

Committee Secretary
Community Support and Services Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4000

10 August 2021

Dear Committee Secretary,

RE: Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation

My interest is with the social isolation and loneliness that women 55 years and over, and living alone are experiencing in my local community. My name is Josephine Coco, I am a registered Gestalt Psychotherapist and also happen to be a member of this demographic. These women that I write about are friends and clients. They are, by-and-large, struggling to meet their most fundamental needs for physical nourishment and safety, and security of accommodation.

The reasons that women find themselves in this situation that I have observed, some of which are true for me as well, include:-

1. Inability to continue their career path when children came along.
2. Divorce and/or separation leaving these women with the burden of childcare and childcare related expenses.
3. Inability to obtain sufficient financial support from partners when relationships split up. It is not uncommon to hear that childcare support calculations based on salary alone for this group was curtailed by shifting salaries to other forms of benefits and income that weren't required to be declared as income. This seems especially true for families of professional couples who together earned a significant income, the partner continuing to develop in their career, whilst the carer lost the opportunities to attend to childcare, then lost a significant portion of the shared resources when separating.
4. Obstacles to returning to career path after time away from employment
5. Difficulty getting a job interview or offer due to break in employment and advancing age

6. Efforts to start small business to bring in some income seriously curtailed by lack of experience, inadequate funds, loss of confidence and of course, Covid restrictions.

Many women in this demographic in this community are either homeless, or shuttling around from one AirBNB or couch to another, if they are lucky enough to have the resources to do so. This is effectively chewing through their limited resources until they reach a point of declaring themselves homeless. This brings with it significant shame and fear. I have personally had clients communicate that they have moved up to 20 times since March 2020. Rents have increased significantly in this region making it unaffordable for many. Add to that, the number of tenants looking for rentals, and exclusion of those without a “desirable” rental history or indeed no rental history making it impossible for these women to find stable rental accommodation. Women in this demographic with a mental health diagnosis are increasingly suffering from further discrimination and inability to uplift themselves or source the support that they need.

A significant additional concern is the number of women who are living in isolation on shacks and granny flats on local farms where the owners, men, don't always observe appropriate boundaries. Not only are these women surviving as best they can, they often become dependent on the farm owner for various small and larger needs, which has the tendency to invite inappropriate behaviours.

Professional women in this demographic in this community are living in isolation due to not being able to find a suitably paid outlet for their skills and knowledge even with online opportunities, the job market preferring a younger demographic. Age discrimination along with perceived limitations of age is alive and well in the job market, in spite of recent education and evidence of life-long learning commitment by these women. Volunteer positions do not always provide the stimulation that educated women need to stay active participants in the community. Some women in their late sixties and early seventies are considering temporarily relocating to southern states where they will need to find rental accommodation to take temporary job roles.

Initiative – Radically Real Conversations

At present I am initiating a forum to bring these women together in conversation- Radically Real Conversations. It is a forum of up to 20 conversations facilitated in a group with Gestalt Group Process. The number of conversations and the progress of the forum is a shared

decision with the women involved. The forum will provide an opportunity to share interests and challenges that they have in common. These conversations become therapy in themselves, and provide women the opportunity to collectively take action to address their challenges. The project is being initiated with very little funding other than what I can personally afford. Because I have to charge a price for it, the first programme excludes those most vulnerable.

I have also offered the concept to the local Maleny Neighbourhood Centre, suggesting that they may be able to achieve a grant to support me to facilitate the programme.

Free Counselling

Additionally, I am providing free counselling support for clients of the Neighbourhood Centre who are experiencing financial hardship, one day each week since February 2021. Covid has impacted many women in this demographic, curtailing their ability to earn income and meet their financial needs. It is these community members as well as young adults transitioning into employment that make up the bulk of my clients at the neighbourhood centre.

On a personal note, whilst I offer significant mental health services in my community, I have a Master's Degree in Gestalt Psychotherapy, and am a Registrant of PACFA, I am not able to offer clients the opportunity to obtain a Medicare rebate. This limits the clients that I can serve to those who have the resources to pay, other than those who attend my free voluntary counselling services. It also limits my ability to provide an income for myself.

Thank you. I prefer that you keep my personal details private.

Kind regards,



Josephine Coco

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M: [Redacted]

W: [Redacted]