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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, gender and disaster: a commentary

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Abstract

This paper summarises research on issues related to women, men and people of diverse gender and sexual identities within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities when they are involved in emergencies, disasters and extreme weather events.

As the oldest continuous culture on the planet, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have much to teach about survivance in a rapidly changing world.
(Watego et al. 2021, p.9)

Introduction

The experiences and knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have historically been largely ignored in the field of emergency and disaster management in Australia. Extreme events and subsequent recovery reflect and exacerbate social inequities (Kennedy et al. 2022; Quinn et al. 2021a; Rogers et al. 2021) and these effects are magnified by historical, inter-generational and cultural trauma that originates from a history of colonisation, dispossession and systemic racism (Savage and Williamson 2021; Williamson, Markham and Weir 2020). The effect of extreme events on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia is unique due to their distinct demographic profile, culture, strong ties to family and community as well as deep relationships with the land. Yet people in these communities are often silenced, local community engagement is minimal and recovery efforts lack aspects of cultural safety and sensitivity.

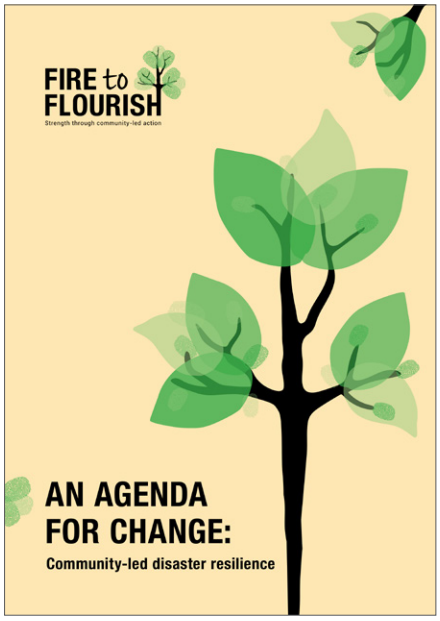
While there is a severe gap in the literature regarding disaster, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and gender, there is a growing consensus on recommendations for:

- recognising historical trauma and resilience
- prioritising and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and leadership
- sharing decision-making
- embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge
- recognising restorative power of cultural healing frameworks
- promoting cultural fitness
- addressing systemic racism
- acting beyond listening
- advancing resilience and equity.

To ensure a just and resilient future, it's vital to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, knowledges and leadership into emergency and disaster planning and recovery. The goal of risk reduction should be to empower communities to withstand and thrive after disaster events. These events can be catalysts to address decolonisation and climate change by embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' strategies and the transformative lessons they offer.

Method

There is a growing body of literature about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and emergencies and recovery. Terms in academic literature include 'disaster' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander/ Indigenous/First Nations'. Within this is a search for gender or sexual-orientation specific data (women, men, sistagirls, brotherboys, transgender, LGBT). Because there is scant academic literature with a



An Agenda For Change: Community-led disaster resilience provides an agenda for community-led recovery processes that improves resilience and wellbeing, particularly for communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage.

gender focus, a second search explored data related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and domestic violence and mental health. The focus for this literature review was on Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, however, the search included relevant data from overseas.

> *There is a great opportunity for Aboriginal-led approaches to address disaster risk that would also benefit the whole community.*
> (Matthews et al. 2020, p.15)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples overlooked in disaster preparation and recovery

The experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been largely overlooked in disaster recovery in Australia (Savage and Williamson 2021; Quinn et al. 2021a). In the aftermath of the Australian Black Summer bushfires in 2019–20, Quinn et al. (2020), Rogers et al. (2021) and Williamson, Markham and Weir (2022) showed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were largely ignored and marginalised in vital fact-finding and policymaking meetings. This disregard extended to response and recovery programs run by external organisations (Rogers et al. 2021) where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge about coping with and recovering from disaster events had been overlooked (Radel, Sukumaran and Daniels 2023). The bushfires left an indelible mark on Australia's history with a vast expanse of destruction that affected many communities. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the land isn't just a place of residence. It is deeply intwined with their cultural and spiritual identity. Consequently, their bushfire experience is characterised by unique challenges and traumas as detailed by Williamson (2022a):

- Disproportionate effects on communities in terms of population and the profound emotional and cultural loss associated with the devastation of ancestral lands.
- The response of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their organisations exhibited remarkable unity, resilience and strength. They undertook evacuation efforts, offered immediate relief and took measures to protect their heritage and cultural values.
- Cultural insensitivity in relief efforts showed the pressing need for a culturally sensitive disaster management framework with community-controlled and representative Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in emergency management, response and recovery playing a central role.
- Trust deficit between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and relief agencies has long-term implications and underscores the need for culturally sensitive response mechanisms.

Williamson (2022a, p.1) emphasises '…the importance of community-controlled and representative Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in emergency management, response and recovery in future disasters'.

Disasters compound social inequities and are opportunities for social justice

The World Health Organization has highlighted that inequities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia, compared to other population groups in Australia, are the most significant inequities in the world (Heris et al. 2022). Disaster events and subsequent recovery mirror and exacerbate these social inequities (Kennedy et al. 2022; Quinn et al. 2021a; Rogers et al. 2021) and disaster effects are magnified by historical, intergenerational and cultural trauma stemming from colonisation, dispossession, and systemic racism (Kennedy et al. 2022; Rogers et al. 2021). Government policies, programs and institutional responses that fail to recognise and uphold Indigenous rights and that disregard the capacity of Indigenous knowledge in social and environmental recovery further contribute to systemic racism and marginalisation that compound and contribute to vulnerability of Indigenous groups (Howitt, Havnen and Veland 2012) According to Havnen and Veland (2012), Indigenous rights and actions that disregard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge in social and environmental recovery contributes to systemic racism

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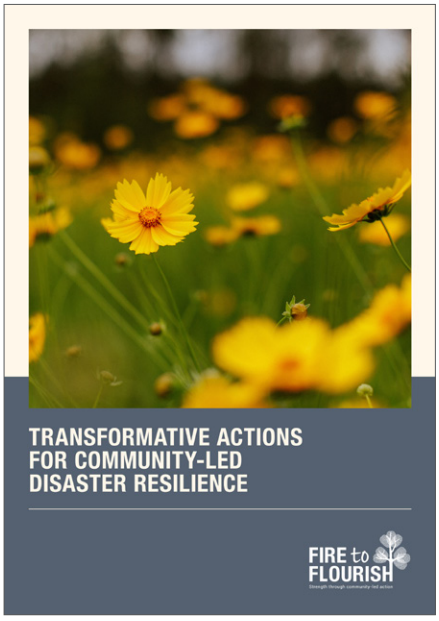
and marginalisation that compounds and contributes to vulnerability. Recovery that lacks cultural competence and sensitivity poses additional risks of aggravating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' traumas (Quinn, Williamson and Gibbs 2021; Williamson, Markham and Weir 2020). These issues themselves produce vulnerability when it is the systems that must be fixed (Quinn et al. 2021b).

The legacy of colonisation has fostered mistrust in governments and mainstream services among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who may consequently avoid seeking assistance during disasters, heightening their risk (Heris et al. 2022; Savage and Williamson 2021). Quinn et al. (2021b) highlighted that in the recovery process, service organisations frequently fail to provide culturally safe environments. The structures themselves, predominantly non-Indigenous, may perpetuate colonial oppression symbolically, and the service providers may lack cultural sensitivity. For example, during the 2019–20 bushfires, evaluation done by the NSW Government (2020) and Keating et al. (2022) showed that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples felt unwelcome at evacuation centres and, in some cases, support services were reluctant to provide immediate relief. The experience of evacuation reminded Elders of historic actions by governments that displaced Aboriginal communities and carried out the forced removal of children from their families (Keating et al. 2022).

Disasters can be catalysts to address issues of decolonisation and climate change through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and resilience. The strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the face of persistent marginalisation is an asset in recovery efforts (Quinn et al. 2021b). The ultimate objective of disaster risk reduction should be to understand and enhance the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to withstand the severity of a disaster and then to thrive and flourish in its aftermath (Rogers et al. 2021; Williamson, Weir and Cavanagh 2020).



Transformative Actions For Community-led Disaster Resilience proposes six actions for putting community-led disaster resilience into practice.

Unique effects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia

The effect of disasters on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is exceptional in several aspects due to their distinct demographic profile, culture, strong ties to family and community, and unique relationship with the land.

Demographics

Savage and Williamson (2021) state that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have a predominantly young population and are especially vulnerable to long-term disaster effects. Children and youth make up the majority of those affected (Williamson 2022c). Attention is needed for people in hostels, detention centres, aged care residences, town camps and people experiencing homelessness (Department of Health and Aged Care 2020). Events like floods and bushfires can disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Williamson 2022b). For example, despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being 3.3% of Australia's population (in 2020), they account for 6.2% of flood-affected individuals outside Sydney (Williamson 2020c).

Culture and strong family and community ties

Extensive documentation cited by Kennedy et al. (2022) highlights that culture and strong family and community ties serve as essential strengths and protective factors for positive mental health and wellbeing among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. In addition, according to McLennan (2015), these relationships appear vital to the mitigation of risk and adversity and the sense of wellbeing within communities. Conversely, this closeness acts as a risk factor in that the tighter knit a community is, the more susceptible it might be to experiencing harms to its members (Matthews et al. 2019). This provides insight into why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience heightened risks of disruption to their supportive close social connections and support when their communities undergo significant upheaval (Matthews et al. 2019). Six months after floods in 2017 in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales, Matthews et al. (2019) found that respondents of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background were significantly more likely to report probable anxiety and depression. Similarly, a study

Table 1: Healing-informed disaster recovery support for Indigenous (and all) communities.

Approach	Methods
Holistic approaches to wellbeing	• Holistic understanding of post-disaster wellbeing, encompassing people, lands, waters and non-human beings. • Spiritual, cultural and social recovery strategies (e.g. artistic expression and storytelling).
Social rather than solo processes	• Strategies that simultaneously support individual and community healing (e.g. group activities, community events and storytelling therapies). • Frameworks and resources that are inclusive of and culturally relevant to Indigenous peoples.
Identifying and treating the roots of trauma	• Understanding of how personal and community contexts (e.g. intergenerational trauma and previous disasters) intersect with disaster recovery. • Embrace of systemic change (e.g. for decolonisation and climate justice) as a legitimate part of recovery processes.
Strengths-based and community-led processes	• Grassroots disaster recovery initiatives that are culturally and socially specific to each community or person. • Strategies for evaluating intervention approaches that are flexible, diverse and dynamic by design.
Socially and culturally friendly spaces	• Prioritisation of culturally safe and inclusive community recovery spaces during and after disasters.
Indigenous notions of responsibility, justice and forgiveness	• Alternative models for responding to post-disaster family violence. • Highlighting personal agency alongside attention to systemic issues after disasters.

Table adapted from image in Quinn, Williamson and Gibbs (2022a).

by Kennedy et al. (2022) that focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, showed heightened levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness and, in some cases, suicidal thoughts and self-harm were reported; these emotions were largely linked to the sense of isolation from friends and family reported by participants. It was also reported that new mothers found the lack of connection challenging when family could not be present at the birth or in the home afterwards (Kennedy et al. 2022).

Unique relationship with Country

> *I've watched in anguish and horror as fire lays waste to precious Yuin and, taking everything with it - lives, homes, animals, trees - but for First Nations people it is also burning up our memories, our sacred places, all the things which make us who we are.*
>
> (Allam 2020, para.11).

Disasters that affect Country directly affect the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Savage and Williamson 2021). As noted in Quinn et al. (2021a), 'these experiences can be particularly profound due to the deep connections between land, culture, history, colonisation and identity' (p.10). In the Aboriginal-led study by Kennedy et al. (2022), it was reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'disruption to cultural practice, and disconnection from Country, family and community was detrimental to wellbeing' (p.1). Research in Australia and overseas has demonstrated that for First Nations peoples, healing from trauma, whether historical or contemporary, is a cultural and spiritual process and is inherently tied to land (Williamson et al. 2020).

A healing framework for disaster recovery

The research points the way towards culturally appropriate, place-based, strengths-based and community-based pre- and post-disaster planning and recovery (Atkinson 2022; Foote et al. 2023; Graham et al. 2022). Aspects of culture need to be viewed and treated as a 'core underlying positive determinant' (Department of Health and Aged Care 2020, p.6). Culturally led solutions are vital and effective for the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and these approaches can benefit the whole-of-population system (Matthews et al. 2020).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, culture and knowledge should be at the forefront of emergency responses including pre- and post-disaster planning, policy and recovery (Williamson 2022c) as seen in Table 1.

What has worked?

During the pandemic, high levels of financial and social support were emotionally and financially helpful, including access to food banks and food deliveries (Kennedy et al. 2022).

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An analysis post 2017 Northern Rivers floods by Matthews et al. (2020) found that among Aboriginal respondents only, higher social media engagement was associated with lower levels of ongoing distress and probable PTSD. Similarly benefits of digital technologies and telehealth support were reported during the pandemic (Kennedy et al. 2022).

Involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and the integration of culturally informed strategies not only mitigates the risks of COVID-19 effects but contributes to long-term improvements in public health outcomes for people in these communities. This approach could also be applicable to disaster recovery (Crooks, Casey and Ward 2020).

Although 7 in 10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women seek help for their mental health concerns, they tend to rely more on telephone hotlines, online counselling and online resources, as well as support groups and school counsellors for those in school or university (Liptember Foundation 2022).

Recommendations

Shared decision-making is required between government bodies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the full range of planning and implementation of disaster risk management (Department of Health and Aged Care 2020; Williamson, Markham and Weir 2020). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples need to be explicitly involved in decision-making processes regarding their social, cultural and spiritual wellbeing on Country, underpinned by their custodian obligations (Keating et al. 2022).

Responses should be based on the best possible evidence and data inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Department of Health and Aged Care 2020; Michaels Tofa and James 2016).

Investment in research that explores the intersections of gender, disaster effects and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should be increased. This includes gathering data on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and gender-diverse individuals during disasters to inform more targeted interventions and policies.

Recognise that racism, sexism and colonisation are drivers of higher rates of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Studies should consider how disasters exacerbate these drivers, leading to increased violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Strategies should address these systemic issues and promote social justice.

Consult with local Traditional Owners and other community members to create diverse opportunities to protect, restore and connect with nature. Attention should be paid to appropriate engagement with places of particular significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Quinn et al. 2021a).

Prioritise supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to remain on Country (Quinn et al. 2021a).

Consider the individual, collective and historical trauma effects in future public health emergency responses using an overarching philosophy of cultural humility, safety and responsiveness (Kennedy et al. 2022).

Formalise 'Caring for Country' as a holistic resilience practice supported by a national Indigenous disaster resilience and climate adaptation framework (Keating et al. 2022).

The Australia Institute for Disaster Resilience 'Working with Indigenous Communities in Recovery' toolkit (AIDR 2022) provides specific ways to implement many of the aforementioned recommendations in recovery centres such as publicly acknowledging the local Traditional Owners of the land the centre is located on; creating a separate and safe space for Elders; having adequate facilities for families with children and babies; inviting local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives to be present in evacuation and recovery centres and providing staff and volunteers who will be working in evacuation and recovery centres with cultural-safety training.

Other options include using everyday language as well as the use of Indigenous art in the planning and recovery phases that can be a 'powerful healer for community expression of grief and hope after disaster' (AIDR 2022).

Conclusion

This literature review underscores the need to address challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia during disasters. It emphasises recognising historical trauma, promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and integrating this knowledge into emergency and disaster management. It highlights the intersection of gender, disasters and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, emphasising the need for research on the specific experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and gender-diverse individuals. Addressing violence drivers like racism and sexism is crucial for social justice. The importance of culture, family and community ties, which can both protect and challenge during disasters is also emphasised. Recognising the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and Country is vital for culturally appropriate recovery. The recommendations listed offer guidance for policymakers, organisations and researchers to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in risk reduction and recovery. Prioritising shared decision-making, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and cultural safety is

essential as well as offering a framework that will benefit all. This review stresses valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's resilience, strengths and cultural heritage and prioritising their leadership in disaster recovery for more just and resilient communities.

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