

Taking it to the street

Paul Gilder meets six influential women who'll sleep rough to highlight the plight of the city's homeless

NUMBERS don't always tell the story. But when you hear that nearly six in every 10 people who access homelessness services across Australia are women, what comes next is a chilling but all too common narrative.

Women with children, escaping violent relationships, or suffering financial or health difficulties, brave the streets when all other options are exhausted. Official figures show that across Australia, more than 105,000 people are homeless. Of the 23,000 Victorians in that figure, one in six is aged under 12.

Next month, the St Vincent de Paul Society will thrust 300 of the state's corporate leaders into the shoes of the homeless to endure a freezing night of solidarity armed with only a sleeping bag, beanie and sliver of cardboard.

The aim of the CEO Sleepout, entering its 11th year, is to raise \$1.5 million, a sum which would procure 200 houses through Vinnies' HomeDirect program. The scheme aims to snap the cycle of repeated homelessness by giving people rental support, access to a 12-month lease and the avenue to save for their

own home.

Vinnies Victoria chief executive Sue Cattermole said housing was the cornerstone of a family's life, not to mention the security and practicality it brings, especially for women. "Without a postal address, it's very difficult to work, access services or get your children back into school," she said.

"People need that support to be able to do so, otherwise the impact is not just for that generation but the next."

Six women participating in this year's Sleepout spoke to *Business Daily* about how vital it is for homeless women to get support and shared their views on empowering women.

JEANETTE PRITCHARD Monash Vision Group chief operating officer

"IT's an absolute travesty in a country as rich as Australia that people are having to face the kinds of difficulties that are associated with homelessness, whether they're sleeping on the streets or on friends' couches or in cars. It's a situation we shouldn't be in, in Australia.

"Most people are aware that in the city centres there are many apartments being built and many are maybe not being occupied. We should be thinking ... what can we do to address this to help people who don't have a home."

DANNI ADDISON Urban Development Institute of Australia chief

"THE policy approach (to community housing) is to deal with the critical need at the beginning, which is definitely

very important, but it doesn't then follow the person to get them into a position where they're empowered enough to

move on from that form of housing.

"I see it more as a cycle and hopefully people work their way through it and out of it rather than through it and back to the beginning. That's where our industry can play a big role in offering and developing that housing stock at affordable rates.

"I had my first child about six months ago and I couldn't imagine the horror of being a young mum without a home, without the economic and physical and social support that I have ... getting women out of those vulnerable situations often brings families out of those vulnerable situations."

MICHELLE GALLAHER Social Science founder

"I REALLY want homeless women to know that other women care. Just by one woman, or six women standing up saying 'I'll do this with you, I'll raise my hand', I think it's a really important message.

"That feeling of being alone, that sense of being lost in the system, particularly when you've got kids too, it just must be so lonely and so confronting. (For me) it's a small token to stay out one night, but the lasting effect is quite dramatic ... I did it six years ago and it really changed my view. It highlighted to me that their lives are not so far from mine."

HELEN SOUNESS

Etsy Australia managing director

"I'M raising a daughter in St Kilda and we pass by homeless people often. I just don't feel it's OK to not do anything about that, that she's being raised so secure and safe in our home and that there are children within blocks of us that aren't safe. For her to see me do something about it feels right.

"I had heard about the event in previous years and thought it sounded amazing but just because it was called CEO Sleepout I assumed I couldn't take part, I was a marketing director at the time.

But actually it's a really diverse group of senior leaders."

KRISTIANA GREENWOOD FM Innovations founder

"ONE of the issues I see is we have all this space, all these fantastic buildings, and at night they're completely empty. So why aren't we, in property, opening those doors somehow to let those people on the streets get some warmth at night, even if it's just to have a shelter in the foyer, have a shower, a cup of coffee, watch TV ... we actually do have the ability to make a change."

"We still only have 18 per cent women in the facilities management industry. I don't think it's just the problem of the women not being welcomed through, the problem is they don't put their hands up ... We have a diversity program but it's all about building confidence in

the women rather than saying we need to give them equal pay, equal jobs; they need to earn that and need to take that on board.”

CAROLYN CRESWELL

**Carman's Fine Foods
founder**

“WE have a choice to either worry about who has more than you or make a difference.

“It's vital, that sense of having some confidence about your life. If there's no foundation around you it's hard to take that next step. Having a house is a big part of that.

“We have this stigma in Australia about how we perceive women ... employers say she's going to go off and have a child, so we won't choose her.

“And women often shrink back, not wanting to put themselves out there. I always encourage women to step forward. Women are often embarrassed to talk about money but you've got to speak up for the pay rises.”

**The Vinnies CEO Sleepout is from
6pm June 23 at the Melbourne
Convention and Exhibition Centre.
To sign up or sponsor a participant,
visit www.ceosleepout.org.au**



Kitting up for the CEO Sleepout is Jeanette Pritchard, Michelle Gallaher, Kristiana Greenwood, Sue Cattermole, Helen Souness and Danni Addison. Picture: STEPHEN HARMAN