

Australian Women's History Network
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Heritage Council of NSW
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Re: Elsie Refuge (former) under consideration for listing on the State Heritage Register

To whom it may concern,

The Australian Women's History Network (AWHN) submits this letter in strong support of placing Elsie Refuge (former) on the State Heritage Register (SHR).

As Australia's leading organisation for women's history, the AWHN promotes research and writing in the field and brings together scholars, students, and other interested parties to exchange ideas, information, support, and resources. We represent 118 members and are affiliated with the International Federation for Research in Women's History. Our official journal, *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, has been published since 1984; *VIDA: Blog of the Australian Women's History Network*, has been active since 2016. Both publications are open access, making the latest research in women's history freely available to the wider community.

As a group of historians of feminist, gender, and women's history, we are acutely aware of the significance of Elsie Refuge in the history of Australian feminism and campaigns against domestic violence. Founded in March 1974 by Anne Summers, Jennifer Dakers, and Bessie Guthrie, Elsie Women's Refuge and Night Shelter was the country's first emergency shelter for women and children escaping domestic violence and abuse. As historian Dr Catie Gilchrist explains, Elsie was established at a time when domestic violence was not considered a crime, a situation only worsened by inadequate government housing policies that prevented married women seeking emergency or social housing, as well as pervasive social stigma.¹ Professor Michelle Arrow has written about Elsie's history too, noting that before it was created 'domestic violence was widely known yet barely acknowledged'.² Elsie sparked a movement across the country to create women's refuges, tackle stigma through consciousness raising, and initiate policy reform. By 1975 the Commonwealth Government began funding women's refuges, which had until then been run on a voluntary basis, and in 1981 the NSW Government became the first in Australia to lead an inquiry into domestic violence. Elsie truly brought about a revolution.

¹ Catie Gilchrist, 'Forty Years of the Elsie Refuge for Women and Children', *Dictionary of Sydney* (2015), https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/forty_years_of_the_elsie_refuge_for_women_and_children.


² Michelle Arrow, *The Seventies: The Personal, the Political and the Making Of Modern Australia* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2019), 73.

The AWHN believes that Elsie Refuge should be placed on the SHR to preserve the site as a symbol of this wider history. Glebe was a major hub of the Sydney Women's Liberation Movement; conserving this building is therefore not only of state and national significance, but also important for the local community and its historical identity. Being the first women's refuge in the country, Elsie holds unique historical significance. Our society faces an ongoing domestic and gendered violence crisis, with two in five women experiencing violence since the age of fifteen, and Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, migrant, disabled, and queer women experiencing even greater rates of violence.³ A historical perspective shows that the battle the founders of Elsie were fighting predated them: as one of our members, PhD candidate Zoe Smith, has shown, in the nineteenth century women were drawing attention to their experiences of marital rape in their writing, a protest against the violence that existed in colonial Australia.⁴ To our dismay, physical, emotional, sexual, and financial abuse as well as coercive control continue today. Understanding the history of this phenomenon is crucial for finding new ways to tackle it in our present moment. Heritage listing Elsie Refuge will create a physical reminder of this story and will serve as an ongoing symbol in the fight against violence in twenty-first century Australia.


Thank you for taking the time to read the AWHN's views in your consideration of placing Elsie Refuge (former) on the SHR. We look forward to a positive outcome.


Yours sincerely,


The Australian Women's History Network national convenors

Dr Micaela Pattison 

Dr Chelsea Barnett 

Dr Kate Laing 

Dr Ana Stevenson 

Dr Michelle Staff 

³ 'Quick Facts', *OurWatch*, <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/quick-facts/>.

⁴ Zoe Smith, 'Friday Essay: "A prisoner on the rack" – How 19th Century Australian Women Wrote About Marital Rape', *The Conversation*, 22 March 2024, <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-a-prisoner-on-the-rack-how-19th-century-australian-women-wrote-about-marital-rape-224261>.