

Breaking the silence on women's safety in disaster

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Women should expect safety in an emergency relief centre. Yet, the opposite can be true, and the fact that women may be unable to find safety underscores the urgent need to reconsider how we think about women's safety during disasters.

Media exposure in *The Guardian*¹ and ABC Online News² reported on the vulnerability of women to violence and sexual assault in evacuation centres in the aftermath of the floods in New South Wales Northern Rivers in 2022. This has rightfully elicited shock and condemnation from within the emergency management sector.

But should these revelations come as a surprise? The reality is that despite years of women being at-risk during disasters, it is only now (2024) that this issue has gained sustained and significant national attention in Australia. There has been only isolated media coverage and scant research, discussion or acknowledgment of this pervasive issue prior to recent reports.

Research conducted by the University of Newcastle³, revealed instances of violence and sexual assault that resulted in pregnancies in the aftermath of the Northern Rivers floods. This was attributed to inadequate triaging and separation of people at evacuation centres and demands serious reflection and action.

The issue seems to be an uncomfortable truth, yet, it is unequivocally unacceptable that women should continue to face such dangers. The question arises: why has there been a lack of meaningful action to address this glaring problem?

A Gender and Disaster Australia (GADAus) literature review collection (see page 73) sheds light on the emergency management sector's reluctance to confront this issue. In particular, 2 reviews relate to traditional women's health issues: 'Sexual violence

and disasters' and 'Sexual reproductive health and disasters'. These reviews detail how the subject remains unexplored and unsupported in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. While there is some literature on these topics in the context of the developing world, the applicability to developed nations like Australia is limited.

Existing literature suggests that disasters disproportionately affect women, with emerging evidence indicating a rise in sexual violence in disaster settings due to heightened stressors.⁴ Women also face other issues such as access to contraception, breastfeeding facilities and reproductive health support for women in evacuation relief centres alongside persistent challenges to address workplace cultures and health concerns.⁵

Despite acknowledging the disparities in sexual reproductive health access, policies like *National Women's Health Strategy*⁶ have failed to adequately deliver service continuity during disasters. What can be concluded from this is that life-changing issues faced by women are not prioritised in disasters beyond the perfunctory⁷, despite severe consequences for women and it is time they were addressed.

Some academic groups are starting to make their mark. Efforts led by researchers at West Sydney University and the University of Newcastle are shedding light on women's issues during disasters. This research is readily available, but a gap persists where the emergency management sector does not hear it unless it is attached to a newsworthy item, such as women's safety in evacuation centres.

The sector is constantly shifting and adapting to the increasing frequency and intensity of disaster events. This leaves little room for endeavours that are not perceived as immediate priorities.⁵ Historically, the sector has been dominated by a monocultural structure, predominantly comprising men within a culture of masculinity.⁸ As a result the sector has a narrow focus on issues that this masculine culture finds important.⁹ For now, we must acknowledge this and do better by supporting and funding research linked to recommendations and actions and raise issues related to women, LGBTIQ+ people and other non-binary people.

In practice, incorporating women's sexual reproductive health considerations into emergency response planning and recovery efforts is essential, as is women's safety in disasters. The *National Gender and Emergency Management Guidelines*¹⁰ can help. The guidelines are a practical checklist that any organisation involved in emergency management can adopt to understand how to appropriately support women, LGBTIQ+ people and other non-binary people during a disaster, including safety from sexual violence and sexual reproductive health care.

Acknowledgment

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Endnotes

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