

## Discrimination Problems, Strategies and Structures

### Forum: 15 March State Library Theatre.

In this forum a diverse Panel of speakers highlighted current issues of housing discrimination in South Australia. The Women's Housing Caucus remains actively engaged with this problem, first publicised in the *Sexcluded?* Report in 2004. The Forum was a good opportunity to take stock of developments since the Report and to look towards future change.

**Elsbeth McInness** (UniSA; National Association for the Single Mother and Her Child) gave an overview of the continuing problems faced particularly by women with children seeking accommodation in the rental market.

She emphasised the interplay of:

- poverty
- anxiety
- inexperience

in compromising the chance of obtaining a home. Discrimination in addition to other factors kept women out of stable, secure housing and jeopardised their prospects of education, employment and health.

**Emma Slape** (REISA) explained the Institute's commitment to professional training, development and good practice. She restated the importance attached by the Institute to legal responsibilities to avoid discrimination. Among other current developments Emma outlined discussions concerning the professional accreditation of tenancy managers and conversations between the Institute (herself and the President) and the commissioner for Equal Opportunity. Plans included joint statements and other collaborative exercises designed to publicise and underline the central role real estate professionals played in combating discrimination. Emma also gave the audience information about the REISA free complaints phone service and encouraged everyone to advertise it!

**Linda Matthews** (Commissioner for Equal Opportunity) emphasised the subtle and complex nature of discrimination. She outlined the pros and cons of the existing Complaints structures. She mentioned that some rental housing complaints were currently progressing through the system and that stressed that when a matter was heard by the Tribunal it could be valuable for its impact well beyond the two parties involved, through media coverage and commentary. While the complaints system had many uses, especially in addressing individual experiences and grievances, multiple strategies were needed to combat discrimination. She was enthusiastic in describing her ongoing collaboration with the REISA and also with the Landlords' Association of South Australia as timely and well-focused.

**Lynn Young** (South Australian Housing Trust/ Department for Families and Communities) outlined the many programmes within the Housing Trust and DFC that aimed in diverse ways to address the problems caused to women by discrimination in the housing market. Lynn was able to provide statistics showing the proportion of women among Housing Trust tenants and bond assistance clients. She also described

some of the projects established in collaboration with the Social Inclusion Board designed to help tenants stabilise their tenancies and build successful housing profiles. Such experience could help sustain private rental tenancies as well as public housing tenancies. Current changes taking place to establish Housing SA were designed to accelerate the achievement of the State Housing Plan and bring affordable, secure and appropriate housing to South Australia's most vulnerable households.

Questions from the audience focused on the instability and insecurity of rental; problems of amenity and maintenance; the imbalance of power between owner and tenant and the practical, as opposed to the theoretical, enforcement of rights.

Professor Ramsay encouraged those present to think about ways forward. Several people reminded the forum of the opportunities available to comment on the review of South Australia's Strategic Plan.

In thanking the speakers and closing the meeting, Michele Slatter highlighted the various ongoing plans for action in this area that had been described. She indicated that a report back on progress would be made at the October Forum