential positions in the public service. While their politics may have looked different to those of the Toora collective, women like Linda Webb had a comprehensive understanding of the importance of women's services. Her concern was to work towards contracts that would give women's refuges a sustainable level of funding, security and reliability. As Marilyn Lake observed, these women themselves were to make an enormous contribution to the survival of women's services across Australia;

> *Working from inside the public service, they acted with initiative, speed and flair to wrest money from established budgets for services that had never before existed. For example, the Community Health Program was identified as a source of funding for women's refuges; later their support became institutionalised in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, and the number of refuges increased from 21 in 1975, to 96 in 1980, and 190 by 1988.*[11]

## investigation and consolidation

> *The stakes were quite high not just for Toora but for women's services… It is important to investigate complaints, so that no-one can criticise the sector or criticise women's services or indeed criticise government funding of [them] either.*[12]

Even after their inclusion in a formal, permanent funding structure like SAAP, feminist services were always vulnerable. Most were run by collectives, which were alien governance structures not well understood or respected by governments. Women within collectives were often motivated by feminist politics and had to develop the skills that would allow them to operate within bureaucratic structures as they went. Collectives were at times inconsistent and unpredictable. Moreover, feminist services were radical and still the subject of public hostility. Perhaps such hostility was a reaction to the significant social upheaval marked by the resurgence of the women's movement, which had exposed the politics of the family unit. Services like refuges were addressing things like domestic violence, incest and sexual assault, which had previously been silenced. Jacqui Pearce attested, *'at various times there were campaigns to governments which were anti-refuge.'* As Toora discovered late in 1988, these campaigns had the potential to seriously damage individual services and threaten the women's sector as a whole. On 21 June, 1988, Liberal Senator for the ACT, Margaret Reid wrote the following letter to the ACT Administration;

> *I have received several telephone calls recently, alleging misappropriation of funds from both the Rape Crisis Centre and Toora Single Women's Shelter.*
>
> *It has also been suggested that the money provided to these two shelters to provide educational programmes to women is being used to transport women to rallies.*
>
> *There have also been allegations of bashings of women within these two shelters, and I understand that one woman had laid a charge.*
>
> *These are very serious allegations and I would like you to look into these allegations and advise me the outcome.*

Over the next two weeks the letter made its way across the relevant departments until it reached the desk of Linda Webb, by then the Chief Executive of Community Services. Complaints against women's services, even anonymous ones, had the potential to become a serious political threat. Linda hoped the matter could be resolved quickly and

without any damage and passed the letter on to Lisa Paul who was the Director of Community Programs at ACT Community Health Service (CHAS). Lisa phoned Toora to let them know of the complaints and of ACT Community and Health's responsibility to ensure that SAAP money was being used *'efficiently and effectively,'* a process that would require further investigation. The collective's initial response was outrage. Lyn told Lisa it was certain that the collective would not participate in any process until CHAS saw fit to substantiate the allegations. Lisa surmised that the collective must have realised the potential danger of the allegations very soon after and decided to cooperate. In the exchanges that followed, Lisa and Lyn came to the agreement that any investigation process would have to be reached cooperatively. The collective seems to have sprung into action almost immediately and they set up the first meeting with Lisa for the next day. Glimmers of a shared agenda emerged during that meeting; in her file note that day Lisa wrote,

> *I talked about where we were coming from: that we were concerned these allegations could be picked up politically and could be damaging for the organisations and for ACT WESP and ACT SAAP. I said I felt we didn't have the information at the moment to refute the allegations. We agreed that a program like SAAP is vulnerable politically. I said our primary concern is to assure ourselves that both organisations are using their SAAP money properly.*[13]

The Toora collective also began to see that the proposed investigation had the potential to improve the understanding of the nature of their service and the reality for single homeless women in Canberra. As Lisa continued, *'Lyn said that a constructive outcome from the process would be if I gained a better understanding of Toora. I said I would welcome that outcome.'* As Lisa commented more recently,

> *I wasn't really that familiar with Toora though I was very committed to SAAP and to homelessness as such, but once we went through a long process-negotiation, (which was absolutely reasonable), as soon as Toora started talking to me about their policies, I was impressed. Impressed by both the policies and the philosophy as put to me by Lesley and Lyn. It was pretty clear from the start that the more I was going to get put to me, the more I was going to get into it, the more impressed I was going to be.*[14]

Over the ensuing days, Toora and Lisa came to an agreement over the investigation process, which was to happen in two parts. The first was to be a general discussion between the two parties to allow the bureaucrats to get a better picture of the service Toora was offering. The second was to be an accountancy exercise to dispel the allegations of misuse of funds. The accounting element of the process was comparatively simple, it took place over four days and while the accountant had some queries she was mostly satisfied by the further information the collective provided her. The process also revealed the inadequacy of the WARS funding by exposing how much the service relied on the refuge's support.

The first part of the process offered Lisa her very first glimpse of a SAAP service. She was only very new to the job at the time, the experience was illuminating;

> *It was pretty clear really, when you go in there and you talk to people and you hear what they're doing and you look at the roster and so on, that they were not actually wasting money, in fact the money was fairly thinly spread.*

Lisa and two other women from the Department spent two days at the refuge talking to workers about residents, Toora's work on addiction and WARS. The collective also had an opportunity to air their own areas of concern, including the fact that they had received no increase in funding for four years which manifested in the desperate lack of cover overnight and the need for a coordinator position. They also spent time discussing Toora's goals, aims and objectives and their policy in regards to residents, workers, employment and finances. Toora's policies had been developed gradually and comprehensively as every new resident presented the collective with a new challenge;

*Their philosophy…about why they want to work for the women they work for. They put it much more articulately than I could - but the way Toora looks after, I remember one of them using the words to me 'women in the gutter' - women who have faced the most difficult things in life. Toora works with a lot of women who aren't getting access to other services and so on. And I thought OK, so here's a service that basically is absolutely committed to the people who need them most. It was a feminist philosophy that I thought was, it was absolutely crystal clear. When you listened to Lesley and Lyn in those days you got this huge analysis, this really sophisticated analysis of where they were coming from which was well based in all sorts of theory and research and it was very, very impressive…They'd been through quite a lot of hard work internally on their policies and philosophy.*[15]

While all the policies Lisa was shown had long been in practice, the collective had never previously recorded them in a systematic way. Dymphna remembers spending the night before the visit in the WARS office fervently typing policy books on Lesley's old typewriter. Her efforts were not in vain; not only were the explicated polices impressive, but Dymphna recalls that she used the experience to get an ASO level five position in policy.

The CHAS report on the investigation stated,

> *ACT Community and Health Service is impressed by the policies and practices of Toora and its effectiveness in meeting its aims and objectives. Collective members all have a thorough understanding of their responsibilities both towards residents and other collective members necessary to provide an effective SAAP service. Toora workers are highly committed and professional and their expertise in the drug and alcohol field is impressive. They are obviously highly competent in providing their SAAP service.*

While it was satisfying for Toora to receive such a sound endorsement, both sides of the investigation had realised the gravity of the accusations. SAAP had been in existence for the better part of four years, yet Lisa remembers that women's refuge funding still felt precarious. As she reflected,

> *That whole investigation is probably one of the hardest things I've ever done.…Partly because it was new territory for me. Partly because I did respect what Toora did and how they did it. They were very process-oriented, in the best possible way, and I wanted to really respect that. And partly because the stakes were quite high. The stakes were quite high for Toora but the stakes were also quite high for women's services…It must have just been on the cusp of SAAP II so there was still a fair bit of flak about women's refuges. It didn't take much for women's services to feel under threat in terms of funding and so on, and given that the investigation fell to me, if I hadn't been able to do it responsibly or professionally… I'm sure one of the reasons why Lyn and Lesley thought, OK, well we might go along with this, is that they were concerned about the reputation of women's services more broadly.*

The original complaint had named Toora and the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre. While the result at Toora was positive, the outcome of an investigation of Rape Crisis was more difficult. As Lisa recalled,

> *It was [a] really hard job, actually finding something which wasn't so flash [Rape Crisis] and doing something about it, which hadn't been done for a long time. And so the challenge there was…how do you maintain a service but actually change the auspice? So I remember going to a meeting, a big meeting in the health building of women's services where I put on the table that we would actually de-fund [Rape Crisis], and invited an alternative auspice and the challenge was, would the sector take on the challenge of someone stepping up and becoming an alternative auspice; or would the need for solidarity amongst the sector itself, which was quite keenly felt at that time, mean that no one would feel that they could step up to that?*

However, what united the women's sector in Canberra was their passionate commitment to maintaining services like those of Rape Crisis. A distinguishing feature of ACT women's services has been way they have come together when one service needed assistance. The challenge Lisa posed was met. One of the women who put her hand up was Di Lucas. She worked as the coordinator of Rape Crisis for the

next 14 years, and in 2004 the organisation continues to offer a unique service to women in Canberra. The solidarity among women's services in Canberra continued. Jacqui remembered sitting on a quickly formed management committee when another women's shelter, Medea, faltered in the early 1990s. According to her this feature of the ACT women's sector was their great strength, *'it was more difficult to de-fund services here in Canberra than in bigger states.'*

In many ways, the Toora collective had been preparing for the investigation since the refuge opened. Lyn recalled, *'one thing Toora has always been really good at is identifying political threats and responding to them. So the way Toora responded to those threats (and it was always a feature of the collective, right from the beginning) was to be better at it [than their opponents].'* Beating bureaucrats at their own game was a feature of the organisation Linda Webb had also noticed;

> *Toora is unusual in its obsession with detail and minutiae. Most [collectives] were more casual. They were true collectives, the cheque came in and if you were lucky someone banked it. So Toora was really very unusual in that everything was kept and collected and documented.*

Lisa's feeling was that the investigation had largely been successful for Toora, but perhaps more importantly, it vindicated the funding of women's services more broadly;

> *I guess the first challenge was how to actually undertake something which would be a win/win…How do I undertake something which would be a win/win by way of, it would be a bit of a win if the services looked good, (and of course Toora did), it would be a bit of a win for them. It would be a win for the reputation of women's services more broadly, within government and outside government. That was the potential of it and I think that probably happened.*

It also changed Toora's relationship with the bureaucracy and the women's sector. As Lisa summarised,

*What [the investigation] did though, I do think it enhanced their reputation. I think it would have enhanced Toora's reputation across government definitely. So across the bureaucracy, across government and I would hope, I would hope but I'm not the judge of this, it would be Toora who would be, sort of consolidated their place in the women's services world, because in this process they also, I was completely aware, took a great risk within women's services.*

# 6

# feminist refuges

*You are a community, you have a much bigger system out there to fight, the common enemy is not in here, it's out there. The common enemy is the dominant culture, the patriarchy … all of those people who would crucify our culture and our people. And together we fight back and if that means that my sister next to me needs so much more than I do, then we give it to her and we support her till she gets on top of it. There [were] a lot of things that I loved about Toora in the beginning [and one] is that we supported each other to get through whatever it was.*[1]

## opposition within the women's movement

While many women saw the establishment of services like refuges and rape crisis centres as focus points for, and in themselves, political actions, there was some opposition within women's liberation to their establishment. Many women thought providing 'welfare' services was a distraction from the main political task at hand, namely the overthrow of the patriarchy. Furthermore, it was viewed as absolving the government of their responsibility to provide these services. Julia Ryan, the daughter of well-known Australian feminist activist and writer Edna Ryan, was involved with the Canberra Women's Refuge collective. She recalled,

> *My mother was very hostile to the whole idea of refuges, because she was an old feminist and an old socialist and she said, 'this is the responsibility of the state, you must not be giving your voluntary time to providing services. This is a trap, you will use all your energy providing services for individual women who are in great need'. I mean, she didn't deny the problem, but she thought, 'this is the wrong move.'*

Even if refuges didn't drain all of women's time and energy, there was also the view that establishing and providing services were not, in fact, a sufficiently strong political action. Elizabeth Reid was the first Special Advisor to the Prime Minister on Women when the position was created by the Whitlam Government in 1974. She wrote in *Refractory Girl*, one of Australia's first feminist publications,

> *The restructuring of Australian society in a revolutionary feminist way will not come about through the setting up of women's shelters or writing articles for women's journals or creating jobs for the girls. These, and similar activities, are not political actions which undermine existing society.*[2]

Some of the women who supported the establishment of women's refuges, like Liz O'Brien, did so with the thought that they would also be a way to recruit women to the feminist movement;

*We had long and involved arguments in the very early 70s about whether or not we should do things like set up women's refuges ... Were the refuges just going to be casualty stations? … We'd say, 'we'll do it because we'll recruit them into the movement, because then we were going to take over the world.'*

Arguably, Edna Ryan's concerns were borne out in the experience of Canberra women's liberation. As Julia described, the prolific and productive Canberra women's liberation eventually became fragmented by the focus on service establishment;

*We got sidetracked into the [Canberra Women's Refuge] collective … and I have to say at the time that the Refuge collective was happening … Women's liberation didn't meet separately any more because everybody was involved in various things. There was a whole child care collective that got a child care centre going and you never saw them again. And like even us on the Refuge you got absolutely overwhelmed by the project so the centre didn't hold. We got diverted. There were other things as well, Abortion Counselling, Rape Crisis.*

However, there were large numbers of women who believed providing services to women had the potential to be revolutionary. As Ara expressed,

*[It is] a real problem in terms of judgement. Who judges whom about what is more political and what is more powerful. To me there is nothing more powerful than a person with a chronic addiction getting well and going, now I will assume my place in the world where I have never been. Watching some of those women who come to Toora particularly where they were spending all their nights…[on] the streets, working for the dollar to maintain a habit that kept them a prisoner. To see them be liberated from that is, to me that is about liberation and…I believe radical feminism is about liberation from all forms of oppression and we focus on things like racism, why? Because they have monumental long term, lasting effects—just look at this country. But we forget about other little things, lots of other isms, like alcoholism, like the things that oppress women so greatly that we don't talk about them. And there are a whole lot of things we don't talk about and I believe that women's liberation still needs to keep going.*

Feminist women's services were unprecedented in the Australian health and welfare sectors. What distinguished feminist women's services from other community services was their philosophical underpinnings. Services such as Toora Single Women's Shelter developed a model of service delivery grounded in feminist analysis.

Feminist women's services developed in an environment in which violence against women went largely unrecognised. The feminist community was outraged by the lack of government, legal and community support for challenging the status quo. This was evidenced by the fact that the concept of domestic violence was not coined until the 1970s and until the 1980s, rape in marriage was a legal impossibility. As Liz O'Brien recounted;

*There were none of the sort of support systems around – [domestic violence] wasn't a crime, you didn't get co-operation with the police, there were no violence prevention orders, there was nothing. It was terrible.*

The feminist community took matters into their own hands. Women's refuges developed in conscious opposition to their mainstream counterparts. The dubious quality of the services available to women leaving marriages and relationships in the 1970s was one of the primary motivations for the creation of feminist services. By and large they were judgemental of women's choices to leave a relationship, narrowly focused on meeting limited short-term needs and prioritised the preservation of the nuclear family. Anne Summers remembered that at the time of Elsie's establishment there were only two existing services for women in Sydney. Both services were run by church groups and had significant limitations. These included only being open at night so that during the day women and their children were forced to leave the refuge despite having no where else to go.[3] Even in the 1980s, a refuge in NSW included amongst its rules, that *'no guest will be counselled and any guest seeking an abortion must find accommodation elsewhere.'*[4] Another refuge in NSW held morning prayer every morning at 8.30, except for Sunday when there was a chapel service.[5]

Most problematically, the mainstream domestic violence services that were available during the 1970s lacked an understanding of the structural inequality of women in relationships and in society more broadly. This had significant implications for their service delivery, which focused on reconciling women with their abusive husbands. Julia Ryan, who was involved during the early days at the Canberra Women's Refuge remembered that,

> *At the time, when women were at the refuge, we automatically linked up with the counselling services of the ACT Department and we found they were saying to these women, who went for counselling there 'what is it in your life that brings you here? Why are you bringing this on yourself? I mean what are you doing to make people hit you?' That was their way of dealing with it.*

The women who opened refuges like Elsie, the Canberra Women's Refuge and Toora were driven by an aspiration beyond just providing crisis accommodation. They also wanted to offer these services within a framework that was based on a much-needed feminist analysis of women's lives. The evaluation of women's refuges in NSW in 1982 explained,

> *Those who established the first women's refuges were motivated by ideas about the position of women in society, the nature of family life, the position of women within marriage and the need to provide continuing support to combat a woman's isolation.*[6]

## breaking down hierarchies – women working together

The principles employed by feminist women's services were extrapolated from those of feminist consciousness raising groups. Feminism ensured that the relationship between the women who worked and lived in the refuges was radically different from those in mainstream services. The feminist principles of mutual support and solidarity ensured that the usual hierarchy of expert and victim, service provider and user, was not replicated. Branka trajkovski joined the Toora collective in 1991 and immediately noticed the difference between Toora and other services in Canberra;

> *The amazing thing was the way they were working with the women…As I started working with the women and got in contact with some social workers, I could see the difference in approach. How Toora was having such a respect for the women as individuals and treating them with respect, where I could see how some social workers were taking over the individual clients, they were speaking for them, doing things for them, even in the presence of the women, they would push her aside and they'd tell you what's the case here, what's the problem here and the diagnosis and all and the woman would just sit there – I'd go, they're treating her like shit. Toora always would say let the woman say her piece. You can advocate for her but you shouldn't be talking for her … I really like that approach and the choice, to work with women where they are at.*[7]

There was a presumed solidarity between residents and workers, an idea that was central to Pat Walker's vision;

> *If we could work together as equals we could explore different ways of bringing about changes for both of us. I think the equality between the so-called 'worker' … who bonds … with those that are in need and shares, and shares their own life, their own feelings and so on, so that it's a mutual exchange, not just a one-way thing. I was also eager to extend my own life and just learn, and in many ways I saw myself having more to learn, different things to learn from the person with whom I was sharing.*

The relationships between workers and clients in existing services tended to be paternalistic. Bridie Doyle explained, *'I think we were prepared to front up somehow to women a bit differently. To be real, not to be, "you are the person on the other side of the desk." I think we really challenged that.'* [8] The women who worked in feminist services refused to place an artificial distinction between their lives and the lives of women who used the service. Meredith used the example of the Toora collective's work on addiction to illustrate this point;

*I guess we read [about addiction] because we were interested as workers, but we were also interested for ourselves, and that was probably one of the bonuses about working for Toora. I had years to learn about women who had grown up with alcohol abuse but that wasn't separate from my own experience.*

An important part of creating an atmosphere of equality and solidarity was a commitment to employing women who had previously used the service and who had relevant life experiences. These experiences included the oppression, abuse, violence, addiction, mental illness, racism, homophobia and imprisonment that were so often issues for women using the service;

*Many women gravitate there. Some of us are the lucky ones who got life, and grabbed hold of it and did something with it. And some weren't. Some were the ones who thought it was a bit too much, a bit too hard, too confronting and ran away. But we are all the effects of what we bring and what we need to do is utilise that. And why I love feminist services is because we brought in a whole picture of our life experience, a whole bit of being able to say, 'some have been locked in psych hospitals, some have been in detoxes, some have been raped, some have been treated brutally, some have been treated with racial hatred, but we come together as a whole to heal each other but we need to use that to heal the others who come through.' Which is why I feel it's really important to employ women who have been clients of the service.*[9]

The principle of employing women who were former residents also served to offer these women opportunities that did not exist elsewhere. Women with criminal records, mental health, or drug and alcohol herstories, rarely found second chances. As one early worker commented, *'they gave me a job when I was probably unemployable.'*

The skills and life experiences these women bring to the service promotes an ease of communication between workers and residents. Eddie Wadick stayed at Toora on and off in the early days and now works as a Resident Support Worker. Reflecting on how her time as a resident shapes her now as a worker, she commented,



*That's the thing, I mean… all the help I ever got was through other people's life experience and once again, it's never come from books, it's all come from hearing. I've only ever read a couple of books in my whole life. So yes, I think that when I open up to an individual, like when I share with one woman I think it is, it's that thing about you're amongst your own kind.*

## the personal is political

The commitment to employing women with relevant life experience brought with it an accompanying responsibility on the part of these women. This responsibility was to work towards personal growth and development. Consistent with the feminist tenet that the personal is political, this personal change was also seen as part of a wider political action for change. Bridie commented that working in a feminist refuge brings with it an,

*Expectation that you will look at how your traumas, your past impact on the way you work with somebody, and they do. As an untreated, unnamed sexual assault survivor I am not going to be able to work with someone's sexual assault. It's important that I know that. If I make the decision that I'm not prepared to work on me, then I need to know I'm not prepared to work with them. And what that might mean for the service. It's this expectation around yes, that you will do your own work as part of that process of equality and empowerment. That telling somebody what you think they should do is not empowerment. In fact, talking to someone about your experience of doing that is.*

'The personal is political' was also the idea behind another key aspect of the Toora approach. Toora understood the importance of numbers in demonstrating that what were commonly seen as women's personal and isolated experiences of violence, sexual assault, homelessness, drug and alcohol issues and mental illness, were in fact endemic issues requiring political change. The collective's foresight in information gathering allowed them to develop a nuanced political and feminist agenda that led Toora to expand their services and demand others. From the very first resident, Toora started collecting statistics via the 'dot book.' This

information was generally not recorded in other services. The first dot book collected data about the woman's ethnicity, mental health, current drug and alcohol use and herstory. Workers asked: Do you come from a dysfunctional family? Are you affected by the addictions of other significant people in your life? Are you a sexual assault survivor? Do you have a herstory of overdose or suicide? Where have you come from, where are you going? Why are you here?

It wasn't long before particular trends started to emerge. The links these statistics made were particularly illuminating for Branka;

> *Once I started working really individually with the women, I got shocked about how much abuse is happening, how much sexual assault is happening, how much domestic violence…That was like a shock to me to see how so many women were using [alcohol and other drugs]. The more I was working the more I could see the link between drug use and abuse in childhood and dysfunctional families and the [women whose] partners or whose parents are alcoholics have more chance to become one and all of that. So it was amazing. And we used to do an info sheet where we were collecting information about the family background and alcohol and drug use. It clearly showed the pattern of parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles are drug users.*

This analysis also allowed workers to offer women a very different understanding of their experiences, one that placed women's lives in the context of the patriarchal system. Bridie saw that feminist services like Toora were far more willing to name the experiences other services left silent;

> *I think we were much more likely to challenge or talk to women about their trauma. To name some of the externals that might have an impact on them. Sexual assault, family dysfunction and PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] and the symptoms of those things that women experienced – self harm, addiction, mental illness and institutionalisation. Perhaps the most important thing was that we weren't scared to hear the answers to those questions, so women never felt ashamed of them.*



# the power of choice

Toora Single Women's Shelter was premised on the power of information and a belief in women's ability to make their own choices about their lives. The collective recognised they could provide information and knowledge to women who may not get it anywhere else. The facilitation of an informed choice had the potential to be revolutionary. It was one of the principles that brought Branka the most satisfaction;

> *Just give [women] an idea … and what are they going to do with that? Some people will choose to do something, some people are not able… But if you give them information they can do something about it. And I think that was fantastic.*

For Meredith,

> *I truly believe that we were committed to giving women the best opportunity to go forward and make better lives for themselves, that their lives would be better coming from Toora. They would have greater choices, more information, greater support, you know I think we did things that were better for women and that's what we worked for.*

Sometimes the benefits of information were not immediate, but Toora was a place that would continue to offer women a different way to see their own experiences. Years from the conversation it might make a difference;

> *It's like planting seeds and you might plant the seeds this year and have a conversation with somebody now, whether it's about addiction or domestic violence and they mightn't be ready to hear it, but in a year's time or two years, or five years, they might say, 'can we have that conversation again, I'm ready to listen and maybe I want to take some of it on board.'*[10]

In combination with a willingness to address those issues often ignored in the rest of the world, information had the potential to change women's lives. Toora's willingness to talk about sexual assault offers a

poignant example. Bridie recalled another worker who felt uncomfortable asking a woman about her sexual assault herstory during the intake but,

> *She said if ever she had doubts she remembered this incident when she asked – I think the woman was 60-something and she asked the question, 'Have you ever experienced sexual assault and if so would you like any help with that?' And the woman sat there and she said, 'Nobody in my whole life has ever asked me that question. Yes I have and yes I would like some help.'*

## changing the context

One distinctive feature of feminist services was that they realised the issues women faced required more than crisis accommodation. They provided services in the context of a campaign for fundamental social change. During the early 1980s women's refuges developed comprehensive policy guidelines. They stipulated that refuges had to meet the demands of women in crisis but they must also,

> *Aim to raise public awareness in ways considered appropriate by the refuge, about the status and needs of women and children in relation to health, welfare, child care, sexuality, finance, employment, discrimination, aging and other diverse aspects of society that affect women and children and are highlighted by the existence of women's refuges.*[11]

The Toora collective had an unwavering commitment to placing women's experiences and needs on the agenda in any forum. Thanks to the articulate and persistent feminist analysis Toora workers provided, the specificity of women's experiences were compellingly expressed. As a key public servant during this period Linda Webb observed,

> *One of their strengths was that when we dealt with anyone from Toora…They had been working with some of those women themselves in the last few days, they had been working with some of the other Toora workers on whatever the topic was over the last few days, and that came across in the way they presented. They had a fair bit of passion about their clients and what they were trying to promote. But it had also been well thought through and work-shopped… And that's what I mean by such a strong collective. You got that real sense that the person you were talking to had this support behind them.*

Over the last 20 years the Toora collective has been a strong and committed advocate for women's needs in Canberra. The Toora collective was involved with the campaign to get Canberra's first detoxification service, the women and children's halfway house and the fight, firstly to establish, and later to save Canberra's Women's Health Centre. Bridie attested the Toora collective had a,

> *Really clear understanding that women's needs are not met by current government policy or practice. That women's homelessness gets disappeared and treated really differently than men's homelessness. So do women's drug and alcohol issues, the things that contribute to those are different to men, that trauma looks different. The real priority of placing domestic violence, sexual assault and mental health issues and the violence of that system, those things were really foregrounded in women's minds all of the time.*

Because of their political beliefs the members of the Toora collective had a commitment to the service that went beyond thinking it of as merely a job. As Bridie expressed, her feminist politics created a particular work ethic;

> *There were principles that certainly I still talk about, which was always remembering I earned my money off the backs of those women's lives and their stress and their trauma, so constantly remembering if I don't actually do this piece of work, or if I don't go out and meet that woman, or if I don't take her to housing or whatever that thing might be, because I'm not feeling like it, that that's cost her, it hasn't cost me. And it hasn't cost some ill-defined government bureaucracy where it's hard to know where the bottom line of the dollar is. I think that is one [principle]. I think never doing for a woman what she can do for herself and really knowing what that means…women's liberation, and the*

*whole notion that we can assist each other to change our lives, which was how…the second wave of feminism happened. It was around that personal and political. And I think that was also one of the guiding ones. It was not just about something I do when I come to work. I think for all of us it was something we tried to live by, those principles were way broader than our work lives.*

Ara Cresswell remembers her own level of personal commitment to her work at Toora;

*My view very much is we really need to work with women to the absolute nth degree, and if they feel like the support is there, then they may make that change and many of them may not ever be able to make the change, but if someone hadn't actually taken the time for some of us, neither would we. For me that stuff is really crucial. That stuff is really, really important. If we don't hold out a hand to each other, who else is going to do it?*

The work at Toora was emotionally and physically exhausting, frustrating and relentless. In the early days members worked many more hours than they were paid for. They would do whatever had to be done to help women in crisis;

*There was this incredible commitment … So much so that we would often be in there at three o'clock in the morning. Someone had a crisis, we just went. There was never a question about it; we just went there … particularly if it was alcohol and drug related, if it was sexual assault related. We'd just go.*[11]

For Jacqui, this level of commitment was one of the strengths of the Toora collective. It had the capacity to change women's lives;

*The most positive thing was that there were no limits about what we might do for a woman. We used to collect [one woman] from Coffs Harbour, we'd go and collect [another] from Sydney, I mean we did all sorts of wild things! You know once we sent a woman on a holiday. The whole collective was going, 'there is nothing we can offer this woman,' and Lesley goes, 'hmmm why don't we send her on a holiday?' And we're all just going, 'you are a complete weirdo.'*

Jacqui laughed when she remembered that, then paused, '*and it changed her life.'*

Eddie, now a worker, describes the importance of what Toora workers did for her in those days,

*I wouldn't be alive today. If those women hadn't of come all the way to Sydney to get me …They drove. I'd kept them awake all hours of the morning, I kept ringing them from the Taxi Club in Darlinghurst and I was ringing on the hour … And I went back to Glebe … and I rang up Ara, this was about five in the morning and I was just off my rocker, and her and Kathy. P, they drove all the way to Glebe that day, after I kept them awake all night, they drove all the way down and got me … and drove me all the way back to Canberra … So they brought me back here and then Lyn and Ara took me to the hospital. And do you want to know something? Lyn told me about this after it had happened. When we went to the hospital … they took me into this room and this woman doctor was having a go at me. Lyn sent me out of the room with Ara … because this doctor was being real narky … and Lyn tore shreds off this doctor because the doctor said to Lyn, 'do you expect me to give away our last bed to a junkie that's going to die anyway?' … and [Lyn] looked directly at her and said, 'is that your professional opinion?'*

One woman who had stayed at Toora summarised the difference the service made in her life; *'Support, unconditional love, knowledge, the feminist knowledge that is given to you. That was the biggest turning point… I had never felt that support ever.'*

# 7

# the toora collective

Early in 1984, Toora relocated to a slightly larger house in Busby Street, O'Connor. They retained the first house, which was renamed Likaya and became Toora's half wayhouse. The Busby Street house is universally remembered as being in terrible condition, the floor of the small kitchen was occupied by a large hole, the danger flagged by a chair sunk into the middle of it. The bathroom, toilet and laundry floors were poured concrete and although the water heater had a propensity to burn women, the house was otherwise dark and cold. There were still only three bedrooms, with ten women squeezed into bunk beds along the walls. Bridie's memories of Busby Street were immediate and vivid;

> *It was such an awful house. I mean it was sort of cute but God it had that smell … really I've smelt it since and I didn't know at the time, but now I know when I walk in somewhere else, that really long-term institutionalised smell. Like lots of mad women not having showers and a 20 year build up of that … It's got its own particular feel.*

Jacqui Pearce started working at Toora in 1988. There was a small office area, which by her recollection was a, *'little space at the front of the house and everything happened. The phones rang, you worked with women, you did everything…it was very intense the whole time.'* Branka maintained that the intensity had its advantages;

> *Everything that was happening, it was happening in that office. The admin person was doing admin businesses. Someone was answering the phone and someone was talking and getting an assessment of a woman. So there was a lot of follow-up or points where people would pick up if you were doing the wrong thing or you could do it differently. It was great for learning.*

By the time Toora had settled in Busby Street, the collective's identity was firmly established;

> *Policy development, [had taken] us full on into the philosophical differences within the collective. These weren't really resolved or consolidated until we went to Busby Street where those who supported reformist politics ended up withdrawing from the collective … [It was there that] we had the final huge meetings that led to the collective split where some influential long term members decided to leave because they could not support the philosophical base that was the working ethos at the time. We [were calling ourselves] a radical feminist collective with many of us seeing ourselves as radical, spiritual feminists.* [1]

The first Toora letterhead cemented the collective's politics in a small, but symbolic name change. Amending gender-specific language was an important part of radical feminist politics. Correspondence was headed Toora Single Wimmin's Shelter.

Collectivity was a definitive element of feminist services. Since the advent of women's liberation, feminist groups had jettisoned hierarchical structures and traditional meeting procedures, and feminist publications, women's health centres and refuges were run by collectives. It was a model Toora had naturally adopted with enthusiasm. Branka arrived in Australia in 1989 from the former Yugoslavia and joined the Toora collective in 1991;

> *The first thing I saw was the working in a collective setting…The good thing about that…was that everyone had the right to speak, everyone had the right to give input and we were working on consensus. We reached a point of agreement and go with that.*

Collectivity grew out of feminist analyses of power and, particularly in radical feminist groups, it was a crucial part of resisting patriarchal systems and creating alternative governance models. Collectives were groups that managed themselves without any hierarchy. This meant that there were no coordinator or director positions – all women did the same job for the same pay. Lyn explained,

> *Like any feminist collective, the [Toora] collective was pre-occupied with issues of power…Endlessly obsessed with critiquing our own political performance, meaning that of everyone in the group. So the political correctness of what we were saying and doing on a daily basis was a matter of huge concern to us all in every way. So that meant that everything we did was subject to debate and discussion and critique…and dramas and tears and traumas and divorces.*

Collectivity was a consensus model of governance. Its principles were heavily influenced by the informality of consciousness raising which had encouraged women to speak, empathise and challenge other women's assumptions. One of the early collective documents outlines Toora's decision-making process in detail;

> ***Consensus***
>
> *Consensus is the method of decision making in collectives. There is a clear procedure for the reaching of consensus, as outlined below.*
>
> - *Whatever the issue is, it is clearly understood by everyone that it requires a decision to be made.*
> - *The issue is clarified until it is clearly understood by everyone.*
> - *The issue is discussed.*
> - *Once discussion seems to have addressed all pros and cons etc: the issue is put up for consensus.*
> - *Sometimes consensus can be reached easily but when it is clear that isn't so, the collective can use the method of going around the room and asking each woman her opinion without interruption by others. At the end of that procedure it can be clear how divided the collective views are.*

If the discussion had been successful, decisions would usually be unanimous. Disagreement was a loaded option for collective members.

> ***Blocking consensus***
>
> *This is only entered into by a collective member if there is simply nowhere else for you to go and your conscience, political convictions or personal ethics are alarmed or outraged enough for you to do this.*
>
> ***Remember:** - breaking consensus is the ultimate act of power in a collective.*

There was no room for unjustified objections in collective processes. The collective could not proceed until the decision was unanimous;

> *Should you be of a dissenting opinion, then it is incumbent upon you to explain very clearly what your reasons for dissent are, and to seek to persuade others of the wisdom of your view. It is not appropriate to sit back and expect others to convince you of the correctness of their views while you simply refuse to budge. You have to remain active in the process.*

For the first ten years, the Toora collective was responsible for every element of running the refuge. Financial Management and funding submissions, employment, case management, worker evaluation, maintenance and policy decisions all went through the collective

process. The process itself was comprehensively debated and articulated. The single memory most workers share are the arduous workers' meetings that went from nine am until six that evening, or as Lyn exclaimed, *'they were meetings that went on all night and all day and all bloody night!'*

Where mainstream organisations had clearly defined individual roles, collectives distributed responsibilities evenly. All women were expected to perform all tasks. In the interests of sharing power and giving all women skills and opportunities, women had a responsibility to pass on all their knowledge.

***Commitment and Responsibility***

- *You are expected to make a commitment to the process of self-evaluation, and to ongoing training and skill sharing…*
- *Workers leaving or changing specific jobs must make a commitment to passing those skills on and training new workers…*

Collectives had an advanced understanding of the power of knowledge. Some collectives actually had limited tenure so that no one woman could accumulate an unfair amount of knowledge and therefore power. Where there were specific tasks, most collectives rotated specific positions regularly. Some women at Toora remember this was often frustrating. For many years every woman took a turn organising Toora's books for several months and the handover process was unbearably time-consuming.

Being a member of the Toora collective was an enormous commitment and the expectations were explicit;

***Commitment and Responsibility*** (continued):

- *You are expected to make a commitment to the refuge for at least 12 months, continuity of the collective is essential.*
- *Collective meetings are compulsory for all full-time workers …*
- *You are expected to make a commitment to attending unpaid meetings and workshops as part of your work.*
- *You are expected to make a commitment to confronting issues such as racism within yourself and within the house.*
- *You are expected to be responsible for your own physical and emotional well-being, such as taking a complete break from being at the refuge.*

Joining the Toora collective also meant more than committing to work at the refuge. The political project was defined far more broadly;

***Commitment and Responsibility*** (continued)

- *Involvement in political activities concerning women's issues is expected. Involvement in the community you represent in identified positions, is expected and attending all meetings relevant to that group …*
- *Workers must be able to discuss and confront women in the house on such issues as drug or alcohol or food addiction, domestic violence, incest, rape, racism, madness, health, class, sexism, prostitution, sexuality etc, in addition workers must be able to discuss and confront other workers on the same issues.*

While they ably represented the needs of women in conventional forums, the Toora collective were committed to a much bigger and more radical political agenda. As Lyn exclaimed,

> *Everything was on the agenda, racism was on the agenda, drugs were on the agenda, environmental politics were on the agenda, everything was on the agenda. And then we'd joke about how you could write a shopping list there because there were so many issues that went on it. And that was true then in a very energetic and dynamic way, I think individuals involved were very limited to direct action as a means of social change at that time.*

Being a Toora worker was never a nine-to-five job. As part of their commitment to change within a wider context, Toora workers were actively involved in political struggles, notably those around racial discrimination and violence against women. There were Toora banners at every Reclaim the Night and International Women's Day march;

*We really lived out that the personal is political. We just didn't go to work and come home. Because we worked at Toora we'd also go to the South African Embassy and protest against apartheid and we would also go out and graffiti 'sisterhood is powerful' on the walls in Civic. Yes, we lived our politics that we practiced at work, at Toora and elsewhere and I guess that I still try to do that, not to the extent that I did then maybe.*[2]

The Toora collective was an important part of the political scene in Canberra. Liz O'Brien was a member of Canberra women's liberation and was heavily involved in the protests against apartheid in South Africa during the late 1980s. For many months there was a picket outside the embassy 24 hours of every day. Liz recalled Toora undertook to sit on the picket one day every week;

*Toora people were very, very active in Women Against Rape and Women Against Racism... whenever we had any Women Against Racism things at the South African Embassy, Toora came out. So they had a much bigger politic. Yes, it became a great centre of political activism.*[3]

As Ara summarised,

*[Refuges] were incredibly political. We were the riff-raff, you know, we all had dreadlocks and tattered clothes and we all went out with banners and I mean, we were out for everything. We were called the rent-a-crowd... Now you look at the reconciliation marches and you see how many people march. [On] the [Aboriginal] Land Rights march in Canberra probably 18 years ago, we were pelted with rocks and eggs and tomatoes and we were one very small group of people, and many of us were women out of the refuges. Because we believed in change for everybody and we believed in equality, and so we were quite radical, and now that's mainstream*.

The changeover from what had been known as the Single Women's Shelter collective to the younger, stroppier Toora collective members was preceded by a similar occurrence at Elsie, Australia's first feminist women's refuge. As Anne Summers noted,

*Elise also attracted a new brand of women's movement activist: Those who were not interested in theory and conferences and endless debates but who yearned to do practical things to help women. These activists willingly took over the roster, drove women and kids to the doctor and did the thousand and one other things necessary to keep Elsie going. Many of them had had violence in their own backgrounds and were more able to help the shell-shocked residents than those, like me, whose heart was in the right place but had no practical experience and very little idea of what to do*.[4]

Many of the women who were involved in the first Elsie collective were middle class, with the sorts of skills and experience that were crucial in establishing services within the political system. However, to suggest the women who joined the Toora collective and established it as a radical feminist collective eschewed theory and debate would be a gross misapprehension. These women's commitment to feminist theory would drive the development of the services over the next 20 years. In addition to their obsession with the exercise of power, the Toora collective also kept abreast of the ever-increasing amount of theory that came out of the women's movement. In addition to the demands of the refuge, collective members were reading crucial feminist texts and adding new feminist ideas to the collective's agenda;

*It was one of the great things about Toora, we discussed everything. Everything in the fine detail. And we'd talk a lot about different kinds of feminists and feminism and that we were radical feminists...And we studied Red Stocking [a radical feminist publication] in depth and Robyn Morgan's [book Sisterhood is Powerful] and a lot of what would now be called more old school feminists. But we did a lot of studying and discussing their ideas and what we all thought.*[5]

There was also an active radical politic at Toora around sexuality. Many of the women who drove Toora through her first decade were young lesbians. Those who weren't were soon convinced. One woman laughed,

*Most of the other women were lesbians so that was an exciting, interesting, new dynamic for me because I didn't identify like that.*

*So that was a point of difference. My relative age was a point of difference… But needless to say it captured my interest enough that probably within about a year I was all those things. So you know – I mean my point of otherness didn't last forever, it didn't last very long at all!*

Feminism was interested in creating an alternative, woman-based culture and lesbianism offered women alternatives to heterosexual models of sexuality, community and family. A lot of the women in the Toora collective saw their sexuality as an extension of their political commitment to women;

*My decision to become a lesbian was both a personal and political decision - personal because I find women gorgeous and exciting, and political because it was about all my energy being committed to women and none of it being wasted on men.*

One of the most wonderful things women relayed during the interviews was the overwhelming sense that they were creating their own community and culture. They were predominantly young women, they were not already enmired in family or domestic arrangements and free to create their own definitions of those things. Many women fell in love with women for the first time while they were on the Toora collective. For many of the women who worked in the collective, the support they received and the level of lesbian community was one of the most important parts of their involvement. In turn, the energy of lesbian women over the last 20 years has been one of the biggest contributors to Toora's continued existence.

The connections women formed in the Toora collective were warm and profound. Branka still remembered the first day she came to Toora. She had answered an advertisement in the paper looking for more workers and came to have a look around;

*We went into the little office, a tiny office and two workers were there, yes, I remember seeing Ara there and Cinmayii. So we sat down and said okay tell me about you. And we started talking about who I am and where I came from and what I did so far and what I think about life and about women issues and stuff. I really enjoyed that conversation and that was where I decided to apply. After talking to Cinmayii. I felt at home – like there is this lovely women who is looking at me, paying attention to what I'm saying. I could see that we had that understanding about life similar. The understanding of life and human values. And I felt so – I found my place. And this is very important…this was like sunshine for me. Another little human being that you can talk with and can be with. So I had a little chat with Cinmayii, you know, what kind of service is this and what do they offer. And she explained about the three months stay and 24 hours and what is the work, you know not too much but just a little bit, enough. So we parted happily, we hugged and off I went so, how do you say – energised, and I sat down and started to write a short letter of application…I thought I'll just write a letter and why I'm applying for the job and what I can offer and why I think I was suited. It was just one page and I remember I wrote, 'dear friend,' because this is how I felt, I had found a friend.*

Meredith remembered the Toora collective as *'a very dynamic, very young women's collective.'* They adopted new ideas with enthusiasm, pushing them as far as they would stretch and formulating new ones to make up the shortfall. An early worker explained, *'You lived and breathed this. So it wasn't just a job in the way that most people understand job and it feels like a lifetime even though [for me] it was just two-and-a-half years.'* Collective members were perpetually tossing around new ideas and questioning their own assumptions at work and at home, while they were on shift and on their days off;

*I think [being so involved with each other] had some really amazing positive impacts in terms of the fact that we spent so much time thinking and discussing and talking and being creative and lateral and just really trying to work outside everything. You know, never kind of sitting with what might be ok. [We kept] on challenging each other and going 'is there a better way of doing this?' So yes, the benefit was this dynamism which was fantastic, [we were] constantly talking about politics and feminism and its relationship to sobriety and looking at ACAism and then developing stuff around Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Like this ongoing thing was always developing about how women were implicated by their life*

*experiences and what we could offer in terms of information that might make a difference. So developing lots of resources, going to conferences, running workshops, you know doing all that stuff.*[6]

Ara's experiences in the Toora collective over its first ten years would play a determining role in the way she went on to see the world;

*The things we did were quite phenomenal, we challenged every idea and every boundary, and nothing, nothing was sacred and nothing was too personal. We challenged everything, which for me is incredible in terms of the person that I have become in my life.*

The Toora collective was intense, personally challenging, all-consuming and very intimate. Ara laughed as she recalled a conversation that started as a survey of women's preferred underwear;

*It was very much a remarkable sharing which then led us all on to talk about sex. What kind of sex people liked and that was fascinating, whether you slept with men or women, whether you slept with both, whether you slept in groups, whether you were into S&M, why you were. Women who'd never had orgasms talked and it was the most incredibly liberating conversation. And we found out these incredible things… [and] it was incredibly liberating in terms of going, well this is what I am into, this is what I kind of think I would like to do, this is the kind of thing that I fantasise I would like to do. And it was the most amazing thing because we were a group of quite diverse women but were able to talk quite honestly about things and it was quite cute. We were able to send someone who had never had an orgasm home and tell her how to practice.*

The women of the Toora collective were young and often inexperienced. Over the years, their involvement with the Toora collective was something that greatly influenced the development of their political analysis. Meredith articulated a story many of these women now tell;

*I did a lot of my political growing up and learning about the world. It was a very formative time in my life…In many ways I learnt about my feminist politics at Toora…I really analysed and thought through and learnt about feminism at Toora.*



The Toora collective was operating in a time of enormous community for women. Coming of age during the feminist revolution had imbued some of these young women with an enormous sense of potential. As Lyn observed,

*Feminism at that time – sort of the second wave stuff was very much your lesbian, feminist, overalled, short hair – it really, really was and it was for us that were in it. You know we liked it like that. So it was a very dynamic, very grass roots focused, probably in hindsight a fairly middle class construct… I think strengths were the enormous sense of possibility and potential and opportunity and imperative. I think women through the 70s and the 80s had both the benefit of…[a] sense of being and sense of [their] capacity to influence social context and there was really strong aspirational politic in all of that about the capacity to make a world of difference.*

Women carry the benefits of being involved in the Toora collective with them to this day. For Ara,

*There is no question that Toora has had monumental impact upon my life and its current direction… I believe that Toora gave me the capacity to take much of my politics and formulate them into some kind of analysis and has given me the passion I have to do the job that I have today.*

Lyn noticed the Toora legacy once she left the organisation;

*When I first started working more broadly having, if you like, grown up in Toora in a political, professional sense, one of the things I noticed…was the fact that I had not evolved professionally or politically in a way that made me deferential to other power dynamics, particularly with the gender issues. I didn't think, act, talk or work like a girl. I didn't and that's because I had been nurtured within a women's environment that conditioned me to believe that my opinion was worthwhile and that I had a huge amount to offer and provided me with the opportunity to do it … It meant that then my subsequent contributions to other sectors, other political movements, has been phenomenal. So if today, and I think it's fair to say that I'm regarded as a fairly sophisticated and well-skilled*

*operator and that's certainly true I think, it largely comes from those antecedents there's no question about it and I see that in my peers as well. Many of them are doing great and amazing things and I'm really proud of them.*

The intensity of the personal connections women formed at Toora has not faded over the last 20 years, despite temporal and physical distance. It is one of the Toora collective's legacies that Meredith values most;

*I think for me – the stuff around collectivity and community and how much you can get done if you really believe that you can. Friendships that remained many, many years later…I guess that real sense that some of these women saw me really vulnerable and wide open and I saw them really vulnerable and wide open and for me [there will always be] a connection and a loyalty. I will always care how Lyn is and I'll always care how Ara and Elspeth are and lots of these women. Cinmayii, all of them, my door will always be open to them and pretty much I think most of their doors will always be open to me. Even though time goes on and you get busy in your own lives and it can be a long time between connections.*



# 8

# forming an analysis of homelessness

The decade after Elsie's opening saw the expansion of the women's refuge movement, as more than 150 women's refuges opened throughout Australia. Over time, awareness of domestic violence had spread and the existence of women's refuges had become more accepted by government and the wider community. The advent of a permanent funding program (SAAP) in the early 1980s gave women's refuges the most financial certainty they had yet experienced and they became an integral part of Australia's social services system.

However, services for single women had only ever constituted a small part of the women's refuge movement. When the report, *Women in Crisis: an evaluation of Women's Refuges in NSW 1982* was published, it



covered 36 women's refuges in NSW and Canberra, of which only two accommodated single women. Services specifically for single women were established as a response to overcrowding in the early refuges and without proper recognition and analysis of the specific needs of single women.

In addition to women and children fleeing violent homes, the first women's refuges had attracted women without children. These single women were generally chronically homeless, chemically dependent, mentally ill and traumatised by violence that did not fit the usual picture of domestic violence. They included young women escaping incest and alcohol and drug affected homes, who were often using alcohol and drugs themselves, and older women often with pronounced mental illness, chemical dependency or both. These women saw the newly established women's refuges as another stop in their transient lifestyles.

Toora's opening in the mid-1980s coincided with the national move to deinstitutionalise mental health services. Consequently, in addition to the single women the original women's refuges had already found difficult to accommodate, Toora also attracted women who had previously been accommodated in the large mental health institutions. As a result, single women's services like Toora began to develop an important political analysis of women's chemical dependency (discussed in chapter nine) and women's experiences in the mental health system.

## women, mental illness and (de)institutionalisation

During the 1980s, a significant policy shift occurred in relation to the delivery of mental health services. Up until then, services for people considered to be seriously mentally ill were provided in large institutions. Revelations of serious systemic abuse and neglect in large institutions and recognition of the dubious therapeutic benefit these institutions provided drove a move to shut them down. This policy, called 'deinstitutionalisation' included a commitment to shift service delivery to these clients to smaller, community-based settings. There was widespread community support for this policy change. However, huge problems appeared in the implementation phase, as the promised shift of funding to community-based services did not occur.

The inevitable result of this was that large numbers of people with serious mental health issues, who had often lived for years in these institutions, were released with inadequate or non-existent avenues of support. While large institutions were of limited value when it came to care or treatment, they at least provided food and shelter to men and women who were often long estranged from friends or family support. The closure of Kenmore in Goulburn and the Watson Hostel in Canberra had a serious impact on homelessness services in the ACT. Refuges were left to deal with the fall out of failed deinstitutionalisation policies, as women that had been confined to institutions were suddenly on the streets with no support. None of them were accompanied by children so the domestic violence refuges were not an option for them. For the most part, they ended up at Toora.

In addition to specialised training on chemical dependency, the collective acquired a large body of knowledge about mental illness. They witnessed firsthand the damage long-term institutionalisation had inflicted on women. Bridie described the women who came to Toora from institutions as having '*a learned hopelessness and helplessness. They had no taught capacity to initiate change, to stand up for their rights and they had no understating of their 'madness' as a natural response to trauma.*' Toora began to talk to many women who had been diagnosed with mental illnesses about alternative frameworks through which they could understand their mental health;

> *Women come in, (and it is still the same), going, 'I am fucked … I've just been labelled with borderline personality disorder.' And it's like well yes, and I could label you as having grown up with domestic violence, sexual assault, abandonment. Those things get disappeared and I think we really started to name some of those for our service users, which moved them out of going, 'oh I'm fucked,' into maybe some of the things that happened to me [were fucked]. And if you do that there's a process you can start doing to change how that looks in your life.*[1]

Meredith saw the work Toora did addressing women's mental illness as integral to the service; *'it was like the veins and the arteries I think, of Toora. The women with mental health and the addiction stuff. It was linked with everything that we did.'* Tjanara was another worker who saw the value of offering accommodation to women struggling with mental illness and excluded from other women's refuges;

> *The fact that we took in women who were mentally ill and unwell and homeless, that's the thing that touched my heart, that we had paranoid schizophrenics and women with bi-polar and [in particular the workers] Cinmayii and Lesley, who had a lot of experience with psychiatric illness, were very compassionate…and treated [women with mental illness] differently in fact because of their medical condition and advocated really passionately on their behalf, and that was probably the most wonderful thing that I got from [Toora].*

The Toora collective began to observe patterns in the women who had been diagnosed with mental illnesses or came out of mental health institutions. They arrived armed with a variety of survival skills in the guise of a shopping list of mental health diagnoses. Bridie remembered an incident that illustrated this to her. There was a young woman with a herstory of mental illness staying at Toora, who would often speak to inanimate objects. One night she went into the lounge room, which was filled with women watching television. Bridie recalled watching through the doorway as the young woman began speaking loudly to the television. One by one the other women left the lounge room. When the last one had gone, she calmly got up and switched the channel. *'She wasn't mad. She wasn't. She was just doing what worked for her. Being 'mad' had kept the world at bay – it meant that nobody ever got close, it was a really successful survival strategy.'* Many of the women who had experience in institutions were canny observers of the way the refuge worked. The collective became aware these women's lives had been reduced to working the systems that controlled them. This created a dependence on institutions which was then taken as further evidence of their 'madness.'

Lesley Fraser, the first Women's Addiction Recovery Service (WARS) worker in a collective meeting, 1987

Pat Walker speaking at Toora's ninth Birthday, 1992

Toora Women Inc. Executive Director Jacqui Pearce and ACT Minister for Women Katy Gallagher at Toora's 20th Birthday party, 2003

Toora team with their new car–mid 1990's (l-r) Sascha, Jenny, Anni, Chrystina, Michelle, Alison, Branka & Jacqui


Toora workers Chrystina & Alison at Toora's Birthday, 1997

Toora team development weekend 1996 (l-r) Branka, Heather, Kathy, Ara, Belinda & Michelle

Toora team in new Toora House office 1993 Top row (l-r) ; Lea, Bonnie, Kathy, Branka & Cinmayii. Sitting (l-r); Tegan & Michelle. Front; Rebecca


Eddie Wadick speaking at the launch of Lesley's Place June 2002

Tjanara & Jacqui at Toora's fifth birthday, 1988

Toora Women Inc. Deputy Director, Kim Werner lighting Toora's 20th birthday cake, 2003

WIRRED team performing at the Christmas party January 2004 (l-r) Viv, Paulina, Nat and Bridie.

The Toora collective observed that an enormous percentage of the women in the mental health system were survivors of severe sexual assault, neglect and other abuse. The collective began to link the past trauma to the symptoms of mental illness women were now experiencing. Originally, the diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) had been limited to male war veterans, but the 1980s brought the realisation that women who had survived domestic violence or sexual assault were suffering identical symptoms. Toora's awareness of PTSD brought the collective to the philosophical and medical position that reclassified the behaviour that had previously been seen as madness, as a natural and predictable response to trauma. The construction of women as mentally ill served to direct attention to the behaviour of women and so obscured and invalidated the original trauma. The Toora collective realised the force of patriarchy went far beyond immediate physical and emotional violence; the oppression of women was systemic.

The Toora collective found solidarity among other Australian single women's services. The first National Single Women's Shelter Conference was held at Toora in April 1987. Representatives from 15 shelters in Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales spent three days at Toora discussing the profile of single women's services and the lack of political analysis of homelessness. Singles articulated, between the women escaping domestic violence and homeless women. In their conference position paper the life experiences homeless women may have shared included being:

- unemployed;
- incest survivors;
- psychiatrically ill;
- drug affected;
- alcoholic;
- Aboriginal;
- victims of domestic violence;
- migrant/culturally affected;
- pregnant;
- Welfare survivors;
- skid row;
- differently abled;
- students;
- lesbians;
- family affected;
- travellers;
- on the run;
- institutionalised;
- elderly;
- needing time out;
- chronically homeless.

## a young women's perspective

As the Toora collective spent more time working through and articulating their politics, their place in the broader women's movement became clearer. The changeover of collectives in the months after the shelter opened had offered the young collective an important determining moment. They identified strongly as a young women's collective. This was also, in part, a response to their relation to the existing services in Canberra and Australia.

Toora opened in 1983, almost ten years after Elsie and the ensuing rush of women's services established during the 1970s. By the time Toora arrived, the Canberra Women's Refuge had been in operation for eight years. The women who worked there had an established collective identity, they were older than the Toora women, they looked different and the methods and the women they worked with were different. Indeed the Toora collective began to identify strongly against the traditional image of what feminists and refuge workers looked like. Next to the women who had established refuges like Elsie and Beryl, now positively old in their thirties, the Toora collective were *'very proudly young women.'*[2] Julia Ryan was involved with the Canberra Women's Refuge and recalled the Toora collective's agenda was tangible, *'Toora was out for young people.'* As they were often unaccompanied by children, young women had been one of the groups significantly affected by the original women's refuges exclusion of single women.

Toora's commitment to the women excluded by women's refuges and those with mental illness and chemical dependency was strong. For Jacqui, it was one of the defining elements of the Toora collective. Toora accommodated women that were then known as *'the skid row homeless women.'*

> *Single women who were also skid row homeless women were at the bottom of the pile in terms of being someone who anyone might care about, you know, they didn't rate a mention, barely rated any services. [Toora was] one of a handful, a very small number of services for single women across the country and still are … And [single women are a] tricky bunch because of the level of drug use and mental health and all the rest of it. So really analysing our stats and seeing this many women have experienced sexual abuse in their life, there must be some links here.*

While the services for single women developed a complex understanding of women's mental illness and chemical dependency, they came up against some resistance, both within the women's refuge movement and within the bureaucratic structures that administered their funding. The needs of single women had only ever been conceptualised as a problem for women's refuges. It seemed that addressing the issue of domestic violence came at the expense of a broader examination of women's homelessness.

## towards an analysis of women's homelessness

The original women's refuges like Elsie and the Canberra Women's Refuge were intended to provide temporary respite and support for women and children to establish independence. Their understanding of women's homelessness was limited to women immediately escaping domestic violence. Julia Ryan was involved with the establishment of the Canberra Women's Refuge and admitted more long-term homelessness was not something the collective had considered. The refuge, *'was very family oriented … We honestly thought the problem was domestic violence, wives and children. That's how we saw the problem…[homeless single women were not] in our universe.'* Both Elsie and the Canberra Women's Refuge soon exposed the far greater problem of women's homelessness. In 1982, the National Women's Refuge Conference report identified the 'problem' of single women in women's refuges; *'Refuge populations are also changing with an increasing number of requests from young and old homeless single women, women with drug, alcohol and psychiatric problems.'*

The *Women in Crisis: Evaluation of Women's Refuges in NSW 1982*, noted that many of the original women's refuges decided to prioritise women with children, leaving single women without safe accommodation;

*After much experience with these conflicts of the need and overcrowding, many Women's Refuges (particularly in Sydney) have developed a policy of giving women with children priority in refuge accommodation. This has meant that single women must compete in the private rental market or face sleeping in the streets, parks or prostitution.*[3]

Liz O'Brien recalled the way the decision of Elsie and the Canberra Women's Refuge was received by some of the younger women in the movement;

*There's no doubt that the women's refuges certainly came to a point where women without children were not part of their work. Obviously that's because the demand was so strong you had to make a choice, some sort of decision. So … some women thought - younger women thought that was part of not understanding or not caring … So there was a level of, 'you don't understand us we don't understand you' stuff and … if your defacto practice has to be that women with children get priority over women without, then you can be easily wound up, 'you're saying women without child aren't important, or women have to have children.'*

There did seem to be some frustration in the relationship between single women's services and women's refuges. Services for single women started to feel that the focus on domestic violence within the women's refuge movement failed to consider the political analysis they had formed of homelessness. It seemed that some women's refuges just did not think that the issues single women brought with them were within their scope. The 1982 National Women's Refuge Conference report suggested that single women were a distraction from the task of addressing domestic violence, single women were *'creating particular problems for the refuges which were initially established primarily to assist women and their children who were the victims of domestic violence.'* This was reiterated in *Working for Change*, which offered a brief herstory of domestic violence services in Canberra. The authors noted the opening of a refuge for single women as an event that finally allowed the Canberra Women's Refuge to focus on domestic violence.

*The need for crisis accommodation for single women continued to plague Beryl [the Canberra Women's Refuge] and divert resources from the issue of domestic violence. The refuge clearly wanted to shed this aspect of its work and… the refuge [for single women] opened in 1982 [sic]. At last Beryl was able to institute a policy of accepting only women who were escaping violence, thus sharpening its focus on the issue which had originally motivated its establishment.*[4]

There was a feeling that single women's needs had been, and continued to be, ignored by the original refuges perhaps because they were too complicated and demanded too much time and attention. In addition, the support single women's services offered did not seem to be adequately appreciated. Lyn recalled that as a single women's service, voicing issues beyond domestic violence within the broader women's refuge movement required some effort. The resistance to hearing the voices of single services seemed to have strengthened their identity and will:

*The whole single women versus the DV [domestic violence] women's sector. That was huge [even] before Toora was in the women's refuge movement. For the whole 1980s through mid 90s that was the defining issue … We were on about addiction and we were doing all the addiction stuff, we were also very staunch advocates around the rights and needs of women without children or without children in their care. It was a huge point of political difference, because the refuge movement nationally as a whole was very much focused on DV and we always saw ourselves as the counter voice. We had years, and years, and years of going to women's refuge conferences and being the radical element that was putting the different view.*

The National Women's Services Conference 1988 neatly summarised the relationship between the domestic violence refuges and services for single women. Toora and other single women's services requested specific time be set aside to discuss the specifics of single women. The conference organisers declined. Toora initially pulled out of the conference in protest but eventually the collective decided to go and Toora workers presented workshops on co-dependency and racism.

The focus on domestic violence extended to SAAP, the program that administered refuge funding. Many women had worked within government structures to ensure the original women's refuges were understood and properly funded. However the differences between services for single women and those accompanied by children were difficult for funding bodies to recognise. The fact that Toora's funding body did not value or share their analysis of women's homelessness became obvious. In their SAAP application for 1987/88, the Toora collective were still asking for funding to cover the 24-hour roster, since 1983 women had been working on-call and overnight shifts unpaid;

> *Unfortunately women in crisis situations cannot be asked to have their crises during specified hours…Single homeless women have a different lifestyle to women with children; they frequently liven up during night time hours, particularly those with psychiatric illnesses or addiction problems, and it is not uncommon for workers to be called in at odd hours. It is not possible or reasonable to expect these women to care take the refuge as they are frequently incapable of caretaking their own lives.*

During 1987, Toora had submitted an overview of their client profile as required by SAAP. By now the Toora collective had carefully observed and articulated the group of women they were seeing come through the doors. The details the collective provided to SAAP reflected Toora's standard statistics, roughly 65% of women were chemically dependent and 35% were 'psych affected.' The Department of Community Services was concerned about Toora's position within SAAP – was the collective providing a homelessness service? Or did their client population fall outside SAAP guidelines? Were these women who would be better accommodated in hospitals and rehabilitation services? As the collective expressed in a position paper in April 1987;

> *Toora has been able to confirm suggestions that because the women who seek accommodation in our service also have a multitude of health problems including alcoholism and psychiatric illness, our position within SAAP is to be reviewed – the issue apparently being that we would be more appropriately placed elsewhere e.g. Health, because the nature of these women's situations is such that they are unlikely to 'move into independent living.'*

For the Toora collective this was an absurd proposition, which revealed the lack of understanding or analysis of chronic homelessness. SAAP's data forms epitomised the problems single women's services had with the funding program. The forms had to be filled in for every woman who stayed at Toora. One of the questions required workers to tick a box about why the woman was accessing the service; 'homeless' was not an option. Many of the single women's services across Australia refused to complete the forms in protest.

In May 1987 the National Single Women's Services Conference presented a paper to the Minister expressing their concerns. The Toora collective continued their efforts at having the specific services single women's shelters were providing recognised and adequately funded. Their primary concerns were familiar – the lack of awareness in funding bodies regarding the nature of single homeless women in Australia, the lack of understanding of the services provided by singles and consequently the inadequacy of resourcing singles. As evidenced by their data collection practices, SAAP was designed to address the issue of domestic violence rather than homelessness more broadly. On reflection, the Assistant Secretary of SAAP, thought, *'Information available in Central office suggests that this is a reasonably accurate assessment of the current situation.'* [5]

Services for single women had less support than domestic violence services both within the women's refuge movement and the government structures that supported them. While feminists had to fight to get domestic violence on the national agenda, they seemed to have been relatively successful and community attitudes shifted in the decades following the establishment of the original women's refuges. However, one of the unfortunate results of the exclusion or the slighting of single women, particularly those with herstories of chemical dependency, mental illness and institutionalisation in the women's sector was that the connection between the lives of these

women and the vulnerability of women and children immediately escaping domestic violence was obscured. Ludo McFerran has written much on the women's refuge movement in Australia. She commented,

> *The fact that the longer term homeless women had probably themselves once been victims of family or domestic violence, that this had resulted in their homelessness, and that they may have had their own children at one time was obscured. Those women for whom being homeless was a new experience perceived the others as different. Perhaps they saw in them their own future, and did not like the vision. Perhaps it was simply they wanted to protect their vulnerable children from the damaged behaviour of some of these women. This tension reoccurs throughout the history of refuges, and has led to a separation of the issues domestic violence and homelessness which is problematic.*[6]

The issues homeless single women brought with them – chemical dependency, self-harm and PTSD, posed a challenge for the women's movement and were less palatable for the wider community. Annie Kenney was a highly politically active refuge for young single women in Tasmania. As they observed,

> *Much of [the stigma attached to women who use the refuge] stems from the belief that homelessness and unemployment are the fault of the individual, rather than that of the political, social and economic policies of the time.*[7]

The women who stayed at Toora added chemically dependent and mentally ill to the Annie Kenney list. All these things were outside the common conception of domestic violence. On the surface they could be seen as things that women actively chose or fell victim to because of some weakness. There was not the clear dynamic of perpetrator and victim inherent in domestic violence. The more the Toora collective examined the issues that affected women's homelessness, the more it seemed they were addressing the parts of patriarchy that seemed more complex than the traditional feminist narrative of domestic violence.

Ultimately, no woman chooses homelessness in the true sense of choice. For those women who managed chemical dependency and mental illness, the trail back to patriarchal violence or trauma was there, it was just more convoluted and not as immediately visible. Single women's services began to clear that path.

# 9

# toora women and addiction

*Toora was able to achieve the things it achieved because it had a recovery-based energy. There's no question in my mind about that... Toora women had a positive energy about doing what they were doing that was unrivalled…On the data other organisations rose and fell on internal political dramas, very fractured, didn't have a shared [agenda]… Toora had something different. It had a very close community, a very big community. A huge community of women passionately committed to a shared agenda for years and years and years. And that's almost unparalleled. So recovery was what it was. It was both a source of energy but also a point of division for many and a point of exclusion for many.*[1]

Within the first months of operation, the Toora collective assessed that over 50% of the women they were accommodating were living with active chemical dependency. They were the women who Canberra Women's Refuge had struggled to accommodate and Toora was fast reaching the same levels of chaos. Lyn suggested much of the mayhem and commotion came from the young collective's inexperience;

> *I remember the first year of being open there were probably two debates that really kept the collective in vigorous discussion. One was the management of resi women, in particular drug and alcohol sector clients… You can always see things much more clearly in retrospect, but what happened was a group of women opened a premises without an underlying, clear discussion about practice philosophy. That's what you say these days. If you were analysing it, you'd say that they hadn't evolved the necessary service policy. Well it sure hadn't. And I think there were possibly different or unclarified views amongst the group as to who [the residents] would be.*

She remembered the earliest days at Toora as a time that,

> *Left the workers without sleep for several months, divided us as a collective, took us in and out of accident and emergency rooms, and prompted several visits by local police. We were not a safe place for women and we knew it.* [2]

One of the original paid workers, Elspeth concurred;

> *We (the paid staff) quickly realised that the way we were operating was unrealistic at best and dangerous at worst. Our ignorance was putting the whole place at risk. It was at this point that we started intense addiction and psychiatric training to get [the collective] up to speed on these two issues.*

There was consensus that the current situation could not continue. The collective was forced to try and make the refuge safe for themselves and residents. They initially tried a conciliatory approach and stuck a 'shape up or ship out' document on the wall, which read:





even if it is a long one, towards recovery and addiction

***SHAPE UP OR SHIP OUT***

*Toora is a feminist shelter, and was set up to provide a warm, safe and caring environment for all women. The workers believe that, at the moment, Toora is not providing this environment. We want this to change so we have made a list of certain practices that we can no longer put up with:*

- *bad mouthing anyone*
- *lack of respect for roster workers*
- *breaking of the rules in the contract, especially NO physical or verbal violence*
- *blaming other people for your actions*

*The shelter belongs to the collective. The residents are welcome to attend collective meetings. Collective and house meetings are the place where any gripes or complaints should be made. No present resident can become a worker until they leave the shelter – and only then if they have respected Toora in the past.*

*Toora needs the residents to respect and support the caring and uncompetitive philosophy of the collective, only then can the shelter be a place where women can become self-respecting and independent people.*

Meredith saw the "Shape up or Ship out" document as the beginning of a process that would radically alter the refuge and the collective;

> *It was the 'Shape up or Ship out' which was given as an ultimatum to residents that you either have to shape up or ship out…[Lesley] walked in and said you've got to tell these women to shape up or ship out. Because this is mad. What is happening here is mad. And for me…that was the beginning of our education with drug and alcohol issues.*

"Shape up or Ship out" was a short-lived remedy. It soon became apparent that the onus was on the collective to create well-informed policy and procedure about working with women with chemical dependencies. One night the collective had to draw the line;

> *I remember the evening and there was a big kafuffle with a couple of resies and it was all really messy and I'm pretty sure the very next collective meeting, which was probably the very next day, was where that discussion took place. We stopped taking resies from that time and we started to thrash through some of the policy issues of how to manage the service and then we were to reopen subsequently.*[3]

The refuge suspended offering beds to women with drug and alcohol issues for several months. Even temporary exclusion of these women was a difficult decision for the collective. Not only was Toora Canberra's only single women's service, but the other women's refuges had a policy of refusing women who were chemically dependent. Toora's hiatus meant that these women had nowhere to go.

The Toora collective included a woman who had a large amount of experience in women's services and a gender-specific analysis of drug and alcohol dependency. Lesley Fraser had trained as a nurse, worked in drug and alcohol counselling and had been a member of the Elsie women's refuge collective in Sydney before she came to Canberra in the early 1980s. Perhaps most significantly, she explicitly identified as an alcoholic in recovery. Lesley was in her late 30s, not old by any means, but some women remember that to the young collective she seemed 'ancient.' She was incredibly passionate and she offered the collective both her knowledge and her political analysis of women's addiction. The collective underwent an intensive process of developing policies and procedures that would allow Toora to accommodate chemically dependent women in a positive and safe way. They ran workshops, visited addiction facilities in Sydney and attended 12-step meetings;

> *Lesley, very much in her wisdom and very much coming from a much stronger place in terms of running services, she actually had half a clue, sort of called time really. So the grand closure was really the efforts of one worker to say this is out of fucking control and until we sit down and work out what we're doing here it's morally reprehensible to keep letting women walk through the door… The other part was her very clear view that our fundamental problem was our lack of understanding of dependency issues. Put simply.*

*Not a popular view I can tell you…It was a pretty strong and enduring one though and even with the benefit of hindsight I'd have to say she was right, right, right and right. I mean the debates that were to follow were debates about what an appropriate response to that might have been. But on the facts it was a case of [who were] the client group and did we know how to handle them? … We didn't. And obviously that was an area in which she had expertise so she very clearly said to the group, 'I'm prepared to support this level of training to come to terms with some of these issues but you've really got to get with the swim'.*[4]

The feminist principles that underpinned the service extended into the way the collective approached the issue. As the Toora collective built up their knowledge of alcohol and other drugs and thrashed out their approach to dependency, the first changes were intensely personal. The collective interrogated their own relationship with alcohol and other drugs. *'We [believed] that in order to be of any benefit to the women walking through our doors we had to look at our own stuff as a collective and as individuals. This was a fantastic process and well ahead of its time."*[5] The process of uncovering the traumas and survival skills of women in the collective was often emotional or painful;

*We were all dealing with learning about our own addictions and our own childhood issues whether it was parent's addictions or sexual abuse. I mean a lot of us were young women who hadn't really thought about a lot of that stuff. We just got along and began our lives. So yes, we were learning about our own traumas … alongside the residents. And our own … ideas and learnings around Indigenous issues, just everything. I was learning new ideas about myself and the world around me and some of that was traumatic and some of that was fantastic.*[6]

During those intense months, many women in the collective began their own recovery from varying levels of chemical dependency;

*I guess before the collective could really accept it we all had to look at our own drug and alcohol processes and our family ones and there was lots and lots of us who had drug and alcohol histories in our own lives or in our family's lives so most of the collective members undertook recovery processes.*[7]

Recovery was an intense and communal process. As Tjanara summarised, workers' *'recovery became collective issues.'* Every woman involved has immediate memories of the 'interventions' that happened in collective meetings. Some of them are more positive than others. Tjanara felt that there were women who,

*Played this card of being older, sober members and it permeated the collective meetings. I mean the collective meetings went from 9 o'clock till 9 o'clock at night sometimes and they were usually talkfests at somebody, so somebody would be the focus.*

Meredith recalled it as a confrontation that had the potential either to offer women something valuable or to estrange them from the collective;

*What kept us there was the love and the passion of Toora and what we were doing together I guess. It was exciting. It was groundbreaking, it was professionally but also personally challenging and, yes. I mean there were a lot of drug and alcohol interventions that happened within the collective, to other collective members…They happened in collective meetings. And I guess some of the people responded in the way that it was hoped by the intervention that they would and they'd get into recovery and they'd go the way that a Toora worker was expected to go I guess. And others didn't…I mean over the years there were lots of painful separations amongst the collective members for lots of reasons.*

Some women felt personal lives and relationships between women in the collective became uncomfortably enmeshed with work. As Tjanara commented, *'personal relationships and work always got tangled up and I think it's because everybody was newly sober.'* For many women the support of the Toora collective was integral to maintaining sobriety. Jacqui remembered the difference the Toora community made to her life;

*The other benefit was that it meant a whole bunch of us got, and stayed, sober…Given there were so few women who were sober, and so few lesbians who were sober at the time, one of the*

*benefits was we all managed to stay sober for a long period of time. And I think that part of [being so] close-knit meant that that was possible. Whereas if we hadn't hung out together we wouldn't have ever made it. So yes, personally there was some benefit there as well.*

There was an ethos of support for women that continued through Toora's herstory. Bridie Doyle didn't join the collective until substantially later but affirmed,

*What I can say now is that my recovery – where it went because I had those women around at work, that I was surrounded by recovery every day of my recovery from the moment I started at Toora and I had done nine months before that. It was really important to getting me to where I got to.*

Toora's focus on addiction and particularly on the specificity of women's addiction changed many women's lives for the better. It would also cause significant rifts both within and outside the collective. An early collective member reflected,

*At a bigger level over the next year, the shakedown and how that would effect individuals and where they'd end up positioning themselves around all that stuff, yes, that was to be a much bigger life-changing event for lots of people. For lots and lots of people...I would have got clean that year. So it was certainly life changing for me and it would have been life-changing for a lot of different women around at that time.*

Some women in the collective thought Toora's focus on addiction was misguided. Ara remembers some women felt so strongly they left the collective; *'When Toora decided to look at the nature of addiction a whole lot of people walked out and said no way, that's not OK. There is something fundamentally wrong with that and walked.'* They felt the collective's focus on addiction was too narrow. As Lyn reported a group of women who left,

*Subsequently set up Medea, which then became Inanna. And that was Helen Rawlinson and Jane Bullen and Winsome and…they went and set up a service for women who were emotionally distressed as opposed to addicted. Because their perception was that there was an undue focus on chemical dependency largely led by Lesley and that that acted to exclude a range of other ways in which women distressed could be understood. So they rocked off to set up a service that avowedly did not subscribe to an addiction model. And that's what they did.*

Elspeth thought the breach within the collective also reflected the different levels to which women were able to see the benefits of addressing chemical dependency.

*Those of us who worked full-time or did a lot of shifts at Toora saw the damage being done [by chemical dependency] and the amazing difference our training was making to the women and well-being of Toora. Those who worked there infrequently, and listened to disgruntled residents fought the changes and training, which added another dimension to the philosophical split.*

Toora's focus on chemical dependency made a vital contribution to feminist analysis of power and the oppression of women but estranged the collective from the broader women's community in Canberra for many years to come. Lyn kept a sense of humour about the cost of Toora's dedication to the issue; *'therein lies the genesis of the notoriety of Toora for the subsequent 20 years. It was not a popular view*.' The women of the Toora collective found themselves increasingly ostracised from the feminist community. Meredith remembered feeling that Toora's isolation was sometimes exhausting and limiting;

*There was great resistance from other feminists in Canberra. There was periods of time where if you were a Toora worker you'd be quite shunned by other feminists…because they didn't buy the clean and sober 12-step line. That wasn't always easy or comfortable. It wasn't for me because I guess I always liked to be in a world that was bigger than – I didn't want to live in the Toora collective. But I don't know whether I got tougher or a bit of both – I got tougher and also more women began to see that there was a lot of sense in what was being said so there were shifts, and times change a bit.*

Elspeth thought the rift, though keenly felt, was not complete.

> *Our collective was also involved in huge amounts of women's action at the time so other services couldn't dismiss us or refuse to work with us—we were definitely putting our feminist ideals into practise when many were just talking about it.*

## addiction and the women's movement

In many ways, the resistance felt by the Toora collective was the expression of debates that were happening within the larger women's movement at the time. Women's consumption of alcohol and other drugs has played an important role in the history of feminism in Australia. One of the earliest public actions of the women's movement in Australia was a protest against a Queensland law that prohibited women being served alcohol in public bars. As Marilyn Lake recorded in her history of Australian feminism, in March 1965, two women went to the Regatta hotel in Brisbane and ordered a beer;

> *Upon being refused … they took a dog chain and a very large padlock from a bag and chained themselves to the rail, an action that sparked enormous media interest and presaged a new phase in the history of feminism. For one of the main reasons these 'wives of University lecturers' were criticised was their lack of feminine decorum: their defiant demand for a drink had flouted the prevailing code of womanly respectability. Feminism was becoming intemperate and brazen. The women's demands to be allowed to drink in public bars, alongside the men, represented a sharp break with a feminist tradition that had been closely allied with the temperance movement and that had cultivated the respectability expected of exemplary citizens.*[8]

Women's drinking was part of a dramatic social and political shift. By the 1970s,

> *the term citizenship was…no longer employed positively in the political language of activists or reformers. It acquired, for a period, more conservative than progressive connotations, and was associated with the maintenance of dominant social and cultural values, with respectability and conformity.*[9]

Women drinking, women using, even women smoking was an act of subversion as it challenged the notions of femininity that feminists identified as one of the sources of women's oppression. During the 70s a strong culture of drinking and bar room politics developed within the women's movement. An edition of *Wimminsnews*, Canberra's feminist newspaper provides an illustration. In 1981, they published a page of songs and chants taken from *Somethin' Good*–a feminist songbook edited by Di Otto and Andy Malone. The title song was set to the tune of Herman's Hermits, *Something Good* written by Carol King and Gerry Goffin;

***Something Good***

*Woke up this morning…*
*There's something special on my mind*
*Last night I found a new scene in the neighbourhood*
*Oh, yeah,*
*Something tells me I'm into something good.*

*A room full of women getting high.*
*Then I looked around and saw there wasn't one guy*
*Well they did some talking to me and I understood.*
*Oh yeah,*
*Something tells me I'm into something good.*

*When I shot the eight ball there was a cheer*
*And I found in my hand a schooner of beer*
*Well they had a style that wasn't too toff*
*In fact, they were everything I'd been dreaming of*
*Everything I'd been dreaming of!*

*I took a crash course in ideology*
*then wiped out the pain alcoholically*
*A nice woman gave me a hug and called it Sisterhood*
*Oh, yeah,*
*Something tells me I'm into something good.*[10]

Di Lucas and Ara Creswell were both actively involved in the women's movement and easily recaptured the prevailing culture. As Di commented, *'It was a real problem even for feminists. You know, young women – the women's liberation movement…because like now you're a feminist you know you can do whatever the boys do sort of. So you can drink as much.'* During the early 1980s, addiction was becoming a contentious issue in the broader women's movement. Ara remembered the inherent challenge of looking at addiction;

> *We were a hard-drinking mob. We were a hard drugging mob. We were women who knew what we wanted and were going out to get it and we could drink as hard as the men. So it was very challenging on that level, extremely challenging to have to stop and look at our own behaviours and work out did they need some change?*

Alcohol had been an increasingly problematic element in the women's movement. Liz O'Brien was active in women's liberation in Canberra and she remembered that at one point the group decided that while women could troop to the pub once meetings were over, drinking had become so disruptive that alcohol was banned from the Women's House on Bremmer Street. Even apart from its potential to derail political meetings, the cost of chemical dependency for women was also starting to emerge.

Many feminists had come into increasing contact with the extent of women's addictions through their experiences in refuges, women's health centres and rape crisis centres and by the 1980's women's services were beginning to respond to the need. Leichhardt Women's Health was providing feminist drug and alcohol counselling and holding lesbian only and women only 12-step groups. Proclaimed



Places in Australia had traditionally offered protection to intoxicated people; in August 1981, Women's Place opened in Kings Cross in Sydney. It was the first women-only Proclaimed Place in Australia. The service provided accommodation for homeless or intoxicated women unaccompanied by children. As they articulated in the addiction issue of *Girls' Own,*

> *Women's Place offers alternatives by providing information, support and a political perspective on her current situation. We consider knowledge about drug and alcohol abuse to be an important link between homelessness/defencelessness and self-determination.*[11]

A discourse about the destruction drug and/or alcohol use was wreaking on women's lives was beginning to develop. *Girls' Own* was Sydney's feminist newspaper. The March/April 1982 edition of the paper was dedicated to "Addiction – a woman's issue." In her article "Killing us Softly," a woman called Margot identified the high level of substance use among feminists, particularly lesbian feminists. Feminist politics and analysis required women to look at their own drug use before they could talk to other women about theirs. As Bridie expressed, while it was a process spearheaded by Toora women, more broadly it was a contentious issue;

> *I need to look at me if I want to change other women. I just can't go this is what you need to do to get well or get better or improve your life. It's that I need to do it…Toora still talks about it – about not asking women to do something you're not prepared to do yourself and it really underpinned everything Lesley thought and did and so it makes sense to me that she put those together and went you cannot work at addiction if you don't look at your own. But Jesus it caused trouble in the other…services.*

Many women in the movement were resistant particularly in the context of women's services to challenging their own experiences of drug use or dependency. Particularly in the context of women's services, it was a resistance that precluded a political analysis of addiction and produced '*the classic victim/expert, us/them politics that radical feminists have sought to avoid.'*[12]

Some women in the movement had a strongly articulated political objection to the focus on chemical dependency. Liz recalls being vehemently opposed to the analysis, she and many women in the movement believed the therapeutic turn feminism was beginning to take lacked a political analysis;

> *Domestic violence, child sex abuse exist because what exists is women having no power. Because what exists is misogyny because that's why these things happen. They don't happen because men are sick, rape doesn't happen because of sex, all that stuff sort of got lost.*

In relation to addiction, an argument many feminists held and expressed with good humour by Liz was,

> *If your underlying politics is that the problem is her addiction then you're not going to deal with the real problem. And I don't mean individually. You're not going to deal with the problem – you'll get many more women who have this problem. And I guess what you've got to see in the late 70s and early 80s – I'm not saying I've changed actually – I mean talk about occupying the high moral ground, we occupied the high ideological ground.*

Liz also remembered thinking that 'addiction theory' was 'blame the victim theory.' Her belief was that it was misguided to focus on a woman's addiction – the true problem was patriarchal power. It was a critique Lyn thought akin to the *'of course she drinks'*[15] school of thought, which lacked any motivation for change.

It was an argument pre-empted by those feminists who were interested in addressing addiction. One of the responses to the critique was articulated in *Girls' Own.*

> *There is another related and I think equally disastrous piece of thinking about addiction that I think feminists are particularly susceptible to…it goes something like this: 'Social conditions cause addiction because they cause people to be unhappy, oppressed etc – therefore to cure addiction we have to change the social conditions'…OBVIOUSLY IN THE LONG TERM THIS IS TRUE. In the short term, while we're offering 'society did it to her/me' rationales, women are DYING, either the death of the body or the death of the spirit, which is worse, or ruining their health and sanity – the very women we need alive and well to change those very social conditions.*[13]

In Canberra, *Wimminsnews* took up the issue. In January 1983, they published a piece, "Addiction: A Womyn's Issue," written by a woman who was identified only as Kate. She asserted women often used alcohol and other drugs as escape or pleasure. However, she argued that for some women it was a manifestation of unhappiness, dissatisfaction or desperation. Ideas of feminine martyrdom, in conjunction with the intensity of women's activism through the past decade, drew her to remind women that, *'this is a fairly important point in feminist theory – that it is revolutionary to look after ourselves.'* [14]

Lyn believed the process the Toora collective was undertaking echoed what had happened in the movement when women had first started to talk about violence and sexual assault during the 1970s;

> *We became a group of women who had developed a new understanding. We had broken the first of the barriers to claiming, owning and understanding an issue: we had broken the twin rules of silence and denial. The pattern was much like the one surrounding the earlier herstory of the women's movement, with issues such as rape, domestic violence and subsequently incest.*[16]

Talking about women's addiction posed very different challenges compared to the challenges of addressing domestic violence and rape. Both domestic violence and rape had an immediately discernable and unquestionable perpetrator and victim. Addiction was more complicated because it did seem to be indicting women or at least accusing them of complicity in their own oppression. In many ways, a feminist approach to addiction was the beginning of an innovative shift in the way feminism regarded the exercise of power. During the early 1980s, chemical dependency and eating disorders demanded the attention of the women's movement. Feminism was soon forced to address not just the daily exhibition of patriarchal violence, but also the strategies women developed to survive. The examination of survival methods like these challenged and enriched feminist ideas of power and the subtlety and

complexity of women's oppression in a patriarchal system. Power was not monolithic, rather than always working from the top down it moved through systems, twisted imperceptibly through women's lives. As Lyn summarised, the Toora collective developed a strong political analysis of chemical dependency in women;

> *We no longer believed that influences such as chemical dependency were secondary to women's oppression under patriarchy and likely to evaporate with increasing politicisation. On the contrary, we became convinced that such processes served the continued oppression of women.*[17]

Ara believed giving women the opportunity to cease destructive patterns had the potential to be revolutionary;

> *This has been the age old problem in terms of women's liberation–is what do you destroy first? You can't dismantle the patriarchy without dismantling all its tentacles. You have to cut the tentacles off … Why do we become addicts? Usually because we can't deal with the pain the patriarchy has foisted upon us. Most women who are addicts have got a history of sexual abuse or trauma. That's all part of the patriarchy. But the patriarchy extends so far and we just have to keep clipping it back. Sometimes yes, it would be great, oh it would be fabulous to just throw a rocket at it and blow it clean out of the water. But the reality is you can't just dismantle the patriarchy, you just can't just over-throw capitalism, it just isn't, that's not viable... What did those people with the really powerful revolutions do? They just began to dismantle the system, little by little. They refused to let go until monumental change occurred and there were losses along the way as there will always be. There will always be losses…But we can't give up that struggle and I believe that unless we deal with all those issues that bind us, all the things and stop hanging on to any of the bits of patriarchy, we can't dismantle them... So if you are caught by addiction, deal with addiction but get on with it.*



The personal nature of the collective's dedication was to permanently change the way Toora worked with women;

> *I think that the empowerment for service users had to only come through really deep analysis and personal empowerment, again the personal and political, and so I think now the benefits of that are being reaped differently than they were back then…We spent a bloody lot of time being very unclient focused sitting and examining our own addictions. But I don't think we would have ever got such a clear analysis and embedded some of that in our practices in the same way if we hadn't done that process.*[18]

Women's refuges had traditionally endeavoured to employ women with relevant life experience. In fact, many community services employed people in recovery, but it was rarely made explicit. Where it is explicit, such experience is often regulated. Bridie knew of one service that had a complete ban on workers sharing anything about their own stories with clients. At Toora, women's experiences of chemical dependency and recovery were part of their qualifications. At one point, the collective endeavoured to have an 80:20 ratio of workers in recovery. Over time, the service developed employment policies and practices that supported and encouraged the skill these women brought. The benefits of having women in recovery in the collective were evident;

> *Toora had the client, the woman, as the primary reason for existing and we never forgot that. So user rights were always fundamental to how Toora made any policy decisions. Toora kind of had it from its inception and I think, yes, there's feminism in that and there's real understanding about what harm minimisation policy is about. It's about people, not drugs. And I think that those sorts of early beginnings really matter and I think that part of that feminism is that there was a heart in there. I think that part of that reason was because many of the workers who had worked at Toora had been through shit, you know, they've had drug and alcohol problems, they've escaped domestic violence, they've been raped, they know what it's like so it's fairly easy to support and understand user rights when you've experienced that yourself. Many of us have been through the same shit that the women are walking through the door with.*[19]

It was a difference that directly affected the women using the service. Eddie found her experience at Toora was different to those at other services, *'because they knew where you were coming from and you didn't have to sit down for hours and explain. It's like alkies and addicts talk in shorthand…it's different.'*

In Elspeth's opinion, the collective's commitment to developing an analysis of addiction was the only thing that meant the service survived to meet the needs of chemical dependent women;

> *Without Toora's response to addiction and dependency I believe Toora would have been closed a long time ago. Our professionalism (by that I mean our working integrity) would have been compromised. Women who worked there would have burnt out quickly causing huge staff turn over and loss of any experience or expertise, and we would have had huge numbers of women dying from suicide and murder on the premises which we did not have in the time I was there. I think the first woman who died at Toora did not happen for many years after the door was first opened. The odds of it happening were enormous—the fact that it didn't happen for such a long time was credit to our addiction training and philosophy.*

While providing crisis accommodation that was appropriate and welcoming to chemically dependent women was important to the Toora collective, it was beginning to look like a band-aid solution. The collective's next political agenda was born.



# 10

# starting WARS and getting WIREDD

With three part-time workers, the collective was under-resourced to provide crisis accommodation for ten residents let alone specialised drug and alcohol support. There were few services for women to be referred to. There were no counselling services that were sensitive to the gendered experiences of dependency; there were no detox facilities where women could take their children.

In addition to providing services, the Toora collective was already doing a lot of work in the drug and alcohol field to be able to train their own workers. Their knowledge was also being utilised by other services. In 1984, Toora hosted the second National Conference on Women and Addiction. Women from the collective gave papers on Women and Addiction, Adult Children of Alcoholics, Co-Addiction and Minor Tranquilliser Use;



*What happened was the service and the organisation gained a reputation for being really expert in both the needs and interests of chemically dependent women but also advocating around them... And that meant that [we] did a huge amount of training work right around the country and largely based obviously on Lesley's expertise, [Toora] became really expert and that load was unbalanced in the context of trying to run a shelter. It was really inappropriate that there was all this output going to training and advocacy work around that issue versus service delivery. So there really was a need to establish a specific service and that's how come we did it.*[1]

Toora's campaign for funding a women-specific drug and alcoholservice displayed the persistence which they were already famous for. In addition to the usual government sources, they applied widely for non-government funding, they wrote to an assortment of charities, foundations, trusts and philanthropic agencies and received countless replies, 'we are unable to meet your request.' In 1984, the collective received funding from the Community Employment Program (CEP) for a trainee addiction worker. Lyn Morgain threw herself into the position, working with women affected by their own dependency or the dependency of others, establishing a support group for dependent women, running education and training in the community.

In April 1985, the collective received funding for one salary from the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse (NCADA), which was filled by Lesley Fraser. The Women's Addiction Recovery Service (WARS) opened in a shed down the side of the Toora house at Busby Street;

*The National Campaign Against Drug Abuse was the first significant funding put into the alcohol and drug sector. So…the WARS position was at that time, along with a worker at Leichhardt Women's Health Centre, the only gender specific alcohol drug worker in the country.*[2]

The Addiction Worker's Report to the Health Authority for April to December that year reads more like a description of a team of ten. Lesley was an active member of the Toora collective, still working on the day-to-day issues of running a refuge. She was on call 24 hours to offer the collective information and support. She worked with Toora residents around drug and alcohol issues, offered counselling, provided them with relevant information and referral. She ran training for new Toora workers. She ran a radio phone-in on local community radio station 2XX on minor tranquilliser use. She went to conferences and seminars, ran workshops and spoke to workers from other services. She accepted community referrals for counselling. She lectured nursing students on attitudes towards addiction. She convened the ACTCOSS Drug and Alcohol Task Force. In her spare time she lobbied for a detox unit;

*It was an enormously dynamic time. You've got to remember that unlike these days there was zero attention paid to women and chemical dependency … any form of process dependency. So whilst women are still grossly disadvantaged in those areas, they weren't even visible then…So the advocacy work done by the service was enormous in terms of getting a detox, in terms of getting training, in terms of getting gender issues on the agenda around drug and alcohol affected women, everything from benzos to methadone and back … So very much all the sort of stuff that WARS still does to this day but in it's embryonic stages.*[3]

Lyn believed the WARS political agenda was inseparable from the collective's. While it *'was really driven by the work of individuals [with a] deeply passionate commitment … it was absolutely supported by the collective. The collective had … a very generous political view of the importance of that work.'* Meredith recalled midnight sprees through Canberra scrawling 'we're dying for a detox' across buildings and bus stops.

The collective also realised that while the support they were offering to Toora residents who were chemically dependent was crucial, they were also committed to a woman's right to choose when and where she undertook recovery. The collective were compelled to differentiate between crisis accommodation for homeless women and a more specific recovery support service. After the "Shape up or Ship out" episode, Lyn recalled the refuge looked quite different for women who used the service;

*I would say it was harsher, tougher, meaner, a less caring and loving environment, probably a lot less rortable. Yes, I think the changes from a resi point of view would have been all bad. Because it was a much more streamlined kind of cleaned up environment. On balance a much safer, more constructive, more validating, possibly life-saving environment… that would be the perception and my argument would be [it was] utterly legitimate. It's about an explicit value system that informs practice, and the need for the organisation and for the staff in it to be explicit about that, and to balance that with consumer right and choice. Not an easy balance… How do you balance some underlying values and beliefs and knowledge systems that inform the practice of the organisation against a consumer's right to access service irrespective of the difference of view?*

WARS afforded Toora that possibility. Since the inception of WARS 20 years ago, Toora has developed the distinction between policy at the refuge and the support women receive from WARS. Eddie Wadick has seen Toora change over the last 20 years. As a resident during the 1980s she remembered that women who came back to the refuge intoxicated, or women in recovery who lapsed were likely to be evicted;

> *One time I came to Toora …and I got on the train sober and I got off absolutely rotten drunk and …somebody had given me a handful of Valium so I took them and I was off my trolley … then I brought out some cans of beer and offered it to the women and so then they rang the worker who came around. It was about one in the morning. I was sitting out in the backyard drinking and these two workers turned up and I didn't know these workers because they were new workers, so they came out the back and saw me drinking and I offered [one of them] some Valium.*

I asked her how the workers had taken it. *'Not very well,'* Eddie replied, *'They dropped me off at Ainslie Village the next day.'* Over time the collective developed policy around what was manageable in a refuge environment. Alcohol and other drugs were banned in the house, but women were free to use elsewhere as long as they were not a danger to themselves or other women when they got home. It meant that chemically dependent women were always welcome at the service and they knew there was always a large amount of information and support available. Women at the refuge can still talk to workers about wherever they are in dependency or recovery without fear of consequence.

## critique of existing services

Lyn thought the WARS funding was *'more as an acknowledgment of our vocal lobbying in the past year than as a part of a clearly defined government strategy of community service provision.'*[4] The collective had spent hours analysing the way that women's dependency differed from their male counterparts. At the time, the assertion that men and women used drugs and alcohol differently was radical. Kalpa Goldflam worked as the co-ordinator of Women's Information, Referral and Education on Drugs and Dependency [WIREDD] after a period of transition from WARS. She identified the difference the service made. *'Before [WARS] there was no such thing, it was just drug and alcohol issues and the perception was it was men's issues.'*[5] There was very little research on women's chemical dependency; the assumption was that addicts were men.

WARS assessed the way that existing drug and alcohol services were approaching women's addiction. Though supposedly gender neutral, it soon became clear that services were structured around a male norm. Observing existing drug and alcohol services, women were at best marginalised, at worst rendered invisible. WARS was vociferous in their critique of the way the existing services acted to exclude women and were at the forefront of the campaign for gender specific services in Canberra. Lyn explained;

> *We noticed, for example, drug users were referred to as male, that benzodiazapines dependence was regarded as a 'soft' drug problem and there was little acknowledgement of the influence of chemical dependency on families and significant others…On the rare occasions when women were acknowledged, there seemed little differentiation between the needs of men and women.*[6]

The Toora collective had a clear analysis of the reasons for women's chemical dependency. In her article "Codependency Issues: a Feminist Perspective," Lesley Fraser wrote,

> *The strong and painful feelings surrounding unacknowledged or unresolved hurt, shame, guilt, abuse, abandonment, betrayal, grief and sadness are called codependency …These feelings lie at the heart of addictive behaviours and form the fertile soil of addiction.*[7]

One of the questions on the information sheet workers filled out with residents on their arrival was about why they used. As Jacqui noticed, the collective's observations of the whys and hows of women's drinking and using were pointed. To the question why do you use, answers appeared repeatedly – to forget, to be numb, not to feel;

> *We can make some of those links. You know, that the bulk of women who end up being addicted to drugs and alcohol have a bunch of abuse in their past, they don't just end up there for no reason. And sexual abuse was a huge part of that, growing up in alcoholic or dysfunctional families was a huge part of that…One of the things that we started to see was that particularly women who got sober then had re-emergence of old trauma around a whole bunch of issues and that often had an impact on whether they could maintain their sobriety or not.*

WARS explicitly acknowledged the specificity of women's experience of addiction. They were prepared to the work with women around the issues like sexual assault and violence that other services were reluctant to consider or considered irrelevant to their work. The factors Toora had identified as directly contributing to women's drug and alcohol use were, and continue to be, entirely overlooked in general drug and alcohol services. Bridie Doyle, the WIREDD co-ordinator from 2001 to 2004 exclaimed,

> *I watch drug and alcohol and they still will not go near the issue of sexual assault. I just read the new drug strategy for the ACT. It's not fucking in there and I'm furious. I have been fighting in that job – God knows how long to say you cannot talk about women's drug use and not talk about sexual abuse. You can't. Statistically you can't do it … all the statistics tell you if you do not deal with a woman's sexual assault she will relapse. You have to deal with it in the first instance. If you talk to [other drug and alcohol services] they'll still be going, no she needs to get her recovery sorted before you go near the topic.*

The Toora collective and WARS had a strong commitment to the value of 12-step programs to women's recovery. Many of the elements of 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous appealed to the collective's feminist sensibility. The groups were often described as a benign anarchy. Reminiscent of collective structures, there were no formal meeting procedures or structures and there were no membership requirements. As more women started to look at addiction, women-specific and lesbian-specific groups formed. In addition, the program had no prescribed outcomes, women determined these for themselves. Elspeth noticed 12-step programs fit naturally with feminist principles. *'Quite early on we adopted the use of the self-help programs with feminist language etc ... Self-help programs fit with the philosophy that women/people should have control over their own health.'*

While 12-step groups were essentially self-help groups, they also offered women in recovery empathetic support as well as replacing the community many women lost when they stopped using;

> *I still think that the self-help meetings are the best way to help women to understand about the addictions and all the different aspects and there are many different aspects of those meetings, if they were addicts or alcoholics. There was always the other information, you know, domestic violence and all those other issues, there was always some services that could give them the information, and show you what was happening so you could see actually what was happening if you like.*

WARS introduced Bridie both to Toora and to 12-step recovery. Sobriety offered her an extension of the politics that structured the rest of her life;

*I remember looking up support services that were around knowing that I actually had problems…I made an appointment with one organisation I knew was probably not 12-step and I knew that WARS was…The one that wasn't 12-step, she was late. It was Thursday, she was late, the place looked revolting. There were cigarette butts out on the floor, it stunk of cigarette smoke, I mean I'm a smoker but it was really vile. There was shit all over her table and all she could say to me was about detox and – by which point I'd detoxed myself and went well I don't need their help, now what? She couldn't offer anything about now what? I then went to see Lesley, and I must have just got [WARS] out of the phone book from memory. She was on time, she had a whole folder full of information to give me. She gave me incredible well researched information and she talked to me about feminists in recovery and how that worked for them. She actually said your sisters need you and you need them and there's nothing like telling me that my sisters might need me to get me motivated, so I did…It was about the only thing I could imagine at that point probably that would get me to give it a try.*

Toora and WARS were well known to be exponents of 12-step recovery, the abstinence element of that was something that had not only caused rifts with the women's movement but also with other drug and alcohol services in Canberra;

> *From the outset, the philosophical differences between WARS and other approaches became apparent as a cause of tension and conflict. While we were funded to provide counselling, we chose to provide advocacy. Where the funding bodies sought treatment, we spoke in terms of training for both lay people (community stakeholders) and professionals. Where they sought clinical support services, we talked of developing peer support networks. Where government strategies aimed at an increased targeting of particular drug types, we were interested in an increasing emphasis on the range of social systems affected by chemical and other dependencies. Our approach has not won us many friends in the field and often leads to some doubt as to whether we could in fact be regarded as a legitimate player.*[8]

In 1986, the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse (NCADA) ran a national campaign intended to raise awareness of drug abuse, particularly those which most ofthe Australian public thought of as harmless – alcohol, tobacco and tranquillisers. Though the campaign was aimed at the general population, in fact exposing the harm of licit substances was greatly beneficial for women. While the women's movement has made women's presence in bars and pubs more acceptable, women's using and drinking was never as public as men's. Women were more likely to drink in secret or be dependent on substances such as tranquillisers—addictions that were sanctioned and even encouraged by the medical profession. The majority of women's drug use was alcohol and prescription drugs. The campaign supported much of the work WARS had done to expand the focus of Canberra's drug and alcohol sector to include licit substances and challenge the idea of an acceptable level of dependency.

In the late 1980s the NCADA launched National Drug Offensive campaigns, the first focused on heroin. Two NCADA staff wrote about the strategy in *Double Bind;*

> *Drug Offensive campaigns are not necessarily aimed at getting drug users to stop … Rather, the focus is on prevention and harm minimisation – that is, to intervene before people start using … [and] to provide safety information to minimise the harm in users who choose to continue.*[9]

Part of the method of prevention was to reinforce negative perceptions about heroin. It was about this time that the media was saturated with negative images of drug use and drug users. Instilling fear and prejudice in the population may have acted to deter some from picking up drugs and alcohol, the campaign definitely reinforced the guilt and shame many chemically dependent women felt.

Other drug and alcohol services in Canberra took on the principles of harm minimisation. At the same time, WARS continued to encourage 12-step and supported women in recovery. There was perception in the wider drug and alcohol sector that abstinence was not part of harm minimisation. WARS believed there was a spectrum of harm minimisation and abstinence sat on one end. While they had long been

providing safety information and were strong advocates for the rights of women who were chemically dependent, they would not be deflected from their political analysis of chemical dependency in women;

> *Toora was known, and for good reason, to be very pro 12-steps and 12-steps is an abstinence model so there was this misconception that if you support 12-steps you therefore only want everyone to stop and there is no other choice. Toora was never that. Toora was always into user rights and choice and women's choice, and women's right to use. But didn't shirk away from the issue of dependency.*[10]

Toora would not stop asking the questions about why women were using drugs and alcohol, returning always to the trauma of violence and sexual assault that is inflicted on women.

One full-time position was never going to be enough to sustain an entire service, and for the years the WARS worker was located in a shed in the back yard, she was seen as a specialised collective member. Indeed the fact that WARS was only funded for one full-time position made the service reliant on the support of the Toora collective. Kalpa remembered the expertise women in this position brought to the collective was invaluable both to the collective and women in the refuge;

> *Lyn was known as the WARS worker. And that was fantastic, having that position there, because there was just all this ongoing support and information about drug and alcohol issues and chatting about case management kind of stuff and really [important] input to the collective and case management issues … We were really lucky because we had on tap drug and alcohol training and Lyn was fantastic. She was a brilliant trainer and really knew her drug and alcohol stuff… [It was] a really good environment to learn in.*

Indeed the role the service was intended to provide was elusive. Perpetually underfunded, WARS oscillated between filling the desperate need for gender-specific drug and alcohol counselling and the provision of training and information to the community and the sector. In many ways the latter seemed like a more efficient use of the resources of one full-time position. Kalpa's opinion was,

> *You actually make a far bigger societal change through training more workers – you put your energy into training more workers in the field to work better than spending hours with one-to-one clients because that's a much smaller population. You train everyone up to work better with women and you don't have to do it yourself. I loved that vision and I thought it was really important.*

The focus on training was never exclusive—WIREDD didn't stop accepting individual referrals for reasons Kalpa articulated;

> *[The reason] I loved working counselling of women as well is [that] while I'm sitting talking to politicians I knew what I was doing because I listened to women's heartache. I really needed that balance…I always used to think I never want to lose that. I never want to lose having the time to actually spend listening to women talking because that's what informs me when I go into a funding body's office or I'm chatting to a politician. And that's what would move them…it came from women's stories that you got to change those big picture things.*

In 1993, Lesley Fraser died. Not only was the collective bereft without her presence, but WARS had so long been driven by her vision and energy that many women remembered the service struggling to find its feet for the ensuing years;

> *[WARS] was unique in the country… It reached points of evolution that it needed to go through, it needed to look at things, it needed to change and as a service it was profoundly influenced by Lesley's death, of course that really affected how it evolved. It probably would have evolved differently if she had been alive. It limped for a while after that in a different way. But you'd expect that. But it found it's energy, it does what it does which…at the end of the day is a very good contribution. I mean I suspect that there will always be that tension trying to balance working with individual women and a broader agenda.*[11]

Kathy Post, Rebecca Mathews, Cinmayii, Lyn Morgain and Lea Collins all worked in the WARS position in the years that followed Lesley's death. It was a time of substantial change for the service. When the

refuge had moved from its dilapidated location on Busby Street, a room had been set aside for WARS in the purpose-built house. As the service's reputation grew in both the women's and the drug and alcohol sector having a confidential location became frustrating. Although the new Toora house was a considerable step up from the shed in which it had spent the first ten years of its life, during 1994, WARS moved out. The collective had been struggling to place limits around the work WARS was doing. The move coincided with a collective proposal that WARS withdraw from its lobbying and advocacy role, stop doing assessments, referrals and counselling and instead,

- That WARS adopt a primary function of information dissemination, resource production, and (contract) training, and that;
- The position adopt the hours and budget that is considered viable by both the collective and the worker undertaking the position.

In December 1994, the ACT's Chief Minister, Rosemary Follett launched the relocated, renamed service. WIREDD – Women's Information, Referral and Education on Drugs and Dependency opened in a converted primary school, the Downer Business Centre. Changing the service's name represented the service's reconfiguration;

> *No coincidence, they had a name change, from calling it addiction to calling it Women's Information, Resources and Education on Drugs of Dependency [WIREDD]. So it changed its name to move from that kind of pre-harm-minimisation model to this is WIREDD now and it's about training and it's really prevention work. It's early intervention, it's about up-skilling workers in the field and also it was a service that was going to provide training for women with issues themselves. So rather than doing counselling you'd go through a workshop and deal with some of your issues through learning about stuff.*[12]

For the next few years WIREDD battled to retain adequate funding. While in 1993 they received funding for two full-time positions, it was a brief reprieve. The next year that funding was cut. Very quickly, the service moved again. WIREDD took up residence in one of the tiny rooms along the second level of the Griffin Centre in the city.



Kalpa Goldflam had joined the Toora collective only a couple of months after Lesley's death. She worked as a resident support worker at both Toora and Heira, did a stint as the service coordinator (a position that had a brief existence during the mid 1990s) and became the coordinator of WIREDD in 1996. As she recalled,

> *I know a lot of what they were doing was they were setting up. WIREDD went through a long process of setting up. Moving to Downer was a huge move. And then moving to the Griffin Centre, but that took a lot of time. Finding a premises. I think that was a lot of the work, was just setting up. Like just getting a shell to be able to then do some stuff in… when it was in the matchbox at Griffin Centre I think it was still settling in to just okay what are we doing here? Where is our focus now? That was my sense.*

Kalpa knew WIREDD were still counselling women about drug and alcohol issues and had formulated an ambitious training calendar, but she laughed when she admitted, *'When I started there it was up in the little matchbox, and I wasn't exactly sure what I was supposed to be doing. I knew that it had a long, very strong history of training in the community.'* She was not short on knowledge however. Her experience at Toora left her well prepared;

> *Anyone who was working in Toora during that time got a lot of advanced drug and alcohol training…There's an enormous amount of on-the-job training. Driving women to detox, chatting about stuff, seeing women in different states, calling the ambulance when someone's OD'd. You know there's a lot of on the job training. You get to see what pills do face-to-face, not just in your brain. But even when I started at WIREDD I wasn't as clear about what a standard drink was. I don't think I could quote that to anyone else. I wasn't clear about some of the really kind of technical stuff. But I knew what a drug and alcohol issue was. I understood women's disadvantage in the world and how that affected drug and alcohol work.*

Services were still clamouring for training on the issues around chemical dependency for women;

> *There seemed to be like a lot of services looking for somewhere to refer women to talk about issues. So for me that was really useful because it gave me more of a chance to develop my drug and alcohol knowledge by working with women which made training them a lot easier for me because I was learning on the job as I went. I think I had my first training session the week I started as WIREDD co-ordinator. Just to one person. A drug and alcohol service rang up and said we've got someone we want trained up on women's drug and alcohol issues – hello – and I went sure, okay. So I kind of just got thrown in the deep end in training. Luckily it was just one-on-one but I found that to be really useful because it put me in the direction of starting to research women's drug and alcohol issues a lot more specifically and develop the beginning of a training program.*

The WIREDD position was split between two women – Kalpa did four days a week and Cinmayii covered the other one. For the following years WIREDD worked to strengthen the WARS work on women and dependency. Kalpa reflected, the drug and alcohol sector was *'a tough sector to work in and you either survive it or you go under. And WIREDD grew in that sector. WIREDD took up a space.'*

Kalpa felt the strength the service grew to rested heavily on the revolutionary nature of its beginnings;

> *We worked really well as a team meeting up with the [funding bodies] negotiating the contracts. WIREDD became a force in itself. Like it became very – well WARS was a very respected service. It was a radical service and I guess I got the opportunity to build in on all that original work that was done, that it was unique and it was radical. When I was working there WIREDD was not as radical as WARS was but it did develop a very strong reputation as an important drug and alcohol service in Canberra.*

While it may have been incredibly stretched for resources, the service never lost its commitment to advocating for wider social changes. As Kalpa remembered,

> *I'd go to meetings, take up space, talk about women's issues, put gender on the agenda and people would go, here we go. Yes, and I loved doing all that. So networking was one of my strengths and I really developed that. Got ACTAADA [ACT Association of Alcohol and Drug Agencies] working really strong. ACTAADA did stuff they'd never done before. We did a day trip for parliamentarians to go around and look at different drug and alcohol services during Drug Action Week.*

One of Kalpa's fondest memories was the Young Women's Health Fair that WIREDD ran for a couple of years. The first was held in at Old Parliament House in 1998; *'There was about 1,000 women there…Young women coming from schools and school buses and we had a band from Melbourne and 45 stalls and it was a huge event.'*

The service operated on one full-time wage for the most part of 15 years. In 1999 they were able to significantly expand their services thanks to the National Illicit Drug Strategy. In the late 1990s WIREDD moved out from its tiny office into a bigger area on the ground floor, which was lighter and more accessible. Even then WIREDD needed more space;

> *Once we got more than one worker there at any one time we had to have somewhere else to counsel, because when someone would come and see me, I'd just shut the front door and put a closed sign on it. When we had more workers there was no confidentiality there, so we actually hired another little room in the Griffin Centre and set it up and painted it and made it beautiful and set up the counselling room. And ... that would be busy heaps of the time because we'd have our little diaries full of women coming to chat about drug and alcohol issues.*[13]

In 2001, Bridie Doyle took over from Kalpa as the coordinator of WIREDD. She felt Kalpa's dedication had greatly strengthened the service;

> *Having one person actually really run and commit to it whereas before it kept flopping around…You know the drug and alcohol system is bloody mad…And it's very difficult to manoeuvre your way through it as a feminist and I think Kalpa did great work around establishing it as a feminist service without completely alienating the drug and alcohol sector.*

The vitality of WIREDD today is a legacy of the passionate innovation of the Toora collective and the Women's Addiction Recovery Service. The women who work there retain a strong feminist agenda, which they continue to offer to women in Canberra. Bridie's description of her own commitment was striking;

> *It doesn't matter to me what somebody uses, how long they've used it, how much they did yesterday. I should be able to tell from them sitting in front of me whether or not they're a risk for dropping on me at the time, or there is some profound medical risk.. I want to talk about the whys. What stops them from using? What purpose does it serve? What could they do instead?'*

In the months before she left the service to become the coordinator of Marzenna, Toora's drug and alcohol halfway house, Bridie was enthusiastic about where the strengths of WIREDD might take the service;

> *I think some of the innovative places WIREDD can go is the stuff around engagement. And it's starting to be talked around in the bigger picture…There is starting to be a bit of research done and it really shows if you have good engagement (which means that the person feels like the person that's with them knows what they experience, really wants to help them, can walk in their shoes) that they will do much better and the outcomes are showing that six to 12 months later and I think we have a lot of work we can contribute around that and that WIREDD is very, very good at that bit. When we did our external evaluation it was the bit that showed up over and over was that women felt very loved, very supported, very held at WIREDD and that that was useful for them, that they talked about how it kept them alive.*

Today WIREDD continues to expand its services and respond to the needs of women. As Bridie reflected,

> *There is that really clear knowledge around there's nothing I can do about stopping the path she's on, I can continue to love and support her, which I do, and I also want to keep her safe. And sometimes that is a real challenge to my heart.*

And sometimes it makes all the difference.



# 11

# Heira: single women escaping domestic violence

The tiny house in Busby Street never really got any less chaotic. While policies and procedures made responses to the chaos slightly more predictable and regular, the women coming through the doors kept bringing the same life stories. It wasn't long before the collective began to identify women who were struggling to maintain their stay at Toora. Single women escaping domestic violence (DV) from their husbands, fathers, partners, brothers and children found Toora a frightening place to be. Branka recalled the experiences of these women. Many of them,

> *Were confronted with women with such complex needs. Other women with mental health issues, sexual assault issues, women raging in the house. Women didn't feel safe, absolutely*



*didn't feel safe. They just escaped a violent situation and they had this angry – like a woman in rage sharing the room with them. They thought hell is at home, but this is hell here as well. I've got to go where I know.*

Most women chose to return home or take their chances elsewhere within a few nights. Bridie's memories of the interactions between the homeless women at Toora and those escaping domestic violence are more colourful. She was one of the women who joined the collective in preparation for the new refuge and saw the need first hand;

*So you had this very tiny, little house [and] you'd have these mad women, like seriously with alfoil on their heads to stop the radars getting them, on the top bunk of the woman who has just never been exposed to any people like this that had just fled DV. Of course they wouldn't stay. The one from DV would just go, 'this is a mad house,' which it was, and leave. So I think when I started we actually hadn't opened the refuge [for single women escaping domestic violence] because we were all being trained to then have it opened so I got to work [at Toora] for however long while it looked like that.*

The collective recognised that Toora was incapable of providing safe and secure accommodation to women escaping domestic violence. Because they were unaccompanied by children, these women were also excluded from many of the other domestic violence specific refuges. With characteristic initiative and vigour, the Toora collective set about remedying the gap in services themselves, and they began campaigning for a refuge for single women escaping domestic violence. Their first proposal in 1989 was rejected, but the collective's commitment was indefatigable. In 1991, they started a petition, which was signed by several hundred Canberrans. In the petition's cover letter the collective summarised;

*The Toora Single Women's Shelter collective through the experience of providing crisis accommodation for women unaccompanied by children has become aware of the needs of [single] women [escaping domestic violence]. The reality of attempting to deal sensitively with women subjected to such violence in the context of a shelter which has as its primary aim the provision of shelter to homeless women simply serves to bring home the unsuitability of this type of accommodation.*

Much like the process of funding Toora, the campaign was lengthy and often frustrating. Chris Rytir answered an advertisement in the paper for workers for the service and after a gruelling interview, was offered the position. She accepted. Chris still recalled getting a phone call from Jacqui during her farewell party in the government department where she had been working. 'We can't employ you,' Jacqui said, 'we don't have any money.' The funding for the service had been delayed and Chris was forced to ask her boss if they could re-schedule the farewell festivities for six months later.

In May 1991, after three years of collective effort, a service for single women unaccompanied by children who were homeless as a result of domestic violence was funded under SAAP. The service was named after Hiera, a queen who fought at the battle of Troy. Within a year however, the letters of the name had translocated and the service is now known as Heira. Ara Cresswell laughed at the confusion around the spelling, at one point there was letterhead with one spelling across the top and the other across the bottom. While it may be strictly incorrect, at least the service has now settled on one arrangement.

Unbeknownst to the Toora collective, an intense exchange had begun between the ACT Housing Trust and Heira's neighbours in Fraser. During November 1991, the next-door neighbour, Robert Pall (not his real name), wrote to the ACT Minister for Housing, Terry Connolly. He outlined the features of the Heira house for the Minister, *'kitchen/eating area, separate dining room, lounge and five bedrooms. It also has a ten meter above ground swimming pool, inground sprinkler system, reverse cycle air conditioning, large solid fuel heater and solar hot water system.'*[1] The house had been bought by the Housing Trust for $190 000. Mr Pall had three primary concerns, firstly, *'whether the house is to be used for subsidised housing, female refuge accommodation or emergency housing?'* Secondly, *'does the ACT Housing Trust normally provide accommodation of this standard with luxury options for potential housing trust tenants?'* Lastly Mr Pall was

keen to advise the Minister that he and his neighbours had noticed a trend of housing trust tenants taking up residence in his suburb, a trend which was affecting the value of their properties.

He was soon joined and even outdone in his crusade by another neighbour, Mary Brennan (not her real name). Her campaign was relentless. She wrote to the Minister and to the ACT Housing Trust and eventually to the Ombudsman. Her complaints were that residents of the area had not been consulted in the decision to use the house to provide some sort of accommodation service. She was angry that they were not allowed to know the identity of the organisation providing the service. For, while she supported *'the dispersement of community services such as the care of the disabled within residential areas, there are some services because of the nature of the nuisance inherent in their operation, that are better separated from residential areas.'*[2] The exchange between the Housing Trust and Mary Brennan continued for six months. By the end of January she was expressing concern for the safety of residents. There was a bus stop close to the house used by children and at night it had the potential to become even more dangerous with the mysterious use of house 129. She drafted a proposed social contract she wanted the Housing Trust to sign. The contract included clauses that obliged the Trust to compensate neighbours for any damage to person or property. One of the biggest concerns was that the value of houses in the area would be prejudiced by the having a service so close by. She suggested the Trust should have to purchase affected houses at their full price and should establish a liaison committee comprising the Trust, neighbours, workers and residents of the service. In a detailed response, The Housing Trust declined to become a party to the contract.

Meanwhile the Toora collective was busy establishing the service. They hired and trained staff and compiled changes that needed to be made to the house: ramps, security and privacy. In February, Mary Brennan was notified that the house was to be used for supported accommodation of an unspecified nature. Despite her most ardent protestations, privacy and confidentiality precluded the Trust from identifying the service provider. Early in March however, Telecom technicians stumbled through Robert Pall's property to hook up Heira's phone lines, and in the process, let it slip who would be using the phones. Robert Pall and Mary Brennan now knew Heira's identity and relaunched their complaint.

By June 1992, Heira had her first residents and the neighbours had the Shadow Minister for Housing on side. Liberal Member of the Legislative Assembly Greg Cornwell, issued a media release criticising the Housing Trust for their extravagant purchase and the secrecy surrounding the tenants. He was so indignant he also was such that he also disclosed the location of the house. His Ministerial counterpart, Terry Connolly, issued a desperate appeal to the media asking them not to publicise the address Greg Cornwall had disclosed. Toora sprang into immediate action and in the guise of Women's Services ACT they issued a press release titled, "Greg Cornwell threatens the lives of women;"

> *Far from some kind of extravagance, [women's] services, managed by non-government bodies, provide an efficient and effective means of meeting what is a critical community need. That Government facilitate the purchase of appropriate accommodation and endeavour to maintain the necessary confidentiality of the address, should be commended not undermined.*
>
> *For women who require supported accommodation to be subjected to these ill informed and unprecedented attacks is a further assault, which no member of the ACT community could support.*

The local media picked up the story. *The Canberra Times,* reported '*the Liberals have described a $190,000 property bought by the ACT Housing Trust for supported accommodation as "Club Med".*'[3] The same day Greg Cornwell also attacked Terry Connolly in the Assembly, demanding answers to a litany of questions in regard to the property. On his way there he appeared on 2CN's morning show with Margot Foster. He reiterated his objections to the luxury of the house, though Margot Foster questioned his assertion that two houses could be purchased for the price paid for Heira. He also reprised the familiar attitudes towards single women escaping domestic violence and their counterparts accompanied by children. Though he quickly back-pedalled, when asked to express his concerns with the house being used as a domestic violence service he said *'there are a number of*

*problems. First of all I am not yet convinced that it is for women and children. There has been some suggestions [sic] that it might just be for single women.'*[4] When he complained of the secrecy surrounding the refuge, Margot suggested, *'Don't you think you've missed the point of the special nature of these domestic violence refuges? The fact is that secrecy is integral to their working.'*[5] The media coverage was the high point in the debacle, they maintained the confidentiality of the address and Heira quietly continued.

Meanwhile, Lesley had seen something called an Italian Talent Quest on television and decided it would be a great event to launch Heira. It was held in the lounge room, Jacqui performed the Nutcracker Suite in a tutu, Bridie hired a tuxedo and played the piano on the ironing board and another worker, Helga, found a pair of lederhosen and performed a clog dance. Jacqui could not quite discern what exactly it was about the event that made it an Italian talent quest, *'it just seemed like any old talent quest to me!'* Despite its idiosyncratic opening, Heira struggled to find an identity during the first few years of operation. For the first time, the Toora collective had to deal with running multiple services in multiple locations. WARS had moved out of the refuge in 1993, Heira was a 20 minute drive away from Toora and Likaya still demanded the collective's attention. Suddenly the collective was managing an organisation, not just one service. At first the collective tried to manage Heira, Toora and run the halfway house as one entity. Soon they found their statistics didn't seem to reflect the specifics of what was happening at any of the services. During 1993, the collective realised that there was a need to split up the data collection to get a clearer picture of the distinct populations at Toora and Heira. Heira was funded for the relatively luxurious number of seven positions, a far cry from the two full-time positions which Toora opened with. The women who joined the collective with the inception of Heira were just added to the team of Toora workers. For many years the rosters covered both houses, rotating through seven weeks at Toora and four weeks at Heira. It meant there was very little stability or consistency for residents of either service or in the collective's knowledge of either of the houses or of the women who lived there.



Heira was a very different service to Toora. The women managed their own lives without the drama of Toora residents. The house wasn't driven by crisis. Some workers didn't want to do the different sort of work that Heira residents needed;

> *The women stayed longer, they were the easier clients, they were the ones whose needs were not quite so complex, and they needed to see the same faces instead of every bloody day seeing somebody new. And in fact that was really important, that kind of shift. And it was also important in terms of women and their career paths. Some women went from Toora to Heira and went, 'I love this domestic violence field,' and went on and moved in different areas of the domestic violence sector. Some went there and went, 'I hate this. I hate DV and I really want [to work] particularly around women with addiction.*[6]

The first year of operation was marked by low occupancy rates. The Toora collective were deep in conversation about why the need that had manifested at Toora daily wasn't translating into Heira's success. Some women thought the reasons were geographic – Heira was hardly central compared to Toora's inner north location. Even without comparison, the service seemed isolated from services like social security and the Housing Trust. Perhaps there had been a problem in how the collective had conceptualised the target group? Perhaps there were not enough single women escaping domestic violence to sustain a specialised service? The referral system for Heira was always through Toora – maybe the chaos of that service still precluded women accessing it and therefore Heira? As the collective developed an awareness of the differences in the services they were offering, Heira began to take shape. Heira created the demand for Toora women to formulate and develop knowledge and analysis of domestic violence. As Branka articulated, *'what Heira house contributed was it was a learning curve for Toora workers … How domestic violence affects women was the real issue there.'* It was another valuable experience for the collective as they learnt about domestic violence and familiarised themselves with the services and networks that already existed in Canberra.

Despite the challenges Heira initially posed to the collective, it provided an important and unique service to women in Canberra. It took shape as a quiet and safe place for women to deal specifically with issues of domestic violence. The house developed a very different feel to Toora as the residents shared their life stories, formed friendships and support networks;

> *There was this dynamic where the women would actually talk to each other about their issues…because different women escaping DV were at different stages…For some women it happens the first time they leave. So they would share their experience and sometimes women would hear, 'oh well I'm thinking of going back to him.' And the women who had already done that would say, 'you be careful about that.' Because, almost like workers would talk, a woman would say, 'there is this cycle of violence, he'll be very nice and buy you flowers.' Women would go and talk to other women, 'oh guess what? I just heard this and that makes sense.' It was amazing, the house working things about domestic violence. That was good.*[7]

While Heira was originally established for single women escaping domestic violence, the client group expanded to accommodate other women whose needs were not accommodated by a homelessness service. Women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds also found life at Toora difficult. Many of these women were also escaping domestic violence and had little exposure to issues Toora residents dealt with daily;

> *A lot of NESC [non English speaking culture] women were escaping DV [domestic violence] and ended up at Busby Street and were feeling very unhappy…In '91 we had mostly some Yugoslav women, Serbian and Croatian, Greek women, Italian women, yes. And some – let me think, yes a few Indian women who would come – day or two at the most and run straight back from where they came from, run straight back because that house was pretty hellish.*[8]

In recognition of this, the first run of Heira pamphlets and resident contracts were printed in several languages, including Arabic, Croatian, Italian, Macedonian, Serbian, Spanish, Thai and Vietnamese. For those women who did not read or write, the collective managed to organise audiotapes of the contract and information. Branka recalled painstakingly translating the pamphlet into Macedonian and Serbian, but avowed it made a significant difference to the women who came to the service; *'It was just respectful.'*

In recognition of the diversity of cultures using Heira, the collective aimed to employ women with relevant life and cultural experiences. These women worked well with women from differing cultures, and challenged the collective;

> *There was a clear need for employing more workers and … we made strategically plan to employ more workers from other cultures because the deal of Heira was to get women who were escaping domestic violence and possibly some other cultures who were not fitting into Toora out, they couldn't feel safe. That's the truth of the matter…The more Toora started employing workers from different cultures, the more workers made an effort to understand what is that about and they could see the difference. It's still a process of learning.*[9]

The organisation as a whole now employs and accommodates women from many cultural backgrounds. Heira continues to operate and to expand the knowledge of Toora workers. As Australia's migration laws become more shameful, the service is developing an understanding of migration and refugee law in Australia and the experiences of those women whose lives depend on it.

# 12

# race and ethnicity at toora

*But if you lined up all the women who reckoned that Toora wasn't for them you'll find…that's all the women of colour, that's all the working-class women and it's all the welfare class women and it's all the transgender people as well as the people with disabilities. And I go hmm, how well did we do really? I don't say that to criticise anyone at all, it's a critique of the way in which processes work and that's why I argued [against] the romanticised view [of Toora] because I think that short-sells the vision. I don't think the vision can always be realised but I think it's wrong to assume something has been transcendent in nature, politically transcendent because why would it be? And I'd much rather deal with the reality. I'd much rather deal with the practicalities.*[1]

Women's liberation was premised on the idea that women formed a global group, a sisterhood united by a common identity and experience of patriarchal oppression. Ien Ang, an Australian feminist theorist, has suggested that it was *'the universalisation of white middle-class women's lives as representative of* ***the*** *female experience which made it possible for modern Western feminism to gather momentum and become such an important social movement.'*[2] During the 1980s the idea that the women's movement did not genuinely include or represent working-class women, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Indigenous women, was beginning to have some currency within the movement and within women's services across Australia;

> *Those major themes going through around racism and addiction…they were such important themes in the whole women's liberation movement at the time and sort of acted out in a way in the women's sector and with Toora.*[3]

The Toora collective were involved in anti-racist political action in Canberra, including the picket outside the South African Embassy and began to realise the collective had to address the manifestations of racism closer to home;

> *It would have been in the 80s that Indigenous women…within the women's movement – there started to be real challenges – collectives being challenged and analysed – how and why we were doing our collective structures, and if we were employing Indigenous women and women from non-English speaking cultures. It was happening in women's services across the board. And I think we at Toora knew that we had to address it.*[4]

Women at Toora felt like they were making every effort to have the necessary conversations around racism. Despite their commitment to the issue, during the 1980s it was difficult for Toora to retain Indigenous workers. It seemed it was not a place that Indigenous women wanted to work. Late in 1987, a young Indigenous woman was hired as a resident support worker. After several performance issues, she was asked to take six months off, as was the practice at the time. The work at Toora was difficult and women frequently burnt out. Often

as an alternative to dismissal, women were given leave without pay from the collective. Three weeks later the young woman resigned and made a complaint to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission under the *Racial Discrimination Act*. While the Race Discrimination Commissioner decided there was not sufficient cause to investigate the matter, it was a clear indication that Toora's racial politics were cause for concern. This was confirmed when the collective arrived at Toora one Friday morning in 1988. The house had been vandalised during the night. Across the walls and footpaths was scrawled, 'Toora fucks over black women,' 'you are on Aboriginal land,' and 'where are your feminist politics?' The reality of addressing racism within Toora was staring the collective in the face, in big, black letters.

What happened at Toora was the same story that was playing out in women's services, women's organisations and networks across Australia. Feminists began to evaluate the cultural specificity of their practices, as Meredith said succinctly, *'about the worst thing you could be would be racist.*' When the women's movement realised it did not represent Indigenous women or women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, they simply invited them to join the sisterhood. Jackie Huggins, an Aboriginal historian, attested that the invitation was extended, *'with little apparent recognition of the full horror of racism in australia, nor of how it continued to damage Aboriginal men as well as women.'*[5]

The membership of the Toora collective was typical of collectives at the time. As Lyn expressed,

> *Fundamentally you were dealing with the white middle-class group largely, [which was] something the group was never very good at acknowledging, to be honest, notwithstanding the explicit discussions around anti-racism politics, which…were very strong. We were very actively involved in a whole lot of anti-racism issues and the bulk of us remain so to this day. But the group itself was largely, notwithstanding individual life experience, pretty much coming from a position of middle class values, white, middle-class values.*



The collective actively attempted to redress the imbalance. They encouraged Indigenous women to apply for positions and join the collective. Tjanara Goreng Goreng was an Indigenous woman who joined the collective in the late 80s in a response to a job advertisement, *'it must have been late 86 or early 87 they put an ad in the paper looking for workers, Indigenous, particularly Indigenous women at Toora.'* Tjanara worked in the collective for a number of years, but she remembered there was no analysis of difference. There were times she found the cultural specificity of collective practice maddening, *'If I have to respect your laws and your culture in your service then you should have some regard for mine.'* She also remembered feeling frustrated; *'I didn't get any training and I didn't get any respect for my Indigenous knowledge or my cultural knowledge and that's a sign of the times really because a lot of organisations were not capable of that.'* Tjanara saw the collective's willingness in principle to address racism, but the reality of doing that would necessitate more than recruiting Indigenous women to work within the collective's existing structures;

> *I believe that [women's services] were actually attempting … to have 30% Indigenous, 30% NESC [Non English Speaking Culture] women and 30% white women [as workers] … but I think that they did not have the ability to create a culturally diverse workplace. They did not have the cross-cultural understanding, they had their road, and it's our road or the high road.*

Meredith concurred, Indigenous women were expected to fit into the established mould;

> *I think we probably did try our very hardest at the time to address [racism] effectively but we can't have been doing everything the right way even if we thought we were. We didn't address it effectively by the fact that it wasn't a place that seemed to work well a lot of the time for Indigenous women … but we liked, at the time, to think we really were … We made commitments to change the make-up of the collective, I mean I wouldn't say it was a middle-class collective but it was a predominantly young, white women's collective with some exceptions. But we knew we had to change that…We started changing our employment*

*policies and trying to work towards equal representation. But I think in hindsight our expectations – we weren't prepared to change that much… We wanted to have cross-representation on the collective, but in many ways we wanted people to fit into our ideas which isn't the way it works.*

Ara described how the appearance of equality ran the risk of being valued above achieving the substantive equality that required engagement and compromise;

*Aboriginal women have been told they have to do better than whites by half, you have to be cleaner … you've got to make sure your clothes are perfectly pressed, you've got to have your food completely neat and your house must be immaculate and you must always be respectful. Why? So that you look like you're equal … And what these Aboriginal women have been told is, change your whole life communication to fit in with us rather than we will meet you halfway.*

The collective's focus on recovery from chemical dependency also became prohibitive to Indigenous women in the collective and as residents. While it was never racist in intention, in practice it described an experience of dependency that Indigenous people did not identify with. Ara reflected,

*I think that it's easy in hindsight to go, 'gee we could have done that better.' But I do believe that where women didn't comply with that kind of dominant culture which was one of recovery, they were very isolated and that was really isolating for the Aboriginal women and for the NESB [Non English Speaking Background] women … Back then the focus was so one-eyed on recovery on 12-step recovery, rather than recovery in a much broader sense that I think many women were marginalised and that was a racist agenda without us ever knowing that.*

As Tjanara commented,

*One day [someone] said to me in a collective meeting, we can't get any Aboriginal women who are sober and clean, and I just thought that was really racist at the time. I didn't say so, but I thought it was. I just thought, well there are plenty who don't drink. Maybe the ones that are coming to you are ones that do drink and maybe your rigid attitude to the way people drink, meaning they're either social drinkers or they're drunks, means that you don't see anybody in between.*

Tjanara expressed the difficulties some Indigenous people had with the 12-step model of recovery supported by the Toora collective;

*[Twelve-step] doesn't [fit the Indigenous experience] and lots of studies have shown that it doesn't fit…A whole lot of reports show that the disease model and the alcohol dependency syndrome models do not fit with a range of people, including Indigenous. It's not an Indigenous experience. They're group drinkers, they're binge drinkers, there's a whole range of experiences. Some drink a lot and some don't drink at all and never have.*

Jacqui remembered that the collective searched for ways to make the 12-step program relevant to Indigenous women and produce more culturally appropriate drug and alcohol resources;

*A few Indigenous women went to the Northern Territory to do the CAAPS [Council for Aboriginal Alcohol Program Services] training program which is all about the adaptation of the 12-steps for Indigenous communities, women said it was really great training.*

Ultimately, Lyn thought that the exclusion posed by recovery, though tangible, was unintentional;

*What happened, I think, was that the recovery model was utilised as a means of legitimising the dominant cultural perspective … That model and that culture and that class of privilege did exclude a whole range of groups over time. And I don't say that as a damning criticism because in fact I know the group tried very hard over that time to do quite the reverse. But not very successfully. So on balance … was [it] purposeful and deliberate? Obviously not. Was it a matter of concern to the group? Yes it was.*

The reality of addressing racism in the women's movement as it was epitomised at Toora, was and continues to be a challenging, painful and complex process. Engaging with racism meant white feminists had to understand the philosophical differences between them and Indigenous women, recognise their own role in Australia's racist history and develop an analysis of difference.

## feminism and women's business

While it was the strength of philosophical principles and political analysis that distinguished feminist women's services from their mainstream counterparts, it was also possibly one of the features that made the participation of Indigenous women difficult. Tjanara recalled feeling the way she viewed women's issues was quite different to the majority of the Toora collective;

> *I'd read about feminism at university, I'd decided that it was a lot of bullshit for me as a black woman. I'm not interested in feminism, and I think if white women need it, if that's their way of dealing with the oppression that's occurred for thousands of years and it's a voice that they have and that's their voice, wonderful, but Aboriginal women have their own voice in their own way and they don't need white feminism to have that voice in their own culture or in white culture.*

Indigenous women faced particular issues which left them hostile to many of the radical feminist principles women's refuges were based on. White feminist critiques of family and sexuality seemed all but irrelevant to Indigenous women. It was difficult to form a critique of the family when your own had been destroyed by white Australia's racist and genocidal assimilation policy. As Jackie Huggins observed, while white women fought for the right to say yes to sex without condemnation, black women were more concerned with, *'fighting denigratory sexual stereotypes and exploitation by white men, the issue was more often the right to say "no."'*[6] Indigenous social and kinship structures were also markedly different from the prevailing Anglo-Saxon models in Australia and warranted their own gender analysis. Some Indigenous women perceived feminism as divisive or anti-men, while the decimation of Aboriginal culture required Indigenous men and women to work together.

## white women and racism

Indigenous women posed a serious challenge to the radical feminist principle of a sisterhood united by an experience of male oppression. One of Toora's early collective policy documents outlined their position on racism;

> *Toora recognises that racism exists in this society on all levels, and is overt and covert … Racism, racial prejudice and cultural prejudice are aspects of the power dynamic of patriarchy. The Toora collective actively involves itself in promoting anti-racist attitudes in its workers, residents and in the broader community…*
>
> *Toora also recognises that, in the levels of oppression, Aboriginal and Islander women, women of non-English speaking background and women of colour suffer discrimination of race as well as discrimination on the basis of sex.*

Marilyn Lake wrote that feminists had a keen awareness of the fact that Indigenous women suffered race-based oppression and discrimination, but their experiences were conceptualised as being extra to their primary oppression as women, *'The different experiences of working class, migrant or Aboriginal women were theorised as a matter of double or triple disadvantage, as different degrees of oppression rather than different kinds.'* [7]

The Toora collective never denied the racist structure of Australian society. As their policy on racism continued;

> *Toora recognises racism, racial prejudice and cultural prejudice are major political and social issues of our time, and that they are perpetuated by a society dominated by Anglo-Celtic men and the racist overview of the white Western male view.*

Perhaps the most difficult proposition facing white women in the movement was the slow recognition that racism was not the exclusive

domain of white middle-class men, as expressed in Toora's policy. White women themselves were beneficiaries and perpetrators of racism. Pursuant to that acknowledgement, white women committed to relinquishing some of the power and privilege they were accorded due to their race. It was an extraordinarily difficult challenge. Di Lucas is a good example of someone who was able to do that;

> *The reason I actually left [Toora] the second time was that a decision had been made in women's refuges, nationally I think, that they would attempt to have a ratio of 3:3:3. Three Anglo, three Indigenous and three non-English speaking. A vacant position came up and they offered it to me. And that wouldn't have [constituted] the 3:3:3. You know, there was all this support for a 3:3:3 ratio but as soon as a vacancy came up they offered it to me, and that really annoyed me and I was a bit passionate about it. Some people thought I was really angry but I always remember Ara saying, 'no, this is what Di's like when she's really passionate.'*

As Meredith expressed, it was something easier in theory than in practice;

> *It was really complex at the time. And people were saying the real challenge was, will you give up your job so an Indigenous woman can have your job? And knowing that that was the right thing to do on some levels but also knowing well, where am I going to go and what am I going to do?*

## developing an analysis of difference

Recognising and engaging with their own racism led feminists to reconsider some of their fundamental assumptions. They had to critically evaluate their own structures and acknowledge that many of the women's services and organisations that sprang up during the 1970s and 80s were white institutions, built on a set of cultural assumptions. While Toora recognised the cultural specificity of their own systems were so entrenched as to be almost immovable, they endeavoured to change them as much as possible.



In the last 20 years, the analysis around race and racism in Australia has become more sophisticated. More women have spoken of their experiences as black women, as white women, as women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. As women talked about the complexity of issues, the Toora collective was able to evaluate their procedure and policies and develop an analysis of difference. The Toora collective had always had a strong objection to tokenism. They believed recruiting women to fill some sort of quota was condescending and had the potential to set Indigenous women up. Meredith saw that fundamental change had to occur; *'I guess the thing is that we were setting the standards. It was our standards which we expected Indigenous women to meet.'* Slowly the Toora collective developed different employment practices that recognised the complexity of racism;

> *My view is, and it's still a very strong view, if you want to employ people who've been decimated by whatever it is, whether it's by racism or whether it's by abuse, or whether it's by the effects of living in a violent world, we've got to be able to live with it and you've got to be able to accept that at times it will bring people undone. And that to me is crucial. And that to me is part of the thing about running a feminist service. You should give a little bit more.* [8]

The inclusions of provisions like cultural leave into the Toora contract made a substantial contribution to Indigenous women being able to work in the collective;

> *We all know that we have a lot more funerals and a longer way to go usually than other people, and then there's also carer's business, a lot of Aboriginal people take care of other people outside their immediate family, so the fact that they incorporate those needs in the contract is a really good thing.*[9]

Tjanara also remembers that having a number of Indigenous workers also made a big difference,

> *And we got another Aboriginal worker after I'd been there a year or so, and she was very good. She was a relief worker and she was very good because she was from western New South Wales somewhere,*

*and she knew how if people were looking down on the ground, they felt ashamed and they didn't want to … but she didn't force people to look them in the face, whereas some of the other workers would say, look at me when I'm talking to you, and yet it was really Aboriginal to look down. It's just one of those simple things.*

Discussions around race and racism were initially quite narrowly focussed. Ara observed, *'then it was very much seen in terms of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal rather than a range of cultures.'* In the years that followed, the analysis of exclusion and difference extended to women from other non-Anglo Saxon cultures. Branka remembered that when she applied for the job, the collective was,

*Clearly interested in me being a NESC woman was what they called it then…I think of myself as a person that's quite adaptable and I was very eager to learn about this [Anglo-Saxon] culture and anyway the way things are done and how…But anyway I found really that there was not much knowledge. There was a lot of ignorance about different cultures. There was an assumption that the good way is this way and the culture hasn't been taken into account so even on a level of me communicating with the other workers, often there would be miscommunication because of that. I'll give you an example…where I came from in our culture…the more you are friendly with people the more you drop all the formalities in communications. Where here it took me a while to get accustomed to say all the necessary 'excuse me, sorry' … The more Toora started employing workers from different cultures, the more workers made an effort to understand what is that about and they could see the difference. But it's still a process of learning, I think.*

In many ways it seems that the need to address racism within their structures was not something that brought women's services in Canberra together. Rather, it became a major point of division and conflict within the white women's movement as women critically assessed the way other services were addressing racism. As Meredith recalled, *'There wasn't – at that time it felt like anyway, there wasn't much room for forgiveness for mistakes…There was a lot of infighting and finger pointing and – it was an enormous issue across women's services.'*

When Toora was taken to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Meredith recalled her experience of the lack of solidarity among the women's community;

*It was painful and it was hard and it was an area that there were casualties. I mean I lost friendships, really precious friendships over that and never been the same again… I guess mostly I remember for me feeling so confused and torn about the whole issue. And because I was one of the Women Against Racism collective I was really stuck in the middle. In fact, I got asked to leave the Women Against Racism collective, by the Women Against Racism collective because I worked at Toora. And I put my heart into that collective as well so it was really – there was – I mean I know it was not half as hard as it must have been for [the Indigenous women involved] but I remember it as a very personally painful time.*

It is crucial to acknowledge that confronting racism and building reconciliation are ongoing processes in Australia and require a willingness and commitment to constantly re-evaluating processes and approaches. As Ien Ang noted, *'to focus on **resolving** differences between women as the ultimate aim of "dealing with difference" would mean their containment in a … structure which itself remains uninterrogated.'*[10] Most of the women involved in the collective were keenly aware of this. Almost without exception, the white women spoke about ways that they wished things had been done differently, but on reflection they also considered that they had done the very best they could at the time with the information and analysis available to them. While their approach was clearly imperfect, in many ways women's services like Toora have provided leadership on the issue of racism in Australia. While the majority of white Australia refused to recognise the cultural specificity and racism of their structures, the discussions on racism in feminist services were explicit, considered and ongoing.

In 2003 women's services in Canberra came together to draft a statement of reconciliation. The document they produced reflects much of the debate that has occurred as well as their willingness to continue the process;

***Statement of Apology and Reconciliation***

*To all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, your families and communities.*

*We, non-indigenous women of this land, apologise for the human suffering and injustice that you have experienced as a result of colonisation and generations of discrimination and marginalisation that has resulted from that.*

*We recognise ourselves as the beneficiaries of this colonisation process and we share with you our feelings of shame and horror at the actions and atrocities that were perpetrated against your people.*

*We recognise you as a sovereign people who have never given up sovereignty of this land.*

*We acknowledge that the removal of children devastated individuals, families and entire communities and that the intention of those policies is to assimilate Aboriginal children. We recognise this as a policy of genocide.*

*We collectively feel a particular sense of responsibility around these racist policies as their implementation required active involvement of community welfare organisations. We unreservedly apologise to the individuals, families and communities for these acts of injustice.*

*We acknowledge your human right to self-determination.*

*We commit to working in solidarity with you in ways that you choose and determine.*

*We are committed to and will work toward an unqualified apology from the federal Government on behalf of all Australian people.*

*We recognise your leadership, we honour your visions and we join with you in your hopes for your futures and for our futures together.*



# 13

# expansion and change at toora

Between 1991 and 1994, the Toora collective undertook several attempts at reviewing the way the organisation operated. The Toora calendar included internal reviews, management weekends and special collective meetings as they grappled with organisational issues. Several positions were created, trialed and abolished over the three years. The first of these experiments involved positions for an Organisational Co-ordinator and a Financial Administrator. These positions were to work nine-to-five and oversee the service. Early in 1994, the collective decided to assess the way the service was running and initiate forward planning. As part of the review, women were asked to comment on Toora's strengths and weaknesses The collective process that structured the organisation appeared in both columns.



# internal pressures

The collective looked dramatically different than it had a decade before. Since 1991, Heira had opened, Toora had finally moved out of its pokey location to a purpose-built house, WARS had renamed as WIREDD and had moved out of the refuge into its own location. The demands on the collective had increased dramatically. From being one service, the Toora collective had become an organisation, overseeing the management of four services. Concurrently, the collective had broadened its membership to include women from a variety of cultural backgrounds and life experiences. For the first ten years of operation, the Toora collective had been responsible for every element of running the refuge. Any decision had to go through the collective process. This meant that issues from the financial management of all four services, writing funding submissions, employment issues, formulating case management, worker evaluations to maintenance and policy decisions happened in collective meetings. The collective now included Heira, WIREDD and Toora workers and still met weekly in the old WARS office. However, the demands on the collective were far too great and Toora added a Management collective, who met monthly. They were a slightly smaller group who started to focus on broader organisational issues including employment, finances and policy development, while the bigger collective worked on case management and maintenance. However, the way the Management collective meetings functioned was one of the biggest areas of interest for a two day internal review early in 1994. Women expressed concerns about attendance, the delineation and delegation of tasks within the collective, recording and accountability procedures and the protracted nature of decision making across the organisation. The problems with the collective process were clear to most women in the service. Branka had joined the collective with the opening of Heira, and though collectivity was etched in her heart, she was beginning to feel frustrated;

> *These things were a killer, the collective meetings were impossible and we had a joke…I don't recall the right words, a funny little thing which was a saying when everyone else is responsible the job doesn't get done. There is no one to chase … It was really hard to follow up if things were not done and why they [weren't]. You can follow up little things like the day-to-day stuff, but bigger things were getting lost because there was so much to do, and as we were growing the paperwork was growing.*

The feeling that the needs of the organisation had outstripped the collective's capacity was unanimous. Lyn knew some kind of change was critical; *'My view was that it was unsustainable. That the writing was on the wall, [due to] the growth and the size of the organisation.'* While she understood the emotional connection to the idea of collectivity, she also noted that it probably did not describe the way that Toora was operating;

> *The manner in which the group functioned meant that a lot of what people were attached to in a values sense was not a practical materiality. And my observation going through the processes with women and the various workshops and meetings and things that we did about it, as you do, was that that was the position that was largely supported by the group. It resonated with people's experience.*

The ideals of collectivity were being called into question in the Toora collective and the broader women's movement. The problems inherent with collective processes had been discernable from the operation of the very first collectives. In 1972 an article entitled "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" had started to circulate through the movement. The basic premise of the article was that the idea of a completely structureless group was a myth. Even entirely unwillingly or contrary to women's ideals, collectives invariably developed their own dynamic that privileged some and excluded others. The article asserted that while collectives worked under an assumption of transparent and equitable processes,

> *The idea becomes a smoke screen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others…because the idea of 'structurelessness' does not prevent formation of informal structure, only formal ones.*[1]

Many women felt that the apparent informality of the processes in the Toora collective was masking the power dynamics that operated. Some women's opinions seemed to matter more than others, some women seemed to have much more information than others, some women's proposals were immediately accepted, and others were interrogated. Ara had been working in the collective since 1984 and by the early 90s she was comfortable and confident in the collective. She observed,

> *In any collective you get these strong voices and I've been involved in collectives for … well over 20 years, of various sorts and have never seen one of those collectives where everybody has an equal voice, because there are some people who are stronger, there are people who know more, there are people who are more articulate. There are people who feel safer about saying 'I don't know this' or 'I'm not understanding.' There are people who are totally insecure and don't feel like they can open their mouths … And the reality is some of us are natural leaders and some aren't. So the natural leaders take a step forward and sometimes vie for power and that happened quite a few times in the collective process.*

Throughout the late 80s, the women's movement had struggled with issues of race and privilege within the movement, and the cultural specificity of the collective model brought it into contention. It was a critique Ara extended to her own experiences in the early days of her involvement;

> *Some of the problems with early collectives were that some of us would take up more space and we would go yes but if you want to talk you just get powerful enough. Very white model, very white model, which was a problem with collectivity and where I had to find my feet. Really tough stuff for me finding my feet in a collective as a working-class woman.*

Lyn Morgain, who had been a member of the Toora collective since she was 17, partly concurred with the critique posed in the "Tyranny of Structurelessness,';



> *There are two predominant views around collectives. One is that it is possible to evolve an egalitarian way of working that provides every individual within the group with a high level of respect. I'm of that view. But there's another view that says that, and the two can be told of as one, there's another view that says any time you do that dominant power structures will take effect within the group. The only means by which you can mitigate that is to be vigilant around it. And to have explicit and open processes that identify the way in which power relations effect to stifle or injure or harm individuals. Great in theory, lots of times great in practice. A lot of opportunities for the very best of that analysis to come to the fore, but equally a lot of opportunity for the very worst of that also comes to the fore. And [collectivity] is like any evolving process.*

Lesley's death in 1993 also had a profound effect on the Toora collective. She had undoubtedly been one of the strongest members of the collective, her knowledge and passion had been one of the biggest influences on the development of the service and she had devoted the last ten years of her life to the Toora Single Women's Shelter. Some members of the collective felt that while officially there was collective responsibility for the organisation this was obscuring the fact that some women consistently worked longer hours than others without any recognition or remuneration. Also, the women in the 'nine-to-five' positions were starting to feel the paralysis that came from working with no clear instruction or supervision. As one of the most experienced collective members, Ara felt that the desire for change,

> *Was prompted because some of us felt like it was time, that we did all the work out there in the world, we were the ones who made the decisions, we went to the meetings, we wrote the submissions. Some of us kind of felt like there's something fundamentally unfair, you lot all go home and we stay here and do all of this and its because you've got a commitment, but maybe... And some of that happened watching Lesley die too I think. And going this woman worked herself into the grave and she's dying penniless. She died absolutely penniless. And it made us go perhaps we need to look after each other a little bit better.*

The intensity the collective had shared through the first ten years as they developed policy, politics, undertook recovery process and fought through some of the service's formative challenges had been reliant on the relatively small size of the group. When Heira opened the workforce doubled and the collective suddenly looked very different. The women who had been around the longest were still operating within the old paradigm. They were having a lot of the discussions informally and making a lot of the decisions as they shared their lives. It was a dynamic which some of the newer workers were beginning to feel disenfranchised by. Branka had joined the collective at this point;

> *One thing I didn't like about those days was that a lot of things happened out of the work setting because a lot of workers were connected and living together and they were a really tight community. So often … when we had real meetings as an organisation it was obvious that things had been discussed [previously], the agenda was set.*

While the intensity of the original collective had brought many benefits to the service, Jacqui realised things had changed;

> *I think the expansion of the organisation really meant that we started having to do some things differently. We couldn't just keep doing things the same way, because we didn't stay as this really close-knit little group. You know, we started to get bigger and employ women from other cultures and yes – really take that stuff on which meant differences and the fact that not all of us kind of lived together at each other's houses 24 hours a day, you know, there was a broader group then and that some women were prepared to challenge and go 'oh no this probably isn't such an ok way to do things.'*

Lyn also felt that it was important that the true power dynamics of the service was running be exposed; *'Women more peripheral to that internal core probably felt the restructure was making explicit things that were already existent. They were right.'* Bridie had temporarily left the Toora collective by the time the change occurred. She had felt frustrated at the lack of transparency of collective structures and decisions while she worked as a resident support worker and commented,

> *I think that restructure was great for me to hear about. It was like it was finally acknowledging that in fact things did work the way they worked … People had more personal power for whatever reasons, but you can structure some of that out … So for me hearing of the restructure I was like, well thank god, at last they've actually named what's been going on for the last however long.*

## external pressures

As their budgets increased, Toora also came under increasing external pressure to formalise the organisation's structure. Toora's necessary interaction with bureaucrats had created difficulties. As a mode of governance, collectivity was incomprehensible to bureaucrats. The collective's lack of a stable point of contact and no easily visible chain of accountability was beginning to work against the organisation. The management collective was the legal decision-making body for the organisation. Its floundering was beginning to cause the collective some concern, particularly as Toora had always prided itself on the level of detail and responsibility it observed. There was a distinct feeling that Toora was not providing accountability equitable to its level of funding. As Ara reflected,

> *The organisation had grown, it had grown too big really to cope with collectivity. It needed a shift. It needed to know accountability, the accountability was not clear enough and really it was time. It had to happen.*

The external pressure the Toora collective felt was shared by other refuges in Canberra and in Australia.

> *I know there was a lot of external pressure on the women's sector nationally around the change from collectivity and most services buckled and in the ACT we only kept Beryl and Rape Crisis as collectives… Rape Crisis has a very strong collective structure but it is a collective structure with very good governance.*[2]

*Nardine was a domestic violence refuge in Perth who was forced to change from a collective structure in the mid 1990s when the Liberal Minister for Family and Children's Services refused their funding until they conformed to a hierarchical structure.*[3]

In February 1995, the Toora collective decided to employ a consultant to review the staffing structure and worker roles. Lyn Morgain had left the collective late in 1993 and she responded to the call;

> *I had the necessary skills, but I think it was much more than that. I think it was about trust, I was speaking from within. The organisation trusted me because I was one of them. But I also had a reputation for frank thinking and communicating so I had the organisation's trust and was not perceived to have a particular agenda or alliance. See even though I was always aligned with the inner core, I was a big part of it, but I think I was always regarded as somebody who had a real commitment to openness and fairness and to open dialogue … I don't think I said anything – Any other consultant in the field would have said exactly the same bloody thing.*

As it happened, Lyn proposed a radical restructure. Her key recommendations were:

- the Management collective should be abolished and replaced with a Board of Management;
- the collective should be divided into three autonomous staff teams – a Toora and Likaya team, a Heira team and a WIREDD team;
- two new positions should be created – a Director and Service Coordinator; and
- the Office Manager and Financial Assistant positions should be abolished and financial management out-sourced.

Lyn recognised the magnitude of her suggestions. In her report she wrote, *'It must however be acknowledged that this would represent the single biggest change in the herstory of Toora and should not therefore be taken without extensive discussion and consideration.'*[4]



Many women in the collective had strong responses to the proposal as they came to terms with the implications. For many women the loss of the collective seemed to signify a loss of feminist principles. Ara remembered that *'some of us were, I was devastated. Whilst I saw that it was essential…I was just devastated about the loss of collectivity, because it was a feminist ideal from way back.'* Lyn also recalled the ramification; '*It was huge. HUGE. It was like the death of the collective, it was enormous. Some people saw it as the death knell of feminism as we knew it, or the feminist organisation as we knew it.'* Indeed, there were women who could not imagine working at Toora under a hierarchical structure and left the organisation at that point. Branka remembered feeling regret at the loss of the positive aspects of collectivity, but realised Lyn's proposal gave Toora the opportunity to set the terms of what was a necessary change;

> *I remember there was a lot of commotion…There were a lot of people who were not ready for change, or fearful of change and were quite, how do you say it, stuck on the idea of a collective and nothing else. And for some they had good reasons…because the collective structure was the only structure where they felt they could be heard and respected as individual workers. So the idea of implementing any hierarchy, any difference, would make a change and the collective would die. I thought Lyn was proposing 'let's do it now in our own pace, in our own design rather than be forced to do the change and say here this is how you need to do it'. I was quite happy to go with that. And it looked gradual, really looked gradual … It started growing on me, the change, as a necessity.*

The loss of collectivity was also frighteningly permanent. While Toora had successfully incorporated as a collective in 1982, by the time the need for change arose in 1995, the ability to incorporate an organisation as a collective had been revoked. While the collective was mostly united in the need for change, there would be no going back. Toora was also among the first women's services in Canberra to formally change its structure, *'there was a bit of flack that came with that but since then all the other services really have really gone that way.'*[5] Toora's restructure did have an impact on the women's sector at the time. Di Lucas had left the Toora collective in the mid 1980s and by 1995 was the coordinator of Canberra Rape Crisis;

*I'm always disappointed when [women's services] move away from collectives. I was disappointed that [Toora] gave that up, that they didn't find a way of doing it in a collective structure because I think we can. That's sort of opening up a whole thing about my passion for collectivity and I've seen so many women's services that have gone from a collective structure back to a traditional structure without really looking – moving through the collective structure to make it something else.*

Within the change to a hierarchical model of governance, Toora developed a structure that retained the strengths of the collective model. The Advisory Forum was created to provide policy advice to the Board. Like the old collective, it comprised every member of the organisation and retained women's participation in decision-making.

For many of the women who worked in the collective model, its strengths live with them to this day;

*The first ten years of my life I learnt to work collectively and it's the greatest legacy you could ever have. Ever. As much as I can joke now and go ooh, process addicts, we were mad, completely mad but that's okay. High energy mad and we did some wonderful, wonderful things. But in terms of working with groups and understanding how people worked together and applying principles in a process then you can't learn better than that. You know women who have spent their working lives in those environments have learnt to be accountable and responsible for their performance and for their conduct in ways that are professionally quite unique and I know that today.*[6]

The change took a little while to really take hold within the organisation. The results of a staff survey in 1996 showed there was substantial confusion about the roles of the new positions, and the newly convened Toora Board of Management had to find its feet. One of the first members of the Board was Lisa Paul, the bureaucrat who had investigated Toora in 1988;

*The thing that I've drawn a lot of pleasure from is to go from the very difficult beginning to become such a huge fan and a friend of Toora's, to then becoming part of Toora on the interim Board which was such an honour and now to remain friends with Toora…That's a good herstory isn't it?*

Over time the organisation relaxed into its new structure, making small amendments when the need arose. Ara Cresswell became the first Executive Director in 1995. In 1998 Jacqui Pearce was appointed to the Director position and continues to lead the organisation today. In recognition that Toora was no longer providing one service, Toora Single Wimmin's Shelter became Toora Women Inc. in 2001. Kim Werner filled the Deputy Director position following its creation in 2002. The new structures afforded Toora a higher level of accountability. That there were women with time to exclusively concentrate on the management and forward planning allowed the organisation to expand to meet the needs of women in the ACT.

## expanding toora women inc.

Since the restructure, Toora Women Inc. has continued to expand to meet the needs of women in Canberra. In 1996, Michelle Tziarkis wrote a report for WIREDD on how women's needs were being addressed by Canberra's drug and alcohol services. One of the most notable deficiencies was a detox facility that catered specifically for women and accommodated their children. This was a problem which Toora was acutely aware of. The need was clearly illustrated by a Toora resident;

*I remember we had one client who was coming and going quite a lot, and really wanted to detox, and she had a baby who was a couple of months old and she really didn't want to go to detox because she felt like, 'family Services will take my daughter, you know, I won't get her back.' So we did a deal with her that if she did go to detox we'd look after the baby for her. And I always remember that, and I arrived home and I was sharing the house with a whole lot of other people, a group house of adults and children and I arrived home with a basket saying, 'look what I've brought home.' And so we had a little baby that we looked after for a little while but then I don't think her mum lasted.*[7]

In 1998, Chrystina Stanford of the Women's Alcohol and Other Drug Working Party wrote a report on the barriers facing women with children seeking detoxification in the ACT. She found access is precluded by a lack of appropriate childcare and the fear of losing custody of children. One of the report's primary recommendations was that a women's detoxification service be immediately established, though such a facility still does not exist.

Lesley's Place was created in direct response to the needs of dependent women with children. The service was launched in June 2002 as a national focus activity for the Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia's Drug Action Week. The service began by providing outreach and phone counselling to both single women and women with children. They offered support prior to, during and after detox programs. In 2003, Lesley's Place began to offer a residential support service for single women and women with children post supervised withdrawal.

Lesley's Place was named in memory of Lesley Fraser, Toora's first WARS worker. Her passion for, and commitment to the needs of chemically dependent women were an enormous contribution to individual women, the Toora collective and the wider Canberra community.

In 2004 Toora has opened two new services, Marzenna and Betty Searle House. Marzenna is a drug and alcohol halfway house for women and children. The Toora collective and WARS were strong advocates for the establishment of the service in the mid 1990s. Betty Searle House marks an important shift for Toora. Frustrated with the lack of options for women leaving Toora's accommodation services, Betty Searle House offers long-term accommodation for women over 55.

Toora's move to develop a more formal organisational structure meant becoming relatively entrenched in government funding structures. The requirements funding agreements entailed significantly altered the radical vision and methods of the organisation. The change and passage of time had benefits for women's services but, as Meredith expressed, some women felt it came at the expense of radicalism and autonomy;

*If you look across the board in feminist services they've changed enormously. And there's a lot more accountability and I guess that was one of the down sides about as we got more funding we'd become more and more accountable and that has taken away from autonomy that we had in some of the early days.*

This change echoed across women's services nationally. Formalising structures and engaging with government policy meant that women's services won better conditions for workers;

> *Now we have a developed sector with reasonable conditions and reasonable wages and a whole lot of professional ethics and professional indemnity insurance to make sure if we fuck up we can be covered. Whereas back then we had nothing except a deep-seated commitment to undoing the damage that men had done to women. And that was the whole reason that we were there.*[8]

The reputation of women's services solidified as they developed structures that were comprehensible to the government and community. Women's services have used their stability to expand their services to include specialised domestic violence, drug and alcohol, indigenous and migrant women's services. Lisa pointed out the benefits of this change;

> *I reckon what's happened is – this is my own view – what's happened is over the SAAPs, the reputation of women's services has become much stronger and more mainstream looking, and I mean that in a positive way. It looks very established, of course you're not going to defund it or get rid of it because it's always been, like it's always been there, you know?*

Increasing incorporation in government and bureaucratic structures had the potential to weaken Toora's identity as an explicitly feminist service. Ara felt there was undoubtedly some loss when the women's refuge movement became more mainstream;

> *The herstory of this sector is that it was based on women wanting to provide safety for women. To protect them from the patriarchy. And that is still very much there, though the analysis is very different. It is all around structural causes of poverty and all*

*of those things and I think we often don't use the word patriarchy. We see it as a 70s notion, when in fact it is alive and well. It just hides in other terminology … we talk about something completely different. We talk about homelessness and whilst we include domestic and family violence in that, it is not explicit, which means we are not talking about men's violence to women, we are not focussing on the patriarchy and what it does to women.*

While the fight against cooption is an ongoing one, Toora remains a strong and explicitly feminist advocate for women, highlighting systemic oppression and disadvantage in the ACT community.



# 14

# conclusion

The establishment of feminist women's refuges had a profound effect on Australian society. Feminists pulled the issues of domestic violence, sexual assault and abuse out of the private sphere where they had been perpetrated and protected. Women stood together and called for responses and change. The women's refuge movement was the direct beneficiary of the revolutionary energy of the women's liberation movement. Women's refuges have transformed the nature and understanding of social services in Australia. Most importantly, they have contributed enormously to exposing the extent of male violence and the systemic nature of women's oppression.

Single women's services have augmented the women's refuge movement. While the rights of women with children have historically been easier for society to accept, valuing the rights and



needs of women without children, or without children in their care, has encountered more resistance. Services for single women demanded the recognition of women's rights separate to their reproductive role.

Toora Single Women's Shelter has made a unique contribution to Australian society, feminism and the women's refuge movement. Their willingness to tackle complex issues like women's chemical dependency and mental illness exposed these experiences as survival strategies. By addressing the issues of chemical dependency and beginning to talk to women about natural responses to trauma, Toora has offered many women an alternative framework through which they can read their experiences. For some women that has brought freedom.

Toora has also drawn the attention of feminists and society more broadly back to the original traumas suffered by women and erased by the passing of time. The examination of survival methods like chemical dependency and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder enriched feminist ideas of power and the subtlety and complexity of women's oppression in a patriarchal system. Patriarchal power is not monolithic; it twists through women's lives erasing evidence of its passage through inciting shame and guilt.

The distinguishing feature of the Toora collective over the last 21 years has been their commitment to exposing the way women's needs have not, and are still not being met by current systems. Toora has always had an awareness of the complexity of women's homelessness in Australia and has been a loud and enduring advocate for the needs of women within housing, mental health and drug and alcohol sectors. In many cases it has been Toora that has filled the gap in services. Over the last 21 years the organisation has established not only the Toora Single Women's Shelter, but WIREDD, Heira, Lesley's Place, Marzenna and Betty Searle House as well.

Toora is an organisation that came of age with the women who devoted their lives to it. The women of the early collective were young, dedicated and inspired by their experiences within the collective. For many of them it was the place they received their political education and articulated and strengthened their feminism. It was the place many women got sober, many spoke about the experiences in their lives no-



one else would hear and were given the opportunity to use those experiences to work with other women. Toora was somewhere women developed intense and unwavering friendships. It was somewhere women fell in love, played with new ideas and found community.

There have also been women – workers and residents who have not made it to Toora's twenty-first birthday. Their absence stands as testimony to the costs of patriarchal violence in women's lives.

Most importantly, in 2004 Toora Women Inc. is an organisation which is still here and still growing. Despite the difficulty inherent in starting a unique service from scratch, and the challenges of maintaining it through political uncertainty and hostility, Toora has not ceased offering feminist services to women who need them. While women's services are being stripped back by recent governments and women's issues are subsumed into 'gender' and 'family' debates, Toora retains her feminism, explicitly and proudly.

Over the last 21 years Eddie Wadick has developed a strong relationship with Toora, first as a resident and more recently as a worker. There are many Toora women with amazing stories; Eddie's is one that sums up the value and importance of Toora Women Inc.;

> *I was staying at Toora and I still had my govie flat in Sydney and I said to the workers, 'I'm going back to Sydney and I'm never coming back.' I said, 'I'm not coming back to Canberra.' So they let me go and I went back to Sydney and I busted straight away and I was on drugs and alcohol. And a worker rang me in Sydney and she said, 'we really want you to come back, we all love you.' And I nearly cried because people had just kicked the shit out of me for so many years, and then she said, 'we don't want to go to another funeral, we've already buried Lesley, we don't want to bury you too.' So I came back and that's how I came back because if that worker hadn't rang me that particular day I may well have never come back. But she rang up and said that. She said, 'we love you.' Most people were going 'fuck off, fuck off.' And she was saying, 'come back, come back.'*

# toora today

## Shirley Chow

**Resident Support Worker, Lesley's Place**

I love to work at Toora because I gain satisfaction from supporting women. Toora workers are special as they are women who understand the needs of each individual. Toora Women Inc. will always be remembered as a place where feminism is embraced.

## Awombda Codd

**Women's Drug and Alcohol worker (WIREDD)**

Toora: an inspiring, caring, exciting, tiring, supporting and challenging environment that has allowed me to grow into me.

## Nadia Docrat

**Relief Resident Support Worker**

I work with Toora, for women. It's the first time I want to go to work and definitely the first time I work with an organisation, not for them. As a young woman, I have learnt to be heard and most importantly to hear others. Working so closely with women has challenged my idea and understanding of feminism and changed it, positively I hope. Toora is unique in that the principles you acquire on the job translate effortlessly into everyday life and the almost mantra-like quality is contagious. I didn't come to work with Toora by accident and I will make the most of this rare and wonderful opportunity.

## Bridie Doyle

**WIREDD Coordinator**

I work at WIREDD because it allows me the opportunity to work in the drug and alcohol sector but remain firmly embedded in a feminist women's service. Feminism is and has been for as long as I remember my raison d'etre, and I cannot imagine working in a service in this sector or any other without a feminist framework guiding the philosophy and service delivery. (They wouldn't be able to manage it either – I tend to eventually drive non-feminist type people positively crazy). To me what makes Toora special is its capacity and willingness to employ women with very diverse and often problematic pasts AND manage the issues this can bring along with it. My favourite moment at Toora (way before this WIREDD sojourn) was one New Years Eve. I was sitting outside with a number of the women residents at midnight, including an older woman who had had a consistently very hard isolated and traumatic life and found it difficult to engage with people. At about one minute past midnight I noticed a large and very bright shooting star cross the sky above us. I turned and the woman looked at me and I knew she had seen it too. It was a very special moment where I knew I was exactly where I was meant to be and I knew that was also true for the woman with me. It felt like a free gift from the universe given specially for her.

# Biljana Petrova-Draskovic

**Heira Team Leader**

Toora Women Inc.'s feminist philosophical base and the guiding principles of safety, respect, choices, equality, advocacy, diversity and cultural inclusiveness have greatly coincided with my personal convictions as principles to live by. Having worked for some community-based and government organisations previously I was not provided with the opportunity to put these into practice. I became very aware of the enormous need for advocacy for women in various positions of inequality, particularly women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds further disadvantaged by unresolved residential status or insufficient knowledge of English. It has been a very rewarding experience at Toora to work together with women towards achieving positive changes in their lives as well as making various services and organisations aware of the need for these. Also the opportunities for professional and personal development here have been extremely valuable and I strongly believe they will continue to be so.

# Mirsada Draskovic

**Resident Support Worker, Heira House**

Toora has meant a new life for me. I thought I would never work in Australia because of my English and people don't give me a chance. Toora gave me a chance to show what I can do. Also I am glad for any way that I can help our women because once I was in a similar situation of trauma and fear. I really enjoy working with women!





# Karene Eggleton

**Resident Support Worker, Lesley's Place**

Wow, where do I start? I think I'd have to write a novel about what Toora means to me and what it has done for me…My decision to apply for a position at Toora came from a life-long dream of wanting to work in the drug and alcohol field and also wanting to make a complete career change. I never in a million years dreamed I'd get an interview let alone a job. I was very unaware of what an amazing place it was to work for too. From day one I knew this was where I was meant to be and since then I have learnt so many valuable things to do with my position and about myself and have met so many wonderful women. I remember when I started just being truly amazed at how many women thought like me and learning that the term for these thoughts and feelings was feminism. I love being a feminist and have just grown so much in applying it to my work and personal life. It has allowed me to stay true to myself and others and be strong enough to ward off those that don't believe in me. I couldn't imagine working anywhere else. I feel blessed to be a part of the Toora family, and in that, being able to assist other women in making life changes.

# Cathy Fisher

**Resident Support Worker, Toora House**

To me, working at Toora has been an absolute revelation. I initially came here almost by accident, but it really feels like the exact right place at the exact right time in my life. Being here has been an incredibly challenging and rewarding part of my life, due to the way I have been compelled and inspired to become the person I want and need to be in my life. This could only be possible thanks to the amazing women at Toora who have walked here before me and walk here with me today.

# Vivianne Freeman

**Resident Support Worker, Toora House**

As an ex-resi, Toora was for me (and no doubt for women in similar situations) Toora was and is a dry dock, Toora was a safe harbour – for the battered, worn out and on (so I thought) my last voyage on earth. The good ship Vivianne was nurtured, empowered, renewed the feminist in me, painted and oiled with love. This ship was loved back to life, given new tools and renewed ones. I went back out, the sails at full mast, into the harbour of community. I am now a Toora worker. From my life's voyages and experiences, I give what was given to me – love. Loved back to life, kindness, the choice to change. Yes, choice. Toora is love with a big heart and many arms and ears. The arms that give and the ears that just listen.

# Gina Garrett

**Relief Resident Support Worker**

I came to Toora because I needed a change and an experience. Once people knew I was working for this organisation they became very excited for me and now I know why. I am overwhelmed by the support and kindness I have been offered by this organisation and my wonderful co-workers. For me, being with, and supporting women is not only important but also gives me the chance to be where I feel I can contribute at my best. Thank you to Toora, for giving me an opportunity to be myself.

# Paulina Hellec

**Women's Drug and Alcohol Worker**

I started working at Toora in 1994. I was new arrived in Australia. I didn't have a clue about refuges, but someone suggested to apply for a job at Toora. I was so excited and empowered during the week of training, because to hear about ACA and Coda was amazing. Just to know all my experiences have a name and I belong somewhere. I have found a lot of support and understanding working at Toora. I like when things are named. It is a safe place for learning. Working at WIREDD has given me the support for doing things in the community , especially the migrant communities. Also being creative, running workshops and accessing people on my own language and I have met wonderful women as co-workers and clients.

# Shireen Hussien

**Relief Resident Support Worker**

I feel so happy and privileged to work for Toora. I had a good and wonderful life but due to my husband's bad habits I had to look for a job and also because I did not want to be depressed. I just did not know that there was so much help and assistance for WOMEN! I love my work at Toora and am extremely happy to help others and the same time be independent and nurture and help myself.

# Branka Jovanavic

**Co-ordinator, Lesley's Place**

I decided to apply for the position, with the encouragement of a friend. To my surprise I got the job. I chose this profession because being a non–English speaking woman, I know how hard it is to have no voice and to be not heard and understood. I know how difficult it is to ask for, and to receive support. Working at Toora I learned about various issues women face in society and through work I came to know myself much better. I was fortunate to be able to also work at WIREDD and Lesley's Place, Drug and Alcohol services for women.

Working in this job has challenged my comfort zones and gave me the opportunity to re-examine and deal with a lot of things in my life. Time I spend working with women, workshops and trainings I attend help me grow in confidence and therefore I am better able to participate and contribute to my team and to the women I work with. I have learned how to support women (and myself) to have healthy boundaries. Working in an environment of people who have suffered violence and abuse, I have learned to respect and value my own life. I learned how important it is to have support and love from people and also how important it is to love people. Even with all the

hardship I would not want it to be any other way. I am very grateful to have the opportunity to work for such an amazing organization and with such amazing women, and to have support in founding my own voice.

Thank you Toora

## Kiki Korpinen

**Resident Support Worker, Toora House**

Toora for me is like a journey. It is ever changing, fluid, yet solid in what it represents. I have evolved, laughed, cried, been challenged, confronted and loved - all in the one place. Toora has shared with me many women's life experiences and I feel honoured to have been a part of the hardship and happiness. There is nothing better than to work with a service where one is able to assist another woman through a time of crisis (unless of course there was no need for this - now that would be even better!). To have the opportunity of providing safety, respect, kindness and a bed in the middle of the night or supporting a woman through her life choices, is for me something very beautiful I can do as a Toora worker. Toora is etched deeply in my heart and I love her to bits!

## Hilda Lamus

**Resident Support Worker, Heira House**

When someone asks you if you would come back in another life what would you change? There are things that I would like to change but definitely not working at Toora. When I was a child brought up in a very conservative way, "the Latin way". My role as a woman was defined very clearly. I could not question authority nor challenge the patriarchal structure. My spirit could not be free as I could not be fully me. Toora allowed me to be me, myself without prejudice, surrounded by love and acceptance. It didn't matter if I spoke with an accent and when I muddled up. I was still listened to. In six years working with the residents I have learned from them a life experience. I am privileged to be able to wake up in the morning and to look forward to coming to work. How many people can say this?





## Priscilla Lawlor

**Resident Support Worker, Toora House**

I choose to work at Toora because I was in foster care as a child and I had a good experience and it helped me become the person I am today by knowing there are people out there willing to help people in need, so I decided that I wanted to get into a welfare field or a similar field that will help disadvantaged people. I chose a women's shelter because my aim was to help women or children namely due to my own life experience and my age. I believed that I could bring a lot of skills, knowledge and hopefully strength to the women that I would be dealing with as they would see how far I have come. It has worked, not only do I get satisfaction from knowing that in our own little subtle way's every woman who walks out Toora's door has been helped and pieces of information that we have told them they may not find useful now but when they need it, it will be there in the back of their minds. This is an ever-changing job and very rewarding, I now love to come to work.

## Natalie Liosatos

**Women's Drug and Alcohol Worker**

I started working for Toora Women Inc. in September 2002 and without a doubt this is the happiest I have ever been in any job, for a number of reasons; Toora is by far the most functional service I have worked in and not necessarily because we always get it right but because so far what I see is a level of honesty, a willingness and a commitment to work at this and the procedures and mechanisms that help make this possible. I love that when I started it was clear that I would be actively involved in all the tasks that make WIREDD function – the nature of a feminist organisation, and this has been extremely empowering for me as a worker. Mostly I love that finally I am working in a job where the core business is supporting women with issues around drugs and dependency, because even though I have worked in a variety of roles this has always been the work that I would do, even when it hasn't been the main objective of my position...and I have had to do it covertly! So now I am very happy...My favourite Toora moment

so far has been sharing my accommodation at the strategic planning weekend with my daughter and all the other Toora women's children that came along to that and getting to know Toora women in a different setting and the very amusing card games that I was introduced to on that weekend…

## Bek McGarry

**team Leader, Toora House**

Toora came into my life accidentally on purpose. It was exactly what I needed and didn't know. Toora gave the voice inside of me the noise to make sound. Here I have grown, changed and evolved from the support, love and unspoken power of the women whom I work with in Toora. I was accepted for all I brought and all I had experienced and that which would normally be rejected or shunned was rejoiced and praised. This had an amazing effect on me and my view of the world. So much that it was life-changing. We as women are strong and resilient and Toora has harnessed this strength, power and knowledge and used it to empower other women. Toora is choice for all who come. Toora is at the forefront of change and movement for women's issues in Canberra and I am proud to be apart of something so profound.

## Jacqui Pearce

**Executive Director**

I started work at Toora in March 1988. I met with the Toora collective who thought my name was Jacqui Pearl, a nickname that has stuck ever since. Every day I am still involved, exhilarated, excited, challenged, and passionate. I love the women – we are completely inspiring and strong and resilient. I detest patriarchy. My life is devoted to the liberation of women and the elimination of oppression. Working at Toora has allowed me to learn to grow, to laugh, to cry, and to know the power of women. Toora gave my life back in ways unimaginable and magical. To those women who have gone before and to the many more who will be touched by the heart of Toora LAUGH, LOVE, HAVE FUN AND KEEP FIGHTING!





## Vivienne Pearce

**Women's Drug and Alcohol Worker**

Working at Toora has been an exciting move for me, I have been working in the drug and alcohol field for nine years now and at long last I can do the work I do best. WIREDD gives me the opportunity to support women in whatever they want or need, to work with them to empower them, to let them know that people care even when they are still using drugs and alcohol. WIREDD allows me to support women in another way of living and feeling, which offers hope. My favourite bit since being at Toora was my first training, Feminism training and turning ten years clean and sober on the same day. What a start. To me Toora is an amazing place to work; it is different for me, as I have worked in other organisations, which I believe hide the real stuff between workers. This has always been an issue for me, because I need things to be up front and open. I tried this in other organisations and always fell short of people being able to be open and honest. Toora is allowing me to be open and honest and able to challenge others and others challenge me. I believe this to be an extremely functional way to work especially with the women we work with; we try to teach them new skills so it should start with us the workers. I also am learning to change my old habits and not be fearful to say what I really think, and to know I am in a safe environment to do this. I love working for Toora Inc.

## Trishka Power

**Resident Support Worker, Lesley's Place**

Just like to say I'm working here at Toora because I love working with women and because I love working with our residents, with the good and bad and hard issues they bring. Seeing women getting well makes it all worthwhile. Plus I'm a big LESBO GIRL and the pay rise we all received!

# Elena Rosenman

**Resident Support Worker, Toora House and Herstory Project Officer**

Toora gives me the opportunity to work, play and write politically. I cannot think of a greater privilege.

# Laura Scicluna

**Resident Support Worker, Toora House**

For me coming to Toora to work has been a life-changing experience. Watching a woman battling addiction in my family made me look at my life. When I did I realised I may have something to give back, may be able to do something more with my life. I started with Toora in a relief worker capacity and kept my ties with the corporate world which was both stressful and feeling more and more pointless. I now work for Toora on contract and have no other employment and although fiscally not as beneficial, the fulfilment and satisfaction is not comparable.

# Caroline Shakespeare

**Benzodiazepines Research Officer**

Respect, choice, individuality, challenge, love, justice, laughter (often side splitting), change, tears, joy, solidarity, dedication, equality, celebration, empowerment, sharing, compassion, kindness, flexibility, integrity, professionalism, openness, learning, growth and self awareness, diversity, great fun, freedom, acceptance, sustenance, herstory, success, encouragement…Toora has provided nourishment for the ground in which all these things have taken firm root and continue to grow through my practice and experience, helping me to be a more excellent person in life. Thank you, Toora Women Inc., let's make the next 20 years even more extraordinary.





# Karolina (Nina) Trailovic

**Relief Resident Support Worker**

Toora has given me the opportunity to view the world from a different perspective. I am grateful to her for this insight that has enabled me to grow.

# Branka Trajkovski

**Resident Support Worker, Toora House**

I am in a long-term relationship with Toora. It started as falling in love at the first sight and has developed and grown into real love, with everything that brings – some fantastic days, some not so great, some doubts, some fears, many great friendships, some days of desperation over women's position in this, still, 'man's world,' joy, lots of joy in experiencing women's strength, love, support… So it was all worth it. Toora has grown and changed through the years but remains a very supportive workplace for women working with women. That is the best.

# Iris Trenka

**Relief Resident Support Worker**

I wasn't even looking for a job when a friend recommended me for Toora. I am so grateful to her and Toora, as they were both instrumental in allowing me to see 'myself'. With the support of Toora I began a wonderful process of recovery that saved me from a life of addiction, oppression, co dependence and misery!

# Rebecca Trindall

**Indigenous Advisor**

Working with Toora and her women has truly been an honour. The diversity within our workplace is precious, I love the different strengths that each woman brings to the organization and what we learn from one another's journeys on a daily basis is invaluable. Toora, her values and philosophies are unique and inspirational to us all.

# Eddie Wadick

**Resident Support Worker, Toora House**

I work at Toora because I love to help women in any way I can. Also I like how Toora operates as a feminist organisation – women empowering each other. Toora is special because it is dedication in helping women and great support of co-workers, it feels like family! Many years ago when I first came to Toora the workers were so lovely and kind it almost felt like I was coming home to a place of unconditional love and support. My favourite memory? Once I had just arrived from Sydney. I was pretty sick so Trish said she would make me lunch. So she put fish fingers on the grill, made a salad and served it up. I took a bite of fish finger and it tasted foul – someone had cleaned out the oven with oven cleaner and hadn't wiped it out. I was a bit paranoid and I thought that someone was trying to poison me! Hence no more fish fingers for Eddie.

# Veronica Wensing

**ARSSC Coordinator**

After several years as NEO at WESNET I have come to rest at Toora. I am one of her newest workers and excited to be part of such a dynamic team. What strikes me the most is Toora's commitment to feminism, which I can see playing out in her day-to-day operations. I am personally uplifted and energised by this passion and commitment, which clearly enhances Toora's professionalism and contribution towards the advancement of women in our society. Congratulations on her 21st birthday and looking forward to many more.

# Kim Werner

**Deputy Director**

The best thing about Toora for me is also the hardest. It's about being challenged about the kind of person I am and how I live my life. At Toora, it is something I am expected to focus on. In other places I have worked that wasn't really a relevant consideration. The only thing that mattered was how well I did my job. That's obviously also really important at Toora, but so is the other bit. To a significant extent, working at Toora is a way of life, not just a job. That makes Toora harder than most other workplaces, but also ultimately far more rewarding. It really is a special place to work, and for me it is a pity that more people don't get to experience a workplace like Toora.

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