

## HISTORY

# Capital, change and Elsie's Place: Understanding the history of safe accommodation in Australia

Kelly Lewer PhDMEd 

School of Nursing, Faculty of Science, Medicine and Health, University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia

## Correspondence

Kelly Lewer, School of Nursing, Faculty of Science, Medicine and Health, University of Wollongong, New South Wales 2522, Australia.

Email: [kellyl@uow.edu.au](mailto:kellyl@uow.edu.au)

## Abstract

Gendered violence, specifically, domestic violence, continues to be a global issue impacting the health and well-being of women despite the improvements to women's rights and the expansion of women's health and well-being services in the 1970s. While considerable attention has been given to this period of time, scant attention has been given to understanding the resources and change processes involved in the opening of Australia's feminist-led women's health and wellbeing services from a theoretical perspective. During a Visiting Scholar appointment at the State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia I undertook a review of historical documentation and academic literature search pertaining to the opening of Australia's first feminist-led safe accommodation for women fleeing domestic violence: Elsie's Place. The concepts of Bourdieu (1977) Theory of Practice informed my understanding of resources, while Lewin (1947) Change Theory provided a conceptual lens through which to view change within the textual and graphical documents. The findings from this project point to the importance of capital, particularly social capital, in the forms of cooperation, collaboration, and networking, in the supporting of change within this sector during the opening of foundational services for women in Australia.

## KEYWORDS

capital, change, DV, homelessness, women's wellbeing

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Gendered inequality including gendered violence are global issues (World Health Organization, 2022), which the United Nations (2022) Sustainable Development Goal 5, aims to address. Inspired by this goal, this literature review provides an understanding of the resources and transition related to the opening of early safe accommodation for women at Elsie's Place (Theobald et al., 2017). Domestic Violence (DV), also referred to as intimate partner violence, refers to abuse and control toward a romantic partner (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 2017). According to the World Health Organization

(2022) 30% of women experience this form of abuse, and the consequences on the wellbeing of women are considerable. Specifically in Australia, DV is the main reason for homelessness among women and children (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2018; Sutherland et al., 2022).

Early literature on this topic commonly refers to safe accommodation as "refuges" or "shelters" as safe spaces for those impacted by this abuse (Murray et al., 2021), to avoid potentially negative connotations, apart from direct quotations from these earlier works, this paper will refer to such spaces as "safe accommodation." Elsie's Place, Sydney, Australia was established in 1974 and has received

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2022 The Authors. *Public Health Nursing* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.



significant historical treatment within the literature as the first feminist-run safe accommodation in Australia (Theobald, 2014). This paper will contribute to this body of work by drawing on the concepts of Bourdieu's (1977) Theory of Practice and Lewin's (1947) Change Theory to understand literature pertaining to the opening of Elsie's Place.

This review took place at the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales (NSW), Sydney, Australia during a visiting scholar appointment. Access was granted to the special collections including grey literature such as magazines, newspapers, pictures, manuscripts, and ephemera pertaining to the history of feminism, women's issues, and the opening of Australia's first safe accommodation for women fleeing DV: Elsie's Place. In addition, a literature search was conducted on library databases Scopus, ProQuest, and Web of Science, using the search terms: women's refuge, emergency accommodation, DV, women's liberation.

Lewin (1947) suggested that change occurs across three pivotal moments: unfreezing, change, and freezing. Inspired by the depiction of these concepts in Cummings et al. (2016) unfreezing informed my understanding of the events leading up to the opening of Elsie's Place, most notably the founders (change agents) efforts to harness support through initial meetings where women had the opportunity to share their lived experiences. Change assisted my understanding of the moment they took action and the strategies used to overcome resistance. Finally, refreezing assisted me to understand the ongoing establishment of Elsie's Place.

Bourdieu's (1977) Theory of Practice provided an understanding of inequality within society, and the competition for resources. His concepts of capital, field, and habitus explain the interactions, including power and control, of people within society. Capital in particular provides a conceptual lens through which to view the resources needed to facilitate the opening and establishment of Elsie's Place. According to Bourdieu, capital is a collective term for resources. In relation to the opening of Elsie's Place, economic capital-related forms of money such as grants, cultural capital assisted in my understanding of knowledge, education, and skills and social capital related to social networks.

The liberation of women was a global movement (Theobald, 2014). In Australia women engaged in liberation meetings and demonstrations. Anne Roberts (1970-1975) used her photography skills to capture such events and contribute to the cause. Her black and white photographs show hundreds of women and some men sitting in rows of chairs looking towards a speaker. Others capture demonstrations with women and some men holding signs, demanding women's rights and equality. According to Theobald (2014, 2017), these events leading up to the opening of Elsie's Place paved the way for improved equality for women.

Such activism became a platform for supporting women escaping from violence in countries such as United Kingdom, United States of America, and Australia. Laville (2014) claims the world's first women's safe accommodation was the Chiswick Women's Aid, opened in 1971, in the United Kingdom by Erin Pizzey and Anne Ashby- the women "who drew back the curtains of England's homes and forced society to look inside" (p.1). Laville's interview with Jenny Smith, one of the first

women to seek safety at the safe accommodation, describes the impact of Chiswick:

'There were women and children everywhere,' said Smith. 'There were lengths of brown hessian hanging at the windows as curtains; mattresses snaked out of the bedrooms and up the hallways in any space that we could get them. It was a bit like a refugee camp, but it was wonderful ... I cannot get away from the fact that Chiswick saved my life....' (p.)

At a similar time, in the United States of America, the first women's shelter opened in the city of Saint Paul in Minnesota (Saint Martha's Hall, 2022).

## 1.1 | Unfreezing

In relation to the opening of Elsie's Place, the Women Against a Violent Society forum held on 10<sup>th</sup> of March 1974 could be considered as the commencement of the unfreezing phase. As captured in the Sydney Morning Herald newspaper article titled "40 Years of Elsie" this event acknowledged the issue of DV (Sayer, 2014). According to Sayer this event was hosted at the meeting rooms of the New South Wales Teacher's Federation union in Sydney and included many women sharing their own lived experience of DV at a time when there was an absence of safe accommodation options for Sydney women leaving violent relationships. The women who led this meeting were change agents who harnessed the initial support in the forms of cultural capital (exchange of knowledge) and social capital (networking).

## 1.2 | Change

If change is the point when human action is taken to evoke the change (Friedman, 2011) then this occurred within a week of the forum when Sydney Women's Liberation members accessed and possessed abandoned homes in Glebe, Sydney, Australia. Within a couple of days, they had repaired, furnished, and opened Elsie's Place – a safe place for women, away from violent partners and homelessness (Jordens & Morrell, 2017). The role of the media was a form of cultural capital during this phase, providing awareness and acknowledgement of DV and informing the community about the availability of support through the safe accommodation. For example, in Woodham (1974) article titled "Help for battered wives" (CLEO magazine), a black and white photograph of the original Elsie building is featured- a simple structure with a failing wire fence provides readers with an insight into the humble yet powerful context surrounding the opening of Elsie's Place. Describing the impact of DV on those who seek support, Woodham writes: "Often they are covered in scars; and often they reach a stage where they can't endure it any longer" (p. 139). She explains that at the time of her writings, in the 1970's DV was an underreported crime.

Furthermore, in the same year, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June, the Daily Mirror newspaper published Griffith (1974) article, "Sydney's Desperate Women." He details the efforts by those involved in establishing Elsie's Place:

Then the women 'squatters' set to work to make the house habitable. Although it was cleaned and sound structurally, all the taps had been removed and there was no running water. There was no kitchen sink...the backyard was a mess of weeds and rubbish. While cleaning up and repairing the house, the women found that the house next door was also empty. They didn't hesitate...they tore down the fence between the two houses and the clean-up operations were extended to both houses.

Griffith described how this venture became a community effort with neighbors from the surrounding community donating household items and called on the commercial sector to donate food toiletry items. The role of the commercial sector in the opening of Elsie's Place is also featured in Sayer's (2014) writings:

Whitegoods wholesaler Joyce Mayne rang up, asked what the refuge required, and the next day delivered refrigerators and washing machines. Rotary obliged by securing the back fence and supplying playground equipment for the children. Local shopkeepers gave them local produce. It would be a year, however, before the refuge would receive any form of government funding (p. 1).

For Elsie's Place to have longevity or to enter the freezing phase where the refuge would become ongoing, the support of the local, state, and federal governments was essential. Before such formal government support was offered, according to, according to Woodham (1974) it was actually the lack of government scrutiny or regulation which enabled the opening of Elsie's Place:

"No inquiries, no inspections, no standards set. Off the record, you suspect the department's attitude is that of deliberate laissez faire. A visit might turn up something which could not be approved officially, and the refuge's service is too vital to risk" (p. 144).

Journalist Anne (Summers, 1975) who was instrumental in the opening of Elsie's Place reflects on the moment the safe accommodation was legalized by November, with the then federal government purchasing the homes:

"The former Labor Government (the Whitlam Government) responded to the publicity given to the plight of these women by providing funds for most of these

refugees. This has enabled them to lease premises, employ full-time staff, and has reduced the worry about where the next day's food is going to come from" (p. 12).

Despite supporting the Elsie's Place, Sayer (2014) reports that the then federal government's response fell short of understanding how widespread, indiscriminate, and dangerous DV was. Interviewed by Sayer, Summers states: "the perception by the Whitlam government was that we were a bunch of middle-class women helping other middle-class women get out of marriages". Despite this interpretation, it must be noted that Elsie's establishment was shortly followed by a vast expansion of services for women. According to McGregor and Hopkins (1991), "Within a year of the events in Glebe [opening of Elsie's Place], eleven refuges were either in operation or about to open their doors, and in mid-1975 the federal government announced funding for them all." (p. 11).

The findings in this article, are the researcher's interpretation of the published literature from the standpoint of capital and change-it does not replace first-hand accounts or lived experience. According to Murolo (2014) largely missing from the literature are the voices and experiences of immigrant and refugee women in relation to the "women's refuge movement." Furthermore, she points to Wilson (1996) claim that racism against Aboriginal and migrant women occurred during early safe accommodation times.

This then raises some further research opportunities for the women's DV support service sector. Firstly, projects which collect and analyze the narratives and stories of the women who have lived experience of the changes in the 1970's would provide a more nuanced understanding of this time. Likewise, projects which present more diversity would promote a clearer picture of this time. Finally, further exploration is required into the implementation of Bourdieu and Lewin's concepts as a reflective and planning framework for change management.

The literature review provides an understanding of the capital and change processes related to the opening of Elsie's Place. For Elsie to become an ongoing service, capital in all forms was needed. Of particular importance was the ability of the founding women to be able to see the possibility and opportunity to support other women. They provided agency to a collective of women who were not able to speak for themselves, and their actions paved the way for the women of Australia to have safe accommodation options.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to acknowledge the State Library of New South Wales, particularly Dr Rachel Franks, for support during my Visiting Scholar appointment.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

None.

## ORCID

Kelly Lewer PhDMed  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2232-8990>



## REFERENCES

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2018). *Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia*. AIHW. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/d1a8d479-a39a-48c1-bbe2-4b27c7a321e0/aihw-fdv>
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice* (R. Nice, trans.). Cambridge University Press.
- Cummings, S., Bridgman, T., & Brown, K. G. (2016). Unfreezing change as three steps: rethinking Kurt Lewin's legacy for change management. *Human Relations* (New York), 69(1), 33–60. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726715577707>
- Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs. (2017). Understanding the power and control wheel. <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels/faqs-about-the-wheels>
- Friedman, V. J. (2011). *Revisiting social space: Relational thinking about organizational change*. 19, pp. 233–257. Emerald Group Publishing Limited. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from [https://doi.org/10.1108/S0897-3016\(2011\)0000019010](https://doi.org/10.1108/S0897-3016(2011)0000019010)
- Griffith, G. (1974, June 7). Sydney's desperate women. *Daily Mirror*.
- Jordens, A., & Morrell, E. (2017). Elsie women's refuge (1974–), the Australian women's register. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/awe0018b.htm>
- Laville, S. (2014). Domestic violence: How the world's first women's refuge saved my life. *The Guardian*. Retrieved November 6, 2022 from <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/apr/28/domestic-violence-first-womens-refuge-saved-my-life>
- Lewin, K. (1947). Frontiers in group dynamics: Concept, method and reality in social science; social equilibria and social change. *Human Relations* (New York), 1(1), 5–41. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872674700100103>
- McGregor, H., & Hopkins, A. (1991). *Working for change*. Allen & Unwin, North Sydney.
- Murdolo, A. (2014). Safe homes for immigrant and refugee women: Narrating alternative histories of the women's refuge movement in Australia. *Frontiers* (Boulder), 35(3), 126–153. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.35.3.0126>
- Murray, S., Bullen, J., Theobald, J., & Watson, J. (2021). Building the evidence for family violence policy reform: The work of specialist women's refuges in victoria, Australia. *Social Policy and Society: A Journal of the Social Policy Association*, 21, 422–438. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746421000051>
- Roberts, A. (1970–1975). *Photographs relating to women's rights*. State Library of New South Wales. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from [https://digital.sl.nsw.gov.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=FL17768098&embedded=true&toolbar=false](https://digital.sl.nsw.gov.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=FL17768098&embedded=true&toolbar=false)
- Saint Martha's Hall. (2022). *History of battered women's movement*. Retrieved September 29, 2022, from <https://saintmarthas.org/resources/history-of-battered-womens-movement/>
- Sayer, M. (2014). 40 years of elsie. *Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/40-years-of-elsie-20140411-36h9v.html>
- Summers, A. (1975, December 27). How women live- if they must- without men. *The National Times*, 22, 12.
- Sutherland, G., Bulsara, C., Robinson, S., & Codde, J. (2022). Older women's perceptions of the impact of homelessness on their health needs and their ability to access healthcare. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 46(1), 62–68. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.13156>
- Theobald, J. (2014). Women's refuges and the state in Victoria, Australia: A campaign for secrecy of address. *Women's History Review*, 23(1), 60–81. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2013.846116>
- Theobald, J., Murray, S., & Smart, J. (2017). *From the margins to the mainstream: the domestic violence services movement in Victoria, Australia 1974–2016*. Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Victoria.
- United Nations. (2022). The 17 goals: Sustainable development goals. Retrieved September 28, 2022, Retrieved <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>
- Wilson, J. T., (1996). Feminism and institutionalised racism: Inclusion and exclusion at an Australian feminist refuge, *Feminist Review*, 52, 1–26. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1996.3>
- Woodham, A. (1974, October). Help For Battered Wives. *CLEO*, 139–141.
- World Health Organization. (2022). Violence against women. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

**How to cite this article:** Lewer, K. (2023). Capital, change and Elsie's Place: Understanding the history of safe accommodation in Australia. *Public Health Nursing*, 40, 191–194. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phn.13149>