

Nomadland, *Australia*

WORDS *by* SUSAN CHENERY · PHOTOGRAPHY *by* WILL HORNER

The housing crisis is tipping more Australian women towards homelessness, and in northern NSW the situation is critical. Five local women share their stories, hoping that their courage and honesty will inspire change.

If you know where to look, you will see them. In cars, vans, campervans. Trying not to be noticed in dead end streets, on headlands, around parks. Trying to sleep in tents, in sand dunes, in bush camps. Women who have been tipped into homelessness. Traumatized, exhausted, disoriented. Always on high alert because they are not safe. Looking for a place to sleep, to shower, to charge a phone, to wash clothes, to eat, to get through the long nights. All their energy taken up by basic survival. Constantly moving because they could be moved on and fined.

They are no longer the welfare cases, the addicts, the unemployed, the mentally ill. They are often educated, middle class, working women – mothers, grandmothers, aunts – forced into desperate circumstances by the lack of affordable housing, or any housing at all. They are the recipients of decades of systemic failure and an economy facilitated by low interest rates where housing has become an investment, a commodity. There are mothers who go to work every day, not telling anyone that they and their children are sleeping in the car, because if they do, their children could be removed by social services or lost in custody battles. Mothers pretending that camping is fun.

They would do anything to put a roof over their children's heads. They have tried and tried, looked at dozens of properties, filled out countless rental applications. If they do find somewhere, often they're paying so much rent that they must go without food themselves, and they could be evicted at any time, or the rent could suddenly be jacked up beyond their reach.

A generation of children is growing up with housing insecurity – not knowing where they are going to sleep each night. And for a mother, there is a profound sense of failure when they can't provide safety and shelter for their child.

Blamed on both the pandemic and the winding back of government support, which has exacerbated an already desperate shortage of social housing, the current rental situation has been described by Homelessness NSW chief, Katherine McKernan, as a "humanitarian crisis". Shelter is the most basic human right, yet more than 15,000 women are homeless in NSW alone. It's been estimated that as many as 600,000 women are living without secure housing nationally.

In the NSW Northern Rivers, where the billionaires are pushing out the millionaires, world famous as a celebrity playground and for its beaches and the glorious rolling beauty of its hinterland, most of the housing stock is taken up by Airbnbs and holiday rentals. And many women are being forced out of their homes and into vans and cars, into lives reminiscent of Chloé Zhao's film, *Nomadland*.

"Down in the dunes, under the sheoaks, there are more tents every week," Charlie Tide, 28, tells *The Weekly*. The Byron Shire is now second only to Sydney and Melbourne for homelessness.

It takes courage, resilience, strength and stamina to live like this: trying to go for a job interview without a place to have a shower, wash your clothes, get a decent night's sleep.

Louise O'Connell, General Manager of the Byron Bay Community Centre, says there is a "tsunami" of homeless women in the district. Her only caseworker is funded by a philanthropist. "It is estimated that there are about 400 women living in their cars in and around Byron," she says. "They're hiding, they go into the hills which is really high-risk stuff. They are ashamed and depressed." It is impossible to know the real numbers because few of them register as homeless.

Iris Ray Nunn

Iris Ray Nunn thought she had a plan B when she had to leave the cottage she was renting because the owner had decided her son would live there. "It was really unexpected that I had to move out. It was a friend," she explains.

Still, she had a coaster bus. "It was like my backup." She and her daughter had lived and travelled in that bus. "So I was like, no worries," she says.

But on the first hot day last November, the temperature gauge failed and the engine blew. "It was going to cost \$9000 to fix it," she explains. And that was when "my bubble burst. I went, oh sh*t. This is summer."

Iris, 47, has not had a home for eight months. "I'm actually homeless. It's hard to even say it," she tells *The Weekly*.

She lived in her car through summer, doing Zoom meetings from picnic tables. Then she sold the bus to pay for the repairs and was able to buy a caravan with what was left over. She has recently written a book, *Climbing The World's Tallest Tree*, but feels her life is consumed with more basic issues: "Where do I live? Where do I put my laptop? Where do I go to the toilet? I've got no electricity, I've got no water. I have to make sure my laptop is charged. I can't actually do more than meet my basic needs right now."

Iris has lived in the Northern Rivers for 22 years. She once owned a house in a valley, with a partner, but after they split, she sold the house to pay out his share. As a single woman, she couldn't get finance to buy another house. Yet Iris is resilient.

"I personally am actually okay, living in something really small without too many material things to take care of," she says. When it gets dark, "I have the little lights that you put batteries in, and I use the light of my phone. I'll use a head torch. It's such a dance to live like that. In a way it's pretty good for the human spirit, that side of things. I've got a plan [to move somewhere] where I will have power, and I will have the water on. I will be off the grid, self-sufficient, and I can grow a garden. It's about working with the elements and rising above it."



"I can't actually do more than meet my basic needs right now."

Cassandra Sheppard

It's the exhaustion, says Cassie Sheppard, that makes it so hard. "I plummeted into a sort of low-grade depression for a while. I would never, ever have imagined in my wildest dreams that I would be in this situation in my forties."

Cassie has a Masters' degree, has travelled the world and worked in the corporate sector. She didn't think she was the type of person to fall through the gaps. "I have a stable, permanent job," she says. "I've done all the things that you're supposed to do to be able to secure permanent housing. And it's just not enough anymore."

A single mother with a 10-year-old daughter, last year she found herself having to pretend that camping was fun. Through no fault of her own, a succession of rental agreements had collapsed and for a while she was camping in her van.

"I just had to be brave," she tells *The Weekly*. "I had to wash my clothes down at the laundromat. The most difficult thing was making school lunches and work lunches in my little camp kitchen that was outside. It rained almost every day. My daughter was young enough that she just thought we were camping."

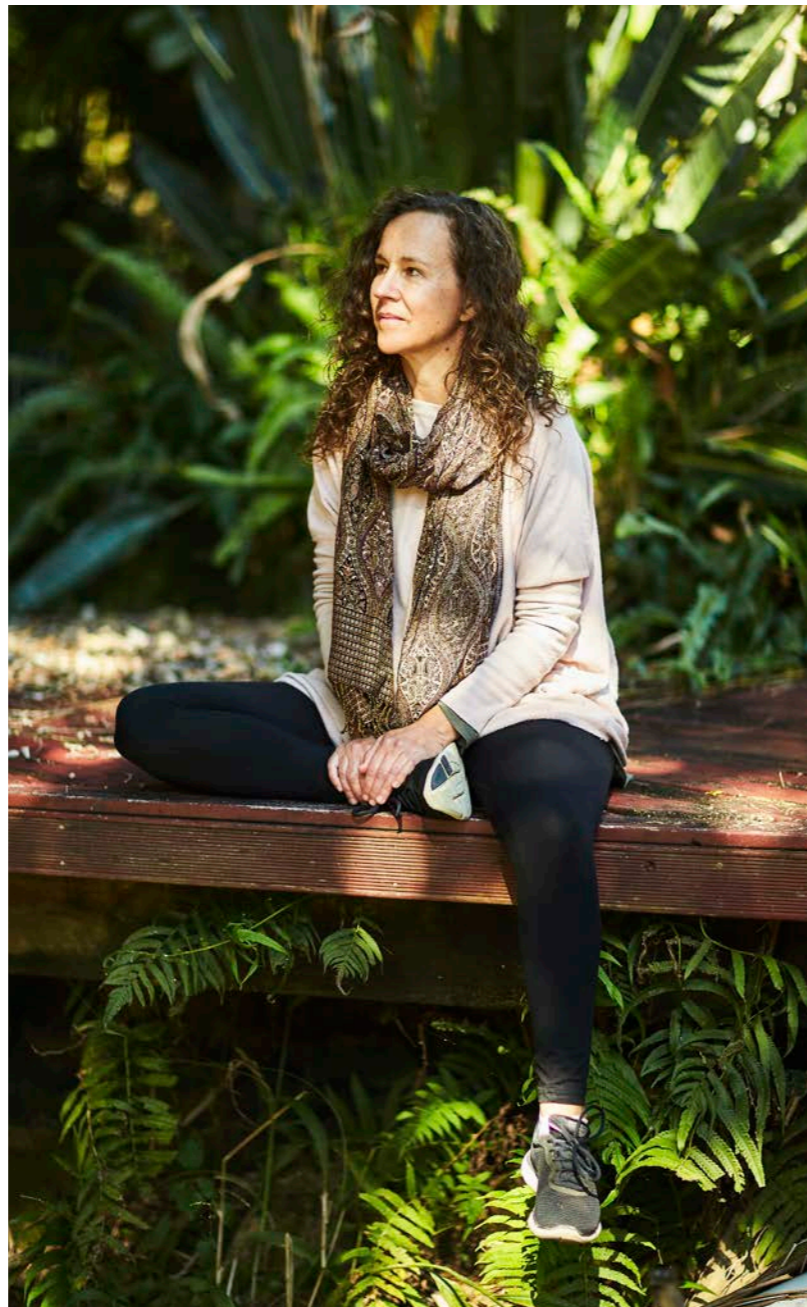
The exhaustion comes from not having all your belongings in one place, from having to be hypervigilant, thinking only about basic survival. "It's just a constant kind of how can I can I fix this?"

Cassie is currently in a "small duplex", with a rental agreement until September when the owner will list it with a real estate agency. More ongoing anxiety. "It is present in an underlying way every single day."

Cassie doesn't want to leave the region because her daughter is in a "beautiful school" that has a nurturing community around it. "If I was on my own, I would have left a long time ago. But I'm so reluctant to uproot this person who I'm growing into a clever, creative, well-adjusted, intelligent person, and so confident within herself. It's a holistic upbringing."

Cassie's primary concern is to "hold her in safety, wherever we are. I can't fall in a heap. It's not an option." When they lived in the van, she would cry at night "but in my waking hours I needed to be okay for her."

Because rental housing has been swallowed up by the far more profitable Airbnb economy in Byron Shire, rents are now the equivalent of Sydney, without the high salaries. "It's really difficult to build up any savings as a single parent." And that means it's not possible to save even a small deposit for a home of her own.



"It's really difficult to build up any savings as a single parent."

The recent government announcement of a program to enable single parents to purchase property with just a two per cent deposit could be a game-changer for women like Cassie but it will only cover a fraction (10,000) of Australia's one million single-parent families and the assistance will be delivered over four long years.

"Things need to change," she insists, "to prevent a generation of children growing up with housing insecurity."

Deva Kirin

It takes stamina, courage and resilience. "You need to be fit and have a strong body to live in caravans or buses," says Deva Kirin, 64, "because it involves a lot of physical challenges."

After living in both for the last five years, Deva was recently able to buy a 21-foot caravan. "It's like living in a tiny house," she explains. "It's only got a bed and a potbelly stove, but it gives me the confidence and the courage to keep doing this in winter because I've got a way of keeping myself warm."

The caravan is permanently parked on the property of a "very kind, generous woman" six kilometres outside the town of Mullumbimby. "We have a toilet and a shower in a building, and a community kitchen." There are about 12 people living

there. "Just having other people around to communicate and share things with has made such a positive difference to my life," she says.

Before the caravan, Deva bought a big bus and lived in it through months of torrential rain last summer. That didn't go so well. "I thought, I'll just try this," she shrugs. "I can maybe drive it around and if I do have to move, I can move it myself. But it leaked water in many places. I've got buckets catching water and I'm putting tarpaulins over it to stop water coming in. I'm up on the ladder every day trying to fix it." The last straw came when a big storm blew her gazebo away. "I just cried," she says.

Now Deva does volunteer work at the Mullumbimby Community Gardens,

running the nursery. She also holds down two jobs, one as a carer for a young woman in a wheelchair and another working for a babysitting company. "Because I have a stable living situation, I'm able to work a bit more," she says. "That allows me to have more money to spend on renovations and the things I need to keep my tiny home comfortable."

Deva doesn't see herself as ever having been homeless, just on the verge. Instead she feels lucky.

"I feel safe here and that I can stay here. It's very important to feel safe," she says. "I'm very proud of myself, that I've been able to manage this situation because my body is strong. I have this belief that I'm going to be okay."





“Survival is very much in the forefront of my consciousness.”

HANNAH ROSS/ABC

Charlie Tide

Charlie Tide has hit a wall of fatigue. She is exhausted from the disorganisation of not having a stable home, and from trying to protect her little girl. In the four years since her daughter was six months old and she broke up with her father, Charlie has moved 23 times. “Six of them were major moves with furniture and everything,” she says, “and the others were sublets, house sits, friends’ couches, various forms of that, and four solid bouts of homelessness. We’ve also been in bell tents – just canvas – so pretty cold.”

Charlie is 28. She is a writer, creative designer and designs jewellery. “That has floated us since 2018,” she says. “But I’ve realised I can’t survive selling necklaces at fifty dollars a pop. I need to do something bigger.” She is resilient, creative, and has an entrepreneurial spirit, but when she was kicked out of her last place, six weeks before Christmas, “I genuinely feel like I have PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) from it,” she says. She had been paying \$300 a week for a home that had no running water. She had built her own makeshift bathroom and kitchen there. “The disillusionment kind of set in because I no longer felt like it was enough to be a good tenant and a good mother,” she says.

Charlie has bought caravans and done them up. “I’ve done up all the caravans that I’ve been living in. And when I’ve found housing, I’ve sold them and been able to invest that into something bigger.”

Now she is refitting an old delivery truck into a tiny house. “I’m actually building it to function as a tea house so we can take it to community events,” she says. And it will serve as her “backup turtle shell, so our home can never be taken away. I’ve had it with renting.”

In the meantime, custody issues have trapped her in an area with a chronic shortage of affordable housing. “I’m living in one of the most expensive places in Australia,” she explains, “but according to the courts I can’t move more than 50 kilometres away because I co-parent.”

Charlie and her daughter love the beach, waiting for the whales to come. But now, she says, “survival is very much in the forefront of my consciousness rather than what I used to do with my daughter. How much do I have to keep fighting to meet my basic needs?”



Sarah-Jane McGrath

Sarah-Jane McGrath, 52, has been living in her van for nearly a year. Months, she says, of “uncharted homelessness”. She can sleep at night now. At first, every sound, every smell would wake her up “in shock. What’s happening, what was that sound? You don’t feel safe.”

She had been living in a studio for 10 years when she was served an eviction notice just at the start of lockdown. When the world was being ordered to stay at home, she had lost hers. “It was just the van and me,” she says. “For many months I don’t remember a lot because I basically had some form of post-traumatic stress.”

Most of Sarah-Jane’s money goes into making sure the van is roadworthy. She has looked at more than 50 properties across NSW, including one four hours’ drive from the place that has been her home for 20 years.

An artist and performer, on International Women’s Day this year she parked her van outside the Byron Shire Council chambers, laid out all her possessions and strung up a washing line in a performance art protest. In the process, she became the poster girl for homelessness in northern NSW.

The idea of being a nomad might sound romantic, but she says, in reality it’s not. And it’s hard to be creative when you’re on the road. A founder of the Mullumbimby Community Garden, she is used to growing food at her doorstep. Now she can’t be sure where that doorstep will be parked.

“Because I don’t have a home, I can’t settle into anything,” she says. “Everything I do is on hold. I’ve got nowhere to do it. I am really resourceful but I’m struggling.”

She has a solar panel on her van and often parks at friends’ houses – but she’s learnt who her real friends are. “I’ve lost a lot of people because they’re not actually prepared to connect like we used to,” she admits.

Sarah-Jane believes the homelessness crisis is a result of poor government planning, and she wants to see change. “I’m going to Sydney,” she says. “I’m going to make appointments with the planning ministers. And if they don’t see me, I will write up a big sign and just sit outside their office. I’m going to make people notice me.” AWW

Helping WOMEN

Creative solutions

In the Northern Rivers women are mobilising. The Women’s Village Collective was created as a call to action to solve the current housing emergency and implement lasting systemic change for women and children. “We know the solutions because we have lived experience,” says spokeswoman Sama Balson. Suggestions include no-deposit housing loans and affordable “rent-to-own” plans to create long-term stable housing. Sama says more social housing needs to be constructed urgently because 10-year waits for government housing are not acceptable. She also believes that equitable superannuation and free or affordable childcare would help. “This housing insecurity is debilitating, it is causing mental health issues, but these are incredibly resilient women and if they’re given opportunity and a safe home, they can thrive.”