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Flinders Institute for Housing,
Urban and Regional Environments

**Women in the Community
Housing Sector: Building
a Workforce for the
21st Century**



Acknowledgements

The authors of this report would like to thank a number of people who assisted them with this research.

A special thank you to Judy Line, Chief Executive Officer, Women's Housing Limited for all her support with the development of this project and canvassing interest in the research among the staff of registered community housing organisations in Victoria.

Thanks to both Margaret Crawford, Director of Housing and Executive Director, Housing & Community Building and Mary Marshall of the Victorian Office of Housing, Department of Human Services.

Thanks also to Holly Mullaney and Brian Pound of the Community Housing Federation of Victoria for supporting the project and sending out information about the research to their members.

Dr Tually would also like to thank Ms Kaye Hampton (FIHURE) and Ms Marg Osborne (WHL) for their excellent interviewing skills.

To Holly and Judy and the others involved in staging the inaugural Women's Housing Futures conference in Melbourne we also express our thanks. The discussion panel on this research held at the conference – Creating Positive Outcomes for Women in Housing – provided validation of the findings of the research and a forum for wider discussion of the research by workers in the community housing sector across Australia. We also thank the participants in the discussion panel (Shelley Mallet, Monique Sasson Wakelin, Steve Bevington, Margaret Crawford, Anne Laffan and Judy Line) and Fleur Bitcon (the panel facilitator) for sharing their experiences and sparking audience discussion.

Finally, our most important thanks to the women who participated in this research, willingly sharing their thoughts, insights and experiences on their careers and working in the community housing sector in Victoria.

Acronyms

ACOSS	Australian Council of Social Services
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CHFV	Community Housing Federation of Victoria
DFaHCSIA	Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (Australian Government)
FIHURE	Flinders Institute for Housing, Urban and Regional Environments
NRAS	National Rental Affordability Scheme
WCH	Women in Community Housing (identifier for respondents in the research)
WHL	Women's Housing Limited (Victoria)

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of **research into the future career aspirations and career progression of women working in registered community housing organisations in Victoria.**

The project was coordinated by Women Housing Limited (WHL) and funded by WHL and the Victorian Office of Housing.

The project investigated the **current roles occupied by women in the community housing sector** in Victoria, as well as **their satisfaction with a range of aspects of their work life, career progression and professional development.** The study focuses on these aspects of work for women as we know little about the career experiences and aspirations of women workers in the sector; and, this remains the case despite the dominance of women workers in the community housing sector generally. **The study also examined how women see the sector and roles in the sector going forward.**

Women are an important part of the community housing labour force and more information is needed on their future career aspirations, experiences and the challenges to their career progression – if the sector is to continue to attract, and retain, women workers over the next decade. These are important issues given that **the loss of any capacity from within the community housing sector is an issue of real concern at the current time**, as the Victorian Government has recently dedicated significant resources to restructuring and repositioning community housing organisations for growth and the Federal Government has committed significant resources to the social housing sector generally – with both actions aimed at expanding affordable housing options for the most vulnerable in the community.

To develop a picture of the experiences and aspirations of women working in the community housing sector in Victoria **in-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with 24 female workers in registered community housing agencies.** Workers were sought from all levels within agencies – from front line staff to senior management. Participants were drawn from a range of age cohorts and stages of the life cycle – young, single, in the family formation stage, mid-career and near retirement. Interviews were conducted with workers between May and July 2009.

Of the 24 interviews conducted:

- half the respondents were employed by registered housing associations and half by housing providers;
- three respondents were at senior management level; six were mid-level managers, and three respondents were in administration. The remaining women (12 respondents) were employed in tenancy or housing officer roles, support roles or multi-role positions;
- respondents were from a range of stages of the life course. Around 80 per cent of respondents were either baby boomer women (approaching retirement) or Generation X women – most of them with school aged or adult children; and
- around three quarters of respondents had children.

Seventeen of the 35 registered community housing agencies in Victoria – as at June 2009 – were represented in the sample for this study.

The findings of the research relate to the following seven areas:

- women's roles in the community housing sector;
- women's careers and career progression (including barriers to career progression);
- emerging roles in the community housing sector;
- job satisfaction;
- tenure;
- women's contribution to the sector; and
- incentives to attract and retain women workers in the sector.

The key findings of the research for each of these areas are:

Women and traditional roles in the community housing sector

- **participants almost universally identified the underrepresentation of women in senior management positions; and a strong overrepresentation of women in most other roles in the sector.**
- women continue to be significantly outnumbered by men in the asset and finance management fields in the sector, as well as in housing/property development and maintenance.
- some respondents felt **this was a trend gaining momentum as organisations were growing in size and moving towards a more corporate and less 'welfaristic' style of management than in the past** – making senior management positions in these organisations more competitive and more attractive to a wider audience of senior managers.
- when questioned about the **reasons for the underrepresentation** of women in the roles identified above, **participants overwhelmingly drew the link between women and their family and personal responsibilities as a major factor.**

Women's career and barriers to career progression

- the issues of careers and career progressions elicited a range of responses from the women workers who participated in this research.
- respondents generally fell into one of three groups when discussing these issues – women who had actively pursued or were pursuing a career for themselves, those who were not focussed on their own career and the progression of that career as they had chosen not to do this, and a small but not insignificant number of women who had 'fallen' into a career or progressed their career 'up' the management ladder without really intending to do so.
- alarmingly, on this issue a small number of women commented on the **continued existence of an 'old boys club' in the sector** and the effect of this on their and other women's careers.

Barriers to career progression

- five often related barriers or challenges were highlighted by most respondents in terms of barriers to their career progression: **family commitments; confidence; opportunity; training and support.**
- **many barriers were self-imposed**, particularly with regard to family commitments and confidence.
- **family commitments:** stood out from the interviews as an area of tension and concern for many women workers in the sector, particularly in terms of balancing work with family responsibilities. **The vast majority of**

participants saw family commitments as a reason for lack of career progression. These barriers were generally broken down further into several areas by participants:

- *a lack of support from the organisation*, i.e. through the organisation not providing a more family friendly environment and so hindering the respondents ability and desire to move ahead in their career;
 - *the individuals own prioritising family* or 'putting family first', i.e. having no desire to progress their careers whilst their family still needs them – and this is regardless of any opportunities or support offered within the agency they work for; and
 - *women lacking the support at home to enable them to spend more time on the job or to study for higher qualifications.*
- respondents also emphasised the fact that **managerial roles require a broad skill base and that obtaining this – and necessary training and experience – is not possible for all workers** in the community housing sector. **Nor is it aspired to by all women.**
 - **confidence:** confidence was highlighted by many women as an important factor in career progression and framing and fulfilling career aspirations. Many women commented that **their lack of confidence in their ability to meet the challenge of senior management roles had shaped their decision to remain at a particular level in their career** (i.e. middle management) and not seek promotion.
 - **opportunity:** women in senior management roles cited a lack of **opportunities** within their organisation to progress further as there were/are no other positions they could move into.
 - a number of respondents noted that **the community housing sector generally is quite flat and this limits the career opportunities open to them.**
 - a significant number of the women interviewed **strongly stressed that they are happy with their place in their agency and the sector** – and the support they receive from their employer and colleagues – and **do not have further career aspirations.**
 - **training:** two concerns dominated with regard to training: first, *the lack of a training budget for staff* – which was reported in some agencies and not in others, and second, women being able to find the extra time outside work hours to dedicate to such education and training.
 - Many women noted the **need for advanced training targeted to their roles** (as managers, team leaders, experienced housing workers) **and their specific client needs.**

Emerging roles in the community housing sector

- analysis of the data on emerging roles in the sector highlighted five widely acknowledged emerging roles:
 - **property development;**
 - **project management and project development** – including managing building and application processes, tender writing etc;
 - **asset management** – including maintenance of much larger property portfolios than has been so in the past;

- **design and planning** – especially requiring architecture and town planning skills;
 - **investment attraction** – attracting/leveraging private sector investment and liaising with private sector partners; and
 - **policy development** roles.
- respondents overwhelmingly noted the **underrepresentation of women in these roles** at present.
 - many respondents also pointed to the **need for more highly skilled and experienced support and tenancy workers to meet both the needs of clients and growth in the sector generally.**

Job satisfaction

- the responses to the issue of job satisfaction on the whole **showed the strong attachment the women have to the sector and their general satisfaction with their jobs and careers.**
- overall respondents were satisfied that they had chosen a career that **allowed them to help people with a fundamental factor in their lives – housing,** whilst also **allowing them to work for an agency with values and a charter that matches their own.** This was crucially important for many respondents.
- other important factors in their job satisfaction were:
 - **flexible work arrangements** – ability to work from home.
 - **maternity leave** – although this was limited across agencies.
 - **growth in the sector** and opportunities for skills development.
 - **supportive management and diversity in daily tasks.**
- **low wage rates in the sector were of concern** in terms of job satisfaction.

Tenure

- regardless of their role in the sector, women said they would remain with their current organisation **as long as their values were in sync with those of the organisation.**
- many respondents noted that one of the key reasons they **might consider leaving the sector in the future is if wage rates continued to remain low** in comparison with similar sectors of the workforce or if they should find another better remunerated job.

Incentives to attract and retain women workers in the sector

Two particular incentives stood out in this regard:

- **providing a family friendly environment**, particularly with respect to working, including flexibility work hours, job sharing, ability to work from home, access to maternity leave.
- **increasing the portability of long service leave for sector employees,**
- other incentives mentioned included: salary sacrifice to buy leave to avoid burnout; **professional mentoring and coaching** to support women in their roles and with their career options; **access to education and training** and time away from work to undertake such activities; **and improved wage rates.**

Women's contribution to the community housing sector

- respondents generally thought that women are more likely to be compassionate to clients and their needs than men.
- recognition that women workers have long been the backbone of the community housing sector – and especially in terms of services to support vulnerable women.
- a significant number of women noted that women workers can and do offer a unique perspective in terms of the design of living and social environments.
- this said, **most of the women felt that these qualities were not unique to women** but in their experiences they have noticed that more women than men exhibited them.

Program Response:

In the light of the findings of the research the following program responses are recommended. The actions are in no particular order of preference, as all are equally important and necessary for attracting and retaining women workers in the sector. They are also essential for ensuring that women workers are adequately recognised for their contribution to the sector and supported in their roles.

First, **programs are needed to build women's confidence and experience in their roles in the sector.** This includes programs that suit women who are senior managers and middle managers.

A range of strategies are needed. For example, **staff exchange programs and secondments to other agencies and positions within agencies will build workers' experience.** These programs are especially important for ensuring that women gain confidence and necessary management experience in agencies that are generally very flat in structure.

Leadership training and mentoring programs are also needed. A more comprehensive program of leadership training – supported by the Office of Housing – should be implemented and available to women sector wide, and particularly for those in middle management roles, or who aspire to these or more senior management roles. The Community Housing Federation of Victoria or Office of Housing could also play a necessary role here, coordinating regular leadership forums for workers in the sector generally, to network, and share experiences and learning. There is clearly room for mentors or professional development coaches for women in middle management aspiring to progress to upper level management, and to support women in senior management positions to deal with the pressures and stresses of their positions.

Second, **a family friendly workplace remains central for women and their careers.** Ensuring that **job share arrangements, part time work and the ability to work from home when needed, are options available to women across the sector is paramount in retaining women workers who have a family.**

Third, **measures to build and share knowledge among workers within agencies and across workers in the sector generally must be introduced** – and at both the agency and sector wide level. Important in this regard are opportunities for networking among women workers in the sector (including among senior managers), and among women workers and other professionals working in associated and relevant fields. **Providing workers with opportunities to attend seminars and conferences on a more regular basis will assist in the exchange of information, and keep workers in the sector abreast of new models in the design, delivery and management of clients, staff and properties.**

Fourth, **all women, especially younger women, must be provided with career counselling and professional development guidance as part of their annual review of progress** in their position.

Fifth, **training remains an ongoing concern in terms of the development and capacity of the community housing workforce,** and current sector growth offers opportunity for new skills development.

New and more accredited training courses and places are required for the emerging roles and areas in the sector; especially in business management, property development and commercial development areas, and environmentally sustainable and sensitive design for new housing. Some of these courses and places in them should be set aside specifically for women who wish to undertake such training.

Specialised training options are needed for workers who have been in the sector for a significant time. **Relevant training options must be consistently and widely promoted to workers in the sector. Scholarships and sponsored places are needed for short and more significant courses to ensure that women have the full capacity to undertake and complete such courses.**

Sixth, **the level of remuneration for workers in the sector remains a major challenge** for the community housing and community services sectors generally. **This has been a long term concern for the sector,** and one that has been widely debated, with limited success.

While the low wage rate in the sector is clearly an overriding issue influencing the attractiveness of the sector to workers, it should also be noted that other important factors are at play in terms of attracting and retaining women in the sector. These include the family friendly workplace arrangements and job flexibility mentioned above, as well as salary packaging options, and the portability of long service leave for some workers.

Finally, **the development of a sector wide workforce strategy encompassing all of the aforementioned strategies and assistance measures is needed. This strategy should acknowledge the existence of gender-based issues in the community housing sector workforce and ensure supports are in place for the continuous improvement of the situation of the workforce.** Importantly, this research shows there is both a real need and real opportunity currently for community housing agencies, the community housing peak bodies and the Victorian Government to address capacity issues in the community housing sector – both in Victoria and Australia-wide. Doing so is crucial given the expressed optimism among participants in this research because of continuing growth in the sector. This said, **the window of opportunity to get things right in terms of supporting current female staff in the sector and attracting new staff is narrow, therefore it is vital action is taken now.**

1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of research into the future career aspirations and career progression of women working in registered community housing organisations in Victoria. The project was coordinated by Women Housing Limited (WHL) and the research conducted by a team from the Flinders Institute for Housing, Urban and Regional Environments (FIHURE) at Flinders University. The study was funded by Women's Housing Limited and the Victorian Office of Housing, Department of Human Services.

The project investigated the current roles occupied by women in the community housing sector in Victoria, as well as their satisfaction with a range of aspects of their work life, career progression and professional development. The study focuses on these aspects of work for women as we know little about the career experiences and aspirations of women workers in the sector; and, this remains the case despite the fact that other studies show the dominance of women workers in the community services (ACOSS 2009, 2008, 2007, 2006) and community housing sectors (see KPMG 2008; Huynh 2009). The study also examined how women see the sector and roles in the sector going forward.

The project specifically focuses on women and their experiences within the community housing sector because:

- they are the largest component of the workforce;
- they have traditionally been concentrated in lower end positions;
- there has been a high rate of 'churn' both within and out of the sector;
- some roles within the sector (e.g. those dealing with the victims of domestic violence) are most easily dealt with by women; and
- importantly, women born in the 'baby boom' generation are likely to retire from paid work in the near future, with the consequent loss of one half to one third of personnel in this sector.

Women are an important part of the community housing labour force and more information is needed on their future career aspirations, experiences and the challenges to their career progression – if the sector is to continue to attract, and retain, women workers over the next decade.

Importantly, the findings of the scoping study allow us to develop a picture of women's current and likely future roles in the housing sector and what types of programs and assistance could best support women with improving their career progression. With this understanding, programs and assistance can be tailored to women's specific needs and circumstances (see Chapter Four), thereby improving women's job satisfaction and ultimately the retention of female workers in the sector. The loss of any capacity from within the community housing sector is an issue of real concern at the current time, as the Victorian Government has recently dedicated significant resources to restructuring and repositioning community housing organisations for growth and the Federal Government has committed significant resources to the social housing sector generally – with both actions aimed at expanding affordable housing options for the most vulnerable in the community.

The current in-flow of money into the community housing sector across Australia generally – in order to meet demands for affordable housing – has also sparked renewed interest in examining the capacity of the sector to meet such demands from clients, agencies

themselves and Governments. The Homelessness White Paper – *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness* – also directs some albeit brief attention to the issue of the community housing sector workforce, noting that, a workforce strategy is needed

To increase the capacity and diversity of the service response, **creative ways of developing a high-quality workforce, retaining and attracting staff, and improving and enhancing career paths in the current employment market must be identified** (Commonwealth of Australia 2008: 42, emphasis added).

Moreover,

Critical issues that need to be addressed include **low wages, lack of career progression, high staff turnover, low skilled staff, an ageing workforce, casualisation of the workforce, and significant workload stress**. Difficulties in attracting young people to the human services field, and in retaining staff, affect the ability of services to deliver quality outcomes for clients. In order to reduce homelessness, the workforce must be adequately trained and well resourced. The SAAP [Supported Accommodation Assistance Programme] IV Evaluation Report found that in all SAAP reviews, increasing staff salaries had clear benefits for the quality of services provided. A key priority is to address the need for increased skills and competency in specialist homelessness services to achieve sustainable outcomes for people with high and complex needs (Commonwealth of Australia 2008: 42, emphasis added).

In recognition of these issues, the Federal Government has funded a Capacity Building Clearinghouse (hosted by the Community Housing Federation of Australia) for the community housing sector to deal with growth and changes in the sector brought about by the introduction of the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS). The Clearinghouse 'aims to build the capacity of affordable and community housing providers, and other interested parties, in the provision of affordable housing initiatives, and participation in the NRAS'. Importantly, it provides many valuable tools and resources to build capacity in the sector, as well as a discussion forum for the sharing of information between stakeholders. The Clearinghouse is therefore a centre that workers and agencies in the sector should regularly visit to keep abreast of new ideas, resources and information made available to the sector as a whole (see <http://www.chfa.com.au>).

Current growth and development opportunities and challenges within the sector have also been discussed in a workforce-focused issue of *Parity* – the journal of the Council on Homeless persons (May 2009). Many of the articles in this joint edition of *Parity and HousingWorks* note and discuss the challenges for the sector discussed in this report – including the need for career and professional development opportunities to be more widely available for employees in the sector, more and better training opportunities and better remuneration for the tasks employees in the sector perform (Gilbert 2009; Pegg 2009a; Wright Howie 2009; Westbrook 2009 on Queensland and developing a national workforce strategy). A number of the articles also discuss the current push for developing national (and state-wide) workforce development strategies for the sector; something that will ensure that workers in the sector are better supported in the complex and challenging work they undertake, and in a changed policy environment (see Westbrook 2009; Huynh 2009 on NSW; Macdonald 2009 on the domestic and family violence sector workforce; Perusco 2009 on the homelessness sector).

2. Methodology and Survey

To develop a picture of the experiences and aspirations of women working in the community housing sector in Victoria, in-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with 24 female workers in registered community housing agencies. Participants were recruited with the assistance of the Community Housing Federation of Victoria, who emailed information about the research to their members. The Executive Officer of Women's Housing Limited provided additional assistance in terms of recruiting participants, using her networks with the other Executive Officers of agencies to bring the research to their attention and encourage eligible staff to participate in the project.

The research received ethics approval from Flinders University and in line with these ethical guidelines, significant care has been taken not to identify any of the participants in any publications resulting from the project. As such, respondent demographics have only been presented where necessary and where they do not identify a respondent. This was deemed particularly important for respondents in senior management positions in agencies, as generally only a small number of women are in senior management positions in registered community housing agencies and our sample reflected this.

Workers were sought from all levels within agencies – from front line staff to senior management. Participants were drawn from a range of age cohorts and stages of the life cycle – young, single, in the family formation stage, mid-career and near retirement.

Interviews were conducted with workers between May and July 2009. Because of the tight project budget and timeline, the majority of interviews were conducted by telephone. To streamline the interview process all participants were provided with the interview questions in advance. In general, interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour.

Participants were asked a range of questions about their careers and their place within the community housing sector in Victoria (see Appendix A for a copy of the Interview Schedule). The questions were developed by the research team in conjunction with representatives from both funding organisations. They were also carefully framed so as not to make any assumptions about the position and aspirations of women workers in the sector, and whether or not they generally face any barriers or obstacles to their career progression. Notably also, respondents were asked to comment on a range of topics about their careers for both themselves and women worker in the sector generally. A wealth of information was gathered through the interviews.

The findings of the scoping study, and potential program responses in the light of such findings, are presented in the remaining sections of this report. The following discussion highlights the commonalities and differences in insights, experiences and aspirations among women workers, as well as the barriers and opportunities to career progression and development identified by them.

Throughout the remainder of this report attention is also paid to identifying any support/incentives or assistance respondents felt is necessary for their career progression, to meet their career aspirations or for women's careers in the sector generally. Pertinent issues regarding women's career progression and suggested support for women raised during the panel discussion around this research held as part of the Women's Housing

Futures Conference are also included in the following sections of the report where appropriate. The inaugural Women's Housing Futures Conference was organised by the Community Housing Federation of Victoria and Women's Housing Limited in Melbourne on August 4th 2009. One of the afternoon sessions at the Conference was dedicated to presenting the results of this research to the conference audience – many of whom are workers in the community housing sector. This session was designed as an interactive panel discussion, eliciting strong audience input. The Community Housing Federation of Victoria and Women's Housing Limited included this session as part of the Conference in recognition of the dominance of women workers in the sector. Comments from Conference panelists or delegates are duly acknowledged in the text.

3. Study Findings

3.1 Introduction and respondent profile

This section outlines some of the preliminary results of this scoping study examining the the future career aspirations and career progression of women working in registered community housing organisations in Victoria.

The interviews were conducted with women workers in registered community housing agencies in Victoria at different stages of career development and progression and at different stages of the life course. Of the 24 interviews conducted:

- half the respondents were employed by registered housing associations and half by housing providers, including a number of small housing providers;
- three respondents were at senior management level; six were mid level managers, and three respondents were in administration, including higher level administration positions. The remaining women (12 respondents) were employed in tenancy or housing officer roles, support roles or multi role positions;
- respondents were from a range of stages of the life course. Around 80 per cent of respondents were either baby boomer women (approaching retirement) or generation X women. Very few respondents were aged under 30. This life stage/age profile is typical of the sector workforce, as noted in previous research on the community services workforce generally (KPMG 2008:2-3); and
- around three quarters of respondents had children. As noted below this had, and for some continues to have, a significant impact on the careers and career aspirations of the women interviewed.

Seventeen of the 35 registered community housing agencies in Victoria – as at June 2009 – were represented in the sample for this study. Most respondents were employees of registered agencies operating primarily in metropolitan Melbourne (18 of 24 respondents).

The remaining sections of this chapter discuss the key results of the research under the following broad themes:

- women's roles in the community housing sector;
- women's careers and career progression (including barriers to career progression);
- emerging roles in the community housing sector;
- job satisfaction;
- tenure;
- incentives to attract and retain women workers in the sector; and
- women's contribution to the community housing sector.

3.2 Women's roles in the community housing sector

When questioned about traditional roles in the community housing sector, participants in the research almost universally identified the underrepresentation of women in senior management positions; particularly at Executive Officer and Chief Executive Officers level, and a strong overrepresentation of women in most other roles in the sector. Respondents felt women dominated in administration, as well as tenancy officer, project officer, housing worker and support worker roles generally.

One of the small number of senior managers interviewed summarised the situation regarding gender roles in the community housing sector as follows...

The sector has a large female presence overall and middle management such as team leaders and coordinators... However, women are underrepresented in executive management roles such as Boards and CEO positions and to a lesser degree in the Executive Officer roles, i.e. senior management where there is possibly 30:70 split [female to male] (WCH10).

A number of respondents felt that the underrepresentation of women in senior management roles was most marked in the larger registered organisations. Some respondents felt this was a trend that was gaining momentum as organisations were growing in size and moving towards a more corporate and less 'welfaristic' style of management than in the past – making senior management positions in these organisations more competitive and more attractive to a wider audience of senior managers.

On this point, one respondent noted:

With the move away from the smaller and 'welfaristic' organisations and emergence of developmental building roles – as organisations grow...there are resultant hierarchical structures with men in the CEO roles and in the developmental building roles as well. Men become attracted to these development and building roles which emerge with the growth of an organisation from the smaller and more 'welfaristic type' organisations (WCH12).

Another respondent commented that...

Community housing organisations were small and an extension of welfare which attracted women. With its growth it has become more of an industry requiring financial expertise and so has attracted more men. [With the growing] business focus [of the sector] it is seen to be more of an industry now and so attracts men now rather than a bunch of 'do gooders' (WCH7).

And, more specifically,

[There] are limited executive opportunities in the larger housing associations as they are seconding men more and more from the UK who are the world leaders in housing associations providers which is an area that Australia is just experiencing (WCH10).

Many of the women workers interviewed also noted that women continue to be significantly outnumbered by men in the asset and finance management fields in the sector, as well as in housing/property development and maintenance. Some respondents attributed the underrepresentation of women in these roles to change in the structure and role of the sector over time.

One woman who has worked in the sector for more than 20 years questioned whether Boards had a role to play in the male domination of senior managers.

...[I] query whether the composition and appointment of senior managers is a factor? (WCH7).

She also commented that there is a

Need to attract young female graduates – [institute] a program to ensure professionals join organisations (WCH7).

When questioned about the reasons for the underrepresentation of women in the roles identified above, participants overwhelmingly drew the link between women and their family and personal responsibilities as a major factor. As one middle manager noted:

...to some extent women pre-select themselves out [of the running for management roles] and from what I have seen some women have no interest in management. Women may be interested in a further career, however, due to competing commitments outside work, they may decide that they cannot commit to this role. However, if employers were more supportive of pressures outside work, women may step up more often into management roles (WCH13R).

Other respondents commented that:

The males seem to move up more readily – not sure why, if they are more assertive and aggressive and career orientated or if women are just not interested (WCH5).

Women apply for jobs they can do whereas men apply for jobs they can get – women may not be putting themselves out for some of the senior positions for these roles (WCH6).

And,

Family focus – for some women family commitments take priority over career progression (WCH13R).

3.3 Women's careers and career progression

The issues of careers and career progressions elicited a range of responses from the women workers who participated in this research. And, it was clear that respondents generally fell into one of three groups when discussing these issues – women who had actively pursued or were pursuing a career for themselves, those who were not focussed on their own career and the progression of that career as they had chosen not to do this, and a small but not insignificant number of women who had 'fallen' into a career or progressed their career 'up' the management ladder without really intending to do so. As such, some of the respondents were quite vocal about their careers and how their careers had progressed or were likely to progress. Other women were extremely satisfied with their role and place in the sector and were not seeking to move on to another higher skilled, different or better remunerated position. For example,

Not interested in Team leader roles or manage[ment] as I feel [my] skills are best suited to the support roles (WCH9R).

In general the women felt that the increasing competitiveness around senior, and in some cases middle, management positions in the sector was of concern. As noted above the increasing competition for senior management roles in the sector, and the seeming success of men over women in these roles (for whatever reasons) was a worry for many.

Alarming, on this issue a small number of women commented on the continued existence of an 'old boys' club in the sector and the effect of this on their and other women's careers. A surprising number of participants (five or 20 per cent of the sample) mentioned that they had seen 'boys club' type behaviour at work in terms of the appointment of senior managers. For example, one respondent noted:

'Old boy's' network exists – people have known about each other for a long time and look toward their network to fill vacancies (WCH18R).

And others commented...

Executive management roles tend to be politically a 'bloke's club'. Board members tend to be experienced men from old established businesses in the not for profit sector and local government sector who have political backgrounds. The Board members are typically over 50 years old may have retired from their paid employment and may be categorised as coming from that era where women did not hold those 'political' roles. Executive management are a part of a network and are introduced into the positions from that network (WCH10).

Strong 'boy's clubs' across the community housing sector. Some of the boys in the CEO positions have formed a supportive network... [and this respondent knew of this costing a woman a job she was qualified for in the sector] (WCH14).

While these comments were not repeated widely among respondents, and may be isolated incidents within particular agencies, they do point to the importance of gender balance and broad organisational and community representation on the Boards of agencies, as well as on selection panels for important appointments.

3.3.1 Barriers to career progression

When questioned on the issue of barriers to their own and women's general career progression in the sector, respondents identified a range of barriers. Five often related barriers or challenges were highlighted by most respondents in this regard: family commitments; confidence; opportunity; training and support.

Family commitments

The issue of family commitments stood out from the interviews as an area of tension and concern for many women workers in the sector, particularly in terms of balancing work with family responsibilities. The vast majority of participants saw family commitments as a reason for lack of career progression. On this issue though, it should be noted that many women felt that they themselves created some of the barriers to their career progression, particularly where family commitments were and are concerned. For example,

Only those imposed through what I feel are my own personal limitations and through the priority that I hold for family commitments. I am not driven by my earning potential but rather feeling good about my work and workplace, my sense of community and the regard I hold for my staff (WCH13R).

Others commented that:

[Because of] my priorities – there were self-imposed barriers earlier on in my career, owing to family commitments (WCH19R).

Women usually bear the responsibility for the family and with the out-of-hours responsibility (for the family) they lose personal impetus to go for higher positions (WCH4).

This same respondent also felt that women might be placing another self-imposed barrier on their careers as...

They have a reluctance – they don't want to apply for senior management roles as they feel that the larger organisations would not want females because they have family and other commitments (WCH19R).

This is also an issue of confidence (discussed below).

Family commitment related barriers were generally broken down further into several areas by participants:

- a lack of support from the organisation, i.e. through the organisation not providing a more family friendly environment and so hindering the respondents (and women's) ability and desire to move ahead in their career;
- the individuals own prioritising family or 'putting family first', i.e. having no desire to progress their careers whilst their family still needs them – and this is regardless of any opportunities or support offered within the agency they work for; and
- women lacking the support at home to enable them to spend more time on the job or to study for higher qualifications. Many women cited the need for a 'wife at home' to enable them to match the success that men have in management.

Respondents also emphasised the fact that managerial roles require a broad skill base and that obtaining this – and necessary training and experience – is not possible for all workers in the community housing sector for a range of factors including family commitments, time constraints and such fundamental things as people's lack of confidence in their abilities.

Many of the women noted that career progression does not just mean into management. Some women don't want or aspire to management roles and the training and responsibility that accompanies such roles. On this point, many women made similar comments to this...

Women I know in the community housing sector tend to be here because of the reward they get from the role itself rather than [because of] a role or salary level (WCH10).

Confidence

Confidence was highlighted by many women as an important factor in career progression and framing and fulfilling career aspirations. In fact, many women commented that their lack of confidence in their ability to meet the challenge of senior management roles had shaped their decision to remain at a particular level in their career (i.e. middle management) and not seek promotion. Respondents qualified this further by stating that:

- they did not feel supported in their career aspirations and progression by their organisations;
- they see men as traditionally holding these roles; and
- they have not had the opportunity to gain relevant qualifications or experience for these roles. For most of the women this was because they had some time out of the workforce or working part time because of family responsibilities, while for others they had deferred further study because of family responsibilities, time or cost. Many respondents commented that there was/are limited or no opportunities for them to act in management roles within their organisation or the sector generally, and this had limited their experience.

The importance of confidence in shaping the career aspirations of women is demonstrated in the following quotes from respondents to questioning about their own career in the community housing sector:

[It was about] developing confidence – believing in my own abilities (WCH19R).

[I] have been offered higher duties but did not feel ready at this stage... Confidence about my knowledge/abilities to take on higher positions (WCH11).

Opportunity

Women in senior management roles cited a lack of opportunities within their organisation to go further as there are no other positions they could move into. Some said that the person further up the career/management ladder than them had been there so long it was unlikely they would move on until retirement and so they had to wait. This was a problem mentioned more by workers in smaller organisations than in larger ones. It also shows the importance of strategies and programs to develop the senior management experience of women in these positions. Introducing a secondment program into the sector, and allowing workers leave without pay to gain experience by being seconded to another position and/or organisation was one possible

suggestion offered by two respondents to the issue of gaining job experience for promotion. As one of these respondents noted,

Secondment to other offices could provide job variety and reinvigorate employees... (WCH1).

Another commented more broadly, stating that...

Being able to try out different roles throughout a women's career progression – this opens up women to explore their own capability and direction (WCH19R).

A small number of respondents commented that their only real employment options - other than movement to a similar position in another community housing organisation or promotion when a position is vacated or created - was a move to government. A number of respondents noted that the community housing sector generally is quite flat and this limits the career opportunities open to them.

Traditionally, most community housing organisations have flat management structures with roles tending to be specialised positions. Therefore, changing roles sideways means retraining. If a person is not suited to management it is difficult to move upwards. New co-operatives and development opportunities – may result in new roles but they can be temporary... [there is] always a lot of competition for these jobs (WCH6).

Respondents in non-senior positions spoke of more opportunities within the same organisation as they grew and met the requirements for registration as a community housing provider. Many of these respondents said that the registration process had brought about significant change in their organisation and this had resulted in the development of new employment opportunities for them and others. Most of the workers who commented on the opening up of new opportunities felt that they had been well supported by their supervisors, colleagues and their Boards in applying for and fulfilling these new and often higher level management and leadership roles (with higher remuneration).

Importantly also, some of the longer term employees interviewed (e.g. with 20-30+ years in the sector) said they were waiting for retirement and did not want to change jobs. In fact, a significant number of the women interviewed strongly stressed that they are happy with their place in their agency and the sector – and the support they receive from their employer and colleagues – and do not have further career aspirations. Some of the women in this group had worked hard in past years to build their career up to the point it is at now and to work to balance their career and family responsibilities.

Many of the younger employees were using their current role in the sector as a stepping stone to careers in related fields – building their skills and experience in the community housing sector first.

Training

Undertaking necessary training and relevant qualifications were also mentioned by the majority of respondents as barriers to their own personal career progression. On this issue, two concerns dominated. First, the lack of a training budget for staff – which was reported in some agencies and not in others, and second, women being able to find the extra time outside work hours to dedicate to such education and training. This was an important barrier to career progression for women generally because of their busy work and personal lives – mostly due to family commitments.

On the other hand, some respondents felt that the organisations they worked for were very supportive and encouraging when it came to necessary education for professional development, and felt they would have no trouble if they wanted to attend relevant training. However, many respondents noted that they felt the available training was good for relatively new employees but it was too basic for those who had been there for several years.

...the Office of Housing does offer some training which is pitched at the more basic level and does not meet the needs of more skilled and experienced housing workers (WCH1).

Lack of developmental type training for executives. That offered by the housing sector is geared towards day-to-day service delivery (WCH10).

Community housing sector training is fairly basic (WCH5).

The women who mentioned concerns over the lack of advanced training wanted more specific higher level training targeted to their roles (as managers, team leaders, experienced housing workers) and their specific client needs. Many acknowledged the existence of the Housing related courses conducted by Swinburne University but some felt more comprehensive community housing sector targeted training was needed, and especially in the emerging fields in the sector (see below).

Women already in management positions who were not waiting for retirement appeared to have more extensive knowledge of outside training than those in the coal-face support and tenancy worker roles. Some belonged to professional bodies such as the Institute of Management and were kept in the loop about education and training options through such organisations, as well as through their own employer. However, not all respondents reported this, and some noted that more could be done by their employer and the Office of Housing to provide training, as well as notify them about relevant education and training opportunities.

Moreover, some respondents mentioned the importance of attending regular conferences to keep abreast of changes and advances in the sector. The few respondents who worked for organisations that offered funding for them to attend a large conference every two years thought this was an important part of their career development and contributed to their professional development and networking. Opportunities to network with other workers in the sector, as well as experts in the community housing field – locally, nationally and internationally, were opportunities that were highly valued by women, and also mentioned as something that could be better coordinated within some agencies.

Many women mentioned that they would like to undertake additional job-related training. Some of the women were undertaking such training, however, others noted that finding the time to undertake training was almost impossible for them. This situation was most often mentioned by women with school age children. For example,

[I am] interested in research and probably would like to do more training but cannot afford the time... Evening work is not possible... [because of] family responsibilities at the moment – due to children's age and conditions (WCH4).

Support

Support from colleagues and especially agency management was listed by all respondents as crucial in terms of job satisfaction and career progression. Many spoke of the ongoing daily support of team members as important to their job satisfaction, in achieving their outcomes, for debriefing and in contributing to a positive work environment.

Support from agency management, or rather lack of it, was a major barrier or positive influence on respondents' career progression. Support was seen as being present if there were open communication channels, women were being listened to and felt valued, there was a process in place for regular weekly and/or monthly reviews of case work and annual reviews of performance and progress.

Senior managers spoke of the huge value derived from having professional mentors outside the organisation assigned to them usually with Board approval. Some thought that their review meetings lacked a development focus and concentrated just on performance.

Annual performance reviews were raised by a small number of the women as an important channel in their career development, particularly where they were more focused on the staff member's career aspirations and progression, rather than only on progress and achievements in their current role.

A small number of women noted that there are limited opportunities and support regarding career development in their organisations and felt the need for

...career counseling to assist employees with identifying areas for career development (WCH8R).

On the issue of support it should also be noted that some women commented on the role of the Community Housing Federation of Victoria, noting that:

The peak body, the Community Housing Federation of Victoria (CHFV), provides a lot of support, advice and assistance (WCH2R).

Other issues raised

It should be noted here that other more agency or organisational level issues were also raised by a very small number of participants. For example, two participants mentioned the size of their organisations as a barrier to their career progression, as there simply are not other jobs within the organisation to move to. For example,

Lack of opportunity within the community housing sector means that one must be patient to progress in this small sector. This will be true especially if one is not recognised as somebody who is a candidate for the property related positions (WCH6).

One of the middle managers interviewed emphasised the fact that there is a 'bottleneck after the ground work positions' (WCH13R).

Another participant noted that she had few opportunities to gain the skills and experience needed to progress her career as she was often excluded from the training options given to other staff because she works part time (WCH 18R). While this is clearly an agency-level issue, it is one worth noting because women workers are more often employed part time than their male counterparts and choose such working arrangements more frequently. Moreover, it is easy to address – at the agency and sector wide level (through provision of better information regarding training opportunities to sector workers) and it shows the importance of inter agency networking and opportunities as part of a career development pathway – and for all workers. Given the results of this research in terms of the importance of flexible working arrangements (see below) this is an area that must be attended to in order to retain and attract quality women workers in particular.

3.4 Emerging roles in the community housing sector

Analysis of the data collected on emerging roles in the sector highlighted six widely acknowledged emerging roles:

- *property development* – as one respondent summarised: 'Key area is in property development – roles in the area of property design, surrounding the environmental factors and house design as it pertains to the environment, the financial aspects, the planning and marketing' (WCH10);
- *project management and project development* – including managing building and application processes, tender writing etc;
- *asset management* – including maintenance of much larger property portfolios than has been so in the past;
- *design and planning* – especially requiring architecture and town planning skills;
- *investment attraction* – attracting/leveraging private sector investment in the sector and liaising with private sector partners; and
- *policy development* roles.

Respondents noted the need for qualified workers in these areas because of future growth in the sector for registered agencies. They also overwhelmingly noted the underrepresentation of women in these roles at present.

Many respondents also pointed to the need for more highly skilled and experienced support and tenancy workers to meet both the needs of clients and growth in the sector generally. Emphasised here was the need for support and tenancy workers able to assist the increasing number of clients being housed with

high and complex needs. On this issue some respondents noted the need for more specialised training for workers to fulfil this role – particularly accredited or recognised training provided by the Office of Housing or other registered training organisations.

One respondent noted that:

... more training would be nice... allowing us to understand and keep abreast of the changes in the community housing sector and gaining more understanding of the new types of people coming under our responsibility i.e. understanding their background and how their needs are different [from previous client groups] (WCH9R).

As part of the questioning regarding emerging roles in the community housing sector generally, respondents were also asked to comment on whether they felt there were any barriers or challenges to women taking up these emerging roles. Most respondents thought that gender would not be a factor in the uptake of these roles: 'if women have existing experience and relevant qualifications' (WCH10). Another respondent summarised the thoughts of many on this issue saying there are 'no barriers for women who have the required *mobility, skills and experience*' (WCH9R, emphasis added).

This said, a significant minority of respondents thought women might face challenges in these areas – and especially in the building and construction fields – as they have traditionally been, and generally remain, male dominated. A number of women thought female workers in these areas may find their credibility questioned, with most thinking this to be a problem for women workers dealing with tradespeople in particular. For example,

[There is a] negative perception towards women in the construction industry and their role and their ability to contribute based on prejudice. Because women are a minority and women have less experience on the tools than the men in the office who have building background (WCH17).

Many respondents felt that more needs to be done in the sector to provide training for people in the emerging roles in the sector mentioned above. And, specifically that the Office of Housing and community housing sector peak body should provide more training and subsidised training places, particularly for women who are underrepresented among workers in these areas.

Importantly, it should also be noted here that one of the few women in the sector working in an emerging field noted...

There is a definite career path as it's a growing area but I feel it is more difficult for females as it's traditionally a male dominated area. As a result of this, I am undertaking external study so I can move forward (WCH24R).

3.5 Job satisfaction

As part of the questioning regarding women's careers and career progression the issue of women's general job satisfaction was covered. While this issue was not one of the overriding focuses of this research, a question about job satisfaction was included in the interview schedule and the issue was mentioned by most women at various points throughout the interviews. The responses to the issue of job satisfaction on the whole showed the strong attachment the women have to the sector and their general satisfaction with their jobs and careers. This said, some respondents were openly unhappy about such things as restructuring in their organisations and where this had left them in terms of employment and career progression.

Overall respondents were satisfied that they had chosen a career that allowed them to help people with a fundamental factor in their lives – housing, whilst also allowing them to work for an agency with values and a charter that matches their own. This was crucially important for many respondents. For example:

I get political satisfaction - derived from...providing housing to some of the most vulnerable people in our community... I live and work locally and I contribute to the welfare of my community (WCH7).

Ultimately, the fact that we are providing assistance to people with something fundamental to their existence (WCH9R).

Getting outcomes for clients, getting them housing (WCH4).

Having success with clients – being able to assist someone in their path towards an improvement in their life (WCH8R).

And,

Making a difference to the clients – seeing a client sign up, work on their issues...to the point where they no longer need assistance...(WCH1).

Many respondents noted that they would leave the agency they work for if the agency's and their values no longer matched. Others commented that one of the challenges for the community housing sector as they see it is

...not losing sight of our charter whilst becoming a community housing business (WCH19R).

If our values of the community sector are retained and not turned into a more profit based business (WCH19R).

For many respondents, their job satisfaction was tied to being able to meet their family responsibilities, and most respondents were grateful to their employers for flexible work arrangements over many years which had allowed them to raise their children. As one respondent noted on the factors that contribute to her job satisfaction,

Family friendly conditions of employment i.e. the flexibility to work from home; and to work around school hours if necessary; take time in lieu (WCH2R).

Others commented that their work allows them flexibility that is not necessarily available in other sectors and this suits their lifestyle and fits with other commitments in their lives. For example, one participant noted she values the ability to work from home.

Lots of flexibility in hours – [to] choose start and end times. PC at home is hooked up to the office – this flexibility is priceless! (WCH13R).

Access to work provisions such as time in lieu were also important contributors to job satisfaction for those with access to such support.

In discussing these factors, it should also be noted that some participants pointed to the of paid maternity leave as an issue for them that also affects their job satisfaction factor, e.g.

Paid maternity leave is not provided but would lead to greater satisfaction if it were (WCH2R, emphasis added).

Employee Assistance Programs were highly valued by those respondents whose employers had them, and were especially important as a means for talking through work issues as well as career and personal issues.

The renewed energy in the sector brought about by the potential to attract more money for houses was a major factor in their job satisfaction for many respondents.

The challenges being afforded by the current changes within the community housing sector. There are plenty of challenges and changes on the horizon within the sector which provide much job satisfaction. But if the challenges cease so will [my] interest.

Many respondents were happy that their organisations were growing for the first time in many years, allowing them to house more of the most vulnerable people in the housing market. Others noted that such growth in the sector was also allowing their role within the sector to develop in new ways; most of the women who mentioned this saw it as a positive influence on their own career development – provided that necessary supports are available to them to avoid burnout (discussed below).

Others noted that the attitude of management to the work roles and career development of staff was central to their job satisfaction. For example,

There is a good culture [in the organisation] owing to management attitude – with minimal 'bitching' and 'no cliquiness'. Everyone is accepting of each others differences. This may be attributed to the management and having an amazing CEO – his attitude filters down (WCH4).

Have a wonderfully supportive CEO who is empowering and shares information on issues across the organisation (WCH13R).

A participant in the panel discussion on this research at the Women's Housing Futures Conference also noted, on the issue of the supportiveness of senior management in their organisation, that good work-life balance flowed from management in their organisation as well.

Support from colleagues was also clearly important in respondents' assessment of their job satisfaction. So too was receiving and being able to share information with colleagues and regular feedback from colleagues and management. Respondents also highly valued having autonomy in their work roles and workplaces. Important also was the fact that women

...are well supported and have opportunity to have input and to share information at team meetings (WCH16R).

And, that

Everyone works together to support each other... (WCH 7).

[I'm]...listened to and that [my] opinions are valued (WCH19R).

For senior managers having the support and appreciation of their Boards was crucial.

Ensuring women have diversity in terms of their daily tasks was also an area mentioned by many respondents as important in women's job satisfaction and therefore their likelihood of staying in the sector in the longer term.

The vast majority of women indicated that they would remain in the community housing sector over coming years. That is, with the common proviso that their jobs remain meaningful and interesting, their values and those of the agency still match, and, for those women with a career focus, opportunities continue for career and skills development and progression within their organisation or the sector generally. Moreover, many women noted that the low wage rates in the sector were something that concerned them in the short and longer term, and this might influence their decision to move to another workplace or line of work at some time in the future.

3.6 Tenure

Overwhelmingly, and regardless of their role in the sector, women said they would remain with their current organisation as long as their values were in sync with those of the organisation. This was an overriding theme in terms of tenure in the sector, along with workers' need to be challenged in their work and able to contribute to the charter of providing quality housing for people in the community. Of course the organisation having adequate funding to support their charter and their staff were also key considerations here. These issues have also been well discussed with regard to ensuring the capacity of the community housing workforce to meet increasing client demands and growth (see the Homelessness White Paper (Commonwealth of Australia 2008); Vindis 2009; Wright Howie 2009).

On this point it is important to note that most interviewees mentioned that sector wage rates are low, especially compared with the private sector more broadly, and with the public service. As one respondent stated...

Recent graduates are recruited [to the sector] but do not last owing to the poor wages. The community housing sector is orienting people who then move on to more lucrative areas of the industry (WCH19R).

Many respondents noted that one of the key reasons they might consider leaving the sector in the future is if wage rates continued to remain low in comparison with similar sectors of the workforce or if they should find another better remunerated job. Many respondents also noted these concerns in their analysis

of their job satisfaction, and as something that needs to be addressed to attract and retain workers in the sector (section 3.7). The issue of wage rates was not specifically explored in this research, as much research has been undertaken on this issue in the past and especially by the state and national peak bodies representing the community housing workforce and unions. Low wage rates in the sector were also raised as one of the challenges in addressing the homelessness problem in Australia in the very brief discussion of workforce capacity and workforce issues in the Homelessness White Paper (Commonwealth of Australia 2008: 42).

Many of the longer term employees said they would stay until retirement and were not looking for opportunities elsewhere. Some of these participants were well aware that this meant a halt to their career aspirations and progression, especially where there were no further rungs on the promotion ladder above their current position. For most of these respondents, their current place and role in the sector was where they wanted to be; for most of these women finding another job late in their career was considered risky, too stressful, or just unnecessary.

3.7 Incentives to attract and retain women workers in the sector

Two particular incentives were mentioned by almost all respondents in terms of incentives to attract and retain women workers in the sector. These were:

First, *providing a family friendly environment, particularly* with respect to working hours. That is, recognition by organisations of the importance of work/life balance and having supports in place to assist workers to establish and maintain a healthy work/life balance. Tenancy and housing workers and administration staff were more likely to mention the importance of work/life balance and having a family friendly workplace – and particularly the importance of flexible work hours and time in lieu – than were senior management. This said, most senior managers also mentioned the importance of these arrangements for women generally and for themselves in their early and mid-career when they had younger children and more significant family responsibilities.

Women need greater supports when they are having families. We need to be able to offer women maternity leave and the ability to return to work in the manner that suits them. i.e. if a woman wants to return in a part time capacity the organisation should assist this to occur so that her skills are retained (WCH13R).

When people return to work after having children flexibility assists in managing family and career (WCH11).

One participant succinctly summarised the importance of family friendly workplace policies for women in the sector:

Family friendly conditions are still necessary to manage child caring responsibilities and so remain an important factor (WCH2R).

Moreover, the...

Work from home option...increases flexibility to meet family commitments (WCH4).

On this issue it should also be noted that flexible working arrangements were seen as necessary for retaining women workers in the sector in terms of assisting them with balancing other care responsibilities, as well as for education. One respondent, for example, mentioned the importance of flexible work times while she was caring for her frail aged mother. Others mentioned that they appreciated agency specific policies allowing them a certain number of hours per week off from work to undertake work related study.

Another respondent commented that 'flexibility leads to happier workers and better output for a more viable environment' (WCH14).

Maternity leave, facilities to occasionally bring children to work when necessary (e.g. on pupil free days and when they are sick) as well as being able to work part time were all incentives that were repeatedly mentioned by respondents and were seen as crucial to supporting existing workers and attracting and retaining women in the sector. Job sharing was mentioned by many respondents as an essential component in allowing women with families to remain attached to the workforce.

Some of the women in the younger age groups (i.e. those aged under 35) were encouraged by the recent announcement of a national parental leave scheme, particularly given the patchy and inconsistent nature of maternity leave benefits in the sector.

On this issue, however, it must also be noted that some of the women interviewed put forward a position that is summarised in the following quote:

Creating a 'family friendly' environment does not necessarily lead to management roles as the number of hours required of those roles require excessive hours.

The second important factor in terms of incentives to attract and retain women workers in the sector was *increasing the portability of long service leave for sector employees*.

A significant number of the mid and later career employees interviewed spoke of never having accrued significant long service leave as they had moved around the sector frequently. For example:

Even after having served longer than ten years in the housing sector I have little Long Service Leave accrued (WCH6).

After 33 years...[WCH4] has still not qualified for Long Service Leave.

Importantly, these factors were mentioned by respondents regardless of their position and stage in the life course. The recent decision by Victorian Government to introduce portable long service leave for community sector services funded by the Department of Human Services (i.e. housing, homelessness and family violence related services) from July 2010 (Darmanin and Kun 2009) will go a long way towards appeasing concerns in this area. As Darmanin and Kun comment in their recent article in *Parity* (2009: 13):

This will encourage people to stay in the community sector and provide many workers with something they could never dream of having: LONG SERVICE LEAVE (original emphasis).

Other issues

Additionally, a significant number of respondents (largely those in higher level positions or who had been in the sector for many years), mentioned the importance of being able to salary sacrifice to buy additional annual leave as a benefit of working in the sector that might attract women workers. They also felt access to this would contribute to people's job satisfaction. Buying additional leave was also mentioned as crucially important to worker wellbeing as it was used as a key method of avoiding worker 'burnout', especially for those workers with unlimited case loads and/or with significant family responsibilities. As one respondent noted,

Additional leave provisions would go some way to acknowledging the challenging work done by them (WCH4).

Professional and workplace mentoring and coaching were recurrent themes in terms of incentives to retain workers and boost productivity. Many senior managers mentioned the important role of external professional mentors in their lives, and this was something they felt necessary in their career development and progression. Some respondents had sought out career advisors or coaches themselves as part of a strategy to attain their career and life goals. Others had been assisted by their supervisors and or Boards to do this. Many respondents felt that access to a more co-ordinated professional mentoring program for the sector would be of great benefit, especially for building women's confidence in themselves and their ability to gain promotions.

Access to education was considered an important attractor for respondents and something that was highly valued. Respondents experiences in terms of education, however, were varied and very much depended on the policies and the management culture of individual agencies. Some respondents reported extensive access to education opportunities – including awareness of Office of Housing education support and Community Housing Federation of Victoria courses – and many of these respondents had undertaken such education in order to diversify and consolidate their skills. A small number of respondents, on the other hand, were critical of the poor education culture in their organisations, and the lack of support for them to undertake further training – for example, the cost of gaining qualifications and not being allowed time away from work to undertake training. Scholarships were mentioned by a significant number of respondents as something that should be looked at sector wide as a means of retaining and attracting workers, particularly in emerging roles in the sector.

Unsurprisingly, remuneration or ensuring 'attractive wage rates' (WCH5) were often raised by women as a key issue in terms of attracting and retaining workers in the sector. Important also, was not just the actual rates of pay within the sector, but improving, or at the very least continuing, current salary sacrificing and packaging options to make salaries attractive compared with other sectors of the workforce.

3.8 Women's contribution to the community housing sector

The final line of questioning in the surveys was a general question for the participants about what they see as the unique contribution women make to the sector. This questioning elicited varied responses, however, many women emphasised the fact that women are generally more likely to be compassionate with regards to clients and their needs than men. As the following comment from one respondent notes...

Women have a better understanding of the need for a secure roof overhead and place higher values on this need. Women try to think about the longer term ramifications for the tenant and what is the most suitable and sustainable outcome for them (WCH9R).

Moreover, a majority of respondents noted that women generally hold the qualities of empathy and good listening skills, and many noted that from their own experience in working with other women, that women workers are often more persistent in meeting the needs of clients and have a strong sense of social justice.

Other women noted that women workers have long been the backbone of the community housing sector – and especially in terms of services to support vulnerable women (i.e. those escaping domestic and family violence) and in the social work roles in the sector. As one participant in the research noted,

Women hold a lot of knowledge on the background and history of the community housing sector and have worked long and hard to get it to where it is today (WCH7).

Interestingly, a significant number of women noted that women workers can and do offer a unique perspective in terms of the design of living and social environments and this is something that could be better acknowledged and utilised within the sector. For example,

Women design houses to be lived in (WCH19R); and

Housing design – women are able to give a unique perspective into areas such as such as layout, security and communal areas et cetera. There are plenty of opportunities for the women to provide this insight (WCH2R).

And,

[Women have] insight into [clients'] needs beyond the property (WCH6).

All of these views considered, it should also be noted here that most of the women felt that the qualities mentioned above were not unique to women but in their experiences they have noticed that more women than men exhibited these qualities.

4. Discussion and Program Response: Building a Workforce for the 21st Century

Agencies should be leaning towards training and plans for women to move forward instead of constantly losing good staff with terrific skills (WCH22).

The discussions with women workers in the community housing sector in Victoria **lead to a number of conclusions about actions needed to better support women workers in their positions/ roles in the sector.** This section of the report notes these actions – providing a program response in the light of the research findings for agencies, the Office of Housing and state peak bodies representing the sector. **The actions are in no particular order of preference, as all are equally important and necessary for attracting and retaining women workers in the sector. They are also essential for ensuring that women workers are adequately recognised for their contribution to the sector and supported in their roles.**

First, **programs are needed to build women's confidence and experience in their roles in the sector.** This includes programs that suit women who are senior managers and middle managers, as well as for women who are working at the coal-face in the sector and in administrative positions.

A range of strategies are needed here. For example, staff exchange programs and secondments to other agencies and positions within agencies will build workers' experience. These programs are especially important for ensuring that women gain necessary management experience in agencies that are generally very flat in structure. It will also help to address one of the key and surprising findings of this research – that many women do not have the confidence to progress 'up' the career ladder in their workplace or the sector generally, as they do not feel they have the relevant experience. These programs are also necessary for women at the coal-face in the sector and for those in middle management who aspire to moving into more senior roles.

Similarly, **leadership training and mentoring programs** have an important role to play in this regard for women. **A more comprehensive program of leadership training – supported by the Office of Housing – should be implemented and available to women sector wide, and particularly for those in middle management roles, or who aspire to these or more senior management roles.** Other leadership programs already operating across Victoria, and nationally where relevant, should also be better promoted to women within the sector. Notable here, for example, are the programs offered by **Leadership Victoria.** The Community Housing Federation of Victoria or Office of Housing could also play a necessary role here, coordinating regular leadership forums for workers in the sector generally, to network, and share experiences and learning.

On the issue of leadership and mentoring, **attention should also be paid to the information and resources developed by, and programs on offer to workers and women workers through, state-based and national professional associations,** for example, through the National Association of Women in Construction¹ and the Supporting Women in the Professional Environment (SWIPE) task group of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects². Many such groups have professional mentoring

and leadership programs that could be tapped by women in the community housing sector as an important support for their careers. These two particular examples are potentially useful as they support women in two of the key emerging areas of employment in the community housing sector where women are currently underrepresented.

In terms of **mentoring, programs need to be introduced at the individual worker level, within agencies and the sector.** The Office of Housing and community housing peak bodies could take on this role, finding suitably qualified people to work with women to progress their careers – if they wish to do so, or to support them in their daily work. Such mentors could be people from within or outside the community housing sector. **Relatedly, the findings of this research show there is clearly room for mentors or professional development coaches for women in middle management aspiring to progress to upper level management and to support women in senior management positions to deal with the pressures and stresses of their positions.**

Second, **a family friendly workplace remains central for women and their careers.** While much progress has been made in particular community housing organisations, in the community housing sector, and in the workforce generally, in this area much more still needs to be done. **Ensuring that job share arrangements and part time work options are available to women across the sector is paramount in retaining women workers who have a family.** The recent announcement of a **paid parental leave scheme** by the Federal Government was welcomed by some of the respondents in the sector – especially for the assistance this will provide to younger women in the sector who are yet to commence a family. **Having the ability to work at home is also essential for many women; allowing them to meet work, education/ training and caring responsibilities.**

It is important to note here that in examining the career aspirations of women workers in the sector it should be remembered that not all women want to build a career as a manager in the sector. **Additionally, career progression and career paths are different for different women.** The career ladder is not always vertical, and many of the women spoken to for this research had worked hard to get to the position they had currently and **did not aspire to moving 'up' the career ladder.** Many of the participants in the research wanted to remain at the coal-face in the sector, working closely with clients and not in management or other non-client focused roles. **Moreover, many of the women who participated in this research had worked their way into a role in the sector where they had a good level of work/life balance and had therefore met their career goals.**

Third, **measures to build and share knowledge among workers within agencies and across workers in the sector generally must be introduced** – and at both the agency and sector wide level. Important in this regard are opportunities for networking among women workers in the sector (including among senior managers), and among women workers and other professionals working in associated and relevant fields. These opportunities are highly valued by those workers who have them and are sought and needed by many who don't.

¹ See www.nawic.com.au

² Interestingly, the Royal Australian Institute of Architects has undertaken past research into the career progression of women workers in architectural profession, and many of the findings of that research mirror the findings of this research for the community housing sector workforce in Victoria (Whitman 2005). See <http://www.architecture.com.au/i-cms?page=5860#> and for the Supporting Women in the Professional Environment (SWIPE) task group see <http://www.architecture.com.au/i-cms?page=8127#>.

A potential program that could assist here is that which is already in place in one agency in the sector and was described by one of the women interviewed. That is,

[her agency has a] policy on conference attendance – every staff member can attend a relevant conference interstate once every two years. Participation in conferences assists staff in their understanding [of] the 'bigger picture' (WCH13R).

Given the speed and extent of changes in community housing at the current time – driven by growth in the sector to meet affordability problems in the housing market and to meet Government priorities on halving the number of people sleeping rough – **providing workers with opportunities to attend seminars and conferences on a more regular basis will assist in the exchange of information. Importantly, this will also keep workers in the sector abreast of new models in the design, delivery and management of properties, clients and staff.**

Another potential strategy of benefit here is **sending sector workers overseas on secondment/staff exchanges to similar community services organisations. This will allow workers to learn first-hand new models of service delivery and new approaches to managing and designing appropriate housing for vulnerable people.**

Fourth, the lack of younger women workers (aged 35 or under) in the sector is a widely recognised challenge (KPMG 2008; Huynh 2009 for NSW), and one that needs specific attention. While all of the actions outlined in this section will work at attracting and retaining younger women workers in the sector, a more comprehensive strategy in terms of articulating career paths, career options and the support available for women as their careers and life circumstances change, is needed. **Ensuring all women, especially younger women, are provided with career counselling and professional development guidance as part of their annual review of progress in their position,** as occurs in other areas of the labour force, will assist with this.

Fifth, **training remains an ongoing concern in terms of the development and capacity of the community housing workforce,** and current sector growth offers opportunity for new skills development. Consequently, as has been widely discussed within the sector, and summarised by Tony Keenan (CEO of Hanover Welfare Services in Melbourne) in his recent article on *Joined Up Services and Workforce Development*:

...we [the sector] are also going to require current staff to work quite differently and to develop new and additional skill sets (Keenan 2009: 28).

A number of strategies are needed to address this issue. **New and more accredited training courses and places are required for the emerging roles and areas in the sector;** especially in business management, property development and commercial development areas, and environmentally sustainable and sensitive design for new housing. Some of these courses and places in them should be set aside specifically for women who wish to undertake such training. Attention should be paid to delivering these courses in alternative formats, so women can balance undertaking them with their already tight work schedules.

The results of this research show that there are very few women working in the community housing sector in Victoria in the emerging fields (see section 3.4). **Workers in the sector would**

also benefit from exposure to a range of training courses in areas not traditionally offered to sector workers, for example, in real estate and property management, and planning and housing design. All such training must be made available to workers in metropolitan and regional areas, to ensure that regionally-focused agencies are not disadvantaged.

And, mirroring other calls on the development of an appropriate community services workforce (Macdonald 2009 on the domestic violence sector workforce in particular; Perusco 2009; Wright Howie 2009) **specialised training options are needed for workers who have been in the sector for a significant time.** These include training for senior and middle managers to continue to efficiently undertake their jobs in a changed policy environment and for certain skilled workers to meet, for example, the increasingly complex needs of clients.

The provision of a suite of training options along these lines – in traditional and emerging areas of the sector, and for new and highly experienced staff, will assist in building the type of workforce that is necessary to meet the increasingly complex needs of vulnerable clients.

Importantly, **relevant training options must be consistently and widely promoted to workers in the sector.** Many of the respondents in this research noted that the Community Housing Federation of Victoria and Office of Housing circulars on training opportunities are essential and an appropriate and valued means of disseminating information.

On this issue of training, it should also be noted that there is clearly more room for sponsored places for women in relevant courses. **Scholarships for short and more significant courses are also needed to ensure that women have the full capacity to undertake and complete courses.** Having the support of their agency and management in undertaking training was something many respondents commented that they needed in order to complete training – especially for courses that require time away from work to complete.

Sixth, **the level of remuneration for workers in the sector remains a major challenge for the community housing and community services sectors generally.** This issue was raised by many of the women in the research as an issue in terms of staff turnover and retention and for their own future employment considerations. **This has been a long term concern for the sector, and one that has been widely debated, with limited success.** This said, it will be interesting to monitor the developments in Queensland on this issue, given the decision of the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission in May 2009 to increase the award rates of pay for community sector workers covered by the *Queensland Community Services and Crisis Assistance Award – State 2008* (Pegg 2009a, 2009b). This ruling has mandated an increase in wages of 14 per cent for the lowest paid workers under the award to 38 per cent for some of those at the upper end of the award. Importantly, the decision was based on the findings that 'there has historically been an undervaluation of work in the community services sector and that this has been on a gender basis; and there has been a lack of enterprise bargaining in the sector' (Pegg 2009b: 1).

While the low wage rate in the sector is clearly an overriding issue influencing the attractiveness of the sector to workers, it should also be noted that other important factors are at play in terms of attracting and retaining women in the sector. These include the family friendly workplace arrangements and job flexibility mentioned above, as well as **salary packaging options** (which assist in improving the attractiveness of current sector pay rates) and such things as the **portability of long service leave for some workers**. This said, women were vocal about the need to have widespread access to portable long service leave to retain them in the sector, and to attract new workers and **to have access to provisions such as salary sacrifice to purchase additional leave – to buy time to spend with their families and/or to avoid burnout in a sector where burnout is commonplace.**

Additionally, one of the strengths of the community housing sector from the perspective of women workers is **the job satisfaction they get from assisting vulnerable people with their housing outcomes, and working for agencies with social values and a social charter that reflects their own.** These aspects of their work keep many women working in the sector, and **agencies and governments must ensure that they do not move too far away from their traditional social values and charters with the increasing pressures on them to grow and move to more business and corporate models of management** than has been the case in the past.

Finally, **the development of a sector wide workforce strategy encompassing all of the aforementioned strategies and assistance measures is needed.** This strategy should acknowledge the existence of gender-based issues in the community housing sector workforce and ensure supports are in place for the continuous improvement of the situation of the workforce. Importantly, this research shows there is both a real need and real opportunity currently for community housing agencies, the community housing peak bodies and the Victorian Government to address capacity issues in the community housing sector – both in Victoria and Australia-wide. Doing so is crucial given the expressed optimism among participants in this research because of continuing growth in the sector. This said, **the window of opportunity to get things right in terms of supporting current female staff in the sector and attracting new staff is narrow, therefore it is vital action is taken now.**

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

Women in the Community Housing Sector: Building a Workforce for the 21st Century

- What is your current position?
 - How long have you been a worker in the community housing/housing sector generally? (May want to ask what they have done in terms of work/a career in the past?)
- Has your position/role changed since you first joined the organisation and in what way? What is the size/structure of the organisation you currently work for? (Is it metro/regional in focus?)
 - What do you see as some of the more traditional roles in community managed housing in which women are under-represented?
- What do you see as the main contributing factors for this under-representation?
- What are the important factors that contribute to your job satisfaction?
 - Do you believe these factors are the same or similar for your male colleagues?
- Do you feel there is a career path in your line of work?
 - If no – why?
 - If yes – can you please describe this career path?
- What do you see as the main factors impacting on your career progression? (prompts: family/caring responsibilities, education/training etc) Are these factors time limited (i.e. only relevant for some of your career)?
- What employment options would enhance and/or support your career progression either in the immediate or longer term?
- Do you feel adequately supported in your position in terms of your career?
 - Why/why not?
 - In what ways?
- Does your employer offer any particular support/assistance to you to help you to progress your career?
 - If yes – what?
 - If no – what is needed? (levers to keep women in the sector)
- Do you feel there are barriers to your career progression?
 - If no – why?
 - If yes – what are the barriers?
- Are there other support programs (technologies, training etc) that you are aware of in the community housing sector, housing sector or elsewhere that you think would help you (or women workers generally in the sector) with your/their career development?
 - Describe?
- How likely are you to remain working in the community housing sector in the next 5 years? 5-10 years? and 10+ years?
 - What will keep you there?
 - What will make you leave?
- Given the growth in the not for profit housing sector, what roles do you see as emerging for workers?
 - What barriers, if any exist for women in taking up these roles?
 - What/why?
- What do you see as the unique contribution women can (and do) make to the community housing sector?
 - Describe
- If a community housing agency wished to target female workers, what incentives or support would you suggest they offer?
- Any other comments or issues?

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