

# Gender and disaster recovery: strategic issues and action in Australia

Tricia Hazeleger examines gendered disaster recovery issues relevant to Australian policy and planning and provides a basis for strategic directions to enhance disaster recovery.

## ABSTRACT

Disasters do not impact everyone in the same way. A better understanding of the diversity of needs, strengths and vulnerabilities within communities is considered crucial to building the nation's disaster resilience (Council of Australian Governments, 2011, p2). Gender is a central organising principle of society. It is a key factor in understanding diversity and effectively responding to needs and harnessing strengths in disaster recovery. <sup>R</sup>

## Introduction

Disaster and recovery are not gender neutral. The way we prepare for disasters, respond to disasters and recover from disasters is shaped by physical and socio-economic dimensions of being female or male. Gender-focused research and reports across the world provide strong evidence that women and men are affected differently by natural disaster (Alston, 2011; Dhunghel and Ohja, 2012; Enarson, 2012; Enarson and Meyereles, 2004; Eriksen, 2010; Ciampi, *et al.*, 2011; Morrow and Phillips 1999; O'Gorman and Clifton-Everest 2009; Pincha, 2008; Yonder, *et al.*, 2005.)

This paper examines gender in disaster recovery policy, planning and practice in Australia and raises a number of critical issues and strategic directions as a basis for future action. These were identified as a result of the *Improving Women's Health – before, during and after disasters* program (Women's Health Goulburn North East, 2012) and the *Gender and Emergency Management (GEM)* project initiated and supported by the Victorian Health and Human Services Emergency Management Branch as part of the National Community Services – Disaster Recovery Sub Committee work plan. The first stage of the GEM project began with the development of a national approach to gender in emergency management, with a broad focus on recovery.

## Global evidence of the gendered nature of disasters

Women's and men's decisions in times of crisis have been shown to differ along risk-taking lines, use and type of coping strategies, adaptability, and advice-taking and information-seeking behaviours (Dankelman, 2008). Research has also highlighted gender factors in sustaining volunteer memberships of rural bushfire brigades (Beatson, *et al.*, 2008), the preparedness of women to make informed decisions during bushfire events (Proudley, 2008), and the importance of gender relations within families and communities in dealing with natural hazards such as bushfire, drought, or flooding (Alston, 2009; Enarson, 2012; Cottrell, 2006).

Preliminary Australian research into family violence during and after the bushfires has reflected international research regarding increases in violence against women during and after disasters (Parkinson, 2012; Whittenbury, 2012). Consequently this must be considered a key factor when assessing gendered differentiation. Thus the way gender is constructed in a society must shape disaster planning and management from risk reduction policy and practices through emergency response and to post-disaster recovery and reconstruction (Enarson and Meyereles, 2004). The many other individual and social dimensions i.e. race, age, (dis)ability, socio-economic status, that intersect (Davis, 2008; David and Enarson, 2012; Enarson and Fordham, 2011) with gender to shape people's experience of everyday life and disasters are not a focus of this introductory paper and require further exploration.

The importance of gender as a cross-cutting issue in disasters has been highlighted in International and Australian Government statements. The *Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 – Summary* (UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2005, p26) identifies 'a gender perspective and cultural diversity' as one of four cross-cutting issues relevant to all agreed priorities for action. This is taken up in the *Australia: National progress report on the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action (2011-2013) – interim* that provides:

- information on the participation of women's organisations
- measures taken to address gender-based issues in recovery
- plans and programs developed with gender sensitivities, and
- post disaster needs assessment methodologies and gender perspectives on risk reduction and recovery [Attorney-General's Department, 2012, p15, 18, 40, 49, 52].

Demonstrating the regional acceptance of gender as a significant issue in disaster planning, a gender statement was endorsed at the *5th Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction*, to which Australia is a party. This statement recognises that gender relations in a society determine the manner in which men and women are affected by, and deal with, disasters and climate change. The statement acknowledges that although women are active in all stages of a disaster, they continue to be regarded as passive victims and their roles and capacities in building resilience in communities are not recognised. Gender relations are also acknowledged as offering advantages to men in general; however men too, are recognised as vulnerable in different ways before, during and after disasters. The gender statement includes commitments to support national and local capacity development for gender responsive disaster risk reduction and gender inclusive development planning.

## Australian disaster recovery planning

Despite evidence that gender is a factor in disaster vulnerabilities and strengths, and recognition at international, regional and Australian policy levels, Australian state and territory and national emergency recovery plans reveal a pervasive gender-blindness. A scan in November 2012 of Australian national, state and territory government emergency recovery policy and planning documents using the terms female, male, women and men, showed that nine out of the 12 documents reviewed made no mention of gender. Eight state and territory recovery plans or guidelines<sup>1</sup> and four key national recovery and resilience policy and practice documents<sup>2</sup> were reviewed. Where gender was mentioned, it was generally identified as an overarching factor without further analysis or strategy development. In comparison, the majority of emergency management policy documents scanned mentioned children, the elderly and/or indigenous and culturally diverse people as well as people with a disability. These groups were included as a focus for specific actions or as case-study examples of good recovery practice.

Policies that included a focus on diversity, complexity and vulnerability e.g. *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience* and *National Disaster Recovery Principles*, mentioned specific groups such as children, people with disabilities and the elderly but did not refer to gender. As a result there is limited identification of the differential needs and contributions of women and men in Australian emergency management policies, nor reliably targeted resources to address inequalities and respond to differences or capitalise on strengths.

## What are the strategic issues?

In the face of Australian policy and planning gender-blindness it is important to ensure that emergency management planning acknowledges accepted Hyogo, regional and national commitments to gender sensitivity and is based on research findings emerging from across the world in a multitude of disaster sites that indicate the critical significance of gender. This enables the identification of strategic issues and directions and improves the way emergency management and recovery plans and activities take into account the gendered nature of disaster impacts and recovery.

The *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience* emphasises the need to be targeted and tailored in developing interventions and disaster resilience capabilities (COAG, 2011, p2, 7, 10, 13). Arguably, disaster recovery will therefore be more effective when based on an understanding of the different needs, vulnerabilities, interests, capacities and coping strategies of women and men, girls and boys before, during and after disasters. This does not compromise strategic directions as it is well established that when gender issues are addressed in disasters, not only do all people benefit (Enarson, 2009, p3) but there are sound economic advantages as well (*UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction*, 2007, p7).

Historically, attention to gender relations has been driven by the need to address women's and girls' needs and circumstances, as women and girls are typically more disadvantaged than men and boys. However, increasingly, the emergency management community recognises the need to understand what men and boys face in crisis situations and how they recover.

Developing an integrated approach to gender in emergency management and recovery essentially involves assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action and making women's and men's different concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation and monitoring of policies and programs. This will increase the effective targeting of emergency management

1. Gender scan – State and territory recovery plans are *Australian Capital Territory Community Recovery Plan* (2007), *NSW Recovery Plan* (2010), *Northern Territory Emergency Management Recovery Plan* (2007), *Queensland Recovery Guidelines* (2011), *South Australia Emergency Management Plan* (2012), *Tasmania Emergency Management Plan* (2011), *Victoria Emergency Management Manual Victoria, Part 4* (2012), *Western Australia State Emergency Management Plan for State Level Recovery Coordination* (2008).

2. Gender scan – Australian Government documents are the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience* (2011), *National Principles for Disaster Recovery* (2011), *Community Recovery Handbook* (2011), *National Emergency Risk Assessment Guidelines* (2010).

resources and strategies. The aim is not to add new tasks or responsibilities to jobs that are already tough, but rather to work smarter to ensure good, commonsense programming in dealing with disasters.

## Gendered data and analysis

International agreements such as the *Hyogo Action Framework* and *5th Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction* (gender statement) consistently highlight the importance of gathering and analysing gender and age disaggregated data to improve effectiveness and limit the potential for inadvertent reinforcement of gender inequalities. Furthermore, Australian government priorities include the development of a gender equity framework and data (Select Council on Women's Issues, 2012).

Nonetheless there is a lack of gendered data or analysis related to disaster impacts, preparedness and recovery in Australia. At its most basic, mortality data is usually available in the reviews of major disasters but there is very limited subsequent analysis of gender trends and patterns to inform emergency management and disaster recovery planning and activities. Across the globe, women are at greater risk in disasters than men (Alston, 2009; Neumayer and Plümper, 2007) and these risks exist during the disaster and in the recovery period that follows (Alston, 2009; Cottrell, 2009).

Neumayer and Plümper's research indicates the significantly higher mortality rates for women in disasters. However in Australia, disaster mortality data from the 2009 bushfires (*2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission*, 2010, p236) and floods from 1998 to 2007 (Fitzgerald, *et al.*, 2010, pp180-186), show that the majority of fatalities are men. This may be related to Australian men being more likely to be involved in frontline emergency management roles, outdoor activities and engaging in high risk behaviour.

Gender disaggregated data regarding disaster recovery e.g. access to and use of support services, community engagement and leadership, risk management and preparedness, and communication and resilience, are generally not available in Australia. Nor are the crucial intersecting dimensions of race, age, (dis)ability and socio-economic status.

Strategic action to get the gender facts in emergency management and disaster recovery is needed and in keeping with Australian government commitments and priorities.

## Increased violence against women during and after disasters

A critical factor emerging from disaster research relates to the increase in violence against women. Violence is the leading contributor to death, disability and illness for Victorian women under the age of 45 (Women's Health Victoria, 2010, p5). The most significant determinants of violence against women

are "the unequal distribution of power and resources between men and women [and] an adherence to rigidly defined gender roles". Furthermore, economic dependence increases barriers to disclosing family violence and seeking support (VicHealth, 2011). These intersecting factors of economic dependence and gender roles are likely to be exacerbated during disasters (Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005).

Vulnerability to family violence is increased during and after disaster by a range of factors.

*"Both men and women suffer grief and loss, and may be traumatised by their experience. Homelessness and unemployment may result from disasters and co-exist with the demands of the recovery and reconstruction phase. Increased contact between the couple, sometimes in shared accommodation, increases tension, and loss of control threatens the male provider and protector role"* (Parkinson, 2011, p16).

Parkinson and Zara's (2012) *The hidden disaster: violence in the aftermath of natural disaster* in this edition of the journal details the gendered issue of violence in disaster recovery and makes recommendations for improvements to emergency management practice.

The growing evidence of increased family violence during and after disasters requires an Australia-wide response. Strategic action to include a focus on disaster recovery and resilience in local, state and federal government plans to reduce violence against women is crucial to address this issue.

The *Victorian Action Plan to Address Violence Against Women and Children* (Office of Women's Policy 2012, p12) includes emergency management workers as a relevant group for inclusion in Common Risk Assessment for Family Violence training across that state. Family Violence and Natural Disasters workshops have been developed by Women's Health Goulburn North East (2012) and pilot programs resourced by state emergency management in flood recovery areas of Victoria and are an example of strategic action to address this issue.

## Men's disaster risk-taking and help-seeking health issues

A World Health Organisation report in 2002 on gender and road traffic injuries remarked that masculinity—as reflected in disaster mortality data—"may be hazardous to health" (World Health Organization (2002), cited in Cockburn and Oakley, 2011). Arguably, hyper-masculinity during and after disasters is particularly hazardous to men and to the wellbeing of women and children who are connected with them (Parkinson, 2011, p29).

In 2005, Australian males experienced higher rates of premature death (as measured by Potential Years of Life Lost), and lost 75 per cent more potential years of life than females. Land transport accidents are also

a major contributor to years of life lost for Australian males (Department of Health and Ageing, 2010, p10). Close to 80 per cent of all those who committed suicide in Australia are men (Mendoza and Rosenberg, 2010, p75) and it is the cause of death with the highest gender disparity i.e. 333 male deaths for every 100 female deaths (Beaton and Forster, 2012, p1). Health statistics such as these can be linked to Australia's particular cultural brand of masculinity and, as with other gender differences and inequalities, can be exacerbated during and after disasters. Masculinity norms may encourage risky ('heroic') action during the search and rescue period, debris removal, and reconstruction, and deter men from approaching relief agencies or seeking counselling later (Enarson, 2000, p4).

At the time of floods in East Gippsland in 1988 the number of male deaths in the under-30 age group was around five times greater than the number of female deaths. Of these, 37 per cent of deaths were as a result of suicide and 13 per cent as a result of other accidents (Emergency Management Australia, 2003, p30). Community development officers working in the flood areas noted the continuing issues for men's health, especially in relationship to the rural male cultural issues which appeared to them to prevent men from seeking assistance for mental and/or physical health issues.

Australian women's concern for their men's health and the consequences of men's behaviour during and after disasters is documented in recent research and projects.

*"Women often need to 'talk' to deal with emergencies, men need to be 'seen to be doing'; we talk a lot more, the blokes don't; they keep it to themselves ... they might say it eventually but they keep it to themselves"* (Hazeleger, 2012).

It is clear from women's stories after disasters that they worry about men's risk of suicide, violence, abuse of alcohol and drugs, risky driving, not talking to anyone and bottling up feelings (Emergency Management Australia, 2003, p30). Women's narratives in the weeks and months after the Black Saturday 2009 bushfires in Victoria indicated that for some men, speeding and reckless driving was commonplace, while others sought out adrenalin rush through motorbikes, martial arts or heavy metal music (Parkinson, 2011, p17, 30).

The *National Male Health Policy* (2010) identifies similar issues and recognises 'drought and other adverse events in rural life' as transitional points where early intervention by health service providers may be of particular benefit (DOHA National Male Health Policy 2012, pp10-19). As such, disasters are readily classified as 'an adverse circumstance' requiring early intervention for men. The Male Health Policy (2012, p10) includes a focus on the question – *which men are most affected?* This recognises the intersecting issues of race, age, (dis)ability and socio-economic status and enables an identification of inequities between different groups of men for urgent attention. Such questions must also be asked in times of disaster to shape and target disaster recovery programs.

There is a problematic lack of information about men's issues in disaster recovery and resilience. The strategic opportunity exists to build emergency management gender issues regarding men's needs and strengths into national health policy agendas and into research projects such as the 'What about men' project funded by the National Disaster Resilience Grants (Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner, 2012) and the commitment to develop a National Centre of Excellence under the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children* (Select Council on Women's Issues, 2012).

## Gendered economic factors in disasters

The economic impacts of major natural disasters are profound for women and men alike. Disasters destroy land, household possessions, crops, livestock, and dreams. Jobs are lost when homes and workplaces are destroyed, vulnerable enterprises fail, markets collapse, and vital commercial and transportation networks unravel (Enarson, 2000, p9). The economic situation of women and men prior to disasters is a major factor in their ability to prepare for and recover from disasters.

Socio-economic gender inequalities and gender differences in Australia are recognised and documented in government data such as the ABS Gender Indicators (ABS 4125.0 – Gender Indicator, 2012) and Workplace Gender Equality Agency reports (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2012).

Internationally, it is clear that economic insecurity contributes to increased vulnerability for women in times of disaster. Disasters put a disproportionate burden on women who are concentrated in vulnerable employment, are more likely to be unemployed than men, and have unequal access and control over economic and financial resources. Women also take on additional responsibilities to provide non-market substitutes for market goods that their families are no longer able to afford e.g. take away food, child care, house cleaning (UN Commission on the Status of Women, 2009 p3).

Enarson's (2000) analysis of the gender economic impacts of natural disasters across developing and developed countries identified that women recover more slowly than men from major economic losses, as they are less mobile than male workers, likely to return to paid work later, and often fail to receive equitable financial recovery assistance from the government and/or external donors. The diverse and often compounding dimensions of race, age, (dis)ability and socio-economic status are particularly relevant in understanding 'which women' are likely to be most impacted during and after disasters.

Economic recovery post-disaster often targets relief funds to male-dominated employment projects in areas of construction, debris removal, and landscaping. This more often supports the economic recovery of men but



**Communities can recover more effectively when issues of gender are incorporated in policy, planning and recovery activities.**

disadvantages women who also need income support (Enarson, 2000, p22). Large public infrastructure and public work projects, including 'Green Recovery' packages, are a common feature in all stimulus packages. However, the jobs created are mostly in construction where 80-90 per cent of jobs are held by men, and in male-dominated engineering fields (Sirimanne, 2009, p7). Women employed in casual, part-time and low paid jobs will see minimal benefit from economic recovery plans geared to major employers in the formal sector (Enarson, 2006, p3). A specific focus on addressing women's employment and income in disaster recovery plans would be useful in future emergency management planning and practice.

In addition, women's informal workload increases dramatically after disasters. While the psychosocial effects of disasters are experienced by both women and men, women more often have the increased responsibility of family care and attending to multiple workloads. Their carer role continues and is exacerbated by limited support (Women's Health Victoria, 2009, pp13-14). Women often take on more waged or other forms of income-generating work, engage in a number of new forms of disaster work, including emergency response and political organising and have expanded responsibilities as caregivers. Women are more likely than men to delay their return to the labour force or reduce their working hours to juggle paid work with the immediate needs of disaster, the urgency of securing relief assets, and the renovation of homes and workplaces (Enarson, 2000, p13).

These issues are confirmed in research following the Black Saturday 2009 bushfires (Parkinson, 2011, p31) and 2010/11 floods in Queensland and Victoria (Shaw, *et al.*, 2013, p7).

Economic recovery is a crucial element of disaster recovery planning and support. Research and the development of strategies to take into account the impact of disasters on economic gender difference and inequalities are activities that will improve the effectiveness of disaster recovery plans and packages

## Conclusion

Gender is a critical factor in disaster recovery and resilience and is recognised as such in international, national and regional agreements. However, Australian disaster recovery and resilience policies and strategies are out of step with the political landscape and emerging research.

The identified gender disaster recovery issues such as increased violence against women during and after disasters, men's disaster-risk taking and help-seeking, gendered economic differences and inequalities, and the lack of gendered data and analysis require strategic action, ideas for which have been identified in this paper. Opportunities exist to incorporate gender as a key factor in Australian emergency management and health policies, planning, research, training and community support for the benefit of all people affected by disasters.

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Tricia was also instrumental in developing and co-ordinating material for this edition of the Journal. Acknowledgement must also go to the Victorian Health and Human Services Emergency Management Branch for their support of the Gender and Emergency Management project.